

“The opposite of good is not evil. It is indifference.”

Ellie Wiesel

I received a call from the local police of my small New England town a couple years ago. When they identified themselves and asked if this was the residence of Solomon Black, my blood ran cold. Why could the police be calling about my 13 year old son? I began bargaining immediately with *The Almighty*. The petition was two-fold. “Please let my child be safe.” “On the other hand if he has caused misery to someone, let your wrath spew down upon him!” It’s an odd coupling. The truth was quickly forth coming. My 13 year old son was being brought up for a civil rights violation! It was reported that he and two friends called a girl from their class “spick” and told her to “go back where she came from.” I was dumbfounded. If this was someone else’s child I’d have chalked this up to no moral education, neglectful parenting, or a child with no ability to think independently. Alas, none of these are the case. This child, my child, is the great grandson of Jewish immigrants, named after my father’s adopted son (an African-American), who has been raised in a multi-ethnic community. He knows better.

I was anxious to hear his version of the ‘incident.’ In the tradition of 13 year olds, when first asked if there had been trouble that day at the beach, he quickly stripped his face of response and shrugged his shoulders.

Kid: “Huh?”

Mom: “Was there some name calling?”

Kid: (continuing to feign innocence) “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Mom: “Come clean. I got a call from the police.”

Kid: “Mom,” (he is exasperated and oh so innocent) this girl has been teasing us (he and his buddies) all year. She’s a pain in the behind.”

Mom: “So, you call her a pain in the behind. What makes it OK to toss out invectives about her racial or ethnic heritage? Those things have nothing to do with her being a ‘pain in the behind.’”

Kid: “Cool off mom! I didn’t say anything.”

Mom: “What happened?”

Kid: “One of the other kids said that stuff to her. He called her a *spick*. I was just there. I didn’t say a thing.”

Mom: “So being ‘just there’ doesn’t make you guilty?”

Kid: “Mom you need to relax. I didn’t do anything. Besides, this is just the way kids talk.”

Mom: “Sweetheart, indifference is what makes for genocides.”

Kid: "Mom you're a little off the deep end on this."

This incident and conversation was the beginning of a new battle. Obviously the way we lived was not enough to combat contemporary culture. Peer pressure fueled by our cultural standards and norms is a more powerful force than I was prepared for. Confronted with television shows based on brutal irony as establishers of the norm, a society permeated by and accepting of violence, racism, material gluttony, and economic exploitation, we are faced with the option of dragging our children into wooded isolation for the years of adolescence or competing with a culture who's most overt values will result in hollow eyed creatures staring yearningly at the eerie blue light emanating from an electronically motivated box in the living room. We are fighting for our children's souls.

What could I do to help my own child and others set a course through these treacherous years? How can this course accept all that is their commission to live and sort through and still offer guideposts and safety islands for them? How can I use the arts with this age group to help them determine the more humane, kinder, path to take in any situation and find the strength to steer for it, and know that every action or inaction has resonance in this world?

Obviously no one thing can provide all this, but as a storyteller I am left to look to my trade and ask; Can it be a force for promoting moral introspection, thinking, and action? First, let us attempt a definition. What is moral thinking and action? Many stories offer 'morals.' Aesop's Fables, Hans Christian Anderson, and The Berenstien Bears all offer little wisdoms for moral living. I believe that these stories offer specific lessons rather than challenging the individual to question their own actions and thinking. If following a list of rules or living by specific pre designed behaviors are a sufficient guideposts for moral living then Jews could have retired after Sinai, Christians with the golden rule, and Moslems would have shaped a perfect world from their seven pillars of faith. Fortunately or not, most of life is lived in a gray area where rules can guide you, but absolute laws of behavior bear no resemblance to the moment to moment choices and actions we are constantly faced with. Hans Christian Anderson's *Steadfast Tin Soldier* braved all forms of humiliation, pain, and finally, death as he stood 'steadfastly' "holding his bayonet firmly and looking straight ahead." Aesop's ant worked diligently, never allowing himself rest or comfort. His reward was to survive the winter. That slothful old grasshopper just sung and danced, and I don't have to tell you where his passion for the living arts led him. Stories with such absolute moral messages teach their lessons with a rigidity that requires full compliance or breakage, and to boot are about as attractive as a bare, raw, radish for diner. That ding bat, macho piece of tin might well of saved his life, sensitized others to his situation, and found his lady love if he'd ever allowed himself to ask for help. That little compulsive ant might just enjoy his life if he allowed a little of the crickets music and the grasshoppers passionate step to infuse his world. Also, by sharing rather than scorning the grasshopper's passion, he might of inspired him to attempt a tad of hard work which could of resulted in his salvation! I want young people to learn how to feel and think and search in every situation for the most humane possible resolution to any situation.

