Ahimsa Center K-12 Teacher Institute Lesson

Title: *Ahimsa through forgiveness: The Holocaust*

Lesson By: Elizabeth Flesh, Hoover High School, San Diego, CA

Grade Level/ Subject Areas: 10th grade ELA; also appropriate for 9-12 ELA/Humanities and students in academies of Visual and Performing Arts (maybe Psychology)

Duration of Lesson: 2 – 3 weeks

**California Content Standards for English Language Arts:**

*Reading Comprehension:* 2.4 Synthesize the content from several sources or works by a single author dealing with a single issue; paraphrase the ideas and connect them to other sources and related topics to demonstrate comprehension.

2.5 Extend ideas presented in primary or secondary sources through original analysis, evaluation, and elaboration.

*Writing Applications:* 2.1 Write biographical or autobiographical narratives or short stories.

**Lesson Abstract:**

Students read sections of Holocaust survivor, Simon Wiesenthal’s memoir, *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*. Upon completion of text, video and audio sources, students construct an understanding of forgiveness, as it relates to Gandhi and ahimsa. Students complete the unit by writing a letter to forgiveness to a person who has harmed them and create a forgiveness offering using the letter. Students may decide to give the offering to the person(s) they forgave.

**Note:** This lesson follows a unit on genocide and the Holocaust. Students have read various articles on different acts of genocide globally as well as Elie Wiesel’s memoir, *Night*. Students wrote a thematic essay on *Night*, discussing themes of Wiesel’s loss of faith, anger, perseverance and hope. This unit follows as a wrap up, allowing students to move beyond the weight of violence.

**Guiding Questions:**

1. Is there a context for forgiveness within the Holocaust experience?
2. Is there a need for us (all of us, not just Holocaust survivors or Jewish people) to provide forgiveness for Hitler, the Nazi soldiers, and the German bystanders who watched the attempted destruction of an entire race without stopping it?
3. Is it possible to learn how to forgive those who have harmed us through the lens of a Holocaust survivor?

**Content Essay**

Forgiveness is difficult and complex. Even though humans are meant to live in non-violent communion, when we are hurt we retract from community and become isolated. Finding the strength to forgive someone who has been a perpetrator of violence can seem debilitating.
Unfortunately, in our modern society, forgiveness – both the seeking and granting of – is often labeled as a weakness. If one forgives, the victim is allowing the perpetrator to be free from a wrong-doing he or she “deserves” to suffer. Many people believe the perpetrator cannot be forgiven for the pain he or she has caused humanity. A continued sense of isolation and mistrust grows from the inability to see the perpetrator with compassion, as another victim of another kind of trauma. Perhaps we do not believe people can change, and thus justice becomes the tangible response to a crime, while hatred is a valid and justified response to a criminal. As educators passionate in creating mindful, considerate humans in our classrooms and the world, there exists a wealth of information and lessons on forgiveness – as taught by spiritual leaders such as the Buddha, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, and Gandhi, to name a few, as well as humans who have endured horrific violence, and have come to a place of peace and release through this act of forgiveness. Through these teachings, our desire should be to authentically incorporate the messages into our daily existences, then to share with our students. As we learn forgiveness, we can teach forgiveness.

What if we could look at our experience on earth as deeply woven and connected with all living beings, just as our spiritual teachers have shared throughout existence? In the retelling of an ancient Buddhist parable, The Buddha and the Terrorist, the Buddha speaks of our connectivity and interdependence, proclaiming,

What you call your ‘individual personality’ or your particular soul did not drop from the sky. Take away your father and your mother, take away all the ancestral influences you have inherited, take away all the culture, language, and perceptions you have acquired: then what will be left of you? In this big picture, you carry within you the entire history of evolution as well as millions of years of the future to come, the entire network of relationships, the continuous dance of life; you are much much more than this small individual soul imprisoned in this flesh and blood personality. You are infinitely flowing energy, you are indivisible; and that is what makes you individual (Kumar 74).

