The Silence That Remains

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Please note, this work includes content related to discussion of the Holocaust and themes of trauma and loss.

When I was younger, I thought everything had a reason. If it rained, it was because the world needed it. If the sun came back out, it was because someone decided we deserved warmth again. Even pain had purpose, at least that is what I was taught. It made the world easier to hold. There was always a why, and I thought the why was supposed to make it hurt less.

But growing up taught me how little the world obeys stories. Kind people suffer. Cruel ones succeed. A child dies while another person wastes a century. The sky stays silent in one place and floods another. Nothing explains any of it.

That silence is where Albert Camus begins. He calls the absurd "the confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (The Myth of Sisyphus, p. 28). There is the hunger for meaning, and then there is the world's blank stare. I have felt that stare. It is the lump in my throat when I prayed and realized no one answered. It is the stillness after bad news when everything in the room keeps going except me.

Absurdism, to me, is not chaos or despair. It is honesty. It is looking at the world exactly as it is, without a filter of divine order or destiny. It says: yes, we want purpose, but the world does not hand us one. So what then?

To understand that question, I had to stand between three siblings of thought that people often confuse. Existentialism says existence comes before essence and that we live first and make meaning afterward through choice and responsibility. Nihilism insists there is no meaning at all, that choice is decoration over a void. Absurdism lives in the space between them. It made the world easier to hold. There was always a why, and I thought the why was supposed to make it hurt less. It admits our need for meaning and the world's refusal to supply it, and still asks how to live. Matthew Bowker writes that "Absurdity appears most forcefully when we refuse to accept the arbitrary limits that define human existence" (Rethinking Politics and Absurdity, p. 41). That sentence freed me. Meaning is not waiting somewhere else. It is the work we do here.

I grew up surrounded by people who believed they had found that meaning already. My grandfather escaped Hungary during the Second World War. He told me once that faith was the only thing he could carry that soldiers could not take from him. He prayed to survive, and when he did, he never stopped. When the Nazis invaded, he was six. He saw buildings fall, and the air itself turn into ash. I imagine the hopelessness of it, a kind that must have felt like breathing through loss itself. The absurd was not theory then; it was the weather.

The records of the time describe it the same way. As historian Saul Friedländer wrote of Europe under occupation, "The void in which people found themselves was not metaphorical. It was a collapse of all human structure" (The Years of Extermination,

Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 23). That void was the absurd made real, the confrontation between moral expectation and senseless horror. My grandfather filled it with prayer because he had nothing else. Faith was the one thing that could make the silence bearable. It was a language against chaos, a way of naming what could not be understood. I think about that sometimes when I read Camus, how both faith and philosophy are different dialects of the same fear.

After the war, he immigrated to the United States and became a Seventh-day Adventist, the kind of believer who treats time itself as sacred. The smell of stew and strong tea filled the house, his Bible open beside the ticking clock. He'd hum a hymn under his breath, soft enough that it sounded like thinking. They ate vegetables, drank water, and spoke softly.

I watched him from the edge of that world. I liked the rhythm of it, the quiet houses on Saturdays, the long walks, the way everyone seemed lighter when they stopped counting hours. It felt like magic, but it was discipline. The faith that carried him through the war carried him through every week afterward. I admire it still. He found a system that held him when the rest of the world collapsed, a meaning to practice faith, the very same faith that kept him alive.

I am not a Seventh-day Adventist. I am not anything, really. I cannot make myself believe in a god, no matter how much I respect the ones who do. My parents never talked about religion, but almost everyone else in my family did. I grew up half inside that faith, half outside it. When I was young, I hated myself for not feeling anything at all. Everyone else spoke to God like an old friend, and I just sat there pretending I understood the language. I tried to pray, but it felt like pretending. I wondered what was wrong with me that belief would not come.

Sometimes I still go to family Sabbaths when I visit them, more out of habit than faith. The songs and prayers sound like a language I used to know but can no longer speak. Everyone closes their eyes and thanks a God I cannot find, and I sit there wondering if they ever really hear Him either. The quiet feels rehearsed, like a play we all agreed to perform. The Harvard Theological Review calls this "awe at the absence of God" (vol. 113, p. 178). I know that absence well. My grandfather filled it with belief; I fill it with awareness. He found comfort in the name "God." I find mine in admitting the silence never left.

There were times when that silence almost swallowed me. Depression turns philosophy into weight. There is the need for a reason to get up, and there is the world's answer, a quiet too heavy to move through. I learned to build reasons from the ground up. Make the bed. Drink the water. Step outside. The Yale Law Review describes this as "acknowledging incoherence without being destroyed by it" (vol. 133, p. 2421). I did not need heaven. I needed morning.

