

James G. Robinson
EWP Practicum / Pat Hoy

Dear Yulia,

I've rarely met a question I didn't have an answer for – or a joke, at least – but I was taken aback last week when you asked why I was always so happy. It was a nice thing to say, to be sure, but you barely know me; we bump into each other at school, and we've taken a few classes together, and share a laugh every now and then. And yet your simple question struck me speechless.

So, I've decided to ask myself the same question: why am I so happy? Perhaps, I suppose, luck has something to do with it. Grief has avoided me, for the most part, and for that I am thankful. Yet within my heart festers a fear that someday it will arrive without warning, out of the blue, and a perfectly normal day will be shattered by the news that my life has irrevocably changed. I know this happens because it happened to a good friend of mine a few years ago, out of the blue, without warning, and although he never shared those emotions I've seen them in his eyes.

My father knows those emotions too. Mick Robinson, his dad, died forty years ago this month, the twenty-sixth of Av on the Hebrew calendar, in Auckland, New Zealand. He was playing cards with the boys, as he did every Friday night, when he collapsed, leaving my father – just sixteen years old – in the same predicament. And so, this year I find myself listening to my father and my uncle as they recite *Kaddish* in his memory, surrounded by Chassids in black hats and white shirts swaying to the soft, turbulent rhythms of whispered prayers.

Although I do not speak Hebrew, I usually know enough of the important prayers to follow the service. Here, I am easily lost; the hectic, purposeful Chassidic pacing is too much for me. So during the silent meditation I gaze at the page of the prayerbook, losing myself in the stark black-on-white lettering of unfamiliar words as I am myself subsumed by the silent, quivering passion of the room. The murmurs of those around me inhabit the page; I may not know what they are saying or what it means but it is enough for me that it means something.

Enveloped by those monochrome words, those colorless mourners, I'm reminded of a painting by Gerhard Richter called "Townscape Madrid", a stark black-and-white aerial view of a ten-block-square city neighborhood. From afar, the scene seems rigidly defined, but when one moves closer ordinary building windows reveal themselves as irregularly oblong ellipses, daubed on monochrome boxes, suddenly teetering along trembling, rough edges. Standing just a few inches from the painting even this structure disappears; at this scale, the strokes now loom large as abstract, muddy Rorschach blots. A viewer's baffled eyes vacillate between the blurred resolution of these colorless, chiaroscuro strokes and the structural realism of the whole, giving the painting an oddly cool, sun-drenched glare.

You grew up in Russia, so you know that glare. Cold weather has it too; a sharp, piercing glaze unencumbered by the humid haze of heat. It's a subtle warning, that light. Seven winters ago, I trudged back and forth through that glare, surrounded by wind and frost across Riga and Warsaw and Vilnius and Minsk, from square to park to cemetery and back again, crossing the same streets over and over again, from all different directions; hoping that my eyes could somehow glimpse a certain building from a certain

height and a certain angle and the city would suddenly be revealed to me as it was when my great-grandparents or great-aunts or great-uncles lived there a century ago. It was, of course, a naive and unhappy hope. Buildings last, but neighborhoods are fragile. They come and go, evaporating across generations in even untroubled cities.

Yes, I visited Auschwitz, a place where countless Jews had died, but I was just as saddened to see the places where my ancestors had lived; the chill of Auschwitz was there too. The old Jewish neighborhoods were busy but ordinary, no different from any other, although the synagogues in each city that Hitler had ordered preserved as museums of the extinct Jewish race still stood, the last residences of a dispersed and destroyed culture. They were filled with kiddush cups and prayer books and silverware, all under glass and bathed by a cool halogen glow.

Andy's family is not particularly religious, but when we went to sit *shiva* with him after his father died I saw that light again. He stood underneath low fluorescents in the kitchen, awkwardly formal amongst the cookies and celery stalks and dip, adjusting to the emptiness of a house full of strangers. None of us knew how to mourn, so instead, we did what we knew how to do. We laughed and joked and told bad jokes and laughed some more. I don't know whether we were trying to cope with that grief or avoid it, but it worked. For three hours, he was alive, unencumbered by the death that surrounded him.

Elie Weisel relates a story told by the Chassidic sage Reb Nachman of Bratslav':

Once upon a time there was a country that encompassed all the countries of the world. And in that country, there was a town that incorporated all the towns of the country; and in that town there was a street in which were gathered all the streets of the town; and on that street there was a house that sheltered all the houses of the street; and in that house there was a room, and in that room there was a man, and that man personified all men of all countries, and that man

laughed and laughed -- no one had ever laughed like that before.

And who was that man? asks Weisel, puzzled. He does not know.

But I have a guess. It was Andy, trying to mask or mend those shattered days through a few hours of laughter. Or perhaps it is each of us, alone, when we are surrounded by a grief that seems to extend to the end of the world and back again, when, like Reb Nachman, we have nothing else to do but throw up our hands and revel in what Weisel calls a "laughter that springs from lucid and desperate awareness ... laughter of protest against the absurdities of existence, a laughter of revolt against a universe where man, whatever he may do, is condemned in advance."

Maybe I seem happy because I can still laugh, unencumbered by grief. I cannot imagine having the courage to laugh in the face of death, and I pray I never will.

Or perhaps I simply seem happy because you have never seen me sad.

James