Buddha speaks of this powerful, shared connection throughout the parable. One of his followers, Angulimala is on trial for the mass murder and terror on a region. He has since renounced his life as a murderer and has become a monk and follower of Buddha. Buddha’s forgiveness precedes both interaction with Angulimala and Angulimala’s confessions, leaving the village to argue the difficulty in forgiving a monster who destroys homes and families. However, there was a woman at the trial who had lost her husband, and whose baby had lost his father, at the hand of Angulimala. Her response to Angulimala’s confession was profound. She simply stated,

‘Your Majesty, on the one hand I wish to see Angulimala severely punished and made an example for others. On the other hand I think that Angulimala’s death will not bring my husband back to life. I ask myself, what will be the benefit of one more death, and what will I and my child gain from it?

‘Your Majesty, it may be true that Angulimala has genuinely changed, and I trust the sages when they say so. I see no sign of violence in his eyes. To ask for his death in this situation would be merely an act of revenge. I do not wish to be a part of it. I can imagine my husband saying that Angulimala’s example gives hope to those who have committed crimes and who are either languishing in jail
or who have been driven underground. Angulimala’s example shows that no one is beyond redemption’ (101-102).

Forgiveness not only means believing in hope for humanity, but also means allowing true healing to take place. The crimes cannot be undone, loved ones cannot be returned. Yet, internal peace is possible through forgiveness. This peace then is free to spread throughout our connected humanity. When Gandhi spoke of the necessity of practicing non-violence – *ahimsa*, he emphasized the importance of living *ahimsa* in its entirety. *Ahimsa* can only be lived in its entirety when one is able to practice non-violent feelings and actions against the self as well as others. When we believe we have been the victim of some capacity of violence, it is difficult to surrender violent thoughts – and possibly actions – on others. Our feelings of anger, resentment and mistrust do not allow us to practice *ahimsa*, as we are not capable of living in complete non-violence. Additionally, if we have wronged someone else and carry feelings of shame and guilt, we are perpetuating violent feelings towards the self. Gandhi’s teachings of *ahimsa* are directly connected to forgiveness, as a necessity towards oneness with self and others.

**Gandhi’s forgiveness and the issues of violence**

Gandhi’s message of forgiveness was woven into his messages of *ahimsa* and freedom – *swaraj*. When Gandhi was young, he stole some gold and felt shame. He wrote a confession letter to his father asking for forgiveness. His father read the letter, wept, and then tore the letter, in an act of resolution. The situation that had conflicted Gandhi and drove him to seek forgiveness was no longer in the eyes of his father. In the biography, *Gandhi: Pioneer of Nonviolent Social Change*, historian and professor, Dr. Tara Sethia documents,

“This act of unconditional forgiveness touched Gandhi deeply. It increased his respect for his father, just as the act of seeking forgiveness increased his father’s trust and affection for Gandhi. Reflecting on this incident several years later in his autobiography, Gandhi characterized it as his first ‘object lesson’ in *ahimsa* as love and forgiveness and noted that it had an enduring impact on him” (Sethia 13).

As difficult as this moment was for him to see the effects his actions had on his father, Gandhi’s courage to honestly and authentically seek forgiveness allowed a crucial step in the path towards *swaraj*. In spite of the pain his confession caused, his action of seeking forgiveness freed him from greater shame and preventing transparency towards his father. He acted in humility and thus created the space for his continued growth in Truth. Gandhi was Angulimala in this moment. While not on formal trial like *The Buddha and the Terrorist*, he had to find similar strength to face his father, an inner trial perhaps. He recognized his wrong doing and sought forgiveness from the person with whom he had been dishonest. Just like Angulimala, he stood in the potential of his father not forgiving him for his actions. However, his father, just like the woman at Angulimala’s trial, was able to release anger and resentment, trusting that this act of seeking forgiveness symbolized Gandhi’s transition to living honestly. As Angulimala learned, as Gandhi taught through his own experience, when one forgives, one allows *ahimsa* into the spirit, cultivating a stronger and more powerful spirit that then carries *ahimsa* through the world.

