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Facing History at South Boston High School

Thomas Klein



Few who lived through the 1970s can forget “Southie,” South Boston High School. Names like school-board member Louise Day Hicks, Mayor Kevin White, and Judge Arthur Garrity get etched into the mind, not only because the forced busing that brought them infamy tore up a city for almost a decade but also because anyone at that time concerned about racial balance must have harbored a little guilt that it was Boston, and not a town closer to home, that got the brunt of disruption. But no one seemed to express that guilt, that shared responsibility for our racist history.

Whether it deserved it or not, Boston developed a reputation as a bastion of bigotry, but that is not what attracted me to the city for a semester of study and teaching. A student in Boston in the formative days of the various human rights movements of the early 1960s, I wanted to return to see what had become of the city crowded with colleges, of Boston’s richly ethnic neighborhoods, of its shamed past. Some years before, I had attended a week-long workshop at *Facing History and Ourselves*, a nonprofit foundation that has trained over thirty-thousand teachers to teach about racism and prejudice and has reached half a million students. Based in the Boston area, *Facing History* asked me to join its twenty-five staff members, in part because I had for several years taught courses in Holocaust and genocide literature and history.

A major part of my stay in Boston would be spending two days a week at Southie, observing a sophomore *Facing History* class taught by English teacher Virginia Ordway. I would be able to come to some definitive conclusion, I thought, regarding the legacy of the terrible forced busing years, at the same time that I figured out why and how Ordway

brought the Holocaust, as a case study of institutionalized hatred, bigotry, and racism, to fifteen diversely ethnic students. Since *Facing History* is usually taught in social-studies classes, I also wanted to see how this curriculum is taught in an English class, see the stories, novels, discussion and writing activities focused on the study of language and literature. In particular, I set out to determine whether it is possible to take students away from their stress-filled lives, transport them sixty years back into our past and into the terrible story of the Holocaust, at the same time providing a sense of respect for, solace in, and acceptance of their own lives. Clearly, the success of such a unit would depend on how sensitively a teacher would balance the conflict between the particular and the universal, the demands of such a complex and painful content and the needs of students.

The familiar images brace one upon entering Southie—the giant steel entry doors, the guard and sign-in at the entrance, the padlocked lavatories (opened only five minutes between classes when they can be monitored), the steel grates on windows and doors, and the darkened, locked library (where, of course, the AV equipment sat). Yet, the school betrays itself; I found myself transfixed with the school's panoramic view of Boston Harbor, the islands and water sparkling, in spite of the fortress atmosphere that envelops the halls. Such a mixture of beauty and sadness would characterize my next three months there.

As I waited for Ordway's *Facing History* class to begin, I met Joe, one of four security guards who work the halls at Southie. A large and imposing man in his fifties with a heavy Irish/Bostonian accent, he regaled me with stories of the 1974–78 period—six-hundred police officers on the streets and in the school, one on each stairway and landing, an FBI helicopter overhead, a stabbing that closed the school for two weeks, all the result of an Irish/Italian/Polish neighborhood rocked by a law that demanded racial balance in the city schools. Of course, the suburbs were exempt from such a demand, and that fact, probably more than any other, incensed most Bostonians (Anthony J. Lukas, 1986, *Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families*, New York: Random).

The neighborhood that Southie serves is still overwhelmingly Anglo, but the high school hardly reflects this. It is presently 36% African American, 26% Latino, 10% Asian American, and 28% Anglo

More on *Facing History*

Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation can be reached at 16 Hurd Rd., Brookline, MA 02146, (617) 232-1595. The organization sponsors numerous workshops annually around the country, and it publishes books and resource guides that would be helpful to teachers wishing to teach about racism and genocide.

Several books have been written to specifically help English teachers present the literature of the Holocaust.

Langer, Lawrence. 1975. *Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale.

Langer's study describes an "esthetics of atrocity" as it appears in major poems, novels, memoirs, stories, and plays of the Holocaust. His approach chronicles violence committed with no apparent reason, requiring a leap of the reader's imagination in order to accept a complicity with atrocity.

Rosenfeld, Alvin. 1980. *A Double Dying*. Bloomington: Indiana UP.

Rosenfeld analyzes the significant authors, major themes, styles, and genres of Holocaust literature. The double dying of the title refers both to the millions of persons who died and to an ennobled conception of humanity that was lost in the Holocaust.

Roth, John, and Michael Berenbaum. 1989. *Holocaust: Religious and Philosophical Implications*. New York: Paragon.

