An Appreciation of Awareness

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 52:39

This is meant to be Dhamma encouragement, hopefully. It will at least keep you going for the rest of the night. I just want to share a little bit of my—it sounds silly—but my love of awareness, really. I wish I could transmit to you all how simple, accessible, and completely life-transforming it can be as we begin to strengthen our trust and confidence in just surrendering into awareness of whatever's happening now.

And at the same time, as it's life-transforming, nothing really changes. That's the paradox. We are so conditioned by our culture and the way most of us are brought up—we're inured to doing something for a result. If we want things to get better, we need to change things. Why would we do anything if everything was going to stay the same? You didn't come here to struggle for nine or ten days and then leave with everything exactly as it was before, did you? Maybe. Good. Then you can just put down expectation.

But mostly, we don't work that way. And of course, it isn't that nothing changes. Everything changes, and everything stays the same. That's really hard to explain.

Talking about awareness is also strange because the use of language—awareness as a noun—makes it sound like a thing. If there's a thing, then it should be existent in time and space, something we look for and can get and hold on to and have and be in relationship to. None of those descriptions are accurate. The closest we can come is that to be with awareness is an activity that arises in the mind in a moment, as all mental activity arises in a moment and passes in a moment. But still, for the use of language and communication, awareness functions as a noun—how to recognize it, how to feel it in our experience, how to trust what pure awareness is.

I'm just sharing some thoughts. I'm in no way giving you the big overview as if I know it all. I'm just trying to share some of my experience and love of this. When I think about my motivation—I can't really speak for Steve or Franz, but I assume they're similar—my motivation to keep coming here and leading these retreats and trying to share with all of you is really just a sense of loving the possibility that we can, for moments (I only know it for moments), be so completely, fully present and alive to whatever's arising in this moment without holding back, without needing it to be different, and without having to make it be all about me. That one is so exhausting, so limiting, so much struggle.

When just whatever's happening is arising, and there's the quality of mind of awareness that's simply fully here without barriers, just knowing—"Oh, it's like this"—no stories, no complications. It doesn't actually sound like such a great thing. Just to be with hearing. Just to see. Pretty sunset, wasn't it? It's like this. Feeling happy with the sunset. It's like this. Sun's gone, what next? What next is like this. That's what I mean—nothing changes.

But just that, just this, to have moments of a life—the regular moments of a regular life—and to be so present, just for those moments, without all the complication, without all the stories, that's the beginning of a taste of freedom. Even if it may not be what we thought we were looking for. We thought it was somewhere else, in bliss, in pure consciousness. Let's get rid of these bodies. Let's stop having any kind of displeasure or unpleasant experience. I kept waiting for years and years. When would I float away on this cloud of compassion and beauty, and my personality would really change once and for all?

I'm still waiting. But without quite so much expectation that it's going to happen.

But you know what really has happened? Often, not always, because nothing's steady state—this personality is just much more at ease with itself, because I realize this is it, folks. This body, this mind, this personality—that's what's arising from moment to moment. Just being at ease with things as they are, but really awake with things as they are. Not being at ease because we're kind of checked out, a little bit deluded. "I'm at ease with that because I don't really have to engage." I'm also familiar with that kind of being at ease. We call that delusion. There are times it's quite comfortable. I see my mind would really like to just check out. Sleep is a good one, unless you're having horrible nightmares. Let's just check out for a little while, have a little bit of rest.

Was it Munindraji who used to say that sleep is the worldling's nirvana? Let's just check out and cruise. But that's not what we're talking about.

Another reason awareness is strange to talk about: the way we've been giving instructions today or in the groups or in the Q&A, we say, "Oh, I was so angry"—I'm making this up, no one actually said this to me—and we respond, "Great, great. Did you notice anger? Anger's like this. Good, good practice." That's awareness. What's so great about that? It sounds pretty passive. Whatever happened, you say, "Oh, awareness can just notice. It's like this. No need to change it. No need to fix it. Freedom is just being totally here with it." Our normal let's-get-things-done, let's-fix-it mind hears that and thinks, "That sounds more like being a doormat to me. I don't really get the freedom in that."

But actually, the steadiness of pure awareness has the power to completely transform our understanding of ourselves and the world. Not the power—that's just what happens.

This is from the Dhammapada, teachings of the Buddha, in a poetic translation from Ajahn Munindo. He translates it as awareness; often you'll see it translated as heedfulness. Just two stanzas:

"Appreciative awareness leads to life. Heedless avoidance is the path to death. Those who are aware are fully alive, while those who are heedless are as if already dead."

