

The Importance of The Witness When Things Seem to Worsen

A witness is someone who experiences and records the realities of the world around them during their lifetime. As witnesses of our own lives, it is important to realize the power of what we can do with what we see, hear, and go through. We bear witness to everything around us, and over time, those present-day realities become history and important stories that need to be told. Throughout history, we have learned about countless historical events and tragedies that have occurred. The role of the witness is to take control of the narratives they have borne witness to, in order to accurately describe their truths. As we face difficult times and challenges during our lifetimes, it is important to remember our value as witnesses. When we witness something, we may respond in a number of ways. For some, expressing themselves through an artistic outlet allows them to cope. For others, taking the initiative to change the world is their way of coping. The ways in which we choose to respond allow us to take control of our narratives and set the foundation for an enlightened society. As a young woman from Newark, New Jersey, I have taken the initiative to act and become involved with my community in the midst of a lead water crisis. Such actions have been inspired by the important efforts made by James Baldwin as a writer, poet, and activist in the 20th century. As seen through Baldwin and the realities of our present-day society, reclaiming our narratives as witnesses is of undying importance.

Water is a vital and nurturing source of survival for human beings. Water is in nearly everything we consume on a daily basis. However, in 2016 it became a dangerous and hazardous resource in Newark, New Jersey. After a routine inspection, water fountains in 30 public schools in the city were shut off due to elevated levels of lead. Students were encouraged to bring bottled water to school as they would no longer have access to the fountains. Despite this, city officials constantly told parents this was not an issue to be concerned about (The Associated Press, 2016).

Lead in water can be very harmful for children during their developmental stages, and there are numerous health complications caused by lead seen in people of all ages. By 2018, thousands of homes in Newark had elevated levels of lead in their water. City officials began to distribute water filters to residents, yet further tests showed lead levels were still high even with the water filters (Iati, 2019). This was definitely something to be concerned about. My household was one of the thousands impacted by these elevated levels of lead. Though city officials attempted to distribute cases of water, the execution was poor and often forced residents to purchase their own water. As I watched my mother struggle to buy cases of bottled water every week, I realized this could no longer continue in silence.

In late 2018, a non-profit organization known as the Newark Water Coalition was created. Since its inception, the NWC has advocated for clean water for all because its volunteers believe that access to clean water is a human right. I decided to become involved in my community by volunteering with the Newark Water Coalition. As a volunteer, I distributed potable water and water filters to Newark residents as part of city-wide distributions. I also interpreted for Spanish-speaking residents while sharing helpful ways to survive with lead pipes in their homes. NWC distributions were held at multiple locations throughout the city, and volunteers did not interrogate residents in the ways that workers at city-organized distributions often did. In August 2019, the MTV Video Music Awards took place in Newark, NJ. In efforts to catch the attention of city officials and the public eye, the Newark Water Coalition protested near the arena. While award show attendees walked across the red carpet, we, as activists, brought the importance of clean water to light on national television. We could no longer be ignored. During my senior year of high school, I organized a fundraiser to donate water to the NWC with the National Honor Society. Once we prepared our donation, members of the society and I

distributed the water at a city-wide distribution, allowing them to experience the important efforts made by the organization. I bore witness to not being able to consume water from our faucet and public water fountains, and to my mother lugging home numerous cases of water each week. I chose to become active to help my community when things seemed at their worst. Today, lead pipes have been replaced for free in thousands of homes across the city because of our work with the Newark Water Coalition. There is still progress to be made, though our decision to unapologetically act has led to changes that may not have been possible otherwise.

My personal experiences as an activist are deeply rooted in the foundation laid by those who passionately and powerfully acted for change during their time. As a writer and an activist, James Baldwin is remembered for his efforts and commitment to the universal struggle for the freedom of all human beings. His work highlighted the connections between race, justice, and liberation during a divisive era in American society. Baldwin was born in Harlem in 1924, the grandson of a slave. Growing up, he found deep connections with reading, writing, and film. In much of his writing, he notes that most films were not representative of his own childhood. Baldwin recounted how as a child he fell in love with actress Joan Crawford when watching a film she starred in. As he grew older, he would come to realize this lack of representation in the media and Hollywood was an injustice (Als, 2017). As a writer, Baldwin tried his best to express himself and the African American experience in the U.S. In the 1940s, he met a fellow writer, Richard Wright, who helped him win a literary grant. He decided to take the opportunity and focus on his writing in Paris. One of his early works, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), was a semi-autobiographical novel and was written during his time in Switzerland. During this time, Baldwin was also close friends with Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who were all advocating for justice in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement in America.

