

## Course Title: Communicating Illness, Grief, and Loss:

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Institution: University of South Florida

Semester Taught: Fall 2009

**Course Description and Objectives:** Wounded Storytellers: Telling and Listening to Stories of Illness, Grief, Loss, Trauma, and Disruption

**General Orientation:** Human beings make sense of their experiences through hearing and telling stories. When illness, trauma, disruption, and loss occur, our stories of self are disrupted and new ones must be constructed or old ones revived. As Arthur Frank points out, we learn new stories by hearing ourselves tell others what happened to us, experiencing how they take in our stories, listening to their responses, and comparing our experience to the stories we know of others' illnesses, disruptions, and losses.

This class will encourage us to cultivate the ability to read and hear illness, loss, trauma, and disruption narratives within a dialectic of intimacy and distance. As we read, watch, hear, and discuss stories, we will move back and forth between being in the immediacy and concreteness of the story--the physical body, emotional experience, and cognitive details; to considering how a story relates to our own lives--experienced, imagined, or foretold; to examining the rhetorical and social aspects of the story as told; to analyzing cultural and structural patterns in illness and loss stories. We will concentrate on "thinking *with* stories," which as Frank explains, means to take the story as already complete, "to experience it affecting one's own life and to find in that effect a certain truth of one's life." Secondly, we will think *about* stories, which means to analyze their content and think about what they mean and what they can teach us. Illness and loss stories reveal particular experiences to readers; they also communicate details of everyday and extraordinary life, negotiations in romantic relationships, underpinnings of families, and the roles of institutions and culture. They can cut through the surface and probe deeply and honestly into important questions regarding meaning and living fulfilling lives. Thus, in dealing with trauma, we deal also with the whole of life in all its relational and cultural dimensions.

**Specific Focus:** This semester we will focus on the Holocaust, an extraordinary, senseless, tragic, and large-scale experience of suffering that is outside the bounds of "normal," one that is in so many ways "unspeakable," and even "unthinkable." We now live in the last era in which we can interact with first-hand witnesses of the Holocaust and document their lives and memories. Now in their eighties and nineties, these survivors have lived with memories of trauma for more than six decades. Experientially, they can be thought of as experts on long-term coping with trauma. We have a unique opportunity to work with the USF Libraries Holocaust and Genocide Center and the Florida Holocaust Museum to interview survivors of the Holocaust and hear and record their testimonies for future generations. These videotaped documentaries and transcripts will be digitalized in our library and in the Florida Holocaust Museum and be

accessible to the public and to researchers. We also will meet survivors who will attend and speak in our class.

In this class you will read personal narratives written by Holocaust survivors; sources that organize and present their experiences in grounded, chronological, and collective stories; commentaries on these experiences; and articles on the doing and meaning of oral histories. You will view films about different aspects of the Holocaust. You will take a tour of the Florida Holocaust Museum in St. Petersburg guided by an experienced docent. You will hear personal testimonies from speakers who themselves are Holocaust survivors. You will access and view interviews of survivors online at the Shoah Institute Archive for Holocaust Testimonies and you will examine other videotapes and transcripts as well.

All of this will prepare you to work with a group of two or three other students to conduct interviews with Holocaust survivors. With each survivor, one member of the group will conduct a pre-interview of about an hour and then, on a later date, a videotaped interview, which will last from 2-4 hours. The survivors may live in Tampa, St. Petersburg, or as far away as Sarasota. A camera technician will be available from the library to film the interviews. The interviewer must have a tape player (preferably digital) as a backup recording from which the group members will do the transcription or use the iPods from the library. You have free access to Express Scribe Transcribe Playback Software (<http://www.nch.com.au/scribe/>), which the library recommends, though you would need your own foot pedal. (I may be able to get one or two.) Your group will be required to conduct and transcribe two interviews, and then to write stories from them. Initial transcription takes at least five times the amount of time as the interview itself, and for many of you, it might take considerably longer. Then someone must audit/edit the initial transcription, which again will take several hours per hour of interview. At that point, we turn it over to the library to make final edits. Labor will be divided among group members with (most likely) only one of you doing the interviews and the others providing important support services.

