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Cassandra, daughter of Priam and Hecuba, was blessed with the power of prophecy. But because Cassandra refused the advances of Apollo, he cursed her that her prophecies not be believed. In *Agamemnon* her prophecies become frantic only to fade into resignation as the last hour approaches. It is from the curse that her paradox arises: on the one hand she knows the truth — she can foretell the future and she knows the evil to come and can warn about it. But the question becomes should she speak the truth if she knows it will not be believed?

The paradox lives on in the literature on genocide. Elie Wiesel's character in *Night* (1960), Moshe the Beadle, also knows the truth — in fact, he has seen and experienced it — and he returns to tell it. But like Cassandra, he is dismissed as mad, and his warnings are not heeded.

The paradox faced by Cassandra and Moshe the Beadle is analogous to the paradox we face in teaching courses on genocide to undergraduates. We know the horrible subject matter and warn that it could happen here; but given the audience, we wonder what becomes of our warnings. In teaching genocide, how do we avoid the paradox of the frantic prophet?

How does one teach about an event that seems to defy both language and conventional explanations? How does one convey the horror of the event without becoming overwhelmed and numbed by it oneself? How does one deal with the inevitable tension between the need to be reasoned and analytical and the equally strong urge to be passionate and emotional and engaged? One voice says be distant and objective and quiet; the other says teach in a constant scream.

In part, genocide is hard to come to terms with because of the magnitude of the subject — the sheer numbers killed, the breadth of complicity, its pervasiveness in history. Addressed directly, genocide is overwhelming, provoking constant temptations to stop talking about it and ignore its reality, to intellectualize or abstract it from people and destroy its reality, or to despair and sink in the mire of believing genocide is all of reality.

Despite these difficulties, we decided it might be valuable to teach a course on genocide to first-year students in their first term of college. Genocide presents to us some of the deepest philosophical and religious questions we can face in the classroom. Our students ask us: In the face of so much suffering and killing, what does it mean to say one is human? They raise questions concerning God's existence and the possibility of intelligibility in the universe: If there is a Supreme Being, what kind of Supreme Being would allow such perverse evil and suffering to exist? From the point of view of secular values, they ask: Is it possible to believe any longer that history is progress?

It is one thing for students to be interested or stimulated by a topic; it is another question whether or not the material is appropriate for the students, for once immersed in the genocides of our time, the world is never the same again. The events can shatter us even as they free us from our confident and comforting illusions.

We set out with the proximate aims of trying to teach students about particular genocides in modern times, to teach them a few theoretical perspectives on why these happen and what might be done to prevent them, and to introduce students to thinking about the general problem of genocide. Our efforts were guided by a fundamental distinction between the process of

learning and the process of integrating the meaning and implications of an important event into consciousness and conscience. One can learn about an event by consuming and assimilating the factual data — but though this can be an important act of witnessing in itself, it is not sufficient because such learning does not necessarily indicate understanding. Understanding and integration were our larger goals.

By integration we mean that the subject matter has been successfully absorbed by the students into their moral and intellectual world so that it somehow informs how they will now view that world. They will become sensitive to the issue of genocidal destruction and, in the best case, that sensitivity will lead to engagement, the action of resisting anything which reflects a genocidal process. From the point of view of developing an understanding of genocide, there seems to be only one good reason to force ourselves and our students to confront so much pain and suffering, and that reason is to make them and ourselves more deeply aware of and resistant to the conditions and processes that are involved in the destruction of a people.

Based on our ultimate goals we excluded a number of approaches. First we decided a presentation of events as only horror stories would not do. Such a presentation not only minimizes the significance and the importance of the event, but also erects a barrier to the students' ability to understand its implications. Contemporary studies of trauma confirm our concerns that just hearing detailed material about trauma can induce secondary traumatic stress syndrome or "vicarious trauma." Repeated exposure to traumatic stories can also lead to "empathy fatigue" or "compassion fatigue." We did not want to traumatize our own students. Moreover, in the course of 10 or 15 weeks, accumulated accounts of genocide can contribute to "burnout," a chronic condition of empathy fatigue in which constant exposure to trauma leads to less integration and engagement with the world rather than more.