Sometimes, when I think of my grandfather, I picture his Bible. It sits on the same wooden table it always has. The pages are thin and the corners bent from decades of turning. That Bible is the object that connects us, not in belief but in endurance. His faith made him open it every day. My awareness makes me look at it and see the same thing he saw: the need to keep going.

Camus said, "To live is to keep the absurd alive" (p. 54). I used to think that sounded cruel, but now I understand. To live is to continue asking the question even after the universe stops answering. Every small act, a shower, a phone call, a joke, is rebellion. The Harvard Theological Review adds, "Meaning is found in the awe of finitude itself" (p. 179). Finitude, the fact that everything ends, is not a curse. It gives weight to every moment I have.

Sometimes, when I feel lost, I remember that we are just on a floating rock. People say that as a joke, but I think it is the most accurate statement ever made. It carries the same energy as Sisyphus pushing

his rock up the hill: hopeless and defiant at once.

Bowker explains that "absurdity has political consequences because it denies the fantasy that history or progress will redeem us" (p. 92). The rock keeps floating no matter how much we vote or pray. That should be depressing, but it is liberating. If no one is keeping score, every act of kindness counts absolutely.

When I visit my grandfather now, he still reads his Bible every morning. He still prays before every meal. He still believes that Sabbath keeps the world from falling apart. I sit beside him with my coffee and my questions. He asks me if I believe yet. I tell him I believe he needed faith and it saved him. I believe I need honesty and it saves me. We are two people in the same quiet, building different kinds of meaning out of the same absence.

The same sky stays quiet but it keeps showing up, and maybe that's the only kind of answer we ever get.

The sky above us has never answered a single prayer. It still manages to be beautiful. That is enough for me.

But sometimes beauty feels cruel. When I read about what happened during the war my grandfather lived through, I wonder how the world could keep being beautiful while so much of it was burning. It is hard to imagine silence that loud, the kind that hums beneath the sound of bombs and trains and orders shouted in languages people no longer recognize. Historian Saul Friedländer describes it as "the collapse of all human structure" (The Years of Extermination, p. 23). That collapse was not only political or moral, it was existential. People were stripped not just of their lives but of the illusion that life made sense at all.

My grandfather never spoke about what he saw, but I can still feel it in the pauses of his stories. He once said that faith was the only thing the Nazis could not take from him. I used to think that meant he found proof of God in suffering. Now I think it means he needed something that could outlast logic. When the world became absurd in the ugliest possible way, faith was his rebellion. Viktor Frankl, who survived Auschwitz, wrote that "those who have a 'why' to live can bear almost any 'how'" (Man's Search for Meaning, p. 104). My grandfather's "why" was belief. Mine has always been the question itself.

I think I inherited his restlessness, not his religion. I was raised around people who believed the world had purpose, but I could never feel it. My parents were not religious, but everyone else seemed to be. I learned the prayers, the Sabbath rhythms, the rules of reverence. I learned how to bow my head even when I did not believe. But beneath all of it, I felt like an intruder. I wanted faith to fill me the way it filled them. I wanted the words to mean something. When they didn't, I turned that failure inward. I thought disbelief was a flaw, a moral weakness, a kind of quiet sin.

It took years for me to realize that disbelief can be its own form of truth. I do not mean rebellion for rebellion's sake. I mean the courage to admit when the story no longer fits. When I finally stopped forcing myself to believe, the silence that followed felt unbearable. But after a while, I started to hear other things inside it: the sound of wind, the low hum of the refrigerator, my own heartbeat. I had been so focused on waiting for a divine voice that I had missed everything else speaking in its place.

Absurdism gave that silence language, the way light gives shape to dust. It didn't answer anything, but it made the emptiness visible. Camus said that once we recognize the absurd, we face a choice: to reject life or to live without appeal. I think about that choice every morning. The absurd does not ask us to stop living; it asks us to live knowing that there is no reason beyond living itself. It asks, if there is no point, why do we still feel the need to do things? The answer I think is because doing is the only evidence we have that we are still here.

The act becomes the meaning itself. My

grandfather's prayer meant survival. My writing means staying alive in another way. My writing is meaning. The person who gets out of bed and waters the plant is creating meaning, whether they realize it or not. It is not grand or eternal, but it is something.

When I was younger, I wanted the world to hand me a purpose, the way my grandfather believed his God handed him one. I wanted life to be a contract, effort on my end, reward on the other. But that is not how the world works. The world offers nothing but itself. We build purpose out of habit, out of persistence, out of the small refusal to stop trying.

There are still nights when I ask what the point of all this is, when I look at the sky and feel the same emptiness my grandfather must have felt in the dark after the air raids. But the question no longer paralyzes me. It keeps me moving. The philosopher Matthew Bowker describes this as "transforming despair into creative freedom" (Rethinking Politics and Absurdity, p. 101). I understand that now. Creation is the only answer to the void.

