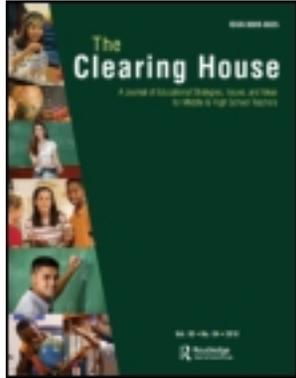


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### Terrible Knowledge and Tertiary Trauma, Part I: Japanese Nuclear Trauma and Resistance to the Atomic Bomb in the Classroom

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# Terrible Knowledge and Tertiary Trauma, Part I: Japanese Nuclear Trauma and Resistance to the Atomic Bomb in the Classroom

MARA MILLER

**Abstract:** This article discusses twelve reasons that we must teach about the 1945 American atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As with Holocaust studies, we must teach this material even though it is both emotionally and intellectually difficult—in spite of our feelings of repugnance and/or grief, and our concerns regarding students' potential distress ("tertiary trauma"). To handle such material effectively, we should keep in mind ten objectives: (1) to expand students' knowledge about the subject along with the victims' experience of it; (2) to develop teachers' awareness of and comfort with it; (3) to help students cope with this knowledge so they are not traumatized themselves; (4) to make sure students don't take refuge in callousness, inappropriate humor, blaming the victim, or despair; (5) to enable students to teach others about the event(s); (6) to enable students to use their increased knowledge and self-reflection individually and as part of the national dialogue; (7) to deepen and "complexify" the conversation on the bombings; (8) to develop supports for teachers and students throughout this process; (9) to reintegrate the objective with the subjective, recognizing that emotion may be appropriate to some learning; (10) to instigate a dialogue allowing teachers and students to continue to investigate this and related topics.

**Keywords:** tertiary trauma, atomic bombings, Japan, teaching strategies, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, community of learners

After many years of teaching college, I recently found myself interviewing for a job to teach middle school

social studies, during which I met with several students at the school. After we'd talked for half an hour, one suddenly became tentative as she asked a question she was clearly worried about. "How do you feel about teaching..." she hesitated, not quite sure how to phrase her concerns, "... sad stuff?"

"Sad stuff? What sort of things do you mean?"

It turned out she was referring to the Holocaust, which her class had studied a few weeks earlier. The students I was talking to were glad they had studied it, but it had been disturbing, and they had cried during the movies their teacher had shown. Some of the parents, and perhaps other teachers, had said this was inappropriate material for children—that they should be protected.

The students were disturbed by this adult response. They said they didn't want this kind of protection. They wanted to learn about their world.

The students' probing about our teaching this material raises serious issues that many of us face when teaching humanities, including social sciences and social studies. These issues arise in regard to not only the Holocaust but also other genocides and military and political decisions of many kinds, such as the 1945 atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and now to environmental studies as well. Indeed, the effects of atomic/nuclear power take on a new relevance with the March 2011 meltdown of the Fukushima nuclear power plant and the more recent threats of nuclear attack by North Korea.

I have taught about the Holocaust in university courses in philosophy and the history of modern art, as well as in seventh-grade social studies. But as a Japan specialist, I encounter these painful issues primarily

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when I teach about the atomic bombings of Japan—an area where until very recently there has been a large pedagogical silence. Seventy years after the bombing, Americans exhibit the same reluctance to address these issues as they did in the mid-1960s when Robert Jay Lifton (1967) wrote his landmark follow-up study of the psychological and social effects of the bombing, *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima* (Lifton and Mitchell 1995).

