

The Role of Witnessing: Influence on Human Actions

Through the election, the BLM movement, the California fires, the COVID pandemic, and *much* more, 2020 has been a culturally tumultuous time. I, like many people, have experienced these things while being in quarantine. This has led me to feel isolated and unempowered and confused. Sometimes when things get incredibly overwhelming, I am tempted by the thought that I could turn the TV off, turn my phone off, and completely ignore the flood of news. I do not listen to this voice; the immense privilege I have that allows me that as an option is the very reason why doing so is unquestionably wrong. My Poems, Politics, and Plays class has felt very timely. I have been grateful for the opportunity to reflect on coping with dilemmas and deciding to act through the lens of witnessing as well as discerning the motivators behind actions.

My personal experience with dealing with dilemmas, especially relating to activism, relates to my childhood growing up in the South. I attended a small, private school in Tennessee. This included a lack of diversity concerning income, race, and ethnicity. I could see that the school was making an effort to change this; the lower grades were much more heterogeneous than my classes. However, what did this mean for my classmates and me? In other words, how could we be activists when we were not witnesses? Additionally, under these circumstances, what motivated many of my peers to be informed and accountable for themselves and others? As we discussed in my Poems, Politics, and Plays class, one of the most powerful tools we have is listening. Despite many of us not being witnesses, we can still support those who are by figuratively passing the microphone and listening. Blackout Tuesday was a significant day in the BLM movement. Many of my peers posted black squares on our Instagrams to show support for the cause. The original idea was to vow to stop business-as-usual activity. Black executives

Jamila Thomas and Brianna Agyemang wanted musicians and businesses to use under a post #TheShowMustBePaused to shine a light on the Black Lives Matter movement and the injustice of the police system. However, this got misconstrued into millions posting a black square—instead of donating or sharing resources—to prove that they are not racist. In retrospect, it is clear that Blackout Tuesday resulted facilitated performative activism. Performative activism can be classified as the participation in activism for social gain, not passion for a cause. When one clicked on #BLM, real and valuable information was buried under millions of blank, black squares. This, in effect, silenced those with something to say, which is unfortunate because it is the opposite of what most were trying to do. In response, many of my friends began frequently re-posting valuable resources such as the names of local black-owned businesses to support, links to GoFundMe pages for those arrested at protests, protest information, information about defunding the police, and more. Many long talks were had as to how, as white people, we can use our privilege to be anti-racist. This was a kind of call-to-action for me as I felt deeply upset by the corruption of the police department. Through conversation and reading, I better understood that each person has different privileges, so it is important to always listen to and support others. Some of the most impactful books that I read include *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson, *Beyond Hashtag Activism* by Mae Elise Cannon, and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. In my high school, community activism has been essential for creating a standard of an accepting, anti-racist atmosphere. This begins with constructing opportunities for growth and change. Following the BLM movement, many of my peers petitioned my high school to remove an outdated, tone-deaf ceremony that annually honored George Washington and other founding fathers. As this usually took place during February, I am hopeful that they will replace it with something to honor Black History month. This decision from my high school prompted a

response by Fox News and many other new outlets. Laura Ingraham condescendingly called my school “a little girls’ school,” and oddly enough, it filled me with a sense of pride because I knew that we were taking a step in the right direction. Despite the backlash, we are trying to better our knowledge, attitude, skills, and critical awareness through open-ears and accountability.

Each person’s motivation to participate in activism is unique. Often, a person directly connects with or care about someone who relates to the cause. For example, if one is invested in the immigration crisis in America because they themselves are immigrants or they have loved ones that are. Another common motivator that falls under this category is the influence of family and friends. One’s surroundings have a great impact on one’s beliefs, especially in their early years. With no exposure to an opinion outside of one’s own, it is difficult to change viewpoints. Something that is often overlooked is how the education that one receives influences their outlook. If one is taught something for years, it starts to become an unquestionable fact in one’s life. This can be extremely damaging. Additionally, if schools do not equip students to be analytical, questioning readers, they can readily fall for the traps of fake news. Without societal support, it is harder to become an activist but even more essential. If a person goes against the grain to become an activist and ally where there are not many, this shows courage and strength. Social media is enabling this to happen more frequently as it supplies encouragement to whoever seeks it. For example, rallying for Biden/Kamala in the deep South might be unpopular, but that does not mean it is not right. If one takes a chance and publicly advocates for an unpopular opinion, it is likely others who agree in private will join. The motivations behind being an activist can be vague, however it usually results from quality of character and outside support.

I recently studied Carolyn Forché's concept of "poetry of witness" and read excerpts from the poetry book she edited, *Against Forgetting*. It is an anthology that denounces tyranny and injustice through a collection of social—personal yet also political—poems. I deeply admire that the only force Forché exerted over her book was her creative license. She focused entirely on giving a platform to those who witnessed and wrote about hardships, such as war or imprisonment. She did not reshape the poets' words or cover any ugly truths. A poem that particularly struck me from *Against Forgetting* was "Forced March" by Miklós Radnóti. This is the last poem Radnóti wrote, and it describes him being forced to march to an unspecified location before his death during the Holocaust. A loved one of Radnóti published the poem in remembrance of his struggle. By publishing the poems in this anthology to represent those unseen by history, Carolyn Forché sets the example of using one's platform to give a voice to those silenced. This should be the blueprint used going forward.

During my Poems, Politics, and Plays class, one of the literary works that we studied is "The Guard at the Binh Thuy Bridge." This poem by John Balaban describes the guard at the bridge during the Vietnam War. The guard spies a woman wetting her face in the water, and, out of boredom, he aims his gun at her and contemplates killing her. The guard is faced with a dilemma and ultimately decides to lower his weapon. Balaban comments on the delicateness of life and how we are all just one decision away from totally altering a life. It is impossible for the reader to know why the guard was tempted to kill the woman and why he did not. The guard's mercy towards the woman is rooted deeply in his experiences and character. Taking place during the Vietnam War, the poem shows the normalization of violence. The guard has been a witness to war for so long that he is almost numb to it; his trauma from the war almost pushes him to an extreme display of anger. Despite this, the guard's morals render him unable to kill her. It

demonstrates the many factors that decide how we react to challenges. Balaban comments on the impact our experiences and innate nature have on our desire to act.

Throughout my time learning online, I have gotten the opportunity to contemplate human nature in response to dilemmas or conflicts. Applying this knowledge to activism and witnessing has enabled me to better understand the world around me. If more people adopted this outlook, perhaps we could overcome party divides and focus on furthering love instead of hate. I am grateful to be improving this skill, especially because of today's tumultuous political setting in which it is necessary. The concept of witnessing in relation to responding to a dilemma is important for all people involved in activism to know.