# Bearing Witness to the Memories and Traumas of Jeju 4·3: The Healing Power of Being Heard

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# Abstract

What is the value, impact and meaning of Jeju 4·3 survivors giving their oral histories and witness testimonies in public venues? These community forums and international conferences are opportunities for Jeju 4·3 survivors to bear witness to previously untold lived experiences and memories during the seven-year bloodbath, known as the Jeju 4·3 Events. Many narratives and stories are revelations of closeted memories, hidden traumas, and unreconciled historical pasts. The audience-listeners who can empathize and identify with speakers' depictions in bearing witness to the inhuman can become co-witness bearers and co-owners of the trauma experiences. Audience-listeners can join the witness-speaker as a fellow traveler in the difficult journey into witnessing, and as a comrade in the struggle to transcend persistent traumas, and society's ongoing domination and dehumanization.

# Key words:

Bearing witness, oral history, witness-survivors, Jeju 4·3 events.

## Introduction

For many Jeju 4·3 survivors, the experiences are too terrible to remember and to utter aloud, even now more than 70 years later. It is understandable that they remain silent. But for other survivors, the atrocities "refuse to be buried." They feel driven to proclaim their memories and traumas "before it is too late." These survivor—witnesses have been speaking publicly at community and international forums and conferences, telling stories of what they remember. They have given oral histories and recorded interviews for documentaries, for history textbooks, for the news media and for social media.

In this article, I review and reflect on the meaning, impact and value of Jeju 4·3 survivors' oral histories and witness testimonies given in recent years. My observations are guided by interdisciplinary methods in participant observation studies (Jorgensen 2015), autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) and psychobiography (Schultz & Lawrence, 2017). In addition to the oral histories and witness testimonies of Jeju 4·3 survivors, I have drawn from research and critiques of other mass violence histories, especially from Holocaust survivor studies (Agamben, 2002; Felman & Laub, 1992), and trauma and memory studies (Herman, 2015; Oliver, 2001).

The oral histories, narratives and testimonies are opportunities for survivors to bear witness to their personally lived experiences and memories in Jeju 4.3. Since these narratives are personal and subjective lived experiences, they are typically not found in the history books and other publications, nor in most documentaries, video, and media reports about Jeju 4.3. The oral histories and testimonies are also important opportunities for audiences to learn what happened in Jeju 4.3, and to know how individuals' experienced the years of terror and violence on Jeju Island. For both the survivor-witnesses and the audiences listening to their narratives, bearing witness can have psychosocial healing effects in one's search for identity ("who am I") and life meaning ("what it means to be human").

The Jeju 4·3 (April Third) Events began on March 1, 1947, when police killed unarmed demonstrators at an Independence Movement rally on Jeju Island. This was followed by protests about police brutality, and then police retaliation. Attacks on government offices, police stations, and polling centers across Jeju Island on April 3, 1948, led to more killing. Ultimately, over 30,000 islanders, 10% of Jeju Island's population, were killed. But even after the violence ended, the South Korean government

outlawed public discussion of the massacre for 45 more years (Hankyoreh 2018a; 2018b).

Jeju 4·3 witness-survivor accounts have become increasingly visible with the rise of public interest in the seventieth anniversary of Jeju 4·3 in 2018. Ko Wan-soon, now age 81, witnessed the massacre in Bukchon Village, where 398 people were killed in two days, the second-largest number of victims in Jeju.

On December 19, 1949, nine-year-old Ko, her mother, older sister and younger brother were ordered to assemble at the local elementary school. Ko reports, "I stood up to see what's going on, and was beaten by a soldier. At that moment, I heard a series of gunshots and saw seven to eight men collapse" (Choi, 2018). She further explains, "When my infant brother cried on the back of my mother, the soldier slammed him in the head twice with a thick club" (Choe, 2019).

At a 2019 United Nations symposium of academics, human rights experts, journalists, diplomats, religious leaders, and peace activists, Grandma [할머니] Ko<sup>1</sup> gave a moving account that brought many in the audience to tears:

"Discovered by the soldiers, I was dragged out into the street, and the sky was filled with smoke as the village burned ... Bang, bang, bang, I heard gunshots, and the heads I saw were gone... I wish I could forget the sin, but I remember when I close my eyes as if it was yesterday" (The International Center for Transitional Justice, 2019).