I interviewed three survivors this summer and have been immersed in films and literature about the Holocaust, especially those dealing with personal testimony. This has been a profoundly meaningful experience, one that has deeply affected my life. I predict this will be an incredible and, for many of you, life changing experience. I will ask you to reflect on your own loss experiences and how this class and the stories you have heard here have impacted how you put you life together and deal with disruption. I promise to hold your hand and guide you the best I can through all aspects of the class. This material is emotionally exhausting and gut wrenching beyond words. You will see images and hear stories you didn't think possible and that you will never forget. You need to be sure you want to and are able to handle this kind of trauma. I feel there is much to be gained from grappling with the messy realities of the dark side of the human condition, but you must decide if you feel the same way. I also feel it is our responsibility as a civilized culture to preserve testimonies of these atrocious events and how people have coped and lived. I also feel it is necessary to try to understand in the best ways we can what happened in the Holocaust so that we can try to prevent this kind of tragedy from ever happening again,

and so we can, in our daily lives, stand up against what we believe to be morally wrong. I am honored to be a part of this process. The requirements—indeed just being in class—will be time consuming and energy draining. If you do not feel this is a journey you want to take for whatever reason, or if you do not feel you can meet all the requirements, please do not sign up for this class.

We likely will shed tears in this class. How could we not? But I also expect that we will build a compassionate community that is sensitive to each other's feelings, needs, loss experiences, life trials, and pain experienced in response to the suffering of others, and that the class will provide collective intellectual discussions and emotional support. Care will be taken that no one ever feels pressed to reveal what is not comfortable to discuss. However, if you are reticent to talk and write about your own illnesses and loss, and if others' stories of disruption and trauma make you uncomfortable, then this may not be the course you want to take (though it may be the one you most need).

Even with this content, I do not anticipate that this class to be all gloom and doom. I expect one of the outcomes to be that we become more aware of the importance of living as well and fully as possible in our day-to-day lives, which can be enhanced by reflecting on the past and future, viewing and analyzing our lives in relation to the lives of others and in the context of the larger world in which we live. To live fully requires us to acknowledge, yet not be overwhelmed by, the presence of death, loss, and disruption. To live fully requires hope, commitment, and engagement. Additionally, I think this kind of investigation can make us better human beings, able to role take and empathize with others' suffering and perhaps better understand our own. I gain strength from collectively confronting my demons; maybe you will too. I also hope that you will leave this class with a sense of personal narrative, testimony, oral life histories, and issues in gaining stories of others and sharing your own that will add to career possibilities as well as enhance your lives.

**Required Books:**

(Available at USF and Gray's Bookstores and online used, sometimes at less than ½ price. Check out Amazon.com and others.)

Frank, Arthur (1995). *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (Paperback, ISBN: 9780226259925.

Marienthal, Hal. (2005). *Good Germans: A Child's Fateful Journey through Hitler's Third Reich*. New York: iUniverse. (Paperback, ISBN. 9780595368594

Reiss, Johanna. (1972). *The Upstairs Room*. NY: HarperTrophy. (paperback. ISBN: 9780064403702)

Smith, Lyn (2005). *Remembering: Voices of the Holocaust*. New York: Carroll And Graf Publishers, (paperback. ISBN 9780786719228) (Please buy Carroll and Graf edition in 2007)

**Recommended:** Everyone will read selections from one of these books, to be assigned

Delbo, Charlotte. (1997) *Auschwitz and After*. Yale University Press, [ISBN 0-300-07057-8](#) (This book is not in the book store but is readily available.) (115 pp)

Frankl, Viktor. (1959). *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston: Beacon Press. (Paperback, ISBN 9780807014271) (pp. 1-93 and 135-165)

Levy, Primo (2008). *Survival in Auschwitz*, Classic House Books or Touchstone Reprint edition (September 1, 1995), (Also printed as *If This Is a Man*. (paperback. ISBN: 978-0979905285) (170 pp)

Wiesel, Elie (1972). *Night* from *The Night Trilogy*. New York: Hill and Wang. (paperback, ISBN 9780809073641) (133 pp)

All other readings will be on Blackboard, unless otherwise noted.

### **Course Opportunities:**

You will turn in two portfolios for this class. The first is an individual portfolio and the second is a group portfolio that you will do with two of three other students.

