

Fighting For The Soul

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I received a call from the local police of my small New England town a couple years ago. 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." His version of the 'incident' went something like this:

Kid: "Mom, this girl has been teasing us (he and his buddies) all year. She's a pain, and besides I didn't say anything."

Mom: "Who said what?"

Kid: "One of the other kids said that stuff to her. I was just there."

Mom: "So being 'just there' doesn't make you guilty?"

Kid: "Cool out mom. I didn't do anything. Besides, this is just the way kids talk."

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. What has gone wrong?

Peer pressure fueled by our cultural standards and norms is a more powerful force than I remembered or was prepared for. Confronted with *Bevis and Butthead* as establishers of the norm, a society permeated by and accepting of violence, racism, and economic exploitation, we are faced with the option of dragging our children into wooded isolation for the next 4-6 years or competing with a culture whose 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 can 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 my storytelling 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?

Obviously no one thing can provide all this, but as a storyteller I am left to look at 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 dinner. 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 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 storytellers we are 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. Then as educators we can 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 then ever, I want 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 ultimately could 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 telling any holocaust tale will share a single vantage point on that event, educating your audience in one way.

But we can 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 storytelling, 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 began with our strength, a story. This is a tale told in first person from the vantage point of a young woman whose family was stripped of their privileges, eventually forced from their home, and ultimately incarcerated in one of the many Concentration Camps that Hitler established for the annihilation of the Jews, Gypsies, intellectuals, homosexuals, and other not deemed 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 themselves. 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.

Preparation

A: Drawing from the characters in the story, I ask students to create three vertical lists. The first includes the 'victims' from this story. The second includes the 'perpetrators', those who sought actively to isolate and eventually kill the Jews (Gypsies, intellectuals, homosexuals, etc.). Finally I ask them to create a list of the 'by-standers,' those who watched as the actions were taken. We look at which list is longest.

B: Now we switch gears. I ask the students to create a victims list for their school. 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. I don't edit, but simply record their observations. Our next list is for perpetrators. What kind of things does a perpetrator do to a victim? 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. Perpetuators behaviors tended to range from name calling and rumor spreading to hat throwing and locker banging. Once on a roll these list are easily developed.

Exercise

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, they are to use as many behaviors as they can from our recently developed list so that the perpetrator establishes dominance over the victim. We usually have 2-3 minutes for this process. I coach the perpetrators with vim and vigor, as a rowdy peer might, to be expressive and use every facility they have to establish their superiority. At the end of the allotted time I blow a whistle and ask everyone to **freeze** exactly where they are.

Evaluation

A: It is not until this moment that students grow aware that this exercise was not about victims and perpetrators nearly so much as it was about the 10 by standers. Students are asked first to evaluate their body language from the position they froze in. More often than not the group has gravitated away from the victim and toward the perpetrator. They are physically tight and drawn in. They discover, upon assessing their verbal responses, that they laughed at name calling and sometimes even joined in. When asked about how they felt during the process most will admit that they were uncomfortable, some much more than others. Finally I ask why no one stopped the perpetrator. It is in the answer to this question that we begin to see and understand how oppression takes form. They all have perfectly 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, any of us could relate to their reticence. (New and fascinating feedback is always generated by this process, so that none of this information is finite.) That fact that it was a similar act to those first practiced against the Jews of Europe as a close precursor of the Holocaust also remained true. Given this frightening truth, our last work is develop strategies that will successfully stop the perpetrator without putting ourselves at undue risk. Their ideas around this problem generate thinking that is often the antithesis of adolescent developmental behavior. Developing these strategies have taught the young people that they must share vulnerable feelings, acknowledge a lack of conformity on their part, and orchestrate their actions communally, if they are act successfully and still maintain personal safety.

B: The last segment of this class turns us back to our lists that we generated from the story. Which list is the longest? I have never come across a oppression scenario where the by-standers did not out number others. Were the by-standers innocent? What were they doing during each segment of the Jewish communities restrictions, denials, incarceration and annihilation? If people were not willing to stand by and watch others be abused at any level could a holocaust happen?

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?

"The opposite of good is not evil. It is indifference."

Ellie Wiesel

Let us use our gifts as storytellers and skills as educators to shape a more responsible world.