

**Anne Frank in Life and Death:  
Teaching and Learning the Lessons of the Holocaust**

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**Description:** This presentation chronicles the presenter's experiences the first time she teaches a course on Anne Frank in a newly developed program on Holocaust and Genocide Studies. Anne's diary is the eighth most widely read book in the history of publishing. Aside from the wide-ranging power of the text itself, the multiple uses and interpretations to which it has been subjected open up worlds of inquiry for teachers. The compelling nature of the text makes it an important entry vehicle for considerations of moral, civic and citizenship education, genocide education and textual and cultural studies. How do the teachers studying it view its controversial history and the accommodations and liberties that have been taken with it? How do we approach teaching "risky" stories in classrooms with diverse learners who are themselves teachers and what happens if we don't teach them?

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Lawrence Langer, the pre-eminent Holocaust literary critic writes:

Wisdom and spiritual insight rarely fall from the lips of a thirteen-or-fourteen-year-old

girl. Indeed, as many of the new entries in the diary will show, Anne Frank was essentially a physical being, a lover of nature, intrigued with her own sexuality. Students and teachers should continue to read this unusual diary, but for the right reasons. A wrong one is to consider it a vital text about the doom of European Jewry. (2002, 205).

From Anne's diary this entry written in May 3, 1944:

*As you can no doubt imagine, we often ask say in despair:  
"What's the point of the war? Why, oh, why, can't people live together peacefully? Why all this destruction?"*

*The question is very understandable, but up to now no one has come up with a satisfactory answer. Why is England manufacturing bigger and bigger airplanes and bombs and at the same time churning out new houses for reconstruction? Why are millions spent on the war each day, while not a penny is available for medical science, artists or the poor? Why do people have to starve when mountains of food are rotting away in other parts of the world? Oh, why are people so crazy?*

*I don't believe the war is simply the work of politicians and capitalists. Oh no, the common man is every bit as guilty; otherwise, people and nations would have rebelled long ago! There's a destructive urge in people, the urge to rage, murder and kill. And until all of humanity, without exception, undergoes a metamorphosis, wars will continue to be waged, and everything that has been carefully built up, cultivated and grown will be cut down and destroyed, only to start all over again! (1991, 280-281)*

"Is memory male?" asks Andrea Dworkin (1997, 240) in her essay on the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. "Women are conceptually invisible (243) in the "romance of male significance [that] mobilizes feelings and attention" (242). Dworkin's observation is my silent subtext as I reflect on my first academic presentation as a fledgling Holocaust scholar. I have asked the members of the Historical Memory Research Seminar to write about their earliest encounters with the text of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. An esteemed colleague sits, gazes about the room, fiddles with his pen. When I turn to him, he answers, quite unabashedly, that he has never read it.

I don't quite know how to respond, but my face registers shock. He explains that he doesn't consider Anne's a diary of the Holocaust, asserting and naming the more "real" (male) diary keepers. I ask myself: 'What is it about Anne Frank that doesn't meet your criteria for intellectual study? A quick look through the pages of her text would show you that she was a thinker. Do you dismiss her because she is an adolescent girl who thinks about love and sexuality thereby rendering anything else she might think about worthless? She is not *just* female, as Dworkin noted, but young as well. I remember myself as an adolescent girl when being physically attractive and having a brain seemed mutually exclusive.

There are two questions on everyone's mind in the seminar group today, though all are, of course, too polite to ask: "Is Anne's work a legitimate object for academic scholarship?" and "How will you possibly have enough to teach a whole course on *The Diary of Anne Frank*?" The unspokenness of these questions vibrates in the skeptical gaze of this man who has the temerity to boast that he has not read the diary. If it is not worth his reading it, how can one possibly justify an entire course framed around it?

My research for the course has taken me far and wide; tentacles of inquiry stretch and weave across the disciplines of history, literature, psychology and philosophy. There will be more questions than there will be answers; this will be a fascinating vehicle for the exercise of critical thinking.

