Trauma and the Vicarious Witness: Constructing Wholeness through a Shared Performance

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The Reading

Below, I present the script of the journey. Slides marked with a single asterisk (*) are from Swiebocka (1993) and those marked with a double asterisk (**) are from participants, exceptions are referenced below the slides.

Vicarious Witnessing in Concentration Camp Museums: A Dramatic Reading
Setting

Black fabric curtains, hanging on all sides, contain the stage. The rear curtain holds two large black and white photographs of two sculptures made by Patrice Keats representing the impact of viewing a photograph of a baby that was posted in the Auschwitz museum. At the right side of the stage, a large slide screen is draped on all sides with black fabric, and at mid-stage are three stools draped in black fabric. On the left side of the stage, there is a small three-tiered table, draped in black, with one sculpture sitting on each of the top two tiers and small unlit tea-candles lined up along the lower tier. At the front of the stage, unlit tea-candles are place along the stage edge and a sculpture sits in the centre. All readers wear black clothing. Dim lights are on until the readers enter, then spotlights light up the centre stage and the table to the left (note: slides are shown continuously, changes are shown in the script).

[The reading begins with participants commenting on their worries, concerns, and reasons for going on the journey to the camps.]

**Speaker 1:** *(enter from the back left side)* Here it is, a year and a half later, and our group from Vancouver gets ready to bear witness in four different concentration camps in Germany and Poland including Auschwitz-Birkenau with the Bearing Witness Retreat.

**Speaker 2:** *(enter from the left side)* I wonder what it will be like to be a part of this multifaith group from Vancouver. I know we will experience our differences as we move through this very intense journey.

**Speaker 3:** *(enter from the right side)* When I tell people that I am going to Auschwitz and that I have no Jewish connection, they don’t understand why I want to go. I also get mixed reactions from people--mostly curious, some resentment, and even once anger. After that, I found myself not saying where I was going.

**Speaker 1:** The notion of other--other as evil--the other that could have sent me to the concentration camps because I am Jewish. I know I am not other to that. In Hebrew, there is an expression, when we speak of non-Jews the words is “goyim” which really means other. But I am also the other, and that is what I am trying to embrace as much as is possible.
**Speaker 2:** It is very important to me that non-Jews are going. It surprises me to discover that I long for this support. Is this a weakness in me? Why should I care what non-Jews think?

**Oppressive Voice:** What side will the goyim be on? Will they support the Jews or will they be on a forgiveness trip with the Nazis?

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**Speaker 2:** One of my friends said “You’re crazy going to a place like that and sticking your nose in evil.” And I said, “I need to put my nose in evil lest I forget the evil within me.”

**Speaker 3:** I remember last year being at some friends who are Jewish. The Holocaust came up and several people made comments about how long do we have to remember; I felt it was said thoughtlessly. I remember feeling really shocked and offended, but still not able to voice my feelings because I am not Jewish. That makes me wonder if I will be a good enough witness, knowing that I am going for my own personal reasons. Am I worthy of the journey?

**Oppressive Voice:** It never happened; the Jews made the whole thing up.

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**Speaker 3:** As I prepare, I know that I am going with trepidation about the dynamics of the group itself and how I will fare amidst it all.

**Speaker 2:** Because I usually travel alone it will be a challenge for me to be in this group. Will I fit in or will I remain an outsider?
Speaker 3: I wonder why I want to go back. This will be my second time; it took me over a year to recover from my last trip. I can’t articulate why I want to go back, but I know I need to go. On my first trip, I didn’t perform any rituals, and I didn’t have the opportunity to debrief what I saw and experienced. I didn’t work through it. I just came back with this terrible case of posttraumatic stress. In a way, I think its unfinished business.

Speaker 3: I just don’t know what to say. I can’t imagine what it will be like or what my experiences will be. Actually, I’m scared. I’m scared of going there.

Speaker 1: I see going to witness the camps as being an act of hope because shedding light, or putting my eyes on things has a way of bringing out the truth which is so reparative no matter how bad it is. By going there and taking it in, I will no longer participate in illusion, secrets, and lies. It’s an opportunity to go outside of my comfort zone and if I do that, there will be some ripples somewhere.

