

# Trauma, meaning, witnessing & action

## An interview with Kaethe Weingarten

By David Denborough

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Kaethe Weingarten's most recent book is entitled *Common Shock: Witnessing Violence Every Day – how we are harmed, how we can heal* (Dutton 2003). This book focuses on what happens when people witness violence and violation, ways of understanding this experience, and options for responding. The following interview explores a number of themes from the book. The interviewer was David Denborough.

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*I'd like to begin by asking you a number of questions that relate to trauma and meaning. I hope that's okay. Within your book, you spend some time describing the many different effects of trauma. One of these effects involves the 'shattering of assumptions'. Could you say a bit more about what you mean by this, and why you think it is important for practitioners to consider?*

When we are talking about shattered assumptions, we are looking at the ways in which experience is registered not just as events but also as meaning. We all have assumptions about how life is, about how life operates, and about how we operate. When we experience a traumatic event, we interpret this event. We give it meaning.

I am reminded of a woman who consulted me in therapy recently. She had experienced unstoppable bleeding from her nose for which she had been hospitalised. This was a serious, potentially life-threatening condition. What she had come to speak to me about, however, was not the physical experience of what she had suffered but the assumptions that she had held about her life that had been shattered by this experience. She was the primary care-taker of her children and one of the key assumptions by which she lived was: 'I am a rock. Nothing can move me. I provide stability to care for others.' This view of her life had been shattered. Traumatic experience is always compounded by meaning. It was the fact that her view of herself and her life had completely altered that she wished to speak about.

*What does this mean in terms of ways of responding to people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event?*

Even in response to an event that most people would find horrifying, there are always profoundly idiosyncratic meanings that people construct. These individual meanings and interpretations of life's events are the paths on which we walk. If we are going to ease somebody's response to trauma, then it is essential that we not only respond to the more obvious meanings of the event, but that we also understand and engage with the particular meanings that the event has had to him or her.

It's relevant to mention the fact that although a traumatic event can shatter assumptions that we hold about our lives this is not necessarily only negative. If opportunities can be provided for people to be self-reflective about this, these can be times when we can begin to discern what assumptions of life have been invisible to us. We can become more conscious of the assumptions we hold about our life, more conscious of our own values.

*You also discuss how particular assumptions are often made by service providers that can contribute to harm to workers. Can you say a little bit about those sorts of assumptions?*

In the culture of professional training for those who work up close to violence and violation and hear people's stories about this (for instance the clergy, police, educators, health care workers, attorneys etc), there are standards that explicitly state that the outcome of good training should be objectivity. The better the workers, the more restrained they will be with their emotions. As workers we hear extraordinary stories, and if we are cautioned to block our own emotional responses – not to engage with our own emotional responses and the meanings embedded in these responses – then this may be harmful to us.

We are trained that 'emotional expression' is good for clients but not for us. I am not suggesting that as service providers we ought to flood our clients with our own emotional responses! That is certainly not what I am suggesting. But I am suggesting that, as workers, rather than aspiring to objectivity, we need instead to understand our own biases, our own assumptions, and develop a coherent method of managing and engaging with the inevitable and invaluable expressions of emotion and meaning by both professionals and clients.

*There is a beautiful quote from your book that I would like to read now ...*

*'I do not believe that suffering serves a purpose, although many people, and I am one, have used suffering to serve a purpose. I used to tell people who asked me whether cancer had changed my life that it hadn't, but I had. I wasn't being a smart aleck, but rather expressing a distinction I thought was critical then, and still do. Cancer brought me*

*nothing but tsuris, the Yiddish word for trouble. I, on the other hand, worked mightily hard to make some good come of it, for myself and others.’ (Weingarten 2003 p.234-5) Can you say a little more about what you are trying to convey with this quote ...*

It’s strange to say, but listening to you read that passage is soothing to me. The distinction goes to the heart of my life. I just don’t think that there is anything romantic or any virtue conferred by suffering. Suffering wreaks havoc. It is people, linked with others, who harness strength and creativity to meet suffering in ways that are fantastic. There are individual human responses, and collective human responses to suffering, all over the world, which to me are quite extraordinary. But this is not because suffering has some virtue, it is because people do. Let’s give credit where credit is due!

