

SURVIVE AFTER SURVIVING – STRENGTHENING CONNECTIONS, AVOIDING COMPARISONS

On an early July day, two women of different ages, backgrounds, and experiences, in many ways more different than alike, entered a room. Ella Mandel, a 100-year-old Holocaust survivor, and Dydine Umunyana-Anderson, a survivor of the Genocide Against the Tutsi in Rwanda, sixty years her junior, came together from different times, corners of the world and different lived experiences—united by their strong call to action to share their powerful stories and to shape a better world through testimony.

Each woman took her seat, invited to share her testimony. When their stories had been told, they turned toward one another. Without a word being uttered, they clasped hands and exchanged a look of profound wordless understanding.

They had both experienced unimaginable pain and suffering, but they had survived. Speaking directly to the camera, Dydine said, "it's one thing to survive; it's another to survive after surviving." Her words perfectly capture the depth of resilience.

There is a prevailing belief that bringing different atrocities into the same conversation leads to comparison and risks of false equivalencies. This can happen when discussions are approached thoughtlessly, without sufficient historical understanding, or sensitivity to victims and survivors (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2018). On the other hand, if the purpose is clear, with connection rather than comparison as the aim, then such conversations can be thoughtful, grounded in historical accuracy, and with great care afforded to victims and survivors. While comparison often leads to greater division, connection has the power to inspire understanding, compassion, and unity. In fact, as Michael Rothberg (2009) suggests in his work on "multidirectional memory" **memories of violence and atrocity need not compete with one another. Instead, they can illuminate one another, creating a richer, more interconnected understanding of human resilience.**

The belief that atrocities should not be discussed together often stems from inherent biases and fears of dishonoring individual histories. By recognizing these biases yet remaining open, we can move beyond comparison toward dialogue that honors distinct experiences while acknowledging shared human emotions and lessons.



Photo Credit: Museums of Tolerance

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At the Museum of Tolerance, two of our core pedagogical principles are “Begin in Story, End in Story,” emphasizing the transformative nature of bearing witness to other’s stories and “Emotion as a Source of Knowledge,” recognizing the profound opportunity for **even deeper connection with history by letting your heart into the experience as well as your mind. We believe that it just isn’t possible to not be affected by the stories of others.** Even when survivors have not directly experienced each other’s trauma, they can connect through shared universal human emotions such as loss, fear, anger, and grief, showing us their infinite wells of compassion and understanding. Our survivors’ capacity for empathy reminds us how understanding can deepen into compassion, and that we possess a limitless capacity for showing care for one another. Empathy does not lessen when given, and our remarkable survivors encourage us to tap into our own capacity for understanding and care. Humans are complex beings, capable of experiencing a multitude of emotions, even those that seem to be in opposition.

These connections and emotions dig into the core of human experience. We ask ourselves what we might offer them by bearing witness, and what we might gain through truly listening. Can we also be deeply affected just by bearing witness? Can we find ourselves challenged by the difficult question of why humanity continues to cause harm and violence on its own, across time and space?

Can we learn something about the bravery of individuals? Can we give them the respect of sitting quietly and holding space for voices that were once almost silenced? **Can we allow ourselves to be affected by the moments in their testimonies when they are no longer recalling, but seem to be reliving their experiences?** Can we recognize heroism in the survival of everyday people? Through engaging with these questions, we remind ourselves that honoring these stories does not mean weighing them against one another. We reject hierarchies of suffering through our dialogic approach to engaging with these events, and by committing to uphold the ethos that Ella and Dydyne already embody, as they honor each story with equal dignity, compassion, and respect.

Photo Credit: Museums of Tolerance



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United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Why Holocaust Analogies Are Dangerous,” April 26, 2018, <https://www.ushmm.org/information/press/press-releases/why-holocaust-analogies-are-dangerous>.
Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, “Is It Possible to Compare the Holocaust to Other Genocides?” November 2, 2020, <https://hmd.org.uk/news/is-it-possible-to-compare-the-holocaust-to-other-genocides/>.
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Key Terms:

Echo Circles: Overlapping emotional and/or moral resonances that may occur when reflecting on separate historical events, with each event's historical contexts remaining distinct.

Bearing Witness: A practice, emphasized by Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel in his book *Night*, in which listeners take on the responsibility not just to hear, but to listen to understand so they can carry forward what was shared in the testimony of others.

Cultural Relativism: The individual's self-awareness and respectful understanding that others view interactions, practices, events and daily life through the lens of their own unique culture.

Confirmation Bias: The tendency to seek out, interpret, and remember information that supports one's existing beliefs, while discounting evidence that challenges them.

Identity Attachment: The strong emotional connection someone forms with specific aspects of their identity, which can shape emotional reactions, especially when those identities feel challenged or threatened.