Speaker 1: (walk forward and stand in front of center chair) The role of vicarious witness is very, very important especially to concretize the fact that something has happened, to face it, and grapple with it. What I see will affect me differently than how it affects others. Witnessing triggers or generates the opportunity to look at parts of myself, and my perspectives. I can acknowledge, face, and see--literally see--something for real, but perhaps even more importantly pulling something out about myself.

Speaker 2: (Stands beside Speaker 1.) How can we prepare for this journey together? What can we put in place to support each other?
**Speaker 1:** Saturday, I invite the group for a prayer in the Or Shalom Synagogue. *(Speaker 3 walk forward and stand beside Speaker 1.)* “T’filat Ha’derech” which is a prayer for travelers. It is a prayer for those of us going, both Jews and non-Jews. I will invite people to bring forward names of people murdered in the Holocaust for us to read at the Retreat. I have prepared a special prayer book to hold the names.

**Speaker 3:** Sunday, I invite the group for prayers at Christ Church Cathedral. The minister has prepared a sermon that includes us all. I will invite people to bring forward names of people murdered in the Holocaust for us to read at the Retreat.

**Speaker 2:** *(walk forward and stand in front of right chair)* I am not a religious person at all and never perform any rituals, but maybe I will find some value in these rituals. Maybe they will have a healing effect. *(Turn head and speak to Speaker 1)* I will see you Thursday in Berlin.

**Speaker 1:** *(Turn head and speak to Speaker 2)* I will see you Thursday in Berlin.

**Speaker 3:** *(Turn head and speak to Speaker 1)* I will see you Thursday in Berlin.

**Narrator:** *(All speakers sit down as narrator walks to center stage)* Our families, friends, and spiritual companions honoured and blessed our journey. I remember the last minute worries of participants. *(group turns on chairs and face towards slide screen, narrator moves to the left)*

**Speaker 1:** *(turn head to speak to audience)* My family brought me up after the war to hate and fear the Germans, to hate anything to do with them. I don’t know how I will be among them, to hear German and Polish spoken.

**Speaker 2:** *(turn head and speak to audience)* I wish I could have the same belief that some people have that things will work out. I just don’t have that belief. I’m not able to
say things will work out because things
did not work out for many members of my
family. Things did not work out for
millions of people then and are still not
working out for millions of people now.
Why I am going back?

Speaker 3: (turn head and speak to audience) I don’t
know if I’m prepared. I could never have
enough information, never know enough,
ever read enough, never see enough. Yet,
I have this sense within me that I
understand something very deeply.

Narrator: (All speaker turn on chair to face the
audience as narrator walk to center stage)
After a long flight, we arrive in Berlin,
find our hotel and have a good nights rest.
In the morning, we explore the Jewish
district in Berlin. Then, we get on a train
that arrives at the first concentration camp
just North of the city--Sachsenhausen. Sachsenhausen started out as a camp for
political prisoners and eventually degraded
into a death camp for all types of
prisoners. It was a staggering initial
experience. (Narrator walks back to the
left)

Speaker 3: Didn’t the woman at the Jewish centre in
Berlin say there was “nothing” at
Sachsenhausen? Here is the camps
entrance at the end of a normal street. It is
huge.

Speaker 1: We are in a bookstore just before the gates
of the camp itself. The woman working
here is incredibly rude and unhelpful; it
makes me angry. I feel insulted by her
attitude. I wonder if she knows I’m
Jewish?

Speaker 2: I go to the museum that is just outside of
the camp gates. I notice myself hesitating
to go into the camp.

Speaker 2: I am looking at barracks, gas chambers,
and photographs of horrors that happened
here. I keep saying “I can’t imagine,” yet I
am imagining many things--fragments of
horrible scenes in my mind that fill in the
gaps to the stories I read. Can my imagination stretch enough to cover the extent of this horror?

**Speaker 3:** I’m about half way down the hall in the Sachsenhausen prison barracks. It feels dangerous to me. I hesitate going close to the cell bars. I am trying to focus on the memorials and flowers that are in some of the cells. I find it distressing because I see a face, a name, and a family; that makes it even more tragic. I say to myself, “don’t think about the people or their stories. Get out of here. Walk straight to the end of the hall and go.” At the end of the hall, I turn to look back down the mud and stone lined hall; the image burns into my mind.

