**Can learning about the Holocaust be spiritual? Reflections on a teaching and learning experience with Primary School children.**

**Abstract**

In April 2017 I spent a week in Poland researching the Holocaust in Europe of 1939-45. Most notably I visited the world heritage sites of the Auschwitz and Birkenau concentration camps. Following the visit, I facilitated three History lessons with ten and eleven-year-old children on the role of Auschwitz in World War Two. As the sessions unfolded, it became clear that not only was the History curriculum being observed - spiritual development was also taking place. In particular, the spiritual themes of meaning, identity and remembering emerged from the children’s responses. This article forms a reflection on how the lessons impacted the children’s spiritual lives. For education going forward, it also considers how the History curriculum might inspire a critical pedagogy which evokes hope and change. It is noted that this is a sensitive topic which potentially incites a struggle on the part of both learners and teachers. In particular, issues such as theology, morality and the role of representation open up a space for questioning. However I conclude that it is through this struggle that self-awareness and criticality might contribute the transformation - of both the learners and the world around them.

**Introduction**

As a teacher in an English Catholic Primary School, it is my conjecture that all aspects of the curriculum have a spiritual dimension. Inspired by Jack Miller and his notion of the soulful school (2000, 107-112), I maintain that it is possible in education to see beyond the aim or objective of each lesson, to consider the wider impact of learning as a spiritual activity. In the past I have written about spirituality in relation to the Music curriculum (Wills 2011; 2018). However, I now consider how History lessons (and those pertaining to the Holocaust in particular) might facilitate reflections on the spiritual themes of meaning, identity and remembering. They might also open up the potentiality for the existential questioning (Hay and Nye 2006, 117), self-awareness (Adams, Hyde and Woolley 2008, 43), and valuing of human relations (Alexander and Ben-Peretz 2001, 41), that are fundamental to children’s spirituality theory.

According to the History National Curriculum programmes of study for England, children should:

address and sometimes devise historically valid questions about change, cause, similarity and difference, and significance. They should construct informed responses that involve thoughtful selection and organisation of relevant historical information. They should understand how our knowledge of the past is constructed from a range of sources (DfE 2013, 3).

These statements illustrate how the History curriculum is interactive, allowing learners to engage personally with the presentation of past events, to become critical and thoughtful. Yet as much as these statements might suggest cognitive questioning and responses, I suggest, following the proposition of Cottingham in an earlier edition of this journal, that such education might inspire a movement beyond immediate objectives, to a learning situation which is transformational (2005, p. 46). Indeed, as Cottingham posits, the impact of History education on the spiritual lives of learners may be much more profound than that suggested by Government - more than merely:

helping pupils to appreciate the achievements of past societies and to understand the motivation of individuals who made a sacrifice for a particular cause’ (2005, 46; DfEE, 1999).

Philosopher Gillian Rose declared on seeing the film *Schindler’s List*: ‘it is my own violence that I discover in this film’ (1996, p. 48). In the light of this, I propose that History education can be existential[[1]](#endnote-1), allowing learners to think again about their responses to difficulty and suffering, their own identity and attitudes, and the part they have to play in the continuing story of humanity. The current discussion illustrates this proposition in the light of my own experience of visiting Auschwitz, and of facilitating learning on the topic of the Holocaust.

**Auschwitz- Birkenau – a description**

The Holocaust is a burgeoning area of interest for me. In the Spring of 2017, I made a visit to Poland to visit the sites of the death camps and other museums, in order to contextualise the many testimonies and descriptions that I had read. Opened in 1947, the Auschwitz museum and memorial, intended to be a lasting memory of the horrors of the Nazi regime, is the site of the largest extermination centre in Europe. In many instances, the original condition of the site is preserved: visitors are able to see the original railway line and entrance, the iconic ‘arbeit macht frei’ gate[[2]](#endnote-2), enter a former gas chamber, tread on grounds scattered with human ashes and walk through the shower building in which prisoners were deprived of all possessions. It forms a lasting legacy of the Nazi ideology that deemed German people ‘superior to others,’ leading to the liquidation of not only the ‘peoples of the East’ (2016: 5) but of other groups such as gypsies, homosexuals and Muslims.

