

International Journal of the Humanities

Volume 2, Number 2

Article: HC04-0115-2004

The Enlightened Witness

Reasserting Humanity in the Face of Violence at the
Beginning of the Twenty-First Century

**Lucien X. Lombardo, Professor of Sociology and Criminal Justice, Old
Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia, USA**

**Karen A. Polonko, Professor of Sociology, Old Dominion University,
Norfolk, Virginia, USA**



Edited by Tom Nairn and Mary Kalantzis

International Journal of the Humanities
Volume 2, Number 2



This paper is published at www.Humanities-Journal.com
a series imprint of theUniversityPress.com

First published in Australia in 2004-2006 by Common Ground Publishing Pty Ltd at
www.Humanities-Journal.com

Selection and editorial matter copyright © Common Ground 2004-2006
Individual papers copyright © individual contributors 2004-2006

All rights reserved. Apart from fair dealing for the purposes of study, research, criticism or review as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part of this book may be reproduced by any process without written permission from the publisher.

ISSN 1447-9508 (Print)
ISSN 1447-9559 (Online)

The International Journal of the Humanities is a peer-refereed journal published annually. Full papers submitted for publication are refereed by the Associate Editors through an anonymous referee process.

Papers presented at the Second International Conference on New Directions in the Humanities,
Monash University Centre in Prato, Italy, 20-23 July 2004.

Editors

Tom Nairn, The Globalism Institute, RMIT University, Australia.

Mary Kalantzis, Dean, Education, Language and Community Services,
RMIT University, Melbourne.

Editorial Advisory Board of the International Journal of the Humanities

Juliet Mitchell, Cambridge University, UK.

Paul James, Globalism Institute, RMIT University, Australia.

Krishan Kumar, University of Virginia, USA.

David Christian, San Diego State University, California, USA.

Giorgos Tsiakalos, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Columbia University, USA.

Mick Dodson, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

Jeffrey T. Schnapp, Stanford Humanities Laboratory, Stanford University, USA.

Nikos Papastergiadis, The Australian Centre, University of Melbourne, Australia.

Bill Kent, Monash Centre, Prato, Italy.

Felicity Rawlings-Sanaei, Global Movements Centre, Monash University,
Australia.

Chris Ziguas, The Globalism Institute, RMIT University, Australia.

Eleni Karantzola, Department of Mediterranean Studies, University of the
Aegean, Greece.

Bill Cope, Common Ground, Australia.

The Enlightened Witness

Reasserting Humanity in the Face of Violence at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century

Lucien X. Lombardo, Professor of Sociology and Criminal Justice, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia, USA

Karen A. Polonko, Professor of Sociology, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia, USA

Abstract

This paper builds on the foundational work of two great humanists who provide transformative lessons from confrontations with violence: Elie Wiesel who confronts the death camps of Nazi Germany and Alice Miller who confronts the 'poisonous pedagogy' of childhood discipline. On this foundation, we explore ways to incorporate these humanizing processes and transformative lessons for our students into three classes taught for many years: "Child Welfare", "Understanding Violence: From Suicide to Genocide" and "Violence in the World of Children: From Corporal Punishment to War." The central theme of this paper is the critical role of the enlightened witness: one who has knowledge of the realities of violence and speaks of and acts on that knowledge to break the silence and cycle of violence. The enlightened witness demonstrates how directly confronting the dehumanizing experiences that resulted from violence and continues to lead to more violence can change our individual and collective lives. Student comments are analyzed to show the power and validity of Wiesel's and Miller's insights into the transformative and rehumanizing power of confronting the truth, testifying to the reality of violence, and moving into the role of activist on behalf of others and ultimately, self.

Keywords: Enlightened Witness, Rehumanization, Personal Transformation, Violence Against Children, Teaching about Violence, Countering Dehumanization, Violence.

The beginning of the twenty-first century has not produced a hoped for millennium of peace. Rather, it has demonstrated our all too frequent fascination with and desire to kill, maim, torture and otherwise reduce and transform the living into the dead. However, we should not think we have just arrived at this point. The tendency toward dehumanization has been noted for many years.

In 1946, Albert Camus (1986:27-28) speaking of our common humanity, used imagery of blindness and deafness to describe a qualitative change that had made its way into human interaction as we progressed through World War II:

Today no one speaks any more (except those who repeat themselves) because history seems to be in the grip of blind and deaf forces which will heed neither cries of warning, nor advice, nor entreaties. The years we have gone through have killed something in us. And that something is simply the old confidence man had in himself, which led him to believe that he could always elicit human reactions from another man if he spoke to him in the language of a common humanity. We have seen men lie, degrade, kill, deport, torture – and each time it was not possible to persuade them not to do these things because they were sure of themselves and because one cannot appeal to an abstraction, i.e., the representative of an ideology.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s the Cold War and potential for nuclear war grew. Faced with growing penetration of technology, specialization, urbanization, bureaucratization, mass media saturation, nationalistic ideologies and intense human suffering (Bernard et.al.1971: 104), a coping mechanism called 'dehumanization' was making its way into our vocabulary to describe the condition Camus had identified 25 years earlier. In their article "Dehumanization," Viola Bernard, Perry Ottenberg and Fritz Redl (1971:108) observe:

The extraordinary complacency with which people manage to shield themselves against fully realizing the threat of nuclear annihilation cannot be adequately explained, we think, by denial and other well studied psychological defense mechanisms. This is what has led us to trace out dehumanization as a composite defense, which draws upon a cluster of familiar defenses, magnifying that fraction of each which is most specifically involved with the humanness of one's self-image and the perception of others. It operates against such painful feelings as fear, inadequacy, compassion, revulsion, guilt, and shame. As with other mental mechanisms of defense, its self-protective distortions of realistic perceptions occur, for the most part, outside of awareness.

