Facing History

2014-2015

**Scope and sequence of the Facing History course at BLS**

***Many of you may have friends who have taken a course called Facing History at other schools or you may have heard of an organization called Facing History and Ourselves that is located in Brookline. The course at Boston Latin began as a traditional Facing History course but has evolved into something rather different and unique to this school.***

***The Facing History course at Boston Latin was born out of the vision of Boston Latin alum, Sheldon Seevak ’46, who dreamed of a school where students would truly care about making a difference and making change in this world. Shelley had absolute faith in the ability and power of young people to right the world and, as a future alum of Boston Latin, he believed that you were all those people.***

***Facing History at Boston Latin is essentially a selective look at local to global history in the past century onward with a focus on discrimination, war, human rights, genocide, and issues of justice. A multidisciplinary course, Facing History here draws heavily on the fields of psychology, sociology, law, biology, literature, humanities, and the arts. Current events and related issues serve as the fulcrum of the course.***

* After we plunge into the year to consider the pivotal role of the bystander and we pause annually to acknowledge the anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attacks and their ramifications for the world and we briefly step into the question of the role of the bystander in history, we begin the year looking at the "ourselves" part of facing history and ourselves. How do we define and see our own identities? How do we categorize ourselves and others? Where do we fit in the bigger world? And what’s going on in that global world beyond Boston that we may or may not know much about?
* How do stereotypes and traditional beliefs affect our views of others? What are race, ethnicity, and gender and what do these have to do with identity? How does prejudice and discrimination develop? And what human rights are we guaranteed and by whom? What are we to do if those human rights are violated?
* We then address questions of why do people marginalize, separating themselves from one another? We look at extreme forms of this--from slavery and discrimination toward African-Americans, the treatment of native peoples, the treatment of Asians, Latinos, Muslims, homosexual/bisexual/transgendered people in this nation, and antisemitism to racism and homophobia. We look in our own backyard—from our cafeteria to the history of desegregation in our own city—from our schools to our sports teams—and then we look more nationally and globally.
* People played different roles in this: perpetrators, victims, bystanders, rescuers, resisters. Why? And what role does stereotyping and prejudice play in all of this? Propaganda played a key role in the encouragement of stereotyping, prejudice, and outright hatreds. We examine propaganda techniques generally in societies by examining language, film, art, the press, and education.
* Why is it that we ask these questions anyway? Why do basic human rights and essential notions of justice seem so obvious and yet so elusive? What are our basic human rights anyway? How are they guaranteed? How have they been violated in this nation as well as in other parts of the world? What is the role of our nation, of the United Nations, of other international organizations, of NGOs, of the International Court of Justice and international war crimes tribunals, etc.? What is our role as individual citizens of a nation and of the world? How have individuals sought to secure and guarantee human rights in places around the world? What good are international forms of justice?
* Identity and nationalism are intertwined. We define various "isms" and relate them to nationalism. We look at colonialism and how that altered identities and nationalisms in various parts of the world. We also ask key questions about nationalism--particularly our own. In the wake of the turbulent events of the past decade, we have been challenged to think about our own national identity--not only how we see ourselves but also how others see us. Recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan make these questions all the more urgent. Are we peacemakers or aggressors? Are we colonizers or the bearer of democratic values? Do we agree with the way others see us? How about our own sense of patriotism? As we face "patriotism and ourselves," do we consider how various members of our society feel they are embraced or marginalized within that society?
* We also examine notions of eugenics, so-called "race science" (in fact, a pseudo-science)--and efforts to measure intelligence, ability, and potential through questionable standard tests (including the SATs) beginning in the early twentieth century.
* We then begin looking at how genocide peculiarly defines the twentieth century. The twentieth century has been labeled by many historians as "the century of genocide." Not that genocide was invented in the past 100 years--indeed, there are many historical genocides that we will not study--but it was practiced in the modern era with an intensity that is important to identify and understand. Throughout the year, we will read parts of Samantha Power's brilliant Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *A Problem from Hell: America in the Age of Genocide*.
* We will look at two genocides that bookend the twentieth century: the Herero genocide of 1904-1905 and the Armenian genocide of 1915-1922/3. The latter was eclipsed during World War I by other pressing events on the world stage. In the meantime, millions of Armenians were slaughtered by the government of what is today Turkey. How? Why? And how does this genocide set the stage for the behavior of peoples in this century?
* World War I and its conclusion set the stage for much of the violence that has engulfed the world since. The 1919 Treaty of Versailles, in particular, building on the 1878 Treaty of Berlin, helped divide up the world among its most powerful nations and, in the case of Versailles, punished the losers of World War I. Those critical decisions merit our study because they are the background to most of the major conflicts that we will then explore.
