The Difficult Freedom of Bearing Witness in Education

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Let me begin by thanking David Hansen for his engaging and eloquent paper on the importance of bearing witness and the pedagogical potential of walking alongside moral witnesses.[1] As he explains in an endnote, this paper builds on (and, in my view, makes an important contribution to) ongoing scholarly conversations on bearing witness, sparked most notably by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's work on testimony and by Megan Boler's 1994 paper, "The Risks of Empathy."[2] In the intervening years, Mario di Paolantonio, Claudia Eppert, Sharon Todd, Michalinos Zembylas, and others have brought insightful and critical analyses on the ethical complexities of bearing witness to historical trauma. Their work has significantly shaped my own understanding of educating for historical consciousness, and in particular, the ways in which we, as Canadians, can take up our individual and collective responsibility for the historical trauma inflicted on Indigenous people and communities, and move toward reconciliation.

However, in today's global context, I can no longer think about bearing witness as being primarily about the past. Rather, I see Hansen's question of "how and why the issue of degrees of freedom bears down hard on the moral witness" as something that concerns us all here and now, because the historical traumas to which the authors in Hansen's paper bear witness became such precisely because the calls of suffering in the present of those other times and places were left unanswered, the moral summons unheeded, the imperative denied. Of course, I am not suggesting that there weren't concerted, and sometimes successful, efforts to intervene in those situations of suffering, nor am I suggesting that the words and actions of Césaire, Rilke, Alexievich, Sebald, and the other witnesses Hansen cites don't matter. But I do want to suggest that, in attending to the pedagogical potential of walking alongside witnesses to historical trauma, we need to pay at least as much, if not more, attention to our responsibility for current situations of suffering, because, while the particulars of time and place may change, we are all inescapably implicated in the

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constitution of events that will or will not become the historical traumas of the future. I am sure Hansen would agree, and that it is just such a concern for the future that has, at least in part, motivated his work on bearing witness. As he puts it, "[T]he touch of the past is precisely what calls out to us to imagine the touch of the future, *when we are the past*, and thus what we ultimately would most want to bequeath to those who come after."

There is much I find compelling in Hansen's paper, including his description of the way in which moral witnesses are summoned to become witnesses, rather than choosing to do so, and his invocation of Levinasian themes of radical passivity and the call to responsibility as prior to subjectivity. However, in what follows, I want to take up two points of tension that emerged for me: 1) the conception of truth hinted at in the concluding section; and 2) a potential underestimation of the psychological risks of using testimonial accounts in education.

In relation to the first concern, I was puzzled by a move Hansen makes in his concluding remarks, where he connects his paper to the theme, "Information, Misinformation, Disinformation." Hansen calls attention to trustworthiness and a commitment to truth as preconditions for moral witnessing, saying that moral witnesses become "bound up in a passion for truth," and that they "take whatever measures are necessary to get as near to truths of human experience as possible." But, in my view, the truths borne by moral witnesses are of a different order than information or facts.

Whether we are talking about the Holocaust, South Africa's Apartheid, the Indian Residential Schools, Argentina's "Dirty War," or other sites of historical trauma, there is an implicit assumption that if we can learn the facts about what happened in the past, we can figure out how those situations came to be, and thereby decrease the likelihood of similar traumas happening again in the future. But to reduce historical traumas to verifiable facts or information risks reducing the victims of those traumas, and the events themselves, to objects of knowledge. This is not to say facts don't matter: they do. I'm thinking, for example, of detailed documentation of genocide during the Holocaust; the actual policies and practices of segregation and state-sanctioned anti-Black violence in

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South Africa; facts about the number of unmarked graves of children recently found on sites of former Indian Residential Schools, and the abuse suffered there; or the body counts of the disappeared in Argentina. Those facts are essential to an accounting and reckoning for the past, but their moral relevance is of a different order. Beyond the facts and information, there is a moral truth that binds the past to the present, and witnesses to the hearers/readers of their testimony—the truth that all of us, here and now, bear a responsibility and ethical debt to and for the past that can never be repaid, as well as a responsibility for the suffering of the present, for example, the ongoing trauma of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. No amount of information will erase that ethical debt and responsibility, nor will it ensure that atrocities will not continue or be repeated in the future.

As I wrestled with what I perceived as a possible conflation of moral truth with information in Hansen's paper, I dug a little deeper into his earlier work and found that he offers a more nuanced description of the truth-telling of moral witnesses in a 2022 paper co-authored with Rebecca Sullivan. They write:

> For the witness, 'to get things right' merges fact with the truth of things. Truth is a controversial and often confusing concept. The truth to which a witness points is not reducible to straightforward, logical terms. It cannot be adequately captured in warranted propositions, nor is it associated with familiar epistemological categories of coherence and correspondence. Ethical truth, or the truth of things, precedes argument, rather than resulting from it, though argument can clarify, steady, and sustain it.[3]

So, I now wonder if Hansen's decision to link the moral witnesses' commitment to truth with the theme was more of a stretch than what he actually intended to convey. In the words of Andrea Walsh, curator of an exhibit of surviving artwork by students of Indian Residential Schools in BC and Manitoba from the 1930s to 1970s:

> Bearing witness does not translate facts. It transforms relation-

> ships. … Bearing witness carries the responsibility to forward the knowledge I have been given. When I consider children's art in these ways [i.e., as a form of truth-telling], it is impossible for it to exist only as a record of the past. It becomes a point of transformation for present and future relationships.[4]

The second point I want to touch on is the potential for unintended psychological harm in recommending walking alongside moral witnesses as a pedagogical approach. My concern is that some of the almost poetic language Hansen uses, such as speaking about witnesses' "ethical artfulness," and of readers being "bathed, metaphorically speaking, in the light of ethical concern," belies the visceral shock, rage, sadness, or shame that can accompany encounters with witness accounts of historical trauma—feelings that may not result in educational growth, but rather distress, disengagement, depression, and even moral paralysis. While I have long been drawn to Boler's pedagogy of discomfort and similar approaches, I have become increasingly cautious about encouraging students to engage in practices where we are, as Roger Simon puts it, "wounded by others' wounds."[5] It brings to mind Sebastian Faulk's novel, *Charlotte Gray,* in which the title character had been tormented throughout her life by an inescapable pain (although she didn't discover the truth of its source until much later) caused by her father having poured out on young Charlotte his harrowing memories and feelings of guilt around his own actions during the First World War, and, in so doing, "asked a child to bear the weight of those unspeakable things, a weight that drove men mad."[6] I am not saying that there is no place for testimony and witnessing to historical trauma in education, only that we need to ask ourselves how much of the weight of the past, and how much of a psychological burden, it is pedagogically and ethically justifiable to place on students.

There is obviously much more I could say about Hansen's rich and thought-provoking essay, but I will end here and look forward to continuing the conversation.

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6 Sebastian Faulk, *Charlotte Gray* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 483.