

Attending Witness

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Martha Ritter's essay is built around recognition of a powerful need. While hardship and suffering take many forms, the desire to voice and have acknowledged one's experience runs very deep. Her prime examples — Holocaust survivors, the Tenderloin writing group, African American women round the kitchen table — underscore a basic consideration. Some suffering is unavoidable, but much, grounded in patterns of domination, oppression, human brutality, and injustice, demands recognition — if not to reduce or eliminate it, at least to call it by its right name.

As Avishai Margalit notes, such recognition is powerfully centered in moral witness, the living presence and testimony of those who have themselves directly experienced evils that they find the capacity to recount.¹ Those bearing witness in this way need an audience. In such circumstances, a second kind of witness emerges, the "addressable other" who acknowledges, and perhaps evokes or facilitates, the story of what they have seen.

Ritter advances a conception of this second sense of witness — for my part I will speak of it as the attending witness — that fuses two components. As she puts it, a "robust conception of witness" is one that is "rooted in attentiveness to one another...and...can facilitate an understanding of how oppression works in our lives."

The first task of the attending witness is to hear what those bearing witness are willing to "put on the table." As Ritter suggests, to be in the position of attending witness implies some remove from what is being described and thus opens a space of reasonable doubt about the accounts given; to acknowledge is not necessarily to agree. It follows that "there is an epistemological task at the heart of our attentiveness to the other...we must listen to others if our own beliefs are to aim at truth." But truth about what?

Here, a number of related but highly contingent possibilities come into view. The essay's summary is a compendium. An attending witness may or "*may not* be involved in inquiry"; responding "*can* entail taking up inquiry"; such inquiry *may* involve interrogating one's own identity and understanding; the response of an attending "witness is *sometimes necessary* for putting claims on the table"; such response "*can* help with the conditions for continuing inquiry"; and witness relations "*hold potential* for finding ways to live together, to see each other, and for the generation of knowledge less controlled by axes of domination and oppression" (emphasis added).

This is all very tenuous. But in this, I think, Ritter gets things fundamentally right. The virtue of her account is that the matrix of acknowledged contingencies — judgment calls about when and for what inquiry is warranted — serves to accentuate the firm core, the profound value of establishing a relationship within which one can acknowledge what another feels compelled to say about what they have undergone.

In *Regarding the Pain of Others* Susan Sontag puts it this way:

it seems a good in itself to acknowledge, to have enlarged, one's sense of how much suffering caused by human wickedness there is in the world we share with others. Someone who is perennially surprised that depravity exists, who continues to feel disillusioned (even incredulous) when confronted with evidence of what humans are capable of inflicting in the way of gruesome, hands-on cruelties upon other humans, has not reached moral or psychological adulthood.²

Sontag's focus is on the power of images. These are not transformative in themselves; rather, they are nothing more, or less, than

an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalizations for mass suffering offered by established powers. Who caused what the picture shows? Who is responsible? Is it excusable? Was it inevitable? Is there some state of affairs which we have accepted up to now that ought to be challenged? All this with the understanding that moral indignation, like compassion, cannot dictate a course of action.³

For Sontag, learning to attend is pivotal in order for much-needed deliberations to commence, to move beyond the "moral defectiveness" of a chronic incapacity to recognize the pain of others. In this regard, attentiveness involves, first of all, avoiding the temptation to entertain diversions, including intellectual or sentimental ones.

In view of the kind of relationships involved, the notion of attending witness is more complex than that of viewing images. But with respect to attention, the fundamental demand is the same: to register as fully as possible what is being said about the matter in question. The key is a kind of disciplined restraint in the service of what is most vital in the experience of those who need to be seen and heard.

The importance of such restraint is evident in the examples of attending witness Ritter includes. These share a kind of moral seriousness that underscores both the inherent value of disciplined attentiveness and, implicitly, how wrong it would be to manipulate, distort, or sentimentalize for self-serving purposes the accounts being given. These cases provide a foothold with regard to the promise of moving toward the kind of "epistemological democracy" of situated knowledge in moral deliberations that Ritter commends in Cheryl Misak's work.

