

Compassionate Witnessing: Creating Moments of Healing for Ourselves and Others
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http://imagineature.amnh.org/st_francis/stfrancis.html

We have just heard Galway Kinnell read the first stanza of his poem, St. Francis and the Sow. He is an Irish American who wrote this poem in the context of our own post-conflict situation in the 1970's, following the American withdrawal from Vietnam. I've chosen his poem because I think it gets to the heart of the matter of healing quickly, simply, lovingly, and all encompassingly. I doubt that I will ever read a prescription written for me or anyone else with the words: Go to someone who will re-teach you your loveliness. Or a prescription that reads: take actions in your community that will help people re-learn their loveliness, but that is the essence of the journey towards healing. Learning, again, one's loveliness. And it is the essence of the work of the healer: to restore to others the means to re-learn their loveliness.

As you can imagine, there are many ways this learning can happen. It is a gift to see the loveliness at the heart center of a traumatized person: that often angry, irritable, hollow, jumpy, fragile, spacey, vulnerable person. And we are fortunate that so many people, coming from different backgrounds and training, do that work well. And it is also inspiring when in the aftermath of peace, previously shattered communities regain their loveliness such that they are able to serve the needs of their members.

Re-teaching a thing its loveliness -- re-learning one's loveliness -- is not a project for an hour or a day, a week, a month or even a year. It is truly a journey towards healing. But it is a journey without a destination. Healing is not the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. It is not crossing a finish line. It isn't done once and for all.

Healing occurs in moments. Any of us can create those healing moments, for ourselves and for others. And there are ripple effects of our doing so, albeit we rarely know the reach of our seemingly individual actions. Healing happens when we bid it and it arrives unbidden. Sometimes we recognize it and sometimes recognition comes later.

In this talk I will highlight several kinds of actions that can create moments of healing. These actions are often small, but they are never trivial. In each case, there is movement from a felt sense of disempowerment to a felt sense of empowerment, a hallmark of a healing moment. And while I strongly believe that individual healing is strengthened and consolidated by repair of the social and political order, I also believe that individual actions do ripple outward and can contribute change at the political level.

Here is one of my favorite examples of just such a contribution. A colleague of mine at Cambridge Health Alliance, Kimberlyn Leary, interviewed negotiators involved in a peace accord process between Acehese guerilla fighters and the Indonesian government. One of her anecdotes really stood out for me. Apparently one of the Acehese fighters had arrived at the meetings with the beginnings of a head cold and was feeling dreadful. Upon learning this, one of the negotiating team members went to a pharmacy and brought back several cold and sore throat remedies to the congested delegate. A year later he

remarked to Dr. Leary in his interview that he believed that his participation in the negotiations had been positively affected by the concern shown to him. This is just one illustration of the way a small gesture at the individual, interpersonal, level can impact the political level.

Of course, we also have highly dramatic examples, too. The 26-year-old Tunisian who set himself on fire to protest that country's autocracy ignited protests over much of the Arab world.

Individual actions can and do have ripple effects. And these actions as well as their ripple effects are often associated with moments of healing. This conference offers a cornucopia of ways that people have taken on the journey towards healing. Many of us here have listened deeply to the pain of others. Many here have suffered. Many are wounded healers, some of whom were always healers and some of whom discovered what Irvin Staub calls "altruism born of suffering," the "willingness to help others...precisely because one's own suffering has stimulated the desire to help others as a way of making sense of what one has experienced."

The saga of my own journey towards healing began 56 years ago during what is called the McCarthy Era or the Red Scare in the United States. In the early 1950's, during the Cold War period, the US government began hunting for subversives, in particular people who had affiliations with communists or were themselves communists. My parents, who had been members of the communist party in the 1930's but had renounced the party when they were still in their teens, like thousands of others, became the subjects of government investigation. I knew nothing of the political turmoil that was closing in on my parents until one afternoon I got off the school bus and saw my mother in a police car. To this day, I see the scene as if I am a camera about four feet above and two feet behind my head. Like other images that form in the context of a traumatic experience, I have retained inconsequential detail: the asphalt is worn, and it dribbles off into a ditch. The police car is blocking the top of the street. My mother's torso is leaning forward and toward the window, her head cocked toward me, her mouth moving. The police are not hurting my mother, she is not in any danger, but the entire scene is ominous. She must be speaking to the officer because the blue door opens. The policeman allows her to tell me something, but what? As my grammar shows, none of these moments is in the past. The scene is always in a perpetual present.

