

In Blackwater Woods

Look, the trees
are turning
their own bodies
into pillars

of light,
are giving off the rich
fragrance of cinnamon
and fulfillment,

the long tapers
of cattails
are bursting and floating away over
the blue shoulders

of the ponds,
and every pond,
no matter what its
name is, is

nameless now.
Every year
everything
I have ever learned

in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side

is salvation,
whose meaning
none of us will ever know.
To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.

~ Mary Oliver ~(*American Primitive*)

Communicating Illness, Grief, and Loss
Witnessing Holocaust Survivor Testimonies and Revisioning Stories of Loss
Professor: Carolyn Ellis
COM. 4020-001
Fall 2009

Room: CPR 345 Time: Tues and Thurs: 11-12:15
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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.

I view illness, disruption, and loss as essential components of our humanity. This class will examine loss experiences of daily living, such as divorce and separation, illness and death, disappointment and disruption as normal (though painful) parts of life (while, of course, also preserving the unique quality of each one). This semester, however, I have chosen to concentrate on 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." That experience is the Holocaust.

Specific Focus: 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 this semester to learn about and from these survivors.

In this class you will read personal narratives written by Holocaust survivors and view films about different aspects of the Holocaust. You will be required to 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 listen to other videotapes as well.

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 enhance your lives.

Cautions: Be aware that some of the readings, films, and testimony in this class may be explicit accounts of personal topics such as raw emotions, mass destruction, deteriorating bodies, sexuality, intimacy, chronic illness, divorce, and death. **This class is for serious students willing to read, think, feel, empathize, and talk about difficult issues. To do well in this class, you must attend regularly, participate, write, and do all the reading!!! If you want an "easy" class, please stop reading now and go look elsewhere because you will not be happy here.**

Required Books:

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

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

Shames, Laurence and Peter Barton. 2003. *Not Fade Away: A Short Life Well-Lived*. New York: Perennial (HarperCollins) 0-06-073731

Texier, Catherine. 1998. *Breakup: The End of a Love Story*. New York: Doubleday 0-385-49523-4

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

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

Course Opportunities

- A. Portfolio:** You will put together a portfolio consisting of the following four assignments. These assignments go directly into your portfolio on the due date and the completed portfolio should be turned in to me on **11/05**. The exception is assignment 2 (your loss autobiography) which is first turned into me on **9/13** and then placed in your portfolio with my comments. Portfolio covers can be simple manila pocket folders or something similar. Each assignment should be typed with 12 point font and one inch margins.

1. **Assignment 1: Obituary:** Write and bring to class on **8/27** a two-three page obituary about yourself. Most newspaper obituaries are bland and unremarkable. Make yours lively and interesting, representing the way you would like people to remember you and your outstanding qualities. I encourage you to include a specific story or two.
2. **Assignment 2: Your loss autobiography.** This should be 4-6 typed pages and should be turned in on **9/8**. (This is the only assignment that will be turned in before the whole portfolio is due on 11/05.) 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. The autobiography should include the following:
 - a. A brief overview of your loss experiences broadly defined. Discuss how you view loss in general.
 - b. 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.
 - c. 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?
 - d. 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? Do you talk to people about your loss experiences? Who? Does that help?

NOTE: if you feel you have had no significant loss experiences, then I will give you an assignment in which you may interview family members about theirs. Talk to me and get permission before you do this alternate assignment.
3. **Assignment 3: 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. In the summary, give a description of this person's experiences in the Holocaust and their life before and afterwards, as told in the interview. This means you have to watch the whole interview. Then give your personal response to the story? How did it 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? Describe. This assignment should be finished and placed into your portfolio by **9/15**.
4. **Assignment 4: Reaction to speakers, films, tour, and readings:** Pick a. one speaker, b. one film or the Holocaust tour, plus c. one book from the class that touched your life in some way. Write a brief summary of each of the three and then your reaction. What was

it about this selection that touched your life? How did it connect to your life? How did you feel? What did you think? Did it make you think about living your life differently? If so, how? Did it reconfirm for you the way you want to live and what's important in living a good life? Explain. This assignment should be 4-5 typed pages and placed into your portfolio by **11/05**.