I think of Camus's Sisyphus again, walking down the hill to his stone. Everyone calls it punishment, but I see it as survival. He pushes because that is what it means to be human. There is no finish line, no prize, only the act itself.

My grandfather's Bible still sits on his table. It is worn from decades of use, the edges of its pages darkened by his hands. To him, that book was proof that someone was listening. To me, it is proof that even in the worst conditions, humans keep reaching for something, even when they know nothing is there. That reaching, that persistence, might be the closest thing we have to meaning.

The absurd teaches me that existence itself is enough. There is no reason we are here, no guarantee that any of this matters, and yet we keep building, praying, writing, loving, surviving. That is what makes us absurd and what makes us beautiful.

The sky still does not answer, but maybe the point was never to be answered. Maybe the point was simply to ask.

The more I think about my grandfather's story, the more I realize that survival itself is a kind of argument. He lived through a time when everything that makes life bearable (home, morality, safety) collapsed. People became numbers. Hope became dangerous. Friedländer called it "the collapse of all human structure." The collapse was not only political, but truly it was spiritual. When I try to picture my grandfather, then at six years old, walking through a city that no longer knew its name, I can almost hear that silence Camus wrote about, the world's refusal to explain itself.

That kind of silence does not end when the war does. It lingers in the generations that follow. My grandfather found God in that silence; I found the absurd. He believed that the world still had order, even if it was hidden. I believe there is no order, and that the human need to invent it is what makes us beautiful and foolish at once.

Sometimes I ask myself why we keep doing anything if none of it matters. I don't have some smart answer. I just know stopping feels worse. Why read, work, love, or dream when the end is already written? The question is not depressing to me anymore. It feels honest. Camus said that "to work and to create 'for nothing,' to carve in the clay of life, to make a face without hope of eternity–that is man's victory." When I first read that, I underlined the words "for nothing." They felt heavy. Now I understand them differently. To do something for nothing means to free it from reward. It means you act because you are alive, not because you are waiting for applause.

Every person I know has their own version of that survival. My grandfather prayed every morning for seventy years. My friends write poems no one will read. My neighbor tends to her garden even though frost will take it every winter. We keep making and doing because doing is the closest we

come to existing on purpose.

Bowker wrote that absurdity "transforms despair into creative freedom." That is what keeps me going. The moment you stop needing a reason, you start having a choice. If there is no divine purpose, then everything you create, every act of love, kindness, or curiosity, exists against the odds. The absence of meaning becomes a space where we can build.

Existentialism says that existence comes before essence, but I think absurdism goes further. It says essence may never come at all, and that is fine. Living the absurd means carrying the knowledge of meaninglessness without letting it crush you. It means learning how to keep walking while holding that truth like a stone in your pocket. Heavy, but manageable.

There are still nights when I feel the weight of it. When the world feels too wide and my life too small. When I think of all the people who died for causes they didn't understand, or the ones who never got to ask why. The philosopher Viktor Frankl wrote that even in a concentration camp, "life holds a potential meaning under any condition, even the most miserable" (Frankl, 2006). He found his in the belief that suffering could teach. I do not share that belief, but I understand the impulse. We invent reasons because we cannot stand the void.

The absurd life is an act of attention. It is not denial, and it is not optimism. It is simply awareness. It looks at the pain, the joy, the futility, and does not turn away. Camus called that rebellion. To look directly at the absurd and continue to live is to revolt. Not by violence, but by persistence.

I think about that each time I visit my grandfather now. He sits at his kitchen table, his Bible beside a cup of black coffee. The light from the window hits the gold lettering on the cover. To him, that book is proof that someone listens. To me, it is proof that humans cannot stop talking to the silence. We speak into it, not because it will answer, but because we cannot stand not to speak. Maybe that is the real purpose: to fill the silence with something human.

There is a part of me that envies his certainty. Faith gives you edges, boundaries, something to rest against. I have none of that. I have only motion. I am constantly arriving, constantly losing and remaking my meaning. But maybe motion itself is the only permanence we get.

The world does not explain itself, but it also does not stop offering itself. There are mornings when I wake up and, for no reason, feel the pull to keep going. Not because I expect reward, but because there is more to notice. The absurd does not promise redemption; it promises awareness. And awareness is enough.

When I walk home at night and see the streetlights flicker across the asphalt, I think of how strange it is that I am here at all. That anyone is. The fact that consciousness even exists might be the most unreasonable thing in the universe. Maybe that is why Camus said we must imagine Sisyphus happy. The point is not the top of the hill; the point is that we can still imagine.

We live as if meaning can be made, and in doing so, we make it. That is the quiet paradox of absurdism. There is no purpose, but there is purpose-making. We are not built to stop searching. We are built to reach out, even when we know there is nothing to reach for.