**Speaker 2:** As I am listening to you describing your experience, I remember imagining myself in a cell, laying on the cold hard dirt floor, and feeling the anguish of what I imagine happened here. What is it that drives my mind to want to know the depths of this terrible story?

**Oppressive Voice:** It’s just history. Get real and stop your bellyaching. Just get over it!

**Speaker 3:** I feel an incredible responsibility as part of the human race for what happened here. I feel helpless because the only thing that I can do is look, imagine the suffering, and to just try to get in touch with that part of my own humanity. I didn’t know it was a death camp.

**Speaker 2:** I go into the building where the doctors did medical experiments. It is terrifying to stand here and know some of the stories about what happened on that cold white tiled table. There is a thick feeling of evil in here.

**Speaker 1:** Hours and hours have gone by. It is
getting dark already. I go to the gate to order a cab. The woman there shouts at me to get out because the gates are closing. She shoves me out the gate. What the Hell?! 

Speaker 3: I am late getting to the gate. I see my friends waiting in the cab. The woman at the gate smiles at me as I pass. I wonder if it is because I’m a non-Jew, like her?

Narrator: With the experience of Sachsenhausen heavy on our hearts, we take an overnight train out of Berlin with an end destination of Warsaw. From there, we visit the Warsaw Ghetto and the second camp, the killing centre of Treblinka. (walks back to left)

Speaker 3: (Turn only head towards audience) I am feeling quite anxious as we leave Berlin. I have a vague uncomfortable feeling. It is a cold, misty, rainy night. I am tired and the train berths themselves aren’t comfortable. I am trying to find my way into the comfortable rhythm of the moving train—but there is no comfort here. I find myself thinking about where and what we are going to next—the uncertainty of it settles into me.

Speaker 1: (Turn only head towards audience) I want to have the experience of going in and out of Poland on the train. Although we could never know what it was like for the millions of people that were transported during the war, I want to ride the same tracks, even the same trains as those that were murdered here. It’s hard to sleep.

Oppressive Voice: The Jews weren’t transported in cattle-cars, they went on the normal train—first class some of them—and they complain!

Speaker 2: (Turn only head towards audience) Here I am, rolling along on a Polish train. How
strange that I feel a sense of peace and even joy. Is it because I remember my train rides across Canada as a kid? I’m enjoying the movement, the sound of the old rusty train, but I’m in Poland, where 3 million Jews were murdered!

**Speaker 1:** It is day again. *(group turns towards audience)* We re-pack quickly and get off the train. *(all stand)* There’s a lone man on the platform who drives us to Warsaw and then the Treblinka camp. *(together everyone walks around the back of the chairs and stands behind their own chair)*

**Speaker 2:** The Nazis wanted to hide the existence of the Treblinka extermination camp. The signage at the site states that there were 800,000 people murdered on this site, at peak times up to 1000 people an hour and 17,000 people in a day. Near the end of the war, Nazis removed all indication of it. When knowledge of its existence came to light, a large memorial was erected • 17,000 symbolic stones are here--it is overwhelming to stand among them.

**Speaker 3:** I am circling around in the stones of Treblinka and feel the sorrow raising up from my boots into my heart. • Tears are streaming down my face. I keep thinking--this happened all in one day--all in one day. It’s staggering.

**Oppressive Voice:** What right do you have to be upset about what happened? You’re not even Jewish!

**Speaker 2:** Although most of the stones have no names because the Nazi’s did not keep track of who they murdered, there are some stones with the names of towns from which people were deported. • Here is the stone with the name of my family’s town the town where they were transported to their death. From the research I have done I know my family was murdered here. One
group member brings out coloured stones and a candle to help me honour them. I am touched by her kind thoughts.

**Speaker 3:** I feel shy and self-conscious around the grief and loss of two of our group members as we stand at this powerful memorial. I am struggling with a sense of what my place is among the group. I am aware of how my membership in the oppressing culture would have kept me safe from all this horror in war times. I experience a sense of shame and at the same time anger and protectiveness for my Jewish friends. I worry about their safety here. These are new experiences for me as I try to locate myself in this very difficult place.