Summer is upon us before I know it. From Jon Blair's film *Anne Frank Remembered* (1995) we move to Anne's signature sentence: "In spite of everything I still think that people are really good at heart," words that have been snatched out of context and plastered everywhere, the misplaced emphasis on her naivete and optimism what Hannah Arendt called "cheap sentimentality" (Colijn, 2000, 175). Listen to the larger context of this portion of her entry, dated July 15, 1944:

*It's difficult in times like these: ideals, dreams and cherished hopes rise within us, only to be crushed by grim reality. It's a wonder I haven't abandoned all my ideals, they seem so absurd and impractical. Yet I cling to them because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart.*

*It's utterly impossible for me to build my life on a foundation of chaos, suffering and death. I see the world being slowly transformed into a wilderness, I hear the approaching thunder that, one day, will destroy us too, I feel the suffering of millions. And yet, when I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that everything will change for the better, that this cruelty too shall end, that peace and tranquility will return once more. In the meantime, I must hold on to my ideals. Perhaps the day will come when I'll be able to realize them! (1991, 332)*

The students respond to the weekly readings using the triple-entry notebook. They record passages of the reading which they find resonant, reflect on why they think this is so and, at a later date, given further reading and reflection, return to the passages to note the development of

their thinking. We meet individually after several weeks and together we discern their personal directions for the final projects. Modeling the diary by journaling works well.

We consider the Diary in its historical context, both the specific history of the Netherlands in the Second World War and the mythology that has grown up around it, no small part of which is due to the popularity of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. We problematize the 'trivialization,' 'popularization' and 'Americanization' of the Holocaust that has followed in the wake of the play and the movie. We consider the diary as the finest record we have of what Katherine Dalsimer (1986) calls "normal female adolescence," how it enacts and articulates what Gilligan and her colleagues will come to recognize as the splitting of the female psyche, the burial of "voice."

*"Dearest Kitty,"* Anne writes at the end of January, 1944:

*Can you tell me why people go to such lengths to hide their real selves? Or why I always behave very differently when I'm in the company of others? Why do people have so little trust in one another? I know there must be a reason, but sometimes I think it's horrible that you can't ever confide in anyone, not even those closest to you. (1991, 171)*

Mother-daughter relationships, father-daughter relationships, female socialization, writing as resistance, gender and identity, male adolescent Holocaust diaries, feminist philosophy and literary theory, adolescent self-writing, appropriation and co-opting of voice, the fear of being a Jew in hiding - all of these are tabled for discussion. We talk about the enforced separation of the public and private spheres and the academic mirroring of that that has kept the experience and meaning of growing up in a family invisible. We honour the power of one individual life to affect history for good or for evil.

The students, most of whom are teachers, present the weekly readings in creative fashion, sharing teaching techniques that make the learning come alive. At the same time they struggle with these issues. Nothing is black or white; the canvas of this course is a palette of grays. Risa, a high school civics teacher, writes in her journal after reading Cynthia Ozick's controversial essay "Who Owns Anne Frank?" - "maybe it would have been better if the Diary had been burned after all?" (Gluskin, July 15, 2002) - a response to Miep's admission that, had she read Anne's diary before she hid it, she would have had to burn it, so incriminating was the record there.

Three classes later Risa asks: "Would we be here if this text weren't written by such a powerful writer?" (July 24, 2002).

We learn from guest speakers. Allan Gould, local writer and teacher, describes his collaboration with his friend, the late Al Waxman, when Waxman produced the stage play of the diary at the renowned Stratford Festival Theatre in Ontario in the summer of 2000. The production of the Diary came about because Richard Monette, Stratford's artistic director, did not want to "let the twentieth century go by without having something on the Stratford stages about the most important event of the twentieth century - the Holocaust" (Gould, 2002). If one of the major functions of theatre is to educate, how is it that schools choose to ignore the major event of the twentieth century in their curriculum?

Gould speaks movingly of Waxman's dedication to the production, how he altered the script to reinsert passages that Anne wrote about her body and her Jewishness, how he asked the actors to ignore equity regulations and remain on stage throughout the intermission to convey the sense of being trapped. Not one actor complained. George Perdakos, playing the part of Otto Frank, diagnosed with cancer in the pre-production period, fought valiantly to make it to opening night, wept overtly when he appeared for curtain calls, was hospitalized the next day and never came home again.

Gould describes his doctoral studies in English at the University of Toronto with the late Nathan Cohen, a well-known drama critic, as his supervisor. Cohen told him that before the Second World War King Lear was only produced in bowdlerized editions because it was such a horrific text that audiences couldn't bear it. After the War the public's tolerance for violence had been so substantially altered that it has since become the most popularly produced of Shakespeare's plays.

