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## Extending the Conversation

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# Writing Wounded: Trauma, Testimony, and Critical Witness in Literacy Classrooms

Elizabeth Dutro

*The scream that goes through the house is the heartbeat that makes audible, at last, who we are, how resonant we are, how connected we are.*

—Weinstein, 2005, p. xii

In his book, *A Scream Goes through the House*, literary scholar Arnold Weinstein writes that he once began the first session of his university literature course by asking his students, “How many of you are hurting now?” His point is that emotions are part and parcel of literature study and of classroom life and too often bracketed from our notions of what constitutes an education or a curriculum. He also writes that he could have asked about other emotions—“How many of you are delighted?” (2005, p. xxii)—and the students would be equally surprised by the question. Equally surprised? Probably. But equally affected? I don’t think so. I think Weinstein asked about hurt because he intuitively feels that pain, loss, trauma—whatever term we might attach to it—is the most resonant emotion to tap for his goals of supporting students’ connections to the visceral aspects of literary engagement. In my university teaching and through my research with students in high-poverty schools, I have come to believe that such an explicit acknowledgment of the hard stuff of life is important in classrooms. I must believe it or I would not choose to share, in the first session of my writing classes, this draft of an autobiographical essay:

When the subject of siblings arises at dinner parties, I consider my responses carefully. If I decide to be honest, I know that I will single-handedly

transform a light-hearted conversation into an uncomfortable silence. “Elizabeth, do you have any brothers or sisters?” Yes, I say, I have a younger sister who is in her first year of teaching. I also have two younger brothers. “Oh? Where are they?” Well, one brother died in an accident when I was a teenager. We were very close. I pause waiting for the “oh, I’m sorry” that sometimes, but not always, follows the awkward silences that greet my confession. Finally, someone will stammer, “and what does your other brother do?” Oh, he’s in prison, I say as matter-of-factly as possible (and very self-conscious of the fact that this is the point at which I begin to take a measure of cruel pleasure in my listeners’ unease). Could there be two topics that make people more uncomfortable? Death and prison. My contribution always marks the end of the sibling conversation, even if we haven’t yet heard all of the stories of brothers and sisters who are accountants or journalists or work for a non-profit and are coming with his or her partner and their two children for Thanksgiving this year. But, I share it, I have to, and I watch as their assumptions about my tidy, carefree life crumble to the carpet.



My intent in this article is to consider how difficult experiences—exposed wounds and the *exposing of* wounds—function in literacy classrooms. I am particularly interested in how such experiences, as they enter the public spaces of schools and classrooms, might foster the kinds of relationships and stances necessary to challenge entrenched inequities and privileged assumptions about Others’ lives and facilitate engagement and intellectual risk-taking for students and teachers. As the presence of difficult experiences in literacy classrooms has moved to the center of my work, I have considered how those hard stories enter classrooms, particularly urban classrooms, how they are taken up and with what consequences and how they might function differently than they sometimes do; that is, I am interested in thinking about how *the difficult* can be productive pedagogically and relationally within literacy classrooms (Dutro, 2008; Dutro & Zenkov, 2008).

In the tradition of autoethnography and certain forms of critical ethnography, my story, entangled as it is in the stories of my students and of the children and youth who participate in my studies of urban classrooms, is my entrée into the theories and practices of testimony and witness to trauma that I explore (e.g., Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Ellis & Bochner, 1996; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000). Telling my story in the particular ways I have chosen illustrates both the purpose and the form of that exploration. Using my research and teaching in urban classrooms as a primary context, I will argue that to be effective witnesses for the testimonies of our students, we need, in turn, to allow them to be our witnesses—even when it is hard, even when it feels too risky.

I attach words such as *productive* and *important* to difficult life experiences purposefully, but not comfortably. The weight of hard life experiences, particularly in the lives of students, is hard to bear. Yet, those stories are part and parcel of classroom life—whether or not those experiences are invited in or acknowledged, met with caring or disinterest, they are always present. Even in their ever-presence, the emotionally fraught experiences, the ongoing struggles, do not comfortably reside within traditional notions of schooling. As Weinstein (2004) describes, “We are pulsions. Life is feeling. Our lives are affective from the get-go: from infancy to death, from getting out of bed in the morning to getting back in it at night (not to mention the time spent in it, in between). We all know this, yet the knowledge we acquire in school, and are taught is in books, seems not to take into account these home truths” (p. xxii).