**Speaker 2:** But I don’t want protection. I hate it when Jews are seen only as victim. I really hate that. The Jews weren’t just victims, they were also resistance fighters and they resisted in so many different ways. Let’s not forget that!

**Speaker 1:** The Treblinka memorial feels like a massive funeral. I sense the heaviness in the air and I remembered how we celebrate funerals in the Jewish tradition--lots of food and drink to celebrate the person’s life. We stop at a country store along the road and pick up Vodka and fresh food. I can see now as we are eating, how we can hold the tension between sorrow and celebration.

**Speaker 2:** We have arrived in Warsaw and go to the Ghetto area. I feel emotionally and physically exhausted. We see memorials commemorating the ghetto fighters and Jews that were transported to Treblinka and other concentration camps. The memorial that stands out for me is the orphanage run by Dr. Janusz Korczak. He stood as a true shield and protector of orphaned children. When he could no longer keep the children from being transported to Treblinka, he told the children they were going on a parade having them dress up and carry flags and...
banners so they wouldn’t be frightened. He went to his death in the gas chamber with the children because he wouldn’t leave them. This story really touches me, moves me. The courage of that man, his devotion, compassion, generosity.

**Speaker 1:** Being in Warsaw, I find myself enjoying the Polish people as well as the sound of their language. I seem to be out of touch with the hate I was raised to feel for this place and the people. I am glad.

[After exploring the Warsaw Ghetto, the group takes the train to Krakow to join the Bearing Witness Retreat.]

**Narrator:** (come up to center stage, group faces audience) The retreat began with a tour of the old Jewish quarters, Kazimierz, and the small museum in the Krakow ghetto. (returns to left)

**Kazimierz “Old Town”**

**Speaker 2:** In the Ghetto museum, I take a picture of a photograph of a woman marching off to work with her shovel while in the Warsaw ghetto. I am wondering what it was like for her. I find that I can’t imagine what it might have been like for any of the women. My mind stops at a certain point in imagining--I can’t get beyond it.

**Speaker 3:** In the Jewish museum there are remnants of religious paraphernalia. I notice that the Jewish members only come in for a few minutes and then go to lunch. After I look at a number of the displays, I notice that I am feeling more obligated than interested; obligated because I am an outsider and feel like it is my duty to see what this culture has once been.

**Speaker 1:** Being separated into the two locations for eating and sleeping will make our connecting more difficult. Without knowing, the organizers have arranged for all of our Jewish members to be in one center and the non-Jews to be in the other. We try to negotiate for a change, with
minimal success. The process of negotiation sets up a dynamic that separates the Canadians from the large group. This holds for the duration of the retreat.

Narrator: *(sit on empty middle chair facing towards audience)* We officially begin the retreat with an initial tour of the Auschwitz and Birkenau camps. We participate in both small and large group discussions at the beginning and ending of the day. Each retreat member is given the names of 100 people. The names are read consistently through the day at the Birkenau selection site. There are multifaith services and opportunities to talk with camp survivors, such as the artist Marian Kolodziej. *(Narrator moves to left)*

Oppressive Voice: *(Ahenakew)*

- *The Jews owned, damn near owned all of Germany prior to the war. That’s how Hitler came in and he was going to make damn sure that the Jews didn’t take over Germany or Europe. That’s why he fried 6 million of those guys. You know?*

Speaker 2: *(Pause 2 seconds, stand up, Speaker 3 moves back a step)* I am shocked and grieved by the hate that I see all around me here. *(Pause, Speaker 2 stands up.)* We are introduced to Auschwitz by seeing an archival film of the liberation of the Dachau camp. Thousands and thousands of starved corpses piled into mass graves. *It seems so unbelievable--I am shaken by the evil intention that caused this horror for so many people. *(Stand) Name: Chaya, Pessy, Sima, and Mier Rozen (Narrator lights candle)*