Gould shares stories about his relationship with the late Victor Kugler, one of the Frank family's office-worker helpers, who moved to Toronto in 1955. Every year Gould would pick Kugler up and take him to the high school where Gould's wife taught so that he could speak about his wartime experiences to the teenagers in her class. His experiences with Kugler led Gould to conceptualize the notion of the 'banality of goodness' - as counterpoint to Arendt's notion of the 'banality of evil'. For Kugler and the other office workers there was never any question that they would help the Franks; quite simply "we were friends."

The decisions life offers are meant to be very difficult. Gould made me wonder if we didn't do a great job of making things more complicated

than they really are. To teach students about the 'banality of goodness' and the 'banality of evil' and the choices that each one of us makes, seems a reasonable expectation for teachers. How could we best share this with our students and even model it for them?

Robert-Jan Van Pelt, expert on the architecture of Auschwitz, convinced us of the importance of proving the authenticity of Auschwitz: if Auschwitz didn't function as an extermination camp, then the murder of 6 million could (quite legitimately) be questioned. The same holds true for the Diary. The extensive and costly analysis of Anne's writing undertaken by the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation in response to on-going attempts to impugn the authenticity of the diary was more than a simple response to neo-Nazi propaganda. These were the two pivotal points of cultural reference for the existence of the Holocaust - Auschwitz and Anne's diary. Has any fourteen-year-old girl in Western history constellated such power around her? Should we not read what she had to say?

"Anne Frank brings out the best in us," I write on the board the day of Van Pelt's visit. We have been surveying the works of Philip Roth and Meyer Levin, speculating about the obsessive hold that Anne's words have had on the most disparate of individuals. Has any literary voice been so completely and frequently co-opted and traduced? What is the nature of her power over us all? - for we, who are immersed in the study of her text, are also galvanized by it, beyond any rational explanation, drawn by the stark honesty of her words, how they reflect selves we know intimately and share so infrequently. "Although I tell you a great deal about our lives," Anne writes on March 29, 1944, "you still know very little about us" (1991, 244).

Deborah Britzman (1999) brilliantly explains the power of Anne's text as performing a "rescue fantasy." Falling in love with Anne through the medium of her Diary, good Christians (and Jews who lived outside the range of Hitler's grasp), absolve themselves of any guilt about their 'bystander' status, how they let the Holocaust happen, how they did not love their brothers and sisters as themselves. A cult of Anne Frank clubs has grown up in present day Germany; it is too facile to infer from this that the deeper lessons of the Holocaust have been internalized.

"It may be comforting," writes Tim Cole in 1991, to think that by encouraging school children to read *The Diary Of Anne Frank* and learn about the 'Holocaust', we can put an end to intolerance and discrimination. Yet if we ask ourselves 'had Anne Frank - an ordinary young Jewish girl - lived next

door, could she have counted on us for help during the Nazi occupation?' and simply answer 'yes,' we betray a lack of humility which confrontation with the Holocaust demands. When faced with what 'ordinary' men and women did to other 'ordinary' men and women because of their Jewishness, what other response is there but 'I just don't know.' It is too easy to say 'yes' and thereby set up self-righteous categories of 'us' and 'them,' meaning 'we' would have helped, but 'they,' the 'racists,' the 'intolerant,' the 'prejudiced,' the 'nationalists,' would not have done so." (43)

Each of the students has, in his or her own way, wrestled with these two questions: Would I have risked my family to save another? Who could I have asked to hide my family? As Maxine Greene (2001) explained it in the wake of September 11, 2001, we must abandon the notions of 'us' and 'them' to look within ourselves, at the darkness within.

Alfred Werner, in an essay entitled "Germany's New Flagellants" (2000, 163) cites German physician and philosopher Max Picard, who, like his contemporary Karl Jaspers, maintained that all Germans bore a collective guilt for the Holocaust. Picard's book *The Hitler in Our Selves*, takes this one step further. He writes: "All of us, gentile and Jew, black and white, European and American, carry some sort of Hitler in ourselves, an inherent sickness of the soul which may brew into a dangerous cancer unless we cure it in time."