And, while I believe that most educators, and many laypeople, would readily concur with bell hooks’s (1994) assertion that “to teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (p. 13), I do not think educators have come to terms or consensus on what it means to enact such respect and care for the hearts and souls of students, nor have we adequately addressed the stakes in such a project. I would posit that one of reasons the terms are so complex and the stakes so high in enacting the often beautifully wrought rhetoric around deep connections and care for students is that trauma is precariously positioned among other aspects of the intersections of lives and schooling.

Trauma is destabilizing, at least in part, because challenging circumstances function differently for some of us than others when we carry them into public spaces—they function for teachers differently than for students, and how those experiences function for students is related to power, privilege, and social positioning (Dutro, 2009, 2010). Interpretations of difficult stories are soaked through with the issues of class, race, gender, and sexuality that saturate all narratives of experience. Indeed, I am struck by how we traffic in students’ difficult stories in urban schools; they get told and retold, they get spun. They may be met with genuine empathy, but too often they serve as evidence of already entrenched class-privileged assumptions about the deficiencies or deviance of students and families living in poverty (Bartolome & Balderrama, 2001).

We cannot be complacent about how difficult experiences function in schools, because, if my data from urban classrooms are any indication,

**We cannot be complacent about how difficult experiences function in schools, because, if my data from urban classrooms are any indication, the hard stories pile up.**

the hard stories pile up. By week, month, year, students' challenging life circumstances accumulate in my notes, my tapes, my "artifacts." Their stories also accrue in my sense of who I am and need to be in both my university classes and the high-poverty K-12 English language arts classrooms I have entered and exited as teacher or participant-observer. In the midst of the daily tasks and interactions—readings discussions, critical essays, unit plans, writing prompts, practice for district and state writing assessments, phonics practice, and literature discussions—hard stories entered those classrooms: a young mother found dead in her bed, a father's slow death from a mysterious illness, a girl preparing to testify against her mother's former boyfriend who sexually abused her, a baby brother's crib death, a mother's cancer diagnosis, a little cousin fatally hit by a car, a stillborn nephew, family members in prison, deaths of beloved grandparents, a cousin killed by gunfire, a move to a new foster family, a move back home from foster care, a preteen sister separated from her new baby.

The difficult stories that enter classrooms and schools are sometimes shared by students and sometimes conveyed by siblings, parents, grandparents, social workers. Whatever the source, once told, students' challenges in many K-12 schools are too often interpreted through the deficit perspectives that surround families living in poverty in the United States (e.g., Nieto & Bode, 2007; Shannon, 1998). I turn to difficult experiences as one way to challenge such Othering. I want to consider the potential of such experiences to serve as a resource for building the kinds of visceral connections—and awareness of disconnections—that call into question the impulse to speak as though we know about a life or an entire community of lives, when all we know is the facade that has been narrated and re-narrated in the image and voice of the materially privileged. For, as Weinstein (2003) writes, "surely the surface story of our quotidian lives—the story we find in a newspaper or a resume, the story an outsider could tell—misses utterly these rich and secret extensions: our past, our loves and losses, fears and dreams (p. xi).



In a search for language, metaphors, and analytic lenses for considering how to make difficult experiences and their functioning in literacy classrooms matter, I turn to the field of trauma studies. For my purposes here, I am particularly drawn to the ideas of testimony and witness (e.g., Felman & Laub, 1992) and Cathy Caruth's (1996) notion of hearing the Other. The constructs of testimony and witness have been central to the field of literary trauma studies, an area of scholarship that seeks to understand the presence and

role of trauma in literature, film, and significant cultural-historical events (e.g., Eng & Kazanjian, 2003; Hartman, 1995; Leys, 2000; Whitehead, 2004; Yaeger, 2002). As such, it is not clinical, nor does it seek to “heal.” Instead, trauma studies “operates on the level of theory, and of exegesis in the service of insights about human functioning” (Hartman, 1995, p. 554).

The metaphors of testimony and witness are often evoked to describe the relation of reader or observer to a text that contains accounts of trauma. For instance, in their germinal book, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, literary theorist Shoshana Felman and co-author and practicing psychoanalyst Dori Laub (1992) write about the crucial role of witnessing testimonies of trauma. They are particularly interested in literature that testifies to large-scale trauma and the witnessing role of readers who encounter trauma on the page. The literary testimony described by Felman and Laub (1992) contains stories told of personal experiences with significant historical traumas, particularly Holocaust literature. Along with other scholars in literary trauma studies, Felman and Laub’s approach to trauma and testimony builds from at least three underlying assumptions: (1) that testimony is the written record of an experience; (2) that the reader has some emotional distance from the testimony being offered in the literature; and (3) that the confrontation with immense trauma such as the Holocaust demands that the reader serve as witness. A reader’s witnessing might involve empathetic emotional responses or expressions—verbal and nonverbal—that acknowledge the weight and importance of the stories told.

