Walking in a Burnt Hole

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The Holocaust is widely studied because “we are seekers of understanding in the territory defined by those events” (Skloot 9). The study of the Holocaust through art allows us to connect and share in the human experience with each other; thus, creating a timeless quality that allows us to continue the conversation beyond the classroom. Through poetry and plays, the Holocaust is brought to life in a more realistic way.

I created a 14-week course for 17 and 18 year olds where they are able to understand the atrocity of the genocide through written works. The course will consist of reading the plays Throne of Straw by Harold Lieberman, Who Will Carry the Word? By Charlotte Delbo, and Bent by Martin Sherman. I’ve also selected ten poems from Holocaust Poetry compiled by Hilda Schiff. All of the the plays and poetry share common themes of choiceless choices, friendship, identity, the blurry line between life and death, and being a witness and a survivor. The culmination of the course is a staged reading performance of selected scenes and poetry from the curriculum to further the students’ and audience’s education.

A final question until I return:
Since shrouds have no pockets
And ashes no permanent home
Where will they keep them?
(Throne of Straw).

I never gave up, I never stopped fighting for one second.
(Who Will Carry the Word?)

Utilizing art as the avenue to study the Holocaust is the most effective way to continue to remember the events and memories of the genocide. My purpose in this course is for the students to not be just witnesses, but to react to and remember history. I hope to carry the word to the students, and that they will then carry the word to others by performing the scenes and poetry to an audience. In turn, I hope the audience will continue the conversation after the performance. As witnesses who then become survivors, we have a duty to exchange these human experiences and share them with one another. My goal in this thesis is to inspire these students and audiences to make the courageous choice to say “I am no longer a bystander, but an activist.” Will you carry the word?

*all photos taken by Sophe Friedman at Dachau Concentration Camp in Dachau, Germany

*From Holocaust Poetry

Never Shall I Forget

Never shall I forget that night,
the first night in the camp
which has turned my life into one long night,
seven times cursed and seven times sealed.

Never shall I forget that smoke,
Never shall I forget the little faces of the children
whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke
beneath a silent blue sky.

Never shall I forget those flames
which consumed my faith for ever.
Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence
which deprived me for all eternity of the desire to live.

Never shall I forget those moments
which murdered my God and my soul
and turned my dreams to dust.

Never shall I forget these things,
even if I am condemned to live
as long as God Himself.

Never.

– Elie Wiesel