Remember, we're only talking about a moment at a time—not that you're aware and then it's forever, or you're heedless and you're doomed. It's a moment at a time.

And the second stanza: "The wise, being fully alive—in other words, being fully aware—rejoice in

appreciative awareness and abide delighting in this capacity."

That would be my motivation, if I could articulate it: that somehow we could all learn to trust, to rejoice in appreciative awareness, and to abide delighting in that capacity.

It's as if we're talking about a shift of refuge. Remember, we took the refuges last night and this morning. We took refuge in Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha. In Buddha, it's really like refuge in the capacity for the awakened, the aware heart and mind. The Dhamma is refuge in things as they are, things as they have come to be in this moment, as the place—"place" is the wrong word—where freedom and ease of heart and mind can only arise when we completely take refuge, when we rejoice in that awareness.

It's a shift of refuge where instead of looking to the particulars of experience to give us happiness or freedom or ease—the particulars of experience will never last for more than a short fraction. Even if something seems to last for a year (and what lasts for a year? what really lasts for a year? what lasts for two minutes if we're looking?)—but even when external situations seem good and last for a year, that's an eon. Nothing really lasts in terms of looking to experience for ease, freedom, or comfort. But that's where we tend to go for refuge—our moods, our thoughts, external experience.

When we start to shift our trust, when we start to shift our refuge to this delight in awareness, it really can be that something's coming up in your mind that's unpleasant, one of your familiar unpleasant habits. You feel the effect in your body; it's unpleasant. And there's this delight in the awareness of it that really is no problem. What's happening is no problem. The next minute, okay, we forget the delight in awareness and we're back in the old habits—the habit of inertia, the habit of "I don't like this, it should be like this, I'm going to fix myself right now." Then: "Wow, wanting to fix myself is like this."

I know I keep saying that, and I know it might sound kind of lame. "Oh yeah, wanting to fix myself is like this." But in the moment that you really are imbibing, really touching with mind and heart that quality of wholehearted presence—awareness that's not colored by greed or aversion or me-me-me—that allows us to recognize accurately. That's where wisdom arises.

Wisdom arises by itself when there's accurate recognition. Which is also a huge relief—we don't have to create it. We can't. I mean, we're trying to make something up, "wisdom." We don't know. It arises by itself when there's accurate recognition, when there's pure awareness. And in that wisdom, that's where freedom comes. Freedom from the suffering of reactivity. You still might have that same silly personality pattern. But you know what? It's okay. You might even see a moment when you love it. "Oh yeah, look at that, isn't that so..."—whatever word you want to substitute there. That's just how it is. Causes and conditions coming together.

The Buddha talked about the path of awakening as beginning and ending as a path, more like a circle. What he talks about is wise view, right view, or right understanding. In our normal way, we think of understanding as acquiring a body of knowledge, a set of ideas. And I'm here talking, blabbing away,

giving you ideas. In our normal way, we think right view is: "Okay, I see the ideas I have that are wrong." We have plenty of ideas that lead us into trouble, plenty of ideas working in the back of the mind that aren't really so helpful. Part of our awareness practice will help us see those. That's true.

But right view isn't about getting another set of knowledge and then holding on to that for dear life. It's not about that at all. Right view, wise view, means actually the way we are perceiving and understanding the world is accurate—not "right" as in "this is good and this is bad," or "this meets certain standards," not that. It's like *yathā bhūta*, a word in Pali. You most often see it in the Buddha's teaching as part of a very profound insight: *yathā bhūta ñāṇa dassana*, often translated as "knowledge and vision of things as they are"—which is very close to awakening, to nibbāna. That's all: knowledge and vision of things as they are. Not "let's get the heck away from things as they are and get to somewhere where we can wake up." What wakes us up is recognizing things as they are, as they are right now, no matter how they are.

Yathā bhūta is the part of that phrase usually translated as "things as they are." But I was using that phrase a couple of months ago, and a couple of friends who are much more scholars of the Pali language told me that the grammatical construction of *yathā bhūta* would be more accurately translated as "things as they have come to be." And that's really how it is—things as they have come to be in this moment.

What that brings in is the fact of conditionality, contingency—the fact that things as they have come to be in this moment is the effect of innumerable causes coming together. Innumerable situations of physical and mental factors, your own particular experiences, others', the past—all coming together in this moment, unable to be separated. You can't really ever figure out all the causes and conditions for this moment. And because of how it's coming together in this moment, it can't be any different, can it? It's already here. How can it be different? It's what it is.