Academia is supposed to be devoted to objective knowledge and scholarship, but it is not much better than commercial media in its presentation of the bombings. Many college professors, even those who teach entire courses on the war in the Pacific, or on Japanese film about the war, avoid the matter.<sup>1</sup> This is despite superb English-language materials on the subject that have become available, such as the films *Black Rain*, directed by Shohei Imamura (Tachibana 1998) and the anime classic *Barefoot Gen* (Masaki 1983; Miller, in press), the websites of the Maruki Gallery (Maruki Gallery 1988) and other artists, John Treat's (1988, 1985) literary studies of Ibuse Masuji and others, and so on. This avoidance characterizes what Lifton (1982) termed "psychic numbing," the large-scale denial and avoidance of traumatic material by a whole society, and suggests the nearly overwhelming difficulty of the material. (The term has recently been expanded to include similar phenomena on an individual level [Feeny et al. 2000; Gregory 2003]). In addition, there is the generalized diminished sensitivity to the value of life, called "psychophysical numbing" (Slovic et al. 2013).

In part II of this article (in this issue), "Terrible Knowledge and Tertiary Trauma, Part II: Suggestions for Teaching about the Atomic Bombings, with Particular Attention to Middle School," I present some ideas about how to present this material in the classroom.

### Reasons for Keeping Silent

This silence has complex causes. Most obvious has been the difficulty of getting materials—a difficulty that arose originally from censorship by the American Occupation Forces in Japan—which was extended for many years due to continuing legal constraints, the lingering effects of the original censorship, and self-censorship (Braw 1991; Maclear 1999; author's personal experience). Fortunately, with the passage of time and the development of the Internet and digital videography, more and more materials are becoming available.

A second reason for avoiding this topic is the fact that some answers are still not available. Some may never be known or *knowable*. So it helps to have—or develop—some facility with John Keats' "negative capability;" that is, the ability to live with indecision, with open issues (bearing in mind that our task is different from the poet's; I do not suggest, as Keats did, that in our cultivation of negative capability we leave behind

facts—but only our normal stance in the world and our habitual commitments).<sup>2</sup> For no matter how certain our own stance may be, at least some of our student audience will not have reached this point (yet? perhaps). The issues are complex enough that they require more than a semester to understand, and some of them may require a lifetime—or many generations.

Yet in a sense these are the least of our problems. For aside from these practical considerations, there are political and ideological issues to face. Regarding the atomic bombings in particular, these conflicts may be seen as generational, with those who fought in World War II taking a very different view of the bombings than those who grew up under the threat of nuclear terror during the Cold War of the 1950s and 1960s. Our students, regardless of how distanced they may be from the war itself, are often close enough to their grandparents to have heard their stories and to share their sympathies, so their responses cannot simply be predicted by age. (In places like Honolulu, itself bombed by the Japanese, where the memory of the bombing of Pearl Harbor is kept fresh by rituals, journalism, and a museum, even young students may voice instantaneous judgments about how the Japanese "deserved" the bombings.) It is understandable, I suggest, if teachers are, therefore, reluctant to take on this ideological burden.

Yet the teaching of history (and art history, literary history, foreign relations, etc.) ought not to be held hostage to politics. We must find ways of handling in the classroom events that have justifications with which we disagree.

Analyzing the 50-year anniversary exhibition of the *Enola Gay* in another type of educational institution, the museum, Timothy W. Luke argues that the difficulties we face in education about the atomic bombings are not due solely to censorship and/or generational differences, but are part of the culture wars. The culture wars are, at bottom, moral, he argues, because they are about domination, and "domination is always well worth struggling to attain within any institutional structure inasmuch as it means getting power. . . . Most battles in these culture wars center on defining 'a way of life' with sufficient moral authority to assure everyone that 'life is as it should be'" (Luke 2002, 18). But here again, the fact that we cannot agree on the justification or interpretation of the bombings must not mean that we neglect to present the facts of the event and at least some of the complexities that surround it.

