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TESTIMONY

CRISES OF WITNESSING IN LITERATURE, PSYCHOANALYSIS, AND HISTORY

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the testimony, which found a particular reverberation in my own life . . .

Literature has become for me the site of my own stammering. Literature, as that which can sensitively bear witness to the Holocaust, gives me a voice, a right, and a necessity to survive. Yet, I cannot discount the literature which in the dark awakens the screams, which opens the wounds, and which makes me want to fall silent. Caught by two contradictory wishes at once, to speak or not to speak, I can only stammer. Literature, for me, in these moments, has had a performative value: my life has suffered a burden, undergone a transference of pain. If I am to continue reading, I must, like David Copperfield, read *as if for life*.

TWO

Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening

DORI LAUB, M.D.

I

A Record That Has Yet to Be Made

The listener to the narrative of extreme human pain, of massive psychic trauma, faces a unique situation. In spite of the presence of ample documents, of searing artifacts and of fragmentary memoirs of anguish, he comes to look for something that is in fact nonexistent; a record that has yet to be made. Massive trauma precludes its registration; the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked out, malfunction. The victim's narrative—the very process of bearing witness to massive trauma—does indeed begin with someone who testifies to an absence, to an event that has not yet come into existence, in spite of the overwhelming and compelling nature of the reality of its occurrence. While historical evidence to the event which constitutes the trauma may be abundant and documents in vast supply, the trauma—as a known event and not simply as an overwhelming shock—has not been truly witnessed yet, not been taken cognizance of. The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to—and heard—is, therefore, the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the "knowing" of the event is given birth to. The listener, therefore, is a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*. The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time.

By extension, the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself. The relation of the victim to the event of the trauma, therefore, impacts on the relation

of the listener to it, and the latter comes to feel the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread and conflicts that the trauma victim feels. He has to address all these, if he is to carry out his function as a listener, and if trauma is to emerge, so that its henceforth impossible witnessing can indeed take place. The listener, therefore, by definition partakes of the struggle of the victim with the memories and residues of his or her traumatic past. The listener has to feel the victim's victories, defeats and silences, know them from within, so that they can assume the form of testimony.

The listener, however, is also a separate human being and will experience hazards and struggles of his own, while carrying out his function of a witness to the trauma witness. While overlapping, to a degree, with the experience of the victim, he nonetheless does not become the victim—he preserves his own separate place, position and perspective; a battleground for forces raging in himself, to which he has to pay attention and respect if he is to properly carry out his task.

The listener, therefore, has to be at the same time a witness to the trauma witness and a witness to himself. It is only in this way, through his simultaneous awareness of the continuous flow of those inner hazards both in the trauma witness and in himself, that he can become the enabler of the testimony—the one who triggers its initiation, as well as the guardian of its process and of its momentum.

The listener to trauma, therefore, needs to know "the lay of the land"—the landmarks, the undercurrents, and the pitfalls in the witness and in himself. He needs to know that the trauma survivor who is bearing witness has no prior knowledge, no comprehension and no memory of what happened. That he or she profoundly fears such knowledge, shrinks away from it and is apt to close off at any moment, when facing it. He needs to know that such knowledge dissolves all barriers, breaks all boundaries of time and place, of self and subjectivity. That the speakers about trauma on some level prefer silence so as to protect themselves from the fear of being listened to—and of listening to themselves. That while silence is defeat, it serves them both as a sanctuary and as a place of bondage. Silence is for them a fated exile, yet also a home, a destination, and a binding oath. To *not* return from this silence is rule rather than exception.

The listener must know all this and more. He or she must *listen to and hear the silence*, speaking mutely both in silence and in speech, both from behind and from within the speech. He or she must recognize, acknowledge and address that silence, even if this simply means respect—and knowing how to wait. The listener to trauma needs to

know all this, so as to be a guide and an explorer, a companion in a journey onto an uncharted land, a journey the survivor cannot traverse or return from alone.

Testimony and Historical Truth

A woman in her late sixties was narrating her Auschwitz experience to interviewers from the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale. She was slight, self-effacing, almost talking in whispers, mostly to herself. Her presence was indeed barely noteworthy in spite of the overwhelming magnitude of the catastrophy she was addressing. She tread lightly, leaving hardly a trace.