Through the lens provided by literary trauma studies, I began to consider the presence of difficult stories in classrooms as forms of testimony and witness (Dutro, 2008). The demands of the kinds of pedagogical testimony and witness for which I am arguing are different, however, than those placed on readers (as in Felman & Laub’s [1992] work) or on writers describing their own and others’ lives (though those demands are weighty indeed) and seem to require a re-visioning of those metaphors. For instance, I began to recognize that when I experienced testimony and witness in classrooms in productive, even transformative ways, it was not a linear, unidimensional process, but rather was circular and cyclical. I find the circular image appealing because it has no definitive end; it implies that there is not a point of leveling off and being “done.” Rather, the smooth endlessness of the circle suggests that the compulsion and responsibility to witness and to testify are always present. In this view, the circle of testimony-witness begins when someone’s difficult experience enters the classroom (in whatever way that occurs) and demands that others bear witness. Faced with such testimony

and in acting as witness, the listener may respond with personal testimony that, in turn, must be witnessed and, again, may prompt testimony from her witnesses.

A circular notion of testimony and witness in classrooms requires teachers to participate as both witnesses to student experience and testifiers to their own. I think it is tempting to view teaching as involving witness, but not testimony. It is not unusual to hear teachers referred to as witnesses to students' lives and learning. But, as witnesses, are teachers merely vessels for the testimonies of Others? About witnessing the traumatic, Felman and Laub (1992) write that "[t]he testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the *blank screen* on which the event comes to be inscribed" (p. 57; italics added). The metaphor of blank screen may work for the reading of accounts of historical traumas that they describe, but it does not capture the circle of testimony and witness that I believe is both possible and necessary in classrooms. Far from a blank screen or an empty slate, I am arguing for an image of a hearer, a witness, who is full of stories, stories through which he or she can connect to the testimonies heard and that, in turn, beg for their own witnesses. Taking in the stories from students' lives, no matter how hard, and acknowledging students as witnesses to our lives "reshuffles that tired deck, stuns us with a larger apprehension of human affairs and our place within them, for we see how tentacular and linked the world really is, how arterial [life's] pathways truly are" (Weinstein, 2003, p. xxix).

Indeed, as Caruth (1996) emphasizes, the act of witnessing cannot but involve a sharing, a taking in, of the difficult story one has heard. Caruth writes of the idea of a "speaking wound"—a trauma borne by another that speaks to the wounds of the hearer (p. 7). In her explication of Freud's reading of Tasso's tale of *Gerusalemme Liberata*, Caruth describes the significance of the voice heard by the hero Tancred as he unwittingly stabs his disguised beloved, writing "we can also read the address of the voice here, not as the story of the individual in relation to the events of his own past, but as the story of the way in which one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound" (p. 8). Caruth's (1996) argument about the importance of the speaking wound within literatures of trauma, the crucial connections forged by the voice of the Other that speaks at one and the same time to its own and its listeners' pain, resonates with my experiences with students. She writes, "It is this plea by an other who is asking to be seen and heard, this call by which the other commands us to awaken . . . that constitutes the new mode

of reading and listening that both the language of trauma, and the silence of its mute repetition of suffering, profoundly and imperatively demand” (p. 9).

In literacy classrooms, I posit, this sharing of students’ wounds requires us to awaken to the ways our stories are connected to those we witness. At the same time, those connections must be allowed to reveal the potentially different ways that we and students are positioned by our challenges. Our testimony, then, functions as a conscious, risky move to share the vulnerability that is inherent in classrooms, while remaining aware of how privilege and power shape the stakes of those exposures. These two moves—a self-conscious attention to both connection and difference between one’s own and others’ testimonies—constitute what I call *critical witnessing*.

Weinstein (2003) writes, “Ultimately, the scream that goes through the house communalizes us, puts us in touch with the sentience of others, quickens (through its tidings) our own sense of life and possibility” (p. xxviii). Tracing the presence of hard stories in students’ and my own experiences in classrooms is part of my attempt to understand how that might be accomplished.