### The Issue of Trauma

Beyond the political and ideological issues and their moral complexities are the issues requiring "existential intelligence" (Gardner 2006). Traumatizing events (especially mass ones) present whole ranges of other complex moral problems replete with questions about

what individuals owe each other (as family members, as co-workers, as strangers), the limits of personal responsibility, what makes life worth living, the nature of humankind, and the usefulness of religion and education and government—all of which offer opportunities for great open-ended questions for “turning reluctant learners into inspired learners,” in Joseph Sanacore’s words (Sanacore 2008, 41). Even the youngest students will raise fundamental questions when confronted with such material—questions that in some cases even now have no definitive answers, despite decades of social science research and millennia of religious insights and teachings. They force us to deal with the importance of truth itself and the nature and value of knowledge,<sup>3</sup> which we ordinarily understand to be positive and empowering, but in these cases may at least seem to be neither. (As Bob Seger said in another context, “Wish I didn’t know now what I didn’t know then.”) Thomas Armstrong (2009), in his book *Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom*, and Ian J. McCoog (2010), in his article “The Existential Learner,” suggest we teach in ways that both develop and take advantage of students’ existential intelligence. Indeed, in some cases, rather than adding an “extra” requirement for already-burdened teachers, using students’ existential intelligence and their experience might make teaching easier and even appeal to “reluctant” learners (see Miller, in this issue).

Finally, an additional difficulty is that we teach these issues—if we do—in the context of our own personal repugnance (and sometimes grief, personal or more general) and in the face of students’ evident distress—a phenomenon I term “tertiary trauma.” (See the following section, “Tertiary Trauma.”) So we have some reason to worry about just getting through the classes ourselves. How are we to help the students? (There are answers to this, some of which are supplied in part II of this article, in this issue.) Holocaust studies has, of course, dealt successfully with many of these issues for years, although the ethical position of Holocaust studies in some respects may be simpler at least in the United States, given that the U.S. was not the primary perpetrator.

This article is part of a book I am writing about teaching what I call “terrible knowledge”: knowledge that is so appalling it seems to damage, rather than empower us. My research questions are why we too often avoid it, why we must not continue to avoid it, and how we can teach it. Although this article focuses on the atomic bombings, many traumatic issues can be very similar, so the implications are broader than the atomic bombings. While issues of uncertainty about the effects of atomic (now nuclear) weapons and accidents are specific to the physics of those bombs, the “carpet bombing” of Tokyo, Dresden (Walzer 1977), and other cities presents similar issues with regard to the bombings of masses of civilians.

The point is, we must teach these matters regardless of whether we have the scientific or historical or political or ethical “answers”; regardless of whether we in our classes can agree on them, or even understand them; regardless of how we feel about them, even though our teaching must take these difficulties into account.

Teaching (and ourselves first learning) a fact-based and accurate national or world history must not depend on (1) the outcome of that history, good or bad; (2) our feeling good about that history and/or its outcomes; or (3) our knowing all the answers to all the factual or value-based questions. Educators must become comfortable with some degree of uncertainty about them and persist in our teaching, because we must proceed without the solace of absolute knowledge.

The question is, how we can teach this terrible material without becoming disgusted and depressed and without allowing our students to become depressed as well?

### Tertiary Trauma

“Tertiary trauma” is a term I introduce to help deal conceptually, practically, and pedagogically with the ripple effects of trauma. The direct or primary victims of trauma are those who are themselves injured, physically or psychically.

What I term “secondary trauma” is the trauma, defined literally, undergone by those who are not primary victims but who are exposed to the terrible effects on the primary victims: witnesses, those who rescue or give medical treatment and other help (such as first responders), and those who are directly affected not by the traumatizing event itself but by what happens to the primary trauma victims (such as orphans). Secondary trauma victims may be affected deeply, as in the case of husbands or fathers of rape victims, or spouses of first responders (Fullerton and Ursano 1997), and the effects may last for years, as with a child who loses a parent through divorce or in an accident or attack (Dietrich 1989; Dietrich and Shabad 1989; Biller and Salter 1989; Lohr and Chethik 1989).

