

The Holocaust among Holocausts: A Child's Lessons Became the Teacher's

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Abstract: The Holocaust is recognized globally as a genocide of remarkable cost in life and liberty. My story is that of the daughter of a child survivor, one who lived in 9 foster homes before coming to the United States with her mother and brother at the age of 11. The need to assimilate, learn new languages and simply survive had a traumatic impact my life as the first child of my mother at 22 years old, who did not have a *normal childhood* for me to replicate. She did her best and I did mine for her. I was a parentified child of someone who spoke openly about what her childhood was like. She gave endless responses to my ceaseless queries, like those of other children about the early years of their parents. My mother's suffering, and her mother's, plus the loss of too many relatives – murdered elders known only to me by name – left voids in my childhood. Childhood is idyllic in storybooks; it was not in mine, but my journey and challenges were to teach me to validate my own experiences even in the shadow of the horrific tales of my mother's. The professional help I sought helped me see the power of knowing oneself and developing boundaries. I knew as a traditional-aged undergraduate that I wanted to be a social worker; I wanted to help others and save the world. Life and a lack of clarity about the professional boundaries and skills I would be taught delayed my enrollment. Fifteen years later, I began the journey to earn my graduate social work degrees and am pleased to be a social work professor now. I share with my students my passion for social justice, woven into the curriculum they must learn. It which falls flat without their examples and my own, of what greatness and true evil can accomplish. I have found that my interests in the fields of HIV/AIDS and aging are natural channels for my passion to help and to make a difference when injustice is glaring. I will not be blinded by the audacity of inequity. I empower my students to see issues and consider how they can create social change to better circumstances for clients with whom they work, to whom they listen, and who become empowered because of their efforts. I channel my efforts inside and outside of the classroom to find equity for people with HIV/AIDS and for caregivers who often forfeit everything due to a system that denies the needs of the aged. Meanwhile we await the awakening of possible Ebola, Zika, or other pandemics in the shadow of the ongoing and devastating, inequitable AIDS tragedy. What have we learned? I am not sure. What have I learned? Everything and nothing. I am a social worker and social work educator because there is so much to do and so many students who want to make the journey to social justice for all.

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I am the canvas of my life experiences, which have influenced the person I have become and my seemingly natural choice of social work as the profession I call home.

I am the child of a Holocaust survivor and my mother's story cannot be separated from my own, even with generational and experiential gaps in our respective journeys. Epstein (1979) presented a compilation of real life stories of the children of Holocaust survivors. This volume was groundbreaking and spoke to me and countless others, even though the details of our personal histories differed.

It is impossible for me to separate the "who" of my self from the lessons taught, intentionally or not, at the feet of my mother, and hers, amidst the aching

void of relatives who existed in name only.

My childhood, filled with family tales some parents might prevent their young children from knowing, led me on a path to fight for social justice. I was always campaigning for some wrong to be righted. I became a lifelong vegetarian and a natural helper to my elders, regardless of the difference in their backgrounds from that of my family.

I grew up in the shadow of demons I could not know, knowledgeable about genocide at an age when children should be marrying off their Barbie dolls. My family was very open and stories were shared; I retained what I could, while some stories stuck at a later age when retold, and I was ready to keep them.

I had a friend whose background made us similar,

although this discourse of the Holocaust did not yet exist between or among survivors and certainly not their offspring. But I understood her mother's broken heart and haunted eyes. I recognized her labor to seem *normal* and raise a proper middle class family when in reality it was she, like my mother, who was really living a life of 'make believe'.

I became the mother I wished my mother had. My knowledge of selfless parenting was non-existent, as my own parent was so young, and her childhood and maternal relationship were often tortuous. I wanted to make this up to her. Was I conscious of this dynamic? Not really. I was a parentified child long before I had ever heard the term. Yet, I tried and we cried, and my grandmother was filled with the litter of demons who had chased, raped, and stolen the life she might have had. She saved her children, lost her husband to the murder chambers of Auschwitz, and brought her family to the U.S. Eventually, I was born.

I applied to an MSW program immediately upon graduating with a degree in French literature. My mother is French, hence the obvious connection and my singular academic goal to spend my junior year in France, which I did. I also deferred my graduate school attendance for several years. My illogical plan ended that goal when I balanced the probability of maintaining my first house – bought at the age of 24 – while commuting to an all consuming job in New York City. The potential of attending that graduate school at that time was not logistically viable. And, in truth, being the keeper of secrets of many, and the kind ear and amateur counselor to too many, convinced me that 24-hour "helping" would not work. Fifteen years later, I had my epiphany. It was time, and to graduate school I went, with a commitment to become a therapist, focusing instead on research and practice within the AIDS and aging fields. I earned a doctorate degree to teach and nurture similarly inspired students.

When my social work epiphany hit, feedback was pretty consistent. In particular, one person said, "It's about time." The fit was good and my wishes to right the wrongs of society now had a seemingly limitless field of horrors to transform into dreams.