She was relating her memories as an eyewitness of the Auschwitz uprising; a sudden intensity, passion and color were infused into the narrative. She was fully there. "All of sudden," she said, "we saw four chimneys going up in flames, exploding. The flames shot into the sky, people were running. It was unbelievable." There was a silence in the room, a fixed silence against which the woman's words reverberated loudly, as though carrying along an echo of the jubilant sounds exploding from behind barbed wires, a stampede of people breaking loose, screams, shots, battle cries, explosions. It was no longer the deadly timelessness of Auschwitz. A dazzling, brilliant moment from the past swept through the frozen stillness of the muted, grave-like landscape with dashing meteoric speed, exploding it into a shower of sights and sounds. Yet the meteor from the past kept moving on. The woman fell silent and the tumults of the moment faded. She became subdued again and her voice resumed the uneventful, almost monotonous and lamenting tone. The gates of Auschwitz closed and the veil of obliteration and of silence, at once oppressive and repressive, descended once again. The comet of intensity and of aliveness, the explosion of vitality and of resistance faded and receeded into the distance.

Many months later, a conference of historians, psychoanalysts, and artists, gathered to reflect on the relation of education to the Holocaust, watched the videotaped testimony of the woman, in an attempt to better understand the era. A lively debate ensued. The testimony was not accurate, historians claimed. The number of chimneys was misrepresented. Historically, only one chimney was blown up, not all four. Since the memory of the testifying woman turned out to be, in this way, fallible, one could not accept—nor give credence

to—her whole account of the events. It was utterly important to remain accurate, least the revisionists in history discredit everything.

A psychoanalyst who had been one of the interviewers of this woman, profoundly disagreed. "The woman was testifying," he insisted, "not to the number of the chimneys blown up, but to something else, more radical, more crucial: the reality of an unimaginable occurrence. One chimney blown up in Auschwitz was as incredible as four. The number mattered less than the fact of the occurrence. The event itself was almost inconceivable. The woman testified to an event that broke the all compelling frame of Auschwitz, where Jewish armed revolts just did not happen, and had no place. She testified to the breakage of a framework. That was historical truth."

The psychoanalyst who had interviewed that woman happened to have been myself, and though my attitude vis-à-vis her testimony was different than the attitude of the historians, I had myself the opportunity of encountering—during the very process of the interviewing—questions similar in nature to those that the historians were now raising. And yet I had to deal with those objections and those questions in a different manner.

I figured from the woman's testimony that in Auschwitz she had been a member of what is known as "the Canada commando," a group of inmates chosen to sort out the belongings of those who had been gassed, so that those belongings could be recuperated by the Nazis and sent back to Germany. The testifying woman spoke indeed at length of her work in a commando that would leave each morning, separately from the others, and return every night with various items of clothes and shoes in excellent condition. She emphasized with pride the way in which, upon returning, she would supply these items to her fellow inmates, thus saving the lives of some of them who literally had no shoes to walk in and no clothes to protect them from the frost. She was perking up again as she described these almost breathtaking exploits of rescue. I asked her if she knew of the name of the commando she was serving on. She did not. Does the term "Canada commando" mean anything to her? I followed up. "No," she said, taken aback, as though startled by my question. I asked nothing more about her work. I had probed the limits of her knowledge and decided to back off; to respect, that is, the silence out of which this testimony spoke. We did not talk of the sorting out of the belongings of the dead. She did not think of them as the remainings of the thousands who were gassed. She did not ask herself where they had come from. The presents she brought back to her fellow inmates, the better, newer clothes and shoes, had for her no origin.

My attempt as interviewer and as listener was precisely to respect—not to upset, not to trespass—the subtle balance between what the woman *knew* and what she *did not*, or *could not, know*. It was only at the price of this respect, I felt, this respect of the constraints and of the boundaries of silence, that what the woman *did know* in a way that none of us did—what she came to testify about—could come forth and could receive, indeed, a hearing. The historians' stance, however, differed from my way of listening, in their firm conviction that the limits of the woman's knowledge in effect called into question the validity of her whole testimony.

"Don't you see," one historian passionately exclaimed, "that the woman's eyewitness account of the uprising that took place at Auschwitz is hopelessly misleading in its incompleteness? She had no idea what was going on. She ascribes importance to an attempt that, historically, made no difference. Not only was the revolt put down and all the inmates executed; the Jewish underground was, furthermore, betrayed by the Polish resistance, which had promised to assist in the rebellion, but failed to do so. When the attempt to break out of the camps began, the Jewish inmates found themselves completely alone. No one joined their ranks. They flung themselves into their death, alone and in desperation."

