

The Significance of Finding a Witness in Liberatory Education

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It was through Caroline Heller's work that I initially became intrigued with the response of a witness in educational contexts. In her ethnography of a women's writing group in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco, Heller suggests that the women came to the writing group to find witnesses. Drawn to the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, Heller explains "Freire was interested not only in how writing affects thinking, but in how writing might more deeply affect the quality of people's lives, especially their perception of themselves as thinkers and as people who take action."¹ To borrow Heller's synopsis, Freire put forth a model of liberatory education based on people coming together to help each other build the language and the literacy needed to both see and challenge the ideologies that formed the dominant culture surrounding them. Freire looked to the process of "conscientization" to revolutionize the social order so that the poor would be enfranchised. The premise of his education was resolutely political. The political work of the Tenderloin writing group was not as explicit as Heller expected, but she writes that the longer she was with the group, the more she "noticed participants in the group critiquing American life and life in their neighborhood, often brilliantly."² She continues

But the real work of the group was both more ordinary and, I soon came to realize, more extraordinary than this. Most of the regular participants...came to be reassured that they had lived lives that were of value and that could be — through the precision of their own words — felt, understood, and remembered by others. Most came in one way or another to find witnesses as they made claim for the richness of their complicated experiences.³

Further, Heller notes, "it was in the achieving of this, and in the awakening of sensibilities that allowed this achievement, that other, more explicitly social, political, and educational functions were also accomplished."⁴ This is a substantial educational claim well worth careful attention. Heller does not elaborate a conception of witness. I will view witness as a relationship between a person who gives testimony or bears witness and a person who listens, who responds as a witness. In this essay, I give particular attention to the epistemological significance of finding a witness. I argue that finding a witness is vital to liberatory educational projects, because witnesses can be required for situated knowledge — that is, knowledge that does not in itself perpetuate oppression.⁵ And in the meantime, being witnesses for one another supports the kind of moral relations that make continued inquiry possible.

Liberatory education has its roots in settings such as Heller describes at the Tenderloin Reflection and Education Center. The resource center works with the residents and homeless of the Tenderloin, a neighborhood that is considered one of the roughest in San Francisco. Most Tenderloin residents live in the neighborhood because they can not afford to live anywhere else. Freire's own work began with the disenfranchised in Brazil in both rural and urban communities, and centered on groups of people coming together in "cultural circles." Referring to the goals of these

groups, Freire writes “Forms of cultural action in such different situations as these have nonetheless the same objective: to clarify to the oppressed the objective situation which binds them to the oppressors, visible or not.”⁶ A primary aim of critical literacy has been for the oppressed to become aware of his or her own oppression. Heller believed that what took place at the Tenderloin Reflection and Education Center fulfilled the underlying principles of liberatory education. But Heller argues that her study urges us to consider a more complicated and more personal conception of liberation education than we have had until now.

Heller, I believe, advocates a second aim for liberatory education: to have another — a witness — recognize you and what you hold to be of value. In connection with this second aim, and my own sympathies with it as an important part of liberatory education, I direct our attention to the broad problem of not recognizing the other’s account of his or her experience as part of not recognizing the other. In this I want, on the one hand, to mind Lisa Delpit’s caution not to be too quick to ascribe false consciousness. On the other hand, I want us to find a conception of witness that does not commit us to necessarily accepting everything a person says about his or her experiences. In regard to listening across differences, Delpit writes

We must keep the perspective that people are experts on their own lives. There are certainly aspects of the outside world of which they may not be aware, but they can be the only authentic chroniclers of their own experience. We must not be too quick to deny their interpretations, or accuse them of “false consciousness.” We must believe that people are rational beings, and therefore always act rationally.⁷

Though I agree that we must not be too quick to deny another’s interpretation, it cannot mean that we must accept, always, the other’s interpretation of their experience as true or right, for that would be to claim that their understandings of complex social and political phenomena are incorrigible. We need a robust conception of witness that is rooted in attentiveness to one another, similar to that which Heller describes, *and* one that can facilitate an understanding of how oppression works in our lives.

