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NEH Institute - Summer 2023

Essay: Making Holocaust and Genocide Education Relevant Through Inquiry and Classroom Application

One of my biggest failures as a teacher was while teaching *Night*, by Elie Weisel.

It was the winter of 2018, I had just taken the Facing History virtual seminar on teaching Holocaust Literature, it was probably my fifth year teaching *Night*, and I was determined to teach it well - not merely from a perpetrators perspective, but from the victims perspective, too.

At the time, I had just recently earned my certification in ESL. I was sensing a growing and unnerving anti-immigrant xenophobia in the collective American psyche, and I thought a preventative measure might be for me to teach, value, honor, and advocate for multilingual students and diverse cultural representations in my school and classroom. I hadn't yet determined to leave my comfortable ELA position in a demographically white and politically red school district in Northern NJ, but the inward resolve was already brewing.

And then, Donald Trump was inaugurated as the 45th President of the United States.

What I recall during those dark winter days was a note from a teacher-friend who said, "we are planting the seed" as a way to help me forge ahed and muster courage. I, however, felt like that wasn't enough. Instead, I felt like a bystander in Ogden's poem, "The Hangman," I was foolishly going to class every day with "right, good hope." Coward's hope.

In the abyss of those early Trump days, I taught what was a spectacular four-corners lesson that Facing History shared with PD attendees meant to have students engage with morally questionable statements. I still do a version of this activity today. It is pedagogically sound, active, and critical; it is a "lesson" that gets students *thinking*. That January day, however, just around Holocaust Remembrance Day, a student left my class after arguing a troubling point about his level of disagreement with a seemingly unquestionable moral statement by saying to a friend: "I don't care what they ask me to do, I just need a sandwich. I'll go build that wall."

Horror struck me. Rapid images and recollections flitted through my brain; time slowed. All I could think was: Had I not just spent an hour working through what scapegoating meant? Had we not spent a month leading up to discussions of persecution and systematic eradication of marginalized others by looking at the poem by Martin Niemoller? Wasn't Trump's plan to bar immigrants splashed in headlines copying that very poem's words and translating them into contemporary terms? Wasn't it at least somewhere in the ether that simplified and repeated refrains like "Make America Great Again," was exactly the same sort of propaganda peddled by

Nazi Germany and the Weimar Republic during and preceding WWII? I thought, for sure, in a then pretty nearly "woke" world and, as Pinker notes, "enlightened" time that humanism surfaces first. What is apparent is that social amnesia born out of some availability heuristic is real, too. As Wiesel noted time and again, indifference was the opposite of love, and what was more indifferent than building a wall for a sandwich?

As teachers, we can exonerate children of almost anything, but I can't exonerate myself.

Needless to say, I left my tenured, safe position and started teaching ESL the following year in a more economically and socially diverse school district. What I learned in subsequent years of reading and teaching *Night* and other Holocaust literature (in the classroom and to my own children texts like: *Man's Search for Meaning, The Diary of Anne Frank, My Struggle: Book 6, The Devil's Arithmetic, The Book Thief, White Bird,* and more), is that the more I read and learned, the less I understood and the less I can seem to adequately impart the messages of those texts to my students. In particular, the nature of the atrocity and its very real and serious applicability to today's world seems like an elusive thread that I can't seem to easily pull forward or make visible to them. In education, we know that the enduring understandings come through transfer, but time and again that transfer is given short shrift in the classroom due to the educator's fear of being dubbed too political or thought ill-prepared to handle "controversial" conversations. In part, that is the reason for this application.