When I interviewed the woman, I knew, of course, that the Auschwitz uprising was put down, but I myself did not know the specific contribution of the Polish underground to the defeat: I did not know of the extent of the betrayal.

Had I known, however, would I have questioned her about it? Probably not, since such questions might have in effect suppressed her message, suppressed what she was there to tell me.

Had I known, moreover, I might have had an agenda of my own that might have interferred with my ability to listen, and to hear. I might have felt driven to confirm my knowledge, by asking questions that could have derailed the testimony, and by proceeding to hear everything she had to say in light of what I knew already. And whether my agenda would have been historical or psychoanalytical, it might unwittingly have interfered with the process of the testimony. In this respect, it might be useful, sometimes, not to know too much.

Of course, it is by no means ignorance that I espouse. The listener must be quite well informed if he is to be able to hear—to be able to pick up the cues. Yet knowledge should not hinder or obstruct the listening with foregone conclusions and preconceived dismissals, should not be an obstacle or a foreclosure to new, diverging, unexpected information.

In the process of the testimony to a trauma, as in psychoanalytic practice, in effect, you often do not want to know anything except what the patient tells you, because what is important is the situation of *discovery* of knowledge—its evolution, and its very *happening*. Knowledge in the testimony is, in other words, not simply a factual given that is reproduced and replicated by the testifier, but a genuine advent, an event in its own right. In a case such as this witness, for example, I had to be particularly careful that what I knew would not affect—would not obstruct, coerce, or overshadow—what she was there to tell me. I had, in fact, to be all the more cautious because this testifying woman did not simply come to convey knowledge that was already safely, and exhaustively, in her possession. On the contrary, it was her very talk to me, the very process of her bearing witness to the trauma she had lived through, that helped her now to come to know of the event. And it was through my listening to her that I in turn came to understand not merely her subjective truth, but the very historicity of the event, in an entirely new dimension.

She was testifying not simply to empirical historical facts, but to the very secret of survival and of resistance to extermination. The historians could not hear, I thought, the way in which her silence was itself part of her testimony, an essential part of the historical truth she was precisely bearing witness to. She saw four chimneys blowing up in Auschwitz: she saw, in other words, the unimaginable taking place right in front of her own eyes. And she came to testify to the unbelievability, precisely, of what she had eyewitnessed—this bursting open of the very frame of Auschwitz. The historians' testifying to the fact that only one chimney was blown up in Auschwitz, as well as to the fact of the betrayal of the Polish underground, does not break the frame. The woman's testimony, on the other hand, is breaking the frame of the concentration camp by and through her very testimony: she is breaking out of Auschwitz even by her very talking. She had come, indeed, to testify, not to the empirical number of the chimneys, but to resistance, to the affirmation of survival, to the breakage of the frame of death; in the same way, she had come to testify not to betrayal, nor to her actual removal of the belongings of the dead, but to her vital memory of helping people, to her effective rescuing of lives. This was her way of being, of surviving, of resisting. It is not merely her speech, but the very boundaries of silence which surround it, which attest, today as well as in the past, to this assertion of resistance.

There is thus a subtle dialectic between what the survivor did not know and what she knew; between what I as interviewer did not know

and what I knew; between what the historians knew and what they did not know. Because the testifier did not know the number of the chimneys that blew up; because she did not know of the betrayal of the Polish underground and of the violent and desperate defeat of the rebellion of the Auschwitz inmates, the historians said that she knew nothing. I thought that she knew more, since she knew about the breakage of the frame, that her very testimony was now reenacting.

Setting Witnessing in Motion: The Password

It has happened to me many times that thinking back to a psychoanalytic session with a patient, I suddenly realize that I have understood it. Everything falls into place and comes together; the patient's life, the issues that s/he was addressing and the ones that were on my mind. Yet hardly anything of all this gets explicitly said in words. We part at the end of the session with an ostensible understanding of what went on, an understanding, however, that barely touches on what it is really all about. Such sudden illuminations are not rare. They often do not last, however. I do forget them before the next appointment, and my patient and I sink back into the routine of everyday quabble. It is as though two simultaneous dialogues proceed and the ordinary one, the one that is commonplace, prevails.