As a storyteller I am in a prime position for presenting stories that will challenge people's thinking and feelings about their behaviors. The beauty of a well conceived and told story is that the listener identifies with the characters of the tale, enters their world and emerges with their their experiences and understandings. If our goal is to promote moral thinking and development then what better tool to create a cognitive and moral dissonance then seeing and feeling a situation from a new vantage point. As educators we can then draw young people into experiences that will help them evaluate what they have learned and felt in the story and apply it to their own lives. I propose that we take this opportunity in educational settings and utilize an often dormant avenue for growth and learning.

More fully aware of the challenge than ever, I wanted to implement this goal with a middle school population.

I am often called upon to share stories out of history. In Duxbury one courageous teacher has had me come a number of times and tell tales from the Shoah. If the Holocaust had been a quirk in time and not an echo of Bosnia, Armenia, Rwanda, etc, etc, etc. it would have little relevance for us. But even if the heinous behavior exhibited in these nations was not a rule rather than an exception, these events are also echoes of situations that surface daily in the lives of adolescents like my sons. Not that adolescents are asked to kill their Jewish, Hutu, or Croatian neighbors, but they are asked daily to stand by and be partner to acts that immediately degrade a human being, and could, by the examples we see in our world, lead to genocide. My son stood by at the beginning of one of these acts.

One can tell the sad and horrible tales of exploitation and murder, and everyone lends an ear. Such stories are filled with tabloid drama, passion, and the stuff of human interest. Simply by telling a personal tale from the holocaust, a new and thus equational vantage point on that event is shared. We can, however, do much more. We can use the terrifying extreme of these tales to encourage adolescents to reflect upon their lives and the long term ramifications of their decisions and actions. Telling the story is not enough. If you have an agenda, in this case to stretch the moral thinking of adolescents, then the story must be used as a springboard and your role as an artist/educator to bring this goal to fruition. I have been developing workshops that would relate the themes of the Jewish Holocaust to peer pressure and scapegoating within the school environment. The participatory workshops, which include improvisational dramatics, and critical thinking skills have been designed to meet some of these goals.

Following is a summary of this process.

The Story

I begin with a story. This is a tale told in first person from the vantage point of a young woman whose family, living in a small Hungarian town. You experience, through her eyes the sequence of events so common to those persecutions. They are one by one stripped of their privileges, isolated by physical identification and curfews, forced from their home to a local and then regional holding area, and ultimately incarcerated in one of the many Concentration Camps that Hitler established for the annihilation of the Jews, Gypsies, intellectuals, homosexuals, and others deemed not Aryan enough in the Europe of the 1940's. I choose this type of story because far from sensationalizing the issues and events of the Holocaust, or even moralizing about anyone's actions, it simply relates one young woman's experience. You are drawn into her world with the same innocence and trust that she lived in it. I want my young audience to identify with a like aged person and come to understand how indeed this could happen to a bright, strong, vibrant, person, like any of them. It is very simply her story.

Questions

After the story I take questions. These often indicate the depth to which the audience understood or were innocent of this piece of history, and it also allows time for the story and its implications to sink into their imaginations.

WORKSHOP FOLLOW-UP

The objective here is to help students come to understand that there are no neutral roles in this life, and explore possibilities for empowerment.

PART A: I Have Seen the Enemy

Drawing from the characters in the story and their knowledge of history, I ask students to create three vertical lists.