- B. 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 the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 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 4-5 pages. (For an example, see "There Are Survivors")

Analysis: A 2-3 page (or more) 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. What did you learn about grief and loss and how it relates to your own experiences? Writing as healing? Coping? Your life? How did this class and re-visioning this story affect how you see and interpret this experience? Be specific. Refer to particular readings, presentations, interviews, discussions, and guest speakers. Don't skim the surface; go deep and really think about this.

The whole creative project should be between six and eight double-spaced typed pages total (double-spaced and 12 font please). It is due on **11/17** in order to get extensive feedback and editing. No exceptions. If you do not desire extensive feedback and editing, you still must turn your paper in on **12/03**.

Keep a copy of everything you turn in. Unless we agree otherwise, this should be an original paper done solely for this class. It will be difficult to get an "A" if your portfolio and final paper are turned in late.

Presentation of Project: You will have about 10-12 minutes to present your re-visioned loss story in class, and you may select which parts of the paper you want to present. (You can only present about five pages in ten minutes.) Please feel free to be innovative in your presentation, using video, drama, music, props, role playing, other participants, or anything else you come up with. You may read from your paper, but I think it is also helpful to the audience to tell part of the story in a more informal way, so I encourage you to do that. We want to hear about your life, your experiences in the class, and what impact writing this story and taking this class has had on your life and feelings about grief and loss. These will be presented from **11/10-12/08**.

- C. Participation:** This course depends on participation and good conversation. Therefore,

you must be able to attend class regularly, keep up with the reading, and come to class prepared to discuss what you have read and experienced. If you are in class, I will assume that you have thoroughly read and thought about the assignments. You are expected to participate in class activities and assignments, such as reading your obituary to the class, presenting your work, and responding to presentations.

- D. Attendance:** I expect you to attend regularly. Participating irregularly will disrupt our community formed around bonds of trust, respect, and a desire to learn. To accommodate for illness, car trouble, family events, court appointments, work, religious holidays, and so on, you may miss two classes and still get an “A” in attendance. (Three misses is a “B” in attendance; four is a “C+”; five is a “C”; six is a “D”; more than six is an “F.”) These are misses FOR ANY REASON. Since I assume that you will not miss class without a good reason, I will not try to distinguish between excused and unexcused absences. Save your “free” misses for when you need them, especially for illness.

NOTE: If there is an **identified flu epidemic** in our community, I will be willing to relax these rules a bit for those who have the flu and can document it. In that case you will have to do an additional assignment on what you missed to get attendance credit. I do not want you coming to class if you are sick since you can spread your colds and flu to other students.

If you miss significant parts of five or more classes, I reserve the right to give you a “C” or lower in the class, no matter how well you do otherwise. Missing the Holocaust Museum Tour counts as two misses unless you attend at a later date on your own. You will then have to pay an admission fee.

Please do not come late and/or leave early, unless it is an emergency, or something you absolutely are unable to control. (Having trouble finding a parking spot does not fit that category!) Do not schedule other activities during class time! If you are more than 15 minutes late, I would rather you not come to class. Arriving late and leaving early is very interruptive, especially if students are presenting their stories. Likewise, no walking in and out of class unless it is absolutely necessary. (Answering a cell phone call that is not an emergency is not a necessity!) Everyone should be able to sit in class for seventy five minutes without leaving. Leaving early or arriving late will count as a partial absence. Attendance counts 10% of your grade.

Why do I have such stringent attendance requirements? I have found that with such sensitive and intimate topics as loss and grief, it is important to form a supportive community in the classroom. This does not happen when students attend sporadically and interrupt the dynamics of the classroom. So if you choose to be here, you have to be here all the time.

- E. Quizzes:** I will ask easy, short-answer questions on the assigned reading to encourage you to do the reading when scheduled. I will drop your lowest grade when I calculate your quiz scores, which essentially means you may miss one of these quizzes without grade penalty (save it for when you are ill). No make-ups will be given. I am very serious about your doing the reading assigned for this class. If there is an identified flu epidemic, we will discuss alternative assignments to quizzes. Quizzes will count 20% of your grade.

