

## **Susie Jans-Thomas** **Creating Compassion through Controversy**

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### Abstract

Every piece of research a scholar creates originates within a certain place in her inner being, where the thinker seeks a utopian depth of understanding. This inner place is devoid of rhetoric, for ideas are steeped in passion's heady aroma of wisdom gained through knowledge. It is the place that permits the total freedom of ideas, exchanges in dialogue that develop formidable treatises to problems, and produce profound acceptance that what one is attempting to accomplish is just. This magical place disappears quickly in the world of the scholar for the boundaries surrounding it are fitted in quotes, anchored in cherished academic freedom, and devoid of the first person narrative reaction to readings that too often challenge the course of an individual's belief system.

This essay is about developing compassion in graduate and undergraduate students who have taken the time to study historical events that exhibited man's cruelty, detailed his oppression, forced prejudicial thought, alienated groups, and evoked tearful remembrances. This essay is the result of teaching. It is a personal account of using literature as a vehicle to make the world a more compassionate place.

### Random Acts of Kindness

It seems that wherever there is celebrity, there is controversy, or controversy soon follows. Oprah Winfrey is one such celebrity who looks controversy straight in the eye. She fought the First Amendment, confronted the fabricated world of fad dieting, read books by new authors, and admitted to an unhappy childhood. In the face of controversy, Oprah has encouraged the practice Random Acts of Kindness by doing such things as paying tolls for the cars behind her on the Illinois Toll Road. She embraces simple practices that allow one to give without receiving materially in return.

Another popular phase of kindness permeated American culture through the book and movie, Pay It Forward. In that story, a young boy is asked to complete a project for school that would transform the world. Armed with a junior high school knowledge of combinatoric statistics, the adolescent deduces that if he does three good things for three different people and in return asks only that they do three nice things for three others, the kindness will reach astronomical proportions. His plan incorporates people from all walks of life, and kindness exists in the world through the actions of strangers. The boy's tragic death prompts a candlelight vigil by thousands of people who have been touched by his simple act of Paying It Forward. Simply stated, there are no repayments for kindness; the spirit should remain alive by its resurrection in the deeds of others.

Several years ago a graduate student entered the classroom in a steaming mist of anger observed visibly through the skin tones of his freckle-faced red head, but visibly atypical given his normally free spirited personality. He was a fifth grade teacher, whose principal had decided that the entire school would practice Random Acts of Kindness by insisting that different individuals and classes were instructed to be nice to other groups or individuals. The graduate student was distraught that this administrative directive was therefore in no way random. Philosophically, if one is to be randomly kind, that kindness is to be impulsive and driven by one's inner compassion. One may believe justifiably that there are no material costs to be kind within the capitalistic society where we live. Thus, when I shared my philosophy with the student, he remained disturbed, for he hoped his students would demonstrate acts of kindness unconditionally. I have long believed in the philosophy that it does not cost anything to be kind, so in a capitalistic society it should be relatively easy to be a kind person. He decided that to reconcile his continuing philosophical discomfort, he would model the lesson of setting a good example. He decided that in order to teach the concept of compassion and kindness he would have to demonstrate it actively to his students.

The idea of Random Acts of Kindness suggested by popular culture developed from this graduate education dialogue and was implemented into my class in Social Studies Methods. Since this course was designed to assist students to understand the curriculum and methodology of effective instruction, there were projects which students were required to complete related to elementary education. Aware of one graduate student's frustrating experience regarding Random Acts of Kindness, I created an assignment which enveloped this behavior, although upon reflection it was difficult to disengage the concept of Paying It Forward.

As this course is presently designed, on the first day of class students randomly pull the name of someone on campus. The names in the bag are those of the people who remain faceless but keep a campus running, e.g., gardeners, librarians, secretaries, bookstore workers. Each student is asked simply to do something kind for the individual. There are no papers associated with the assignment, no in depth study to complete, and no report to the professor. Students are just asked to be kind. Since the initiation of this project, students have demonstrated looks of disbelief; it is as if they feel they are being tricked into failure, or have missed the objective. However, the results of the project are the reward.

