

Aren't We All Witnesses?

I.

I find myself in constant conflict and dilemma during this quarantine.

I'm sick of inhaling the toxic waste of gasoline-fueled car engines as I step outside with my teal-colored Nike running shoes; have the Lilies of the Incas conserved their soft, floral aroma? My friends and I have been isolated for 8 months, our only form of communication being iMessage's such as "How are you?" When we reunite in person, can we collectively guffaw again?

The world around us rapidly erodes. However, according to President Trump, "the root cause is not climate change." Maybe he's right...because he is the patient zero of the current issues plaguing our society, from labeling white supremacists as nonviolent American citizens, like us, to becoming the most pronounced advocate for police brutality and racial injustice.

However, the final goodbye to my friend was the most painful moment of my lockdown.

The final phone call to Room 4 in the COVID-19 wing of Stanford Health Care Hospital. The final "I love you." The final inhalation of oxygen. The final exhalation of carbon dioxide. The final spike on the heart rate monitor. Goodbye, Sam.

The government's handbook: How to Govern a Country Through a Pandemic For Dummies™ lays in the trash. And to think we could have saved hundreds of thousands of lives.

The challenge resides in determining how we should respond to such conflict, dilemma, and pain.

How did I?

II.

It was a routine; every Friday at 7:00 PM PST I walked towards the Fallon Sports Park as the cold breeze entered through my right ear and departed through my left. The milky white moon was not enough to light up the environment. So, I sprinted to the basketball courts in the park, hoping no one would jump out of the 5-foot bushes encircling the stone path to kidnap me. By the time I stepped foot on the concrete court, I was already tired, debating whether I would play or call my parents to pick me up.

If I chose to play with my friends, the same person, Justin, would always fiercely guard me. He was surprisingly physical for his short height and relentless in his pursuit to prevent me from scoring points. Simply put, Justin was motivated. On and off the court, he challenged me to improve, physically and intellectually. He was my 24-hour Energy Drink. Unfortunately, our middle schools and high schools were always 10 minutes apart from each other.

However, four years ago, Justin stopped coming to the court every Friday night. Was he injured? How do I ask him if he sprained his ankle if he does not have a phone? Whatever.

Five weeks later, I downloaded Instagram and saw the five-week-old posts of my friends. Justin had stopped coming to play basketball because he committed suicide. The black-and-white photos of his yearbook smile captioned “RIP” startled me. No adult I interacted with in those five weeks ever mentioned that my friend, our community member had committed suicide; they

disregarded what had occurred and attempted to justify their ignorance by minimizing my friend's internal suffering, labeling his story as "characteristic behavior of teenagers who are too academically incompetent in school and therefore have no future. Anyways, need a summer job to improve your resume?" What a utopic reality I live in!

Angered, I interviewed dozens of students at Justin's school on why he decided to commit suicide: the counselors at his school were not willing to help him face the bullies who incessantly teased him for his height and A- grades. Troubled by my community's unconsciousness, I immediately acted to raise awareness about my friend's story and fulfill my responsibility as a witness to moral ineptitude, not his suicide.

I worked to create an organization, WeCare, that would focus on mental health issues. Brainstorming the specific ways in which WeCare would serve others was surprisingly straightforward. For me, encouraging words, such as those from a loved one, have helped solder broken wires. I wanted to create the same opportunity for others. I organized monthly events where community members could consult with psychologists for free and interact with other people in similar situations to establish collective morale.

III.

I chose to actively respond to conflict, dilemma, and pain by embodying the role of a witness and an activist to prevent others from suffering alone and committing suicide.

A witness's duty is to discuss the torturous reality he or she experienced and publicize these traumatic events to ensure that other citizens hear about it. One prominent witness is James Baldwin, an African American writer who explored the intersection of race and society during

the latter half of the 20th century. He believed that witnesses who fail to inform society about the pain they suffered, or even closely observed, they become bystanders, supporters of the perpetrator.