I met one of my first and best teachers when, in a nauseating rue of excitement, hope, and terror, I stepped directly from college into my own classroom. David, an African American boy, small for his age, with a head full of lovingly cared-for Jeri curls, was just shy of 8 when I met him on the first day of second grade. But I had already heard an earful from his previous teacher. David had anger so deeply etched in the furrows of his brow and his narrowed eyes that his first-grade teacher’s dismissive “little thug” warnings were tinged with fear as well as defeat. At 21 years old, I was naive about many, probably most, aspects of teaching, but I was not naive about what made David angry. Perhaps because of my five years of living an Eleanor Rigby life—with my conviction that others would be shocked if they knew the depths of pain that lay behind the mask of normality I pulled from the jar by the door each day—it was pretty clear to me. If I had been dismissed by those who were paid to clear a path for me in the world; if those grown-ups who were supposed to help me talked about *me* like that in their lunchroom; if their failings of me, their inability to look more deeply, became, simply, *my* failure to be the first grader they dreamed I’d be—hell, I’d be angry, too.

David and I did pretty well the first several weeks of school—me trying hard to prove myself his ally, his brow periodically, if warily, unfurrowing—but we didn’t reach our turning point until October. That day, hot Santa Ana winds whipping through the dusty city, David pushed someone



on the playground and, as always with these incidents, I ushered him into our classroom rather than down to the principal's office. I responded to the playground supervisor's stern account with an overly confident, "Oh, no, I'll take care of it. Really, it's fine. I'll take care of it," and closed the door on the look she shot back that clearly conveyed she'd like to send both David and me to the principal's office.

David's tears were different this time; he often shed angry tears after conflicts with other kids: no-one-understands-me tears, why-do-I-always-get-blamed tears. These were not those tears—they streamed down his face, they gushed to the rhythms of his sobs. I laid my hands on his shoulders until he could tell me. His grandfather was sick, very sick, and was about to die. His grandfather, who I knew was the only stable male presence in David's life, was leaving him—did leave him, the next day. For the rest of that week, David and I spent recesses walking around and around the school playground, following the chain-link fence that ringed the flaking asphalt and continued on to the dry, yellow, Southern California grass of the field. Around and around as other children ran, climbed, and wrapped tether balls on poles. We talked about grandfathers and brothers and how much we missed them. We talked about other things, too. Soon David returned to his tether balls and me to my brief recess prep time.

I did not completely understand it then, but I now better comprehend what I learned from and with David. So, 16 years after I last saw him when composing a poem as part of a workshop with university students in my writing course, I found myself writing about David:

***For David***

I am a teacher  
I wonder if I will matter  
I hear his sighs of frustration  
I see the pencil lying still on his desk  
I want him to feel success, feel connection to this place  
I am his teacher  
  
I pretend that I know things I do not know  
I feel dizzy leaping into the space I cannot see  
I touch his shoulder  
I worry that even two short years of hearing 'you're a rotten kid' 'you don't measure  
up' are too many  
I cry at home, but here it is all hope  
I am his teacher

I understand that he needs me to help him shake the failure, listen to the grief  
 I say, you have great ideas and I want to hear them, the world wants to hear them  
 I dream that I made a difference and that he, a man now, is fine.

When it was my turn, I read my poem aloud to my students, making it through to the end, but barely. David, helping me, still, as I try to perform some of what I learned from him.

More than 10 years later, Julius was the first child who asked me to tell the story of *how* my brother died. A few children had previously wanted to know his age or if it was an accident or an illness that had taken him, but they didn't probe for details and, always following their lead, I didn't volunteer more than the fact and feelings of my loss in connection to stories they shared with me. Julius, though, was different. One day, as I sat on a low cinderblock wall, watching children play at lunch recess, Julius walked over and sat down beside me. "So, how did he die?" he asked, his eyes on the kickball game unfolding in front of us. "Well, he was playing in the mountains, by a stream—playing with his best friend—and a rock rolled down the hillside and hit him in the head." "It must have been a big rock." "It wasn't as big as you might think, but it was big enough and it was going fast. I guess we don't know for sure what rock it was, but we thought we might have found it." "Did he die right away?" Julius asked, looking at me now. "No, not right away. A helicopter came to take him to the hospital, but he died by that night." "Did you see him?" "Kind of. I saw the stretcher come up the hillside in the mountains. And, then, in the hospital, I saw him for a minute before his surgery. Just a minute." He asked a bit more—did my brother know I was there? No. So, they did surgery on his head? Yes, his brain. It didn't work? No, it didn't work at all.

Julius asked for these details a few weeks after we had learned of our common membership in the small tribe of those who have lost siblings in childhood. One day, I sat beside him, jotting notes on my laptop, as he silently read from his third-grade basal reading book. In the middle of the story, he turned to me suddenly and said, "When I was in second grade, my brother had died in February two years ago. He was four months." I turned from my note-taking, startled, and quickly closed the lid of my laptop. "Oh, Julius. Did you know my brother died too?" (I know I said this because it is in the transcript. I would never have remembered, nor believed, that I shared this so early in that conversation.) He continued, "I was downstairs with my best friend while everyone else was upstairs. He was sick and he had a really bad ear infection. My mom checked on him earlier and he was OK and she went to check on him at 6:00 and he was dead." "How horrible,

Julius. I'm so sorry. I bet you think of your brother every day," I replied. "Yes, I do." "I know, me too."