It seems as though this depth of forgiveness is uncommon, or unpopular in our society. While violence is as intense as ever, our interpretation and/or teaching of forgiveness seems diminished. As educators in the 21st century, violence is a common thread that exists between
us, our schools, our communities and our students. Our world is violent: we experience acts of violence on all media outlets reflecting the atrocities of nation against nation, man against man. We wrestle with comprehending the violence inflicted on school children, on an African American, high school boy walking home one night from the store, and increasing drone warfare. Throughout history, war has violated our senses and understandings, furthering our isolation and fear of “the other.” Young people consume this toxic energy on a daily basis as they attempt to interpret the world and their place in it. When we commit to teaching our students the events of atrocious violence, we often conclude the unit without resolution. This perpetuates fear and mistrust, planting seeds of future violence as the cycle continues. In the extended dialogue of violence and war, the concept and construct of forgiveness is often overlooked. However, forgiveness is a more powerful weapon than any waged in times of war. Forgiveness means to extend and expand, allowing a true healing to take shape, smoothing out pain. To forgive is not to forget, as His Holiest, the 14th Dalai Lama explains, “I believe one should forgive the person or persons who have committed atrocities against oneself and mankind. But this does not necessarily mean one should forget about the atrocities committed. In fact, one should be aware and remember these experiences so that efforts can be made to check the reoccurrence of such atrocities in the future” (qtd. in Wiesenthal 129).

The Holocaust and Simon Wisenthal’s Question of Forgiveness
One of the most profoundly violent acts on humanity – most certainly in the 20th century – was the Holocaust. Scores of history texts have been written documenting detail upon detail of this most profound crime against humanity. Most humans, upon reading history texts and Holocaust survival accounts, feel immense pity and sorrow for the loss of upwards of 6 million Jewish people. Additionally, humanity can easily feel intense anger and hatred towards Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party. But what about forgiveness? Is there a context for forgiveness within the Holocaust experience? Is there a need for us (all of us, not just Holocaust survivors or Jewish people) to provide forgiveness for Hitler, the Nazi soldiers, and the German bystanders who watched the attempted destruction of an entire race without stopping it? One can argue the entire world facilitated the Holocaust as we collectively stood on the sidelines. In Hind Swaraj, Gandhi states, “the force of love and pity is infinitely greater than the force of arms. There is harm in the exercise of brute force, never in that of pity” (qtd. in Parel 82). In this case, is pity enough, or is forgiveness essential in order to heal the wounds of the Holocaust and through the attainment of swaraj, remove the potential for another tragic event in the future? Finally, is it possible to learn how to forgive those who have harmed us through the lens of a Holocaust survivor?

The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness, by Simon Wiesenthal, is a brief yet profound autobiographical soul-search for the meaning of forgiveness. Wiesenthal was a prisoner of the Holocaust in a Polish concentration camp when his work group was taken to a German hospital outside the camp. A nurse spotted Wiesenthal and took him with her to a patient’s room. The patient, a German SS soldier, was dying of shrapnel wounds. As the 21-year-old former member of the Hitler Youth lie waiting for death, he sought forgiveness for committing brutal acts of violence against the Jews. Fate desired Wiesenthal to be the one to encounter this young man, and was thus faced with the excruciating decision to forgive. Throughout this memoir, the reader is held in agony alongside Wiesenthal. The dying soldier’s
description of violence is painful, and one can feel a physical and emotional response. When the soldier pleads forgiveness, both reader and Wiesenthal are dumbfounded. Wiesenthal is overcome with anger, hatred, pain, sorrow, grief – difficult for even the most empathetic to understand this unbelievable request.

Ultimately, he leaves the hospital room silent, without having said a word to the young man, without reconciliation, without resolution. Wiesenthal is haunted by the soldier’s request for years. He sought advice from his friend in the camp, Josek, who responded that Wiesenthal could not have forgiven on behalf of the entire Jewish race, but only for a crime committed against him. Unsatisfied with this response, Wiesenthal interrupts, “But aren’t we a single community with the same destiny, and one must answer for the other” (Wiesenthal 65). After the war, he visits the soldier’s mother if only to get a glimpse of who this boy truly was, before the pain and separation of war and violence took hold. Wiesenthal concludes his memoir stating, “The crux of the matter is, of course, the question of forgiveness. Forgetting is something that time alone takes care of; but forgiveness is an act of volition, and only the sufferer is qualified to make the decision” (Wiesenthal 97-98). His final words are a question he turns to the reader, “what would I have done” (98)?