1. Victims

The most obvious is the Jewish population, but students will usually generate a fuller list including Gypsies, intellectuals, homosexuals, the physically handicapped, Jehovahs Witnesses, and other.

Issues:

-The question often emerges: "What is a victim?" It is a difficult question, as most of us are victims as the result of internal fears or external circumstances at some point in our lives. In this case, the definition can be clearly stated as 'individuals or groups isolated, persecuted, and exterminated by the Nazi regime.' It is, however, a good idea to maintain that the definition changes depending upon the circumstances.

-Students will almost always be aware of Jews as the object of Nazi persecution, but less aware of the other minorities that suffered at their hands. By introducing these other communities, the Nazi persecutions begin to come much closer to home. In our generation homosexuals, in this country, continue to be persecuted, and in some cases, exterminated. Simply saying the word "homosexual" in a middle school evokes nervous, self-conscious, giggles. At this early point in the synthesis, simply have students note their response, and possibly share with them some of the events involving the persecution and murder of gays, within the last decade.

Historically, Native Americans and their way of life were systematically destroyed by the European settlers who named this land. If you are not familiar with this history [Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee](#) by Dee Brown is a good starting place. By exploring who victims, past and present, have been, it becomes increasingly more difficult to create an 'us' and 'them' mentality. Once you realize that your forebearers perpetrated very similar crimes, you cannot deny that the possibility of this behavior also lies in you.

2. Perpetrators

I define these as those who sought actively to isolate, persecute, and exterminate the aforementioned groups. We love 'bad guys.' If one can find *evil* outside them self then they, by conclusion, must be *good*. We yearn for *bad guys*. **Facing History and Ourselves*** reminds us that there were very few committed Nazi Party members (200-400), and yet they were able to draw an entire continent into a genocidal journey. The student's task here is to understand who actually stated and engineered the 'final solution?'

Issues:

-What's the difference between a German and a Nazi? Students will often offer that the Germans are perpetrators, when in fact it was the committed core of the Nazi party that initiated the acts we know as the Holocaust. This is a wonderful opportunity to discuss democracy. Germany was a democracy during the rise of the Nazi party. We live in a democracy. You might want to discuss the various popular political parties. What are some political parties that are active but do not hold a large percentage of public support? How can a voracious right-wing minority gain control of a government in a democracy? How can they influence a major party? How can a majority who disagree with them be heard? Help them reflect on their role and potential as citizens of a representative democracy.

-Often the role of collaborators will emerge here. What is an active collaborator? The story depicts a number of them. The head of the Town Council, who lied about the use of family lists for ration stamp books (these were used to round up the Jews of the town for 'deportation. '), is a good example of a willing collaborator. Do they belong in the 'perpetrator' list? Let the students decide.

3. By-standers

Who watched? Who stood by as Jews, Gypsies, intellectuals, homosexuals, the physically handicapped, Jehovah's Witnesses, and others were isolated, persecuted, and exterminated by the Nazi regime? This last list usually results in some cognitive dissonance. We are not used to examining this role. Often I will have to walk student back through the story:

"Who instigated the first isolation and defrauding of the Jewish population?" (Being set apart with the Star of David on their coats, limited in movement, denied business ownership, given restricted rations.....)

The conversation moves to specific perpetrators. The Nazi invaders, supported by the town council, and offered enforcement by local soldiers allowed these policies to be set into place. Once we establish this I ask again:

"Who watched?"

They offer ideas.

Our list begins.

"When the town crier first told all 600 Jews of this small town to come for a weeks' stay in the synagogue, who did not instigate, suffer from, or protest this decree?. Who watched this happen?"

Our list lengthens.

"When the family was resettled in a Jewish ghetto in the nearest large city, who was responsible for the "relocation?" Who just watched?"

Our list grows longer still. We continue in this pattern of discovery through the end of the story.

They often come up with ideas, and groups that I had never even considered.

