

Preface

by Margot Stern Strom

According to anthropologist Marcelo Suárez-Orozco, “globalization defines our era.” He defines globalization as the “movement of people, goods, or ideas among countries and regions.” While globalization is not new, transnational exchanges continue to accelerate, even in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001. These exchanges are dramatically changing the world in which we live. How we respond to those changes will shape future generations. Suárez-Orozco notes that, “Education is at the center of this uncharted continent.”

How will classrooms across the world help students negotiate the challenges that come with the unfamiliar? Often uncertainty is coupled with change. How can we help our students live with uncertainty without compromising their values? Across much of the world, communities find themselves challenged by visible signs of difference—new faces, new customs, and new ideas. Each day newspapers report on religious and ethnic tensions both within and across borders, whether it is about the placement of a new church or the religious dress of new arrivals. What can educators do to help promote tolerance, respect, and understanding? Sociology Professor David Shoem points out:

The effort it takes for us to know so little about one another across racial and ethnic groups is truly remarkable. That we can live so closely together, that our lives can be so intertwined socially, economically, and politically, and that we can spend so many years of study in grade school and even in higher education and yet still manage to be ignorant of one another is clear testimony to the deep-seated roots of this human and national tragedy. What we do learn along the way is to place heavy reliance on stereotypes, gossip, rumor, and fear to shape our lack of knowledge.

The success of that “reliance on stereotypes, gossip, rumor, and fear” can be seen and heard in classrooms across the world. Students express a universal knowledge of negative words and hostile images of “the other.” When asked what they know about “them,” the answers too often reveal virulent stereotypes: “Asians are...,” “Blacks are...,” “Jews are...,” “Muslims are...” Even very young children have managed to acquire a store of racial and religious epithets. Although we teach our children that “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me,” they know a different reality. They are well aware that words of hate degrade, dehumanize, and eventually destroy. Indeed, much of the violence that threatens our society has its roots in bigotry and hate.

How did our children acquire the language of bigotry? One answer lies in the lyrics to a song from the musical *South Pacific*: “You’ve got to be taught to hate and fear. You’ve got to be taught from year to year. It’s got to

be drummed into your dear little ear. You've got to be carefully taught, you've got to be carefully taught." Our children have indeed been carefully taught and far too many of them have mastered the lesson. If we are to win the struggle for the world's conscience and future, we must counter lessons of hate with lessons that promote understanding and caring. We must help students examine their thoughts and feelings and then confront not only their own potential for passivity and complicity but also for their courage and resilience. And we must teach them to value their rights as citizens and take responsibility for their actions. To do so, they must know not only the triumphs of history but also the failures, the tragedies, and the humiliations.

Why is it necessary to study evil in the past to understand freedom, value difference, and seek justice today? Hannah Arendt, one of the foremost political philosophers of our time, offered one answer to that question. She argued that we can put past evils into the service of a future good only by squarely facing reality. She wrote, "The methods used in the pursuit of historical truth are not the methods of the prosecutor, and the men who stand guard over the facts are not the officers of interest groups—no matter how legitimate their claim—but the reporters, the historians, and finally the poets." The facts, no matter how horrifying must be preserved, not "lest we forget," but so that we may judge.

Joseph Brodsky, a Nobel Prize-winning poet from what was once Yugoslavia, agrees. In his view, evil is not an aberration that stands apart from ourselves but a mirror—"a reflection of ourselves: of human negative potential." And he maintains that we will never be able to combat evil unless we honestly examine the negative as well as the positive aspects of our nature. History matters for other reasons too. It fosters perspective-taking, critical thinking, and moral decision-making. Our students must learn that the world they live in did not just happen. It is the result of choices made by countless individuals and groups. Even the smallest of those decisions can have enormous consequences for both good and evil. Journalist Bill Moyers proudly notes that every school he attended was a legacy created "brick by brick, dollar by dollar, classroom by classroom, book by book" by people he had never met, many of whom had died long before he was born. In *Before the Mayflower*, Lerone Bennett, Jr., uses a similar metaphor to describe how communities throughout the United States came to be segregated. He likens it to the building of a wall "brick by brick, bill by bill, fear by fear." After World War II, a German professor described a similar process when he confessed:

If the last and worst act of the whole [Nazi] regime had come immediately after the first and smallest, thousands, yes millions, would have been sufficiently shocked.... But of course this isn't the way it happens. In between come all the hundreds of little steps, some of them imperceptible, each of them preparing you not to be shocked by the next. Step C is not so much worse than Step B, and, if you did not make a stand at Step B, why should you at Step C? And so on to Step D.