Although dehumanization can have a short term 'adaptive effect' in protecting us from



overwhelming pain and suffering, the long term effect of this protective mechanism is 'maladaptive', manifesting itself in the following personal and social traits: increased emotional distance from other human beings; diminished sense of personal responsibility for the consequences of one's actions; increasing involvement with procedural problems to the detriment of human needs; inability to oppose dominant group attitudes or pressures; feelings of personal helplessness and estrangement (Bernard et al 1971:112-117). These traits reflect the images of blindness, deafness and silence to the human condition that Camus referred to. Dehumanization would seem to have become an ingrained part of the world's personal, social and cultural life.

As we moved through the 1990's, we witnessed a continuation of forces that increased dehumanization, and ultimately reinforced the severely maladaptive personal and social consequences listed above. As chronicled by Robert Kaplan (2000) in *The Coming Anarchy* and his other works, in the post-Cold War world of the late 1980s and 1990s, disease, particularly HIV /AIDS, overpopulation, unprovoked crime, scarcity of resources, refugee migrations, the increasing erosion of nation-states and international borders (globalization), the empowerment of private armies, security firms, and drug cartels, famines, ethnic violence and genocides, unbridled corporate greed and the growing gap between the wealthy and the poor all increase and reinforce threats, powerlessness and pain and suffering with which we must come to terms. In his writings and in being a witness to the horrible possibilities, Kaplan warns against the denial and silence that permit violence to increase.

Clearly the experiences of the past century have challenged our humanity and led us to exhibit the maladaptive traits of dehumanization. Kirby Farrell (1998) calls this period, when surviving trauma seeps into deep cultural forms of expression, the Post-Traumatic Culture. Coombs (1995) characterizes this as a period of 'phony culture' where the confidence-man, one who preys on the good faith of others, is hero and hype (events for profit rather than meaning), immediacy (focus on short term gain versus long term development), frivolity (action for action's sake devoid of human meaning) and artificiality (lack of authenticity in life) dominate our personal and social interactions and their cultural expressions.

These conditions, then, lead us to turn a blind eye to the suffering and death of our fellow human beings. They lead us to turn a deaf ear to their cries. These conditions make us silent in response to what we know is wrong. These conditions keep us from facing the truth buried in our knowledge of the suffering that is all around us. In our classes, we have discussed these issues with students using the term 'the post-dehumanized generation' to describe a cohort that has lived with such conditions for so

long that models of generations who experienced a more humanized world and its alternatives have disappeared from their consciousness. The 'post-dehumanized' condition must be countered if we are to rehumanize our societies, our cultures and ourselves.

To counter dehumanization and to become more human, we must be able to reduce our emotional distance from other human beings; take personal responsibility for our actions; become more involved in addressing human needs; learn to oppose dominant group attitudes that promote suffering of others; and grow in our feelings of empowerment and belonging. To do this we must begin to confront the forces of dehumanization and the violence that is in our world and within ourselves and become enlightened witnesses. The enlightened witness speaks and acts on his and her knowledge of suffering, and as such, can help us find a way toward our individual and common humanity.

Becoming Humanized

The dehumanization process prevents us from being able to see violence where violence exists. We cannot feel other's (or even our own) pain. We are unable to acknowledge the suffering of others and, therefore, we see no need to act to relieve what we cannot see. We are not the human persons we once were, the selves we could have become if we were not dehumanized. We are representatives and we see, feel, speak and act not as our authentic selves but in our roles, as representatives of our gender, race, ethnic group, age group, nation or ideology as they are perceived to promote self interest -- disconnected, fragmented and inauthentic as it is.

The critical issue then is how do we become 're-humanized'? What must we do to be able to speak and act as authentic ourselves? In their article "Dehumanization," Bernard et al (1971:122-123) offer the following observations about humanizing:

The most essential approaches toward achieving this goal, however, lead us into such general and only seemingly unrelated issues as the degree of political freedom and social justice; our patterns of child care and child-rearing; and our philosophy of education, as well as the quality of its implementation.

Accordingly, it would seem that whatever can quicken and extend our capacity for imagination, in both the empathic and conceptual spheres, is a vital form of "civil defense." It requires, to begin with, all the pedagogic ingenuity that we can muster to overcome the lag in our intellectual development that keeps us from fully comprehending the new dimensions of our existence.

Throughout their writings, Elie Wiesel and Alice Miller both explain how rehumanizing, i.e., becoming empathetic and authentic, being able to give and receive, speak and listen, being able to provide witness to the suffering of others and act in

ways that do not inflict suffering, was derived through personal confrontations with violence. Themes of suffering and death, knowledge and silence, breaking silence and bearing witness are reflected in the works of Elie Wiesel and Alice Miller and are central to both dehumanization and the process of re-humanization. Knowledge of these processes is a way all of us can confront and integrate experiences of the past into the present, to prevent the continuation of violence.

If each of us confronts this hidden knowledge, we are able to become an *enlightened witness*: one who recognizes and works to overcome the forces of dehumanization; one who has knowledge of the realities of violence and suffering; and one who speaks of and acts on that knowledge to break the silence, stop the violence and heal the pain. The enlightened witness demonstrates how directly confronting the dehumanizing experiences that lead to and result from violence can change our individual and collective lives so that we act to acknowledge and reduce the suffering of others, rather than add to it.

Elie Wiesel: Humanizing from Confrontation with the Holocaust

In his book, *From the Kingdom of Memory*, Elie Wiesel (1990:137), internationally respected writer, professor, activist, Holocaust survivor and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, speaks of the aftermath of dehumanization associated with the atrocities of the Nazi concentration camps:

As in a dusty mirror, I look at my childhood and I wonder if it is mine. I don't recognize myself in the child who studies there with fervor, who says his prayers. It's because he is surrounded by other children....I watch them as they enter an abyss of flames, I see them transformed into ashes, I hear their cries turn into silence, and I no longer know anything, I no longer understand anything....