Tertiary trauma is experienced by someone exposed to the traumatizing events through the mediation of witnesses’ accounts, texts, photographs, and so on. Babette Rothschild groups secondary and tertiary trauma together under the rubric “vicarious trauma” (Rothschild and Rand 2006), but for pedagogical and philosophical purposes it is useful to separate them. I omit here two other groups studied in the context of the Holocaust and the 9/11 destruction of the World Trade Centers: first the young children and unborn children of mothers—and perhaps fathers—of victims who are not directly impacted themselves and who may never see or be told anything about what their parents suffered, but who nonetheless seem to suffer from the distorted caregiving of traumatized parents, and second, fetuses

and nursing infants who may be physically affected by the physiological changes in their mother's body due to stress, malnutrition, depression, and so on. These categories are obviously not mutually exclusive. As with primary and secondary trauma, the severity is determined by a complex of factors, some of which are situational, and not all of which are yet understood, even in medical cases, much less psychological ones.

In addition to the previously mentioned difficulties of finding appropriate materials, there are several problems here for educators arising from the several groups of stakeholders. First, we may find ourselves overwhelmed in learning or teaching about the traumatic events. (If you Google "atomic bombings" long enough—six or seven hits did it one day for me—the offerings begin to include helpful suggestions such as "people who search this topic also searched for 'depression' and 'symptoms of depression.'") Second, our students may find themselves overwhelmed by traumatic (and, arguably, traumatizing) images and accounts. This effect may self-replicate and magnify itself as other students respond to classmates' responses—either appropriately or inappropriately—and the teacher needs to take student reactions into account. Finally, as in the case I recounted previously, parents and even other teachers may criticize the exposure of students to unpleasant material; teachers need to be prepared for this.

This may all seem daunting, but there are many specific things we can do to ensure that this works well for students and that they are not injured by what transpires in the classroom or in their own research. (See part II of this article, this issue.) The important point is that none of this means that we are entitled to continue to avoid teaching about traumatic historic events. We all have a lot to learn from Holocaust studies in this regard.

### Why Teach This Terrible Knowledge? 12 Reasons

In light of the unpleasantness, difficulties, and risks, what can possibly justify forcing this knowledge on others? If the consequences are so dire, why should we teach this terrible knowledge? There are 12 compelling reasons.

1. One reason is that it is the truth, or part of the truth, part of human history, to which we have a commitment, like it or not.
2. "No more Hiroshimas" has been the rallying cry of the city of Hiroshima and supporters around the world and in Japan. We cannot truly understand Japanese politics or art or identity without recognizing the central role the atomic bombings play (Miller 2010).
3. It is a way of honoring the victims, both living and dead. There is an increasing interest in creating memorials for victims of disasters, and fascinating

theoretical work is being done in this regard. But even setting these new perspectives aside, caring for our dead is one of the first things that human beings began to do as we developed culture. It does not behoove us to ignore our dead.

4. For the survivors, it contributes to the resuscitation of their shattered dignity. (This is different from the previous point, in that it focuses on benefits to the victims, whereas the previous point addresses our ability to maintain and strengthen our own humanity.)
5. A lot of what we learn from any specific study is generalizable to other traumas, especially those that are large scale and/or technologically produced, government-sponsored, racially motivated or genocidal, and so on. Among other things, we learn what the survivors did that worked or didn't, and what human beings are capable of (in a positive sense).
6. Similarly, the skills students learn in studying such matters can be applied later to other studies (and conceivably to life), and can be transmitted to others. They deserve to know the heroism and failures of those under duress.
7. Teaching and learning about these events can allow us to face our own terror and horror, both of being victimized ourselves by nuclear warfare and accidents or by other disasters, and of recognizing our own potential to act badly.
8. Studying the bombings and other devastating events is necessary if we are to understand the world produced by the atomic bomb, including the international art world, the peace movements, and so on.
9. Such study allows us to reassert our own dignity and take our place in the chain of history without cowering in denial or self-delusion.
10. With accidents such as Chernobyl and Fukushima, our historical experience with atomic/nuclear power assumes contemporary relevance.
11. About 2,500 years ago, Plato reported that Socrates told us "the unexamined life is not worth living"—a recommendation that applies equally to society and individuals. Our students need to know about the actions of our country if they are to recognize the ways these actions have shaped their own society.
12. Unless we learn how to come to terms with such events, we proliferate a pattern of identifying only with winners, and avoid identifying with and understanding victims and their situations (which *always* do include some form of resistance).