I now specialize in the fields of HIV/AIDS and aging, as the convener of the gerontology minor at

my college. My specific area of aging focus is on the needs of caregivers, the most compelling and inconceivable oversight of the inevitable, and the blind eye leaving families devastated by multiple layers of loss. This insidious, too often unavoidable circle, strangles families, causing systemic changes that cannot be overlooked. These devastating gaps in caregiver assistance remain ignored by the powers that can save those who have, do, and will suffer the impossible juggling of work, home, family, finances and finding time and resources in the absence of any such surplus. This is a national disaster, deliberately ignored as many holocausts have been in the history of the world and our current history, as witnesses document yet another unacceptable staple of our nation: what should be done by the *haves* for the *have nots*. Sadly, there are a plethora of circumstances like the HIV/AIDS epidemic and families in need of caregiving assistance, that divide our nation into those who are (un)worthy and (ir)responsible, or not. So many exist within the standards set by outsiders, unaffected, who do not recognize the damage caused. I dread another holocaust of any type.

Caregivers struggle on, sharing the terror and outsider/unworthy status of fellow citizens who do not know if they will be able to pay their bills and keep their home. Meanwhile, someone needs care that is only available from a family member whose other role(s) become challenged, compromised, and often irrevocably changed. Our nation ignored those initially, continually and globally stricken by HIV/AIDS. Perhaps the plight of caregivers in this country can be called a holocaust of sorts, too.

The Holocaust remains part of my life. The lessons learned and the suffering that survived became the most important legacy of my elders. Surely my essence would be the same, absent of the many first-hand tales of survival I painfully listened to, not knowing if it was okay to feel sad when the horrors were not my own. I believe the intensity of this childhood environment, and the innate urgency to stop the ills and suffering in the world were surely fanned by my upbringing.

I cherish examples from my life and continue to learn much from my peers. Elders in my building include Holocaust survivors with advanced Alzheimer's Disease who need protection, beyond the obvious. They are owed better pasts in their homelands with

families long since murdered. They remind me that my choice in profession was sparked by the nightmares of others, perhaps wrapped in seemingly *normal* lives with children and grandchildren, mean while encasing hurts that Freud might hesitate exploring. I became a social worker and ultimately a professor because I felt I could contribute more by igniting the passion of the social work profession in others, while sharing the knowledge base needed to become the best practitioner possible. Like others, I thought I could exponentially help more individuals and systems by providing tools to students, rather than to work directly with seekers of our services.

I love my mother, but this did not prevent the need for years of therapy to understand my own context, which could never measure up to my mother's suffering. Each plight I faced was dwarfed by any of hers. It was not a game of the dozens. This was an internalized experience of not knowing where my suffering began or if it mattered. We all suffer in some way and, hopefully, learn. My learning enticed me to gain the skills to help others as a licensed clinical social worker.

In 1991, the *Hidden Children Foundation* was established. This fledgling international organization sought to validate the experiences of survivors who had not been in concentration camps and instead had other perilous stories like my mother's and Anne Frank's. We attended the *First International Gathering of Children Hidden During World War II* and ran into old friends and neighbors whose histories had been vaguely shared, mostly about countries of origins, despite many hours and social events spent together. This was a stage of the coming out process for those who concealed their journeys of hiding to survive. An informal group began for the children of these survivors and I became the contact person for *second generation* individuals who wanted to know more. We eventually found a therapist of great talent and a similar background; a formal therapy group was started. Our therapist unveiled so much about the power of family dynamics and individuals' idiosyncrasies, relevant to genocide. I learned. We learned. I worked privately with this brilliant woman and I now love my mother better, understand her a little more, and still wish to protect her from everything far beyond my capability or reality, pre-dating my very birth.

My students experience my investment in outing and fighting institutional racism, genocide, global suffering, and the stories that should never be forgotten about the Holocaust and other holocausts, past and present. I connect the Ebola unknowns and AIDS pandemic to my students' typically sheltered suburban lives, and help them to become advocates and educators. This is life affirming for me; I feel I am contributing something of the suffering and murders of my grandfather and for his entire family. I also honor the memory of my cherished uncle, Guy, "who was born during one Holocaust and died during another," as my mother so eloquently told the National Public Radio (NPR) interviewer during one of the AIDS quilt displays on the Washington Mall. Meanwhile, I hid behind the Washington monument, choking from the confusion of too many thoughts and the flurry of words I might share if I were to be interviewed as well.

Stories prevail. Our family has journeyed to the archives of my mother's ancestors, in Germany, and the hiding place in France where she last lived with both parents. The kind people in this place, smaller than a hamlet, kept her father's papers, *la petite valise*, a lawyer's records of his efforts in three languages, to save his family. We have met people who knew him, my grandmother, and my mother when she was just a child of five or six, in one of her 9 foster families in a hiding place that was her *best* home for two years.