FINDING A WITNESS

Finding a witness can support speaking of our experience and, in some cases, is required for a person to narrate their experience. We can see the relationship between speech and the presence of an “addressable other” in survivors of the Holocaust speaking of their experience, such as in the collection of testimony for the Fortunoff Video Archive project.⁸ Dori Laub, a psychoanalyst, was one of the interviewers in the archive project. Himself a survivor, Laub describes the particular circumstances of the Holocaust as preventing the possibility of witnesses both outside and inside the event. He writes “As the event of the Jewish genocide unfolded, however, most actual or potential witnesses failed one-by-one to occupy their position as a witness, and at a certain point it seemed as if there was no one left to witness what was taking place.”⁹ Witnesses on the outside failed to say anything against what was taking place. This failure of witnesses on the outside affected the prisoners’ ability to be witnesses for themselves. Without witnesses on the outside, in Laub’s view, the prisoners were unable to narrate their experience even to themselves because they came to question their own humanity. Laub holds that the

act of bearing witness to the Holocaust still can and should take place belatedly. The archive project made it possible for survivors to tell their experience by providing the witness that was missing earlier. Laub states

Bearing witness to a trauma is, in fact, a process that includes the listener. For the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an other — in the position of one who hears. Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude.¹⁰

Laub's work to record Holocaust testimony illustrates just how fundamentally a person bearing witness needs to presuppose that there is another, an addressable other — a witness.

Stated in broad terms, we need to be seen and heard by others, to have our perceptions taken into account. This need is rooted in the fact that we are ontologically in relation to one another. We are always persons in relation, co-constructed as persons in a myriad of ways. The fact of our interdependency has ethical significance. We see this in a fundamental way in Laub's analysis of what it means to be a witness: if we cannot find an addressable other, then we can lose the ability to narrate our experience. In a sense, we cease to be ourselves. We rely on the response of others to be selves, particularly in conditions of trauma or when our experiences are at odds with what is generally taken to be true. These are times when we must look for witnesses.

Finding witnesses can support and sustain a person's speaking of their experience beyond situations of trauma. Patricia Hill Collins conceptualizes the testimony of African-American women as a profound act of resistance to oppression. She traces the tradition of testimonials within the African-American community to church settings, explaining that

Within a narrow use of the testimonial, individuals testify within a community of believers such that each testimonial spurs others on to greater faith. However, a broader use of the testimonial involves testifying the truth to cynics and nonbelievers. Within a more generalized testimonial tradition, breaking silence, speaking out, and talking back in academic settings constitute public testimonials.¹¹

We can note two communities here: one, a community of believers and second, a community that is made up at least in part of cynics and non-believers. The distinction between these two communities and between private and public knowledge are key in understanding how Collins uses the term "testimonial." Private knowledge, in Collins's view, is "the collective secret knowledge generated by groups on either side of power that are shared in private when the other side's surveillance seems absent."¹² Collins notes "Drawing on traditional African-American cultures of resistance, conversations around the kitchen table become classrooms of learning how to cope with oppression."¹³ In such conversations, women speak about their lived experience in ways that challenge the prevailing interpretations of black women's experience in public discourses. Her description brings to mind an intimate relation among friends in which one's perceptions are affirmed. The nods of agreement, shouts of response, and encouraging presence of others moved by what you say supports speech, and we may find ourselves able to say things that we would not otherwise. In Collins's account we can see how the

response of a witness can nourish and sustain us, as for example in sitting with friends at the kitchen table.

Finding a witness supports or sustains speech and can sometimes be required for a person to speak of his or her experience and beliefs. We must look for witnesses, it seems to me, when others have turned away. It is a purely human action of looking to be heard and understood. This takes on particularly importance in the face of a refusal on the part of others to acknowledge perceptions we believe should be acknowledged or when faced with indifference or general disbelief. However, from these two examples, it seems that there is little room, if any, to ask questions about the testimony or, stated differently, to open the testimony to inquiry. In both, as more broadly in literature on the response of a witness, there is an assumed agreement with the testimony. This is problematic when we consider that the reasons we look for witnesses are often related to finding justice, to speaking the truth of our experience. In regard to aims of liberatory education, we limit an objective understanding of how oppression works in our lives.