Occasionally, I am aware of both dialogues during the clinical encounter. It seems to me that in addition to what is manifestly said, associated to, dreamt about and elaborated, there is another, a more subtle melody. A cue is dropped, barely heard. "Do I really hear something?" I ask myself. Can I lock in on it, take hold of it? Is it not too esoteric? Is it not simply originating from the deep recesses of my own unconscious? At times, when I lose myself in such deliberations, the melody is gone and "work proceeds" in its empty track—a stylized dance—a minuet of empty postures. At other times, I seize upon it and echo it in my response. I simply indicate that I know it, and thus *make myself known as one who knows*. The patient may dismiss it or pass over it in silence; yet there are times in which it is as though a cord is struck and an internal chorus, a thousand voices are set free. The other melody, that subtler music, then emerges, suddenly resounding loud and clear. It has always been there, center-stage, waiting to be liberated from its captivity of silence. It is as though a secret password has been uttered, in the expectation that it be passed over once again; a word by which the patient names himself and asks against all odds for a reciprocal identification. Only this time I

responded. And only this time, when I was present enough to recognize and hear the password, could the door be opened and the hidden voice emerge and be released. I had to hear it first, acknowledge that I spoke its language, identify myself to it, acknowledge both to myself and to my patient, who I really was, so that it would be possible for him or her to really speak.

Nowhere in my work with patients have I found this to be more true than in my listening to victims of trauma and particularly to survivors of the Holocaust and to their children, when such secret password comes to be a signal that we both share the knowledge of the trauma, the knowledge of what facing it and living in its shadow are really all about.

The Black Hole

In thus acknowledging the password and in hearing it as a signal of this mutual recognition of a shared knowledge, the analyst identifies himself as a listener who can precisely recognize, and *meet* the victim's silence; a listener who can recognize, in other words, and meet, "the gaping, vertiginous black hole" of the experience of the trauma. It is in these words that Nadine Fresco describes, indeed, on the basis of her interviews with children of Holocaust survivors,[1] the silence that has swallowed up their past:

> The gaping, vertiginous black hole of the unmentionable years . . . The silence formed like a heavy pall that weighed down on everyone. Parents explained nothing, children asked nothing. The forbidden memory of death manifested itself only in the form of incomprehensible attacks of pain . . . The silence was all the more implacable in that it was often concealed behind a screen of words, again, always the same words, an unchanging story, a tale repeated over and over again, made up of selections from the war.
>
> It was a silence that swallowed up the past, all the past, the past before death, before destruction. To speak up and thus to realize the grip of death, which was the grip of silence, seems to have represented for these parents too grave a danger for such an action to seem possible.

It is thus that the place of the greatest density of silence—the place of concentration where death took place—paradoxically becomes, for those children of survivors, the only place which can provide an

[1]Nadine Fresco, "Remembering the Unknown," in *International Review of Psychoanalysis* 1984, no. 11, pp. 417–427.

access to the *life* that existed before their birth. "It is," notes Fresco, "a concentration of death, but it is also the ultimate concentration of life." As a site which marks, and is marked, by a massive trauma I would suggest, then, that the figure of "the concentration" is, in turn, a black hole. Concentrating at once life and death, the black hole in effect collapses, in this way, both the gaping hole of genocide and the gaping hole of silence. The impossibility of speaking and, in fact of listening, otherwise than through this silence, otherwise than through this black hole both of knowledge and of words, corresponds to the impossibility of remembering and of forgetting, otherwise than through the genocide, otherwise than through this "hole of memory." As Nadine Fresco puts it:

> As if one gave oneself the right to remember only with genocide as one's memory. As if the very faculty of remembering and forgetting derived from the genocide. As if the genocide alone had made you a being of memory and forgetting.

It is thus genocide, and genocide alone, that one can give oneself the right to feel as *real* and as *lasting*, making it in this way both the nidus of one's actual life and the driving force that shapes the meaning of one's destiny. The continued power of the silenced memory of genocide as an overriding, structuring and shaping force, may be, however, neither truly known by the survivors, nor recognized as representing, in effect, memory of trauma. It finds its way into their lives, unwittingly, through an uncanny repetition of events that duplicate—in structure and in impact—the traumatic past.

Second Holocausts, or the Return of the Trauma

Survivors will experience tragic life events not as mere catastrophes, but rather as a second Holocaust, the ultimate victory of their cruel fate, which they have failed to turn around, and the final corroboration of the defeat of their powers to survive and to rebuild.