Another boy, listening, moved closer and told us the story of his grandmother's death, and how his name, whispered in Spanish, was her last word. A bit later, after Julius too spoke of losing his grandmother, I turned to Julius and asked, "Have you ever written about how you feel about your brother? Sometimes it helps me to do that." Without pause, he responded, "My dad kicked a hole in the wall. My dad just walked up to the wall and kicked it." "There's nothing like that kind of sadness," I say, and ask, "It happened on a February day?" "February 26. If it had been November 26 I would have been so mad." "Why's that?" I asked. He met my eyes, "It's my birthday." And, then, I share, "You'll always remember that day, February 26. My brother died on May 7; that's tomorrow. But you know how long ago?" Julius shook his head. "A long time ago. It's been 21 years. But I still think about him all the time. Just like you do."

Several days later, Julius walks with me as the class heads back to the classroom after recess. "I've been thinking about your brother," he says. "Really," I reply, "because I've been thinking about your brother too." "It sure is hard, isn't it?" he says, with a small, sad smile. "Oh, yeah, it sure is, Julius. It really is." "You never get over it." He states this; it is not a question, and his glance at me seems to seek only confirmation. "That's right. You always miss him, your whole life. But, it gets a little easier, Julius; it does get a little easier as the years go by."

In reviewing my transcripts and notes, I had to get to this day, this walk from playground to classroom, before I could feel comfort with my responses to Julius's initial sharing of his loss. Initially, reading that transcript, I cringed at how early I shared my connection to his story. *Just let the child tell it first*, I thought. *You should tell him, yes, but surely you could wait*. I wondered if I should have been a quieter listener. But I was wrong in my self-scolding. In that initial listening to the tape, transcribing our words, I had discounted Julius's role as listener. He needed to testify to his loss and I was his witness. Clearly, his testimony prompted my own. He was my witness—and an attentive witness indeed. He had perceived something in my words that he had clearly revisited in the days that followed and, in our walk from the playground, he brought that notion back to me—"You never get over it." He stated it as truth, spoke back what he had heard in my story, looking only to have it confirmed; 21 years later and she is not "over it." Getting over a brother's death is not a task or a process he needed to face. He could keep his brother, the missing of his brother, as part of who he is and will be.

So, now I do not cringe at my impulse to testify. I see now—or, rather, I have learned from David, Julius, and other students—that testifying and witnessing the hard stuff is a reciprocal process.



My sharing of personal hard times as purposeful pedagogy has been an evolving practice. It happened, in part, because from adolescence forward loss has been an integral part of who I am. It is simply there, in my flesh; if there is ever cause to run DNA tests from a lost strand of hair or a quick swab of my cheek, surely loss will be there on the double-helix, no longer mapped to active grief, regret, or panic. Just simply there. So, I assume it must be there in my responses to students' lives, my level of comfort with pain when it walks through the classroom door, and the themes I am likely to highlight in my own analyses of shared texts. However, 10 years ago when I prepared to teach my first university course, I did not have any plans to invite pain to the party. Teaching adults for the first time felt challenging enough. But, as I well knew, life doesn't unfold according to a syllabus, no matter how long we may have labored over it.

On the first day of class, it was not my well-crafted "introduction to our course" statement that I shared with students. Instead, it was Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Dirge without Music," the poem I found serendipitously soon after college and to which I've clung ever since. I came to class that first day of spring semester clutching Millay because an aspiring teacher in her early 20s, part of a cohort of students who had grown close since they'd come together that previous fall, had killed herself over the semester break.

I am not resigned to the shutting away of loving hearts in the hard ground.  
So it is and so it will be, for so it has been, time out of mind:  
Into the darkness they go, the wise and the lovely. Crowned  
with lilies and with laurel they go; but I am not resigned.<sup>1</sup>

In that room, thick with shock, grief, and, of course, guilt (How could we not have noticed? Did she really convince us all with her "see ya after the break?" as she went home to swallow an entire bottle of pills?), I told the students that Millay's poem had been important to me in my own experience of loss. I offered that tiny scrap of my life. Why? To signal solidarity, understanding, empathy? Did I offer my personal loss because I couldn't share directly in their collective grief? I didn't know the young woman, hadn't known her yet. For me, she was the student who would have filled that empty chair, whose face would have become familiar—a semester, even a year, of

hallway smiles, office conversations, email exchanges. Perhaps I would have written her a letter of reference, hugged her at graduation, as she headed off to her own classroom. Then, a couple of years later, I might have run into her in the mall and, recognizing her face, greeted her enthusiastically, asking about how her life has been, hoping against hope that she wouldn't be able to tell that I no longer remembered her name. No, I didn't know her; but I do know the feeling of loss and I needed them, at least, to know that; yes, I think that is what that little scrap of my life was meant to convey.

