
 Magazine / Nonviolence and Peace

TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST: WHY EDUCATION FOSTERS EMPATHY

Knowledge of the Holocaust can help diminish extremism.

BY REV. MARK E. FOWLER

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WE'D ALL LIKE to think that empathy is a primary motivator in our lives. The ability to understand and share the emotions of another feels like an intrinsically human characteristic. But what happens when society erodes our collective empathy in service of a very individualistic worldview; when the world asks us time and time again to gloss over our mistakes instead of learning from them? Who are we to each other when we stop asking questions about the impacts and consequences of our actions?

Recently the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany released the first-ever 50-state survey conducted on Holocaust knowledge among millennials and Generation Z in the U.S. The data is alarming.

More than 60 percent of survey respondents did not know that 6 million Jews were murdered during the Holocaust; nearly 50 percent could not name a single concentration or work camp, though there were more than 40,000 in operation during World War II; and more than 10 percent believed that Jews themselves caused the Holocaust.



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These statistics are terrifying. Knowledge increases our ability to treat one another with respect despite our differences. How do we move forward as a global society, especially in a country as diverse as the United States, when so many people lack such crucial information?

It's not just knowledge we're missing. We're also missing crucial demographic data about the survey respondents themselves, including their religious affiliation, educational attainment, and socio-economic class. Even without this demographic information, we know that the knowledge and understanding about this genocidal event among millennials and Gen Zers across the U.S. does not cut it. We need to do better.

Building knowledge about global atrocities such as the Holocaust can become the foundation for building empathy. Knowledge and acknowledgement of the Holocaust across faith communities allows us to share our tragedy and pain collectively. All religious communities have a responsibility to educate younger generations about the dynamics and impacts of supremacist ideologies in order to ensure respect for all traditions and for the histories of all people.

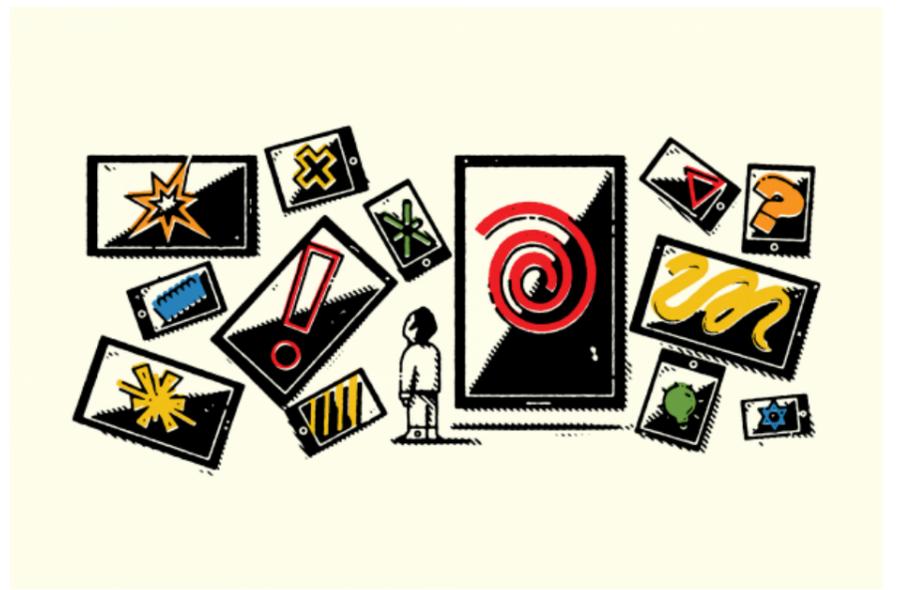


Illustration by Michael George Haddad

YOUNGER GENERATIONS ARE HUNGERING FOR THIS KNOWLEDGE.

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ALL RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO EDUCATE YOUNGER GENERATIONS ABOUT THE IMPACTS OF SUPREMACIST IDEOLOGIES.

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Younger generations are hungering for this knowledge. A hopeful light shone through all the survey findings: Sixty-four percent of all U.S. millennials and Gen Zers believe that Holocaust education should be compulsory in school. And 80 percent of all respondents believe that it's important to continue teaching about the Holocaust.

Our communities need to be intentional about what we're teaching, why we're teaching it, and if we're effectively communicating the lessons we intend. Teaching about the Holocaust and other genocidal events should be our "booster shot" to ensure that we never forget and to energize our communities to prevent such atrocities from ever happening again.

We have a collective moral responsibility to create a world that promotes justice and builds respect for all. History shows how weak we are when we refuse to learn from past mistakes or are blind to each other's humanity. Empathy doesn't cost a thing.



Rev. Mark E. Fowler

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