But what is the scope of cases holding promise of this kind? Considering the basic elements of the conception of witness at hand, contemporary culture is awash in witness. On television, daily fare includes celebrity hosts — to say nothing of their vast audience — attending witness to people reporting all kinds of complaints and troubles grounded in some state of affairs regarded as wrong or unjust. Media-based examples are easily multiplied, raising the question of what to make of vicarious, second-hand forms of attention to the testimony of others. Meanwhile, apart from the media, diverse, more or less formal instances of direct interaction taking the form of attending witness routinely transpire. As a teacher educator, for example, I attend to the tales of teachers who, feeling dismayed and disrespected in the machinations of school reform, offer poignant testimony of their struggles. I suspect I am in tune with the times in this respect.

Listening to folks wishing to "put it on the table" has become commonplace. Some of this, no doubt, rises to the level of educationally significant, knowledge-

generating, potentially liberating witness. But some — much? — is at best a counterfeit, and may in fact contribute to the sort of clutter that dulls the impact of genuine moral witness.

I believe that implicit in Ritter's account there is a way to suggest a criterion for drawing distinctions of this kind. The paper suggests that attending witnesses emerge in response to people whose struggles place them among others acting under a description. While each Holocaust survivor is unique, each is also identifiably, and viscerally, a member of the classification of Holocaust survivors. So too with the residents of the Tenderloin.

The attending witness is aware of this classification; it is partially constitutive of their understanding of what it is that they are doing when they attend to persons of that kind, indeed, that they are “doing something” at all. And in turn, the moral witness recognizes that he or she represents a kind of experience shared by others with whom they are classified. The sense of witness as a public phenomenon hinges on these understandings: that there are kinds of people to attend to, on the one hand, with kinds of experience to report, on the other.

In the cases at hand, Holocaust survivors or Tenderloin residents give voice to what they themselves have seen and been through. But in doing so, they are also engaged in the elaboration of what being a person of that kind means, and in so doing, extending, modifying, or even transforming that meaning, and perhaps in time, the kind itself. We can much more readily think, now, of the strength and dignity of Holocaust survivors or the Tenderloin writers, for example.

The point centers on what Ian Hacking has dubbed looping or interactive effects between kinds or classifications of people and the people thus classified. Such effects are vital because, as Hacking notes,

classifications can change our evaluations of our personal worth, of the moral kind of person that we are. Sometimes this means that people passively accept what experts say about them. But feedback can direct itself in many ways. We well know the rebellions of the sorted. A classification imposed from above is rearranged by the people to whom it was supposed to apply.⁴

And the same point applies to classifications that come not from experts but other expressions of socially constituted power imposing classifications, creating kinds of people.

As Hacking points out, interactive effects open new possibilities for action and experience. But in addition, they allow for fundamental inquiry involving reconsiderations of past experience. On both fronts, the potentially liberating effects are extensive, but also unpredictable. And we must not assume that the interactive effects are always positive; classifications can come to bind or limit more tightly, or in different ways, over time. In any event, the dynamics of classification provide a central object of continuous inquiry about the evolving truths of one's experience. In this way, the truths most pertinent to an epistemological democracy are moving targets, accounts of emergent self-understanding.

I am suggesting that what distinguishes genuine cases of attending witness is a particular sensitivity to such dynamics, the interactive process through which kinds

of people grapple with and in turn modify what it means to be of that kind. This is what an attending witness witnesses, more or less astutely.

And if that is so, the quality of attention and related inquiry in witness relations is itself morally implicated in the interactive effects that result from those relations. As Ritter makes plain, what unfolds is the educationally vital product of contextualized judgment, fraught with uncertainty, filled with promise.

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1. Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).
 2. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2003), 114.
 3. *Ibid.*, 117.
 4. Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 131.