Speaker 1: *(Speaker 3 stands, Speaker 1 sits on middle chair)* When I was in a Jewish summer camp during my adolescence, they had a day of fasting called “Tisha B’Av” which isn’t specifically about the holocaust, but the holocaust is brought in and it certainly was in that camp. We read “Night” by Ellie Wiesel and talked about the children’s poetry from the Warsaw ghetto. We were 15 year-olds fasting and
remembering the holocaust; it was a very powerful experience for me. To imagine what it would have been like to experience that suffering. It was really the first time, even though I grew up with it around me, I remember trying to think what it would have been like to be there. (stand) **Name:** Moshe and Shimon Rosenberg (Narrator lights candle)

**Speaker 3:** (Move to right chair and sit down.) As I see the people in the film, look at their photographs, hear their stories, and the walk around the site itself, I find that I am imagining myself in their place—prisoners, guards, soudocommandos, capo, child, man or woman. I keep wondering: what would I have done? How would I have managed? What might I have felt? It is a constant struggle between the inner and outer experience of where I am in reality and what I am imagining. (stand) **Name:** 17 members of Lien de Jong’s family, especially her father, Charles de Jong and her mother, Catharine Spiero (narrator lights candle)

**Speaker 1:** When I see the gates of Birkenau in the distance, I am struck by the size of the camp; it’s staggering. As I enter, I see that the camp covers over 400 acres of land almost devoid of trees. I can see almost the whole camp from the tower gates. It’s November now, so there’s nothing to stop the unforgiving winds that blow across the camp. I imagine the people’s experience of both the harsh cold and relentless heat. As well, the barracks have no foundations; they sit on wet cold ground. The whole camps is disarmingly quiet, like death hanging in the air. I don’t know how to describe it really. (stand) **Name:** Wolfe Hamo and extended family from Lodz (narrator lights candle)

**Oppressive Voice:** (Ahenakew) *You know, how do you get rid of of of of you know a disease like that, that's going to take over that's going to dominate, that's going to everything.*
Speaker 2: There were 44 railroad tracks in the train yard at Auschwitz during the war, more than twice as many as at New York's Penn station. Auschwitz was a transit center for receiving prisoners from all over Europe and dispatching them to the forced labor sub-camps. (stand) Name: Erich Geiringer, father of Eva Schloss, stepdaughter of Otto Frank (narrator lights candle)

Speaker 3: I feel really hopeless here. I’m very very sad. I imagine the thousands of people who would have gone through here. Each time I walk down the tracks to the selection site, I am imagining the crowds there, people who have traveled for many hours, having no sleep, crying, confused, afraid. It is a formidable image. (stand) Name: Dorothea Elisabeth Katzenstein (Narrator lights candle)

Speaker 1: Being at this camp, I am becoming clearer about what happened. We are talking about real people. Obviously, before I got here, I was taught about it and thought about it as a historical truth, a catastrophe, but it was abstract history. Being here and reading people’s personal stories, seeing their photographs, toothbrushes, and hair makes it very real. I think that the major change for me is taking it in at a very personal level, getting it really clear that these were really people suffering here. When I hear that six million Jews being killed, how do I take that in? (stand) Name: Devorah Leah (Narrator lights candle)

Oppressive Voice: You people are exaggerating--6,000,000 Jews weren't killed. What about all the others who were killed? How come you people never talk about them?

Speaker 3: I am here on the northwest corner where there is a small grove of birch trees. I see a display of pictures of women and children in these very same Birch trees.
These images are really powerful. The people are sitting in the birch trees after they have gotten off the train, been stripped of their belongings, walked across the full length of the camp, and are unknowingly await their turn in the gas chambers. *(stand) Name:* Joseph Perlmuter *(Narrator lights candle)*

**Speaker 1:** At the selection site, a mother is separated from her eldest son—he goes to the left and she and her younger children, to the right. Not knowing that she was going straight to the gas chambers, she called after him “Don’t eat the fresh bread!” because he had some stomach problems and she was reminding him to take care of himself. That was a very poignant story in the sense that the people had no idea about what was going or happen to them. *(stand) Name:* Lena and Otto Albersheim from Lengerish *(Narrator lights candle)*

