

## *A Simple Invitation*

When the phone rings one January morning in 1996, I have no inkling that the invitation I am about to accept will be the beginning of an odyssey. I hear only a voice at the other end of the line proposing a compelling piece of work.

Dr. Susan Weil, who coordinates a cross-cultural literacy program at The City College of The City University of New York, is inviting me to spend a few weeks in the summer teaching in Austria. There are eleven students, Susan tells me, two Americans and nine Austrians. All but one are practicing teachers of English. All are enrolled in a master's degree program in language and literacy at City College. But while the teachers receive their degrees from The City College of The City University of New York, they never actually attend classes in the States. The two- to three-week intensive courses are taught in Austria—in this case, Innsbruck—by City University faculty.

Quickly I take stock of my life. I am an English professor whose specialty is the teaching of writing. I've led teacher training institutes for over twenty years. Before I had children, I traveled every summer. But for the past twelve years, since the birth of my daughter, Sara, and twin sons, Josh and Sam, I've stayed close to home. The trip I make most frequently is to the pediatrician's office.

I'm tempted to accept. I have always dreamed of combining teaching with traveling. Working with teachers for whom English is a second language intrigues me. I am certain my husband will understand, and we have a babysitter we trust. I say yes on the spot.

It is only after I put down the phone that doubts begin to creep in. What have I done? It's not the teaching that troubles me; it's the place. For as much as I yearn to travel, Germany is the last place on Earth I want to go. Austria is a close second.



On June 28, I am sitting in the plane, imagining two and a half weeks without kids, dogs, phone calls, or car pools. Amazing—I have the next nine hours to myself, to read, review my plans for the course, or just sit there and not do a thing.

As I settle back in my seat, my attention is drawn to the large screen at the front of the cabin where every few minutes a map charting our progress appears. The major cities are labeled first in German, then in English.

Without warning, I hear the voice of my mother: *We're Jews. If we had been born there instead of here, we would have been herded into cattle cars and sent to the camps.*

Images of the Holocaust come unbidden: photographs of emaciated prisoners in striped pajamas, their agonies clearly visible in their hollow eyes and haggard faces; film clips of Hitler, right arm raised in the *Sieg Heil*; the worn pages of a novel I cherished, Meyer Levin's *Eva*, the story of a Jewish girl who tried to survive by "passing," living in Nazi-occupied Austria under an assumed name, pretending to be Christian. At thirteen, I was gripped by her courage and imagined myself in her place, spending hours in my bedroom practicing the sign of the cross, genuflecting, yearning to be safe—and Gentile, like the popular girls in my junior high school. A question that haunted me then: If I had been born there, would I have survived? A question that haunts me still.

Suddenly, my face feels hot; sweat breaks out on my forehead, gathers in my armpits. I am an adolescent awash in fear, assaulted by language and all it calls up in me. The Holocaust. The gas chambers. Auschwitz. Treblinka. Tears sting my eyes, slide down my cheeks. I don't want to be hated or hunted. I don't want to be counted among the dead or despised. I hate Hitler with all the fury a thirteen-year-old can muster. I hate the Germans. I hate the entire world for allowing this to happen. I want to scream, to stamp my feet in protest, to turn my back on all of it: atrocity, history, Judaism.

Taking long, slow breaths, I tell myself to calm down. Reaching for my bag, I find a tissue, wipe my eyes, and put on my sunglasses.

I glance sideways, hoping no one has noticed. Why have I agreed to teach in Austria?

The answers come quickly: I've been hired to do a job I love. The Holocaust ended over fifty years ago. I'm an adult, not a thirteen-year-old. I miss traveling. Why should I refuse? After all, Austrian teachers shouldn't be different from other teachers.

But then, once again, I hear my mother's voice. *No matter what they say or do, no matter how stunning their accomplishments in art, music, and philosophy, within every German, every Austrian, lies a Nazi in disguise.*



On June 29, I arrive at the airport in Innsbruck and am greeted by Tanja Westfall, the coordinator of the Innsbruck courses and one of the two American participants in the course. A bubbly, vivacious woman in her late twenties, with thick, brown hair and a big smile, Tanja has invited me to stay with her in the tiny village of Hatting, a short train ride from the city and the University of Innsbruck, where the courses are to be held.