This was an experience that engaged my body, mind and spirit. I was a witness to an act of political violence with no physical violence in it. Yet, I knew this scene threatened life as we had lived it. I was an unintentional witness to a moment in the social-political history of my country that ensnared my insignificant family and led life-long consequences for each of us. The events of my parents' investigations, testimony and subsequent secret monitoring by the FBI have contributed to the trajectory of my adult life. This terrifying time -- when both of my parents were taken away to testify in front of government committees -- directly influenced my subsequent choices to work as a political activist, peace psychologist and trauma researcher and clinician. The events of this time and my reaction to them are part of my braided vulnerability and resilience. My personal experience with the ways that events in the political realm can have significant consequences in the domestic realm, has led to theorizing a relationship between political

violence and intimate violence. This history has led me to the conclusion that individual and familial healing is incomplete until there is repair of the social and political order.

These experiences also started a life long interest in understanding the position of the witness, particularly the witness to political violence. We are all familiar with the terms victim and perpetrator. And we know a great deal about the dynamics of trauma that can follow from an encounter between them. Much less is understood about the dynamics of the witness, and yet far and away the majority of violence and violation that anyone will experience will come through the position of the witness. We tend to separate out these terms as if they were mutually exclusive roles, but of course they are not. Any of us can be, depending on circumstances, a victim, witness, or a perpetrator.

A witness is a person who sees, hears or learns about violence and or violation either at the time it occurs or after. The person may recognize the true nature of the experience at the time or recognition may be delayed. Witnessing fractures language in ways that mirror the fracturing of language experienced by those whose experience is witnessed.

Judith Herman, in her book *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), writes eloquently about the aftermath of violence in situations of domestic abuse, as well as political terror:

“Witnesses as well as victims are subject to the dialectic of trauma. It is difficult for an observer to remain clearheaded and calm, to see more than a few fragments of the picture at one time, to retain all the pieces, and to fit them together. It is even more difficult to find a language that conveys fully and persuasively what one has seen. Those who attempt to describe the atrocities that they have witnessed also risk their own credibility. To speak publicly about one’s knowledge of atrocities is to invite the stigma that attaches to victims.” [p. 2]

Whether in the context of massive, calculated, large-scale violence or “small,” humiliating violations, whether the violence is personal, structural or collective, a single event, or continuous and chronic, whether it is political or intimate, witnesses assume risks. ... These risks are biological, psychological, interpersonal, societal, spiritual, and material.

Let me start with the body. The body’s cuing system can become an unreliable guide, producing psychological effects that not only disrupt the individual, but which also tangle interpersonal relationships. Attempts to manage the cascade of biological, psychological and interpersonal disruptions can create more chaos. This is a slide that South African colleagues Lane Benjamin and Sarah Crawford Brown produced to conceptualize the biological and psychological effects on relationships of exposure to chronic continuous violence.

From recent neuroimaging studies, we now know that trauma following exposure to violence – whether childhood maltreatment or political torture – produces consistent changes in the brain. An agitated limbic system becomes cut off from the rational

resources of the prefrontal cortex losing access to the cortex's ability to put emotional experiences in a verbal and coherent narrative form, to dampen inappropriate fear responses and connect current events with one's autobiography. Binaries--us versus them distinctions, black and white thinking--dominate. Shades of grey are the province of the cortex, which is as if sundered.

Even as I speak some of you may be having sensations in your body ... you may be noticing a tightness in your chest or throat, a restlessness in your legs, a wavering of attentionand some of you may be aware of feelings, for instance, of irritation or sadness. These sensations and feelings may well be biological and psychological sequellae of experiences in the past that have now invaded your present, even altering your neurochemical environment. These responses are a nearly inevitable reminder of witnessing violence. The way we manage our reactions—those that affect our mind, body and spirit—impacts the life of our families, our communities, and our nations.

