

Joanne Hemenway on witnessing her own divorce and repairing that of her parents

The lecture presented by Kaethe Weingarten on Witnessing carried me back in memory to a time of my own unaware disempowerment and my movement to a place of aware empowerment. While such movement occurred over a three year period of time, I would not recognize the impact of that movement for several more years to come. Nor did it ever occur to me to consider it in the context of "witnessing" until I heard Kaethe's presentation.

Today, twenty-five years later, only rarely do I reflect on that time. Still, remembering now that evening when my husband arrived home and announced he was leaving the marriage, quickly evokes memories of helplessness, powerlessness, and the sheer terror I felt of being abandoned. For it was not just my adult self that reacted, but also the child self within me, though at the time, I had no awareness of such an inner dynamic.

As a child of four, my own parents had separated and divorced and one day all that was familiar and secure in my life was gone. I had no power, no control. Now, with two daughters, age three and six, once again I was suddenly thrust into that same place and I was terrified. Not only was I terrified for myself, but I was terrified for my daughters, terrified lest all the pain and devastation I had experienced as a child of divorce, they too would experience. At that time, I could not see any possibility whatsoever that it might be different for them. I was to learn otherwise.

In her article, "Witnessing, Wonder, and Hope", Kaethe Weingarten speaks of "voice not as an individual's achievement of self-knowledge but, rather, a possibility that depends on the willingness of the listeners that make up the person's community." (p.392) My immediate reaction on hearing my husband's announcement was to reach for the phone to call our family friend, physician, counselor, and "weighty" Friend our of local Quaker (Religious Society of Friends) meeting. I had worked as a nurse in his clinic; he had counseled us during an impasse in the earlier years of our marriage; our second daughter was his namesake. He listened to both of us and from his individual listening, we moved to a more corporate listening as a group of individuals, members of the Ministry and Counsel Committee within our Friends Meeting for Worship, agreed to come together for the purpose of listening, reflecting, and discerning. Such an opportunity was the beginning of voice for me though at that time, I had no such awareness. Only momentarily did it offer some sense of empowerment for a week later, my husband packed his bags and left our home.

During those early weeks, I struggled with my own pain, fear, and despondency. Simultaneously, I struggled to maintain a sense of normalcy for my daughters lives, knowing I had to cope reasonably well lest I abandon them as I myself had been abandoned as a young child. And there was the fierce hope within me that somehow this horrifying reality would be turned around. Then, just two months after my husband left, he informed me he had engaged an attorney, was filing for a divorce, and I would be receiving the necessary papers. Inwardly,

I raged against my helplessness and powerlessness to stop what I did not want and could not control.

When he arrived the following week to take the girls to visit their grandparents, I told him clearly, matter-of-factly, that I had decided to take my own life and the lives of our children. Only momentarily stunned, he quickly regained his composure, accusing me of merely attempting to manipulate him. Watching him drive off with the children, I looked across the street and saw my dear friend and neighbor hanging out her wash. Sandi was a young widow with two girls the same age as mine; she too was a Quaker. Suddenly, I knew I needed to tell her of my decision. It was a beautiful clear, blue-sky day in May; the white sheets flapped back and forth in the warm breeze as I shared my plan with her. I will always remember her gently but firm admonishment, "If you decide to take your own life, that is one thing, but you have no right to take the lives of your children." The simplicity of her words sobered me and I returned home knowing that somehow I was going to have to deal with this reality bearing down upon me. It would not be until years later, reading Toni Morrison's book, *Beloved*, that I would understand my impulse to destroy the three of us. To imagine my children suffering as I had suffered was too terrifying.

It was, however, our physician/Friend who understood and sensed within me what I could not understand or sense within myself. With the arrival of the initial communication from my husband's attorney, Donnell's advice was to, "Wait. Just wait. You do not want to become Bob's adversary. Once involved legally, you will be pitted against one another." And so I waited.

It was early fall before I received the next piece of correspondence, the actual petition for the divorce. Now I would need to do something. By now, our situation had all the seeds for retaliation: my hurt, anger, humiliation, and powerlessness to effect any change. Furthermore, Bob had become more distanced and hardened, refusing to provide any financial support. Everyone else told me, "You need to get a lawyer." But there was something more ... the memory of my own experience as a child. Weingarten states, "Witnesses assume risks." (p.393) Once again, Donnell was there, witnessing with me, teaching me, helping me to witness to a truth hidden so deeply within me, it was inaudible to my own ears.

While there was a specific deadline for a response, and while the expectation was that it would, of course, be a response from an attorney, Donnell helped me to see that I could write my own response being careful that it met the necessary legal criteria. I carried one copy to the courthouse to be filed, sending another to Bob's attorney indicating my compliance with the law. I clearly remember the sense of newly discovered power I felt on learning that both had been documented. I was learning to witness to my own inner truth, i.e. I did not want the divorce; I did not believe it was best for any of us; and I did not wish to become my husband's adversary. Newly aware, newly empowered, in a similar fashion to Kaethe Weingarten's young daughter, "I could contain the chaos of terror." (p.399)

Time was on my side for in 1976, under the then new no-fault divorce laws, if one party did not agree to the petition for divorce, there would be no hearing for at least two years. For the

time being I could set aside my anxiety and terror of what seemed to be the inevitable outcome hoping for a miraculous change of heart on the part of my husband. And the waiting gave me some measure of control. Such control, however, suddenly evaporated when I received a notice for a hearing. It was now just fifteen months since the filing of the petition and my response, and I learned that the law had been changed; the waiting time had been shortened and I was ill-prepared. Once again, all the voices of others admonished me, "You need to have an attorney." And once again, I felt trapped and powerless. Still, Donnell, a faithful witness reiterated, "Remember, you do not want to become Bob's adversary."

