

# To Make the Rest Participate In It: The Use of Contemplative Pedagogy in The Holocaust and the Arts

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In the preface to *Survival in Auschwitz*, Primo Levi says he wrote the book because he felt “the need to tell our story to ‘the rest’, to make ‘the rest’ participate in it” (9). Levi’s intentions in writing his essential Holocaust testimony are worth reflecting on for a moment.

“The need to tell”: what is this need? Is it a need to tell so that others will know what happened inside a death camp? Is it the need to warn others so that they will be vigilant in guarding against conditions that could allow another Holocaust to occur? Is there a more fundamental need underlying this one, a need as basic as the need for food and shelter? Do we all feel a need to tell our stories, whether they happen to be ordinary or extraordinary, common or unique—stories of our loves and losses, stories of our lives at work and at the gym, at the doctor’s office and on vacation? Telling our stories to each other: is this how we define, project, sustain, and protect ourselves? If there’s a teller, must there also be a listener? What does it take to be able to listen to another’s story, especially if it’s a horrific story, a painful story, a story that might implicate the listener in the action or inaction that contributed to the teller’s suffering?

“Our story”: Whose story is this, anyway? Levi’s story? His story and the story of a few other prisoners he came to know in Auschwitz? Could it also be the reader’s story, the story of anyone who reads *Survival in Auschwitz*?

“To the ‘rest’”: In placing quotation marks around the word “rest,” is Levi questioning our habit of seeing the Holocaust as the story only of those who experienced it directly—as victims or perpetrators? *The Holocaust: those poor souls. How lucky we are to have been born elsewhere, born after . . .*

If you were in my honors special topics class, The Holocaust and the Arts, right now, I would pause here and ask you to reflect for a moment, in writing, on your experience upon hearing the questions I have asked up to now.

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Did you answer quickly, to yourself, one or more of the questions? Did you feel the urge to share your response with someone, with me? Can you reflect on your motivation for wanting to share your thoughts with me? What was and is it like to have to withhold your response?

Not thinking, not only thinking, but the experience of thinking; not communicating but experiencing the urge to communicate and what happens to you internally when you are not given the opportunity to communicate: that's what I'd encourage you to pay attention to, observing without judging yourself.

Self-reflective writing is one method of inquiring into one's inner experience of learning. But what aspects of self do we invite our honors students to reflect on when we ask them to write informally in their notebooks on what they've just heard or read? Do we ask them to explore their "thoughts" and "feelings"? "Feelings": do we ask them to pay attention to and describe physical sensation as well as emotional responses to whatever text is under consideration? Are physical sensations—quickening of breath, sinking feeling in the chest, tightening of the throat—even relevant to critical and imaginative thinking?

Psychologists, neuroscientists, and educators familiar with the benefits of contemplative practices say that physical sensation is as worthy of investigation as thought, and they suggest that various kinds of contemplative practices, including self-reflective writing, repeating short phrases, concentration on the breath, guided visualizations, deep listening, adapted for the classroom, can help students improve their ability to direct and sustain their attention on an object of inquiry, learn to recognize and live with ambiguity and uncertainty, and develop resilience that is useful to learning (Hart; Palmer & Zajonc; Simmer-Brown & Grace).

My experience of integrating contemplative practices into The Holocaust and the Arts has convinced me of the value of such practices for the reasons just noted as well as for the purpose of deepening a sense of community among the students. Further, when these practices are clearly linked to the course "content," they increase the likelihood of students engaging deeply with demanding, difficult (emotionally, intellectually, even spiritually) material.

Now, back to where we left off a few paragraphs ago. If we were in class, after we had finished writing about our experiences upon hearing the questions I asked, I would invite a few of you to share your observations with us. As each of you spoke, I would listen and encourage you to listen for possible connections between your experience and Levi's ideas, as expressed by the sentence under consideration and other passages in *Survival in Auschwitz*.

Then I'd direct our attention to the rest of Levi's statement.

"To make the 'rest' participate in it": Can a text "make" a reader "participate" in its story? Can a text, read by a twenty-year-old American student in Western North Carolina in 2012, transport that student from the familiarity and security of her honors classroom to Auschwitz in 1945?

