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# Stories of the Holocaust: Teaching the Hidden Narrative

Barbara Vacarr, Ph.D.

Every November, as the world remembers the devastation of Kristallnacht, I teach the Stories of the Holocaust course. The idea of teaching the Holocaust through first person narratives of victims, perpetrators, bystanders, and rescuers took shape during a visit to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum with my father, a survivor of the Holocaust. It was in this visit that I fully realized the power of narratives as I uncovered the hidden narrative I share with my father. His inability to speak his experiences shaped my personal vision of who I am, of my father, and of the world. My father's silence kept me from fully knowing him and myself. In the absence of my father's stories, I shaped him in the image of Holocaust stereotypes. I perceived his silence in my life as the helpless weakness of the victim. Amidst the haunting images housed in the museum, my father began to tell me his escape stories. In his stories, I encountered my father the hero, and saw him as I had never seen him before, through eyes of compassion and deep admiration. This encounter with my father's heroism put me in touch with my own and I was moved to create the Stories of the Holocaust course.

My experience teaching "Stories of the Holocaust", as well as the experiences of my students, has given me a deep appreciation of the transformation that can take place in a safe learning environment. It has also clarified the institutional support that is necessary for constructing and participating in transformational education. The following discussion examines the ways in which the delivery, the process, and the content of this course work together to facilitate a transformational learning experience in which students are invited to discover the hidden narrative in theory.

Stories of the Holocaust is offered in a two weekend format with a month between the two weekends. Prior to the first weekend of class, students read first person narratives of Holocaust survivors, perpetrators, and bystanders. The first weekend of the course provides an immersion experience into the Holocaust. It is spent living and studying together as we visit the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and meet with survivors. In the month-long period between classes, students read ghetto diaries and rescuer narratives. The second weekend of the course is held on campus where students meet with a resistor and a Jehovah's Witness who tried to protect her family by joining the Hitler Youth. The emphasis during the second weekend is on deepening understanding through an examination of the themes contained within the narratives.

One of the fundamental strengths of the Stories of the Holocaust course is also one of its greatest challenges. In addition to being diverse culturally, students in this course come

from different schools within the College. Students come together from the Women's College, the Adult Baccalaureate College, and the graduate programs. Even within the same programs, students are pursuing different majors. Consequently, the challenge of the first weekend is to create an inclusive learning community. This challenge is addressed during the first stage of group development as students negotiate membership in the group. There is a distinct way in which the delivery and design of this particular course catalyzes this process. Being away from one's usual support systems, in combination with the difficult nature of the course material, contributes to a sense of vulnerability. This heightened vulnerability provides motivation for group cohesion.

The group process is initiated as we come together on Friday night in Washington D.C., where I begin by telling the story of my personal connection to the Holocaust, and the way that coming to terms with my own story led me to the creation of this course. In doing so, I model a way of speaking to the material that is personal and reflects the transformation of experience into action. Students follow by sharing stories of their personal or professional interests in the course and articulating their relationship to the material. Quite often this process becomes one of student's identifying their cultural backgrounds. Differences in identity are exposed and alliances within the group are formed.

Following introductions students meet in small groups to discuss the narratives read prior to class. In these discussions students identify themselves through their relationship to the narratives. Albert Speer's *Inside the Third Reich* engages students in a rich discussion that begins to bridge their own stories with those of the authors. As one of the most powerful men in Hitler's Germany, Speer's story is one from which students initially want to distance themselves. For many he becomes the personification of evil. However, as students discuss his life they are drawn into the very human story of abdicating responsibility for the promise of power. It is in this discussion that students begin to look at, question, and share their own experiences of responsibility and silence. Within these very personal experiences the polarity of good and evil is questioned. The group tentatively begins to consider the possibility that good and evil live commingled in the individual and in society. The idea that good and evil are not "different coins" is a difficult one, particularly in the context of personal experience. As I teach this class, I am continually confronted by students' desires to remain locked in the comfort of dualistic thinking. A student's comment made during this discussion speaks to the painful process of challenging this dualism, "what do you mean that we are all capable of evil in the same way that we are capable of great good? The people who did these things were evil. And no matter how much Speer fights with his own conscience, he was evil, ". The group gains strength as students support one another in the struggle to contain the polarities of experience. Beyond its centrality to the course, engaging in this struggle is essential in our development as moral human beings. As a Psychologist, I know that living in the tension of this struggle is the possibility for movement beyond the rigid confines of

dualistic categories. More importantly, our ability to truly engage one another in authentic interactions is contingent upon the development of more complex and contextual thinking.

