

Redeeming the past? Overcoming: Overcoming

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [February 13, 2002](#) issue

Lawrence Langer explains in *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* that written accounts of life in the Nazi concentration camps often seek to integrate the Holocaust experience into a larger structure of meaning. Holocaust then becomes a testimony to the “indomitable human spirit,” an example of growing through suffering, a proof that moral integrity is possible even under extreme duress, a source of a more informed sense of ourselves as human beings, and so on. (Langer’s book is based on videotaped testimonies located in the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University.)

Oral testimonies, on the other hand, show that in the lived memory of the survivors, the Holocaust experience refuses to be tamed and appears, instead, to be something that *cannot* be integrated into a larger narrative of meaningful life.

Consider the dilemma of Abraham P. When he and his family arrived at Auschwitz from Hungary, his parents were sent to the left (to their death) while he, two older brothers and a younger brother were sent to the right. Abraham P. recalls:

I told my little kid brother, I said to him, “Solly, go to poppa and mamma.” And like a little kid, he followed—he did. Little did I know that I sent him to the crematorium. I am . . . I feel like I killed him. . . . I wonder what my mother and father were thinking, especially when they were all . . . when they all went into the crematorium. I can’t get it out of my head. It hurts me, it bothers me and I don’t know what to do.

Can one give meaning to this experience? Not according to Langer. “Harmony and integration,” he argues, “are not only impossible—they are not desirable.”

But can we afford to reject integration and harmony? With Langer, I believe that we must. And yet over the course of past decades, the belief that identity has a narrative structure is prevalent, and it seems almost impossible to reject this belief.

Consider Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*. He claims that, as a basic condition of making sense of ourselves, we must "grasp our lives in a narrative":

We want our lives to have meaning, or weight or substance, or to grow towards some fullness . . . But this means our *whole* lives. If necessary, we want the future to "redeem" the past, to make it part of a life story which has sense or purpose, to take it up in a meaningful unity.

It is not only philosophers who tell us that our whole past life must be integrated into a meaningful unity. A good deal of trauma literature echoes the same idea. In *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body and Society*, Basl A. Van der Kolk and Alexander C. McFarlane argue that since patients cannot change their past, traumatic memories must be "placed in their proper context and reconstructed in a personally meaningful way." In other words, "giving meaning is a central goal of therapy." But should it be? Holocaust testimonies strongly urge us against this move. They tell of experiences which stubbornly refuse to be integrated into a meaningful whole.

Just the other day I was talking about these issues with a group of pastors. One of them suggested that we should not think so much of "events" and "experiences" as being redeemed, but of *people* as redeemed. So it is in a good deal of the Christian tradition. Think of Gregory of Nyssa and his vision of the eschatological movement of the soul—a soul which, like the apostle Paul in Philippians 3, forgets what is behind and stretches itself out toward that infinite ocean which is God. Such a soul, says Gregory, "no longer gives any place in itself either to hope or to memory. It has what it was hoping for, and it drives out memory from its mind in its occupation with the enjoyment of good things." Or think of Luther's "wonderful exchange" between Christ the bridegroom and Christian the bride in *The Freedom of a Christian*:

He suffered, died and descended into hell that he might overcome them all. Now since it was such a one who did all this, and death and hell could not swallow him up, these were necessarily swallowed up by him in a mighty duel; for his righteousness is greater than the sins of all men, his life stronger than death, his salvation more invincible than hell.

Narrative integration into a larger framework of meaning? Nothing of the sort! In Gregory's account of salvation, memory of the past is not given meaning but driven from the mind. In Luther's account, sin—along with death and hell—are not taken up

into a meaningful unity but swallowed up by Christ. If wounded and sinful people are to find redemption, they need a robust understanding of salvation, one in which “driving out” and “overcoming” play no less important a role than “integrating” and “harmonizing.”