Teaching and Learning—Violence and Healing

Regina Shands Stoltzfus

A student begins to share a reflection from the assigned reading. She falteringly begins to explain how this particular chapter, in which the author describes the after-effects of a brutal sexual assault, was very close to the bone for her. The student confesses that she didn't finish reading the assignment. In fact, she doesn't know if she can stay for the discussion. The more she talks, the more her voice breaks until she dissolves into tears. Except for her sobs, the room is silent.

Early on a Monday morning midway through the semester, a murder/suicide occurs in a parking lot less than two miles from our campus. As the details of the tragedy unfold, the campus learns that the murder victim was one of our women students.

A male student expresses his frustration at the amount of time spent discussing male violence against women. His primary concern seems to be that we understand that not all men are violent, and that he, himself is not a rapist, nor is he an abuser of women and girls. He demands that we give equal time to discussions about women's violence against men and boys.

In "Personal Violence and Healing," the Peace, Justice and Conflict Studies (PJCS) class at Goshen College in which these events have taken place, academics, activism, and soul care come face to face. Such scenarios are not outside the real work of the class. Each calls for making in-the-moment decisions about how to move forward and think through what they mean for our learning community. The role of a professor in a PJCS classroom—particularly one like this—takes various forms. As a group facilitator, he or she must pay attention to behavior that in other classes might simply be seen as disruptive and as an obstacle to the session's learning objectives. Current events, whether far away or local, take on a different life in a classroom where

The Conrad Grebel Review 32, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 152-162.

the very subject matter is violence. Here, hearing, holding, and honoring stories is a central focus, learning is collaborative, and students share in the leadership.

I taught this class for the first time in 2007. The course was developed and previously taught by Ruth Krall, a long-time professor of Religion, Nursing and Psychology, who generously shared her resources and notes with me but strongly urged me to make the class my own. In trying to do so, I am in debt to people and places that shaped me as a peace studies educator. My formation is grounded in the church that raised me, an urban congregation that taught Anabaptist theology in a primarily black church context. At Lee Heights Community Church in Cleveland, Ohio, I learned peace and justice by watching my elders commit to "being church" in an integrated context (nearly unheard of during that era) and confronting institutions that sought to diminish black life. My understanding of what it means to wage peace and foster justice is built upon a foundation of understanding and addressing structural injustices like racism and sexism. Before teaching in the college classroom, I provided peace education for the Ohio Conference of the Mennonite Church, Mennonite Conciliation Services, and Mennonite Mission Network. I also spent seven years as a pastor in the Lee Heights congregation.

An Overview of the Class

Personal Violence and Healing is a 300-level seminar style class. Students who enroll in it come from a variety of disciplines. Over the course of the semester they are engaged in an intense study of an area of violence that they are interested in. Each student takes a turn leading a session by presenting their research, which they turn in as a paper at the end of the semester.

Two questions provide a foundation for the semester's work: (1) What is the cultural permission for violence? (2) What does it mean to receive, hold, and tell a story of trauma? Sub-questions in the second question are: Who "owns" such stories? Who is allowed to tell such stories? How are they told with integrity, and with an eye toward the healing of both those traumatized and the structures that perpetuate violence?

Together we pursue these questions as we read and discuss, and students use them as a central focus for their research projects. They are

important questions to ask if one is serious about not only helping people heal from trauma and violence but stemming the flow of violence. Since personal acts of violence are often related to systems of oppression that are intricately connected to one another, dismantling such systems demands an understanding of how they came to be and what keeps holding them together. For example, to begin to grasp why sexual assaults happen most often to women, and why indigenous women experience these assaults at statistically greater rates than other women, one must become aware of a long history of social, cultural, and legislative policies permitting violence to certain bodies deemed unimportant. One must also examine cultural expectations about masculinity and what constitutes a "real man." With this broader perspective, ending "violence against women" becomes a much more complicated process than just punishing individual men.

The questions also help distinguish between doing education with a view to stopping violence and just being voyeurs. We examine how stories of trauma have been suppressed or misused, and how they shed light on seeing rape and sexual assault as issues of power, control, and dominance (rather than as a matter of women who are slutty or men who are effeminate, and therefore are "asking for it" and can be blamed for their own victimization).

As a learning community, my students and I read about, and hear from, individuals who study trauma from a number of standpoints: people who have been violated, helpers/healers (including but not limited to medical professionals, law enforcement personnel, social workers, teachers, family members, and pastors), researchers, and perpetrators. There is an opportunity—but not a requirement—to share personal stories.

