

Giving Testimony, Receiving Testimony

Notes from the Field

Patrice K. Curtis, November 2011

Introduction

When I read that the Collegium 2011 Distinguished Scholar would be Rev. Dr. Gabriella Lettini, I wanted to bring the voices of those affected by war into the space. The use of testimony in the public square most often focuses on the ways in which content can be used to affect policy, offer salve to those in grief, and begin the healing process. Before testimony reaches the public square, there is a time in which the testifier shares their narrative with a testimonial interviewer. Indeed, it is in the process of the first interview that testimony is born.

In the first decade of my working life, I worked for a few years in countries wracked by civil war. I also worked in Washington, DC for another five years or so on humanitarian aid and development policies of countries where civil war had destroyed livelihoods and families. Specific to this paper, I spent time in Kenya, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. This is not a scholarly paper; it is based upon my own experience as a testimonial interviewer of internally displaced persons and refugee women in Kenya and eastern Bosnia-Herzegovina in the 1990s. The refugees in Kenya largely came from southern Sudan, forced from their country by a several decades old civil war. The women in Tuzla came from all cities and villages in eastern former Yugoslavia.

I was a participant-observer, that is, I lived in the refugee camp in Kenya, lived in the refugee camp in Croatia, and lived in the small city of Tuzla, where many were housed in schools set up like dormitories, with one family *per room* -- housed internally displaced people. Building rapport and creating a safe environment in which women felt comfortable occurred through a process of spending time together, visiting with them repeatedly over a period of time, until an opportunity would organically present itself for them to talk deeply about their experiences.

Before I undertook my first interviews in camps, I spoke at length with political and religious leaders of the communities about my intent. Most suggested that women would not want to talk about the horrors; that husbands and wives often did not tell each other the totality of their individual experiences in order to protect their spouse from pain. I found this to be true when both spouses were present; interviews were often stilted, so I abandoned joint interviews. There could have been several reasons for this: women tended to defer to men; spouses had previously edited what they had told their partner and were afraid of revealing new information; the relationship between spouses may have been strained from living in camps and centers with little privacy; or something about the way I was perceived. For example, in Bosnia, I was often chastised – as a proxy foreign journalist – for the way in which Bosnian Muslims had been portrayed as being

like Africans in the foreign press. Many said to me, "This is not Africa," and it was a common phrase in newspapers.

Nonetheless, I found that when women were interviewed in a one-to-one environment, they were open about wartime events. (My interviews included a women translators.) Not surprisingly, they would avoid lengthy discussions about violent events, such as rape and murders. At times, testifiers would not explicitly state what had happened, but fidgeting, a poignant silence, suddenly downcast eyes, an increase in the speed of oration would hint at something that remained unspoken. In receiving testimony, it was a fine balance between knowing when to probe because more may be forthcoming, and simply letting go. This was not, after all, testimony being prepared for a court of law.

In The Anthropology and Ethnography of Violence, Antonius Robben and Carolyn Nordstrom write, "Many ethnographers who study violence have experienced bewilderment on first seeing it. There seems to be no higher ground from which to observe the world of violence with relative detachment."¹

My personal experience and my observation of other workers around me requires that I suggest an extension of this definition to those who are in the theater of war, geographically just outside of it, or arrive just after the end of war.

Robben and Nordstrom continue, stating that the shock felt is best "qualified as existential shock. ... It is a disorientation about the boundaries between life and death, which appear erratic rather than discrete. It is the paradoxical awareness that human lives can be constituted as much around their destruction as around their reconstruction and that violence becomes a practice of negating the reason of existence of others and accentuating the survival of oneself. It is this confrontation of the ethnographer's own sense of being with lives constructed on haphazard grounds that provokes the bewilderment and sense of alienation experienced by most of us."²

My disorientation began just a few years out of college, when I spent six weeks as a volunteer in a refuge camp in eastern Sudan. The camp was the destination for Eritreans fleeing attack by Ethiopians. My work then did not include receiving testimony; I just did whatever labor was needed, a pair of hands. But I witnessed the streams of people coming into camp and being hospitalized or dieing, the children with distended bellies and unnatural red hair; all this, caused by acts of violence.