Wiesel (1990:33-34) continues to describe the aftermath of trauma in terms of a world that had lost its meaning—a loss of faith, of belonging, of orientation, the death of part of self or self as known:

What we suffered has no place within language: it is somewhere beyond life and history. The ghetto and the sealed cars, the children hurled alive into the flames, the dumb old men with slit throats, the mothers with crazed eyes, the sons powerless to relieve their fathers' agony: a "normal" person cannot take in so much horror. A normal person cannot absorb so much darkness, nor can he understand, or ever hope to understand.

The suffering of those in the death camps involved not only the atrocities perpetrated on an entire group, but also the torture of self and loved ones. Referring to the arrival at Auschwitz in his

testimony at the Barbie trial, Wiesel (1990:181-182) states:

The blows rained down on all sides. I was not able to say goodbye to my mother. Nor to my grandmother. I could not kiss my little sister. With my two older sisters, she was moving away, borne by the crazed, black tide....

This was a separation that cut my life in half. I rarely speak of it, almost never. I cannot recall my mother or my little sister. With my eyes, I still look for them, I will always look for them. And yet I know....

Survivors experience not only the pain and suffering of the trauma, but also shame and guilt for having survived—the shame and guilt that the executioners should feel but do not; the shame and guilt that functioned to keep them from feeling the unbearable pain of the atrocities. As Wiesel (1990:182,187) testifies at the Barbie trial:

In a small wood somewhere in Birkenau I saw children being thrown into the flames alive by the S.S. Sometimes I curse my ability to see. It should have left me without ever returning. I should have remained with those little charred bodies....

Can one die more than once? Yes, one can. The survivor dies every time he rejoins, in his thoughts, the nightly procession he has never really left. How can he detach himself from them without betraying them? For a long time he talked to them, as I talk to my mother and my little sister: I still see them moving away under the fiery sky.... I ask them to forgive me for not following them.

Moreover, there is nothing that one can do to bring the dead back; there is no way to unsay or undo; there is no way to go back and take the beatings or fatal blow for a loved one. Acknowledging this at the Barbie trial, Wiesel (1990:188-189) goes on to stress the role of the *enlightened witness* for the survivor and for the dead:

Thanks to this trial, the survivors have a justification for their survival. Their testimony counts, their memories will be part of the collective memory. Of course, nothing can bring the dead back to life. But because of the meetings that have taken place within these precincts, because of the words spoken, the accused will not be able to kill the dead again.

In explaining why he writes, Wiesel (1990:14) states: "The only role I sought was that of witness. I believed that, having survived by chance, I was duty-bound to give meaning to my survival, to justify each moment of my life. I knew the story had to be told. Not to transmit an experience is to betray it; this is what Jewish tradition teaches us." The survivor has a *duty* to bear witness, to make sure that the accused cannot kill again, to honor the memory of the dead, to provide meaning when it can be found no where else.

Our duty is to make suffering cease and not to increase it. Being enlightened witnesses is thus central to our human endeavor. In *Conversations with Elie Wiesel* (Wiesel and Heffner 2001:12-13), Wiesel describes the continued importance of serving as an enlightened witness in his life:

I go around the world, I travel, and whenever I hear about someone suffering, I try to go there and bear witness. That's my role, at least to bear witness. To say, "I've seen, I was there." Sometimes it inspires others to do what I am doing. More often than not, it doesn't.

I have the feeling, honestly, that my life is an offering. I could have died every minute between '44 and '45. So once I have received this gift, I must justify it. And the only way to justify life is by affirming the right to life of anyone who needs such affirmation.

Finally, in his address delivered in 1986 upon acceptance of the Nobel Prize for Peace, Wiesel (1990:235) states:

As long as one dissident is in prison, our freedom will not be true. As long as one child is hungry, our lives will be filled with anguish and shame. What all these victims need above all is to know that they are not alone; that we are not forgetting them, that when their voices are stifled we shall lend them ours, that while their freedom depends on ours, the quality of our freedom depends on theirs.

The process of ending violence and beginning the healing involves, at the most basic level, enough 'points of light' to be able and willing to see the truth, to have compassion for the pain and suffering of self and others, and the courage to act in ways that will end the suffering and pain.

Alice Miller: Humanizing from Confrontation with Childhood Suffering

Elie Wiesel's work makes clear that part of the process of ending violence, overcoming dehumanization and finding meaning is through facing and bearing witness to the painful truth of the suffering in our world not only of the atrocities of the Nazi Holocaust, but also of the pain of even one hungry child. Similarly, the work of Alice Miller, internationally respected psychoanalyst, writer and nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize, explores the issues of dehumanization, suffering and truth. However, Miller focuses on the critical link between the widespread trauma, violence and dehumanization embedded in childrearing, the defenses children must adopt to survive and the widespread dehumanization and appetite for violence found among the adults they become.

In *Breaking Down the Walls of Silence*, Alice Miller (1993:2-3) places these issues in the context of facing the painful truth about the meaning and loss, neglect and suffering experienced in childhood

at the hands of adults and states why we need to learn about and face the suffering and pains of childhood:

...the truth about our childhood is something we cannot, and should not, forgo, either as individuals or as a society. One of the reasons is that behind the wall we erect to protect ourselves from the history of our childhood still stands the neglected child we once were, the child that was once abandoned and betrayed. It waits for us to summon the courage to hear its voice. It wants to be protected and understood.... But this child. ... (a)so has a gift for us, a gift that we desperately need if we truly want to live.... It is the gift of the truth, which can free us from the prison of destructive opinions and conventional lies. Ultimately, it is the gift of security, which our rediscovered integrity will give us.