One of the best and most current anthologies of Holocaust literature, this book offers a succinct historical overview of the Shoah (for many the preferred term for Holocaust), as well as essays, memoirs, and short fiction, from such important writers as Bauer, Levi, Hilberg, Borowski, Lifton, DesPres, Langer, Wiesel, Rubenstein, and Fackenheim.

Strom, Margot, and William Parsons. 1982. *Holocaust and Human Behavior*. Watertown, MA: Intentional Educations.

Available from Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation, this anthology of materials for teachers was written to accompany the teachers workshops on teaching about genocide, racism, and the Holocaust which *Facing History* has conducted over the last fifteen years. Its readings reflect the latest scholarship on the Holocaust and trace the roots of prejudice in our lives.

Young, James. 1990. *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*. Bloomington: Indiana UP.

This study describes the processes by which historical memory works in Holocaust diaries, memoirs, fiction, poetry, drama, video testimony, and memorials. Young holds that while the "facts" of the Holocaust

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American, numbers which almost exactly match the breakdown in Ordway's class. Clearly, Anglos have fled to other schools under a modified choice plan. The racial tensions left in the school suggested that a program like *Facing History* would be welcome, at the same time that it would require balancing the needs of two very different kinds of cultures.

Fifteen students sat in clusters by race and gender on my first day. Ordway was starting the *Facing History* unit and wrote on the board, "Describe one time you were a victim of peer pressure. How did you respond and why?" In a pattern often repeated, the lesson started with a short writing activity that asked students to think about an issue in their own lives, in this case conformity, that also played a role in the Holocaust or some other genocide. But always, it seemed, the lesson had to compete with an avalanche of "noise," various forms of unintentional distractions (there were announcements over the loudspeaker and a fight broke out in an adjacent classroom), and many deliberate distractions, most of which came from the students—rude comments and interruptions, jokes, outrageous protests at some slight or remark, rude knocks on the locked door, journals left in lockers or lost. My suspicion was that underlying the resistance was a sense of shame and low self-esteem, suggested by one student's comment after he was told that his student teacher was not paid for teaching: "Why would he get paid to teach a bunch of morons?"



Many students openly resisted the lesson, denied that they had ever given in to peer pressure. Alex, for example, answered he would never be a victim of peer pressure because all his friends are "retards." He got the giggles he might have sought although, as I got to know Alex better and discovered how alert he was, I thought there might have been some small truth in his sarcasm. A few responded more thoughtfully. John wrote,

When I was a kid last summer some fellows I know from around the way asked me if I'd like to sip on a few beers, but I said, "No way Jose!" If it happened now, I'd say the same thing.

Joseph wrote,

Last summer I went down the beach and planned on not going swimming because of the pollution. My friends were saying, "Go in, come on. You're not gonna get sick." So I went in, and when I came out I had big red blotches all over me.

The next day I asked the students to write about why they thought they were studying racism, anti-Semitism, and the Holocaust. Most offered only vague answers, some form of "to learn about the past" or "to learn about other cultures." Ed, an African American student, wrote, "In no way does it apply to me." Of the fifteen students, two showed some emerging insight: Joseph, who is also African American, wrote, "This applies to me because I'm in an interracial area. In school and where I live. It's to help me better understand people of different cultures." And Sandra, a Latina, wrote that "it

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is to show that racism still exists among us, so we can understand its dangers," and she gave an example of her father who "doesn't really like Dominican people just because they're not Americans." While some would call such fragments of insight primitive, the *Facing History* philosophy is to move students gradually from literary and historical examples of genocide (focusing especially on the Holocaust) back to present-day experiences of intolerance and racism. By shifting between the past and present, students are to gain critical perspec-

tive on both kinds of events. To examine these students' lives without a buffer like the Holocaust could, in fact, be overwhelming. Because they are mostly the rejected and silenced and because, in reaction, they often act out their aggressions on each other, the *Facing History* curriculum should, in theory, be a fitting content.

The next day Ordway handed out copies of Frank Tashlin's short children's story *The Bear That Wasn't* (1946, New York: Dover), an allegory about a bear who loses his identity after repeatedly being told, by corporate bureaucrats, that he is not a bear. Ordway asked students to draw analogies, after which Ben said, "Selling out is like when a hard core rapper sells out to an R and B band." "Good," Ordway said, and beamed.

Suneo asserted that "the factory (where the bear is forced to work on an assembly line) is like jail." Another good response. Ordway has clearly begun to get students to see that we are very malleable, that society often shapes who we are. This lesson foreshadows study of the early stages of the Nazi reign, when propaganda fanned the fears and hopes of the German people.