Here is a simple exercise I ask people to do. Imagine a work group of 4 persons. They have all been witnesses to extreme violent events and they have been dysregulated by them. They are involved in a common task and have work to get done. Now imagine that each of them has evolved a different coping pattern such that a dominant quality intermingles with their personality. One is a little spacey, one hyper-vigilant, one morose and one quick to anger. How well will they get on with the tasks at hand? Now imagine the four people are a family. Place the family at the dinner table. What will conversation be like?

Interpersonally, we know that there are significant effects of exposure to violence. As people have their assumptions of the world shattered – life is fair, life is good, life is predictable, life is under my control – they tend to isolate themselves from others. True engagement diminishes. Silence and even secrecy enter relationships. Seamus Deane, in his memoir *Reading in the Dark*, eloquently captures this:

“So broken was my father’s family that it felt to me like a catastrophe you could live with only if you kept quiet, let it die down of its own accord like a dangerous fire...I felt we lived in an empty space with a long cry from him ramifying through it. At other times, it appeared to be as cunning and articulate as a labyrinth, closely designed, with someone sobbing at the heart of it.”

From Seamus Dean, *Reading in the Dark*

Recent neurobiological research tells us more about interpersonal consequences. Threats to one's group, which happens in instances of political violence, can trigger the shutting down of brain capacities for empathy, compassion, reflection and dialogue. This can occur when there is sensory overload or emotional overload (such as exposure to terror, horror, helplessness or humiliation). Feeling favorably towards strangers is often the first set of functions to disappear. A person may have the experience of being a solo self. Cortical top-down processes are “off-line” and not available to regulate aggression. This is a dangerous situation that we observe -- or face -- frequently. Now we have the neuroscience to support what we already know.

When whole swaths of people in a community have been exposed to violence over time, we can, as Kai Erikson (1995), points out, speak of traumatized communities as distinct from assemblies of traumatized persons.

“Sometimes the tissues of the community can be damaged in much the same way as the tissues of the mind and body...but even when that does not happen, traumatic wounds inflicted on individuals can combine to create a mood, an ethos – a group culture, almost that is different from (and more than) the sum of the private wounds that make it up. Trauma, that is, has a social dimension.” (185)

In communities, we can have wounded individuals, assemblies of wounded individuals and then a wounded community. In most cases, violence of any kind, over time, damages community. Or, if a common culture arises, it is one of cynicism, discouragement and despair. How do we re-teach, a neighborhood, a parish, a community, a town, a region, a country its loveliness?

As I mentioned earlier, my own work has been on witnessing violence and violation. I have proposed that witnessing takes place not from one position but from four. The position we are in has significant consequences.

I first presented this diagram at a conference in Cape Town in 2000, explaining that one could change witness position and that each witness position had an impact on the self, one's family, one's community and one's nation. At the end of my talk, a tall, slender man, a few years older than I, whom I shall call Peter, came to the dais and asked to speak to me. He was wiping tears from his eyes. We walked over to the side and he confided in me that he had been one of Nelson Mandela's guards on Robben Island. At first, he said, he was in the red square. He was unaware of the true nature of Apartheid, its effects on colored and Black citizens of South Africa, yet he was empowered by the system, both as a landowner in the Eastern Cape, where he had a small farm, and as a member of the SA defense forces, where he worked as a medic. He was the one who dispensed Mandela's medications... or withheld them, upon instructions from the government. Exposure to Mandela and the other political prisoners on Robben Island opened his eyes to the truth of the regime. Initially, he plummeted into a depression, aware now but seeing no alternative for himself, no way to extricate himself from his situation and predicament. He felt disempowered, unable to act on his knowledge... in the yellow square. Eventually, however, when Mandela left the island, which he did in 1988, after 25 year there, Peter left the service and went back to school. He was now studying to be a counselor. He hoped to work in a township with Black youth and in some small measure pay back what he had been the unearned beneficiary of under Apartheid.

Peter made immediate use of the witness position grid to help account for his actions. Many people are stunned by it. I teach at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard and the Fletcher School of Diplomacy at Tufts University in classes that deal with the effects of political violence on youth. Each year, groups of students wait in line to tell

me a variation of the same story: I thought I was such a wimp. I saw my father taken away by the security forces or I saw my sister raped by the militia or I heard my father escape through a window, “But nothing happened to me. I always thought I was weak. Now I understand that a witness can have the same symptoms as a victim. I have been trapped in the aware and disempowered position but I do not have to stay there.”