Students stop by my office to chat in hopes of gaining further insight into "What is wanted" from the assignment. I tell them to be kind, and they all too often grow frustrated with the abstract notion behind the assignment. Many sit and think in the silence of my office, wondering if I will break that silence by offering them a quick solution. When I fail to do so, the dialogue begins. We realize there are individuals living among us daily who view our responses to life's situations peculiar to their personal circumstances without our knowing it. Imagine how lovely the world would be, we discuss, if we stopped to ask a gardener for a tour of his roses, or if we were to put a smile in our voices as we rejected the telemarketer's call. Most of the students will openly admit that they have no idea the name of the person whom they have drawn from the bag, which brings a bit of sadness, albeit one they sense will vanish when the project is completed.

There are no physical assessments to these projects of which I express wonderment as to how the projects are developing. On a personal level, this was the most difficult portion of the assignment for me, but I had to allow student independence in order to see how the project would develop. The rewards of the assignment are immeasurable. There are no standards that could possibly necessitate the project into the academic category; however, students are recognizing the qualities of others in ways I never could have predicted.

One student came into my office and told me about how she shared a soda with a woman on the grounds crew. She learned all about the family and friends of a person who makes certain that the sidewalks are shoveled for the safety of others. Another student left a bouquet of tulips on a person's desk in the Business Office one morning, only to find that by the afternoon the flowers were arranged in five different vases and spread throughout the entire office. My favorite outcome of this assignment was receiving a wonderful thank you note from a secretary for the flowers and candy she had received from me. The student had placed my name on the card. Kindness is something learned through example, and in so doing, the controversy behind the original requirement that had been thrust on a graduate student by his school principal, has grown to encompass a college community where no one really knows the origin. In the spirit and success of the project, the origin is not needed.

#### Tuesday's With Morrie

In educating students to become teachers they must examine the lives of others who have chosen the profession insightfully and who enjoy that chosen path. One of the readings required in Foundations of Education is Tuesday's With Morrie. The non-fiction work describes the accounts of a former college student, Mitch, who learns that his beloved professor, Morrie, battles but subsequently dies from Parkinson's disease. Mitch visits Morrie to learn life's lessons of ethics, logic, life, and love. Morrie's words are full of passion as he questions, probes, and assists Mitch to discover the path to a rich and meaningful life. Mitch learns life's greatest gift is giving of self, and Morrie's life is destined to continue in spirit -- for his wisdom has been shared with another who has chosen to receive it and pass it forward to others.

Students who study the relationship between the two men, grow in the understanding that a teacher never knows when his words are going to be meaningful to another. In some respects this fact may peel away some of the ideological ideas the fresh faces of undergraduate students maintain, yet the reality of this acceptance is steeped in the notion that the gift of teaching will continue.

After assigning the book a few years ago, I received a handwritten note from a student on a Curious George note card. The student thanked me for assigning the book, and stated, "Dr. Susie, I can hardly wait until you have a terminal disease so that we can discuss the meaning of life." My laughter could be heard around the college, for in my heart I knew this was a heartfelt response written as an immediate reaction to the reading, and she had the courage to mail it. There was no time for editing. The message was plain, simple to the

core, and most importantly steeped in passion. Compassion was formed when the student later shared with me that she knew that I would somehow touch her future as an educator. The power of the written word had moved her to write to another.

## The Holocaust

In the course of history, the Holocaust proved to be one event that demonstrated man's inhumanity to man. While there have been many instances of genocide throughout humanity, the Holocaust remains at the forefront. Hitler's plan to create a Master Race was systematically implemented throughout Europe. In textbooks across the United States coverage of the Holocaust ranges from one paragraph to one page; the concepts surrounding the event are described only because textbooks define history by wars. I teach five different classes related to aspects of the Holocaust. Using literature as the foundation of the courses, graduate students gather to discuss readings of biographies, autobiographies, and historical accounts of the human condition during the time period of the Holocaust (1933-1945). Helping students understand the philosophy behind Racial Hygiene is one aspect that assists in the development of compassion.

In one course a man said that he would have been one of the first individuals to be exterminated because he has an artificial leg. As the course continued, he shared that he was a twin. This too would have been a death decree, and the realization was a dark moment in retrospective thought. Studying the Holocaust prompts questions such as, "How could they do those things?" "Where was God?" "Who could say it didn't happen?" These questions are difficult to answer, for the ensuing sands of time have provided a buffer.