Dialogic Thinking: Part of the concept of multidirectional memory, created by Michael Rothberg in *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (2009), which suggests that collective memories of different atrocities don't have to compete. Instead, they can converse with, borrow from, and echo one another in a complex, non-linear, and interactive process.

Teaching Framework: Forging Connections, Avoiding Comparisons

1. Frame the Purpose through Begin in Story, End in Story

- **Clarify intent:** Begin every lesson or dialogue by naming why different histories or testimonies are being brought into conversation.
 - **Use phrasing like:** “We’re not comparing suffering; we’re exploring shared human experiences of resilience and moral choice.”
- **Start with human narratives, not events:** Introduce learners to individual testimonies or survivor accounts before exploring the broader historical moment. This can be learners' emotional entry point into the learning experience.
- **Anchor in historical accuracy:** Establish distinct historical contexts before connecting them. Students must know the facts so they can continue to engage in moral or emotional reflection.
- **Set community norms:** Encourage language of connection (“what echoes do you hear?”) instead of comparison (“which was worse?”).
- **End with reflection through story:** Ask learners to write or share a short “echo story” — how one testimony helped them see another differently, without ranking or equating.
- **Avoid abstraction:** Keep focus on human beings, not statistics. Names, faces, and personal choices create emotional entry points that resist flattening distinct histories into comparison.
- **Ground facts in lived experience:** Use personal testimonies to humanize history by revealing how real individuals experienced these events. These stories offer emotional entry points, help students connect beyond static facts and figures, and give survivors space to reclaim what was taken from them at the time: their humanity and their voices.

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2. Use Emotion as a Source of Knowledge

- **Validate emotional reactions.** Encourage learners to recognize feelings like grief, anger, fear, and compassion as part of historical understanding.
- **Support the connection between trigger and emotion.** Help students articulate the specific causes of their emotions to develop emotional intelligence by learning to name what they feel and why. This leads to deeper self-understanding and insight into their relationship with history.
- **Teach emotional literacy:** Help learners practice curiosity through empathy (connection) rather than equivalence (comparison).
- **Reflect on shared humanity:** Ask questions such as,
 - “What universal emotions or needs do you recognize here?”
 - “How is what we are experiencing showing up in your body at this moment?”
 - “How might empathy deepen our commitment to prevent harm, rather than invite competition over who suffered more?”

3. Foster Multidirectional Memory

- **Introduce Rothberg’s idea** (in age-appropriate form): memories of atrocity can *illuminate* rather than *compete*.
- **Encourage dialogic thinking:**
 - Use Venn diagrams or “echo circles” to show overlapping emotions or moral lessons—while keeping separate the historical circumstances.
 - Ask: “What do these experiences teach us together about human resilience and responsibility?”
- **Avoid the “hierarchy of suffering.”** Reiterate that acknowledging one group’s trauma does not diminish another’s. Emphasize that learning about one atrocity should **expand**—not **limit**—our capacity for compassion.

4. Recognize and Address Bias

- **Model self-awareness:** Discuss how confirmation bias or identity attachment might shape emotional reactions (“*I don’t want their story to overshadow ours*” “*They can’t possibly understand how we feel*”).
- **Name fears openly:** Let students voice the discomfort of “doing a disservice” or “saying the wrong thing.” Normalize this as part of ethical learning.
- **Reframe from fear to awareness to responsibility:** Take the time to unpack fear as a valid response.
 - “What happens if, instead of protecting boundaries between histories, we explore what they teach us about each other?”
 - What in this moment is triggering your fear, and what might be linked to your expectations about what could happen if we continue to engage in these discussions?
 - How can we address our fears to collectively honor the gravity and complexity of these events while ensuring that the connections we make inspire a deeper sense of responsibility in our role as sharers and keepers of memory?

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5. Invite Witnessing, Not Judging

- **Teach “bearing witness” as an active stance:**
 - Listening with empathy, not comparison.
 - Holding silence as a form of respect.
 - Recognizing the courage of ordinary survival.
- **Use reflective prompts:**
 - “What responsibility do we have after hearing this story?”
 - “What does it mean to ‘survive after surviving’—for the person, and for us as witnesses?”
- **Encourage collective reflection:** Group discussions should aim to build understanding, not verdicts about suffering.
- **Maintain a focus on Equal Dignity:** Commit to holding each testimony with equal moral weight and truth, embodying gratitude for the courage of those who share their stories and recognizing the responsibility of the listener.
- **Acknowledge cultural relativism:** Consider the cultural differences in storytelling and testimony sharing. Understand the unique connections that different cultures may have with storytelling, including variations in delivery, timing, and purpose. Intentionally create spaces that honor and respect these cultural differences.

6. Situate Learners as Contributors to History

- **Connect past and present ethically:** Encourage learners to practice compassion by moving beyond empathy to consciously choose ways to act on lessons of tolerance, repair, and moral courage.
- **Reinforce that learning history is not passive:** Each learner becomes a “witness after the witnessing.”



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