In 1958, James Baldwin returned to America to witness and document the multitude of systemically propagated racial injustices African Americans experienced. In Author Peck's film *I Am Not Your Negro*, an extension of James Baldwin's *Remember This House*, James Baldwin upheld the role of a witness. Baldwin spoke to thousands of black and white citizens to cultivate even the slightest social acceptance of African Americans. Even through his manuscripts, Baldwin portrayed how African Americans were stoned and denied equal opportunity through an array of different media. He believed that the urge to act is not sufficient to fulfill one's responsibility as a witness because the details of the suffering will still remain concealed. Thus, those who experience similar, pain-inflicting realities will not cease to. Collectively, we have the authority to suppress the rise of such systemic injustice. "Deciding to act" and "witness" are perpetual synonyms.

Baldwin evolved into an activist by acting proactively. Yet, not all activists are witnesses. An activist can mimic the role of a witness without being a witness themselves by acknowledging the presence of the traumatic reality the witness experiences to a larger group of people. Such activists cannot discuss intimate details about a trauma they have not experienced.

However, I do not advocate for the abolishment of isolated coping mechanisms such as coloring in a sketchbook. Merely engaging in such activities in response to the witnessed difficulties is both immoral and unethical. For instance, when you witness a police officer killing an unarmed African American, it is just as evil as the crime itself to simply scan biased news

articles and not demand justice and true change. At least for once in America's history, we, the government and society, must conscientiously uphold the necessary change we enact.

Like Baldwin, a witness can perform his or her moral and ethical duty through a public form of art centered on the suffering. A visual depiction of the existence and effects of a traumatic event may be more evocative for some. For instance, the Vietnam War Memorial, designed by Maya Lin, in Washington, D.C. is a global symbol visually demonstrating the costs of war. Though it may just seem like a black marble slab inscribed with thousands of names, the Vietnam War Memorial acts as a never-dying witness to the Vietnam War. Each name on the wall represents a life, one that conflict and dilemma took away to inflict pain upon a nation. Maya Lin is an activist, not a witness. The Vietnam War Memorial is both a witness and an activist. It influences generations of people to become activists who suppress even the thought of constructing similar walls due to more, unnecessary human carnage.

Witnesses, like us, like me, can prevent similar forms of trauma from being imposed on others by taking command of the narrative. To echo Baldwin, those who deliberately abandon their "witness responsibilities" are synonymous with the perpetrators.

IV.

I did not passively watch my friend tie a rope around his neck. I did not know for weeks that he did. I am not his witness. I am a witness to the thousands of perpetrators who entombed

his story. Not one of his witnesses transmitted his story or initiated the rebuilding of the local education system. A system that killed the one empathetic teenager I knew.

If I had chosen not to act, his suicide coupled with the lack of “WeCare” would have continued to effectuate insomnia-causing nightmares. By acting, I proved to myself and my community that I could transform pain, which controlled me for days after learning that I had lost my friend, into activism. As a witness, I’ve learned that we always witness, but only a few mature into witnesses. As a male South Asian student, I take an oath: as a witness, I will not hesitate to epitomize the beliefs of Baldwin and advocate for those who have suffered and cannot physically speak.

I have decided to act, perpetually, not perpetually perpetrate. Will you?

VI.

I hope that WeCare will continue to serve as a space where we can openly communicate with each other. I will be your witness.

During the March 2019 event, the Mayor of Fremont exclaimed, “The suicide rate has decreased by more than 15%!” due to WeCare’s programs. Collectively helping people overcome their mental challenges so they can focus on what matters most to them is what matters to me. By raising awareness about the severity of mental health and destigmatizing it, I find purpose in helping prevent more friends from feeling devalued by others, or even themselves.

I failed to recognize Justin's challenges. This was my old self, one that I have matured from. I strive to uphold my oath and continue serving as a witness and an activist. I look forward to the moment when we all spontaneously fulfill our responsibilities as witnesses, eliminating the need for WeCare and such oaths.

Works Cited

Brooks, Aaron. "7 Unexpected Ways Instagram Has Changed the World." *Social Media Today*, 7 Oct. 2018, www.socialmediatoday.com/news/7-unexpected-ways-instagram-has-changed-the-world/539032/.

Kushner, Tony. "Notes about Political Theater." *The Kenyon Review*, vol. 19, no. 3/4, 1997, pp. 19-34. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/4337551. Accessed 28 Oct. 2020.

Schroth, Raymond A. *The Return of James Baldwin*. 24 Apr. 2017, www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2017/04/24/return-james-baldwin.