Two years ago, I was teaching *Night* in a Transition's ESL class. In that class, I had a student who was new to the United States from Russia. He was and is still a wonderful young man, but when I think about teaching *Night* to him, I am reminded of the complexities of teaching about the Holocaust. At the end of one class, Alexsei came up to me to tell me that I was wrong about how I was teaching about Nazism. I was showing clips from the films *The Final Days of Sophie Scholl* and the film *Denial*, and it was counter to the way WWII, the Holocaust, and Nazism is taught in Russia. To Alexsei, I had it wrong. I went immediately to my Supervisor because I was so "shook." Just as years before with the American student who wanted to keep immigrants out of the US didn't correlate xenophobia with scapegoating, I couldn't comprehend how an immigrant to the US could not see the parallels drawn between his contemporary reality and the text's message. To this day, I am not really sure how to teach the valuable lessons Wiesel imparts in *Night* to students who learn about genocide, and in particular the Holocaust, in countries that had or have a complicit culpability in the atrocity. For example, I read *Second Hand Time* and cried at memories of Russian troops conning Jewish children into open graves with candy. Alexsei's lessons about atrocity and genocide must have been very different, and sadly formative, for him to valorize, to some extent, the Nazi agenda.

Is my lack of understanding an answer I can get from Hannah Ardent? Maybe, but I think the work that the NEH Institute at Penn State does and the space provided for educators to work

together and through inquiry-based learning is how I will really and finally learn how to teach these texts, and this time, well.

As is evident, I am not a new teacher. I am not even new to teaching Holocaust literature, but I find that - even with NJ educational expectations - Holocaust studies get minimal attention in schools. Moreover, very many of us are not equipped or ill-equipped to address the subject in terms of time, historical accuracy, grade level approaches, reaching different constituent groups, and in terms of transfer, too.

I am currently the Supervisor of ELA and Social Studies in the Rumson-Fair Haven school district. Demographically, I am back in a rather homogeneous and sheltered community with about only 9% diversity and no specific Holocaust studies represented in the course catalog. At best, we cover the topic through a traditional social studies sequence, but it is my hope to make it a more central focus in the years ahead. Specifically, as a teacher of English 9 myself, I hope to develop a unit that includes human rights studies in and around canonical works like A*ll Quiet on the Western Front* in 2023.

In thinking forward and toward the the institute and the inquiry-based questions that I would be interested in exploring, some might include:

1. To what degree might the study of the Holocaust inform our understanding of other genocides throughout the world and/or provide predictive foresight of burgeoning systemized hate and othering?
2. How can we teach the Holocaust in ways that reframe it away from reductive binaries of perpetrator/victim or evil/good and recontextualize it as a series of factors (economic, social, political) that coalesced and, when left unchecked or when fuelled by erratic leadership, created a mass of hate or rage toward a "they." In other words, how can we teach it not as a matter of whether you are a good person or a bad person, but that we all have the ability to be swept into hate hysteria, and how might we see and thwart that social "we" desire?
3. Clint Smith makes the point that, in Germany, you are not able to build on land where concentration camps once existed, but in the US you are able to and there are, in fact, prisons built on former plantations. A question might be, to what degree are memorials, statues, and what we hold as sacred spaces essential reminders of and safe-guards against that which is shameful in our past in the hopes of living more humanistically in the future?
4. As a literacy teacher, I am interested in reading specifically and craft as well. Dante Allgheri is said to have created Heaven in a way that is not comprehensible because as a "place" it too is incomprehensible. In what ways do writers and Holocaust narratives help us to understand the reality of the war, the camps, the crimes, the degradation? In what ways are words incapable of explicating that reality? Why is that so?

I sincerely hope my application for the NEH Institute is considered. I would like nothing more than working with colleagues on ways to teach better, and I can think of few subjects more essential to teach to students as the Holocaust or about genocide. Not long ago, I read and shared with my students while teaching *Things Fall Apart*, that some people say Colonialism is the worst crime perpetrated against people in all of humanity, and out of an imperialist agenda, genocise is birthed. As Yates writes and is perhaps too often quoted, "What rough beast slouches toward Bethlehem?" These ideas that float regularly through an English classroom or curriculum might not stick well without educators who have thought deeply about how to make those words and warnings more palpable to today's students.

I still believe that education is what can make the "center hold," and I hope that this essay helps express the commitment I have toward teaching Holocaust studies. It would be an honor to participate in this project this summer and into the fall of 2023.