- 1. Individual Portfolio:** The following assignments and materials should be included in your individual portfolio on the assigned dates.
  - A. Your loss and trauma autobiography.** This should be 5-9 typed pages and should be turned in on **9/15**. (This is the only assignment that will be turned in before the whole portfolio is due.) I will read it and give feedback. I will be the only person who reads this and I will not share specifics with anyone else without asking your permission or unless I am legally required to do so. Once I have given you feedback, please put this assignment with my feedback on it in your portfolio to be turned in on 11/24 with the rest of the assignments that follow. The autobiography should include the following:
    1. A brief overview of your loss experiences broadly defined. Discuss how you view loss in general.
    2. A description of the different kinds of loss you have experienced, for example, death, illness, separation, failure, disappointment, identity, change and transition, traumatic experience, collective trauma, and other, with brief stories to illustrate.
    3. A section about how you coped with these loss experiences. What was the most difficult aspect to cope with? What coping mechanism did you use? What worked and what didn't?
    4. A section about where you are with all this now and where you'd like to be. For example, do you think about loss a great deal? Particular experiences? Do they interfere with your life, impact your relationships and sense of well-being? What helps you, reminds you, makes the experience worse or better? Do you talk to people about your loss experiences? Who? Does that help?
  - B. Summary of a Holocaust survivor interview.** Write a brief summary of an interview you watch on the USC Shoah Institute Foundation for Visual History and Education

(<http://vha.usc.edu/v600/login.aspx> or go to the library home page, click resources, then more resources, then Shoah). To access this website, you must connect from a computer on campus or one directly linked by remote to the university. You must register on the site. Sometimes it takes a few hours to access your chosen interview. This assignment should be 3-4 typed pages. Your written document can be brief, written as an outline or prompt for your presentation.

You will speak from this document in your class presentation of about 12-15 minutes each. The presentation should have three parts: Part 1: summary of the story; Part 2: response to the interview technique and; Part 3: your personal response to the interview. In the presentation, give a description of this person's experiences in the Holocaust and their life before and afterwards, as told in the interview. Then give your personal response to the story. Some questions to consider follow: How did hearing the story make you feel? What was the hardest thing to imagine and cope with for you? What did you learn about trauma and grief from this story? What did you learn about the Holocaust? Did hearing about this experience raise important questions about values and how to live your life? Tell how. Additionally, describe the interview technique and discuss how effective it was, the positives and negatives. These presentations will take place on **9/29 and 10/06**.

**C. Summary of your participation in the group book review.** Please write a brief summary of your participation in the preparation and presentation of the group book review and include any notes or handouts you used there. This should be 1-3 pages. Presentations of the book review should be 35-40 minutes per group and will take place on **11/10** (with perhaps one beginning on 11/03).

**D. Re-visioned loss story:** For your final paper, you will write a creative re-visioned loss story, the topic of which you will select from the events described in the loss autobiography you wrote in the beginning of the semester. You might tell a story about your own illness, disruption, or loss (broadly defined; for example, it might be about a relationship breakup, divorce, failure, or experience of betrayal), a caretaking experience, dealing with a death, or your experience with a public tragedy, such as Katrina or September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Select one episode/event/loss experience that you would like to think more about and that you are willing to present to the class. Video, movie excerpts, photography, or artwork may accompany the written project. Your work should be interesting and emotionally evocative. Try to make it lively, using scenes, dialogue, and vivid descriptions. The narrative should be about 5-7 pages. (For an example, see "There are Survivors").

Analysis: A 4-5 page analysis should accompany the creative section. In this analysis, discuss the meaning of your story and interpret the significance of your creative project to the study of disruption, loss, and illness. You should provide 1. a cultural analysis (for example, see Kleinman's response to "There are Survivors"); 2. an emotional/personal analysis (for example, see Bochner's response to "There are Survivors"); 3. a meta-

autoethnographic commentary that discusses how you have re-visioned your experience in light of the experiences of this semester and the writing of the story. For example, what did you learn about grief and loss and how it relates to your own experiences? Writing as healing? Coping? Your life? Refer to particular readings, presentations, interviews, discussions, and guest speakers when appropriate. The whole creative project should be between nine and twelve double-spaced typed pages total (12 font please).

**The entire individual portfolio is due on 11/24.** You will have 30 minutes to present from this project on 11/17-12/08.

- E. Group Portfolio:** The following materials should be included in each group portfolio:
- A. **Transcripts:** Interview transcripts and cds of the two interviews from your group. Also email me the audio files.
  - B. **Story summary:** A summary of the story of each of your interviewees (4-6 pages).
  - C. **Process summary:** This should include two parts. Part one: A general summary of the process your group went through—describe what happened, the pitfalls and successes, and what you might do differently, if you could do it all over. Part two: Include individual summaries of each person’s description of his or her own participation in the pre-interview/interview/transcription process. This will be different for all of you, depending on your particular role in this process. The general summary should be 4-6 pages and each individual summary should be 2-4 pages. Suggestion: One person might take charge, gather the individual summaries and then write the group summary.