It is a heartening interaction. This year a woman who had served as a Rear-D commander in Iraq, whose duties included support of the family and supervision of mortuary affairs actions, found herself “emotional” in ways she had not experienced before when two close friends were shot down over Baghdad. After class, writing to the professor to explain why she abruptly left in the middle of my presentation, she wrote, "Prior to that experience in 2005, I would never have considered myself an overly emotional person, but I have recognized residual personal impact. Dr. Weingarten’s research ...put a name to ...my experience.”

Understanding one’s witness position is key to functioning well in a world in which violence and witnessing violence is commonplace. Without understanding, we cannot change our witness position. Understanding one’s witness position is key for those whose occupations over expose them to violence. We cannot stay open hearted for long or for the long-haul unless we understand our witness position and we have strategies for staying in the aware and empowered position. In a moment, I will talk about a few such strategies.

I have just said that some occupations over expose their members to violence. How professionals deal with their own witnessing has significant ripple effects outward to the wider community. As a society, we place high levels of trust in certain occupational groups who take on high levels of responsibility as well as the personal risks associated with exposure to violence. For instance, we entrust teachers with the task of educating our youth, doctors with diagnosing and treating our illnesses, clerics with ministering to our spiritual needs, police with protecting us, and journalists with informing us about our world. We expect these professionals to perform these tasks competently and with integrity. When we believe that a professional, for instance our school principal, has failed to perform his job satisfactorily, let’s say, by acting in a racist manner, we experience a betrayal of trust.

Those who are first responders to violence are at particular risk as witnesses. And yet they may never have thought about themselves as witnesses. They may never have had training in the kinds of compassionate care of the self that first responders need to stay healthy. The demands of the job may make self-care unrealistic. Further, the unspoken rule of their occupation may deem self care self-pity. Mental health professionals are faced with a particular dilemma. While emotional expressiveness is what they are trying to draw out in their clients, objectivity for themselves is seen as the gold standard.

The same witness position grid can be applied to professionals who serve others. Position One occurs when a person is an aware and empowered witness to violence or violation. Taking action, and clarity about what actions to take, goes along with the experience of this witness position. A person is likely to feel competent and effective in Position One. Position Two may be the position that is most dangerous to others. People

who witness violence and violation, who are oblivious about what they are witnessing, but nonetheless respond as if they know what they are doing, will be misguided. Their actions will be ineffective at best and harmful at worst. The negative impact of witnessing from this position may be far-reaching, particularly if the person witnessing occupies a position of power or is perceived as having power. Those in the unaware and empowered witness position may become perpetrators. Position Three warrants a certain amount of pity, except that the effects on others, not just the self, are so disastrous. If one is unaware and disempowered, the potential for being non-protective when one should be protective and passive when one should be active is so great as to make it a near certainty. A professional who is unaware of and thus passive in relation to the urgent need of a client has abandoned that client and the effects may be as harmful as actions taken from Position Two. Position Four may be the most common for professionals who serve others. In this position, a person is aware but uncertain what to do or lacking the internal or external resources to act exactly as he or she knows to do. This position saps a person's energy, enthusiasm and resolve.

In the case of clerics, we know that they are often first responders. In the United States, they are five times as likely than a mental health professional to be turned to in the case of a death of a loved one. Since the sexual abuse scandals, secular Roman Catholic priests report levels of depression and anxiety seven times the rate of the general population. While they are called upon to be traumatologists, they are rarely trained as such. The impact of witnessing so much suffering is often beyond their capacity to bear. The dysfunctional ways clerics have tried to manage their own suffering has had devastating effects beyond themselves to entire parishes and communities.

The model suggests that only the aware and empowered position is "safe" for people. This assertion is backed up by research in a great many areas.

Aware of our witness position, we have a chance to change positions. If we are overwhelmed we may erroneously believe that relief can come by moving into unawareness, a cognitive numbing strategy. However, the only relief and benefit to the ones we serve comes from moving into the aware and empowered position, that is, moving up not over.

There are many ways of moving into the aware and empowered position, and I've written extensively about this. For today, I want to mention three: compassionate witnessing, reasonable hope, and the idea that the small is not trivial.