Resources and Processes

During the first month of the semester, I provide the primary input, covering theoretical and theological approaches to understanding violence. Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery*[1] is our grounding text as we build a vocabulary and begin to see how the body, mind, and spirit respond to trauma. We then set the schedule for the balance of the semester; students work through a self-care plan, sign up for a "class opener," decide upon a

[1] Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

topic to research, and submit a research proposal.

During the next month, we focus on another text and process it with student-led discussions. For the past two years the class has read Andrea Smith's *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*.[2] Smith, a Native American anti-violence activist and scholar, brilliantly documents the intersections between different kinds of systematized and state-sanctioned violence. She draws important connections between the rape and sexual assault of indigenous women and the process of colonization in North America, and helps readers understand how one system of violence upholds and enforces others. It is not a huge book, but it is a substantial read. The first year I used it, I made the mistake of trying to move through it too quickly because we had a third book to cover. I discovered that the theme of conquest demands much processing time, and after that year I deleted the third book from the syllabus.

Reading and processing Smith's book together in class is a way to acknowledge that horrific acts of violence happened, and to honor the bodies and spirits that they happened to. Students who are not indigenous to the continent are also forced to examine how the colonization process that benefits non-Natives was built and how it continues to violate the bodies of Native women and men. Students are very often dismayed that they did not know this part of American history.

The deleted third book is one I hope to come back to. *At The Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape and Resistance*[3] by Danielle McGuire details the history of African American women who experienced sexual assault at the hands of white men who often were not charged and rarely prosecuted. Organizing against this systematized violence that married racism and misogyny was a starting point for the activism of Rosa Parks, whose image has been sanitized into a sweet story about a woman who "just got tired" one day. Her story is one powerful example of how people educate themselves and others to address systems of injustice, do the hard work of strategizing

[2] Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2005).

[3] Danielle McGuire, *At The Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Vintage, 2011).

(often over long periods of time), and then are ready to mobilize because they are organized.

The final third of the semester is devoted to the students presenting their research. They are essentially teaching the class what they have learned and leading a discussion after their presentation. During these sessions, they make connections between their projects and often share insights and resources with one another.

Studying Violence with Eyes and Heart Open

Here I will outline in more detail some elements of my approach. The student described in the first vignette at the beginning of this account was motivated by a reading assignment. She had a powerful need to talk about her experience. Fortunately, by that point in the semester we had built up enough of a community to hold that moment with her. We knew how to support her and each other, and she trusted her classmates and me with her story.

Not surprisingly, Peace, Justice and Conflict Studies classes are a draw for individuals who empathize with the pain of others. In the initial meetings of this particular class, we talk about triggering and secondary trauma, and the necessity for "self-care" (see below) during the semester. Our eyes and are hearts must be open to receive and carry each other's stories as well as the books we read and the videos we view. Although everyone is invited to share stories, no one is required to do so. We agree not to share stories outside the classroom. Even so, questions arise: Is this a safe space? What can I say here? What might I hear? What kinds of stories are appropriate for the college classroom? How do we monitor the sharing? How much is too much? The subject matter of the course can—and does, eventually—throw off even the most skilled facilitator, as will be evident in the stories that follow.

During the first session, I say that I want us to foster a place where we can learn well, be ourselves, and equip ourselves for the work of stopping and healing violence. Because we are all also engaged in unlearning the systemic violence our culture supports (racism, classism, sexism) I cannot guarantee "safe space." The best that I and my students can do is to commit ourselves to trying to make the spaces we inhabit, in the classroom and elsewhere, safer than they would otherwise be. We can work together to make this particular

space as safe as possible.

The subject matter of the course is violence, primarily systemic, institutionalized violence—a subject that can make people uncomfortable and defensive. Often they feel helpless upon learning the pervasiveness of systemic violence. Sometimes they will defend the racism and the racists of the past, by saying it was a different time and they weren't there. Sometimes they are offended by the fact that I would even bring racism up. How do I deal with this? I have learned to name it upfront. There will undoubtedly be moments where participants will feel uncomfortable. This is not a bad thing, I say, and I observe that we will all experience it at some point during the course.

At times students of color will, curiously, even defend racist behavior. I believe that in a predominantly white, small liberal arts college, students who are "different" or part of a minority group need to protect themselves. If they don't acknowledge the racist/sexist behavior of which they have been on the receiving end, or if they downplay it, this lessens the chance for friction with peers outside the classroom. Within the context of a small campus, students will protect their social circles.

In one semester a male student challenged nearly every point I made about gender inequalities and violence against women. Eventually, as I did my planning, I began to anticipate his probable objections and to formulate a response. His main objections centered on his disbelieving the statistics and anecdotal evidence on gendered violence. Dealing with this student began to occupy my emotional energy; I was becoming less responsive to other students, and some were beginning to participate less. I contacted him outside of class and noted that he seemed to disagree or counterpoint virtually every statement I made in class. I acknowledged that I couldn't spend time arguing with him during every session, and offered to let him finish the course as a direct study. He responded by saying he didn't realize how much of my energy he was using, and agreed to tone it down. He remained in the class, and we finished the semester in fine fashion.