Such was the experience of French author Martin Gray, who, in spite of his unyielding struggle and thirst for life, was forced to witness the destruction of his entire family in the flames of Warsaw and Treblinka. He rebounds from it, builds a new family, a new castle for himself in the South of France, until a forest fire, momentarily, destroys it all again.

In Martin Gray's own words:[2]

> At that time too, I could save nothing but my naked life. I escaped from fields of ruins, I fled from sewers and from Treblinka, and not one of those that had been mine remained alive . . .
>
> Later, it seemed that after all my lonesomeness, the time had come for me to find my peace: my wife, the children. But then that blaze, Tanneron in flames, the crackling of the fire, that smell, that heat—just like Warsaw. Once again everything was taken away from me, everything that seemed to have been given to me as a present: a wife, children, a life. For the second time I remained alone, with nothing but my life . . .
>
> I speak, I try to comprehend. Their death has reopened all the graves. In those graves, my people, my parents, my siblings, my friends were coming back to life; my people, my family, died in them a second death.

And such was the experience of another man who came to live the tragic loss of his second family as yet another Holocaust. Like Martin Gray, this man in turn had lost all his family in Auschwitz and married another survivor in the DP camp. The couple had two children, a girl and then a boy. Two years after the boy was born, the wife suddenly died of a severe internal hemorrhage, a late sequela of the pregnancies she should not have had, because of persecution-related health damage. This loss was more than the survivor could bear, and he gave in. He promptly gave up the baby for adoption, married an American-born woman from the neighborhood, and after insisting that the daughter call his new wife "mother," disappeared for a whole year—ostensibly hospitalized for a mysterious illness. The dead mother's name was banned in this new family—her existence was denied.

When the daughter grew up, she carried on her father's legacy. She left the husband she had married and aborted the baby she had conceived, and embarked instead on a mission of repair: to refind and to regain her younger brother—the son her father has lost of his own volition. When her biological brother, meanwhile estranged and raised by other parents, failed to return, she proceeded to have a baby—a little boy—of her own and on her own, without the encumbrance of a husband. To her surprise, her father, although saddened that she did not have a conventional family, was totally delighted with the newborn baby.

As in Martin Gray's case, it was the second, reiterated loss of the survivor's family—of his first wife and consequently, of their newborn baby—which was experienced by the camp survivor as a *second*

[2]Martin Gray, *Der Schrei nach Leben*, Der Goldman Verlag, Munich: 1988.

holocaust, an inescapable fate he could neither prevent nor fight, and a devastating blow to which he had no choice but to succumb. It was the child, his daughter, whose life unwittingly bore witness to the trauma of this second holocaust which her father was attempting to repress and to forget, by acting out and living out the lessons learned from him—not to love, not to dare fate, not to risk having a family of her own (for such family and such loved ones were only destined to be taken away again)—and by setting out at the same time to refind, rebuild and recreate the family the father had relinquished. Both the father and the daughter shied away from *knowing* and from grieving, a loss they could henceforth only *relive* as haunting memory in real life, at once through the actual return of the trauma and through its inadvertent repetition, or transmission, from one generation to another.

The "second holocaust" thus turns out to be itself a testimony to a history of repetition. Through its uncanny reoccurrence, the trauma of the second holocaust bears witness not just to a history that has not ended, but, specifically, to the historical occurrence of an event that, in effect, *does not end*.

The Dread of the Return

The fear that fate will strike again is crucial to the memory of trauma, and to the inability to talk about it. On breaking the internal silence, the Holocaust from which one had been hiding, may come to life and once more be relived; only this time around, one might not be spared nor have the power to endure.

The act of telling might itself become severely traumatizing, if the price of speaking is *re-living*; not relief, but further retraumatization. Poets and writers who have broken their silence may have indeed paid with their life for that deed (Celan, Améry, Borowski, Levi, Bettelheim).

Moreover: if one talks about the trauma without being truly heard or truly listened to, the telling might itself be lived as a return of the trauma—a *re-experiencing of the event itself*. Primo Levi narrates a recurring nightmare in Auschwitz.

> They are all listening to me and it is this very story that I am telling: the whistle of three notes, the hard bed, my neighbour whom I would like to move, but whom I am afraid to wake as he is stronger than me. I also speak diffusely of our hunger and of the lice-control, and of the Kapo who hit me on the nose and then sent me to wash myself as I was bleeding. It is an intense pleasure, physical, inexpressible, to be at home, among friendly people and to have so many things to recount:

but I cannot help noticing that my listeners do not follow me. In fact, they are completely indifferent: they speak confusedly of other things among themselves, as if I was not there. My sister looks at me, gets up and goes away without a word.