For some American students, the Holocaust is an interesting and illuminating subject for studying human behavior, yet it remains removed in the past, something that happened fifty years ago to other people in other countries. For others, the Holocaust is an overwhelming but compelling emotional experience of traumatic horror. The polarities of these positions are bridged as students have an intimate experience with a survivor, rescuer, or resistor who spends a two to three hour period sharing the story of her/his pre-war, war, and post-war life. For those students whose only contact with the Holocaust has been in a history course or in a written narrative, this encounter is profound. The intimate nature of the encounter and the dialogue that focuses on the full story of a life create an empathetic connection with the storyteller. In her/his story we live the stories of our own relationships with mothers, fathers, siblings, and community. It is within this connection that we witness the unspeakable losses of the speaker which were the result of the same kind of stereotyping and racism that exist in our world today. In this connection we are also confronted with the complexities of both experience and history.

Inevitably, in the discussion that follows students wonder why people did not act differently, why they stood by silently, why they did not escape? The stories uncover a chilling reality about the world in which the Holocaust took place and the reality of our own complacency. Survivors speak about the step by step process in which events took place that belied the ultimate outcome. In each story lies the painful discovery of the very human experience of adjusting ourselves to the frightening realities in the world around us as we struggle to maintain control of that world. Their stories push us to realize the mistake of our attempt to construct meaning from questions that frame simplistic answers. As we struggle with dualistic thinking that seeks to place events in cause and effect relationships, the focus of the course shifts from an attempt to understand the "why" of the Holocaust to an inquiry into the "how". The course becomes a course of questions that defy easy answers. The first night of class ends with students looking to one another for support in dealing with the painful realities of the stories, and the discomfort of the void created by questions that have no simple answers.

The next two days are spent in the museum. For anyone who has not experienced the Holocaust museum in Washington D.C., words are inadequate approximations of the experience. The form of the museum follows its function to produce a visceral experience of confinement, powerlessness, despair, rage, and grief. Its brilliant design moves visitors more deeply, step by step, through the destruction of European Jewry. The museum experience is made more powerful by the encounter students have already had with a survivor. History has been given a name and a face to which the museum provides a disturbing context.

The first day in the museum is spent just walking through seeing history. On the second day, students walk through the museum in groups of three looking at the artifacts from the perspectives of victims, perpetrators, and the bystanders who appear in many of the museum's photographs. The objective of this configuration is to engage in perspective taking, and to attempt to see through "their" eyes. We return from the museum silenced, each of us isolated in our struggle for words. The silence is penetrated as each member of the group draws what cannot be spoken. Through our drawings we begin to make contact with each other and with the experience of the museum. The conversation reflects the difficulty of comprehending humanity's capacity for indifference. This discussion is made more personal by student's shocked reactions to the museum's portrayal of America's silence during the Holocaust. Shock yields to an uncomfortable self-examination as students begin to acknowledge the many ways in which we routinely remain silent and indifferent to oppression in our everyday lives. Anger at "those" bystanders shifts as students begin to tell stories of their own indifference.

I was very moved by the story of a young African-American woman who was clearly shaken by the things she saw in the museum, and was disconcerted by the fact that she had never before encountered the Holocaust. As she shared her reactions she spoke about her experience when she first came to college. She described her ambivalence in classes that seemed to spend so much time focusing on women's issues and women's oppression. Having grown up in an African American community, there were more immediate civil rights concerns that involved members of her community. She spoke eloquently to her growing realization that, "feminists are fighting for the same things as are people in my own community". She acknowledged her growing understanding that to dismiss the voices of women who are fighting for equality can lead to perpetuating and perpetrating the same kind of racism that she has experienced as a person of color. It was a powerful moment when she subsequently turned to the Jewish women in the class and asked them if they experienced the same kind of racism in this culture as she does. In the conversation that followed students shared stories of marginalization, realizing as they did so, that the same kind of racism portrayed in the museum is an inescapable reality for members of society whose appearance marks them as different from dominant white culture.

It is important to note the tension that is present in the room during this discussion. It is one thing to visit a museum that reveals a history of stereotyping, marginalization, and oppression, it is quite another to address it interpersonally in the moment. During a similar discussion that took place the first time I taught this class, students entered into a very tense conflict with one another. The divisions occurred between Jews and non-Jews and older and younger students. As one student stated at the end of that course, "It was as if all our differences were in the room, and it was frightening to think that there would be no way to work it out". As in the discussion described above, this incident took place at a point in the course when students had already established support within the group, a

norm of allowing space for each member to speak, and for members to speak about personal experience.