Considering questions of memory and representation in Holocaust studies, Marla Morris offers the model of a "dystopic curriculum" that allows the shadow of the object, the shadow of the Holocaust, to darken perspectives. But darkening perspectives does not mean sliding into nihilism. A dystopic curriculum is an ethical one, a response to [Levinas'] "invocation" of the other. A dystopic curriculum is a promise of remembering that attempts to cut through lightness and inauthenticity toward the dark. (2001, 11)

Nel Noddings observes that American curriculum veers away from treating anything that "smacks of suffering or grief." As she sees it "[e]ducation has at least in modern times been guided by optimism and notions of progress ... Perhaps we should now consider an education guided by a tragic sense of life (Noddings qtd, in Morris, 11). Maxine Greene (2001) would judge this reluctance to examine our darker side part of Dewey's

legacy and the shortcoming of his vision. Jung and Freud both have alerted us to what the Shadow holds; educators continue to avoid that territory at their peril.

Though the literary imagination may not always get us there, as Greene feared, creative critical thinking will be required. The critical thinking skills that we hone through the close study of literary texts must be engaged in order to negotiate the information galaxy of the internet and to deconstruct the rhetoric that followed September 11 - the polarization of good and bad, the "axis of evil" that is always out there and never in here, the flattening out to the one right way.

The students take the ideas of this course in a wide arc of directions: they write poetry and uncover lost poets and unfamiliar texts; create an abundance of curriculum at elementary and secondary levels; mine the vast body of internet resources; integrate personal, family, community memories into theory; contend with moral, aesthetic, political, pedagogical questions. Our time together is so charged that they beg for an extra class; it lasts from nine to three and ends only because I have a doctor's appointment. We cannot leave this.

Carson, born in Newfoundland, introduces us to a play based on the true story of a fourteen-year-old orphaned girl, survivor of Auschwitz, who was adopted by childless Jewish Newfoundlanders. It is a haunting commentary on her life, set against the experiences of a liberating soldier. Carson and Joan, whose father, a Canadian soldier, was a prisoner of war in four different camps act out scenes from the play in costume. He wears her father's uniform. Jody, the grandchild of survivors, is driven to understand what keeps her from being able to teach children about the Holocaust. She produces an entire unit for grade six which she hopes to use this year.

One powerful theme resonates through all their stunning final projects: it is goodness. Not goodness, wise Risa points out, as naïve faith, but goodness as an exercise in maintaining control in extreme circumstances. Samantha, a self-declared pessimist fascinated by Anne's optimism, reads the Diary alongside Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946, 1985). Frankl, a psychoanalyst, survived his concentration camp experience by actively seeking to do kind deeds each day that he was there.

He writes:

I remember how one day a foreman secretly gave me a piece of bread which I knew he must have saved from his breakfast ration. It was far more than a small piece of bread which moved



me to tears at that time. It was the human "something" which this man also gave to me - the word and look which accompanied the gift.

From all this we may learn that there are two races of men in the world, but only these two - the "race" of the decent man and the "race" of the indecent man. Both are found everywhere." (Qtd. in Cartoock and Spencer, 234)

It was not the circumstances in which you found yourself that determined your survival, Frankl concluded, it was the attitude you took toward those circumstances.

Anne, not a psychoanalyst, fourteen years old, champions goodness - and is frequently dismissed for it. The world has changed since September 11, 2001; the era of goodness may yet be at hand. Novelist Carol Shields, writing in *Unless* (2002), the most recent and perhaps most profound of her works of fiction, is concerned with "[g]oodness but not greatness" (191), with human kindness, loving relationships, women's values. Anne, like Sophocles' Antigone, chooses to "join in loving not in hating" (Woolf, 190) though, like Freud, she understands the evil that lurks within.

Anne Frank brings out the best in us. We love her because we know that, could we believe as she did, in the face of terror, if not in the squalor of Bergen-Belsen, we want desperately to believe in the goodness of humankind. This is the power of her legacy. She, alone, dares to admit that she wants to believe that people are basically good at heart.

Journalist Judith Miller writes:

Abstraction is memory's most ardent enemy. It kills because it encourages distance, and often indifference. We must remind ourselves that the Holocaust was not six million. It was one, plus one, plus one ... Only in understanding that a civilized people must defend the one, by one, by one ... can the Holocaust, the incomprehensible, be given meaning. (1990, 287)

We must acknowledge with appropriate respect the magnificent achievement of this singular fourteen-year-old girl, only one of one and a half million innocent children brutally murdered in the Nazi plan to destroy the Jews, at the same time as we mourn what more she and they might have given to the world.

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