Over the next couple of years, a ripped-corner piece of life turned to whole pages shared with students. Not constant, but over time and, it needs to be said, amid the laughter and camaraderie that was present in those classrooms (and which, I remain convinced, were also fostered by sharing the hard stuff). The novelist Madeleine L'Engle (2001) once said, "Inspiration usually comes during work, rather than before it" (p. 71). Illustrating well L'Engle's claim that we encounter insights while deeply immersed in our pursuits, I had been bringing my loss to my university classes for a few years before I truly recognized the practice for what it was. I was attempting to perform the theoretical and pedagogical arguments I was framing through

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my work with children in high-poverty classrooms and my reading of trauma studies scholarship. Or, perhaps it was that I had found the theoretical voice

in trauma studies for what I was experiencing in my research and pedagogy. Either way, in the contexts of modeling the writing process and conversations about risk-taking in writing and the vulnerabilities we demand of K-12 students when we require them to write, read, speak in a public space, I had found ways to share my writing in ways that exposed the stories that were not easy to tell and, certainly, not easy to hear. I kept sharing them, though, because I was convinced that they were positively affecting my and my students' experiences in our classroom.



The image of the wounded writer arises in the work of scholars who evocatively push the field to consider how the forms our inquiries take can intervene in both what we know and the ways we know (e.g., Ellis, 2004; Lather & Smithies, 1997; Richardson, 1997; Sparks, 1996). The anthropologist Ruth Behar (1997), for instance, weaves her own experiences, including those of loss and illness, within and around the stories of those who participate in her research, thus pushing the boundaries between the observer and those

she observes, the researcher and the researched. She poses questions to ethnographers that echo in my experience as a teacher and researcher: “When a storyteller opens her heart to a story listener, recounting hurts that cut deep and raw into the gullies of the self, do you, the observer, stay behind the lens of the camera, switch on the tape recorder, keep pen in hand?” (p. 2). When we hear a difficult story from a student, is it OK to swallow our own pain? To be the witness who bears no testimony? Behar contends that wounded writing is crucial, that for her it conveys how she “has come to know others by knowing herself and has come to know herself by knowing others” (1997, p. 177).

In his book, *Dying to Teach*, Jeffrey Berman (2007) recounts a teaching experience that is the closest I have found to the kind of pedagogical circle of testimony and witness I am advocating here. A few weeks before his wife Barbara’s death from cancer, Berman chose to share with his undergraduate students a draft of the eulogy he would read at her funeral. As he describes it, he had never shared something so personal with his students. After the reading, he decided to craft an optional writing assignment that asked students to express their feelings and opinions about the experience. Fifteen of the 22 students chose to write the optional essay and all of them felt it was a profound and important educational experience. Most found it difficult to hear the eulogy yet also believed that it was appropriate, created a connection with Berman, and demonstrated a trust that, in turn, facilitated their willingness to take risks in their writing for his course. As he recounts, “my new self-disclosure was different, and they now saw me differently. I was still their teacher, but I had now become another member of the class, one who was struggling, like everyone else, with a personal issue. I had never used the word ‘intersubjective’ in class, but the classroom suddenly became a space where every person, including the teacher, was sharing aspects of his or her own subjectivity with each other” (p. 127). I resonate with Berman’s description of shared struggle as site of connection. He acted on an intuitive sense that sharing that rawest experience of his life was not just the right thing to do but also the only possibility, both pedagogically and humanly, at that moment in his life. For him and many of his students, it marked a transformative moment in their educational experiences.

Berman (2007) also writes, “My self-disclosure narrowed the distance between students and teacher, leading to a more equal classroom relationship based on reciprocity” (p. 134). I know what Berman is getting at in his sense of a shift in the power dynamics in his classroom. However, such a claim, if it applies in any classroom, certainly needs to be contextualized.

When I consider the multiple and complex issues of power that swirl in high-poverty urban schools, for instance, any use of “equal” to describe the impact of a teacher’s difficult story feels misplaced and points to the necessity of a critical stance in acts of witnessing. Rather than increasing equality, a classroom space of testimony and *critical* witness can work toward equity precisely because it acknowledges commonalities of human experiences *and* inequities at one and the same time.