A desolating grief is now born in me, like certain barely remembered pains of one's early infancy. It is pain in its pure state, not tempered by a sense of reality and by the intrusion of extraneous circumstances, a pain like that which makes children cry; and it is better for me to swim once again up to the surface, but this time I deliberately open my eyes to have a guarantee in front of me of being effectively awake . . .

My dream stands in front of me, still warm, and although awake I am still full of its anguish: and then I remember that it is not a haphazard dream, but that I have dreamed it not once but many times since I arrived here, with hardly any variations of environment or details. I am now quite awake and I remember that I have recounted it to Alberto and that he confided to me, to my amazement, that it is also his dream and the dream of many others, perhaps of everyone. Why does it happen? Why is the pain of every day translated so constantly into our dreams, in the ever-repeated scene of the unlistened-to story?"[3]

Similarly, Chaim Guri, in his film *The Eighty-first Blow,* portrays the image of a man who narrates the story of his sufferings in the camps only to hear his audience say: "All this cannot be true, it could not have happened. You must have made it up." This denial by the listener inflicts, according to the film, the ultimately fateful blow, beyond the eighty blows that a man, in Jewish tradition, can sustain and survive. The absence of an empathic listener, or more radically, the absence of an *addressable other,* an other who can hear the anguish of one's memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story. And it is, precisely, this ultimate annihilation of a narrative that, fundamentally, *cannot be heard* and of a story that *cannot be witnessed,* which constitutes the mortal eighty-first blow.

III

Undoing the Entrapment: Psychoanalytic Work with Trauma

"The real," says Lacan, is that which always comes back to the same place."[4] While the trauma uncannily returns in actual life, its

[3]Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, trans. Stuart Woolf, New York: Macmillan/Collier, 1961, pp. 52–53.

[4]*Jacques Lacan: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: Norton, 1978, p. 42.

reality continues to elude the subject who lives in its grip and unwittingly undergoes its ceaseless repetitions and reenactments. The traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of "normal" reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after. This absence of categories that define it lends it a quality of "otherness," a salience, a timelessness and a ubiquity that puts it outside the range of associatively linked experiences, outside the range of comprehension, of recounting and of mastery. Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect. The survivor, indeed, is not truly in touch either with the core of his traumatic reality or with the fatedness of its reenactments, and thereby remains entrapped in both.

To undo this entrapment in a fate that cannot be known, cannot be told, but can only be repeated, a therapeutic process—a process of constructing a narrative, of reconstructing a history and essentially, of *re-externalizating the event*—has to be set in motion. This re-externalization of the event can occur and take effect only when one can articulate and *transmit* the story, literally transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back again, inside. Telling thus entails a reassertion of the hegemony of reality and a re-externalization of the evil that affected and contaminated the trauma victim.

The psychoanalytic reconstruction of the history of trauma is uniquely suited for this process to take place. In psychoanalytic work with survivors, indeed, historical reality has to be reconstructed and reaffirmed before any other work can start. This primary stage of the psychoanalytic work has been described as "the phase of joint acceptance of the Holocaust reality" by both analyst and patient.[5] The analyst must often be there first, ahead of his patient, and, once having acquired factual information, must wait with patience and with readiness for the latter to join him in that place. To allow the psychoanalytic process of evolving knowledge to be set in motion, a place that is safe and safeguarded by human presence has to be created. During this joint endeavor of the psychoanalytic encounter, both parties have to pass a mutual test of safety: they have to prove to each other that they are stable and strong enough to affirm the

[5]Ilse Grubrich-Simitis, "From Concretism to Metaphor," in *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984, vol. 39, pp. 301–19.

reality of the terror of the extermination camps in actual *nonmetaphorical statements*. It is only when and if this task is accomplished, that the survivor is enabled to surrender himself to the psychoanalytic process and to reclaim both his life and his past.

Undoing the Entrapment: The Testimonial Process

Autobiographical accounts of trauma such as the historical testimonies recorded by the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale, in turn set in motion a testimonial process similar in nature to the psychoanalytic process, in that it is yet another medium which provides a listener to trauma, another medium of re-externalization—and thus historicization—of the event. As such the testimonial enterprise is yet another mode of struggle against the victims' entrapment in trauma repetition, against their enslavement to the fate of their victimization.