The next day's lesson, on the film *After the First* (1984, Dir. Nick Frangakis, Franciscan Communications, 1229 S. Santee St., Los Angeles, California 90015), raises questions about how we develop our values and attitudes and about what happens when we individually come in conflict with cultural norms. The short film is about a boy taken to the woods by his father to learn to handle a gun and, eventually, to kill his first rabbit. Most of the boy's reluctance to use the gun is silenced by the father, who urges him to get into the thrill of shooting. The students, however, got only a glimmer of what was happening in the film; most of them seemed to side with the hard-nosed father, who calls the rabbit "just a rodent" and coaxes the boy to toughen up for the kill. I was learning how easy it is for students, or for ordinary citizens, to become caught up with the excitement of hunting. At this point, apparently, the students had a long way to go before they understood how easily anyone could become hardened to suffering or terrorized by fear.

After studying the process of identity formation, students approached the Holocaust more directly, through a study of the historical sequence of events that conditioned perpetrators (through propaganda and terror) to hate Jews and conditioned bystanders to feel content in doing nothing to stop it. Visits from Holocaust survivors and camp liber-

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are important, it was the "structural, mythological, and figurative apprehension of these facts that led to action taken on their behalf."

In addition to the above books, *Facing History* teachers use other materials to help students make personal connections to issues of peer pressure, conformity, and the early stages of Nazi rule.

After the First. 1984. Dir. Nick Frangakis. Franciscan Communications, 1229 S. Santee St., Los Angeles, California 90015.

A fourteen-minute film which dramatizes a twelve-year-old boy's first hunting trip. The boy enjoys learning to use the gun correctly on inanimate objects, while pleasing his dad. Then the father kills a rabbit, and the boy is visibly upset and is told, "You'll see, after the first time it gets easier."

The Eye of the Storm. 1970. Social Studies School Service, PO Box 802, 10200 Jefferson Blvd., Culver City, CA 90232.

In 1970 Jane Elliot divided her third grade class in a small Iowa town into two groups (blue eyes and brown eyes) for a lesson in discrimination, one group being superior to the other. Her exercise has been repeated three times on The Oprah Winfrey Show and in many corporations. Issues of victims and victimizers are explored.

Friedrich. 1986. Prod. Mary Johnson and John McGannon. Facing History and Ourselves.

Designed to accompany Hans Richter's novel of the same name, these two excerpts enhance Richter's story of two young boys who are caught up in the events of Germany during the Weimar and Nazi eras.

The Hangman. 1963. Melrose Productions. CRM, 2233 Faraday Suite F, Carlsbad, CA 92008.

A poem written by Maurice Ogden and narrated by Herschel Bernardi provides the script for this parable in which the people of a town are hanged, one by one, by a mysterious stranger who erects a gallows in the center of town. For each hanging the townspeople find a rationale, until the hangman comes to the last survivor, who finds no one left to speak for him.

Jackson, Shirley. 1948. "The Lottery." *The Lottery*. New York: Farrar.

Jackson, extrapolating on her own experience in a small New England village, paints the initially peaceful picture of the town's three-hundred inhabitants gathering for their annual drawing of lots, the purpose of which is to select one person for a ritual stoning. Few question the brutality, and those who do are ridiculed by old man Warner.

Klan Youth Corps. 1982. Dir. Catherine Olian. Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 823 UN Plaza, New York, NY 10017.

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ators reinforced these messages and made the events of five decades ago real. After several visitors offered students first-hand testimonies, Ordway assigned *Friedrich*, which tells the simple but horrific story of the destruction of a Jewish family (Hans Peter Richter, 1961, NY: Puffin). *Friedrich* is fiction, narrated by a Christian boy, who gives an account of his friendship with his Jewish neighbor Friedrich, spanning the years from 1925–1942.

The study of *Friedrich* begins when students are asked to write in response to the question, “How do you think you would react if you had seen a neighbor walking down the street wearing a sign that said, ‘I deserve a beating because I love a Jew?’” The question is excellent in that it complicates easy answers and easy virtue, like saying, “I’d stand up to the Nazis; such discrimination is horrible.” Heroism came at a high cost during Hitler’s reign, and Ordway wanted students to see how the annihilation of a culture can begin with seemingly small acts. Taken directly from the book’s chapter on the two families’ cleaning woman, this quote explains Frau Penk’s fear of being beaten and her refusal to clean for Friedrich’s family.