In *For Your Own Good*, Miller (1990b) explores the hidden cruelty in the way we raise children, the poisonous pedagogy that justifies this cruelty, and the dangerous consequences of this for children, hence society. Children who are not allowed to experience their feelings or react appropriately, who are forced to obey without question, whose wills are "broken," who are routinely insulted, ridiculed or ignored, who are hit, slapped, beaten "for their own good," who are forced to watch violence against a loved one, adopt mechanisms like denial, projection, introjection that allow them to survive (Miller, 1981). However, these survival mechanisms are dysfunctional in the long run, producing adults who are dehumanized, lack empathy, and inflict violence on others.

The degree to which the child loses his authentic self and his capacity for compassion or mercy reflects in part not only the degree of abuse, neglect, hatred and/or humiliation experienced, but also the lack of "helping witnesses" or "enlightened witnesses." Miller (1990b:xvii) argues that as long as this child within is not allowed to become aware of what happened to him or her: "All appeals to love, solidarity, and compassion will be useless if this crucial prerequisite of sympathy and understanding is missing."

Alice Miller (1990b; 1993) not only shows us how the dehumanizing effects of poisonous pedagogy create perpetrators who perpetuate violence against others, including their own children at the micro level, but she also shows us how those victimized in childhood can bring this trauma to the social and political realm at the macro level. In discussing the horrors of the Holocaust, Miller (1990b:x-xi) states:

... the terrifying stockpiling of nuclear weapons worldwide raises the same question in an even more acute form: namely, what could motivate a person to misuse power in such a way as to cause, completely without scruples and with the use of beguiling ideologies, the destruction of humanity, an act that is altogether conceivable today? It can hardly be considered an idle academic exercise when somebody

attempts to expose the roots of an unbounded and insatiable hatred like Hitler's; an investigation of this sort is a matter of life and death for all of us, since it is easier today than ever before for us to fall victim to such hatred.

In her work, Miller (1990b:xi) attempts to "...show how Hitler's childhood anticipated the later concentration camps." In explaining why abuse would feed roots of a mass murderer in one such as Hitler but not in another, Miller (1990b:xi) continues:

Hitler never had a single other human being in whom he could confide his true feelings; he was not only mistreated but also prevented from experiencing and expressing his pain; he didn't have any children who could have served as objects for abreacting his hatred; and, finally, his lack of education did not allow him to ward off his hatred by intellectualizing it. Had a single one of these factors been different, perhaps he would never have become the arch-criminal he did.

On the other hand, Hitler was certainly not an isolated phenomenon. He would not have had millions of followers if they had not experienced the same sort of upbringing.

In linking the potential for personal and large-scale suffering to the widespread cruelty embedded in childrearing, Miller (1990b: afterword to the Second Edition) offers hope for ending the hate in our future.

People whose integrity has not been damaged in childhood, who were protected, respected, and treated with honesty by their parents, will be--both in their youth and in adulthood--intelligent, responsive, empathic, and highly sensitive.... They will use their power to defend themselves, not to attack others. They will not be able to do otherwise than respect and protect those weaker than themselves, including their children, because this is what they have learned from their own experience, and because it is this knowledge (and not the experience of cruelty) that has been stored up inside of them from the beginning.

In order to raise our children, the next generation, differently, we will need to access the truth. Miller (1981:15) states that "...the experience of one's own truth, and the postambivalent knowledge of it, makes it possible to return to one's own world of feelings at an adult level—without paradise, but with the ability to mourn." She (1981:15) continues that this truth is "accompanied by much grief and pain," but the result is a new way of being and a new empathy with one's own fate "born out of mourning."

Critical to this process of healing through experiencing the grief are helping and enlightened witnesses. In reflecting on her own journey, Miller (1981:ix) acknowledges that: "Had just one person understood what was happening and come to my

defense, it might have changed my entire life." She (1981:ix) urges all of us to serve as witnesses for the suffering child: "By witnesses I mean people who are not afraid to stand up for children assertively and protect them from adults' abuse of power." Moreover, Miller (1993:53) states: "The experience of my own truth has given me a commitment to speak out as unequivocally as I can – now. I want to do whatever I can to stop the world from being governed by destructive blindness."

Alice Miller (1993:9) describes what happens to the individual when he or she is able to discover the truth and challenge the forces of dehumanization.

People whose only experience has been the wall of silence cling to the wall, seeing in it the solution to all their fears. But if they have once glimpsed an opening in it, they will not endure its illusory protection. The idea of ever again living as they once did, bereft of their new-won consciousness, becomes unimaginable as they realize that what they once held to be life was, in truth, no life at all. Part of their tragic fate was to have had to live for so long without that realization. Now they wish to save others from the same fate, as far as is possible. They wish to share their knowledge of the causes of their suffering and how it can be resolved. They want to let others know that life, every life, is far too precious to be ruined, squandered, or thrown away. And they want to say that it is worth feeling the old pain, never felt before, in order to be free of it – free for life.

Herman: Humanization and Science

This importance of making explicit the links between individual reaction to trauma and the social context within which the trauma and reaction occur is underscored in the work of Judith Herman, a Harvard professor, psychiatrist and recipient of the C. Wright Mills award for her book *Father-Daughter Incest*. Herman (1992:3) states that her book *Trauma and Recovery* is "about commonalities: between rape survivors and combat veterans, between battered women and political prisoners, between the survivors of vast concentration camps created by tyrants who rule nations and the survivors of small, hidden concentration camps created by tyrants who rule their homes."