Studying violence together as a community requires vulnerability, and building trust is important. At the outset we share what I hope is low risk, as I ask students to say what they want to research, and why. Over the years, their research has included topics such as art therapy for sexual assault

survivors, clergy and sexual abuse, bullying and LGBT youth, and loss and grief among adoptees. I am touched by the passion and care in the students' work. When they present their findings in class, I am often impressed by the questions they ask and the support they offer each other.

I advise students that I am not a trained therapist and that our class is not a therapeutic space. Ongoing, deep distress must be tended to outside class, and I help them find the necessary support. I try to achieve a balance between facilitating our academic activities, and participating in and nurturing the necessary vulnerability. I am responsible for bringing the content: I write the syllabus, decide what we're going to read, and give grades at the end of the semester. The students produce work (discussion leadership, presentations, and papers) which I evaluate. I talk—and I listen.

The issue of sexualized violence in society is of course prominent in this course. Although experienced by boys and girls, and by men and women, rape and sexual assault are most often experienced by women and girls at the hands of boys and men.[4] Gender dynamics in the classroom itself also need attention, something that can produce frank discussions about the misuse of male power and the consequences of male domination in society.

Willingness to be vulnerable enhances the possibility of good teaching and learning in this type of course. Our classes to a degree seem to self-select their participants. Generally, one doesn't just stumble into such a class and expect that it's going to be an easy ride. PJCS students are the kind of students very likely to seek outside counseling. They find that studying conflict, violence, and trauma is hard work emotionally and psychologically. It may also present a personal crisis, particularly for those in the process of forming and owning their adult faith. The deep study of violence can trouble their understanding of who God is and how God operates in the world. While musings on theodicy may not be new, new questions confront students as they discover the depth and pervasiveness of violence in our culture. Anger at people who do terrible things, at God who seemingly permits these things to happen, or at ourselves for our participation, ignorance, or ineffectiveness

[4] See *National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia, www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/cdc_nisvs_overview_insert_final-a.pdf, and *National Violence Against Women Survey*, National Criminal Justice Reference Service, US Dept. of Justice, www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/183781.pdf.

is a predictable and appropriate response.

Often, students' prior biblical and theological training does not sufficiently equip them to address violence in a way that feels sustainable. It is particularly difficult when we look at how religious systems are implicated in the very violence we seek to end, such as the slave trade, colonization, and gender hierarchies that give men the power to dominate women and children.

It can be tempting, as professors, to try to remain detached and not be vulnerable. After all, we could say, I'm the one in charge; I have to be in control. Indeed, we might have been taught that it is unprofessional to let students see our human, frail side. I disagree; I want my students to know I am human. However, as an African American woman, I also know that many of them have never had an "authority figure" that looks like me.

A conversation about "isms" (sexism, racism, classism, etc.) is a conversation about power and how it is arranged hierarchically. Those socialized within the context of a racialized society are instructed by a narrative about how power should flow, with "whiteness" as an identity constructed to determine who should govern and who should be governed. For example, in the United States there were four racial categories in the first census in 1790: free white men, free white women, all other free persons, and slaves.[5] The construction of "whiteness" served to identify those who could be citizens, own property, and govern—those who had power.

In teaching this class and others, one thing I must do is to claim my authority to teach. Because I teach about identity and difference, I must address the possibility and probability of dealing with students and colleagues who perceive my subject matter as not real scholarship—as something I do because I have a chip on my shoulder or have a vendetta against white people, especially white men. Being mindful about the stereotypes about black women, I work hard to maintain a balance that allows me to be approachable enough to hear student concerns and struggles yet authoritative enough to demand rigor.

Committing to Radical Self-Care

Poet, essayist, and activist Audre Lorde (1934-1992) wrote a series of essays

[5] www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/overview/1790.html.

about her battle with the cancer that eventually ended her life. In addition to the illness, Lorde also struggled to pay medical expenses and to continue her work as an educator and activist within institutions that seemed to be trying to silence her. Of these struggles, she wrote, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."[6] Those who would commit themselves to the enterprise of healing must be equipped to tend to their own wounds, to undertake radical acts of self-care. Self-care is part of the foundation for doing social justice work. If we are not working on our own wholeness (*shalom*), it is much harder to work for wholeness on behalf of other individuals or systems. Since structures of violence and injustice operate by dehumanizing, a necessary first step in undoing them is to recognize and interrupt patterns of dehumanization. Recognizing and tending to our own humanity is critical.