**The completed group portfolio is due on 12/01.**

- F. Participation:** This course depends on active participation in class and groups, class presentations and discussions. Therefore, you must be able to attend class regularly, keep up with the reading and assignments, and come to class prepared to discuss what you have read and done. I will ask each of you to take the lead on one article or book during the semester. That means simply reading it thoroughly and coming to class prepared to take a significant part in the class discussion of that article that evening. I will, of course, assume that everyone in class has read and thought about the assignments. I occasionally might ask thought questions on the reading to encourage you to do it in time for class. Please turn off cell phones. If you bring laptops to class, please use them only for taking notes. Keep distractions to a minimum. You are required to take a tour at the Florida Holocaust Museum and participate in interviewing one or two survivors and/or transcribing interviews.

**Grading:**

This is an unusual class to grade. If it’s clear that you have done your part in all the group activities, come to class, done your presentations, handed in a complete portfolio and a creative story, thought about your own experiences, and read the assignments, you will most likely

receive an A or B in this class. The individual portfolio will count about 50% of your grade with the final paper counting most of that grade; the group portfolio about 40% percent of your grade. Participation--including attendance, presentations, and evidence of thoughtful responses to class readings and presentations--will count about 10%. But as you can see, all these activities and assignments are intertwined.

It will be difficult to get an "A" if your work is handed in late, if you take an incomplete (which I strongly discourage unless you have a serious documented medical emergency), if you miss more than two scheduled classes, or if you don't participate fully in the interviews and other group activities. But I also must say that I am not concerned that much about grades in this class, and instead I hope that we will all get passionately involved, help each other, pitch in where needed, do our part and more, deal with all the exigencies the best we can, and see this as an extraordinary opportunity. I'm going to be right beside you, interviewing and working away. I'd like to think we'll all get "A's" in this class, including me! I'm willing to work with you in any way I can and be flexible, given that we are working with other people and trying to do some very difficult tasks this semester.

**Tentative Schedule:** This may vary depending on speakers' schedules, our own interview schedules, and other exigencies.

**8/25:** Introduction to the syllabus and the USC Shoah Institute Foundation for Visual History and Education

Activity: In groups please discuss the meaning of the Mary Oliver poem, your reaction to it, and how your reactions connect to your hopes and fears.

Activity: Film: Children from the Abyss (60 minutes), from *Broken Silence* by Spielberg and Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation.

**9/1:** Survivors' experience before the war: Persecution and the search for refuge (Tori)

**Reading:** Smith, *Remembering* pp. xi-64

Marienthal, *The Good Germans*, pp. xi-248

History of the Holocaust, article to be found at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Holocaust](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Holocaust)

Activity: Film: "I Remember" (60 minutes), from *Broken Silence*

**9/8:** Wounded Storytellers: Lecture/Discussion with Arthur Bochner

**Reading:** Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, pp. xi-208.

DeSalvo (1999) *Writing as a Way of Healing*, Chapt. 2, "How Writing Can Help Us Heal," pp. 17-28

Ellis (1993) "There Are Survivors," pp. 712-730

**9/15:** Doing Interviews: Assign survivors

**Reading:** Shoah Interview Guide

[http://college.usc.edu/vhi/download/Interviewer\\_GuidelinesAugust10.pdf](http://college.usc.edu/vhi/download/Interviewer_GuidelinesAugust10.pdf)

DC Holocaust Museum Guide (excerpts to be assigned)

<http://www.ushmm.org/Archives/oralhist.pdf>

**Readings on oral histories:** Assmann (2006) "History, Memory, and the Genre of Testimony," *Poetics Today*, 27, 261-273; Kushner (2006) "Holocaust Testimony, Ethics, and the Problem of Representation," *Poetics Today*, 27, pp. 275-295; Golombisky, 2010, "Oral History," *Communication Research Methods in Postmodern Culture*, pp. 111-134; Greenspan and Bolkosky (2006) "When is an Interview an Interview? Notes from Listening to Holocaust Survivors," *Poetics Today*, 27, 431-449.

**\*\*Assignment: Turn in Loss and Trauma Autobiographies**

**9/22:** War and the Third Reich Begins

**Activity: Tour of Florida Holocaust Museum**, 55 Fifth Street South, St. Petersburg: Time: 1:00-4:00 p.m. (There will be a speaker, Phil Gans, at 1 and the tour starts at 2. )

(Please check directions but basically you want to look for exit 22 on left and merge into I-175, go to 6<sup>th</sup> St and turn left, then turn right on 1<sup>st</sup> Ave. S. Museum is immediately on the left and there is a parking lot just before the museum.) phone: 727-820-0100 We will try to organize transportation for this day. Make sure you are on time. It takes between 50-60 minutes to drive to the Museum from the University.