As part of my visit, I engaged in a six - hour study day at the sites of Auschwitz and Auschwitz II (Birkenau). This involved a tour of the sites with a guide, entry to certain parts not open to the public (which remain unchanged since 1945) and time spent alone in order to reflect on the experience. Some aspects were incredibly moving; for example, one room contains a wall-length glass case full of female hair whilst another contains named suitcases of victims, many of whom believed their journey to Poland was for a better life. Knowing I was soon to be teaching Year Six (10 -11 year old) children about World War Two, I considered how appropriate it would be to share my experiences with children so young, and indeed if it would ever be possible to convey such information in a way that would be effective. On arriving at school on the first day following the school holiday I was greeted with a number of children eager to know about my trip; therefore, I decided (in agreement with the Assistant Headteacher) to lead a series of three lessons about Auschwitz and the Holocaust with the eldest children in the school.

**The lessons**

Following National Curriculum guidelines, the first lesson invited the children to construct knowledge from a range of resources. Sat in the school hall in small groups, the learners looked at the range of postcards, pictures and guidebooks, and made notes. As a group, they wrote an account of the knowledge they deduced from the source materials and they presented this to the class. In the second lesson, again following guidance, the children in pairs devised questions about Auschwitz which they then researched using online media. They were also allowed to ask one question to myself about my experiences of the visit and I answered these questions in a circle forum at the end of the afternoon.

The third lesson was more reflective, allowing the children to write about why they think it is (or not) important to learn about the Holocaust in school, as well as record what they think they should never forget from History. Inspired by the final scene of the film *Schindler’s List*, where survivors saved by Oscar Schindler and their actor counterparts placed a stone on his grave, each child in turn read aloud their statement of what they should never forget, and similarly placed a stone on the class altar to form a cairn – a symbol of remembrance.

**Reflections**

During the three lessons, it became clear that the learning was having a personal impact on the children in a way that resonates with what is associated with the spiritual dimension of personhood. The children’s responses in class as well as the statements made in their written work illustrate that an existential dimension of education was in evidence in addition to the fulfilment of National Curriculum guidelines. Some children, like Gillian Rose, were themselves confronted by what they learnt. One child in particular stated that History teaches us how other people think, both bad and good, and that even minor situations in our own lives can reflect the same (immoral) values[[3]](#endnote-3). This illustrates the implication of Hannah Arendt in the notion of the ‘banality of evil,’ that all injustices and terrors are never beyond any one person (1963). For education, this takes us beyond the notion that there are (for example) lessons to be learnt from the past, to an understanding that the History curriculum might provide a ‘framework within which we can ask pupils to confront human action and moral judgement’ (Husbands, 1996: 65).

It is important to note, that as this article forms a reflection on lesson taught by a class teacher as part of the curriculum, no particular research framework was applied. Furthermore, from an ethical point of view, it is not possible to include children’s responses verbatim. However, through reading and assessing the children’s work, and through their discussions, three themes seemed to be in evidence within their responses to the lessons. All three – meaning, identity and remembering - are each represented in the literature of children’s spirituality, and therefore will be considered now from both historical and spiritual perspectives.

*Meaning.* One group of children articulated that History can help us to find meaning through bad experiences. This seems to suggest a deeper spiritual view than that stated by Government -produced documentation; the most recent *School Inspection Handbook* includes the assertion that children’s spiritual development involves ‘willingness to reflect on their experiences’ (Ofsted 2017, 39). Yet existential reflection such as illustrated here involves more than just ‘thinking about;’ it becomes an inspirational and motivational factor in a child’s life.