However, many in the class had not done the required writing and reading. When Ordway angrily asked where their books were, Joseph, a student from the Carribean, said, “A Jewish kid jumped me for mine.” No one laughed. A week earlier, after seeing a powerful testimony of a survivor who was a twin operated on by Mengele, this same student said, “Slavery was just as bad. They punished the slaves. Many died.” Ordway was emphatic here,

No, Joseph. Slavery was terrible and certainly genocidal, but slave owners needed to keep their slaves alive for greater profits, in spite of the fact that thousands died. The Jews were all to be killed. While we do not want to say that one atrocity was worse than another, we do want to see the difference.

This exchange suggested the central tension between studying the past and respecting the students’ feelings and needs. It appeared to me that Ordway handled the confrontation sensitively but firmly.

At this point in the class only Aretha seemed to understand the creeping terror recounted in *Friedrich*. After Ordway asked why Friedrich’s family stays in Germany, Aretha explained to the others that Herr Schneider, Friedrich’s father, doesn’t leave because he is German and because few think mass murder will happen to the Jews.



Next Ordway took students to the chapter which dramatizes Kristallnacht, during which the narrator willingly participates in the destruction of a Jewish home. Ordway asked why the narrator, by now a very close friend of Friedrich, helps the perpetrators. Yung, first to respond, is Vietnamese and one of the most capable students in the class; several days earlier, he had said Hitler was “right” for trying to kill the Jews because the Jews, as foreigners, had no right to be in a German country. Ordway corrected Yung’s misunderstanding about Jews not being Germans, another confrontation

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requiring immediate but sensitive response. Very likely, Yung was thinking of the French and American “invasions” of his own country and mistakenly extrapolated to the Jews in Germany. (When I asked Yung two weeks later what he thought, he admitted he was more sympathetic to the Jews, though he still felt confused.) Yung’s understanding about the narrator’s participating in the pogrom was that he “was forced to participate.” Aretha gently corrected him, “He was not forced. He did it willingly. It gave him a feeling of power; he felt exhilarated.”

At the end of the class the discussion moved to the nature of group behavior with the question, "Why do you act differently in a group, as when a storm knocks power out and people loot?" Will said, "It's like busing in Boston; individually people act civilized; in groups they went crazy." Ordway was pleased with the reference to busing and wrote "Mob Action" on the board. The bell rang, too quickly, for the discussion was just getting started. The class was over. Clearly, the students had stumbled through the novel, but the gravity of the discussion and the attention it drew from students suggested more would read the assigned chapters for the next day. They did.

There is nothing neat and tidy about bringing *Facing History* to Southie. The class I observed did not "click" quickly; most don't. The last twenty years of Boston's history offers reasons for student

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recalcitrance: resentments for "loss" of a neighborhood, further dislocation of the family, more hours before the tv, a weak commitment to education, a largely unmanaged ethnic diversity in the school, and economic recession hitting Boston particularly hard. These forces make it difficult to balance the demands of human-rights education against students' more immediate needs for attention and care.

Throughout my stay, after-class discussions with Ordway provided important insights into the class and into the students' experience. We started with the ethnic composition of the school, and Ordway explained that busing "killed the school system." Most Anglos have fled from the public schools in Boston, moving to private schools. Those who remain in public schools attend Boston Latin or another "exam school," the equivalents of private prep schools. Many others have simply dropped out. Ironically, the present "choice" system, which gives students some limited control over which school they attend, combined with the desegregation orders, have simply moved the segregation from one neighborhood to another, one school to another. True, Southie appears to be integrated, and some students praise the diversity and appar-

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An eleven-minute, color video. CBS-TV news correspondent Christopher Glenn reports on the efforts of the KKK to recruit youngsters aged 10-17 to its ranks. Youth corps members are interviewed and like their adult counterparts, they freely spout the vilest racist slogans.

Monteleone, Thomas. 1978. "Mister Magister." *Other Worlds*. Ed. Rod Serling. New York: Bantam.

Mister Magister is a mysterious alien who comes to town with a shooting gallery to test the villagers. Only one girl questions the killing of an African American, a Jew, an immigrant Swede, a Native American, and others. Similar to *The Hangman* and "The Lottery."

Night and Fog. 1955. Dir. Alain Resnais. Social Studies School Service, PO Box 802, 10200 Jefferson Blvd., Culver City, CA 90232.

31 minutes, color and black and white, French with English subtitles. Alain Resnais has combined scenes of Nazi extermination camps today with historical film footage and still photos to create a film that succeeds in being poetic and brutal simultaneously. While this film has been criticized for its failure to mention the Jews as victims, it is considered a film classic.

