

The Michael S. Rapaport
Everyday Ethics Across the Curriculum Initiative
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Bunkong Tuon
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I used funding provided by the Rapaport Everyday Ethics Grant to purchase films and scholarly texts for my Winter 09 First-Year Preceptorial. Titled “Good and Evil,” this Preceptorial focused on topics such as suffering and innocence, war and trauma, religion and spirituality, writing and healing, in texts across several disciplines: literature, philosophy, religion, and history.

The class was divided into three sections. We started the class with a study of spiritual texts such as *The Way of Chuang Tzu* and *The Book of Job*. We continued our ongoing dialogue about suffering, innocence, and the existence of a Divine Being by reading nineteenth-century European and American texts, such as Poe’s short stories and Dostoevsky’s “Grand Inquisitor.” In the third and final section of the Preceptorial, “Contemporary Narratives of Trauma and Suffering,” we read twentieth-century works on war and trauma, exploring the politics and ethics of writing/witnessing in testimonial and graphic narratives on the Holocaust, the Iranian Revolution, and the Cambodian Genocide.

It was in this section of the Preceptorial that I put to great use the funding provided by the Rapaport Everyday Ethics Grant, purchasing course materials on the politics and ethics of teaching such painful subjects as war and genocide, trauma and healing, and human rights. With the grant money, I bought scholarly texts to help students understand that genocides do not occur in a vacuum and that an understanding of historical context helps explain how people can commit atrocities upon others. For example, students were required to read an article that traces the history of anti-Semitism in pre-Christian, Greco-Roman world, and the Christian notion of supersession. In another section, we discussed how the Khmer Rouge regime, with its specifically anti-Western, xenophobic policies, emerged out of the context of Western colonialism—beginning with France’s occupation of Cambodia in the second half of the nineteenth century and American involvement in the Viet Nam/American War in the twentieth century. I also used films such as *Persepolis*, *Night and Fog*, and *The Killing Fields* to provide filmic perspectives to accompany the literature that we read in this class.

In addition to asking for help with procuring both scholarly texts and films for my class, I was also interested in the politico-ethical aspects of teaching difficult subject matters in the classroom. I bought books on teaching about genocide and the Holocaust to help me with my own concerns about teaching such challenging subjects. These concerns were expressed in such questions as: What are my ethical and political responsibilities as a teacher to the writers and their works? What are my teaching responsibilities to students? What are my students’ responsibilities? Ultimately, together as a class, what sort of actions should we aspire to take in light of what we learn about our world from these texts?

These are, indeed, questions that refuse easy answers. As a class, we discussed both the political and ethical reasons why these books were written. In the very act of writing, these writers bear-witness to the atrocities committed under oppressive regimes, informing the world about what happened

and hoping that the same mistakes will not be made in the future. They also commemorate memories of those friends, family members, and neighbors who lost their lives. Furthermore, these writers took up writing as a way to heal themselves of traumatic memories, exorcising the demons and nightmares of a traumatic past in the act of writing and speaking to the world.

Yet, the question still remains: how do we, as a class, respond ethically to these texts? I hope that we were able to respond with respect—the forms of silence and questioning. Silence is our way of expressing honor, gratitude, and respect to the writers who have the courage to refuse silence and to tell difficult stories. Questioning is our way of trying to understand intelligently what happened, so that the victims will not have perished in vain and so that we can work to prevent future atrocities. I did not want students to be so overwhelmed with emotions of guilt, shame, and pity that they are unable to think critically and ask important questions. This is one of the reasons why, when we studied the Khmer Rouge regime and read Loung Ung's *First They Killed my Father*, I did not tell students about my personal connection to the events described in the book. I do not want students to feel embarrassed or be afraid that they might offend me with their questions about Cambodia and her painful past.

The respect that I aspire to (i.e. respect that is expressed in both silence and speech) has to do with my understanding of the importance of teaching such difficult subjects as the Holocaust, the Cambodian Genocide, and the Iranian Revolution. In my understanding, teaching is a type of witnessing, as my students and I honor the memory of the victims in our critical reading and respectful discussion of these texts. Teaching, in this sense, can also be political—as the knowledge created in class has the potential to change the minds, behavior, and, with great hope, actions of our students, who will be the future leaders of our world.

Yet, I know that my first-year students and I lead very busy lives. I respect the fact that they are at Union for an education, and I hope that the little kernel of knowledge that we produced together in our Preceptorial will remain with them through their time at Union, graduate and medical schools, and beyond, where they can contribute ethically and, by extension, politically to the world.

Looking back on the Preceptorial, we had some very good and engaging conversations about our roles as students and teacher, about the books we studied, about the functions of art, literature, spirituality, and politics, and ultimately, about our global community. Thanks to funding provided by the Rapaport Everyday Ethics Grant, I was able to provide students with important scholarly texts, relevant films, and a politico-ethical framework to grapple with books on genocides and human atrocities.

For those who are interested in the list of books and films that I purchased for the class or in conversations about the issues raised in this report, please feel free to contact me.

Bunkong Tuon, Assistant Professor
Department of English
807 Union St. Schenectady, NY 12308
Voicemail: 518-388-6044
Email: tuonb@union.edu