Interestingly, there is growth that accompanies every course that surrounds student compassion for daily living. An 82 year old student posed the question, "After reading all of these accounts of starvation, do any of you look at a piece of bread differently?" With silence, students gained eye contact with one another to begin a response. Unlike other courses I teach, students do not lose eye contact in Holocaust classes when they do not know the answers. Silence is an acceptable response; they may laugh -- which grants a freedom of understanding. There is an unwritten code that says there will not always be answers, sometimes the questions are rhetorical in nature, often the same questions are asked again and again, but the laughter is through the tearful shroud of knowing they will now be carrying the words of the masses who lived and died under Hitler's watch. This burden of knowledge in and of itself is enough to build compassion and assist that students will recognize aspects of oppression do exist in daily life, as well as to inspire their work to rid society of prejudicial viewpoints that cause one group to belittle another. On the last night of class in Children of the Holocaust, I gave each student a gift wrapped in a piece of white tissue paper and told them they were to take it with them as a remembrance of the class. Mumbled students comments ensued which testified that they had never before received a gift from a professor. The students became playfully mistrustful of my intentions as they surmised I must be resorting to some form of trickery. Each student carefully opened one's package, and following gasps and tears, silence pervaded the room. Each person had received a barb from a piece of barbed wire. Barbed wire is one of the many

symbols associated with the Holocaust. It is everywhere in Holocaust literature and art. Survivors' stories of the oppressive nature of the barbed wire fences haunt readers of the Holocaust. The students immediately understood the meaning behind the gift: Never Again.

After several minutes of silence, I asked students to do me the favor of informing me in the future how the study of the Holocaust had created compassion in them. I knew that some would respond to me immediately, others would think about it for a few months, and still others I may never receive a response. All of these behaviors were acceptable to me, for I believe that Holocaust studies are like faith development, where on any given day, everyone is at a different stage. When studying any aspect of the Holocaust, students must grow emotionally by understanding the ideological constraints that promote oppressive actions of one group on another. However, I can honestly say that all the students who received barbed wire were emotionally shaken into an unexpected and uncomfortable reality. As the Professor of the course, I began to receive gift responses the following week while hosting a Christmas gathering for all of my students in my home. A man from the Holocaust class quietly shared how his wife had moved the barbed wire off their dresser when dusting. He was upset that she had touched it. Students from other classes did not know of the barbed wire gifts, and they began listening intently as the story unfolded. Before many more minutes had passed, all the students began discussing knowledge they had learned in classes that had created within them an awareness of the human condition. They continued to discuss controversial issues such as cloning, bussing, welfare reform, logical reasoning, and others which brought a permanent smile to my face as I listened intently.

Once the students departed, I was left with memories of their dialogue, and hope that they were remembering a compassionate lesson: It does not cost anything to be kind. While clearing away paper plates and napkins in the family room, I noticed something on the computer printer. It was a piece of black velvet carefully rolled with its ends bonded by pieces of twist-ties from a grocery store. I imagined all sorts of wonderful objects that might be inside the rolled velvet. Unrolling the velvet I found a piece of paper rolled around a piece of barbed wire. The note said, "This is a pledge to correspond with a woman in the Kenosha jail." This is an act of kindness never considered by many, yet one person is reaching out to another as the result of studying genocide, thereby justifying that it does not cost anything to be kind.

Using literature to teach controversial issues allows individuals to examine oppression, prejudice, and human rights, while developing compassion for others. The standard textbooks proscribed by professors often leave students with theory, but no practical application of that which is learned. Literature is a tool that assists students to critically explore ideas through the words of an author. Students who study controversy want to do something for others. They grow to recognize that place described in *The Wizard of Oz* as over the rainbow, or the land beyond the eye so aptly described by Alice on her adventures in *Wonderland*. Perhaps the assignments and gifts given by this author are a bit oppressive, because in all fairness to the students, I am in a position of authority over them. However, dialogue with students previously had demonstrated that they had studied issues like Civil Rights, or Women in History, or Censorship, or Japanese-American Internment, or the

Holocaust as mere historical events found on flat pages of a history text. They grew to recognize that all of the events affected people and all of the instances of atrocity revealed that there were people within these societies who were willing to act with compassion toward others.

No, professors cannot require students to be compassionate to others, but they can provide examples that will enable them to act accordingly when placed in their personal life situation.

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