**Please remember to bring your USF ID or you will have to pay an admission fee. If you absolutely cannot attend this day, please plan another visit on your own.**

**Reading:** Smith, pp. 65-102

**\*\*Assignment:** Watch a Holocaust interview on USC Shoah Institute Foundation for Visual History and Education (<http://vha.usc.edu/v600/login.aspx>) from beginning to end. These are usually around 2-2 1/2 hours but may be longer (as much as four hours) or shorter. See <http://www.lib.usf.edu/shoah/> for directions. Remember you have to be on campus or connected to USF through a remote connection to access the site.

**9/29:** Narrative Inquiry in Health and Illness Panel

**Reading:** No reading so you have time to make contact with your survivors, meet in groups, and prepare for pre-interviews

**Activity:** We will hold class from 2-3 pm and then attend the Panel, from 3:30-5. During the first hour we will begin presentations of the interview summaries

**\*\*Presentation: Summary of interview you watched on the USC Shoah website due (12-15 minutes each)**

**10/6:** Becoming a Witness

**Reading:** no reading

**\*\*Presentation: Presentations of interview you watched on Shoah survivor (12-15 minutes each)**

**\*\*Assignment: Make contact with your survivor and prepare for pre-interview**

**10/13:** Telling and Listening (**Meet in Library Grace Allen Room, 4<sup>th</sup> Floor**)

**Reading:** Rosenthal (2003). "Healing Effects of Storytelling: On the Conditions of Curative Storytelling in the Context of Research and Counseling." *Qualitative Inquiry*, 9, 915-933;

Klempner (2000). "Navigating Life Review Interviews with Survivors of Trauma," *The Oral History Review*, 27, 67-83.

Baylor University Institute for Oral History Style Guide for Transcription.

[http://www3.baylor.edu/Oral\\_History/Styleguiderev.htm](http://www3.baylor.edu/Oral_History/Styleguiderev.htm)

Activity: We will watch a video of one of my interviews and view the transcripts

Activity: Library presentation on transcribing

**10/20:** Personal Narratives of The Hidden and the Rescuers; Kristallnacht and the Kindertransport

Activity: Sylvia Richmond, speaker

Activity: perhaps show some of *Anne Frank Remembered* or part of Lisl Schick's videotape, Li

**Reading:** Reiss, *The Upstairs Room*, pp. vii-196

**10/27:** Personal Narratives of The Ghettos and Resistance

**Reading:** Smith, 103-208

Speaker: Jerry Rawicki

**11/03:** Personal Narratives of The Camps, Death March, and Liberation:

**Reading:** Smith, 209-290

Activity: Holocaust speaker or videotape

Activity: One presentation of reports on books

**11/10:** Personal Narratives of Life in the Camps.

**Reading:** You will be assigned a portion of one of the four books on life in the concentration/death camps

**\*\*Presentations: Reports from groups on Delbo, Frankl, Levy, and Wiesel (40 minutes each)**

**11/17** The Aftermath: Coping with Grief

**Reading:** Smith: pp. 291-340

Excerpt from Hedtke, Lorraine and Winslade, John. *Re-membering Lives: Conversations with the Dying and the Bereaved*, Chapter One, pp. 1-15.

Selections from Attig, Thomas. *The Heart of Grief*,

Loving in Separation, pp. 39-41,

The Dance Continues in Memory, 153-158,

Loss and Spiritual Pain, 245-249,

Resilience, 257-262,

Grief is a Journey of the Heart, 281-286

Lama Surya Das (2003): *Letting Go of the Person You Used to Be: Lessons on Change, Loss, and Spiritual Transformation*, pp. 25-38.

Ellis: "Revisioning 'There Are Survivors,'" pp. 141-164 in Ellis (2009), *Revision*

Neumann, A. (1998). On Experience, Memory and Knowing: A Post-Holocaust (Auto)biography. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 425-442.

**\*\*Assignment: Begin Presentations**

**11/24: Presentations:** Telling Survivors' stories, Revisioning your own

**\*\*Assignment due: Your individual portfolio is due today.**

**12/1: Presentations (cont.)**

**\*\*Assignment due: Your group portfolios are due today.**

**12/8: Exam week: Presentations and Wrap Up**

"In Germany, they came first for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist;

And then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist;

And then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew;

And then . . . they came for me . . . and by that time there was no one left to speak up."

--Martin Niemöller (1892–1984)