**Speaker 2:** Yes, I am getting that feeling, too. It is very cold today. ● I hate being cold, so the stories of the cruelty around the cold—pulling people outside naked and hosing them down, making them stay there all night. That created such an image for me; it’s a very hard image for me to get out of my head; it stays with me. *(stand) Name:* Zuskin family *(Narrator lights candle)*

**Speaker 1:** Everything the Nazis guards did here must have been in full view of everyone. What I keep imagining is how close together every single horror was, every single trauma, and what that must have been like. Packed into everyday, every single horror in concurrent layers. *(stand) Name:* Moshe Dermer and Michael Shrentzel from Bukarina *(Narrator lights candle)*

**Speaker 2:** *(talking quickly throughout)* I was observing all the photographs in the displays and thinking “I don’t know how many more corpses and starving people I can bare to look at.” I get really tired of looking at Jewish corpses and skeletons and welcome the photographs of the resisters. ● My frame is skeletal, when I
look at the corpses and starved bodies, I see myself in them. My God, they are still living with those stick-like limbs I think it creates a numbness in me; I become numb when I see the corpses and the starved. They are peering out at me from the photographs. The whole unfairness of life, unfairness of it all. I find that really hard to handle, it almost makes me want to give up, it is too intense. I can’t deal with it.●

*(stand) Name: Pearl Spiegel and Yaakov Dermer from Bukarina (Narrator lights candle)*

**Oppressive Voice:** ● The Jews did a Holocaust of their own when they killed the first-born son of every family in biblical time. They deserved to suffer, too!

**Speaker 1:** ● I see the harshness and suffering in these poor bodies that have been stripped down--all the fat on their bodies, the good parts of life that fill us up and fill us out--gone. *(stand) Name: Hedwig Ury-Ulm (Narrator lights candle)*

**Speaker 3:** How do I cope with it? Because I was a firsthand witness in Africa, I say to myself--“I’ve seen this kind of stuff before--people with rotting legs from leprosy. I can handle this; I can stand it.” I try to stay with it, not shy away or ignore it. I want to be a worthy vicarious witness of this horror. *(stand) Name: Elishbeth Fekete (Feldmar) from Budapest (Narrator lights candle)*

**Speaker 2:** When the images get too intense for me I say to myself, “I’ve seen this before. I’ve seen it so often, I can handle it. Its old hat; I am a seasoned concentration camp observer.” That’s the script. I hope it will act as a buffer but I can’t forget these images. They stick in my mind like Velcro. *(stand) Name: Max and Amalia Loewenberger, Edita and Karel Berger (Narrator lights candle)*
[In the next section, participants describe their coping behaviours such as overeating, sharing food with others, drinking vodka with the group, and finding support from specific group members. Additionally, members describe their struggles with religious, emotional, and cultural differences as they move together through the experience as a group. For example, one participant says, "I felt lost and out of place. I don’t connect to the religious rituals." Another stated, "I believe our minds always think in terms of, ‘if I’m this, I’m not that; if its this way then its not that way.’ This duality has created a distance from the experience for me; it takes me away from what I am here for." And another participant said, "When we did the spiritual ritual at the execution wall. I felt like I was a guest at the Kaddish, a guest at the Zen Buddhist ritual, and I couldn’t relate to the Catholic ceremony. I sort of found myself being a bit of a bystander on the outside." The discussion ends with a description of a large group discussion during the retreat below.]

**Speaker 1:** I suppose this sense of isolation and separateness was most highlighted last night in our large Bearing Witness evening. As you recall, there was a long discussion about whether it would be acceptable to the larger group if a small group of participants read the names of the Nazi perpetrators on the Birkenau site this morning. The discussion was very heated, confusing, and hurtful. We heard anti-Semitic comments, separation between newcomers and returning participants, and isolation of the German participants.

**Oppressive Voice:** You can’t really say anything critical to a Jewish person without them bringing up their suffering in Holocaust. It gets really irritating.