This wider view is central to the premise of the text *Man’s search for meaning* (1946; 2008)by Viktor Frankl. Having spent time in Auschwitz, and testifying to his survival through meaning making, the author’s thesis is that one’s life’s quest is a quest for meaning. He writes: ‘the great task for any person is to find meaning in his or her life’ (2008: 8). In addition, he believes that each person is afforded the choice to make the search for meaning, and that all can choose how they respond to various situations in life (8). For example, in the biographical section of the text, he describes how those who wrestled with the meaning of suffering were more equipped to endure the horrors of the camp. He boldly states: ‘whoever was alive still had reason for hope’ (89). Without making explicit reference to the (G)od of any religion, he does suggest that meaning-making might be connected to an awareness of an ultimate purpose (51) – in contrast to the many for whom ‘everything became pointless’ (80). He also writes about the value of nurturing the inner life, so that through art, nature and humour, his spirit could ‘transcend that hopeless, meaningless world’ to consider the meaning of his sufferings (51).

Furthermore, Frankl considers how a view of the future invokes a sense of hope. In fact, as he observes: ‘the prisoner who had lost faith in the future – his future was doomed’ (82). As a psychologist, hope for Frankl was based on the desired opportunity to publish his work in a time and place beyond the present (68). For other fellow prisoners, the future included the hope of being re-united with loved ones. Yet having hope also includes having courage to face adversity, and the mental will to consider how to negotiate all the difficulties presented in any situation. This takes a certain amount of resilience, but illustrated by an account of two ‘would -be’ suicide cases, who came to realise that ‘life was still expecting something from them; something in the future was expected from them (87),’ it is made clear that when a ‘man’ considers the ‘why’ of ‘his’ existence, ‘he’ is able to bear any ‘how’ (88).

Being contextualised in the horrific setting of Auschwitz, this statement cannot be sentimentalised. However, it is important to note that not all survivors trod the same spiritual path as Frankl. In *The Drowned and the Saved* (1958; 1987), Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi describes how those who survived did so by virtue of strength, but not necessarily morality. Indeed, he writes: ‘survival without renunciation of one’s moral world…was conceded to only a few very superior individuals, made of the stuff of martyrs and saints’ (1987: 103). He describes how a number of prisoners used manipulation, deception and exploitation to avoid either selection or a hopeless life (104-112). The philosophical issue of morality will be touched upon in due course. Nevertheless, if in drawing on the stories of Holocaust survival children are given the opportunity to reflect on how to make meaning for themselves in times of adversity, to consider the value of the inner life and ultimate purpose, and to have a vision for the future, this might inspire hope and change.

In the literature of children’s spirituality de Souza asserts that the ‘attribution of meaning to experience’ is part of spiritual development; therefore, when learning about the past is applied to a learner’s own life, it can have a lasting effect (2010: 2). Hyde extends this premise by asserting that within traditional, cultural or historical contexts, learners can individually create meanings that offer personal significance for themselves. He suggests that observing a space between particular frameworks (in this case the History curriculum) and the individual might allow for the development of meaning that is personally relevant (2008: 116) and therefore enduring. Thus again, when children draw on such learning to provide the inspiration to find meaning through difficulty, it can affect their view of existence.

*Identity*. Living in a multi-cultural and multi-ethic society, the children in my school have been educated in tolerance and acceptance, and in particular in relation to British Values education, their understanding of inter-personal relations is based on mutual respect (2014: 5). On the other hand, from observation, the children seem to be less confident in their own self-identity, finding it difficult to assess their own strengths and abilities or express feelings and emotions. However, learning about Auschwitz seemed to nudge them towards greater self-expression. A number of children were fascinated by the ideal of the Aryan identity in National Socialism, but were also appalled at the injustice, inciting them to use language such as ‘horrific,’ ‘evil,’ ‘frightening’ and ‘disturbing.’ They felt very uncomfortable that race, gender and age determined life or death; furthermore, they considered that any one of them could be consigned to the gas chamber, were they Jewish at that time.

The loss of identity is one of the aspects of Auschwitz that struck me most; from the striped uniforms and shaved heads to the allocation of a number and the removal of all possessions on entering the camp, one’s personal identity ceased. This is documented in most written accounts. Frankl describes his experience of the shower room. Knowing that he was not chosen for selection yet still not knowing what lay ahead, he recounts how the identities of himself and his fellow prisoners were stripped away along with all clothes, hair and material possessions. He writes:

While we were waiting for the shower, our nakedness was brought home to us; we really had nothing now except out bare bodies – even minus hair; all we possessed, literally, was our naked existence. What else remained for us as a link with our former lives? (2008:28).