The research reviewed by Herman (1992) on the experience of trauma is consistent with points made by Wiesel and Miller in showing that: traumatic events overwhelm people's sense of control, connection, and meaning (p. 33)¹; as a result of trauma, the world feels devoid of meaning, "things

¹ While Herman (1992:34) states "simplistic efforts to quantify trauma ultimately lead to meaningless comparisons of horror," she adds "nevertheless, certain identifiable experiences increase the likelihood of harm...(for example) when the traumatic events include physical violation or injury, exposure to extreme violence, or witnessing grotesque death."

are no longer what they seem,"(p. 53)²; and even in the long run, "many traumatized people feel that a part of themselves has died. The most profoundly afflicted wish that they were dead." (p. 49). Herman (1992:51) adds:

Traumatic events ...shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim's faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis.

Herman (1992:96) notes that: "Repeated trauma in adult life erodes the structure of the personality already formed, but repeated trauma in childhood forms and deforms the personality." Similar to Miller, she outlines the system of psychological defenses such as denial, dissociation, etc, that children must adopt to survive a situation of horror and impotence. Later, it is these very defenses that *impede* the integration of the trauma, the feelings of horror and pain experienced and the mourning necessary for healing, for holding the truth, for finding the way back to one's self, for bearing witness to the suffering of self and others.

Critically, Herman notes that these psychological defenses operate not only at the individual level, but also at the scientific as well as the social and political level. Herman (1992:8-9) shows that scientists who study psychological trauma must constantly deal with the tendency in the field to challenge the credibility of the victim, to challenge the credibility of the investigators—clinicians and researchers alike, and even to challenge the validity of the very notion of trauma itself, "(i)n spite of a vast literature documenting the phenomenon of psychological trauma"

As such, Herman (1992:9) outlines the social context required to bear witness at the individual and societal level:

To hold traumatic reality in consciousness requires a social context that affirms and protects the victim and that joins victim and witness in a common alliance. For the individual victim, this social context is created by relationships with friends, lovers, and family. For the larger society, the social context is created by political movements that give voice to the disempowered.

Herman (1992:9) continues that the systematic study of psychological trauma and scientific advances in the field can only occur to the extent that they are supported by a political movement powerful enough "...to counteract the ordinary

social processes of silencing and denial." In providing examples, she (1992:9) notes that the study of the trauma of domestic violence, sexual and/or physical, can only proceed in a societal context that allows one to question the subordination of women and children; the study of war trauma can only proceed in a societal context that allows one to question the sacrifice of lives in war and/or the ethics of the war itself. Herman (1992:9) concludes:

In the absence of strong political movements for human rights, the active process of bearing witness inevitably gives way to the active process of forgetting. Repression, dissociation, and denial are phenomena of social as well as individual consciousness.

Teaching about Violence and the Humanization Process: A Step Toward Enlightened Witnessing

The role of the enlightened witness—to be willing to see the truth, to have compassion for the suffering of others, and to act in ways that reduce the suffering of others, is critical in the process of rehumanization at the individual and societal level. Clearly there are many ways to serve in this capacity—at the macro level through education, research, political activism, writing; at the micro level through bearing witness to a friend's pain, to standing up to a parent hitting a child in the store, to challenging a colleague who makes a racist remark.

As professors who teach courses on violence, we were most interested in the ways in which education could facilitate this process of rehumanization. As discussed above, Bernard et al emphasize the importance of "pedagogic ingenuity" in the rehumanizing process. Teaching is also central to Wiesel's and Miller's missions of reducing suffering in this world. In *Banished Knowledge*, Miller (1990a: 171-172) states:

Of what use is writing, speaking, imparting knowledge, one might think, when so many people cannot help but remain blind? Must we wash our hands of these adults? Is it too late to help them with information...? I don't think so. My hope is linked to the concept of enlightened witness. If I succeed with my books in reaching a few people who were fortunate enough to have had a helpful witness in their childhood, even if only for a short time, then, after reading my books, they will become enlightened, *conscious* witnesses and advocates of children. Wherever they live, they will become aware of the suffering of children more quickly and more deeply than others who must deny it. They will try to uncover the child abuse that occurs unconsciously and is taken for granted by others. In doing so, they will change public awareness, and even the most relentless supporters of punishment will be forced to notice that much of what they had so far regarded as right and proper is life destroying.

With respect to education, the questions, then, are how to serve best as an enlightened witness and how

² Herman (1992) notes that: "Feelings of guilt are especially severe when the survivor has been a witness to the suffering or death of other people. To be spared oneself, in the knowledge that others have met a worse fate, creates a severe burden of conscience." (p.54)

to encourage this process in others? This task is difficult for many reasons. Recall that most adults, students and teachers alike, suffered as children. Defenses adopted in childhood that are no longer functional, such as denial, persist. At worst, the trauma may have been so great as to preclude the development of parts of the brain in children that are responsible for empathy (See Perry, 1997). And, indeed, we are well aware of the research that shows that children and teens who are abused end up perpetrating violence on others.

At best, the way back to one's authentic self is a *process* that involves, at a minimum, integrating the trauma and mourning the loss. In order to do this, individuals need to have enough "health" to have the desire or ability to face this. Also complicating this process is that even if one does face one's own suffering and the suffering of others, there is another layer of fear to overcome in acting upon this truth, in standing up assertively on behalf of those suffering.

Fortunately, there are also factors that promote openness to this process of rehumanization. Many who have suffered, at some level, continue to question, to search for meaning where none seems possible. And as the readings we use in our classes suggest, except in the most severe cases, there seems to be an inexorable will to survive in spite of ourselves and seek an end to the suffering, a return home.