THE RESPONSE OF A WITNESS

Given our understanding of why we look for witnesses, it follows that we want the person who responds as a witness to be present to us — to listen to and acknowledge our perceptions. We can characterize the listening by the attentiveness described in Iris Marion Young's notion of "moral humility." Young argues that it is ontologically impossible to imaginatively put one's self in another's position and, further, that reversing standpoints is politically suspect. In Young's view "each participant in a communication situation is distinguished by a particular history and social position that makes their relation asymmetrical."¹⁴ Young advocates an openness to others that is rooted in the assumption that "one cannot see things from the other person's perspective and waits to learn by listening to the other person to what extent they have had similar experiences."¹⁵ She calls this openness an attitude of "moral humility."

Young's conception of "moral humility" is similar to Laurence Thomas's notion of "moral deference." Thomas's language vividly describes the extent of our openness. He writes:

Moral deference...is not an activity for the faint of heart. For it is a matter of rendering oneself open to another's concern, and letting another's pain reconstitute one so much that one comes to have a new set of sensibilities — a new set of moral lenses, if you will.¹⁶

Thomas proposes moral deference as a mode of learning through which one acquires a sensibility to the way in which a self-respecting oppressed person lives in the world. Moral deference is due in relations between a person in a "privileged" group and a person in a "downwardly socially constituted" group. For Young, the difference is that in moral humility, I only admit that I lack knowledge of the other; in moral deference, I recognize that the other has the knowledge that I lack. I adopt the broader term of "moral humility" to describe the response of a witness.

In listening to the experience of the other in an open way we allow beliefs to be put on the table. The importance of allowing beliefs to be put on the table cannot be overstated. But there is a second move, I suggest, of acknowledging what we have

heard. Acknowledgement does not entail agreement. We feel acknowledgment as a taking in of the weight or significance for both the other and for ourselves of what we have heard and, often times, beginning inquiry or joining in inquiry. This does not mean that one need agree that the testimony is true and that it is significant in the way that the person bearing witness holds it to be significant. But there is a certain weight to the inquiry. Given that others have turned away, responding as a witness minimally requires that we do not immediately disregard or refute the other's account. Further, given that the testimony may be fragile, I add the qualification that when and by whom the inquiry is carried out is not always the same and must be considered when opening the testimony to critique. But more needs to be said about the epistemological assumptions of the inquiry, given my claim that the response of a witness can be required for the generation of situated knowledge.

SITUATED KNOWLEDGE

To make the claim that knowledge is generated, we need some notion of objectivity. I turn to Donna Haraway's concept of "situated knowledge" given our aim of a robust conception of witness that can facilitate an understanding of how oppression works in our lives. Haraway proposes that the metaphor of vision can give us a usable account of objectivity. She suggests that we can look to "embodied vision" as opposed to the vision where we leap out of our bodies and into a conquering gaze from nowhere.¹⁷ In what Haraway calls a doctrine of embodied objectivity, feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledge. Borrowing the term from Thomas Kuhn, Haraway advocates a "passionate detachment" that requires more than acknowledged and self-critical partiality: "We are also bound to seek perspective from those points of view, which can never be known in advance, which promise something quite extraordinary, that is, knowledge potent for constructing worlds less organized by axes of domination."¹⁸ Haraway argues for

politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are the claims on people's lives: the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity.¹⁹

To describe who engages in situated knowledges, Haraway draws on "the complex history of 'witnessing' and being a 'witness' within the stories of science studies in relation to Robert Boyle's development of the experimental method in the seventeenth century."²⁰ Boyle's modest witness is invisible, that is, "he is an inhabitant of the potent unmarked category, which is constructed by the extraordinary conventions of self-invisibility."²¹ But the boundaries of the supposedly public space were strictly marked. Women, to name one group, were excluded from the epistemic community capable of generating "knowledge." Thomas Hobbes repudiated the experimental way of life precisely because its knowledge was dependent on a practice of witnessing by a special community, like that of clerics and lawyers. Similar to Hobbes, Haraway's intent is to open the witnessing community. To do this, she refigures Boyle's "modest witness" into the "mutated modest witness."