How much of our time do we unconsciously or habitually spend either trying to pretend this moment isn't the way it is—have you ever noticed yourself doing that?—and then pretending that we don't notice that we're doing that? This is denial. I am in awe of the power of denial in the mind. It's amazing, actually. Because when we break through the denial, we see: "But I knew I was doing that for ten years. I knew I was doing that and somehow pretended I didn't know." It's amazing.

Have you ever known yourself to either pretend this moment isn't the way it is, or try to make it be different, or be afraid and project this moment infinitely into the future—"It's always going to be this way"? There is no way it's going to be this way even next moment. Impossible. The conditions are already different for next moment than this moment. Even talking about "next moment" is just an idea.

So *yathā bhūta*—things as they have come to be in this moment—gives the living, moving, unstable, vibrant, alive nature of life in every moment. What frees our heart and mind from confusion, from suffering, is simply wise view, wise understanding, which is the recognition of the reality of how things actually are in this moment. Not every single cause and effect, but just the reality of our mind, of our body in this moment. Free from the confusion, the overlay that's put on top when we don't realize that the

awareness greeting this moment—first, if there's any awareness at all that we even know we're in this moment, that's good—but the awareness, if it's colored by wanting it to be different or hating how it is or thinking it should be like this and trying to nudge it, all of that gets in the way of actually recognizing how things are.

So right view, what frees our heart and mind, is so elegant. It's not that we have to somehow get rid of the greed, the hatred, the confusion, as if there's this huge mountain inside of us, although it may feel like it. A huge mountain we chip away one little chip every hundred years, and maybe sometime in some future life we'll have managed to dig out all the greed for a second. It's not like that.

It's fresh every moment. And what's so elegant about the freedom of heart and mind is that when there's an accurate recognition of this vibrant, changing, unstable nature of cause and effect—of all life—in that moment of clear recognition, of pure awareness, the wisdom arises of "Oh, this is how things are." And in seeing how things are, greed doesn't arise because it doesn't make any sense. Trying to hold on to something that's already going is so clearly suffering. You don't even have to think about it.

Like that sunset. Did you sit there thinking, "Just let it stay still for two more minutes so I can enjoy it"? Maybe you did. Our mind is capable of anything. But pretty much we know the sun's going to go down. Pretty much we know that's going to happen. We can appreciate the beauty or how it's making us feel. Hopefully we can let it go. If you couldn't let it go, that's a great place to say, "Oh, that's the suffering—holding on to something that's already not here anymore." Or if you start thinking, "Okay, twenty-three hours and fifty-five minutes, maybe only fifty-four, and I can watch the sunset tomorrow"—it's so clear that's nuts, right? It's so clear that's suffering anyway. We let it go. Still enjoying the beauty—that doesn't have to be done away with. But it's so clear it's gone.

So greed doesn't arise. Hatred doesn't arise. Me being able to change that, needing to change it, doesn't arise. Seeing, beauty, appreciation—the next thing arises. You hear the bell. It's the next arising thing. "Oh, time to go sit"—a thought. You turn and walk in here. You think, "Damn, I don't want to do that." You notice aversion. Whatever. It doesn't matter. *Yathā bhūta*—things as they have come to be in this moment.

That's what's so elegant: the clear, deep seeing automatically frees the mind. The wisdom comes from that.

So what makes clear seeing? What are the conditions that allow for this wisdom to arise? Awareness. Mindfulness. First, the willingness, just this sense of being fully present just for this moment. In this moment, it feels like nothing, right? "Here she goes again, be present with whatever." Because we're focusing on the thing, on the object—the mind state, the sound, the idea, whatever.

Just start to notice: awareness is like this. The steadiness, the continuity—that's really key. It's not just one moment and then we go off in our habits, our refuge in delusion or wanting or making up stories as a way to pacify ourselves. Or more likely, we make up stories as a way to get ourselves really upset. Have you noticed that? Things are fine, you don't feel so good maybe, or something's going on you don't like, but it's

okay. But the mind spins out into the future—it's going to be all day and ten days, and what am I going to do, and oh my God—and we're all upset. What's happening now? Actually, sensations, thoughts, it's okay.

The continuity is really the key. Not that we can be continuous—we're going to forget all the time because the habit is to forget. But remember what we talked about this morning and last night: the remembering. As soon as you think, "Oh yeah, I was spaced out," you're already not. That's what's so easy. That's what we want to learn to trust, to actually delight in.

