

"Where Is Dignity after the Humiliation of the Holocaust?"

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My work on the Holocaust began over a decade ago when I traveled to Innsbruck to work with Austrian teachers enrolled in an MA program in language and literacy offered by the City College of the City University of New York. While there, I discovered that these teachers were highly literate and could speak easily about literature, language and learning. But they were silent when it came to addressing the history of their country or the actions of their parents and/or grandparents during the Holocaust. I came to see, first-hand, how their silences were the result of a deeply embedded sense of shame, one that makes it almost impossible for them to engage in dialogue about their own responsibility as educators when facing their own history.

I came to understand that shame and humiliation are as much a legacy of the children of perpetrators and bystanders as they often are for the families of survivors. Embodying what Bjorn Krondorfer calls 'the conspiracy of silence,' these second and third generation Austrians exist in an uneasy tension with their history. Without a language to deal with or the personal and emotional skills to confront a past that more often than not remains unacknowledged, they remain stunted in their own development as educators and have no way to move toward a dignified response when asked to reflect on or to teach about their history. At best, when charged with teaching about the Holocaust, they teach 'the facts'; but survivor testimonies and cultivating empathy for the victims are virtually absent from their pedagogy.

Such a dismal state of affairs does not need to be the norm. It became clear to me that through engaging in reflective and open-ended writing and by learning how to respond to one another using appreciative listening, the teachers were able to find ways to address the shame and silence they have carried for decades. This work is slow and arduous. But it has the potential to resolve generational trauma by turning toward rather than away from what hurts and by making dialogue – across generations and across cultural divides – possible.