Haraway's mutated modest witness is about "telling the truth, giving reliable testimony, guaranteeing important things, providing good enough grounding — while eschewing the additive narcotic of transcendental foundations — to enable

compelling belief and collective action.” Haraway argues for a strong objectivity that “insists that both the objects and the subjects of knowledge-making practices must be located.” Locating, in Haraway’s view, is not a listing of adjectives or assigning of labels such as race, sex, and class. Haraway asserts that “Location is not the concrete to the abstract of decontextualization. Location is always partial, always finite, always fraught play of foreground and background, text and context, that constitutes critical inquiry.” Boyle’s modest witness understands rational knowledge to be disengaged, “to be from everywhere and nowhere, to be free from interpretation, from being represented, to be fully self-contained or fully formalizable.” Haraway’s mutated modest witness understands rational knowledge to be a “process of ongoing critical interpretation among ‘fields’ of interpreters and decoders.”²² I do not adopt Haraway’s “mutated modest witness,” because Haraway does not give us enough direction on the terms of the inquiry. For this, I turn to the pragmatists, who I believe have long been engaged in the generation of situated knowledge.

TRUTH AND INQUIRY

On the pragmatist view of truth, as Cheryl Misak explains it, when we aim at empirical adequacy, predictive power, understanding the way things work, understanding ourselves, and the like, we aim at truth. Building on Charles Peirce’s conception, Misak claims “A true belief is one upon which inquiry could not improve — belief which would fit with experience and argument and which would satisfy the aims of inquiry, no matter how much the issue was subject to experiment, evaluation, and debate.”²³ Misak holds that the “best kind of pragmatist replaces the old dichotomy between neutral standards and no-standards-at-all with a substantive, low profile, conception of truth and objectivity, a conception which nonetheless can guide us in inquiry” (*TPM*, 14). Notice this is the same problem that Haraway addresses in her conception of “embodied objectivity.” Misak links truth, objectivity, and inquiry. “Truth is a property of belief — a belief is a product of our deliberation and investigation” (*TPM*, 50).

Inquiry is defined broadly. Misak explains that seeing moral inquiry as being truth-apt or aiming at truth does not force us to think of moral inquiry as the active testing of hypotheses. The inquiry is not so organized, nor the questions always clear. The process of inquiry “can take all kind of forms, not all of them resembling self-conscious, organized, and systematic investigation” (*TPM*, 108). Inquiry can begin in any number of ways. Misak elaborates:

Challenges can come from within, when my own judgments and principles conflict and I feel a pull toward revising them. Or they can come from without, when I see that the judgments and principles of others, from within my circle or from afar, conflict with my own judgments and I feel a pull towards reconsidering them. (*TPM*, 53)

In Misak’s view, a minimal characteristic of good inquiry is that which takes experience seriously. And so, in this view, if we fail to take the experience of others seriously, then we fail to have beliefs that are genuinely aimed toward truth. In responding as a witness, I do not only mean that we must take the experience of others seriously. I want to be clear that it is their account of their experience that we must take seriously to meet the minimal characteristic of inquiry.

In moral deliberation in particular, Misak holds that “we must not underestimate the value of listening to ordinary people’s own stories — their accounts of how injustice, for instance, has played a part in their lives.”

Moral deliberation displays a kind of epistemological democracy. We are all involved in moral discussion and in experiments in living, to borrow a phrase from Mill. Moral judgment is inextricably bound up with our relations to theirs and anyone who stands in such relationships has plenty of engagement in moral deliberation. Truth requires us to listen to others, and anyone might be an expert. (*TPM*, 96)

And so as inquirers, people who want to get it right — to have true beliefs — we must listen to the experience and reasons others put forward. In responding as a witness, as I have characterized it, we may be drawn into the inquiry of the person bearing witness or begin a related inquiry.