Levi also comments on identity; in his account he names the stripping of identity ‘the demolition of man’ (1987: 28). He argues that there is no language with which to express this horror – to lose everything - and that no-one in the human condition could sink any lower than this.

Nothing belongs to us anymore; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair; if they speak, they will not listen to us, and if they listen they will not understand. They will even take away our name: and if we want to keep it, we will have to find ourselves the strength to do so.’ (28)

He also writes about the de-humanisation strategy of the camp officials: the ‘single grey machine’ (56). For him, life in Auschwitz reflected a slow death of the soul. The rigorous routine, the lack of autonomy, the beatings, hunger and fear, all eroded one’s personhood. This continued until the prisoners were no longer people but ‘automatons’ whose daily march to work became a ‘dance of dead men.’ He describes this as madness: ‘to annihilate us first as men in order to kill us more slowly after’ (56).

Structuring a sense of self is a key aspect of children’s spirituality, particularly in the observation that it includes children having a voice and the opportunity to construct their own ideas. For Adams, Hyde and Woolley it is about personhood, which includes self-respect, finding one’s place in the world and the ability to respect others (2008: 72). Senses and feelings are also important; the authors list emotion, sensitivity, care, kindness and love as important elements in nurturing spirituality (73) and suggest that such aspects of humanity might be scaffolded to harness children’s experiences and feelings. This is certainly antithetical to the regime promoted in the concentration camps; yet through learning about the loss of personhood, children are given the opportunity to reflect on the value of recognising their own identity, strengths and emotions. In turn they are also able to recognise the identity, strengths and emotions of others.

In a practical way, this notion is embedded in school life through the *Growth Mindset* programme. Based on the theory and research of Carol Dweck, the programme aims to increase self-awareness and self-esteem. Through motivational language, imagery and cultural role models, the whole learning environment serves to instil in children a mindset that is willing to embrace challenge, learn from criticism and be inspired by others. In recognising their own potential and considering difficulties as the opportunity to learn and grow, all children in school are encouraged to work hard, develop resilience and as a result, succeed (2008: 6-7). Recognising one’s abilities and strengths contributes to the growth of identity; thus, I contend that alongside the British Values and Growth Mindset programmes in school, the History curriculum has a part to play.

*Remembering.* A common theme amongst the children’s writing and talk was the sense that we should never forget what happened, so that it might not happen again. The cairn built in lesson three provided a powerful illustration of the value of remembering. In Poland, the transition of the Auschwitz and Birkenau camps into World Heritage Sites ensures that there is a lasting memorial to the Holocaust. The publication of testimonies and descriptions contribute to the canon of memory - most accounts now outliving their authors (Wiesel, 2006: xv) - and the statutory inclusion of Holocaust studies in the curriculum for Secondary schools in England also ensures that remembering will continue (2013: 4).

In the introduction to his book *Night* (1958; 2006), Elie Wiesel states how he felt compelled to bear witness to his experiences of Auschwitz. Concerned that any representation of the events might be misunderstood, incomprehensible and even disbelieved, he struggled to recount his story: ‘after all it deals with an event that sprang from the darkest zone of man’ (2006: ix). Nevertheless, for him remembering is imperative.

For the survivor who chooses to testify, it is clear: his duty is to bear witness for the dead and the living. He has no right to deprive future generations of a past that belongs to our collective memory. To forget would not only be dangerous but offensive; to forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time (xv).