Or, can the text bring Levi's Auschwitz into our room to join our circle? Can this text, *Survival in Auschwitz*, and other Holocaust texts—Wiesel's *Night*, Ruth Kluger's *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered*, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Zvi Kolitz's *Yosl Rakover Talks to God*, Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog*—participate in our lives, my students' and mine?

Perhaps. Perhaps in small ways. Small, surprising, and significant ways.

The exercise I have just described, which I have not yet used in class but plan to use the next time I teach *The Holocaust and the Arts*, has the potential, I think, to help students discover, in the moment of the classroom experience itself, a meaningful connection between their personal lives and the lives of those who were caught up in the catastrophe of the Holocaust. By observing our own experiences—an opportunity afforded by contemplative practices in the classroom—we might gain valuable insights into ourselves as well as into the experiences of others, including the experiences of Holocaust victims/survivors.

In *The Holocaust and the Arts*, I used a variety of contemplative exercises with this very possibility in mind. Early in the semester, to "discuss" Elie Wiesel's *Night*, a text most students in the class had read before, I created an exercise in which silence played an integral part. After our customary two minutes of silence, eyes closed, attention resting on physical sensation, with which we began every class period, I asked students to write briefly in their journals about a passage that stood out for them on a particular reading of *Night*.

After a few minutes, I explained how the class would proceed. Each student would be given three minutes to share with the class something about the passage about which they had just written. After the student finished, we would sit silently for one minute. I would ring a bell at the beginning and end of the minute of silence. Then the next student in the circle would be invited to share her comments about the passage she had chosen. Another minute of silence would follow, after which the third student would speak. We would continue around the circle until each of the fifteen students in the class had spoken.

I gave the students one additional instruction. They were asked not to respond to what anyone else in the circle had said. It would be fine, I told them, if they had chosen the same passage as another student. They could share with us their own reflections on that passage without commenting directly on what a previous student had said.

Then we began. Each student offered a concise, meaningful observation about the passage she or he had chosen. In between speakers, I rang the bell to signal the beginning and conclusion of our minute of silence. Before we had heard from even half of the students, I knew, given the range of passages they had chosen to reflect on, there would be no need for further discussion of *Night*. The students themselves were identifying and exploring many, if not all, of the text's key passages.

After the last student spoke, we sat for a minute. Then I asked the students to reflect in their journals on this experience, this method of engaging a text.

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Finally, I invited students to share their reflections on the experience. The students commented on a number of ways the experience affected them. One of the most profound observations was offered by the last student in the circle to have presented her chosen passage to the class. “I realized,” Julie said, “as I listened to my classmates, that I was giving each speaker my undivided attention. Usually in class,” she said, “while one person is speaking I’m half listening and half composing the thought that I would like to share next with the rest of the class. I realized during this exercise,” she said, “that I usually don’t really listen deeply to what others have to say. Because I knew I’d have my turn to speak, this time I could listen without being distracted by my own thoughts.”

Deep listening: how lucky for Julie to have experienced, at least once, the difference between giving her full attention to someone else and giving him partial attention while the other part is focused on herself. How lucky for the rest of us in the room to have heard, and in some way shared, Julie’s excitement about this insight into her experience of listening to others.

Following Julie’s comments, I asked the class this: is there any connection between the experience of deep listening and Elie Wiesel’s *Night*?

Many hands went up. Everyone pointed to *Night*’s first chapter. In it, Moishe the Beadle, the caretaker of the Hasidic house of prayer in Wiesel’s small town, a poor man whose poverty bothered no one only because he had “mastered the art of rendering himself . . . invisible,” is arrested by the Hungarian police and deported. Then, he miraculously escapes execution by the Gestapo and returns to Sighet to warn its residents, otherwise still, in 1941, relatively untouched, of the nightmare unfolding around them. Had they listened, the townspeople, some of them might have escaped the Holocaust. “But,” as Wiesel writes, “people . . . refused to listen.”

To whom does one listen? When? Why? What is the price of not listening? These questions, central to the opening chapter of *Night* and clearly intended to introduce Wiesel’s concerns that *his* readers would not listen deeply to his story and its implications, suddenly had immediate application to the students’ own experiences in the classroom. To which of their fellow students do they listen? Why those students in particular? Why not others?

While this simple exercise involving speech and silence may not have transported these students to Transylvania in 1941, it certainly revealed at least one way that young Elie Wiesel’s experience was relevant to their own experiences in a classroom in Asheville, North Carolina in 2012. “To make the ‘rest’ participate in it.”