**Speaker 2:** I think we Canadians, all emotionally left the group last night. That is what made our own rituals so powerful today. We started this morning when we read names at the selection including their ages; we had a strong sense of the people living a life no matter who short. Later, we honoured those murdered relatives of our friends and acquaintance from Vancouver by reading their names and lighting candles for them in the children’s barracks. We also placed a blessed healing stone from a Haida Gwai’i elder into the pond where the Nazis put the ashes of over one million people murdered in the camps. It was a powerful day.
**Speaker 3:** We ended the retreat by going to see Marian Kolodziej and his collection of paintings; it was like a mythical journey. The walls of the Monastery were covered from top to bottom with paintings of the faces of concentration camp victims; it was amazing. Marian, now in his 80s, had been in the camp when he was 17. I saw the paintings, and his beautiful wife, as an affirmation of his life. He hadn’t talked about the camps or the holocaust for over 50 years. Then he had a stroke and in order to heal himself, he started painting. He created hundreds of these huge paintings. Someone in the group asked, “Did it help to heal you?” and he said “yes and no.” Yes, it got him through that period after his stroke and revitalized him. But no, it didn’t help him with the holocaust at all. In fact, he said it made him worse because everything that he had successfully repressed his whole adult life came into his mind.

**Speaker 1:** Now--I am ready and want to go home. I am saturated. I don’t think that I have ever wanted to leave somewhere so badly as this last day at Auschwitz.

**Speaker 3:** *(All speakers sit in chairs facing left.)* Now that we are on the train-ride out of Krakow and I lay here alone with my thoughts, I think it is harder than when I came into this city. I am not so naïve; I am filled with the horrors of the concentrations camps, the stories that I heard, and this awful feeling of Auschwitz that it left inside of me. I think that I have found something to stand for and I understand racism as no other place could teach me.

**Narrator:** *(enter from the left and stand at center stage/ all speakers turn on seat to face audience)* In this pond in Auschwitz-Birkenau, the Nazis discarded the ashes of over one million people. *(pause)* Although we left Europe behind us, we all carried the memories of our visit very close to our hearts. We spent time
together, trying to make sense of our experiences, noting changes in our feelings and thoughts, as well as the strong desire to take action together in our communities. All of us returned home with a new perspective on our lives and the lives of others. (step back to candle area)

[In the final section of the Reading, participants talk about many issues including aspects of death, dying, grief and hopelessness; their sense of difficulty in coming back to the mundane of everyday life and how the camp experience preoccupied their mind (re-experiencing); questions about the usefulness of the retreat itself in challenging racism; changes in old patterns of stereotyping, hate and prejudice; and their efforts and commitments towards reconciliation between conflicting relationships and cultural groups.]

**Speaker 1:**  
(lean forward on the edge of the chair) I see this trip to the camps as being a natural antidepressant as well as an anti-oppressant. It really levels the playing field and makes me realize how very grateful I am for my life, for having life. I see hope, potential, and possibility in the young people around me.

**Speaker 3:**  
(lean forward on the edge of the chair) I’m quite clear that bearing witness, is about being responsible, carrying a responsibility. Now that I’ve been there, seen those things, and taken the position where I have born witness to the evidence, I can’t just go about business as usual. I cannot and will not be complacent in the face of oppression again.

**Speaker 2:**  
(lean forward on the edge of the chair) I have this expectation that I will be able to somehow explain or express what I see in a way that others can hear. It seems to me that it would be selfish to go there and not share it in some way. What we saw there is really about all of humanity—about each one of us.

**Oppressive Voice:**  
*Who gives a damn about the Jews, eh?*
**Speaker 3:**  
(Close book and stand) I do! I’m never going to forget the images of the concentration camps.

**Speaker 2:**  
(Close book and stand) I do! I went to a concentration camp and witnessed the inhumanity of racism and murder.

**Speaker 1:**  
(Close book and stand) I do! I ended up forgetting to remember the hate with which I was raised.

**Narrator:**  
(Joins group standing) The concentration camp sites document the deepest and worst violation of humanity, right where the crimes took place. Our experience of vicariously witnessing the horror of the camps has enforced and advocated for us the universal meaning of human rights. At no other place is the message about the value of freedom and dignity more powerful than on the edge of this abyss.

[Audience members are invited to light a candle and set it on the stage to remember anyone who died as a result of oppression. We then invited people for a discussion about the reading. The topic in each of the three groups that I conducted focused on racism and reconciliation.]

**About the Author**

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