My personal experience comprises both these perspectives of listening to trauma: that of the analyst in my practice with patients and that of the historical witness—of the testimonial interviewer—in recorded interviews with Holocaust survivors. With all the obvious and perhaps irreconcilable differences between these two perspectives, I find the process that is set in motion by psychoanalytic practice and by the testimony to be essentially the same, both in the narrator and in myself as listener (analyst or interviewer).

From a clinical perspective, we can try to understand what is happening in the testimonial interviews in the technical, metaphorically approximate terms of "a brief treatment contract": a contract between two people, one of whom is going to engage in a narration of her trauma, through the unfolding of her life account. Implicitly, the listener says to the testifier: "For this limited time, throughout the duration of the testimony, I'll be with you all the way, as much as I can. I want to go wherever you go, and I'll hold and protect you along this journey. Then, at the end of the journey, I shall leave you."

Bearing witness to a trauma is, in fact, a process that includes the listener. For the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an *other*—in the position of one who hears. Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take

place in solitude. The witnesses are talking *to somebody*: to somebody they have been waiting for for a long time.

The Listening Position: The Interviewer's Task

The task of the listener is to be *unobtrusively present*, throughout the testimony; even when and if at moments the narrator becomes absent, reaches an almost detached state. The listener has to respond very subtly to cues the narrator is giving that s/he wants to come back, to resume contact, or that s/he wishes to remain alone, a wish for aloneness that sometimes coincides with the emergence of a creative testifying self. Survivors beginning to remember often desire to be alone, although very much in someone's presence; the listener has to be exquisitely responsive to these cues. For lack of a better term, I will propose that there is a need for a tremendous libidinal investment in those interview situations: there is so much destruction recounted, so much death, so much loss, so much hopelessness, that there has to be an abundance of holding and of emotional investment in the encounter, to keep alive the witnessing narration; otherwise the whole experience of the testimony can end up in silence, in complete withholding.

Paradoxically enough, the interviewer has to be, thus, both unobtrusive, nondirective, and yet imminently present, active, in the lead. Because trauma returns in disjointed fragments in the memory of the survivor, the listener has to let these trauma fragments make their impact both on him and on the witness. Testimony is the narrative's address to hearing; for only when the survivor knows he is being heard, will he stop to hear—and listen to—himself. Thus, when the flow of fragments falters, the listener has to enhance them and induce their free expression. When the trauma fragments, on the contrary, accelerate, threaten to get too intense, too tumultuous and out of hand, he has to reign them in, to modulate their flow. And he has to see and hear beyond the trauma fragments, to wider circles of reflections.

Where such circles of associations and reflections intersect, converge, a latent and forgotten memory might suddenly emerge—come back to life—establishing a further link in the testimonial chain. The listener must firmly be there to confirm it, assist in its full deliverance. He has to move quietly and decisively in bringing things together, yet not succumb to the temptation and the danger of a premature

foreclosure, which might be reached, alternatively, through a cognitive suppression, through an emotional catharsis, or through a crushed surrender to the ubiquity of silence.

The Hazards of Listening

For the listener who enters the contract of the testimony, a journey fraught with dangers lies ahead. There are hazards to the listening to trauma. Trauma—and its impact on the hearer—leaves, indeed, no hiding place intact. As one comes to know the survivor, one really comes to know oneself; and that is not a simple task. The survival experience, or the Holocaust experience, is a very condensed version of most of what life is all about: it contains a great many existential questions, that we manage to avoid in our daily living, often through preoccupation with trivia. The Holocaust experience is an inexorable and, henceforth, an unavoidable confrontation with those questions. The listener can no longer ignore the question of facing death; of facing time and its passage; of the meaning and purpose of living; of the limits of one's omnipotence; of losing the ones that are close to us; the great question of our ultimate aloneness; our otherness from any other; our responsibility to and for our destiny; the question of loving and its limits; of parents and children; and so on.

To maintain a sense of safety in the face of the upheaval of such questions and the onslaught of the images of trauma, the listener experiences a range of defensive feelings, which he needs to control and of which he needs to be aware if he is to carry out his task. These listening defenses may include the following:

- A sense of total paralysis, brought about by the threat of flooding—by the fear of merger with the atrocities being recounted.
- A sense of outrage and of anger, unwittingly directed at the victim—the narrator. When we meet a friend who has a malignant disease, we often feel angry at that person. We are torn apart by the inadequacy of our ability to properly respond, and inadvertently wish for the illness to be the patient's responsibility and wrongdoing.
- A sense of total withdrawal and numbness.
- A flood of awe and fear; we endow the survivor with a kind of sanctity, both to pay our tribute to him and to keep him at a distance, to avoid the intimacy entailed in knowing.