In Misak’s view, “Inquiry begins with the irritation of doubt and ends with a stable, doubt-resistant belief. But we can’t know when this is – and so should focus on inquiry and getting the best answers that we can” (*TPM*, 53). The idea of truth guides inquiry but, as Misak interprets Peirce’s position, we never really reach the end of inquiry. Misak writes “Peirce insisted that we need a conception of truth which ‘can and ought to be used as a guide for conduct’” (MS 684: 11). We need a conception of truth which can guide inquiry and deliberation” (*TPM*, 56). Truth guides inquiry with the idea of a rational belief. The conception of a “rational belief” closes the gap between truth and inquiry and in Misak’s terms “explains why some of our current beliefs are considered rational, or more likely to be true, than other beliefs, even if we cannot know that they are true.”

If truth is the belief that would best fit with the evidence, were we to have so much by way of good evidence that no further evidence would overturn the belief, then a rational belief is the belief which best fits with the evidence that we currently have. . . . Although we are never in a position to judge whether a belief is true or not, we will often be in a position to judge whether it is the best belief given the current state of inquiry. (*TPM*, 57)

Peirce claims that bivalence, the idea that a belief is either true or false, is a regulative assumption of inquiry. This assumption explains why we inquire into the issue. Misak’s notion of inquiry supports situated knowledge, if we understand situated knowledge to be an ongoing interpretive practice of coming to rational beliefs. Such a practice requires that we speak our beliefs and listen to the experience and reasons of others.

In sum, in listening with moral humility, one takes on the task of understanding the experience of the other. Thus, there is an epistemological task at the heart of our attentiveness to the other. This kind of listening can be a requirement for some experiences to be spoken. In acknowledgment, we may engage in the open sort of inquiry that Misak describes. And indeed, we must listen to the experience of others if our own beliefs are to aim at truth. If witness is to be a relation that can foster knowledge, then it also has to be the case that the one listening may refute, or can in principle refute, what the other says. Just when this is done and by whom is dependent on the particular situation and must be sensitive to the trust that is formed in the relation. This point is clear in considering listening to survivors who speak of their experience for the first time.

We may not be involved in inquiry when we listen to testimony, but responding as a witness can entail taking up an inquiry. Our inquiry may involve interrogating who we are and what we understand to be true on the basis of the other's testimony. The response of a witness is sometimes necessary for putting claims on the table. It never gets in the way of inquiry and can help with the conditions for continuing inquiry. In the meantime, the relation of witness holds potential for finding ways to live together, to see each other, and to generate knowledge less controlled by axes of domination and oppression.

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1. Caroline E. Heller, *Until We Are Strong Together: Women Writers in the Tenderloin* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), 10.
 2. *Ibid.*, 17.
 3. *Ibid.*, 18.
 4. *Ibid.*, 18.
 5. Maureen Ford persuasively shows that grounding educational practices in the standard view of knowledge obscures claims about oppression and privilege and inscribes relations of oppression and privilege in knowledge construction practices. Ford suggests that situated knowledges offer more to educators because they are (or at least aim to be) politically sensitive. Maureen Ford, "Being in the Know(n): Educational Implications of Situated Knowledges" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1995), 183.
 6. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970), 176.
 7. Lisa Delpit, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 47.
 8. The archive project was founded in 1979 by a New Haven grassroots organization and adopted by Yale University in 1981.
 9. Dori Laub, "An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival," in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, eds. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992), 81.
 10. *Ibid.*, 70–1.
 11. Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 237.
 12. *Ibid.*, 49.
 13. *Ibid.*
 14. Iris Marion Young, *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 39.
 15. *Ibid.*, 49.
 16. Laurence Thomas, "Moral Deference," *The Philosophical Forum* 24, nos. 1–3 (1993), 247.
 17. Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 188.
 18. *Ibid.*, 192.
 19. *Ibid.*, 195.
 20. Donna J. Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium: FemaleMan_Meets_OncoMouse* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 158.
 21. *Ibid.*, 23.
 22. *Ibid.*, 22, 37, 37, 196, and 196.
 23. Cheryl Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality: Pragmatism and Deliberation* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 1. This work will be cited as *TPM* in the text for all subsequent references.