* We will naturally spend some considerable time looking at the Holocaust and related events. The Holocaust is a worthy focus for us because it is the most well-documented and researched of the past century. Patterns of behavior that emerge during the period from 1933 to 1945 reappear in other genocides. To understand why the Holocaust in Europe happened, we retrace European history of the past two centuries. We look at the planting of the seeds for Nazism and why they took root in Germany, the Nazi party's emergence, the sequence of actions the Nazis took, and the transformation of daily life in the country from 1933 on.
* Using the Pulitzer Prize-winning volumes *Maus I* and *Maus II*, by cartoonist Art Spiegelman, we look in depth at the treatment of the Jews in Poland through the eyes of the son of concentration camp survivors. Moreover, as the violence in Europe escalated, we consider the responses of citizens of different countries to Nazi policies and actions. The efforts of targeted peoples to escape and the varying responses of others, including the United States, are explored, as are the intensified efforts to degrade and dehumanize peoples through ghettoization and killing squads. We look as well as how the Nazis methodically built killing centers--from euthanasia programs to gas chambers--and succeeded in murdering vast numbers of people on an unprecedented scale.
* What did bystanders do? Were they silent or did they become rescuers or resisters on some level? For the Holocaust, our investigation includes well-known examples of citizens like Oskar Schindler and the Danes as well as the people of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon and Chiune Sugihara. We look at German students who risked creating leaflets for their organization The White Rose, hoping to persuade fellow citizens of the immorality of Nazi policies. For the Rwandan genocide, we look at people like Romeo Dallaire and Paul Rusesabagina. For events such as the rape of Nanjing, we consider what people like John Rabe and Minnie Vautron did. At the same time, we grapple with the many, many individuals who, alas, did not act.
* Today, there are individuals and groups out there alleging that the Holocaust and other genocides never happened. We examine attempts to "revise" - in fact, to deny--the Holocaust and question methods and motives behind these views.
* While the course examines the Holocaust in Europe as its central case study, it is not the only episode in recent world history that we address. Ethnic cleansings, episodes of rampant discrimination, and genocides in Stalinist Russia, Guatemala, Chile, South Africa, Rwanda, Cambodia, Kosovo, Bosnia, Israel and Palestine (selectively studied in specific years) are explored in parallel fashion and we make an effort to understand why these actions continue to happen, despite the lessons of history.
* We turn as well to the Second World War in Asia. We look back at what transpired in China and Korea--focusing specifically on the rape of Nanjing and the so-called "comfort women" in China, Korea, and elsewhere in Asia. We focus as well on the Japanese-American internment camps in this country and American attitudes toward Asia and Japanese views of the United States. Finally, we will examine the U.S. decision to drop two atomic bombs on Japan, reading John Hersey’s 1946 classic study, *Hiroshima*. This, along with the bombings in Dresden, Hamburg, and throughout Germany, raised the technological stakes. How did the advent of the bomb change the nature of war? And what implications did the dropping of the bomb have and continue to have for human rights, justice, and reconciliation?
* We will consider the disturbing events that occurred in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s as well as Rwanda, site of the massive 1994 genocide of nearly 1 million people in 100 days. Both occurred in your lifetime and yet how much do we really understand about (a) what happened and (b) why these events took place? In many crucial ways, understanding these genocides forces us to understand the particular and complex nature of post-World War II global society as well as the base impulses of human beings, no matter how “advanced,” “evolved,” and “technologically sophisticated” we think we are.
* Ultimately, we look at the issue of judgment and reconciliation. What meaning do law and punishment have, given the magnitude of the crime of genocide? What role does reconciliation play in trying to create a society in the aftermath of such events? How do you commemorate the loss of individual lives? Memory is key here, and we discuss what to remember and, as Elie Wiesel reminds us, to "never forget."
* Genocide is the most extreme, but certainly not the sole expression of discrimination and marginalization. Toward the end of the course, we will return to the themes of the course's beginning and look at our own history and efforts to rid the world of genocide, discrimination, and "othering." We will look at the human rights movement, peace movements, and the effort at ensuring that that all peoples and all societies are held to a standard of justice based on a respect for human rights and human dignity. We will look at the United States' position with respect to these efforts in particular.
* As the final project in this course, each student, working alone or in a pair, create a monument or memorial to an issue, event, or person related to this course. These are presented and put on exhibition during the final month of the course.
* Finally, we conclude the course by asking what role we, as citizens, might play if we are to be active participants in social action in our communities. We look at what upstanders and activists have done and consider their work thoughtfully. Using a social justice lens, we ponder the essential question of “what can we do” to change the paradigms we have been exploring all year? From time to time throughout the year, various individuals who may be called “upstanders” will come in as guest speakers. We come up with specific, concrete ideas and proposals and we study in depth the actions of individuals who have indeed made a difference and taken steps to be active world citizens.
* Throughout the year, as in year's past, current events will be an integral part of this course and may well alter the nature of what we study during any particular year. Current events are woven into every aspect of this course as so much of what we study in the past is alive and well in the present. In 2014-2015, we will spend one day per week focusing squarely on current events related to the central themes in this course as a strategy to connect the past with the present on a regular, systematic basis.