*I’d now like to ask you some questions related to witnessing. The very beginning of your book starts with a quote from James Hatley: ‘By witness is meant a mode of responding to the other’s plight that ... becomes an ethical involvement.’ That is a most beautiful sentence. Why did you choose to start your book with that quote?*

That sentence represents the heart of the matter for me. It evokes what it means to be a compassionate witness. If we witness the traumatic experiences of others this requires an ethical involvement. One aspect of this is to ensure that at no point do we ever confuse whatever suffering might come from witnessing with the suffering that we are witnessing. These are not akin to each other. We have an ethical responsibility to ensure that we are not confused by this.

*In your book you also describe the significance of ‘de-humanising practices’ and ‘re-humanising practices’. Can you please speak a little more about this?*

We are surrounded by de-humanising practices every day. Whether these are related to forms of structural violence, like poverty, or whether they occur within families in the form of humiliation and shaming, there is seemingly no escape from de-humanising practices. We have all experienced them.

Ironically, there is no word or phrase that is generally used to describe ‘re-humanising’ practices. It is a phrase that I use to convey what I think we need more of. Given that structural violence, collective violence, personal violence and violations are so integral to the suffering in this world, I believe we need practices that restore dignity and compassion. I try to provide a theory of re-humanisation and make a case that the actions individuals take in responding to others who have experienced harm and trauma do matter. Our individual actions ripple outwards.

When one individual makes contact with another person who is suffering, the ways in which he or she does this are significant. Whether you have been an unintentional witness or an intentional witness to somebody else’s suffering, it is possible in that moment of witnessing to turn towards and engage in re-humanising gestures, actions and practices. If we reach out in these moments and extend ourselves in a compassionate way, the effects of this ripple outwards. When we are suffering, if people respond to us in re-humanising ways, it makes it more possible for us to live lives that are less defined by fear. If, through our interactions with others, we come to believe that others do care about our experiences of trauma, then we become more open to complex thinking. Ultimately, we become more capable of living hopeful lives and this ripples through communities. In this way, I believe that individuals, in how we respond to others, can initiate changes that can have profound effects.

*Can you say more detail about what practices of compassionate witnessing or re-humanising responses look like? What differentiates them from other forms of response?*

There is now a significant literature in relation to witnessing and testimony. This began to be developed in the late 1950’s by people taking testimonies from Holocaust survivors (see Langer 1991, Felman & Laub 1992). A second wave of literature began to be inspired by the work of Tom Andersen in the 1980’s (Andersen 1987). And, more recently, Michael White’s descriptions of outsider-witness practices (White 1995) have contributed significantly to what we can understand to be re-humanising and compassionate forms of witnessing the experiences of others.

There are a number of key steps involved in responding as a witness to those who are suffering. First, the witness needs to situate herself or himself in ways that give expression to how fully committed she or he is to understanding the experience of the person whose suffering is being witnessed. This can be done in different ways. The witness uses everything about herself to create a bridge between herself and the person or persons she is responding to. The purpose of this bridge is to understand the other. Receiving this committed understanding can be, in itself, a profound experience for the person whose experience is being witnessed.

Second, a sense of movement occurs in the conversation. This happens as the witness asks questions in order to more fully understand the particular meanings that the person has made of the experience. This process co-evolves and moves slowly.

Third, the witness needs to recognise what he/she has been told and the ways in which this new knowledge has an impact. The objective here is not to be objective! In this context, objectivity is useless and toxic. What gives witnessing significance is precisely the ability to bring everything one knows and has learned in life to this moment. To do this we must know what it is about the person's testimony that has resonated with us and why.