For a lot of us, not all of you, but a lot of us, our mind has such a habit of self-judgment or self-blame. Have any of you noticed that? When you're walking or sitting here, and suddenly you realize, "Wow, I didn't know what was going on for however long"—how often is that followed by the thought, "Well, you're supposed to be continuous now. Come on, what's the matter?" Some kind of judgment.

That makes the whole thing so much heavier, doesn't it? If you believe that—"I should have been more mindful. I've been here a whole day, and look how much I'm spaced out. This is exhausting. They said it was easy. They said it was relaxing. I don't think it's relaxing. I think it's heavy. I think it's exhausting." Be mindful all day—and you're projecting already. "Oh, aversion's happening now."

When we're not fighting with it, it's just this. Actually, that becomes delightful. I don't mean aversion's delightful. Aversion's aversion. It's not delightful. But the awareness of it can be delightful. And it's just that simple. It's learning to trust that that's really enough. We don't need to add that extra—how can I do it better, how can I have better mind states? When you notice that, okay, that's just the next thing to be aware of. But even that—when we see, we don't have to be in contention with anything in our experience.

When you start to really believe that about meditation, both for new people and old people... I've been practicing meditation for—I won't tell you how long. But so much of it, and it's been extremely beneficial, all of it—but for so much of the time, there's been subtly in the background the sense of how to do it right. And if there's a way to do it right, that means there has to be a way to do it wrong. And for sure, if there's a way to do it wrong, every time I don't like what's happening or what's happening doesn't fit whatever idea I have of what "right" is, in comes that judgment—"you're bad, you're wrong"—the heaviness. And then when I think about wanting to be mindful, it comes with heaviness, with aversion. "I can't do it right."

Can you actually even let in the trust that we don't need to be in contention with anything in our experience here? Awareness doesn't care what awareness is aware of. Any object of mind or body—and let me know if you can find any object that isn't of mind or body—is a perfectly wonderful way to recognize awareness. Because awareness can be with anything.

When I start to realize this—and I have spaces of time, on and off retreat, because when we're talking about just noticing in this relaxed way, you notice it doesn't require a really strong, focused, one-pointed samādhi. That's something we can build up on retreat. But just noticing you're aversive, for example, you're greedy—I know, a lot of times we don't notice it, but I actually did notice it—you don't really have

to be in an incredibly subtle state of mind to notice that, do you? Not always, anyway. It can get by us, but this we can do in our daily life.

To actually know that whatever's arising is really fine—meditation becomes fun because you're not fighting anything. You can't do it wrong. And then the willingness, the mindfulness, the awareness begins to develop a momentum. Yeah, you have to put in some time. That's not going to happen in a day. Our habits are strong. But it comes to be: "Oh, whatever's happening, I can be aware of that. Awareness can be with that."

And then as the awareness begins to get a momentum, as the continuity begins to become stronger, that's what allows for the recognition of things as they have come to be in this moment to arise more accurately. Out of that, we start to see cause and effect.

For example, my silly example of the sunset. There's some awareness through the whole thing. You're watching the sunset. You're appreciating the beauty. You notice your mind going from really liking that into some fantasy—some really happy fantasy. You got from this sunset to a sunset somewhere in the Caribbean with somebody you haven't met yet but that you really are going to be spending the rest of your life with. How fast can that happen? Does any of you notice anything like that ever happening today? Maybe not that particular one. Or it could be negative. It could go either way.

And then you're aware of that. You notice the happiness of that. Then you think, "Oh my God, I'm here and I should be mindful." You notice the aversion. You notice from the aversion how it makes the body feel heavy. And then you notice in the heaviness—this is because there's some continuity of mindfulness—that when the body's heavy, you don't want to be there anymore. Suddenly, from being really with the sunset, your mind is going, "You know what? I'm going home. It's enough of this. I'm out of here." Five minutes before, it was the peak of your life.

The steadiness of awareness—we start to see the cause and effect and how it works together. We go, "Wow, look how the mind works. It's so interesting. It's fascinating." And then you see: this is how suffering is created. This is how freedom from suffering arises, right here, in this moment. Suffering comes to be when we're fighting with experience, in contention with experience, denying experience, wanting it to be different, all caught up in me-me-me.

The awareness comes: "Oh, look at that. I wanted to go away. It's just like this." And you turn around and walk in the hall without any more story. Just that simple.