### Objectives and Strategies in Teaching Terrible Knowledge

The importance of the project does not mean, however, that we can proceed following our usual pedagogical habits. While special methods and material are important, we need to be especially clear about our

objectives, our intentions, and the means we expect to use to achieve them. I believe the following are the necessary objectives in handling such material effectively.

1. Expand students' knowledge about the subject itself. Our definitions of the topic, however, should never overlook the victims' experience of it—and their resistance to it (at the time and afterward). (I owe my appreciation of the importance of teaching resistance along with "victimization" to the founders of Drew University's program in Holocaust/Genocide Studies, who graciously allowed me to sit in on their seminar. They stressed the point that one should never teach violence or victimization without also presenting the ways in which those hurt resisted what was being done—asserted themselves as agents in the face of their attempted objectification.)
2. Make your first objective the development of the students' own awareness of and comfort with (1) your own and your students' discomfort, (2) the necessity and usefulness of negative capability in this case, and (3) the differences between teaching this and other material.
3. Help students cope with this knowledge so they are not traumatized themselves, and don't get overwhelmed by guilt, revulsion, disgust, hopelessness, vicious judgments, or self-righteousness.
4. Make sure students don't take refuge in callousness, inappropriate humor, blaming the victim, or despair.
5. Enable students to teach others about the event(s), formally if they are preparing to be teachers, informally if not, but with whatever audiences are appropriate to them throughout their lives. (This is a continuing education project.)<sup>4</sup>
6. Foster students' ability to use their increased knowledge and self-reflection with others on an individual level and as part of the national dialogue.
7. Deepen and "complexify" the national and international conversation on the bombings.<sup>5</sup>
8. Develop supports for themselves and the students as they do all this. This subject matter requires a real "community of learners," within and outside the classroom.
9. Invent ways, or sets of ways, to reintegrate the objective with the subjective, and recognize that emotion may be appropriate, even essential, to the learning of some information.
10. Instigate a dialogue of a kind that will allow teachers—and students—to continue to investigate this and related topics on their own, with others, in print, in the classroom, and in private discussions. I write this, then, not within the typical models of scholarly publication, but as a form of what Nancy Hartsock and others call "transformational power," the kind of power that enables others to transform

themselves in such a way and to such an extent that they are empowered do what they themselves might want to do but have hitherto been unable or disinclined to do (Hartsock 1983; Wartenberg 1990).

These are complex objectives, and they differ significantly from much of the rest of our teaching. Specific tactics for these endeavors are in part II of this article (in this issue), the book, and some lesson plans I am developing. I will just mention, though, that I have found that the more explicit I am with my students about these difficulties, and about the objectives themselves, the better they rise to the occasion. And they need lots of time to process, in discussion, which may proceed more slowly than usual.

### Conclusion

This article barely scratches the surface of the difficulties we encounter, emotionally and intellectually, socially and politically, in teaching the "sad stuff." Teachers most often avoid it for reasons that are understandable, if unjustifiable. But we cannot pretend to be preparing our students for life in the 21st century if we cannot confront with them the complexities of our recent past. We must change our approach to teaching difficult material of all kinds, not only the Holocaust.