There are a myriad of specific actions one can take to move up into the aware and empowered square. One type of action comes about when we turn an experience of unintended witnessing of violence or violation into compassionate witnessing, by choosing to witness. Choosing to witness violence shifts the dynamics of helplessness in powerful ways. I am sure everyone in this room has many examples from your own life. On one end of the continuum is something like this: I am standing in line at the pharmacy and the man in front of me is berating the young clerk because his prescription is not ready. When it is my turn, I can say, "I'm really sorry that man lit into you. That was really unfair. I hope the rest of your day goes better." To more complex compassionate witnessing, for instance, working with traumatized communities.

Colleagues of mine and I worked in Kosovo in the aftermath of the war. We spent weeks reflecting back to people their stories of survival in ways that highlighted their resourcefulness and courage, offering a compassionate witnessing that helped all of us feel more aware and empowered.

Compassionate witnessing of others who have suffered violence is easier if we are supported by some ideas about hope and harder with some other ideas about hope. Thinking and writing about hope has been a second major focus of my work for the last decade.

I think of hope as something we do. Of course, hope may be a feeling, but I am concerned mainly with the practice of hope. In any case, I believe that feeling follows action. The practice of hope makes life purposeful and meaningful. It gives one something to do.

But what one does is inextricably related to how we understand hope. Hope that is best expressed in images of rainbows and butterflies will direct us to activities that may not touch the suffering that we and others around us experience.

Unlike what I call rainbow hope, which can set up unrealistic expectations, reasonable hope, consistent with the meaning of the modifier, suggests something both sensible and moderate, directing our attention to what is within reach more than what may be desired but unattainable. Many people, considering their experience in relation to “hope,” are daunted by its accumulated lofty meanings in current cultural discourse and (wrongly) classify themselves as hopeless. Reasonable hope softens the polarity between hope and despair, hope and hopelessness (Flaskas, 2007b) and allows (more) people to place themselves in the category of the hopeful.

“Reasonable hope” refers to actions that one takes. This is in contrast to “rainbow hope,” which refers to feelings one may or may not be able to summon. Whereas hope is most often considered the attribute of an individual, reasonable hope can be the actions of one or many people, acting together or individually.

Time is a critical dimension of our understanding of hope. Hope’s objective is most often placed in an eagerly awaited future, with the arc of time between the present and the future filled with anticipation. Reasonable hope’s objective is the process of making sense of what exists now in the belief that this prepares us to meet what lies ahead. With reasonable hope, the present is filled with working not waiting; we scaffold ourselves to prepare for the future.

Supported by the idea of reasonable hope -- and not undermined by ideas that derive from rainbow hope -- people are more likely to find ways to move into the aware and empowered position.

The third idea that supports the aware and empowered position is that small actions need not be trivial. In this example a simple acknowledgement turned what might have been an overwhelming encounter—one in which I felt aware and disempowered – into an encounter in which both of us felt aware and empowered. My belief that small actions

need not be trivial ones let me stay connected to the person, believing that I could offer something of value to her even though the scales of my offering in comparison to her experience were so skewed. Believing this allowed the encounter to unfold in a way that created a moment of healing for both of us.

This event happened not too long ago. I had lost an earring that I had bought in 1993. It wasn't expensive, but it was versatile and so I wore it all the time. I went back to the store where I had bought it, but they had nothing comparable. I went next door and there was the very woman, a Tibetan, who had sold me the earring I sought to replace. Delighted, I showed her the earring, told her I was looking for another black earring, but that it didn't have to be all-black, since I had taken to heart what she had told me at the time, "Plain black looks better set off by something contrasting."

The woman looked at me with wide, dark eyes as she knelt to take a pair of earrings from a low shelf.

"Thank you for telling me that."

"Well, it's true," I continued. "Actually, I remember everything you have said to me over the years." And I had. She had sold me two other pieces of jewelry at the other store.

She got up from where she was bending and faced me. "I was trafficked here."

"Excuse me?"

"I know this is very hard to hear. But I was trafficked to the States."

I thanked her for telling me and told her a little bit about myself. She too shared more over the next few minutes. She showed me a pair of earrings and I said, "Whatever you give me, I accept. I'll remember this conversation for the rest of my life."