- Foreclosure through facts, through an obsession with factfinding; an absorbing interest in the factual details of the account which serve to circumvent the human experience. Another version of this foreclosure, of this obsession with factfinding is a listener who already "knows it all," ahead of time, leaving little space for the survivor's story.
- Hyperemotionally which superficially looks like compassion and caring. The testifier is simply flooded, drowned and lost in the listener's defensive affectivity.

These are some of the ways in which the listener feels the need to protect himself from the offshoots of the trauma and from the intensity of the flood of affect that, through the testimony, comes to be directed toward him.

A Cultural Transvaluation

Sometimes the defenses in the listener are engendered, consciously or not, in response to the defensive life activities the listener observes or senses in trauma survivors. Most Holocaust survivors have, by any measure, rebuilt their lives, and the thrust of this rebuilding covers the widest spectrum of activities and the highest levels of accomplishment. Survivors have, in fact, rebuilt new friendships, new careers, new families, and have kept the careers highly successful and the families intensely bonded and cohesive. Yet in the center of this massive, dedicated effort remains a danger, a nightmare, a fragility, a woundedness that defies all healing. Around and against this woundedness survivors keep amassing fortunes, keep erecting castles. They cannot help but keep up this relentless, driven productivity, this fierce undoing of destruction. They cannot stop, cannot divert their gaze. The notion of a life cycle which comprises a diversity of rhythms and of phases, a cycle in which one can sometimes take pause and decide to change direction, is radically alien to their self-perception and does not pertain to their life scheme.

Before the defensive fierceness of this relentless productivity, ceaselessly erecting fortresses against the danger of its own annihilation, the listener in turn experiences a need, an urgency to pull back, to withdraw into a safer place, a place where he can in turn protect himself.

Insofar as they remind us of a horrible, traumatic past, insofar as they bear witness to our own historical disfiguration, survivors

frighten us. They pose for us a riddle and a threat from which we cannot turn away. We are indeed profoundly terrified to truly face the traumas of our history, much like the survivor and the listener are.

What can we learn from the realization of our fear? What can we learn from the trauma, from the testimony and from the very process of our listening?

In the wake of the atrocities and of the trauma that took place in the Second World War, cultural values, political conventions, social mores, national identities, investments, families and institutions have lost their meaning, have lost their context. As a watershed event, the Holocaust entailed an implicit revolution in all values, a reevaluation or, to use a Nietzschean term, a "transvaluation" of which we have not yet measured the array of cultural implications for the future. Within today's "culture of narcissism,"[6] which may itself be explained as a historical diversion, a trivialization, a philosophical escape from, and a psychological denial of, the depth and the subversive power of the Holocaust experience, the survivors, as *asserters of life out of the very disintegration and deflation of the old culture*, unwittingly embody a *cultural shock value* that has not yet been assimilated. Their very life-assertion, paradoxically enough, constitutes as yet another threat in that it is the vehicle of an inexorable historical transvaluation, the implications of which we have yet to understand.

[6]Cf. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, New York: Norton, 1978.

THREE

An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival

DORI LAUB, M.D.

I would like to propose some reflections on the relation of witnessing to truth, in reference to the historical experience of the Holocaust. For a long time now, and from a variety of perspectives,[1] I have been concretely involved in the quest of testifying and of witnessing—and have come to conceive of the process of the testimony as, essentially, a ceaseless struggle, which I would like here to attempt to sketch out.

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My Position as a Witness

I recognize three separate, distinct levels of witnessing in relation to the Holocaust experience: the level of being a witness to oneself within the experience; the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others; and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself.

The first level, that of being a witness to oneself, proceeds from my autobiographical awareness as a child survivor. I have distinct memories of my deportation, arrival in the camp, and the subsequent life my family and I led there. I remember both these events and the feelings and thoughts they provoked, in minute detail. They are not facts that were gleaned from somebody else's telling me about them. The explicit details (including names of places and people), which I so vividly remember, are a constant source of amazement to my

[1]As the cofounder of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale: as an interviewer of the survivors who give testimony; as a psychoanalyst who treats Holocaust survivors and their children, and as a child survivor myself.