¹ Antonius C.G.M. Robben and Carolyn Nordstrom, "The Anthropology and Ethnography of Violence," in *Fieldwork Under Fire: Contemporary Studies of Violence and Survival*, ed. Robben and Nordstrom (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1995), 13.

² Ibid.

The shock came out in ways now funny to me. For example, I was in the grocery store at home, a short time after returning. I found myself standing before a laundry detergent, and I simply could not believe the dizzying number of options. Of course, there were no more choices than when I had left six weeks prior. But I found that I could not articulate why two or three options was not enough. I walked out without buying anything.

Testimonies

I have chosen parts of six testimonies to share with you. I offer a few of these with trepidation, and only after discussions with others, who shall remain anonymous, as I do take full responsibility. The question I grappled with was deciding whether or not to share testimony where women described what really happened to them. I still stand before you with some nervousness, but need to say that the reason I have decided in a few cases to be blunt is that this is what occurred over a decade ago to these women is still happening today. Just a few months ago, a female lawyer in Libya accused Libyan soldiers of gang-raping her. Secondly, a few weeks ago a new series on PBS, called *Women, War and Peace*, showed the first hour-long segment called *I Came to Testify*, which explored how the courage of 16 Bosnian women who testified in court, facing three men who were accused of sexual violence against many women. Sexual violence has long-reaching impact, stretching over multiple generations.

My hope, then, is that you will stay focused on the fact that we live in a world where women are still targeted by combatants; that this is part of the moral injury of war for soldiers who find themselves at odds with their compatriots who find such behavior acceptable; and that progressive liberal religion must raise its voice against such gross human rights transgressions within our faith traditions and in the public square.

I have only used the initials of testifiers for their privacy. I know many of these women are still alive. Let us begin. This is the voice of A.G., a 32-year-old Dinka woman, who lived in southern Sudan:

Testimony of A.G.

A.G. shared her testimony with me on July 30, 1994 in Kakuma camp in Kenya. She and her family, grown by two boys and a girl, had lived in camps for six years at that point, living out of a mud hut, crammed in with hundreds of others. A.G.'s was one of many testimonies of fleeing war.

Here is the testimony of a woman's flight from Srebrenica to Tuzla, Bosnia.

Testimony of E.M.

Now we enter into a place where we must open our hearts and sit with great suffering. Here are two voices of women who fled from Zaire:

Testimony of M.F.
Testimony of H.Z.

Refugees might escape their homes, and elude death on the road to the camps. But over-crowding in camps can be fraught with difficulty. M.N., a Dinka, shared this:

Testimony of M.N.

As one receiving testimony, we are separate from testifiers as one who has not shared their experience. Still and not surprisingly, though, we can experience connectedness through empathic wounding in the face of so much suffering. We can be reminded in unexpected ways of our connectedness too. In Kenya, crowded camp conditions had resulted in a malaria epidemic. Although I had the resources to be able to take prophylactics, I contracted malaria too, experiencing malarial fever, the deep fatigue, and frightening auditory hallucinations. Perhaps not surprisingly, our shared experience of malaria brought me into closer connection. The veil between those who give testimony and those who receive is thin; our shared humanity is made stark by giving and receiving testimony.

Some scholars argue that “institutional practices instrumentalise pain to construct political subjects and to dramatise the dominant truth-claims of the institutional order.”³ Receiving personal testimony – not for strictly institutional purposes but for the potentiality to increase understanding of what had happened – poses a different sort of challenge for the one receiving testimony. In these conversations, theological questions rise to the fore: what answer can liberal religion provide in the face of such evil? Is witnessing the impact of evil sufficient? What pastoral care can we offer someone so afflicted?

I leave you with one final voice. R.N.’s husband was killed by the SPLA, and she became separated from his family and her own, with a newborn child. She eventually made her way to Kakuma refugee camp. She said,

Testimony of R.N.

³ C. Nadia Seremetakis, “Memories of the Aftermath: Political Violence, Posttraumatic Stress, and Cultural Transitions to Democracy,” in *Women and the Politics of Peace: Contributions to a Culture of Women’s Resistance* (Centre for Women’s Studies: Zagreb, 1997), 133.