

Herman Hesse, 1919 (letter to a friend)

– from <https://www.brainpickings.org/2018/12/12/hermann-hesse-letter-to-a-young-german/>

You write me that you are in despair and do not know what to believe, what to hope. You do not know whether or not there is a God. You do not know whether or not life has any meaning, whether or not love of country has a meaning, whether, in the wretched condition of the world, it is better to strive for spiritual goods or merely to fill your belly.

I believe your state of mind and soul to be the right one. Not to know whether there is a God, not to know whether there is good and evil, is far better than to know for sure.

Five years ago, if you remember, I should say you were pretty well convinced there was a God, and above all you had no doubt as to what was good and what was evil. Naturally you did what you thought was good and marched off to war. For five years now, the best years of your youth, you have kept on doing “good”: you have fired a gun, gone over the top, lounged about in barracks and mud holes, buried comrades or bandaged their wounds. And little by little you began to doubt the good, to suspect that the good and glorious occupation you were engaged in was fundamentally evil, or at the very least stupid and absurd.

And so it was. Evidently the good you were so sure of at the time was not the right good, the good that is indestructible and timeless; and evidently the God you knew in those days was not the right God... Hundreds of thousands of bloody battle sacrifices were offered up to him, and in his honor hundreds of thousands of bellies were slit open, hundreds of thousands of lungs torn to pieces; he was more bloodthirsty and brutal than any idol...

Has anyone stopped to consider, and to wonder at the fact, that in those four years of war our theologians buried their own religion, their own Christianity? Committed to the service of love, they preached hatred; committed to the service of humanity, they mistook for humanity the authorities who paid them.

We are all of us equally guilty and innocent of the fact that our faith was so weak and our officially patented God so ruthless, that we were so incapable of distinguishing war and peace, good and evil. You and I, the Kaiser and the priest, all played a part; we have no call to accuse one another.

[...]

It is childish and stupid to ask whether this one or that one is guilty. I propose that for one short hour we ask ourselves instead: “What about myself? What has been my share of the guilt? When have I been too loudmouthed, too arrogant, too credulous, too boastful? What is there in me that may have helped... all the illusions that have so suddenly collapsed?”

If you are now wondering where to look for consolation, where to seek a new and better God, a new and better faith, you will surely realize, in your present loneliness and despair, that this time you must not look to external, official sources, to Bibles, pulpits, or thrones, for enlightenment. Nor to me. You can find it only in yourself. And there it is, there dwells the God who is higher

and more selfless... The sages of all time have proclaimed him, but he does not come to us from books, he lives within us, and all our knowledge of him is worthless unless he opens our inner eye. This God is in you too. He is most particularly in you, the dejected and despairing... Search where you may, no prophet or teacher can relieve you of the need to look within... Don't confine yourself... to any other prophet or guide. Our mission is not to instruct you, to make things easier for you, to show you the way. Our mission is solely to remind you that there is a God and only one God; he dwells in your hearts, and it is there that you must seek him out and speak with him.

May our eyes remain open even in the face  
of tragedy.  
May we not become disheartened.  
May we find in the dissolution  
of our apathy and denial,  
the cup of the broken heart.  
May we discover the gift of the fire burning  
in the inner chamber of our being –  
burning great and bright enough  
to transform any poison.  
May we offer the power of our sorrow to the  
service  
of something greater than ourselves.  
May our guilt not rise up to form  
yet another defensive wall.  
May the suffering purify and not paralyze  
us.

~ The Terma Collective

May we realize the greatness of our sorrow  
and not run from its touch or flame.  
May clarity be our ally and wisdom our  
support.  
May our wrath be cleansing, cutting through  
the confusion of denial and greed.  
May we not be afraid to see or speak our  
truth.  
May the bleakness of the wasteland be  
dispelled.  
May the soul's journey be revealed  
and the true hunger fed.  
May we be forgiven for what we have  
forgotten  
and blessed with the remembrance  
of who we really are.

Just try it once — a tree, or at least a considerable section of sky, is to be seen anywhere. It does not even have to be blue sky; in some way or another the light of the sun always makes itself felt. Accustom yourself every morning to look for a moment at the sky and suddenly you will be aware of the air around you, the scent of morning freshness that is bestowed on you between sleep and labor. You will find every day that the gable of every house has its own particular look, its own special lighting. Pay it some heed if you will have for the rest of the day a remnant of satisfaction and a touch of coexistence with nature. Gradually and without effort the eye trains itself to transmit many small delights, to contemplate nature and the city streets, to appreciate the inexhaustible fun of daily life. From there on to the fully trained artistic eye is the smaller half of the journey; the principal thing is the beginning, the opening of the eyes.

- Herman Hesse (again)