Baldwin returned to the American South in the late 1950s to bear witness to the harsh realities of the Jim Crow era. He bore witness not only to his experiences as a gay African American man, but also to the experiences of the entire Black community as they faced cruel laws and violence. Baldwin often documented these experiences in letters he wrote to his family and pieces that would develop into his future works. As a public speaker, he would educate others about these realities from the most raw and valid perspective.

Baldwin's work was thought-provoking, powerful, and extremely relevant to our present-day realities. His work is what inspired Haitian-born Raoul Peck's film *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016). This hybrid documentary is an adaptation and embodiment of Baldwin's unfinished manuscript, *Remember This House*. The essay and film provide a social critique of America's unjust society and what needs to be done in order to progress through Baldwin's friendship with Medgar Evers, Malcom X, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. It follows Baldwin's time in the South and depicts the struggles faced by African Americans during the mid-20th century and today. As a visual essay, the film features clips from the 19th and 20th century that depict the terrible treatment of the African American community along with contemporary clips. This juxtaposition of the past and our present-day society is a powerful message of how little has changed and why activism is still necessary (Peck, 2016). As a witness and an activist, Baldwin inspired necessary conversations and enlightened others as best as he could in hopes of change. His work and lectures often emphasized the questions: What is going to happen to *this* country? What will be *your* role in making a change? These questions have inspired me, along with many other leaders around the world, to advocate for others by using our voices and experiences.

Today, we are bearing witness to a global pandemic in which hundreds of thousands of lives have been lost. We are also bearing witness to a country in turmoil due to the 2020

presidential election. For some, it has been helpful to express themselves through public art. In June, the Black Lives Matter movement was amplified following the ever-present police brutality against people of color. One of the ways in which people brought attention to the importance of the movement was public art. In many cities around the country, murals that read “Black Lives Matter” lined the streets. In Harlem, local artists painted “Black Lives Matter” along both sides of a main avenue. Their goal was to create art that truly represented the Harlem community as a whole, which primarily consists of people of color (Jacobs, 2020). For activists, a global pandemic has not kept them from gathering in-person and protesting. This summer, a number of protests were organized to resist the unjust actions of corrupt police departments across the country. I personally attended a protest in Newark, New Jersey, in solidarity with both my community and the African American community. It is a reminder that our realities are constantly evolving, and that history continues to be created. However, we, as witnesses, must be at the forefront of this history. Our experiences and our voices matter. The ways in which we respond to the world around us make an impact and set the foundation for future generations. Even during uncertain times, there are many ways to remain involved with one another, and there is still progress that needs to be made. When once asked what he bore witness to, Baldwin replied, “Witness to whence I came, where I am. Witness to what I’ve seen and the possibilities that I think I see...” (Williams, 1987). Now, more than ever, we must continue to take control of our narratives in order to enlighten ourselves and the world around us.

Works Cited

Als, Hilton. "Capturing James Baldwin's Legacy Onscreen". *The New Yorker*. February 6, 2017.

Print. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/02/13/capturing-james-baldwins-legacy-onscreen>

Iati, Marisa. "Toxic lead, scared parents and simmering anger: A month inside a city without clean water". *The Washington Post*. October 3, 2019. Print.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2019/10/03/toxic-lead-scared-parents-simmering-anger-month-inside-city-without-clean-water/>

Jacobs, Julia. "The 'Black Lives Matter' Street Art That Contains Multitudes". *The New York Times*. July 16, 2020. Print.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/16/arts/design/black-lives-matter-murals-new-york.html>

Peck, Raoul, director. *I Am Not Your Negro*. 2016. Written by James Baldwin. Magnolia Pictures, Amazon Studios.

The Associated Press. "Elevated Lead Levels Found in Newark Schools' Drinking Water". *The New York Times*. March 9, 2016. Print.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/10/nyregion/elevated-lead-levels-found-in-newark-schools-drinking-water.html>

Williams, Juan. "Baldwin The Witness' Testament". *The Washington Post*. December 2, 1987.

Print. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1987/12/02/baldwin-the-witness-testament/f74d821a-2608-4a9e-b629-ccf36463f84f/>