As I deplane, all I can do is stare, eyes wide open, mouth agape. The snowcapped mountains that rise so steeply seem to protect the order and calm of all that lies below: the churches with their steeples rising above the towns; the towns, almost toy-like in their precision, surrounded by fields in nuanced shades of green, sloping ever higher; on each slope, sturdy wooden houses in brown and ocher; on each house, window boxes overflowing with geraniums. I had no idea Innsbruck was so beautiful. Only later do I realize that for a moment I have forgotten this exquisite land once harbored unspeakable horrors.

After we collect my luggage, Tanja drives us to her flat. While she is making lunch, I unpack and settle in. Joining her in the kitchen, I glance out the window. I notice her neighbor, an old man, working in the garden next door. He is wearing blue overalls and a cap, using a scythe to cut the grass. Raising both arms up above his head, he brings them down swiftly, neatly cutting through the dry yellow weeds; then piling them to one side, he takes a step and begins again. I imagine such a scene has repeated itself for centuries: peasants in the fields, cutting hay, storing it for winter as feed for the animals. A simple world, bucolic, peaceful, timeless.



But suddenly I wonder if he was a Nazi. Maybe he still is. What would he say if he knew a Jew was sleeping in the next house? And then, just as suddenly, I turn from the window.



On July 1, the first day of class, Tanja and I arrive early. The room is airy with large windows facing the Inn River. The mountains and their snow peaks rise in the distance. The tables and chairs are arranged in rows with a lectern at the front. I ask Tanja to help me move the furniture. This is not the way I want to begin. We push the lectern into a corner and rearrange the tables into one large square. Then we place twelve chairs around the perimeter. This will be a collaborative endeavor; we will be speaking to and with one another. I will lead the conversation, but I won't dominate it.

Soon the teachers, my students, arrive. We begin formally, with handshakes and introductions. Thomas, the other American student, has a round face, kind eyes, and an arresting dark beard. Hans, fair-haired and portly, is the only other man; his wife, Martina, trim and businesslike, is also in the course. Both appear to be in their forties. Andrea, with curly red hair and bright green eyes, is in her twenties. The youngest member of the group, she has brought some bread and cheese for our first day. The eldest, Hilde, a large, soft-spoken woman in her fifties, has brought bottles of apple juice and club soda to mix the popular *Apfelsaft gespritzt*.

Tanja introduces me to several women with blond hair: Margret, big-boned with a strong, purposeful handshake; Ursula, willowy and graceful, with a shy smile; and Christa whose face causes me to gasp inwardly. With hair the color of straw, clear blue eyes, a perfectly straight nose, and prominent cheekbones, Christa looks to me like a member of Hitler's master race, an Aryan beauty.

The last two to arrive are Astrid, an attractive woman whose long white hair is pulled back in a bun, and Ingrid, thin and birdlike, with sharp eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses. Astrid, in her late forties, has a daughter who plays cello with the Vienna Philharmonic; Ingrid, turning thirty, has two young children at home.

Margret and Andrea, I soon discover, have each already obtained one master's degree and teach in prestigious *Gymnasien*, Austrian high schools for college-bound students. Christa teaches at a private Catholic school for girls. Tanja and Hans both teach at the

university. Thomas works in a language immersion program for adults. The others all work in the *Hauptschule* system, roughly equivalent to the vocational tracks in American schools.

I am to teach two graduate courses—one on the teaching of writing, the other on the teaching of literature. Rather than lecture, I invite my students to join me in a range of activities and then to reflect with me on what they are learning. When it comes to reading and writing, I know of no other approach that makes as much sense.

We begin that first night, simply enough, by writing about our experiences with writing. I write along with the group, then invite people to read aloud all or a part of what they have written. I respond to each person's draft by carefully rephrasing what I hear, focusing on the theme of each story. As we go around the room, we hear a range of increasingly sad tales.

Hans, brash and bold, vividly recounts the harsh criticism he received. "I stopped writing," he reveals, smiling ruefully, a shock of blond hair falling over his eyes, "I was so ashamed of my errors."

Margret recalls that at the university "writing was not about our ideas." Her chin juts out as she speaks with some anger: "Your writing had to be perfect, or you felt you were stupid."

Most of these teachers admit that they dislike writing, don't do it very often, and associate it with struggle and pain. The most common denominator: feeling judged and falling short.

"Isn't there another way?" Thomas implores, his dark eyes serious and brooding.

"There is," I promise. "There are ways to make writing come alive so that each person's voice counts. So that teaching is about much more than what students do wrong. We will explore this way of teaching together over the next few weeks. Tonight was just a start, but can you already begin to see what's different here?"