In a Facing History course, students examine each of those small steps. As they do so, they discover that history is not inevitable. They also come to realize that there are no easy answers to the complex problems of racism, antisemitism, hate, and violence, no quick fixes for social injustices, and no simple solutions to moral dilemmas. Meaningful change takes patience and commitment. Still, as one student said of the course, “The more we learn about why and how people behave the way they do, the more likely we are to become involved and find our own solutions.” Another writes:

Life used to be so easy. There always seemed to be an answer to everything. Everything fit into place, getting up at seven o’clock, going to school at eight, coming home at four, doing homework at eight, and finally going to bed at eleven. In my tightly scheduled life I left no time to reflect. In these past four months, however, I’ve been forced to think. It hasn’t been easy.

She’s right. It is not easy. Facing History began for me in 1976, at a time when I was both teacher and student. I taught history and English to junior high school students in a suburb of Boston in the morning and studied moral development theory at Harvard University’s Graduate School of Education in the afternoon. That spring, I attended my first workshop on the Holocaust and discovered a history of which I was totally ignorant. As I listened to the speakers and reflected on the issues they raised, I began to feel a sense of disquiet about my own education and that of my students. As my uneasiness intensified, I came upon a letter that a principal sent to his teachers on the first day of school:

Dear Teacher:
I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no man should witness:
Gas chambers built by learned engineers.
Children poisoned by educated physicians.
Infants killed by trained nurses.
Women and babies shot and burned by high school and college graduates.
So I am suspicious of education.
My request is: Help your students become human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmanns.
Reading, writing, arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more human.

That letter provided the impetus for me to face my own history. My journey began with newly awakened memories of my childhood. I grew up in Memphis, Tennessee, at a time when separate never meant equal. I grew up in a city where “colored” water fountains did not spout brightly colored water as a child might expect but stood instead as symbols of the unchallenged dogmas of racism. I grew up in a city where black children

could visit the zoo only on Thursdays and where “their” library housed discarded books from “our” library. I grew up knowing there would always be empty seats at the front of the bus for young white girls while those with a darker skin color would stand crowded at the back of the bus. I grew up knowing all this, but it was never addressed at school.

Conspicuous by its absence from my formal schooling was any study of the ethical or moral dimensions of history or human behavior. Our teachers didn’t trust my classmates or me with the complexities of history. The dogmas were easier to teach. There were, on occasion, inspirational teachers who encouraged dialogue, risked inquiry, or introduced controversy. But I am hard pressed to remember any discussion of race or any explanation of the water fountains, zoo admission policies, the separate libraries, or the way seats were allocated on the buses. What my teachers neglected or elected not to teach, I ultimately learned at home. My real education was family centered. My parents taught me the meaning of social justice, the importance of political participation, and the value of faith. Those lessons nurtured my development and gave impulse to my life’s work. Later as a teacher, I tried to ensure that my students learned what my own teachers failed to teach—that history is largely the result of human decisions, that prevention is possible, and that education must have a moral component if it is to make a difference.

Facing History and Ourselves is based on those beliefs. It is also based on the conviction that education in a democracy must be what Alexis de Tocqueville once called an “apprenticeship in liberty.” That is, it must promote the attitudes, values, and skills needed to live in freedom. In an article entitled “America Skips School,” Benjamin R. Barber, a political science professor, said of that process:

The claim that all men are born free, upon which America was founded, is at best a promising fiction We acquire our freedom over time, if at all. Embedded in families, clans, communities, and nations, we must learn to be free. We may be natural consumers and born narcissists, but citizens have to be made.