This makes a case for a further feature of History education: that of the role of story. It might be argued that there is no remembering without story. The spiritual dimension of story is considered by Trousdale, Bach and Willis, who assert that the personal encounter with story (literature) is ‘the key to moments of deep knowing’ (2010, 319). The testimonies of Frankl, Levi and Wiesel are not appropriate for the age group with which I work. However, the story of Anne Frank for example, taught as part of the Literature curriculum but nevertheless impacting both the History and Spirituality aspects, engaged the children’s imaginations, allowing for empathetic reflection and the opportunity to consider the value of cultural and religious freedom. The children’s book *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas,* located within a Holocaust setting allowed, also allowed the children to learn about the atrocities from the perspective of a child of their age. The themes of friendship, identity and sacrifice are prevalent in this text, encouraging the children to consider these themes for themselves. Thus, the opportunity for historical literature to provide moments of ‘deep knowing’ and to take children beyond representation to re-consider their own life perspectives, must not be ignored.

Furthermore, the retelling of the stories must also include evaluation, without which, we might be drawn into pity for or blame of others. Primo Levi states:

We are in fact convinced that no human experience is without meaning or unworthy of analysis, and that fundamental values, even if they are not positive, can be deduced from this particular world which we are describing. (1987: 97).

This takes us into the realm of critical pedagogy as well as spirituality. Whilst suggesting that Holocaust education might prevent such horrors happening again, it is clear that the horrors *have* happened again and continue to do so. The Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech of Elie Wiesel, included in the revised version of *Night*, outlines how. Speaking in 1986, Apartheid in South Africa, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, hunger, racism and political persecution were all listed as examples of continued injustice (2006: 119). Not much has changed since then, and we might add the European refugee crisis, the wars in the Yemen and Libya and the continuing issues in Iran and Iraq to the list of ongoing examples of oppression, injustice and exclusion.

As teachers and learners then, we must consider the meaning that this has for our lives and futures. Students on the whole will not be exposed to the same horrors as Frankl, Levi and Wiesel. However, oppression, injustice and exclusion still feature in contemporary life both in wider society and on a local scale. Critical pedagogy thus inspires students to wrestle with the complexities and ambiguities of what is presented in class, so that they may become equipped to challenge the same values when they present themselves in daily life. In an earlier article, I suggested that critical pedagogy might allow learners to evaluate the (often unseen) power influencers in their lives, and to encourage them to consider the moral and ethical value of such influencers (Wills 2014: 195). In the same way, a critical approach to learning and remembering has the potential to interrupt learners and their own sense of security, to be able to confront their prejudices and make changes in their own lives.

This is not easy. In fact, it might be considered a struggle for both teacher and learner alike. In relation to History education, Cottingham notes that struggle nevertheless inspires a discomfort which can motivate students to make sense of the dichotomy of personal and inherited teaching. In History the student ‘is confronted by issues and questions beyond the sphere of their everyday lives’ (2005: 47) Yet the confrontation – indicated by the short maxim from Rose quoted earlier – can also inspire change. The transformed individual can inspire change on a local level; in turn it can potentially effect a different future on a wider scale.

**Philosophy of Education**

It might be suggested that when considered philosophically, some particular aspects of Holocaust education invite a struggle for teachers and learners. This means that ‘how’ learning about Auschwitz and related topics are presented becomes open to critique, not least in terms of the emotional dimension of the subject and (especially for the Catholic Primary school), the questioning of the presence or absence of God. The struggle faced by teachers might concern the power influences inherent in their position as facilitators of the learning experience, and in particular difficulties regarding representation. The struggle faced by learners might concern how to reconcile this aspect of History with their prior moral and theological perspectives. These concerns are considered briefly now, with conclusions drawn for the spiritual value of learning about the Holocaust for education going forward. The issue of representation is addressed first.

Echoing the fears of Elie Wiesel in attempting to convey his experiences of Auschwitz (2006, ix), it is difficult to present this aspect of History to children in a way that highlights the horrors without causing upset and inspires empathy without lapsing into sentimentality. Gillian Rose extends this issue, describing it in terms of the problem of representing the ineffable (1996, 42) and that which we ‘dare not understand’ (43).

Her argument is that representation (e.g. retelling the story) is limited. It keeps learners in a safety zone in which learning equates to recall, and a lack of understanding keeps at a distance any personal involvement with the subject. This inspires a paradigm of piety (43). She argues that Holocaust piety promotes learning as voyeurism: here the student looks upon the situation, is horrified and makes a judgement (54). Rose calls this a crisis: ‘the crisis of the sentimentality of the ultimate predator’ (47). Learners are ‘spared the encounter with the indecency of their position’ (45) and continue unmoved to the next instance in their lives. Yet she asserts that education *must* allow learners to understand – and to understand is to see oneself as continuous with the humanity that allowed the Holocaust to happen (43).

