

PAMPHLET 35

BEARING WITNESS

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@2000**

A pamphlet reader wrote:

The seduction of the hiring process convinced me I had arrived in an organization that would embrace my methods. A place I thought my heart and talents could finally grow and flourish. I offered too much of myself unprotected and was “wacked” into reality.

I watched as the president of the company berated, humiliated, and then fired a good and stable sales representative. He did this in front of all the employees of the company. I sat and squirmed in my seat, metaphorically visualizing the owner shooting a hostage in the head to instill fear and ultimate control over the rest of us. The president noticed my discomfort. He asked, in a threatening manner, if I wanted to stay with the company. I felt compelled to quit on the spot, which I did. I managed to speak my mind a little as I left. I am now home, unemployed and recovering.

Bearing witness requires that we experience the life of another and then take compassionate action. The action we take, our moment of authenticity, requires courage, and we may have to “bear” the results of our courage and action. The man who wrote me experienced the life of the sales representative and took action. The company president, who is not fit to be called a leader, betrayed the trust this man put in the company when he was hired: the trust that he and others would be treated with basic human respect. While wounded, the man’s soul is intact, as is his integrity.

Most who witnessed what happened admire his courage and action although he will never hear that from many of them. Some will think him

a fool for speaking up and losing his job. They are as soul-dead as the abusive president of the company. They traded authenticity in exchange for the illusion of security. Like their president, they need to ponder that what they do in their lives they take with them into eternity. The wounded warrior will also take his action and integrity with him into his eternity. I hope he realizes that his loss is temporary. I admire him.

As this man discovered, there is often a material price to pay for bearing witness. The man's story is not unique or unusual. Truth-tellers are demonized, scapegoated, neutralized, and marginalized every day in our organizations and institutions. But life doesn't need more materialism. Life, and our large, interconnected living systems, need questioning, authenticity, and action that will influence the course of our shared destinies.

Many of our organizations are cesspools of addictive and abusive behavior even as executives espouse otherwise. People harm the spirits of others daily and humanity is lost. The external presentation of such organizations is glossy and superficial like the appearance of those who claim to lead them. When we do not speak up about what we see and when we do not leave such soulless enterprises, our denial and indifference collude with the sickness.

The actions we take when we bear witness don't have to be large. We change our world by bearing witness to what is in front of us daily. Because everything is interconnected, nothing is trivial or inconsequential. Our small moments of authenticity have large impacts that we are often unaware of.

Indifference is the alternative. What is the virtue of our shared indifference? Why do we want to pretend that what is real is unreal? Our mindlessness is the most fundamental harm we do to ourselves.

Why are we afraid to leave crazy organizations? Do we assume we cannot be successful elsewhere? Did we give up our freedom for things material? Are we terrified to enter the unknown? These same organizations can be places of great healing if first they acknowledge the suffering and take corrective action.

If we are to find this courage, and take these risks, we need faith in something larger than ourselves and trust that what we give will come back to us one-hundred fold. We must also create a community of like

thinkers who will support our authenticity. We cannot do this work alone; we need others.

Sometimes we bear witness in the most powerful ways by looking at ourselves:

The board of directors of a company took an action that violated the values of the organization. A conflict within the board ensued. Diane and I met with the board, and we talked about what had happened, the company values, and how the employees of the company were watching to see what the board would do. The chairman of the board met with employees, acknowledged the failure to live the values, and recommitted to their principles. This action demonstrated leadership.

The owner and founder of a company felt bad that employees believed the leadership of the company did not live by the stated values. The owner, an artist at heart, believed that the values represented his best work as the leader of the organization. Some board members felt he should throw the values out. Instead he recommitted to the values. He acknowledged that the leadership had not been perfect but he would not eliminate their core beliefs because employees were imperfect in living them. This action demonstrated leadership.

Many people like to talk about new ways to work, lead, and live in organizations. But that is all they do: talk and talk and talk. I believe that many of the talkers and thinkers would do well to get out of their heads and venture into the pit of real life (in organizations and elsewhere) and begin to experience what others live every day. Then bear witness and use their influence to bring about action. The pain, fear, and confusion they will feel will awaken them to what is real and they will learn how to be of service to real people, in real life situations.

The president of the company will continue to hurt people (and the organization) until someone holds him accountable. If lucky he will be wounded and opened to his soul. Then he can choose to become mindful of his impact on others and to change or to remain lost. What of those who were indifferent? Most will continue to add to the thoughtlessness of the world by colluding with the leadership they condemn. A few will have their own moments of authenticity as time goes on.

Life is challenging. The reader who bore witness is wounded deeply. From his pain he will find healing. From his brokenness he will find wholeness.

From his sadness he will find joy. I trust he will make these choices. He already took the first courageous step.