A Portrait of Elie Wiesel. 1988. Dir. Erwin Leiser. PBS Video, 13220 Braddock Place, Alexandria, VA 22314.

29 minutes, color. Wiesel, the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize recipient, talks openly about his childhood in Sighet, Hungary, the shattering realities of the Nazi invasion, his experience in the camps and his liberation, and what his life has been like since. Useful with his memoir *Night*.

The Wave. 1984. Films Incorporated, 55476 N. Ravenswood Ave., Chicago, IL 60640.

This Emmy Award winning film recreates a classroom experiment in which a high-school teacher and his students became involved in lessons in obedience and community. While studying Nazi Germany, the students were unable to understand how the German people could have been unaware of or indifferent to what was happening.

ent harmony in the school, but the psychological distress experienced by most students I observed is surely destructive to their educations.

Again and again, indirectly but emphatically, students revealed anxiety, shame, and low self-worth related to themselves as learners. The student teacher in Ordway's class was asked repeatedly, "Why are you teaching *here*?" and "When you gettin' a *real* job?" When she gave each student a pen and pad of paper, one asked, "You're giving these to us? Why?" At Christmas time, fights and

other incidents of violent behavior rise dramatically in the school, probably because then students' disappointment about what they don't have becomes paramount.

Ordway spells out the psychology that results from such shame. Rather than show weakness by admitting they're victims of a social system that puts its priorities into massive savings-and-loan or corporate bailouts and defense budgets, many of these students practice bravado at the expense of their learning. Trampled by failure, they feel few can or will care about them. They subconsciously feel like losers, losers who cannot engineer their own rescue. When one refuses to imagine oneself as a victim, or as a victimizer, the possibility of empathic identification with a literary or historic figure (like a survivor of the Holocaust) disappears. All this makes it very hard to teach *Facing History*, which requires identification with the processes of victimization. The students' low self-esteem also puts a premium on their succeeding and makes failure something to be avoided. Thus, when students refuse to work, as they often did, telling them they have failed to learn can, ironically, be defeating. For Ordway, their despair can become defeat, and defeat must be avoided at all costs.

Not many people could balance the twin demands of the *Facing History* curriculum and the stress-filled lives of these students. One insight into how this can be done comes from a closer look at Ordway, whose personality and background fit the task of teaching *Facing History* well. She told me, "I've always felt like 'the other,'" by which she means the outsider, the rejected, the silenced.

I've felt different as an Italian Catholic, as a "dark-skinned person," not an Irish Catholic, who are the majority here. We (my family) thought of ourselves as immigrants, and the Irish were Americans. Other kids got bologna and mustard for lunch; we got peppers and eggs. Mom said they ate junk food. And a childhood friend once looked at me with contempt and called me a "nigger." She was Irish.

Tall, statuesque, supremely confident in the classroom, with riveting and intensely serious eyes, Ordway can be tough with her kids, though she denied the label "street-wise." "Savvy" was a better word, she told me. Her persistent "Excuse me?"

greet the frequent student interruptions during class; she can be equally affectionate and calls a student "Hun" when anyone is having problems. *Facing History*, which she has been teaching for several years, has affected her deeply. The class began when her director of curriculum for grade nine approached her about attending the *Facing History* workshop. She did, and found the experience "extremely disturbing and stimulating." "I knew I had to teach it," she recalled, but she didn't know how. A curriculum course at a nearby university gave her the chance to put together a nine-week unit. The rest is history. The course has even affected her personal life. For example, she has an increased awareness of wanting her children to grow up "as moral human beings who know their authentic self, who can separate this from the labels society puts on them."

Ordway described one particularly difficult student who espoused the Nazi ideology and initially felt anger toward Ordway for what she was trying to teach. He did all the reading and, at the end, wrote an essay on dehumanization.

Over the past nine weeks I learned a whole lot of things I never knew happened. In the beginning of this course we learned about the process of dehumanization. Dehumanization is when you take away someone's human qualities. You treat them like animals. Some forms of dehumanization were depriving Jews of owning pets and wearing yellow stars. We learned in *Friedrich* how it all started and how it all ended. It went from merely writing the word "Jew" on the doctor's sign to death in a gas chamber.

Ordway has been to Israel twice and has visited the camps, spending seven hours in Auschwitz, but she still describes herself as cautiously optimistic.

You just plant the seeds, hope you get them to think a little, to act and not just react, to begin to see themselves as contributing members of society, not just victims. I want them to be conscious of making choices, to see the consequences of discrimination, to ask questions that lack simple answers.

Most would agree that in spite of the obstacles, Ordway has gotten her students to think more than a little.

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