Akin to the thinking of Hyde, transformative learning for Rose takes place in the middle space between the individual and the representation. This is a dialectical situation in which the learner is not a voyeur but a participant (55). The opportunity to ask questions, make reports and take part in remembering afforded by the National Curriculum allows students to become personally involved in learning. Such learning can inspire them to empathise with prisoners (57), able to recall not just facts but consider the agonies of being oppressed; yet equally, see might see themselves as the Kapo. Alignment with the evil of the oppressor confronts their own morality and causes personal questions to be asked.

This idea incites the learners to struggle, an idea developed by Adrian Skilbeck in terms of moral education. His proposition for a ‘first-person concept of ethics’ (2014, 61) takes students beyond the analysis and commentary of ‘institutional learning’ (60-1) to a pedagogy in which emotion and personal reflection redress the balance. Without lapsing into subjectivity or distortion, the middle space allows learners to involve themselves in evaluating morality and this opens up the potential for critical thinking. In this space, personal reflection ‘is open to both questioning by oneself and others and subsequent modification in the light of reflection’ (69)

In the *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Judith Suissa comments on morality in terms of the notion of the morally unthinkable. This concerns the disbelief of many students - disbelief that such a horror could happen in modern Europe. Her thesis is that for Holocaust education to be effective, students making moral judgements must first be encouraged to evaluate how and from whom they established the morals by which they make such judgements. She also suggests that in the light of History education, this prior moral framework might also be held open to judgement, evoking struggle in terms of the confrontation and personal reflection as stated above (2016, 291).

Finally, it must be acknowledged that the discomfort, criticality and struggle involved in Holocaust education has the potential to destabilise inherited theological views. Critical thinking about History and morality can also lead to an appraisal of the nature of God. In *Night*, Wiesel recounts how the beliefs and rituals of some prisoners inspired the hope of redemption. Acts of worship, prayers and the reciting of the Kabbalah took place often at night in the camps, and as the Jews remembered their historical salvation from slavery, hope for a similar liberation continued (2006, 41; 45; 51).

However, for Wiesel, although himself trying to find comfort in the rituals (45), God died (34). Unable to reconcile a God of love and redemption with the evil experienced, he came to reject the God of his tradition. On witnessing the hanging of two prisoners, one whose life still lingered, the following exchange is documented:

Behind me I heard the same man asking

‘For God’s sake, where is God?’

And from within me, I heard a voice answer:

‘Where He is? This is where – hanging here from this gallows’ (65).

It must be acknowledged that encouraging a critical pedagogy is risky. Particularly in a Catholic school setting, it is the courageous teacher who opens up the space for theological exploration and doubt. However, I suggest that when the classroom provides a safe space for such questioning and struggle to take place, the inherited notion of God need not necessarily be rejected but re-evaluated. It must be considered then how might teachers encourage children to wrestle with issues such as these, yet within a framework that promotes a God of acceptance and love.

**Conclusion**

In consideration of the question posed in the title, I suggest that a spiritual dimension of education might be inspired not only by the Holocaust, but the by History curriculum in general. The responses of the children and reflections on the spiritual themes that emerged illustrate how such learning can contribute to the Government-led requirements for spirituality. However, as suggested by Rose, Cottingham, Suissa and Skilbeck, this subject area should also invite criticality, thus not only might piety and sentimentality be avoided, but individual learners might be able to think again about their own moral choices and values. In this respect, I posit that spiritual education might be accompanied by critical pedagogy inspiring a deeper response to the events of the past for a transformed present and a hopeful future.

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1. By the term existential I refer to a form of education that allows students to understand the meaning and purpose of their existence (Webster 2004, 9). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. English translation: Work will set you free. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Permission to use this statement has been provided by both the school and the child’s parents. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)