Early leaders of the United States understood the connection between freedom and moral education. After all, liberty, equality, and justice are assertions of right and wrong; they raise moral issues that require the ability not only to reason but also to make judgments and then take appropriate action. Only a people that truly values its own freedom will respond to injustice with moral outrage. That is why abolitionist and author Harriet Beecher Stowe viewed the mid-nineteenth century, the age in which she lived, as a time when “nations are trembling and convulsed.” When asked if the United States was safe from those convulsions, she replied, “Every nation that carries in its bosom great and unredressed injustice has in it the elements of this last convulsion.” Poet Langston Hughes expressed it more directly when he wondered what happens to a “dream deferred.” “Does it sag like a heavy load?” he asked. “Or does it explode—like a raisin in the sun?”

Barber warns that we have been “nominally democratic for so long that we presume it is our natural condition rather than the product of persistent effort and tenacious responsibility. We have decoupled rights from civic responsibilities and severed citizenship from education on the false assumption that citizens just happen.” He describes civic literacy as the “fundamental literacy by which we live in a civil society. It encompasses the competence to participate in democratic communities, the ability to think critically and act with deliberation in a pluralistic world, and the empathy to identify sufficiently with others to live with them despite conflicts of interest and differences in character. At the most elementary level, what our children suffer from most, whether they’re hurling racial epithets from fraternity porches or shooting one another down in schoolyards, is the absence of civility.”

Barber and others have defined *civility* as “a work of the imagination, for it is through the imagination that we render others sufficiently like ourselves for them to become subjects of tolerance and respect, if not always affection.” Former President of the Czech Republic Vaclav Havel has called the building of a civil society the “greatest challenge of our time.” Facing History and Ourselves seeks to meet that challenge by reviving the time-honored idea that history is a branch of moral philosophy with lessons that can serve as guidelines for prudent thinking and moral behavior. With the guidance and support of the Facing History staff and resource speakers, teachers and students explore the roots of religious, racial, and ethnic hatreds and their consequences. And they come to recognize that “the shadowy figures that look out at us from the tarnished mirror of history are—in the final analysis—ourselves.”

Facing History holds up “the tarnished mirror of history” by asking students to analyze events that threatened democracy in one of the most murderous centuries in history—the twentieth century, a century marked by the Nazis’ attempt to exterminate the Jews of Europe solely because of their ancestry. That history, like every history, is both universal and particular. As Catholic historian Eva Fleischner has noted, “We can attain universality only through particularity: there are no shortcuts. The more we come to know about the Holocaust, how it came about, how it was carried out, etc., the greater the possibility that we will become sensitized to inhumanity and suffering whenever they occur.” She therefore views the history of the events that led to the Holocaust not as *their* history but as *our* history. In her view, it touches us all.

Important connections can be made with the events that led to the genocide of the Armenian people during World War I; the enslavement of Africans; the destruction of Native American nations in the years that followed European colonization of the Americas; and mass murders during World War II in Nanking, China, and the Soviet Union and more recently in Cambodia, Laos, Tibet, Rwanda, and Sudan. However, the series of events that led to the Holocaust is the focus of this book for a number of reasons.

Perhaps the most important is that it helps students better understand the modern world and ultimately themselves. In no other history are the steps that resulted in totalitarianism and ultimately genocide so carefully

documented not only by the victims but also by perpetrators and bystanders. It is a history that clearly shows the deadly consequences of unexamined prejudices, unfaced fears, and unchallenged lies. It shows too the dangers of charismatic leaders who manipulate the young by appealing to prejudice, fear, and ignorance. We do not want yet another generation of young people influenced by propaganda to march blindly in someone else's parade.

It is a history that shattered what historian Ronnie Landau calls in his book *The Nazi Holocaust*, "Europe-centered, liberal dreams of Western reason and culture as forces that necessarily sensitize and humanize us and which promote genuine tolerance of difference. It also destroyed, once and for all, the tottering belief that science and technology were securely harnessed for the good of humanity, as scientists, politicians, bureaucrats and generals found the means progressively to give destructive expression to their decisions and fantasies."