The teachers spontaneously rap their knuckles on the tabletop. I flinch. "Did I say something wrong?"

Hans quickly explains, smiling broadly, "That's our way of saying thanks. It was a great beginning."

On the drive home, Tanja tells me this is high praise.



At our second meeting on July 2, everyone is a bit more familiar. Smiles are wider, handshakes and hellos more heartfelt. Christa



places a vase of homegrown flowers on the snack table. Andrea, chatty and effervescent, adds a platter of *Speck mit Brot*, explaining to me that thin slices of ham and hardy bread are an Austrian staple; Margret brings a bowl of strawberries. Hilde, once again, mixes *Apfelsaft gespritzt*.

I begin a discussion of one of the texts I had assigned, *A Letter to Teachers* by Vito Perrone, an educator who invites teachers to consider the meaning and purpose of their work. "What do we most want our students to come to understand as a result of their schooling?" Perrone asks.<sup>1</sup> He then articulates a clear and hopeful vision of what is possible in classrooms:

If we saw the development of active inquirers as a major goal, much that now exists—workbooks and textbooks, predetermined curriculum, reductionism, teaching to tests—would, I believe, begin to fade. Teachers would be free to address the world, to make living in the world a larger part of the curriculum.<sup>2</sup>

It was statements like these that I expected to discuss with the Austrian teachers.

But they are struck by something else Perrone has written, something so obvious to me I have never before stopped to examine it: "Education at its best is first and foremost a moral and intellectual endeavor."

Andrea, her green eyes clouded, is bewildered. "What does this mean?" she asks. "Do you honestly think education is connected to morality?"

I do, I think to myself. But I want to move slowly here. I want to understand why Andrea is asking this question and to discover if her bewilderment is shared by others.

"Do most of you have this question?" I ask, looking around the room, examining their faces. Several people nod.

I suggest that they break into small groups to talk about their responses. But as I move from group to group, I hear: "We all follow the same procedures"; "Teachers here are taught not to speak about what they believe"; "We can't deal with morality in the classroom."

"This is not our way," says Hans, with quiet certainty, crossing his arms on his chest and nodding his head.

"That's right," echoes his wife, Martina. "We have been trained to keep ourselves and our values outside of the curriculum. In the classroom, we must be morally neutral."

The other text I have assigned also challenges the views of these teachers. In *Literature as Exploration*, Louise Rosenblatt claims that teaching involves taking an ethical stance. She writes:

The teaching of literature inevitably involves the . . . reinforcement of ethical attitudes. It is practically impossible to treat . . . any literary work . . . in a vital manner without confronting some problem of ethics and without speaking out of the context of some social philosophy. A framework of values is essential to any discussion of human life.<sup>4</sup>

Andrea finds the whole issue curious. She is perplexed by Rosenblatt's insistence that a teacher should not "try to pose as a completely objective person" and that "a much more wholesome educational situation is created when the teacher is a really live person" who, when appropriate, can state his or her "attitudes and assumptions . . . frankly and honestly."<sup>5</sup>

"How can one be a whole human being in the classroom?" she wonders aloud, her red curls framing her face. But most of the others seem not to share her curiosity.

I am taken aback that this group of Austrian teachers, at least those who have spoken so far, seem to find a focus on ethics troubling. But only a few have spoken. Most have remained silent.

What did you expect? You are working with the children or grandchildren of Nazis, says my mother's voice. Have you told them you are Jewish? If they knew, would they still rap their knuckles with such enthusiasm?

This is not an issue, I respond. Almost everyone in the room looks younger than I, and I was born after the war. These teachers in front of me are not responsible for what happened.

Well, their parents were alive then, she replies. Your father was a staff sergeant in the U.S. Army. Their parents could easily be my age. What did their parents or even their grandparents do?

But Mother, I answer, I have not come here to accuse them. I have come to teach them.

But then, I ask myself, isn't this precisely the issue? What am I teaching here? Do the moral questions that concern me have a place in this classroom?

At break time, as the teachers snack on cheese and chat in German, I stand back and observe. As a group they appear kind, caring, bright. They have come with the desire to understand new theories and progressive practices in the teaching of writing and

literature. This much I can impart to them. And yet there is so much I already feel I can't impart, can't say, can't admit, don't want to face, here or ever. Slowly, I let out a sigh.



On July 4, I am sitting in Tanja's garden at a wooden table under an apple tree. The homework assignment is to compose a piece of writing that matters; the topic and form are open. I have come outside to work on mine.