In the Zen ox-herding pictures, those ten pictures that depict pictorially the path of practice and awakening, the last one is after he's awakened—he picks up his bundle and goes back into the marketplace. In any moment, we just... all that poofs away. You turn around and walk in here and sit down. So simple. Because it's that simple, our thinking mind says, "I'm afraid that's not really going to do it for me. I need something a little more." Oh yeah, thinking wants something. Thinking, wanting—it's just

like that.

All I'm encouraging you to do is trust that simplicity. Just notice. Notice when it's present. Start to notice. You can palpably feel when that simple awareness has that quality of purity—not colored by greed, by wanting. Not a sense of struggle, but a sense of presence. We don't have to create the wisdom, the clear seeing of things as they have come to be. We're not trying to figure it out. We don't have a clue. But the truth just presents itself over and over and over.

Quite a few people have mentioned today, in different ways, seeing aspects of how their mind is relating to certain problems in life here or at home, and seeing a way that the mind kind of amps it up, makes it more complicated. That just comes by steady awareness. It's a wonderful thing. An amazing thing.

I want to switch gears a little bit, though it's really the same thing—appreciating this.

I remember in the three-month retreat this year when Joseph Goldstein, one of our friends and colleagues, was giving a talk. I think it was at the beginning of the retreat. People were doing just what we're doing here, but for six weeks or three months. He was just saying how much to appreciate the opportunity to do this. He was saying how really fortunate we are, how privileged we are to be able to have the time, have the interest, have enough space in our life, have the good fortune to be able to do this.

That's true. Whatever our life situation—both us as teachers and you—it takes a huge commitment and sacrifice for many people to be able to take nine days like this out of what everyone's life is, so complex and busy, with so many different strands and so many different people. It's hard. Some people are saying today that it's really difficult at times to step out of that. Sometimes we have the support of friends and families. Often we don't. They think we're abandoning them. It makes it hard. So many people don't have a sense that it's okay to do this for themselves. "It's just being selfish"—that's our cultural misunderstanding.

I want to say yes, we are incredibly privileged. No matter how difficult it was for us to get here, there are many people in the world who don't have the physical possibility.

I was just in Burma for some weeks, and so was Steve. We were doing different things. But in terms of our privilege, no matter how hard our life is—and I'm not saying this as a guilt thing at all—it's more a sense of gratitude, to appreciate the possibilities of what we can do here.

I was in Burma, and one of the things we were doing: someone had given a few of us friends a couple of thousand dollars and asked us specifically to go through the village around the monastery where we were staying and find some of the worst, most tumbledown shacks where people were living. Believe me, it's really hard to pick out the worst because they are pretty bad. We're talking about little bamboo shacks with thatched roofs full of holes. A house that only has two walls. Four ladies living in this community in a house with two walls, completely open to everything, with only one little latrine for seventeen houses way over there. The floor is these bamboo poles with huge holes in between them. And that's not even the worst.

In terms of doing this, which in some way was lovely to be able to do, seeing not just the poverty but the quality of people's lives—seeing how different people in similar situations can be so different. There are some people where the husband had died, he was an alcoholic, the sixteen-year-old daughter had to leave school in the last year—which is a really hard thing, to get to the last year, to have enough money to do it, and then have to leave to work in a factory to support the other kids—and the mother's cooking little fried things outside the house. And this family was so filled with light. They were so beautiful, so loving in this situation.

And then there are other families just completely beaten down, just completely dulled out. An old granny—I don't know how old—taking care of her four grandkids because the mother, who knows where the father ever was, was out doing really hard physical labor all the time. The granny was just barely relational. A lot of Burmese old women smoke these old cheroots, these thick stogie cigars. She'd just sit there smoking it and hand it to the three-year-old to put out. The six-year-old would light it for her. We were telling them about a free school, because a lot of these kids don't go to school—they can't even afford the school fees—and some nuns had started a free school up the road. So we're telling them about the school, and they just look at us with dead eyes. Too much to even figure out how to tell the kids to just walk up to the school fifteen minutes up the road.

Similar situations, but just to see. There are people who have no way to practice or look at their mind, or who have the chance—in Burma, there's meditation centers two feet down the road everywhere you are—but no interest, no energy, no possibility.

So that we're here, that we have the interest—I just want to say it's a wonderful thing. Appreciate that in yourself. Please let yourself feel grateful for the opportunity and for your interest.