Landau notes that the Holocaust was, "in part, the outcome of problems of identity—the alienation and isolation of the individual in our modern mass societies, which have become so depersonalized and conformist."

Nazism appealed to people's need for a sense of belonging, loyalty and community, a need left dangerously unfulfilled by modern, vast, centralized society. It encouraged a psychological state whereby they could easily be sucked into the entire bureaucratic process. Bureaucracy is a human invention which can subjugate its inventor, undermine human conscience and allow individuals to abdicate personal moral responsibility.

Thus the events that led to the Holocaust raise profound and disturbing questions about the consequences of our actions and our beliefs, of how we as individuals make distinctions between right and wrong, good and evil. Those questions are universal even though the Holocaust is unique. Many of these questions center on the ways we as individuals and as members of groups define what Helen Fein calls our "universe of obligation"—the circle of persons "toward whom obligations are owed, to whom rules apply and whose injuries call for [amends] by the community."

This history also forces us to consider the consequences of what it means to be pushed outside that "universe of obligation." In *The Cunning of History*, scholar Richard Rubenstein describes such individuals as "superfluous." As he puts it, "Political rights are neither God-given, autonomous nor self-validating. The Germans understood that no person has any rights unless they are guaranteed by an organized community with the power to defend such rights." And in the 1930s and 1940s, no organized community was willing to defend the rights of Jews, "Gypsies," and other groups the Nazis regarded as "subhuman."

The racism that permeated Nazi Germany was not an isolated occurrence. As Rubenstein explains, Auschwitz is linked, although not exclusively, to a cultural tradition of slavery "which stretches back to the Middle Passage from the coast of Africa, and beyond, to the enforced servitude in

Ancient Greece and Rome. If we ignore this linkage, we ignore the existence of the sleeping virus in the bloodstream of civilization, at the risk of our future.”

Facing History and Ourselves confronts that issue and others like it by offering a rigorous study of the events that led to the Holocaust and a thoughtful examination of universal themes inherent in that history. Like many people, we regard the Holocaust itself as a unique event for which comparisons are inappropriate. Yet we also believe it is essential to explore connections between the events that led to the Holocaust and the world today. In the TV series, *The Ascent of Man*, Jacob Bronowski explained why: “When the future looks back on the 1930s, it will think of them as a crucial confrontation of culture..., the ascent of man, against the throwback to the despots’ belief that they have absolute certainty.” He then gave his viewers a glimpse of Auschwitz:

This is the concentration camp and crematorium at Auschwitz. This is where people were turned into numbers. Into this pond were flushed the ashes of [over a million and a half] people. And that was not done by gas. It was done by arrogance. It was done by dogma. It was done by ignorance. When people believe they have absolute knowledge, with no test in reality, this is how they behave. This is what men do when they aspire to the knowledge of the gods...

I owe it as a scientist..., as a human being to the many members of my family who died at Auschwitz, to stand here by the pond as a survivor and a witness. We have to cure ourselves of the itch for absolute knowledge and power. We have to close the distance between the push-button order and the human act. We have to touch people.

Racism and antisemitism, scapegoating and stereotyping, a propensity to violence, intellectual and cultural arrogance, a failure of empathy are all issues that are difficult to confront. But in a book written soon after World War II ended, Bronowski urged that they be faced. He began by describing the ashy, clinical remains of Nagasaki, Japan, and told of “a universal moment.” “On an evening like that evening, some time in 1945, each of us in his own way learned that his imagination had been dwarfed. We looked up and saw the power of which we had been proud loom over us like the ruins of Nagasaki.” The experience convinced him that all decisions about issues which weigh the fate of nations “should be made within the forbidding context of Nagasaki: only then could statesmen make realistic judgments of the problems which they handle on our behalf.” Confronting those issues is profoundly uncomfortable. Yet if we deny students access to them, we fail to honor their potential to confront, to cope, and to make a difference today and in the future.