Grading:

Your grade will represent my appraisal of your performance and effort in the class. Your grade will consist of the following: Final stories (written and presented) will be 30%; the portfolio 30%; quizzes 20%; attendance 10%; and participation 10%.

I will be giving plus and minus grades. Late assignments will receive lowered grades. Please see the attendance policy above.

Class Policies:

University and Class Policies:

Availability: I will be available during class and office hours to address your concerns and to respond to inquiries about your papers and portfolios. I will be willing to read and respond to short portions of your papers in class or during my office hours, though I will provide detailed written critique of your portfolios or stories only when they are turned in for evaluation.

Disability: Any student with a disability is encouraged to meet with me privately during the first week of class to discuss accommodations. Each student must bring a current Memorandum of Accommodations from the Office of Student Disability Services which is a prerequisite for receiving accommodations. Accommodated examinations through the Office of Students Disability Services require two weeks notice. When possible, course documents will be made available in alternate format if requested in the student's Memorandum of Accommodations.

Religious Holidays: If you have a conflict with a scheduled class due to a religious holiday, you must inform me in writing during the first week of class so that we can make alternative arrangements for work you will miss. If you need to miss more than two classes for religious holidays, please see me.

Academic Integrity: For university guidelines, see www.ugs.usf.edu/catalogs/0405/adadap.thm.

Selling Class Notes: Students are not permitted to sell notes or tapes of class.

Cell Phones and Computers in Class: All cell phones must be turned off when you enter class and throughout the class. Do not text message, check, or play with cell phones in class. They should be put away during the entire class. If you are involved in a situation where you must be available for a call (and I consider these to be rare), please let me know before class and make sure the ringer is off. No headphones in class. I prefer no computers in class because I like to see your face rather than the back of your laptop. If you bring them, please turn them off and close them during class. This is not the time or place to be checking websites or e-mail. If I find you "playing" on the computer, I will ask you to leave it at home. Likewise, no reading of newspapers or other outside materials, or engaging in other distractions, such as passing notes. While I may not always point these things out, I will take points off your grade if you engage in disruptive activity.

Discussion: Please keep on topic in group discussions. Feel free to state your opinions and disagreements with me or other classmates. Some of the issues we will discuss can be volatile. We will practice respectful discourse and try to learn from difference as well as similarity of values and experience. Above all, be supportive of your classmates.

E-mail: Please make sure you receive e-mail on the account listed in blackboard. You will be responsible for any information I send to the class via e-mail on blackboard.

Cancelled Classes: Please check your e-mail and Blackboard for rescheduled classes or work assignments in case of cancelled class due to a hurricane or other community health emergency. In the event of an emergency, it may be necessary for USF to suspend normal operations. During this time, USF may opt to continue delivery of instruction through methods that include but are not limited to: Blackboard, Elluminate, Skype, and email messaging and/or an alternate schedule. It's the responsibility of the student to monitor Blackboard site for each class for course specific communication, and the main USF, College, and department websites, emails, and MoBull messages for important general information.

Tentative Schedule:

8/25: Introduction to Class and project.

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, and what you want to get out of this class.

8/27: Meet the students through their obituaries

Assignment: Write and bring to class today a two-three page obituary about you.

Activity: Read your obituary to class

Portfolio Assignment One: Your obituary should be placed in your portfolio as assignment one. See detailed description of all Portfolio Assignments starting on page four of the syllabus.

9/1: Telling our Stories and Writing as Healing

Reading: 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

Activity: Continue reading obituaries

9/3: Becoming Witnesses to Testimonies

Introduction to the Holocaust and the USC Shoah Institute Foundation for Visual History and Education (Chris and Tori)

Reading: History of the Holocaust, article to be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Holocaust

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

Reading: Frank (1995) *The Wounded Storyteller*, Chapt. 1, "When Bodies Need Voices," pp. 1-25.

