

WITNESSING —

In the modern world, the act of witnessing and being witnessed by another is a rare one. Witnessing in this context does not refer to legal terminology or to witness a crime or accident. Witnessing here refers to the art and act of emotionally, physically and spiritually *seeing* someone for who they are in the moment. It is the ability to stand fully present and to kinesthetically “hold space” for another, allowing one to have the complete experience of oneself. It also acts receptively, when we are witnessed by another or a group. We have the opportunity to stand in ourselves and have someone actually see who we are. I don't think many of us enjoy this experience too often.

The dictionary defines witnessing as, “testimony, evidence, confirmation,” and “to be witness to the authenticity of,” and “to serve as evidence of.” When we are witnessed, the “evidence” that we exist occurs, we receive another's “testimony” that someone else sees and hears who we are, and we are confirmed for that. Our “authenticity” gets validated. When someone else can verify our authenticity and when we do that for another, something powerful happens for both people involved. The seer and the seen find communion—common union. They experience connection and relationship. The opportunity for validation occurs and the us vs. them dynamic gives way to an I and thou relationship.

When a parent witnesses her child, when a parent truly sees that child especially in moments of great distress and upset on the child's part, the child gains an invaluable sense of who he is. He realizes his own validity, his own sense that he matters, and he is encouraged—literally given heart and courage through this act. This powerful moment changes both parent and child. The parent stands in the sacred and non judgmental place of creating safety and support. The parent includes all of what is happening for that child and the child in turn gains trust, support and confidence, knowing his expression is valid and valuable.

In a powerfully transformative movement practice entitled, Body Tales, created by Olivia Corson over 25 years ago, witnessing serves as a key component to the work. Participants express improvisational movement with personal story for personal growth, healing, the creation of community and as a form of grass roots community theater. People open pathways to their own stories, many that have lain dormant for years, and allow the oral tradition to reemerge as they literally “move” that story. The group, or in partnership with another, witnesses the mover as she expresses from that true and deep place. The person is energetically “held” by the group, watching, listening, seeing, hearing and connecting with that person. For many, this is the first time they have ever been seen in this way and had their stories listened to without interruption, interpretation or judgment. They get the chance to return to the ancestral tradition of storytelling—something many of us have no connection to any longer.

Having participated in this work for over seven years, I personally know the value of being witnessed by another as well as a group. It serves a different purpose and function than having an audience watch me perform. In witnessing, the viewer is actively engaged with the mover, holding the “kinesphere”—the energetic container—so no matter what comes up, it can be validly held and acknowledged.

I have gained just as much value from witnessing another; watching another have full permission to express his story, as he needs, with his own movement. To watch someone venture into personal darkness, grief, rage, confusion, humor, and know more of who he is as a result, is quite a gift to see. I am privileged for the responsibility and the accountability to stand present for another so he may have the permission to share whatever is most needed for revelation in that moment.

Many of us in today's world have lost contact with our connection to the natural world, to the air, the animal life, the trees and the roots of those trees. In fact, when witnessing in Body Tales, we are reminded to connect with the trees around us and to deepen our own roots so that we sense and feel that powerful binding relationship. Many of us have been uprooted from family, tradition and connection. We are uprooted from a deeper sense of place and belonging—often ruptured from that sense of who we had been, as a human being belonging to a tribe or family or group. We are encouraged to root down in the earth, “to get with the trees and each other, and really see each other.”

Witnessing is a powerful act and not one taken on lightly. It requires us to have our full sensory abilities up and ready to go. It requires us to share who we are with another in silence and to stand without judgment or criticism. That can be a tall order for many of us given how quickly and easily it is to judge another. In witnessing, that lower order gives way to one that asks us to see beyond the personality self and to acknowledge a more authentic and true self before us.

Witnessing is a practice and a discipline. It takes years to solidly and to truthfully witness another, creating that dynamic bond that lives between all of us. We give others permission to act more freely and authentically and we experience being truly seen and heard when someone reciprocates this act for us.

How transformative and empowering if we could extend this to other countries—to witness our so called “enemies” for who they are - void of the projections we put upon them. How powerful for children, elders, those with illnesses, prisoners, our spouses/partners, our leaders, our bosses to be witnessed and seen and heard. And powerful for each of us to be witnessed as we are, right where we are. What a powerful shift that could have on the planet for everyone.