After the first semester of teaching Personal Violence and Healing, I clearly needed a self-care plan myself. There was of course the usual end-of-semester fatigue. Additionally, I had extended myself in caring for students—meeting with them outside class and being hyper-attentive in class to our process and conversations. And then, after classes ended, I was faced with reading a stack of research papers about violence and trauma. I slogged through the stack—and had the most miserable break between semesters I had ever experienced. I had neglected to listen to my own instruction! I then determined to become more attentive to self-care as a daily practice, and to bolster the self-care component of all of my classes, but especially this one.

The self-care component is designed for individuals as well as the whole group. The students' first course assignment is a self-care worksheet that becomes a semester-long contract. They are asked to reflect upon what they have learned to do when under stress. What kinds of habits do they already have that work? How do they know that these habits work? What new habit might they be willing to commit to? Then, they are asked to try something new. In order to hold them accountable, I tell them I reserve the right to check up on them if it seems necessary. This alerts them that I am paying attention to things like body language, affect, and participation. I also check up on those who miss class. One year I had a student who was

[6] Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light* (Ann Arbor, MI: Firebrand Books, 1988), thefeministwire.com, accessed May 2, 2014.

experiencing significant stress related to events outside class and could not complete the required readings, which were themselves acting as a trigger. The student took an extension and finished the work several weeks later.

This past spring semester was the first time I required students to complete a "community care" component. Each class session began with a student sharing a reflection or leading in an exercise. The variety was amazing and served to enhance our growing sense of community. Students would often build on what we were currently reading or carry over a discussion from the last session. One student told us that when she is stressed she watches funny YouTube videos, and shared several of her favorites. Laughing together felt good. One student used cooking as an outlet, and brought in treats she had made the night before. Another student told us about her "God Jar"—a practice of writing down on a piece of paper the things that worry or pain her and giving it to God by placing it in a jar, which she then invited us to do. She collected our scraps of paper, and promised not to read them but to give them to God. Other students shared songs or led us in body movements, one simply inviting us to lay our heads on the desks for five minutes and rest in silence.

I also pay attention to our setting: where and how we sit, and rituals that set the tone for our time together. I regularly provide a variety of teas and hot water, and instead of using the overhead florescent light with its low-level buzz I bring lamps into the room. Colorful fabrics to cover the table as well as candles and flowers help make the space attractive and comfortable. For book discussions, we opt to move our chairs into a circle (this works when the class is relatively small).

Teaching in this Body

I am an African American woman in an institution where most of the students and a majority of the faculty are white. Teaching about personal acts of violence that are connected to larger structures means talking about ethnocentrism, racism, and sexism (among other "isms"). This means being vulnerable in a different way, and teaching in a manner that opens me up to criticisms that I must decide if and how to address. Teaching people—especially those who find themselves in privileged positions—about these isms is hard work and must be done in a manner that is simultaneously gentle

and tough. I cannot teach this content as though it is sterile or unconnected to either my life or the students' lives, although it may be connected to us in significantly different ways. This is a place where the "bad guys out there" scenario just doesn't work. Here we can come face to face with what it means to have violence committed in our names and/or for our sakes.

As a black woman, I reflect on a fact that helps me understand this issue. I have privileges as someone who was born in the United States and holds a US passport. My citizenship gives me privileges that I did not personally earn, some of which I value very much. (I could also add the privileges that being part of the educated, middle class affords me, but I will stick to the citizenship example, because this is an identity I had no choice in or agency with.) There are acts of violence committed in my name by my government that operate to preserve my privileges. Granted, some people who utilize anti-oppression models have shifted away from talking about "privilege" to using language about "dominance" and "control," saying less about white privilege and more about white supremacy. But whatever the terminology, the reality requires thinking through. Do students learn best if such topics as privilege, dominance, control, and supremacy are addressed gingerly or if they are handled plainly and bluntly? This is where having formed a community and possessing a sense of shared agreement seem a necessary part of the pedagogical commitment.

Teaching this class and having these conversations, although some of the hardest work I have ever done, brings me a great deal of satisfaction. This work is about stories and statistics, and about examining structures and speaking to systems. It is also a work of the spirit, an activity that can have different meanings for different people in different contexts. Sometimes violence is contained within the very structures where we have learned our spirituality and our faith stories; we must reclaim them. To build a new world, peace studies educators must create new paths, new ways of understanding old stories, and new ways of being. May we commit ourselves to being teachers and learners of these new paths and new ways.

Regina Shands Stoltzfus is Assistant Professor of Peace, Justice and Conflict Studies at Goshen College in Goshen, Indiana.