The question I ask myself now is not why anything matters. It is why we keep asking why. Maybe the act of asking is the most human thing about us. Maybe the need to understand is our version of faith. Not belief in a higher power, but belief in the question itself.

My grandfather's prayers and my writing are the same gesture performed in different languages. Both are acts of reaching toward meaning. Both are forms of defiance. Both admit the world is indifferent and continue anyway.

There are no grand conclusions here. There

is only endurance, awareness, and a kind of quiet love for the world despite itself. The absurd is not something to solve. It is something to live inside.

Sometimes I think about how strange it is that anything exists at all. The sky, the noise of traffic, the way my coffee cools in its cup. All of it continues whether I understand it or not. I do not think the world was made for us. It does not bend itself toward our stories or our suffering. It simply moves. Camus wrote that "the struggle itself is enough to fill a man's heart." I think what he meant is that life's value isn't found in its reason but in its experience. The act of living is the answer to its own question.

When I look back on everything, my grandfather's survival, my family's faith, my own disbelief, I see the same thing running through it all. The refusal to stop. Whether it was prayer or persistence, something in us refuses to give in to nothingness. My grandfather believed that God carried him through the war. I believe that the human instinct to continue carried him. Both ideas might mean the same thing.

I have read enough history to know what hopelessness looks like. There are photos from the war where the people are not even people anymore, just outlines of endurance. They are evidence that consciousness can exist even in hell. Maybe that is what Frankl meant when he said, "When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves." The absurd does not demand we fix the world; it demands we witness it. It asks us to look, to feel, and to stay.

There are still days when the silence feels like a weight pressing on my chest. Days when the news makes it impossible to believe that progress is anything more than illusion. Bowker was right when he said that "absurdity denies the fantasy that history or progress will redeem us." The world keeps circling, indifferent, repeating its mistakes. There is no divine lesson waiting for us at the end of it. There is only what we do with the time we have.

I do not pray. I do not believe in an afterlife. I do not think anyone is keeping track of what I do here. But I am still moved by the smallest things: a song that feels like memory, the smell of rain, the first breath of cold air in autumn. These moments do not mean anything beyond themselves, yet they make me want to stay. Maybe that is the paradox of being human: even when we know there is no reason to continue, we still do.

When I was younger, I thought meaning was something handed down, like a secret or an inheritance. Now I know it is something we build and then rebuild every day. It never lasts. It isn't supposed to. The absence of permanence is what makes life vivid. The absurd reminds me that nothing is guaranteed. Not happiness, not purpose, not tomorrow, and somehow that makes everything feel more alive.

Love makes more sense to me now. It is not sacred because it lasts; it is sacred because it doesn't. To love someone knowing they will leave or die is to accept the absurd fully. It is to care in spite of futility. My grandfather once told me that love was proof of God. I think love is proof of humanity. We love even when it hurts, even when it fails, even when it cannot save us. That is what makes it real.

There is a painting in my grandfather's house that I used to stare at as a child. It shows a hill at dusk, a single tree at its peak, and the suggestion of a road winding upward. I never liked it much when I was younger; it felt too still, too quiet. Now I see it differently. It reminds me of Sisyphus. The hill, the climb, the inevitable descent. The point is not the top but the movement itself. Maybe we are all pushing our own stones, waiting for them to roll back, and calling that waiting hope.

Absurdism has not given me answers. It has given me perspective. It tells me that the universe will remain silent no matter how many times I ask why. It tells me that I will die and that everything I build will fade. But it also tells me that none of this

erases the fact that I am here now, aware, alive, able to look at the sky and call it beautiful.

When my grandfather prays, I sometimes watch him quietly. His lips move, his eyes close, his hands rest on the table. There is peace in that gesture. I do not share his belief, but I understand the need behind it. We both want to connect to something larger than ourselves. For him, it is God. For me, it is the world itself, its indifference, its persistence, its impossible beauty.

The sky above us has never answered a single prayer. It does not need to. It holds the same sun that rose over the camps and the same moon that watched over the ones who escaped. It keeps moving, and so do we. Maybe that is the point.

We do not need a higher purpose to live. We live because we can. We create because the silence demands an echo. We love because it reminds us that we are not alone in our confusion. Every act, no matter how small, is a conversation with meaninglessness. And every time we speak, we prove that meaninglessness never wins.

I think that is what I believe now. Not in heaven, not in destiny, but in the quiet persistence of being. The absurd is not a problem to solve. It is a condition to inhabit. And once you stop trying to make the silence speak, you start hearing everything else: the wind, the laughter, your own heartbeat, the sound of existence continuing.

I do not know if my grandfather's God exists. I do not know if anything waits after this. But I know that the sky is still beautiful, and that I am still here to see it. Maybe that is enough.

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