The sun feels warm on my back; flies buzz around my head. Annoyed, I swat them away. Once again, I am haunted by thoughts of the Holocaust, of what happened literally on the ground on which I am now walking, living, breathing. I picture the SS, marching through the streets of Innsbruck, hounding the Jews, pulling them from their homes, rounding them up and packing them off in cattle cars. I see blood staining the streets, the blood of those who were too slow or too old, those who tried to hide or dared to resist. I hear the screams of mothers as children are pulled from their arms, the burst of machine gunfire. Tears spring to my eyes as I write:

*What am I doing here  
in the homeland of Hitler's birth?*

*Why have I come  
across an ocean  
to a land and a language  
I've never wanted to know?*

*Never would I come here  
to the land where Nazis reigned,  
to the place where your people  
turned my people  
into objects of derision and hate.*

*Like the numbers  
etched into their forearms  
images are seared in my brain  
of bodies, piled high  
in ditches, of hair  
and teeth, piled high  
in corners.*

*I see the laboratories  
the wombs of young women  
filled with concrete  
the bodies of babies  
flung aside*

*And the Mengele selection  
the preference for twins*

*Oh  
my twins*

This thought blots out all others. I am wordless. I cannot go on. I want to go home, to get out of this place, this country. Back to my own people. I'm startled at this. I'm not religious. For most of my life, I have been ambivalent about Judaism, more interested in blending into a Christian world than standing out as a Jew. And yet, here, the Jews have become my people.



On July 5, the fourth class meeting, there is turmoil in the classroom. The teachers are finding it excruciatingly difficult to write. No matter how many different methods I show them, when they have to sit down and face the blank page, they freeze.

Ingrid, one of the young teachers from the *Hauptschule* system, precise and pointed in both looks and style, challenges me openly with her frustration. "I just can't do this. Why should I even try? If I want to say something to someone, I can call them up and talk."

Hans, who teaches business courses at the university, concurs, tossing that unruly shock of blond hair out of his eyes. "What is the point of writing if the teacher does not give you a topic? I do not mean to be rude, but to me this activity is a waste of time."

I recognize this phenomenon. American teachers who have written only academic papers often resist invitations to write more creatively. But never before have I seen such deep distress in a group.

We are sitting around our classroom table. "Why do you think this is so hard?" I ask.



Ingrid responds promptly: "Our professors never asked us to be so creative. When we are asked to write in school, we expect to be given assignments with specific requirements."

I am aware that how I respond is crucial. Eleven teachers are watching me.

I say, "It sounds as if many of you are blocked." I can see their bodies relax. "In fact, it sounds to me as if you are describing a kind of paralysis."

I can almost hear the sighs of relief. I have adequately named their dilemma. But while I am speaking, I realize that I am also speaking about myself; they are mirroring my own paralysis.

"Look," I say. "I can answer the question, 'Why write?' But for now, I think it's important to let the question sit. Why don't we break into small groups and see what others have to say. You can either share the work you have brought or talk about why writing was hard for you. You know," I add, "you can be fairly certain that if you are experiencing a problem here, at some point, your students may too."

I have placed myself in a group with three Austrian women: Margret, whose comments in class have impressed me; Christa, whose quiet presence intrigues me; and Martina, who other than supporting Hans, has been reserved. We move our chairs into a corner of the classroom. As they pass out copies of their work, Christa and Margret each comment that neither of them experienced any trouble finding a topic.

Christa agrees to read first. In a quiet voice, she reads aloud the story of her mother's struggle with cancer and her quiet death at home; by the time she finishes, we are there with her, standing around her mother's bed, praying for her release. We all have tears in our eyes.

Margret volunteers to read next. Her piece is not as straightforward, her voice less certain. It takes me a moment to realize that she is using a child's point of view to convey utter helplessness in the face of an abusive father.

Christa comments on the power of Margret's last line—"How can you cross the chasm if the bridge is not there?"

"I feel, what is the word . . . ?" Christa asks pausing, "stranded?"

"Yes," I say, jumping in. "That's exactly the word. I also feel how stranded and lost that child is."

Margret's face, closed until now, relaxes. I see the hint of a smile.

We turn to Martina who has remained remarkably quiet. "I have not been able to write a thing," she admits, the lines around her thin mouth tightening. "I've tried, really, but I am just so tired, and for me the school year is still not yet over. I still have meetings and paperwork to complete. It is not possible for me to do this right now . . ." Her voice trails off.