The second half of The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness is a symposium of 53 contemporary world leaders, spiritual leaders, authors, educators, etc. all responding to Wiesenthal’s final question. Back and forth, the conversation travels from forgiveness to not. For some of the world’s most revered intellects, this question remains enormous and extremely difficult to answer. Is there a response to Wiesenthal’s question that transcends fear and judgment? Gandhi would argue yes, there is power in recognizing our interconnectedness, as each one of us is our brother and sister’s keeper. In the documentary, I Am, Tom Shadyac conducts extensive interviews in an attempt to understand “what is wrong with the world, and what can we do about it.” Several psychologists, medical doctors, philosophers and historians come to the resounding conclusion that we are born to respect, to love others and to live in community. They assert that empathy and compassion are strong qualities within us, proving that we work better in community. Additionally, research shows that everything we know is connected on an unseen level and all of life is completely interwoven. When there is a great oppression of people, like the Holocaust, every single living creature on the planet is affected. In some capacity, it is easy to disregard humanity when responding to violence. However, Gandhi teaches us that we cannot respond to violence with more violence. Choosing to not forgive someone, regardless of the crime they have committed, is choosing to maintain a violent divide within life. Additionally, if we are all connected, we are all responsible to forgive the crimes of those before us, as those crimes before us have influenced and shaped our understanding of the world and humanity, and we can create a new influence of non-violence and reconciliation. Archbishop Desmond Tutu states, “It is clear that if we look only to retributive justice, then we could just as well close up shop. Forgiveness is not some nebulous thing. It is practical politics. Without forgiveness, there is no future” (qtd. in Wiesenthal 268). In order for us to begin living ahimsa, we must choose forgiveness.

In conclusion, the Buddha, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, Gandhi and Simon Wiesenthal are few of many teachers and leaders who confirm through their accessibility of materials and conviction of message: it is possible to teach forgiveness of this depth and honesty in classrooms.
Educators are capable to guide students through lessons of deep violence to provided opportunities for authentic forgiveness. There can be a validation of the hurt and pain students experience and witness and, simultaneously, a continued path illuminated towards forgiveness. With these teachings, it is possible for both teacher and child to transform and heal. In order to teach forgiveness, it must be practiced, and this journey of practice is open to all.

**Bibliography:**

**Teaching Activities:**
1. Teacher shares the parable, *The Buddha and the Terrorist*, giving a synopsis of the text.
   Teacher reads aloud the trial and the example of forgiveness shown to Angulimala
2. Class discussion on forgiveness: What is it? When is it appropriate to forgive? When is it not? How do we forgive? Who benefits from forgiveness?
3. Students define *ahimsa*, create concept maps
4. Students break into groups and read aloud sections of *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*. Students share with small group their individual responses to Wiesenthal’s question, then share out to class
5. Watch Ted talk and Alice Herz’s story; listen to Moth talk
6. Read examples of forgiveness from the *Forgiveness Project*; jigsaw stories and present
7. Watch *Long Night’s Journey Into Day*, discuss forgiveness and the TRC’s role in healing
8. Students write a letter of forgiveness to someone who has harmed them. This does not need to be a person they are still in contact with, nor does the person need to be alive, in the United States, etc. the person must, however, be real. Once students draft letter, tear up the letter, keep the tearings
9. Students will create papier-mâché bowls as their forgiveness offerings. In addition to using newspaper strips (which may be significant as the plethora of violence in the media will be documented on the bowls), the students will include their torn letters. As a final act of release, students can choose to give their forgiveness offerings to the person in mind (if able).
10. Students free write their process of forgiveness and can share if they choose, their experience with the forgiveness offering
Materials Needed:

- Computer and internet access:
  - Youtube.com: Alice Herz Somer: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fqeyWaeAQY&list=FLtgAevg7aAsaO2CuwcPHMJw&index=1
- Netbooks for the Forgiveness Project stories
- Documentary, *Long Night’s Journey Into Day*
- Plastic bags for letter tearings
- Plastic bowls
- Recycled newspapers
- Glue mixture
- Brushes or wooden sticks
- Paper towels
- Free write prompt