Issues:

This list gets Talmud scholars going because there are many hairs that could be split. Students raise questions about:

- People who benefited from the persecutions, but did nothing to instigate or enforce them.
- Young men drafted reluctantly but serving in the German Army
- Those who joined the Nazi party under duress in order to maintain a job or position of status

Whenever possible throw the questions back to them. Using a consistent definition for a perpetrator as those who sought actively to isolate, persecute, and exterminate the a fore mentioned populations, have them determine the status of these groups.

Part B: Bringing it Home

Drawing from their lives at the school, I ask students to create three vertical lists.

1. Victims

"In your school and community what kind of kids get singled out and picked on?" Victims have included those considered 'Geeky', having a mild physical deformity, a strong intellectual disparity from either side of the norm, representatives of minority racial or ethnic groups.

Issues:

Students will not feel free to share this knowledge. It is taboo to talk about in large groups, and especially around adults. As the leader it is best to begin by sharing your own experiences. Were you 'picked on' as a kid? Why? Who was the object of derision in your school or community at their age? Why do you think they fulfilled that role. (It is important to have previously cleared this discussion with administrators and teachers prior to this session and let students know that they will not be chastised or disciplined for honest participation.)

I don't edit, but simply record their observations.

2. Perpetrators

No one thinks of them self in this role. Instead of asking for characteristics of a perpetrator, ask for descriptions of their behavior. How does someone point out another's weakness or difference and act on it. At first they are shy to share the real and nasty antics that are pulled, but with a little cajoling and promises that there will be no personal repercussions for their honesty, another list is created. Perpetrators behaviors tended to range from name calling and rumor spreading to hat throwing and locker banging. Once on a roll these lists are easily developed.

Issues:

If students cannot or will not suggest behaviors, remind them that these lists are not censored and go again to your own childhood.

"The other girls in the cabin used to call me Judy Doddy, and throw socks at me."

"Whenever Tim would walk within a block of us we all hold our noses and pretend to cough and gag from the stench."

"Ed used to elbow kids into their lockers so hard that their books would fly all over the floor during period changes."

A few of these usually loosen them up.

Part C Living the Issue

Now we start cooking. I separate the class into groups of approximately 12 students each, and ask each group to assign one person to the role of 'victim' and one to the role of 'perpetrator,' and to make a circle with the victim and perpetrator at opposite curves. When I give them the **go** signal, *the perpetrator* is to use as many behaviors as he/she needs to in order to establish dominance over *the victim*. They can draw from their own arsenal or from the list of 'perpetrator behaviors' that we just developed. This is a short period 60-120 seconds and must have a clear beginning and ending. During this short period all attending aids and adults are asked to coach the perpetrator with vim and vigor to fulfill their role. All the energy and focus goes into yelling encouragements, ideas, and praises at the aggressing perpetrator. At the end of the allotted time I blow a whistle and ask everyone to **freeze** exactly where they are.

Issues:

-Middle school students are often self conscious at the beginning of this exercise. It is important to choose, as the perpetrator, a student who is willing to act out the role.

-Occasionally there is a sadist in the crowd. Keep an eye out for someone who might fly into full blown physical violence. Remind them ahead of time that no physical pain can be administered, and remove them if necessary.

-The freeze at exercise end is very important. Students need to note their physical stance and feelings.

Part D Evaluation and Action

1. Have all students observe where they are standing and their body shape and position at the exercises conclusion. It is not until this moment that students grow aware that this exercise was not about victim or perpetrator. It was about them, the 10 bystanders. Students are asked first to evaluate their body language from the position they froze in.

- "Are you in the same location as you were 2 minutes ago? If not, where did you travel to?"

- "How do you feel, physically? Is your body tense or relaxed? Are you feeling anything specific in your neck, chest, stomach...?"

-“What was your verbal response? Did you laugh at name calling and sometimes even join in? Were you appalled by the name calling? What did you do in response to it?”

-“Would anyone like to share other responses they had?”

(Note all responses before considering them.)

-More often than not the group has gravitated away from the victim and toward the perpetrator. If this was the case, ask them why they think that happened. If they gravitated toward the victim, ask them why they think that happened.