The objective is to help teachers figure out ways to generate some degree (quantitative) and level (qualitative) of understanding of what happened during and after the bombings, and what that means, sufficient that (1) we ourselves do not become tertiary victims, frozen, unable to respond; and (2) we are able to generate ways of dealing with these matters, for ourselves and with our students, so they can continue this process on their own, flexibly and in our various ways, varying both by each individual and in accordance with circumstances and by our own life histories. My accompanying article, "Terrible Knowledge and Tertiary Trauma, Part II: Suggestions for Teaching about the Atomic Bombings, with Particular Attention to Middle School" (this issue), explores some specific ways to do this.

### Acknowledgment

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internship program, and my students for their responses to my teaching this material. I presented the thesis of this article as an editorial in the *Honolulu Star-Advertiser* on August 8, 2012: "12 Reasons the Atomic Bombings of Japan Should Be Taught" (<http://www.staradvertiser.com/s?action=login&f=y>).

## Notes

1. The exceptions are those explicitly banded together to work on the issue, a fact that suggests the usefulness of community building in countering our resistance to and denial of this subject matter. Examples include the participants of the 2003 Hiroshima Peace Culture Institute (HPCI) Reconsidering Hiroshima/Nagasaki conference on teaching; contributors and curators of the *Scream Against the Sky* exhibition and catalog (Munroe 1987); and the members of PoNJA-Genkon (i.e., the post-1945 Japanese art discussion group Gendai Bijutsu Kondankai), which held its first symposium in April 2005, *Japanese Art Since 1945: The First PoNJA-GenKon Symposium* (proceedings and abstracts of panels on Fiction Disruption, Ephemeral in the 1960 "Art and the Growing Nation" have been published [Tomii 2005]). Essays include "Opening Remarks" by Ryan Holmberg; "Emperor Tomato Ketchup" by Terayama Shuji (trans.); "Some Young People" by Nagano Chiaki (trans.); "Cai Guo-Qiang on Guerilla Art: A Public Dialogue with Tomii," an excerpt from "Make Your Name Foreign" by Huang-chuan Yi; and "About PoNJA-GenKon and the Symposium" by Tomii Reiko with Tezuka. I have also heard that there is a research seminar at a college or university in the Pacific Northwest working on this topic, but so far have been unable to find it. I would appreciate readers' help in identifying this and other groups.
2. John Keats, in a letter of October 27, 1818, suggested that a poet, "possessing the power to eliminate his own personality, can take on the qualities of something else and write most effectively about it" (*Glossary of Poetic Terms*, by Ian Lancashire, Department of English, University of Toronto, 1999–2002, [http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/display\\_rpo/terminology.cfm#negative](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/display_rpo/terminology.cfm#negative)). "What quality [goes] to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (from his letter to his brothers, December 21, 1817, <http://www.mrbauld.com/negcap.html>).
3. I refer here to Roger Bohn's (1994, pp. 61–2) classic distinctions among data, information, and knowledge: "Data are what come directly from sensors, reporting on the measured level of some variable. Information is data that have been organized or given structure—that is, placed in context—and thus endowed with meaning. . . . Knowledge goes further; it allows the making of predictions, causal associations, or predictive decisions about what to do." These distinctions are especially important, as our teaching about the atomic bombings can easily bog down completely at the level of data or information.
4. The 2004 U.S. presidential election brought home to me the fact that most voters have not had a college education and are more than a bit at sea when it comes to dealing with the complexities of contemporary situations. I have since been explicitly encouraging my students to think of themselves as teachers and to recognize that they have been given the enormous benefit of several years learning *how*,

not what, to think, and should share this with the rest of the world for the rest of their lives, helping others develop these so-called liberal arts skills as well.

5. I realize that *complexify* is not a word. But I coin it, on the model of *simplify* and borrowing that word's somewhat positive connotation (we simplify when it is valuable or advisable to do so; otherwise we are being *simplistic*) in order to have a ready term for the valuable process of recognizing needed additional complexity. *Complicate* is too negative.

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