We listen sympathetically and suggest that she find some way to make her exhaustion the subject of her writing.

"Well, that could work," she says, smiling ruefully, "maybe . . ."

Now it is my turn. I inhale deeply, still not sure what to say. "I have been keeping a journal about my experiences in Austria," I begin, "but I doubt whether I can tell you what I am writing about."

They look at me with surprise. They have no idea, I think, and I have no idea what to say next.

I look at Christa's face, still tear-stained. Then I imagine the stranded child Margret just described. "It's a lot like Margret's chasm," I say. "I don't know if there is a bridge here."

They sit quietly, waiting for me to go on. I know I have to continue, to make some explanation. But what? We are just beginning to build some trust in the group. Will I shatter it if I mention the Holocaust? Do I dare? And yet, if I don't, how can I possibly explain what is happening to me?

I look at each one, and in a halting voice, I finally say, "O.K., I'll tell you what's going on. The more I walk on this land, the more my mind fills with images of the Holocaust. I see it everywhere I turn, every time I see an old person, every time I try to write. But how can I talk about this? I . . . well . . . I don't think I should. This is not why I am here."

Margret straightens her back and looks at me hard, her eyes narrowing. With undisguised vehemence, she exclaims, "How can you not talk about this? We never discuss our past, but we must! Of course, you should continue to write, and you must let us hear it."

"You are encouraging me?" I ask, startled.

She nods.

I am speechless. I can barely face what I am feeling. Each time it surfaces I want to push it away. Now this Austrian woman is urging me to make my fears public in a roomful of Austrians?

"I don't know," I respond hesitantly. "I'll try to keep writing. Maybe I'll be able to read some of my work to the three of you, but I'm not sure I can share this with the large group."



"You must try," urges Margret.

"You all agree?" I ask.

"Yes," says Christa.

"Yes," says Martina.

"There is nothing more important you can do here," adds Margret.



For the rest of the evening, I am in turmoil. I suspect it might be useful for the teachers to learn that I, too, am having a writing block. But I am petrified to raise the issue of the Holocaust with them, scared that they will reject me and my questions, even more scared to face these questions myself.

Several hours later, when the entire group reassembles to reflect together on the night's work, I have made up my mind to speak. It's a risk, I know. But how better to emerge from behind the mask of professor than to reveal what moves inside me? How better to answer Andrea's question about how to be a whole human being in the classroom?

The twelve of us are seated around our large table. My heart pounds as I begin to talk: "Before we write reflections tonight, I want to say something about the paralysis that Ingrid and Hans mentioned earlier today. I, too, have been experiencing it. Every time I try to write, I silence myself."

Not a sound in the room. I have caught their attention.

"I came here to teach," I continue, "but I now realize I also came with questions about what happened here, in Austria, over fifty years ago. I don't expect you to explain the war to me. But I am curious about all of you. How do you cope with the knowledge of what happened here?"

It is so quiet I can hear the clock on the wall ticking.

"For the past few days, I have been plagued by questions about your history. I have felt I cannot ask them, that I cannot write about them, that it is not my place. But I also realize that I am not morally neutral and if I pretend I am—if I act as if these questions are not important to me—then I am contradicting myself, denying theories I have asked you to consider, subverting my own values."

I take a breath. I am greeted by blank stares. I assume that references to war and moral neutrality are sufficient to explain what I am referring to. I cannot bring myself to utter the words "Holocaust" or "Jew."

"You don't need to speak right now," I say. "But if you have a response, I'd like to hear it. I am mentioning this tonight because I want you to see that even a writing teacher can, at times, be blocked. And that one way out of this block is to begin to speak about it. So why don't we all write some reflections, now, on whatever comes to mind about tonight's work."

People pick up their pens. The concentrated quiet in the room tells me that everyone is writing.

I ask for volunteers to read. It is as if no one has heard a word I've said. Astrid, strands of white hair escaping from her bun, excitedly describes what is happening in her writing group. It is so valuable, she says, to see what her peers are writing. Ursula demurely expresses interest in changing topics. Hilde sees a new way to begin.

Margret reads last:

How can we not address Sondra's questions? How can we avoid talking about the fascism in our land, our country, our blood? How can we not teach our children who they are and be willing to take the beating of the world? We are the generation that must respond. Our parents can't and won't. We must own our dark side.

As Margret looks up, our eyes meet. This night as we leave, there is no knuckle-rapping. Only silence.