Another exercise we tried in class used language itself—drawn from the assigned texts—as what is called the object of concentration for brief meditations. Here is an example of this kind of exercise, an exercise that could be called “phrase practice.” Several texts, including Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Ruth Kluger’s *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered*, tell stories of luxury and poverty. Given that recurring theme, while we were reading Kluger’s memoir, I asked students to work with two words, “excess” and “scarcity,” in a brief meditation. I instructed students to repeat the words quietly, internally, to

themselves. I also asked them not to intentionally reflect on the meanings of the words, not to think about them in relation to the texts we had read so far in the class. If they found themselves “thinking” about the words, that was fine, but they should let the “thinking about” go and return to just repeating the words softly to themselves. We did this exercise for about five minutes, after which students wrote in their notebooks about what they had experienced. Then some students shared their experiences with the rest of the class.

Several students talked about coordinating the phrases with their breathing. A few students reported saying the word “excess” on the exhalation and “scarcity” on the inhalation. Inhaling, one student noted, suggested to her the need and desire for air, hence “scarcity,” and exhaling suggested to her that she had enough air and could give some back to the world without missing it too much, hence “excess.”

Other students repeated the words in exactly the opposite order, “excess” on the inhalation and “scarcity” on the exhalation. Of those who performed the exercise this way, one student, Katherine, offered the following observations:

When I inhaled I thought “excess” because I had a lot of air available to me; when I exhaled I thought “scarcity” because this air was being taken away from me and each molecule of oxygen became so much more valuable and precious than before. During this exercise, I noticed that I also exhaled more slowly than I inhaled, perhaps in an attempt to hold onto the air that I did have.

One set of simple instructions, two ways of following those instructions.

I did not see the implications of these two different approaches to following the instructions, but Katherine did. She wrote,

These different approaches intrigued me: how can people end up with varied experiences while following the same directions at the same time? This question of mine seemed similar to the earlier questions of why many people stayed in their hometowns instead of fleeing to other countries during the Holocaust, even with enough knowledge to understand that leaving may be wise. Maybe people who chose to remain where they were desired to linger so they may hold onto a status quo that they accepted, much in the way I tried to hold onto my “excess” by exhaling very slowly during the meditative exercise. Perhaps those that did try to flee their home environment saw opportunities for “excess” abroad, while sensing “scarcity” in their hometown, relating to the ways the latter group approached meditation. A classroom of 16 people, all meditating in their own way on the same two words became a microcosm for a larger cultural experience that occurred 73 years before.

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*How can people end up with varied experiences while following the same directions at the same time?* Katherine's surprise at discovering that her way of following simple instructions differed from the way some of her peers followed the same instructions led her to an insight into the behavior of others living in a dramatically different situation than her own. If she hadn't been given the opportunity to pay attention to her own experience, in this case an experience of practicing a simple meditation technique, and then given the opportunity to listen to her peers describe and reflect on their personal experiences of the exercise, she might not have gained greater understanding of the decisions made by others in a different time, place, and situation.

Self-inquiry can lead to new insights into the self and others. I have illustrated only a few of many contemplative practices—mindfulness of physical sensation, phrase practice, silence, and informal, reflective writing—that can be useful in helping students experience the connection between their personal lives and course content. And not just course content, but also the process by which one inquires into material in search of knowledge.

An emerging body of research (see the website of The Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education, <<http://www.acmhe.org>>) supports the value of integrating contemplative practices into higher education for other reasons, too. In an age of distraction, these practices can help students strengthen their ability to direct and sustain their attention on an object of inquiry. In a period of uncertainty, which itself can cause high anxiety, these practices can help students develop emotional balance and resilience, qualities shown to contribute to successful academic performance. In an increasingly polarized nation, contemplative practices can help students develop the skills to see ideas and experiences from multiple points of view and to live with ambiguity and uncertainty.

I suspect many students in The Holocaust and the Arts experienced some of these benefits, and I know, based on what these honors students said in class and at conferences, where a few of them presented on the use of contemplative practices in class, that, in at least some small ways, they experienced what Primo Levi wanted his readers to experience: as they became more attentive participants in their own stories, they also became participants in his story.

## REFERENCES

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