The Seamless Monument

Barbara Pucci interviews Daniel Paley Ellison

Go to places that scare you.

—Phadampa Sangye

Although many might consider the history of mass destruction and genocide too difficult and disturbing a subject for young students, T&W writer-in-residence Daniel Paley Ellison believes that these subjects are fundamental to any education in the humanities. After a series of meditative retreats in Auschwitz and Hiroshima, he began to adapt his experiences to the classroom in an ongoing project with students and teachers at P.S. 116 in Manhattan. The Seamless Monument Project: A Living Laboratory of Poetry, Art, & Non-Violence uses historical conflict as a springboard to explore the roots of violence and the issues of identity and difference. The year-long course engages students directly with primary source materials, including photographs, paintings, poems, songs, documentaries, testimonials, letters from soldiers and survivors, museum visits, and visits to memorials in New York City and Washington, D.C. In the following interview, Paley Ellison discusses how his time in Poland and Japan has influenced his approach to educating children about the nature of suffering and the necessity for empathy.

Barbara Pucci: What made you want to use your experiences of meditating at Auschwitz and Hiroshima to create a body of artwork that could be used as a teaching tool?

Daniel Paley Ellison: To begin with, I am Jewish. My family in Poland was killed by the Poles before the Nazis even arrived, and my family in Hungary was sent to Auschwitz. Like many third-generation survivors, I grew up with this enormous silence and with a great deal of hatred of Germans and Poles. There was a real sense of separation. But, because my immediate family was secular, it was very unclear to me what exactly Jewish meant, why exactly my parents would boycott German products, and what it meant to come from a heritage and lineage of people who were—and continue to be—persecuted.

It was not until we moved from the city to a farm in the country (my parents decided to homestead and bought this rambling old farmhouse) that I actually experienced anti-semitism firsthand. Thirty years after the Holocaust, in upstate New York, far from Germany and Poland, we found ourselves being attacked by our neighbors because we were the only Jews in a country town. I grew up knowing fear.

In the early 1990s, when I started my Zen practice, I encountered an American Zen teacher named Bernie Glassman, who, as co-founder of the Peacemaker Community, was planning a trip to Auschwitz with an international, interfaith group of contemplative social activists. His vision—to bring wholeness to a place that represents absolute separation—was very appealing to me. That's how I decided to go, and since that time, I've returned on four different occasions.

BP: You speak of Auschwitz as a place that possesses a definitive aura. Do you believe that places retain their own spirit and that we can learn from simply being in those locations?

DPE: I don't know if Auschwitz has a spirit. I *do* know that to sit on the train tracks all day for a week is a powerful thing. The barbed wire is still there, the remains of the gas chambers, the gallows, and the killing wall. But also, so are the birch trees.

It's an actual place, but also over time, sitting every day, with your face against the wall, facing your own mind, you begin to realize that you have all sorts of different thoughts: cruel, sad, neutral, joyous thoughts. It doesn't feel quite so nice or comfortable. You begin to realize that we each have our own Auschwitz, inseparable from ourselves. So it's not just a historic thing; it is present in those parts of ourselves that we try to eliminate, that we try to pretend do not exist. The Seamless Monument Project concerns Auschwitz and any place—any part of ourselves—that is denied, suppressed, killed, neglected.

When I started the project I never thought of going to other places. But after I went to Poland a second time, I decided that I should go to other sites that have endured suffering: to talk to people in Hiroshima and watch the lan-terns float down the Otagawa River in Japan.

BP: What are you trying to teach people through the idea of seamlessness?

DPE: The Seamless Monument is a koan. Koans are teaching tools in Zen Buddhism; they strive to break down the paradoxes that we live in. Form and formlessness. The abstract and the real. The absolute and the relative.

The actual name for my project came from a story about a Zen teacher, Hui Chung, in China. He is dying, and Emperor Su Tsung asks him: "What will you need when you die?" The teacher points back at the Emperor and says: "Build a seamless monument for me." Build something without a seam. The one body of things: total interconnectedness. He is bouncing the question back to the Emperor, but the Emperor doesn't get it. And, of course, what the Emperor's really asking is: "What is death?"

In the classroom, my aim is to bring things close. For me, The Seamless Monument was sitting for eight hours every day at Auschwitz; for the students, it may be writing a poem from the point-of-view of Auschwitz or Hiroshima. On several occasions I have asked students to write a poem called "I, Hiroshima," which requires them to imagine that Hiroshima itself is their body.

from ***I, Hiroshima***

I did not see any houses
I did not see any trees
I did not see [...]
Walking through the streets of Hiroshima
I took a step through hell and returned.

—*Shelly Golan, 5th grade*

The Seamless Monument Project concerns Auschwitz and any place—any part of ourselves—that is denied, suppressed, killed, neglected.

from ***Shadows***

The tide blew beautiful down the shore.
People flew horrible down the road.

[...] Shadows of kids playing baseball.
Shadows running. Terrified speed. What is hot?

Teachers teaching students.
The bomb teaching Japan to surrender.

Crying. Cry. Happy the war is over.
Cry. Cry. Cry for the ones who died.

Young man, a boy, sells newspapers.
Making money. New world.
One young man.
Two legs.
One arm.

—*Aaron Gerowitz, 5th grade*

BP: You have said that your project is intended to explore the nature of suffering. How do you go about teaching so difficult a subject?

DPE: The nature of suffering comes from our attachments. I talk to the students about how we cling to things as if they were fixed, when in actuality everything transforms. Most of our suffering comes from this central denial. It also occurs when one person (or, in the case of Nazi Germany, a group) feels that it is right. The guards in Auschwitz had to keep their system closed and to cling to the idea that the people they were slaughtering were less than human.

I speak with candor to the students about fixity and its relationship to violence. What are our fixed ideas about the world? How do these ideas harm others and ourselves? Albert Einstein expresses it best when he says that each human being "experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separate from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of consciousness." And this delusion, he says, "is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and affection for a few persons nearest us."

I am particularly interested in awakening students to the violence that happens every day through acts of omission: acts of turning away, of not wanting to see homeless people on the street—those are all forms of violence. Who needs a course in miracles when you can have a course in empathy? Empathy means leaving out objectivity, which even scientists are foregoing because it doesn't truly exist. The empathy I want to teach with The Seamless Monument Project is the physical action of understanding—through writing, dialogue, and art.

BP: And you're finding that the kids are very willing and eager to explore these ideas? Do you ever find it frightening or depressing yourself?

DPE: A very good friend of mine calls the class my "Tour of Terror," and even my grandmother says: "Can't you just go to the Bahamas or something?" But I don't find it depressing. I feel this is what I've learned from being a Jew. Look at things, and question. Even as a secular Jew, there's this tradition of questioning everything. And I don't think going deeply into such things is a sign of depression.

As for the students, we each have our own thresholds for such things. My interest as a teacher is going to that edge and seeing what's there. What is it like there in that groundlessness?

There's a story I love very much. On a visit to a monastery in Tibet, a teacher and his attendants notice that there is a raging guard dog tied to the gate. As they get closer, the chain breaks and the dog comes bounding toward them. All of the teacher's attendants flee. But the teacher runs straight toward the dog as fast as he can. The dog, caught off guard, whimpers and runs away. That is the fearlessness I am interested in. Just meeting that fear.