In seeking to obtain some preliminary insight into this issue, we examined student responses to the question, "what were the most important points learned in this course." Responses were obtained from three courses: "Child Welfare" developed and taught by Dr. Polonko (N=37, Spring 2004); "Violence in the World of Children" co-developed and team-taught by Dr. Polonko and Dr. Lombardo (N=180, Spring 2004); and "Understanding Violence" developed and taught by Dr. Lombardo (N=125, Fall 2003). In all three courses however, we strive through research and other vehicles to make explicit the connections between violence at the individual and societal level; to show how violence perpetrated against any group places other oppressed groups at greater risk in that society; to show the interconnections between different types of violence (e.g., between hate crimes, rape of women and child abuse); to help them understand that the use of legal violence against a group reflects that group's lack of power; and to demonstrate that the use of legal or "legitimated" violence against a group of human beings typically leads to the same consequences as the more severe, "illegal" forms (e.g., frequency of corporal punishment and physical abuse of a child both increase the likelihood that this child will commit violent crimes as a teenager and adult). Throughout, our concern is to draw the connections between the suffering of all human beings.

In teaching these courses we attempt to serve as enlightened witnesses. We reasoned that a teacher can and must try to serve in as many ways as possible---- by speaking the truth of the suffering of oppressed groups; by asking students to face the truth through required readings on the research and watching documentaries in class; by calling on them to bear witness to the truth in their lives or the lives of others through journals; by giving them opportunities (optional) to engage in political action on behalf of oppressed groups; and by speaking our truth not only about the pain of others but about the pain and suffering that we ourselves (or those we loved) experienced as children.

We understand that it is important to try to give students a language for seeing and recognizing the human suffering of children and others, as well as their own. We acknowledge the importance of attempting to give them strategies for humanizing their interactions with others (including children). Often students find their way to acknowledging their own suffering through exploring the experiences of others involved in war, hate violence or abuse. Sometimes they must confront their own experiences before they can acknowledge and empathize with the victims of child abuse, hate crimes or wars. Whichever direction the trajectory towards enlightened witnessing takes, confronting violence in the world of children is often a key transformation.

In the classes that we teach, students are explicitly asked in writing assignments, journals, and reports to take research and concepts they are learning and apply them to their personal experience. One exercise that we ask students to complete is to provide their definition of human dignity and then to give examples of when, as children, their human dignity was supported and when it was violated. Our students are also exposed to films that provide opportunities for confrontation with and personal reflection on both the infliction of violence and its survival: NIGHT AND FOG, BLACK RAIN, THE RAPE OF NANKING and BEYOND HATE are watched, written about and discussed. Robert Coles' LISTENING TO CHILDREN provides an opportunity to observe and reflect on the both surprising moral strength and vulnerability of children. Students are also encouraged to engage in and report on political and social action relating to violence in the world of children and other forms of violence (e.g., writing letters-to-the editor, participating in International Spank Out Day: <http://www.stophitting.com/spankOutIntrnl/>).

Before analyzing student responses to the question, "what were the most important points learned in this course" (described above), we must stress that we use this information simply in an exploratory fashion, in the hopes of securing some preliminary insights into this process. Although guaranteed anonymity otherwise, students could be identified by

the professor. Thus, at least some students might say things that they think we might want to hear. Also, we did not ask every student a series of questions on the degree to which they assumed the role of “enlightened witness” in reaction to the course. As such, there may be even more change than we have evidence of. (For this question, there was no required length or effort.)

Student Responses to Confrontations with Violence

In examining student responses, we noticed a number of points. First, very few students remained completely unmoved in their reaction to education on the suffering of oppressed groups, particularly the pain of children. These few tended to give very short and terse responses to this question; although in venues other than this question, these students were more likely to express anger over what they believed was the obvious bias of the course materials. Examples of such feedback have, in the past, varied from “the Holocaust never happened;” to “white men are being discriminated against now and can’t get a job because women and minorities are getting all the jobs and promotions;” to “children need a good whooping every once in a while; I was hit and I turned out fine.” This is in spite of evidence presented in readings and discussions to the contrary on these issues.

Of the majority who expressed change in reaction to course materials, responses tended to center around a new-found ability to *see the truth of the suffering of others* or to *see the truth of one’s own suffering*. *Activism* taken to stop the suffering of others tended to focus on either one’s family and friends or the larger political context.

The most common responses involved changes in bearing witness to the suffering of others. For example, one student writes:

#1 There are so many issues I was unaware of, from the rates of child abuse, and sexual abuse and the article that struck me most was child labor. How could we as Americans allow other countries to hire children to work in factories, not only depriving them of a childhood, but exposing them to so much harm? We should stand up against it and not support industries that support child labor. We should also make people more aware of the issues that face so many children.

We should aid in the prevention of corporal punishment. I never looked at the affects of corporal punishment until this class. Now that I am aware of the long term as well as short term effects I am now not only pushing the ideas out to friends, but also working on learning more alternatives to practice on my children once I become a mother. It’s a process that I’m working through. Being a child that was raised in the beliefs of corporal punishment, it’s hard to just up and change. However, now that I am aware of all the risks, I don’t want to put my child in danger of it. I think courses on these ideas

should be more accessible and a part of parenting courses.

From this course I also took foster care into consideration. With so many children out there in bad situations and from what I’ve learned from the reading, I want to be a foster parent. I want to help children find a nice loving home. I just want to share and make them feel loved and appreciated.

Responses like these contain the elements of: having been unaware, in denial or ignorance of the suffering of specific others; shock and dismay in assimilating this new knowledge; and then commitment to ending this suffering. It is interesting to note that these students who express profound concern for the pain of children and commitment to helping children, either in their family or in the larger societal context, tend to express comparatively less sympathy for themselves and what they went through.

#4 Dr...., honestly, the beginning of the semester, I thought to myself that you were out of your mind the way you talked in class about spanking and child’s perspective. ...I was not raised to try to think or even consider my feelings as a child. What I have learned as a parent is to switch role. Put myself in my son’s place before I begin to react towards something I feel is wrong.