In that first class, the conflict happened shortly before lunch. In the first few moments a student left the room quite upset. Bringing the student back into the room and deciding to remain beyond lunchtime were important commitments the group made, essentially modeling the way an inclusive community works. In the tension of the process, students spoke their anger of being defined by the "other". It was a vulnerable process, one in which fear and a desire for inclusion were exposed. Yet, safety was more than the product of established group norms, it was a result of continually relating the conflict in the room to the content of the course. It was important to identify the issues in the room as the same issues we were attempting to understand by studying the narratives of the Holocaust. In framing it this way students were able to integrate the learning intellectually and emotionally.

The conflict was an invaluable experience of struggling with the complicated concept of tolerance, the consequences of being defined by others and engaging in defining others. The group grappled with the problem of remaining intact in the face of individual differences. Ultimately, members of the group recognized the need for community to be inclusive and protective of everyone. In the words of Cornel West,

The interplay of individuality and unity is not one of uniformity and unanimity imposed from above but rather of conflict among diverse groups that reach a dynamic consensus subject to questioning and criticism. As with a soloist in a jazz quartet, quintet or band, individuality is promoted in order to sustain and increase the *creative* tension within the group- a tension that yields higher levels of performance to achieve the aim of the collective project. This kind of critical and democratic sensibility flies in the face of any policing of borders and boundaries of "blackness," "maleness," "femaleness," or "whiteness," (West, 1993)

Stuart Cook, a social psychologist, identified conditions that lead to favorable attitudes toward people who are different. One of these conditions is that our contact with the other must be authentic and not superficial, we must come to know the other as an individual (Fogelman, 1994). Essentially, the other must exist for us as a subjective experience. If our goal in teaching the Holocaust is to make the lessons personally relevant then the encounters we facilitate between students and those who lived the event, and within the classroom itself must be authentic ones. Narratives provide a rich vehicle for these encounters. The very construction of narratives facilitates a connection to others and to our own history as they "involve not only a sequence of events, but also a story teller and an intended audience,"( Noddings, et. al, 1991). It is in this dynamic relationship between the storyteller and the listener that we deepen our understanding of the narrator's culture, reality, gender, beliefs, and choices which comprise one's life history (Ibid.) And it is in the practical ethics of peoples' lives that we confront the profound, and often

uncomfortable, questions about the decisions that real individuals, groups, and nations made and did not make. As Bill Moyers said in an interview with Margot Stern Strom, "...Unless we keep hammering home the irrefutable and indisputable facts of the human experience in history, history as it was experienced by people, we are going to find ourselves increasingly unable to draw distinctions between what was and what we think was," (Johnson, et. al, 1989). Teaching through the lessons that are embedded in life stories provides an inclusive, critical, and pluralistic way of thinking that stands in sharp contrast to Nazi Germany's annihilation of thinking and difference.

As the 'teacher', I am most aware of my own growth and learning that resulted from this experience. In the moment of that class I was frightened and worried about my own ability to responsibly facilitate the conflict. In retrospect, I stand in awe of the process, and have gained clarity about the importance of creating safe learning environments that challenge us to engage in conflict with one another and that move us beyond polite political correctness. I am also aware of the need for institutional support in creating these classrooms. It is courageous and creative work. It is the kind of work that initiates all participants into new ways of experiencing ourselves and our worlds. Initiations require witnesses. Just as students require a witness to their learning process, a place to speak their experiences, and teachers who reflect their abilities back to them, faculty require an institutional witness. Specifically, transformative teaching is supported through institutional structures such as: alternative delivery models that provide sustained contact among class participants, teaching assistants, and forums for faculty to debrief their experiences. Mostly, however, the risky business of transformational education is best supported by institutions whose commitment to diversity recognizes the need to move beyond rhetoric and engage its community in "authentic" interactions.

I recently finished teaching this fall's Stories of the Holocaust. At the end of class, as we were reflecting on our experiences with one another, I was struck by a student's comment. She said that for her, "Studying the Holocaust with this group was like being in a microcosm of everything. It was as if we were studying the whole world and the world will never look the same," her experience resonated with my own. The journey which began for me in the discovery of my father's story has come to full fruition as I continue to discover myself and the world in our stories.

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