And then it is the witness who offers a reflection, responds to what she has heard. It is the time to give a sign, a response that what the person has said has registered. It is time to show the person who is being witnessed that you really have taken in what has been said, that you have tried to make sense of this, that you understand the import of it, and that you feel it in every way that you have to feel. The reflection is to convey all of this. This form of witnessing is a profoundly re-humanising experience for both people concerned.

*You mention in your book that witnessing can also involve ways of enabling people to get in touch with aspects of their lived experience that the trauma has disconnected them from ... that compassionate witnessing can involve assisting people in a 're-remembering of qualities, feelings, beliefs, values, commitments'. Can you say more about this?*

Yes, that's one of the forms compassionate witnessing can take, and it's one that narrative therapists have explored and written about. One of the hallmarks of trauma is the way in which it can fracture a person's experience of continuity of self. For some people who have experienced trauma, the past has moved into the present. In this way, the traumatic experience has never really passed. Compassionate witnessing practice is a process of assisting people to restore a sense of continuity of self. One way to do this involves re-linking people with the histories of their qualities, feelings, beliefs, values and commitments. This has to be done with a great deal of delicacy. It is not possible to impose a sense of continuity of self, but it may be possible to provide openings for the person to experience a sense of self which is continuous with their history by virtue of openings that are offered.

*Kaethe, in your travels through a range of different cultures and contexts, I am sure that the practices of compassion and witnessing must differ markedly. I would like to ask you about this ...*

The ways in which people offer comfort and compassion to each other differ enormously depending upon context. There is an extraordinary variety of different practices of compassion depending on region, gender, ethnicity, age, sexual preferences, ability, and so on. Children in a fourth grade classroom in Boston may offer compassionate witnessing through the touch on a friend's arm, or by catching each other's eye in a certain way. Mothers in South Africa whose children have died from AIDS may, in contrast, join together in song, in chants, in dance as they share each others' sorrow and survival. Gestures, words and interchanges all have different meanings in different contexts in different places. I am interested in how we each do this in our own contexts. We all have skills in compassionate witnessing. It's just a matter of becoming more aware of these, honing them, noticing when we are using them. It is also about orientating ourselves to our place in the world.

*This brings us to one final question. I'd like to ask you about your hopes for ongoing legacies of this book and this project ...*

On a practical note, we have created a website which contains a witnessing archive (<http://www.witnessingproject.org/archives.html>). We are collecting stories from people who have witnessed violence and violation, and creating a space where ideas can be shared about these experiences. There are also various witnessing projects that we are currently involved in. Many of these will continue to explore and establish what is effective action when we witness the suffering of others.

On a more personal note, I have had seventeen years of living with the possibility of a fore-shortened life due to cancer. Throughout this time, the work of witnessing has offered me a particular sense of purpose. When one focuses on the importance that everyday actions can have in witnessing the experiences of others, every minute counts. Every minute of our lives has renewed purpose even when we don't feel that we can do much at all. During my third round of treatment in 2003, I developed the Treatment Dedication Project, in which people can dedicate their cancer treatments to people or organisations whose work they want to honour. This project is based on the belief that everyone, no matter how diminished, has something to offer, and that anything can be turned into an offering (<http://www.witnessingproject.org/treatded.html>).

Every interaction we have in this world is an opportunity to play our part in transforming local cultures away from cultures of violence and de-humanisation, and towards cultures of compassion.

When life is looked upon in this way, individual actions do make a difference. This is how I understand my life, my work, and my life's work. Our individual actions are linked to families, are linked to communities, are linked to the societies in which we live. I sincerely believe that even small actions can make a difference in transforming violence. A small action is not necessarily a trivial one. I hope this understanding of life is a legacy of my work.

*Thanks Kaethe. I always appreciate speaking with you. You have a most beautiful turn of phrase. And while we have been talking about matters of trauma, you have offered a most hopeful description of life.*

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