I bring this passion to my students and weave it into lessons inviting discussions about their similar family and first hand experiences. We discuss institutional and global racism about the *haves* and *have nots* and those who seemingly deserve to live and those who do not. After all, actions speak louder than words and we are consumers of statistics. HIV/AIDS is a subject about which I am passionate and, like many, limitlessly saddened. I teach a course about the global realities of this pandemic. How can 50% of AIDS cases be African Americans who only comprise 13% of the U.S. population? Similarly, why are the people of Africa dying of AIDS and Ebola while those in affluent nations benefit and thrive from relevant and available prevention, education, and treatment options? This holocaust is about social value, it might seem, or so it does to me. It again addresses who is worthy and who is expendable, as all genocides do. But this stage of death is preventable and I want my social work students to understand this by making

them teach others about what they learn. They come to understand their power and relish in their roles as educators, hopeful they will have enlightened and saved the futures of one or many who will, hopefully, pass their learning on and pay it forward. This is what I learned from my life as one of the *second generation*, as the child of a Holocaust survivor. This is why I do what I do.

In 1991, I wrote the following piece shortly before my epiphany to pursue that social work graduate school thing for real, having identified my place in the Holocaust history of my family.

Expression of Impressions

The exhaustion is a part of me. So familiar, like my own skin that I no longer remember can be cured of its blemishes. I wear it like the old sweater that was my mother's or his. . . or hers despite the fact that it is made of wool to which I am allergic.

Helpless inside, yet so helpful outside. How can I explain or excuse? Who would understand this huge step already taken in being able to recognize this much? Of even understanding and then recording it in words?

Exhaustion is different from fatigue. It is the scent of the exhumed legacy. It is the primal memory so loud and persistent even when my sense of logic deafens me to its agonized screaming. It is the undertow of my tears, memories I repress but couldn't remember if I tried, like a flavor I craved of something I've never tasted. How can it be?

Why do Jews number so few among my friends? Why are my Christian friends so understanding and supportive of this panic I'm finally acknowledging? Why am I but one of their many, many Jewish friends? Why is my Catholic friend from Brazil who suffered incredible political persecution and witnessed the resultant murders of so many friends, able to understand the intensity and importance of the legacy while my few Jewish friends cannot?

Last night I spoke with one of my old Jewish friends about my anxiety and about my mother's

even more intense version. About how I did not want to share this with her, to distract her from her own frightening, so-long postponed, acknowledgment. My friend said that it helps to feel validated in some area, that one can help another at least a little bit while in the midst of one's own helplessness. I said no. It isn't so. My legacy is to survive. My mother's experience and honorary title is that of SURVIVOR. To be able to squelch anything and everything else in order to live. In order to not die. Anxiety is nothing compared to the barking of dogs, the wailing of sirens, stumbling blindly in the night exhausted, hungry and terrified. No, she is so close to touching her own wound, I will not distract her with mine. My friend understood the distinction from her own American Jewish roots, but that was with her sincere intellect only.

It is not that I mean to exclude the survivors from the 2nd generation meetings. It is that I need to expose my sadness, my frustration and anger at having had such a dysfunctional upbringing. What is so hard about raising a child? I don't know, I have none. Why couldn't you spare me your terror? Why do I have to wear a scar for which I have no memory? I was brought up to respect my elders, to not contradict (well, I try anyway), and to support, even in my own panic and fear, those who lived through it all. I cannot talk freely and seemingly self-indulgently in front of you. As the Hidden Children are only coming to understand, their survival was at a painful price, valid after all even though they didn't die or face the camps, so I must allow myself to admit and mourn my own scars, thirty-three years denied. I want to hold each of you and hear your stories and absorb your tears. But I don't feel strong enough. . . yet. I want to become whole and step out of my pattern of helping at any cost to my own sanity and need. I need to be with my own, the "kids." I know it is somewhere in all of this tangle and honest strength from being so close to my bottomless, inconsolable core. But I feel weak, out of control, without patterned devices to distract or to continue functioning. It is the fear of the new perspective more than of the discovery itself. At least there is a relief, an answer, in the latter.

From this frightened perspective, things have an ominous new meaning. Perhaps it is as tainted as

the functional, strictly structured one I've surrendered to until now, but even in its extremeness there is some grain of truth. I live from the neck up. I use my mind and quick wits in order to know what is going on. . . always. My family had a dog while I was growing up. She was the sweetest, most insatiably affectionate being I've ever met, yet she was terrified of every noise and had bad dreams. The only honestly functioning dysfunctional member of the group. Funny, that. And despite my intellectual defenses that protect my body, which shelters my heart and its emotions, I am brilliantly functional even with my dysfunction. That is why it seems so ironic to me to have to cross over into the terrifying land of "lack-of-control" as I travel to the realm of my real self, my body and emotional memories.

It is in this nameless panic that I resemble my mother most. While I wish I better bore her

external, superficial features, I instead bear the crucial inner ones. I do not feel ashamed. I feel scared, afraid that they, who have always seemed so strong, may not conquer that mountain again. But maybe there is a greater sense of strength from the peace of knowing and completeness. Maybe I was only defensive and protective after all. . . of myself and my mother within me.

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Reference

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