I have written previously, if fleetingly, about my brother’s death. But, I think to myself as I write this, the only people aside from close friends who I have told about my other brother’s imprisonment are children who participated in my research and my students. It is a story I have less often voiced—and not out of shame or embarrassment. For years, that experience was shrouded in a veil of hurt and anger that was just too frightening to lift.

Imagine that you have watched your parents lose a child suddenly in a “natural,” but violent accident. Imagine that you finish your adolescence not at all convinced that the loss won’t erase your father from your life as well, as he seems to fade, body and spirit, before your eyes, or that your mother won’t one day float away on her own tears, not choosing to leave, reaching back for you with all the strength she can muster, but just unable to escape the flood. Imagine, then, that the pieces of life slowly, but steadily begin to rearrange themselves into something that looks like a livable future. A baby arrives, laughter returns and, then, a little boy, older than the baby, already shaped (more than you could have known at the time), but lovingly folded into the re-formed family. Imagine the little boy growing into a pre-adolescent and bringing into that finally-reassembled life his drug-addled rages, profanity-filled rants, police, courts, threats, rehab, more drugs and, finally, after the interminably long wait for his 18th birthday and the slim sense of freedom from chaos—felony fraud, felony drug possession, felony breaking and entering. You may feel sympathy for the boy and I’m glad. He deserves sympathy. I, his sister, felt nothing but anger toward the boy. He had caused too much hurt to people who had already reached their threshold for pain. Those were the years that I understood what people meant when they said that hate can be connected somehow to love. And, when I got the news that his sentence was in and it was not short, I was glad to know he was finally contained.

Anger is corrosive and I am thankful, now, to be rid of it. I forgave my brother, finally, slowly, while spending time with children who understood that life can pose challenges. In no way do I consider the confluence of my time with children and my capacity to forgive a coincidence. Bearing witness to students’ lives, and their generous listening to my testimonies,

helped bring perspective to that piece of my story. Although my capacity to forgive didn't come in one moment, I do know that Sam made a difference. Sam, white and very poor, was one of those whom the other kids in third grade called "hillbilly." On a sunny spring day, his teacher Sharon showed me a paragraph Sam had written in his journal. It described how much he missed his father, who was in prison and was scheduled to soon be released. "I thought you might like to talk with him about it—you know, your interest in how the kids' bring all parts of their lives into the classroom and all," Sharon said. "Yes," I said and nodded, "thanks," and I took the story and placed it in my folder.

I read Sam's story several times that night. I knew, without ever making a conscious decision, that when we talked about his writing I would tell Sam that I had a brother in prison. I listened the next day as Sam spoke about his father, the fun they had together, and how much he missed him. I waited and then, at a pause in his story, I told him, "I don't know what it's like to have your father away from you in prison, but I do have a brother in prison. I know a little about that." Sam's gray eyes grew large—this was not what he expected to hear from the likes of me, the middle-class white woman, the university professor. But then he said, "Man, it's hard isn't it. Hard to have a father there and hard to have a brother there." I had to answer, "Yeah. That's right." And, for the first time I acknowledged something other than relief about my brother's imprisonment. It was hard.

Sam served as witness to my story of a brother in prison. He assumed the role of witness, a position I had been in the day before when I read the testimony he shared in his writing, the pain of missing his father, of counting the days until he would be released. As I read Sam's story, I knew I would share my own. Whether for me or for him or, in some way, for us and our relationship, I told him about one brother, just as I had told Julius about the other. Yet, I was painfully aware that although my story of a brother in prison may have provided a connection with Sam that I hope served us both well in that moment, there is very little connection in the ways our stories function for us. Mine has shock value—it shakes up my listener's assumptions. I get to see the double-take pass through my listener's eyes. Sam's story of his father can provoke sympathy, even empathy, but no adult in his school would be surprised. He is one more kid with a family member in prison.



Moving difficult stories to the center of research and teaching—and, through that work, into a vision of more equitable classrooms—is inherently risky for those on both sides of the witness chair. In Boler's (1997) words, "listening is



fraught with emotional landmines” (p. 179). If that is the case, then telling is surely riskier yet. Sharing hard times is not, should never be, a requirement for students. My contention, however, is that difficult experiences *do* enter our classrooms. Therefore, it is incumbent on literacy educators to pay attention to how those experiences function for us and our students. And, if a student chooses to take the risk of testifying to trauma, it is the very least we can do to risk the role of witness, to refrain from steering response to safer ground, and to allow another’s testimony to speak to our own wounds. This is difficult, for as Boler writes, “The desire to order chaos through simplified schemas, to ward off the felt dangers of ambiguity, seems perhaps more ‘human’ a characteristic than any other” (p. 175). As researchers and teachers of literacy, we recognize the power of story to move us, but in acknowledging that power, in attempting to harness it to intervene in what we deem possible to understand and to enact in our professional lives, we necessarily make ourselves vulnerable.