The place I want to go with this is to say that some people actually don't understand what we're doing, think it's just some kind of—the classic thing—"Oh, he's just off meditating, staring at his navel for seven days." Have you heard people say that? Just kind of completely self-absorbed, selfish. Or some kind of esoteric mind game. The world is in such a state. There's so much suffering. There's so much cruelty. There's so much greed. And we're sitting here looking at the little subtleties of the movements of our mind. When my mind's in aversion, I can look and say, "What? Why don't you go out and do something useful? Just sitting here looking at how there's a little bit of aversion when somebody steps in front of you in line, and oh, I'm so upset about it." It's like, "Come on, get over yourself." That's aversion. "Get over yourself"—that's aversion.

I just want to say, for me, it's not a little esoteric mind game. These habits, when we don't see them—the greed, the aversion, the confusion, the self-judgment that show up here—when we don't see them here, when we don't have the awareness, when we don't trust awareness, when we fall into these habits, when we have wrong view, not understanding things as they are, that's going to impact how we understand the world, the choices we make, and how we act.

Look at the world. What's running the decisions? Pick a government, any government, pretty much any government. Are you inspired to look at how it goes about its business? We're in the US. Definitely not inspiring to me how they go about their business. I don't get a lot of wisdom and compassion coming out of it. There's some beaten down efforts, but pick anywhere.

To me—and of course I've spent my life doing this, so I'm biased—to me it's so important. Because when we understand things as they are, when we're in a situation in our life, we can see it more clearly. And then with the wisdom, the natural effect of wisdom... We were reading that thing last night, I forget exactly how the translation went, but you know the usual one: "Do good deeds, avoid causing harm, and purify the mind. This is the teaching of all the Buddhas."

The effect of purifying the mind—and that's what we're doing. Any moment of pure awareness is a moment of purifying the mind, purifying the consciousness. In that moment, just in that moment, when there's not this confusion, this self-involvement, this greed, the thought of doing harm doesn't arise. Just like greed makes no sense, selfishness makes no sense, causing harm makes no sense—it doesn't arise. The natural actions of a mind and a heart, just in the moment that it's pure, will be more of compassion, connectedness, caring, or just equanimity, non-reactivity, just doing what needs to be done in the moment. Not thinking it out. The next moment we might be confused again.

Seeing how this is true for all of us, the small little habits here can really manifest in a big way.

This summer I was in Munich for a month or so. I often go to Germany. But this summer I had more time there than usual, and on one Sunday I was able to go to visit Dachau, which I had never had time to do before. That was one of the concentration camps in World War II, just outside of Munich. You can get there quite easily on the rail line. They made it into a museum. I'd never visited another one. I went by myself, which was really great.

In a weird way, it was a very powerful experience, of course. But it was—it's hard for me to find the words when I try to describe it—it was very grounding. It really reconfirmed in a very powerful way the importance of this practice, the importance of purifying the mind.

It's set up, I think, very well. The grounds are beautiful, and mostly the buildings are gone, but there are a couple of buildings that were left as samples of some of the dorms. Then it's set up like a museum. You go in the building and they have big placards, posters, with writing and photographs of all different aspects—the people who came here, different things that happened, the people that worked there, all kinds of things you wouldn't have known about.

For example, in one room there would be a big poster, one for each of the different nationalities or ethnic groups of people that were in this particular camp—Dachau. Many different groups: the Roma, people from Czechoslovakia, people from Hungary, the Jews, gay people, all different. What I thought was brilliant was that it wouldn't just be writing. They would have photos. They would describe a particular

scenario. And then they would have a picture of a person and a name. There was a way that they made it real, that they allowed the mind to connect. Whether it was guards, whether it was people who were working there in different ways, or people that were helping the trains run—all different. So there was a sense of real human beings, and vastness. It was vast. There had been so many buildings. My friends told me, "Oh, this is one of the little ones."

What struck me was this sense that made it human. You see different people. And when you see a person, you can't just go—I couldn't just go off into—"Oh, this was some monsters who did this." First of all, this kind of cruelty targeting one group against another—we all know that didn't just happen in Germany in World War II. You could really see... What's going on in the Congo. What's going on in Guantanamo. What's going on in Sudan. What happened in Cambodia. Look at the Burmese government against its own people.

Looking at the way they made it human for me—I was watching all the different people going through, all kinds of normal people—and I would watch how this way of making it real was intense but not overwhelming. There was some way it was really accessible. I could see how people would start to look, and then they would get really moved, but not turned off, really there. It was really drawing people in. It was very touching.

But what it did for me was this: this is the human condition. Who knows? I don't know what I would do if I were in a situation where... We don't know the power of denial in our mind when we have to make choices.

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