For July 6, the fifth session, we have an eight-hour class with time to work in both small and large groups. Following this session, we have a four-day break. It would be so much safer to move on, to act as if I hadn't raised anything unusual the night before. But my instincts tell me it would be wrong. I want to name what occurred, to mark it in some way. I also want to see if anyone is feeling unsettled by the personal turn of events I have initiated.

As we gather around the table to go over the day's schedule, I ask for everyone's attention: "I want to begin today by returning to some of the issues we raised last night. I want to take a few minutes to retrace the steps we took." There is no fidgeting, no looking out of the window.

I summarize the events—beginning with Ingrid's and Hans's questions about the purpose of writing and ending with my revelation



about my own writer's block. Then I say, "I can't help thinking that we have an unusual opportunity here. We can act as if nothing momentous happened last night, or we can approach the questions I raised with care and respect and see what occurs. We have a chance, I think, to speak across cultures."

As I conclude my talk, people get up and begin the day's work. I do not know whether I have reached them; do not know if they are aware that when I refer to "my questions" I am referring to the Holocaust, to their parents, to their own knowledge and responses. I am still speaking obliquely, wanting to open a dialogue, not shut it down. And I still cannot say the word "Jew" in front of them.



For the literature course, we have been meeting in reading groups, discussing our responses to Toni Morrison's *Sula*, a poignant and powerful novel. Almost everyone seems to be pleased with the experience of keeping a "reading log" or a "response journal." Ingrid comments that this approach encourages students to respond honestly. Hilde, whose vision of classrooms has not dimmed with increasing age, plans to use this approach with her weakest students. With these teachers, I have discovered, it is easy to talk about pedagogy.

But the conversation stalls when I move us into the larger implications of the novel. "It's hard to be born in America," I say slowly, looking at the group, "without absorbing prejudice."

They look at me without commenting. I continue, "The question for many American teachers is what to do about racism. We often use Toni Morrison's work because it helps us address a range of racial issues. But many teachers I know well, particularly white teachers in urban classrooms, also wrestle with their own prejudices, knowing that the roots of racism are deep, that they may have to acknowledge and combat racism in themselves before they can really reach their students."

Do they see the connection? I wonder. Do they understand I am suggesting that Austria is not the only country where a violent, eliminationist racism took hold? I don't know. The teachers nod, smile, even take notes, but they do not respond.

The pace picks up again several hours later when writing groups meet. Now it is obvious that everyone is actively engaged. The talk is lively, even boisterous. One writing group does not return for a

scheduled activity. They report later, shocked by their own behavior, that they were so involved with one another's work, they just couldn't stop. I am delighted by their disobedience.

Sitting at our small table, Martina, Margret, and Christa encourage me to read the poem I have been working on. I consent, but I lower my eyes as I recite the lines about Nazis, about "your people" and "my people." My voice quivers as I read.

When I finish, I look up. I see tears in their eyes. "Thank you," says Margret quietly.

One hurdle overcome, I think to myself. I've admitted that I am Jewish. They could not know how hard this was for me. But I notice that I also feel relieved. For now I assume the group will understand why I am asking about the past. After today, I assume, the classroom grapevine will transmit the news: Sondra is a Jew.



Several hours later, I am sitting on a stool in a local bar with Tanja, Thomas, Andrea, Martina, and Hans. Drinking beer, enveloped in cigarette smoke, we tell stories of family life. Andrea, a mother of three, asks me about child rearing in New York. "Can you leave your baby in the car while you run into a shop?" she asks, alluding to a common practice in Innsbruck.

"Are you kidding?" I exclaim. I describe my fear of having my kids out of my sight for even a minute when we are in a supermarket or at a playground. "New York is a wonderful, exciting place," I continue. "but as a parent, it is hard not to worry or to imagine threats even when there aren't any."

Then she asks, "Is it safe to visit Chinatown and Harlem and the Jewish quarter?"

I can only smile. "Being aware of personal safety is important in every neighborhood," I respond first. "Chinatown is relatively safe; so is Harlem these days. But in New York, Andrea, there is no Jewish quarter. In New York, being Jewish is so common, it's like, well . . ." I burst out laughing, recalling a quip a British colleague once made, "it's as if everyone is Jewish."

I doubt that the group has any notion of what I am referring to, but everyone joins in laughing. Suddenly, I notice, I feel a greater sense of ease among them. Not bad, I think, making a Jewish joke at the half-way mark.