But students are made vulnerable every day and some much more than others. In urban schools, the class-privileged assumptions that ascribe Otherness to students and families living in poverty operate from an arm’s-length perspective, employing “those people” language both literally and figuratively. Such language, in Shannon’s (1998) words, constructs a “distinction of value among human beings” (p. 4), creating an “us” and “them” that casts the middle class as the subjects and the poor as objects, thus perpetuating assumptions of deficiency in high-poverty families and communities.

In this essay, I have explored how a consideration of the difficult stories—the traumatic, the painful, hard stuff of life—as they circulate through a space of testimony and critical witnessing, might facilitate

a world that is linked and meshed, a world in which pain and feeling bind us rather than divide us, an ecosystem that flaunts the primacy of emotions itself as human bridge. Such [stories] makes at last visible nothing less than a new map for displaying our true arrangements. But the complacent cover of conventional wisdom and everyday logic—received ideas about boundaries that are supposed to separate me from you, now from then, here from there—is blown sky-high. (Weinstein, 2003, p. xxx)

My experiences with children and youth suggest that to explode those boundaries in classrooms, we must both connect deeply to students’ experiences and be highly cognizant of the differing consequences they bear. Given that combination, might a pedagogy of critical witness make it difficult, if not impossible, to hold students at arm’s length? Might it be unfeasible to Other them in the ways advocated by the seemingly ubiquitous programs that

gobble up poor students' lives and spit them out, digested and repackaged, for the convenience of the middle-class? Could the metaphors of testimony and witness be useful reminders of the benefits of stepping away from the shield of the position, the front of the room, the pen, the lens, as we navigate the personal, emotional dimensions of relationships in classrooms? These are questions I continue to ponder. They are also questions I bring to and attempt to perform with my own students, the preservice and practicing teachers who have opted to spend a lifetime in the best position possible to serve as those critical witnesses to students' lives.

It is not enough, as Caruth (1998) argues, to experience the narrating of a traumatic experience from a distance. The wounds exposed in those stories become shared in the telling and demand a witness unafraid to call up hard stories. Such stories constitute a "plea by an other who is asking to be seen and heard, this call by which the other commands us to awaken" (p. 9). We need to let our hearts break in the face of some of the stories our students bring to us and let their hearts bleed a bit for us. I have learned this from students—and there is no going back.

**Could the metaphors of testimony and witness be useful reminders of the benefits of stepping away from the shield of the position, the front of the room, the pen, the lens, as we navigate the personal, emotional dimensions of relationships in classrooms?**

### Note

1. Excerpt from poem "Dirge without Music" copyright ©1928, 1955 by Edna St. Vincent Millay and Norma Millay Ellis. Reprinted by permission of Elizabeth Barnett and Holly Peppe, Literary Executors, The Millay Society.

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The National Council of Teachers of English is now accepting nominations for the David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English. This award recognizes published research in language, literature, rhetoric, teaching procedures, or cognitive processes that may sharpen the teaching or the content of English at any level. Nominations of publications to be considered should be postmarked no later than **March 1, 2011**. Any work or works of scholarship or research in language, literature, rhetoric, or pedagogy and learning published during the past five years (i.e., between January 2006 and December 2010) are eligible. Works nominated for the David H. Russell Award should be exemplary instances of the genre, address broad research questions, contain material that is accessibly reported, and reflect a project that stands the test of time. Normally, anthologies are not considered. Reports of doctoral studies, while not precluded from consideration for the Russell Award, are typically considered as part of NCTE's separate "Promising Researcher" program. Works nominated for the award must be available in the English language.

To nominate a study for consideration, please email the following information to [college@ncte.org](mailto:college@ncte.org): your name, your phone number, your email; author, title, publisher, and date of publication for the work nominated; and one paragraph indicating your reasons for nominating the work. Please include four copies of the publication for distribution to the Selection Committee, or give full bibliographic information so that the Selection Committee will encounter no difficulty in locating the publication you nominate. **Send nominations and materials by March 1, 2011**, to David H. Russell Award, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096, Attn: Felisa Mann. Final selections will be announced in mid-August 2011.

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