What I did was small. I told her that I had remembered what she had said to me and yet, obviously, to her it meant that I had seen her as a person of value and that her opinions had mattered to me. She then confided in me a profoundly significant part of her life's journey while, as a visitor to her store, I was surrounded by evidence of a very different part of that journey. The exchange was a vivid example that small actions need not be trivial. Believing that this is the case, I stayed aware and empowered during the encounter and did not slip as I might have, into square four, feeling aware but disempowered.

As many of you may have already observed, moments of healing are almost always associated with feeling aware and empowered.

This conference is going to provide abundant opportunities for compassionate witnessing, for turning toward reasonable hope and away from rainbow hope, for working with the notion that the small is not trivial and above all for recognizing the importance of staying in the aware and empowered position.

In closing I'd like to share a practice with you that I have been working with for the last several years called Insight Dialogue. Insight Dialogue is a form of interpersonal meditation that was developed by Gregory Kramer and I think it may have something important to offer us as we spend the next two days together. For while there is the potential for moments of healing for us at the conference, there is also the potential for any of us to feel overwhelmed, aware but disempowered.

I am going to read a massively edited version of the guidelines and then lead us in a very short exercise using them.

They are pause, relax, open, trust emergence, listen deeply, and speak the truth.

The first instruction in Insight Dialogue is Pause. Dwell in the present moment with immediate experience before speaking, or while listening.

The second instruction is Relax. When we Pause into awareness, we also relax the body and mind. Whenever we recognize tension, we can choose ease.

In Open, we allow awareness to extend beyond the body. We are simply and fully present with others with a kindly, accepting, mindful awareness. In Open, awareness encompasses the external as well as the internal. It is wider, more spacious.

The fourth instruction is to Trust Emergence. It is a reminder to let go of illusions of control and to drop the weight of being in charge of what is beyond the grip of the rational. When we Trust Emergence, our speaking and listening derive from our making sense of the moment as it is unfolding.

Last, a pair: Listen Deeply and Speak the Truth. To Listen Deeply is to surrender fully to the arising words of our co-conversationalists. Grounded in clear awareness and sensitive to the speaker's offering, we are a receptive field touched by the words, emotions, and energies of our fellow human beings.

Then attuned to the moment, we Speak the Truth. With Speak the Truth we are invited to bring our highest intentions and refined perceptions into language.

These guidelines are used with a contemplation. I suggest that we take 6 minutes -- 3 minutes each -- and with a partner you use the guidelines to talk about your responses to this contemplation:

What will help you participate with a radically open heart at this conference?

I am going to use this small chime to signal when it is time to start to speak/listen and when it is time to change speakers and when it is time to rejoin the whole group. So find a partner, decide --quickly-- who will speak first, and listen for the chime that will signal that I will speak the guidelines again and then you can begin speaking, first one and then the other. I will use the chime to tell you when it is time to switch speakers.

Bell. Start.

Pause. Relax. Open. Trust Emergence. Listen Deeply. Speak the Truth.
What will help you participate at this conference with a radically open heart?

Bell.

I hope these guidelines will be useful to you through the next few days. For me they encourage what my colleague James Griffith calls “a committed opening of one’s being,” (Griffith, 53). They encourage me to open to wonder and awe. Happily, opening to these emotions maximally activates my brain to the very states -- reflection, dialogue, empathy and compassion - that promote healing and improve the social fabric of our communities. Opening to wonder and awe is not necessarily pleasant. The work of healing involves opening in wonder and awe to what the poet Jorie Graham calls “the sound of a sorrow that is inseparable from terminal anger,” (Graham, 2004, p.10, citation from *On Hating to Hate*). This is the sound that people make when they suffer from violence. It is what there is to hear.

I am going to close now with one more thought, this time about Imagination. We are at this conference, fundamentally, because each of us wants to participate in the transformation of violence. Transforming violence requires imagination, but also the ability to un-imagine. Harold C. Goddard, the noted Shakespeare scholar, has written that while force can impose order on chaos, it can never restore harmony. Only imagination can. Something that I believe is playing out now in the Middle East.

How do we imagine a world without violence and unimagine a world with violence? That is our task. We must unimagine what is here and imagine what might be. This is work I believe we are all devoted to doing. I look forward to spending the next two days with you.