#32 I have definitely learned the detrimental effects that spanking, and corporal punishment have on children. At first I didn’t see anything wrong with it because I thought I had come out fine but now I recognize the negative impact it has had on my life. I plan on teaching my 2 sisters and brother the negative effects corporal punishment/hitting a child can do to the development of their children. I do not think it is too late for them b/c they do not have kids yet. I would like to see a trend started in my family were no child experiences such punishment and detrimental effects.

#35 ...corporal punishment was used to control me when I was a child so I always assumed when I had kids I would do the same. I learned that it is not about control of your kids & it should be a mutually rewarding relationship, not one of domination. I will not spank, slap, hit or harm my children in any way b/c the consequences are too great...Finally, I must have been sheltered my entire life b/c I was stunned to learn of the prevalence of maltreatment in our society. I can no longer ignore this, *I feel I have become an enlightened witness through this class & I will now do whatever I can to make sure I do everything possible to do what is in the best interest for children.* (Emphasis added)

Responses from another student illustrate explicitly the courage it takes to go beyond acknowledging the truth to speak out and advocate for children.

#5 The next most important thing I learned from this course is that *even I could make a difference*. I often fear voicing my opinion due to fear of rude comments & criticism. But from this class I learned sometimes you

have to take negatives to create positives. I was a bit fearful doing the project. I was scared of what people in the restaurant would say. But when I was passing out the fliers I got a calm feeling. I knew that this was the least I can do for children & if I can stop just one child from getting hit it was great. (Emphasis added)

28 The second most important thing I have learned in this course is that child abuse/child slave trade are more widespread than I thought, and that we need to get the word out that it is not okay, and it needs to stop. I have felt empowered to get out in the community and make a difference like I never have before. I think it is important to get as many people involved as I can to fight for kids – because if we don't fight for them, then who will?

While many students could become enlightened witnesses to varying degrees for children—their own or others, far fewer students moved to acknowledge their own suffering. As noted in the above responses, of those who said they were hit or otherwise mistreated, justifications for their parents' behavior often followed.

4 Though I wasn't bad as a child, I was spanked and I basically grew up thinking it was right. After taking this class, I learned that corporal punishment can in fact scar children for life. Now, I don't blame my parents or myself for spanking, but I know I still look back at the occurrences negatively....

The following are responses from the very few students who acknowledged that she/he did suffer.

#5 it is never okay to hit a child. Before this class, I always defended my upbringing “ I turned out fine”. Well I realized now that because of the spankings I had, I do have issues. I must deal with them and realize negative effects that spanking has on children. 2. The problems that you dealt with as a child must be grieved & let go. As an adult you hold in too much anger & hurt & resentment. Your parents did the best they could with the way that they were brought up.

#10 Another important thing I learned from this course was about my own fears. I was sexually abused by my older brother's friend when I was about 10 or 11. I have done a very good job at ignoring the past, I think that is why I turned out okay, but I have finally realized that it wasn't my fault.

Finally, a student response suggests bearing witness to the truth of both her suffering as a child and the suffering of others.

#79 I also learned that as a child who was once abused, I need to take an active role in helping the children of today. I never used to want to voice my opinions & views about how hitting children is bad because I honestly didn't think there was much local support. It wasn't until this class, I was able to open up and realize that taking the backseat on this issue will not help change anything. I am in the process of healing from my past and want to do ANYTHING I can to stop violence

against children. I was one of those students who blocked out my painful childhood.... your lectures tapped into my past and made me realize that I do not want to be a parent that continues the cycle.

Discussion and Remaining Questions

Our analysis of student responses suggests that education *can* be a vehicle for serving as an enlightened witness for at least some students. For us as college professors, as witnesses to the suffering of others and as survivors of childhood suffering ourselves, this gives us hope for our future and meaning in areas where none seems possible.

Teaching these classes in a way that tries to incorporate the role of enlightened witness and the lessons learned from Elie Weisel and Alice Miller can be very difficult as one comes to grips with the need to be vulnerable and heart-centered while teaching a body of research; as one recognizes the many ways one fails to do that in the class no matter how many times one succeeds; and as one experiences the anger that many students bring to you when first exposed to information on the suffering of others. Fortunately, since there is no choice but to act in this role, the rewards are substantial as indicated in the student responses discussed above.

In the end, we are left with many questions. Recall that we stated that there are many different ways to act in the role of enlightened witness---speaking the truth of the oppression of children and the suffering of victims of various forms of violence; asking students through their reactions to readings and movies to face the truth; calling on them to bear witness to the truth in their lives or the lives of others through journals, writing assignments; giving optional credit for political activism on an issue important to them; and speaking our truth not only about the pain of others but also about the pain and suffering that we ourselves (or those we loved) experienced as children. Although it is clear that some students were empowered enough to take on this role themselves, we do not know which aspect is most important. Our experiences confronting violence with our students leave us with many questions.

First, we need to understand what makes the difference in who can hear the truth on the *suffering of others* and why. What characteristics of the teacher and the students work against being able to hold the truth? Student reactions to research on violence ranged from the few "who believe that the violence studied didn't/doesn't happen or is deserved," to those who believe "the violence against their group is real and important but dismiss the suffering of other groups," to those who "see the interconnections between all forms of violence perpetrated against all groups." Clearly, the capacity for empathy and related abuse would be relevant. But, we need to understand more.

Similarly, learning about the extent and consequences of certain types of violence seem to have a more profound impact on some students than other types. For example, the issue of the consequences of using corporal punishment against children can elicit larger reactions than other issues.

Second, we need to understand what makes the difference in moving from seeing the truth, to wanting to be an *advocate* or enlightened witness for others. What is the effect of how many points of light/helping witnesses they had; the severity of abuse they experienced; their levels of ability? In all of this, you can know the truth, but not have the *courage* to do anything as several of our students said. Moreover, you can know the truth, but not have the empathy or mercy (See Perry, 1997). These are very complicated and very important processes.