Though we try not to overwhelm students, we are not always successful. A number of journal entries from students in previous classes demonstrate the level at which the material affected them. One student started to reach the threshold after just one week:

After completing my first college paper and having the topic be on something as difficult and draining as the Holocaust I am becoming a bit apprehensive about this class. I am not sure that I will be able to handle ten weeks of depressing material. I am worried that if I continue to read literature such as *Night* over and over in this class I will not make it and will not give it my full effort, for it will not be interesting to read, it will only be upsetting to me.

We decided that one way to address the issue of numbing among students was to alternate between texts relating concrete examples of genocide, such as Elie Wiesel's *Night* (1960) or Philip Gourevitch's

We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda

(1998), and more theoretical texts on the issue of genocide, like Herb Hirsch's

Genocide and the Politics of Memory

(1995) and Walliman and Dobkowski's

Genocide and the Modern Age

(1987). These theoretical moments of abstraction were meant to give the students a break from the gore of genocide, a framework for understanding genocide which ultimately would allow them to come back to the material less worn out.

Just as dangerous as “numbing,” genocidal tales of horror are also potentially exploitative. Piling up the details of horror plays with students' emotions in a kind of manipulative fashion that can turn into a psychological or emotional exercise of power. Again, turning to the literature about trauma workers, we find that experiences of hearing about trauma create situations of negative “counter transference”: in terms of a class, this means that the teacher's own psychic issues come to structure interactions in the classroom — despite the best intentions of the instructor. This problem adds to the danger of numbing students and turning them away from the material.

In addition to burnout, trauma, and manipulation, other problems surfaced. Some were expectable, such as a problem of naiveté among generally upper- and middle-class white students, or the problem of comparative suffering, in which students tried to make sense of the horror of genocide by prioritizing the genocides into a hierarchy of suffering.

Frequently there are problems with the students' ability to tolerate moral complexity and ambiguity, leading to quick moral judgments about genocide. It is as if the students are compelled to judge, simply in terms of good and bad, right and wrong, even when explicitly asked not to do so. On the other hand, the students' judgments tended not to be grounded in publicly accessible reasons, and therefore they admitted being convinced of opposite views very easily.

The problem here is that the students showed a kind of moral relativism which allowed — perhaps compelled — them to both judge and dismiss moral issues quickly, but also to admit the validity of every other claim. In either case, what the compulsion to judge cut off was the ability to explore the ways in which we, too, share culpability for genocides, even if we can immediately label them evil. To paraphrase Philip Gourevitch (1998), moral judgment about genocide is just not significant — everyone in the class already knows that genocide is wrong: what is significant is exploring how those who already know it is wrong can participate in it anyway.

It may be that the difficulties the students had with introspection and with dealing with this material are not personal, but systemic in the postmodern world. In contrast to the modern ideal of universal moral values, postmodern values may be considered more as context-related possibilities. Postmoderns, therefore, are not likely to show reactive moral responses to the threat of genocide, but to reflect on the issue in a more complex, exploratory fashion. This can be good, but it, too, can lead to begging the real questions by distancing and avoidance behavior.

To meet this challenge we had to find ways to break through what may be a fairly robust socially constructed and psychological resistance to learning about genocide in this generation of students. Our solution for this has been to provide students with conceptual maps that guide them through their thinking about genocide. For students to be able to make an event a part of their world, they need such conceptual frameworks, for as humans we only make something ours when we have some kind of symbolic framework that locates it for us, that allows us to feel the event as part of something that has a "logic" to it, no matter how perverse that logic may be. As Robert Jay Lifton (1986) has said, "The mind cannot take in or absorb those experiences that cannot be meaningfully symbolized and inwardly re-created."

Such an understanding is not easy to acquire, as we have learned repeatedly from our students. For us, right now, the framework has something to do with groping towards what we might call the dimensions of the genocidal "logic." We have chosen as our primary texts those which display this "logic," the logic of power, absolute power, dehumanization, absolute phobic dehumanization, "othering" and "absolute othering" of victims. Presented in terms of these more abstract theoretical frameworks, genocide almost seems explainable, even if we know in our hearts and souls that no explanation will ever be sufficient. In this case, theory frames Cassandra's or Moshe's frantic warnings. We may still be frantic prophets, and what we say may not really make sense, at least on an existential level, but at least we are not dismissed as mad. And the cover that theory provides allows us to hold the attention of students for at least a few moments longer.

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