Assignment: Turn in Loss and Trauma Autobiographies to Chris or Tori

Portfolio Assignment Two: When I return the assignment to you, place the Autobiography with my comments into your portfolio as assignment two

9/10: No formal class: You are required to 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 two 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.

Reading: none

9/15: Becoming Witnesses to Testimonies

Activity: Film, Children from the Abyss (60 Minutes)

Reading: none

Portfolio Assignment Three: You should write a summary of the story conveyed in the Shoah interview you watched, describe how it affected you, and place this writing as assignment three into your portfolio.

9/17: Becoming Witnesses to Testimonies

Activity: Discussion of film, Shoah interview, and the Holocaust in general

Reading: none

9/22: **Tour of Florida Holocaust Museum**, 55 Fifth Street South, St. Petersburg: Time: 11:00-2:00 (Tour starts at 11 and Phil Gans, the speaker, begins at 1.)

(Please check directions but basically you want to look for exit 22 on left and merge into I-175, go to 6th St and turn left, then turn right on 1st 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.

9/24: The End of Love: Divorce and Separation

Reading: Texier, Catherine. 1998. *Breakup: The End of a Love Story* (Pp. 1-79)

9/29: The End of Love: Divorce and Separation (cont.)

Reading: Texier (Pp. 80-159)

10/1: Attachment, Love, and Loss: Discussion and catch up

Reading: none

10/6: Critical Illness and Caregiving: Intimate Relationships

Activity: Movie: "Shadowlands" (VHS, 133 minutes)

Reading: none

10/8: Shadowlands: (cont)

Reading: Shames, Laurence and Peter Barton. (2003). *Not Fade Away: A Short Life Well Lived*. (pp. 1-115)

10/13: Living Fully/Dying Well: Discuss Shadowlands and *Not Fade Away*

Reading: Shames, Laurence and Peter Barton. *Not Fade Away: A Short Life Well Lived*. (pp. 116-224)

10/15: Living Fully/Dying Well: Discuss *Not Fade Away*

Reading: none

10/20: Back to the Holocaust: Personal Narratives of the Hidden and the Rescuers; Kristallnacht and the Kindertransport.

Speaker: Survivor: Sylvia Richmond

Reading: Reiss, Johanna. *The Upstairs Room*, pp. 1-94.

10/22: The Holocaust: Personal Narratives of the Hidden and the Rescuers; Kristallnacht and the Kindertransport (cont.) (Tori and Chris)

Activity: Anne Frank video

Reading: Reiss, *The Upstairs Room*, pp. 95-196.

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

Speaker: Survivor: Jerry Rawicki

Reading: none

10/29: Personal Narratives of Life in the Camps

Activity: Video on The Children

Reading: Elie Wiesel, *Night*, (pp. 5-133 in *The Night Trilogy*)

11/3: Personal Narratives of Life in the Camps

Speaker: to be announced

Reading: None

11/5: Revisioning and Coping with Grief:

Activity: Discussion of Wiesel and speaker

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

Portfolio Assignment Four: Reaction to speakers and readings. Pick one speaker, one film, and one book (or the Holocaust Tour) to respond to and include your response in your portfolio as assignment four.

Completed Portfolios Due: Please turn in by class time today!!!

11/10: Revisioning and Coping with Grief

Activity: One or two student presentations

Reading: Excerpt from Hedtke, Lorraine and Winslade, John, 2004, *Re-membering Lives: Conversations with the Dying and the Bereaved*, Chapter one, pp. 1-15.

Excerpts from Attig, Thomas. *The Heart of Grief*, 2000

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

11/12: No formal class (I'll be at a conference): This makes up for the extra time it took to go to the Holocaust Museum. Use this time to work on your final papers.

11/17: Revisioning and Coping With Loss: Your Stories

Activity: Presentations

Final papers due, if you want extensive editing and written feedback.

11/19: Presentations

11/24: Presentations

11/26 Thanksgiving Holiday

12/1: Presentations

12/3 Presentations

All final papers due.

12/8: Presentations and wrap up (scheduled for 10-12)

"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)