Post-Dialogue, or After-Silence at the Holocaust Museum

By Rachel Baum

There is pre-dialogue, our slow or feverish preparation for dialogue. Without any idea of how it will proceed, which form it will take, without being able to explain it, we are convinced in advance that the dialogue has already begun: a silent dialogue with an absent partner.

Then afterwards, there is post-dialogue or after-silence. For what we manage to say to the other in our exchange of words—says virtually nothing but this silence, silence on which we are thrown back by any unfathomable, self-centered word whose depth we vainly try to sound.

Then finally there is what could have been the actual dialogue, vital, irreplaceable but which, alas, does not take place: it begins the very moment we take leave of one another and return to our solitudes.

Edmond Jabès[1]

It is, to many of us, obvious that dialogue is a necessary response to the Holocaust. We need dialogue, need the common ground that makes dialogue possible. We know all too well what happens when human beings become disconnected from each other, and how people with whom we do not speak can become dehumanized. Dialogue is not the single answer to the world's problems, but it is hard to imagine our finding our way to any sort of solutions without it.

Yet for those of us who engage in interreligious dialogue, it is not always clear what dialogue *is*. We think of dialogue as involving words, and yet good dialogues involve a great deal of listening. When we listen, we have to attend both to what is said, and what is unsaid. Dialogue is inextricably connected to silence.

The Holocaust, one of the most well-researched events in modern history, is a subject surrounded by silence. With everything we know, there is still so much that we cannot know. Learning about the Holocaust is, in part, a training to hear the silences. What stories do we not hear because the victims were routinely killed? What remains unspoken in a recounting of survivor experience?

When reflecting on the time I spent together at the Holocaust Museum with other Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars, I admit that I cannot remember all that was said. What I remember most is the experience of sharing silence together, held by the space of the museum. Although our conversations at the Museum were fruitful and important, what I remember most are the spaces in between. Those spaces were framed by our presence at the Holocaust Memorial Museum, whose walls hold such suffering. Although I have been to the museum many times, it was different to see it through the eyes of people who had never been there before. I don't remember our talking while we walked through the exhibit, although perhaps we did. What I remember most is simply the presence that we shared, the ability to be with each other in a vulnerable space.

What made that space vulnerable was not only the suffering of the victims, but what it meant for us to be in that space. We had come to the museum to work on a project that looked at

how our religious traditions deal with the Other – the stranger, the one who stands outside of the tradition. In our essays, some of us wrote of our religion's positive tradition of welcoming the stranger. Others wrote about ways in which our tradition could be read – should be read – in ways that would welcome the stranger.

At times I felt that our writing did not take enough risks. It is, after all, difficult to be vulnerable in academic writing. Yet experiencing the Holocaust museum together, there was not one of us who could say, with confidence, that our tradition had the answer, that our tradition could have alone stopped the Holocaust.

On the first day, one of the Muslim scholars talked about humility as a guard against religious triumphalism, which we all identified as a central barrier to interreligious dialogue. Religious humility is linked to vulnerability, because it identifies a limit to knowledge, to certainty. Being in the space of the museum reminded each of us that we need each other and that we are vulnerable to one other. Because we could be a victim, because we could be a perpetrator, because we could be a bystander, we are vulnerable and our religious traditions alone cannot protect us.

Since that time, I have tried to carry that vulnerable space into my classroom. Although the space of the museum offers a very specific opportunity, the walls of a Holocaust classroom define a space too, a space of vulnerability and openness for students who are confronting this subject, perhaps for the first time. Students who come with a well-defined religious viewpoint find that many of their beliefs feel insufficient in the shadow of the Shoah. Christian students who learn about the history of Christian anti-Judaism often experience a sense of loss as they struggle to reconcile their religious commitments with their new knowledge.

Indeed, interreligious dialogue often throws us back onto our own traditions. In our meeting at the Holocaust Museum, some of the most intense conversations were between members of the same faith tradition, rather than among the different faiths. In a certain sense, we are most vulnerable to those we feel closest to, because they have an ability to wound us in ways that outsiders may not.

In the Fall of 2013, in my course on "The Holocaust and the Politics of Memory," I had a Muslim student -- the first, I believe, in one of my Holocaust courses. The class was a vulnerable place for her, and I tried to hold that space open for her, to create a space where vulnerability could be met with vulnerability. We are all vulnerable in the shadow of the Holocaust, and part of my work as a teacher is to help students share that tenderness in the space of the classroom. Over time, as the community of the classroom grows, a shared sense of responsibility develops and students feel protective of each other.

By the end of the course, my student expressed her feelings of solitude, that she has important things to say about the Holocaust and the misuse of Holocaust memory, but she doesn't have a community in which to say it. She wants to tell her Muslim friends, but she worries that in her community, what she wants to say will put her outside.

I sent her a copy of *Encountering the Stranger*. It is not an entirely satisfying response, but I wanted her to know that she is not alone.

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[1] Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Dialogue*, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 7.

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One of Dr. Baum's primary interests is interfaith dialogue. In 2007, she was an invited guest of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum as a member of an interfaith group of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars. The group's book Encountering the Stranger: A Jewish, Christian, Muslim Trialogue was published by the University of Washington Press. Dr. Baum's chapter is entitled, "Loving the Stranger: Intimacy between Jews and Non-Jews."