Third, we need to understand what affects the ability to see the truth of and have mercy for *one's own suffering*—which the student him/herself went through. Many students who expressed dismay over the suffering of others could not feel empathy for themselves—e.g., they say that they were hit and turned out fine but then go on to say that they won't hit their children now, and they will fight to educate others because now they know it can hurt *others*. Perhaps, part of this answer involves not only the type of abuse experienced (e.g., being a victim of violence vs. witnessing violence against a loved

one), but also the degree to which the violence or trauma is internalized (guilt, violence toward self) or externalized (violence inflicted on others).

Recall also that facing one's trauma is associated with grief and mourning. This is a difficult journey without enlightened witnesses—a supportive circle of family, friends, and therapist. In addition, this process can trigger deep fears. Students seem better able to face the truth of their suffering in childhood if they feel safe. In this sense, a pragmatic book on parenting and conflict, *Do I Have To Give Up Me To Be Loved By My Kids?* by Paul and Paul (1995) has been very useful to students in addition to the powerful books by Alice Miller and other enlightened witnesses. At a minimum, students need to feel safe in being able to stay connected to the parents and other family members who hurt them (e.g., my parents did the best they could) and safe in knowing that they still turned out ok, that they are still good persons and that they are still whole in spite of having suffered.

Finding answers to the questions posed above is an important part of the process of rehumanization. As discussed at the very beginning of this paper, as the threat of war and nuclear annihilation continues to loom ahead, as hate and violence feed our fears, the process of rehumanization takes on such importance—for our sake, for the sake of one's we love and will come to love, for the sake of the planet we live on.

References

- Bernard, Viola, Ottenberg, Perry and Redl, Fritz (1971). "Dehumanization." In Sanford, Nevitt and Comstock (Eds) SANCTIONS FOR EVIL: SOURCES OF SOCIAL DESTRUCTIVENESS. Boston: Beacon Press (pp. 102-124).
- Camus, Albert (1986). (Originally published 1946) NEITHER VICTIMS NOR EXECUTIONERS. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers.
- Coles, Robert (1985). LISTENING TO CHILDREN. PBS VIDEO.
- Combs, James (1995). PHONEY CULTURE: CONFIDENCE AND MALAISE IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICA. NY: Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Farrell, Kirby, (1998) POST-TRAUMATIC CULTURE: INJURY AND INTERPRETATION IN THE NINETIES. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Herman, Judith (1992) TRAUMA AND RECOVERY: THE AFTERMATH OF VIOLENCE – FROM DOMESTIC ABUSE TO POLITICAL TERROR. NY: Basic Books.
- Imamura, Shohei (1989) (Director) BLACK RAIN. Image Entertainment.
- Kaplan, Robert (1994) "The Coming Anarchy," THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY. Feb.
- Kaplan, Robert (2000) THE COMING ANARCHY: SHATTERING THE DREAMS OF THE POST COLD WAR. NY: Vintage Books.
- Miller, Alice (1981) THE DRAMA OF THE GIFTED CHILD (originally published as PRISONERS OF CHILDHOOD). NY: Basic Books.
- _____ (1990a) BANISHED KNOWLEDGE. NY: Doubleday.
- _____ (1990b) FOR YOUR OWN GOOD: HIDDEN CRUELTY IN CHILDHOOD AND THE ROOTS OF VIOLENCE. NY: Noonday Press: Farrow, Straus & Giroux.
- _____ (1993) BREAKING DOWN THE WALLS OF SILENCE. NY: Meridian.
- _____ (2001) THE TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE. NY: Basic Books.
- Moyers, Bill (1991) BEYOND HATE. PBS Video.
- Paul, Jordan and Paul, Margaret (1995) DO I HAVE TO GIVE UP ME TO BE LOVED BY MY KIDS. NY: Berkley Books.
- Perry, B. D. (1997) "Incubated in Terror: Neurodevelopmental Factors in the 'Cycle of Violence'" In: CHILDREN, YOUTH AND VIOLENCE: THE SEARCH FOR SOLUTIONS (J Osofsky, Ed.). Guilford Press, New York, pp 124-147.

- RAPE OF NANKING. (2001) A&E Home Video.
- Rasnais, Alain (1955) NIGHT AND FOG. VIDEO. Criterion Collection, 1955.
- Sanford, Nevitt and Comstock, Craig (1971) SANCTIONS FOR EVIL: SOURCES OF SOCIAL DESTRUCTIVENESS. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Wiesel, Elie (1985) THE NIGHT TRILOGY: NIGHT; DAWN; THE ACCIDENT. New York: The Noonday Press.
- _____ (1990) FROM THE KINGDOM OF MEMORY: Reminiscences. New York: Schocken Books.
- Wiesel, Elie and Heffner, Richard D. (2001) CONVERSATIONS WITH ELIE WIESEL. NY: Schocken Books.

About the Authors

Lucien Lombardo spent 8 years teaching in a maximum-security prison in New York State. He received a MA degree in Latin American Studies from the University of Wisconsin in 1969 and was there during the years of protest. His prison years covered the time of the Attica prison riot in New York State. He coordinates Individualized Interdisciplinary Studies program at Old Dominion University and has taught about prisons, violence, crime and the media for many years. His teaching and writing seeks to integrate personal experience and meaning with academic study and thoughtful contemplation.

Karen A. Polonko, Ph.D. is Professor of Sociology at Old Dominion University. She has taught courses on the sociology of children, marriage and families, child welfare, and violence in the world of children. She is coauthor of the book *The Sexual Bond* and has published in the areas of marriage, families, children and fertility. Current interests include comparison of United States vs. Human Right's law on children, consequences of corporal punishment, the implications of research on energy fields for children's well being, and the interconnections between the causes and consequences of different types of child maltreatment for the cycle of violence.