-Often our bodies tell us what our intellects won't admit. Once they discuss their physical state, ask them what it represents in terms of their unconscious response to the activity.

-Laughter can be used to many ends. It is both a way to discharge nervousness or discomfort as well as a way to greet authentic joy and humor. If they did laugh, ask them which of these sources their laughter was born in.

Students usually will share a high level of discomfort around this exercise. I will encourage and reinforce all their responses.

Issues:

There's always one youth who just loves this exercise and would have wished only that it could have been more physical and longer. Instead of chastising this youth for a sadistic streak, ask them why. Continue to follow their reasoning and its logic to its source. “Why is it fun to watch someone be humiliated?” “Why does that give you pleasure?” Eventually you will come to ground zero. The student will often discover that if someone else is the focus or derision that he/she is, for this time, safe from it. This is exactly where you want to be. If, however, they take you in another direction, go. It might be a place that we can all learn from.

THE BIG QUESTION

“Why didn't anyone stop the perpetrator?”

It is in the answer to this question that we begin to see and understand how oppression is allowed to live and thrive among any population of good souls. Students will have good reasons for not standing between the perpetrator and victim. From fear for their own physical and/or social standing to the belief that I, as the authority figure, had sanctioned the exercise, their reticence to intervene is logical. I welcome all their reasons, and they often come up with rationales for inaction that I could never have generated. They all have a place because they represent legitimate fears and necessary self preservation.

It is at this juncture that I refer back to our story and thinking about the Holocaust. We look at the three lists. “Which is longest? Why didn't these people, the obvious majority, do anything to stop the isolation, persecution, and extermination of Jews, Gypsies, intellectuals, homosexuals, the physically handicapped, Jehovah's Witnesses, and others?”

In truth, the reasons given for non intervention, are usually darn good ones. No one wants to be the next victim, or risk the safety of their family to speak out for a cause that is not theirs. **“Were their reasons for non-intervention the same as yours?”** Were the by-standers in either situation innocent? If people were not willing to stand by and watch others be abused at any level could a holocaust happen?

That fact is that bullying in the school and community is similar to the acts first practiced against the Jews of Europe as a close precursor of the Holocaust. If those large numbers of by-standers had taken a position could Hitler and a few hundred dedicated Nazi's have perpetrated the Holocaust? If you and your friends don't like behaviors that isolate and bully others, do you have the power to stop it?

Our final work is for students to generate ideas and actions that make them successful activists in stopping bullying behavior. In smaller break-out groups, often the original 12 person exercise group, I ask them how, without putting themselves at undue risk, they might stop bullying behavior. Developing these strategies helps to build a sense of community absolutely necessary if students are to feel the level of empowerment necessary for taking strong moral actions in their world. There is not finite list to be created, but students should be encouraged to look at levels of functioning.

-First they must have a system of communication that will enable them to diagnose a common issue or problem.

-They must then develop a plan of action that does not recreate the very problem they are trying to solve.

-They must have a system of evaluation and ongoing communication to monitor their results.

It is best for them to create a theatrical scenario demonstrating their technique rather than simply reporting on it.

Issues:

Their thinking around solutions can be as one dimensional as the cartoon shows they have been raised on. As they plot and discuss continue to throw in questions that will expand their thinking.

“Will going to a teacher or the principal solve the problem for all time?”

“Will hitting someone enable them to behave in a kinder way?”

“Have you asked yourself why the perpetrator behaves in the way he/she does? Can you deal with source of their rudeness, anger, or cruelty rather than its manifestation?”

Conclusion

I finish this storytelling workshop by returning to my son. If Ellie Wiesel is correct and “The opposite of good is not evil. It is indifference,” what was my son’s obligation?

Kid: “One of the other kids said that stuff to her. He called her a *spick*. I was just there. I didn’t say a thing.”

If my son is willing to put himself between the crassness of his peers and the object of their derision, could he not also stop the next holocaust?

*Facing History and Ourselves: A Holocaust Curriculum
International Educations 51 Spring St. Watertown, MA 02172 (Copyright 1982)