Perhaps, I wondered, I might find an attorney who would understand my position and so I began making phone calls. In a way similar to Kaethe Weingarten's experience, I felt that "each phone call I made provided a temporary respite from my fear and created a witness for that moment." (p.399) Unsuccessful in my search, ready to return to despair, aware and feeling underpowered, I made one last call to an attorney who was a friend of a friend. I will always remember that moment of connection on the telephone; it was clearly palpable. He listened, he heard me, and he responded. His suggestion was to act quickly to request a postponement for the hearing date. He explained exactly how to proceed, offering to do it for me, but simultaneously affirming my ability to do it myself, then reminding me to let him know how things turned out. Once again, I felt the zest, the energy of aware empowerment.

Within a few days, I proceeded as advised, fulfilling all the necessary requirements, appearing before the judge myself to request a postponement. With my request granted, I felt a growing sense of voice and movement; I now had three months to prepare for the hearing. During those weeks, I searched arduously, talking, writing, questioning. In the library, I discovered a particularly valuable resource which assisted me in writing my own separation agreement. And the attorney who had responded on the telephone in such an empathic way, treated me to breakfast at the Colonial Inn in Concord, reading over my materials, making suggestions. While he agreed to accompany me, to offer his presence in the courtroom allowing me to handle the proceedings myself, he clearly felt I was capable of proceeding on my own.

A few weeks before the hearing, I visited the courthouse, sat in on various hearings so I would have a sense of familiarity with the place and the protocol. I sat up high on one of the seats against the wall as close to the judges bench as I could, taking notes on my observations. At one point, the judge surprised me when he stopped the proceedings at hand, asking if I was a student. Explaining why I was present, he seemed amusingly confused and with only a nod of his head went on with the hearing before him.

Then, a few days before the hearing, I spoke with Donnell. "Who will go with you?" he asked. "You can't go alone." It had not occurred to me to do otherwise. He went on, "Anyone who faces the system alone is sure to receive the axe. When others are present, it forces them to listen and take heed." With his advice, I asked his wife Elizabeth, as well as three other individuals from Friends Meeting, and two of my neighbors to accompany me. Perhaps the most important person to accompany me was my mother. Here was an essential form of witnessing, for her powerlessness and inability to be present during her own separation and

divorce hearing twenty-eight years earlier had been devastating for the course of my life. Somehow I needed her to be there.

Early on the morning of the hearing, my neighbor Sandi suggested we take some time for silent worship beside the duck pond behind her house. Out of the silence her words floated across the still waters, “If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.” (Psalm 139) We lit a candle and headed for the courthouse.

On arriving, it was clear that Bob’s attorney was visibly disturbed with me and my approach; he did not want to deal with me; he wanted to deal with another attorney. Lining a few benches our group’s presence had a powerful effect on the outcome. After a few hours, the presiding judge, sensing that something out of the ordinary was in the air of his courtroom, took an adjournment. Shortly after, the clerk came over to our small party inquiring which case we were awaiting. When he returned again, he announced that the judge requested to see the attorneys for our case in his chambers. As I was represented myself, I entered along with Bob’s attorney; Bob waited outside in the hallway! I felt such a mixture of delight and apprehension but clearly I was empowered. Yet, as the judge listened to both of us, he instructed me, “If you have property and children, you need to have an attorney.” His words sobered me but once again, I was given more time with yet another postponement. The experience of that morning provides clear testimony to Weingarten’s premise, “Witnessing at it best is not done solo. It is rather a profoundly relational experience.” (Lecture 3/21/01)

In preparing for the final hearing nine months later, I seriously considered the worlds of the judge. Yet, after careful thinking, I made the decision to continue on representing myself. It was now three years since Bob had left and while I still yearned to save our marriage, I now understood that it made no sense for me to struggle for that; if the marriage was to work, he needed to want to be there. I knew too that simply by virtue of waiting the required time under the no-fault law, he would be granted the divorce. Still, I needed to be true to my own inner truth. Weingarten tells us, “There are many types of witnessing: compassionate, determined, intentional, reluctant, unwilling.” (Lecture 3/21/01) It seems to me my witnessing encompassed all of these elements.

My mother declined to accompany me for that final hearing but the presence, once again of Friends and neighbors supported and strengthened me. In a small room off the courtroom, Bob’s attorney and I reviewed the divorce agreement. I had written it in ordinary language; it contained all the necessary requirements and arrangements. He was frustrated and perplexed but Bob had previously read it and was in agreement. I had come prepared for the inevitable, prepared to bear the pain of the inevitable. On one level I had lost; on a deeper level I had won.

Yet it would not be until three years later that I would experience a deeper, more profound sense of liberation and empowerment. With all that had transpired during those months and years, Donnell urged me to “write it down” and had eventually offered me enough money to take a leave of absence from my job to begin writing chapters for a book. It was then that I felt

moved to revisit that same courtroom and to review those documents. Seeing then the words “Pro Se” stamped on the divorce agreement I had written I wondered as to their meaning and sought out an attorney standing at the desk nearby. “Pro Se” he explained, “It means for oneself.”

I closed the file. Yes, I had done it for myself, for the young child who still lived within me as a means of redeeming my past history. But equally important, I had done it for my own children as a means of redeeming their future history. Choosing not to become their father’s adversary has positively impacted all of our lives in numerous, ongoing ways all these years. For as Weingarten states, “Every witness position creates consequences for the individual, family, community, and society.” (p.397)