Hong Chun-ho, of Donggwang-ri, Seogwipo City, Jeju Island, was age 10 when her village was razed by counterinsurgency forces in the winter of 1948-49. Nowadays, she speaks frequently at the Donggwang Village Community Centre about her experience to visitors. The Community Centre is not far from the caves where she and the villagers hid (Coote, 2019). She recalls in vivid detail how the adults swept footprints from the snow so the police and militia could not locate their hiding spots. But when the police did come to Donggwang-ri, they followed the footsteps, caught everyone and killed most of them. She often walks visitors to a grassy clearing known as the "Killing Fields" -- where 29 were massacred. Some were killed by pistols, some were killed by bamboo spears, and others who were wounded were burned in flames. They dumped the bodies the Seogwipo's Jeonbang Falls (The 19th World Peace Island Forum, 2018: 35–36).

Grandma Hong acknowledges a difficult past,

<sup>1)</sup> Halmeoni [할머니]: Korean for grandmother; grandma; granny; elder. This deferential and endearing term may be used both for calling biological maternal and paternal grandmother and also all elders (Kwon, 2016).

especially before President Roh Moo-hyun's apology to the Jeju people in 2006. "When he apologized, we applauded." We were so happy," she said beaming (Coote, 2018). Hong spoke with gratitude about young people today taking an interest in learning about Jeju 4·3, and interviewing her and other survivors. However, she also noted there are politicians who still do not accept the reality of 4·3, and opponents who continue to deny what happened (Coote, 2018).

# What Is Bearing Witness?

Since the Holocaust, historians, psychiatrists, and human rights scholars have used the term bearing witness to describe the process of retrieving, literally "re-collecting" and testifying about difficult memories, including memories of atrocities, brutality, dehumanization, and traumas (Felman & Laub, 1992). This is not only about the seven-year bloodbath, 1947–1954, of Jeju 4·3, but also after that, when the government outlawed free speech in Jeju, enforced censorship of the press, denied Jeju citizens their civil rights, and practiced job discrimination against them. As described in survivors' testimony, the denial and dismissal of Jeju 4·3's reality continues even today (Coote, 2018).

A common tendency, even among Jeju victims, is to try to erase the atrocities from memory and to deny that they occurred. This response is understandable because the memories are horrifying, overwhelming and unfathomable. Inner voices say "please do not tell me," "No," "I cannot tolerate hearing this," and "I cannot believe any of this is true."

To bear witness is to journey into the terrain of profound suffering, where the dignity of one's being is questioned and under assault, and where the meaning and value of one's life and existence are being squashed. These violations "so destroy the essence of innocence, decency and life itself [such] that the experience penetrates beyond comprehension and words" (Lederach & Lederach, 2011: 1–2).

In studying the survivor testimonies from Auschwitz, Giorgio Agamben observed that "human beings are human insofar as they bear witness to the inhuman" (Agamben, 2002: 212). Agamben's statement is both an existential declaration of what it means to be human, and an invitation to claim one's humanness by bearing witness to the full spectrum of human experiences, especially the unbearable and unthinkable. Paradoxically, the measure of one's humanness is the extent to which

one bears witness to the inhuman.

Mahatma Gandhi expressed a similar call a generation earlier. "To see the universal and allpervading Spirit of Truth face to face," he wrote, "one must be able to love the meanest of creation as oneself" (Gandhi 1949: 420). Both statements, to "bear witness to the inhuman" and "to love the meanest of creation as oneself," are invitations, if not imperatives, to face and acknowledge the unbearable atrocities, brutalities, nightmares and unthinkable suffering which haunt us in our closeted memories, hidden traumas, and unreconciled historical pasts. They involve opposing the "ordinary response to atrocities ... to banish them from consciousness," (Herman, 2015:1) and facing the darkest human traits we do not want to know about, especially in ourselves.

The inhuman refers to violence to one's body, mind or psyche, where one is denigrated, demonized, and viewed and treated as subhuman. Thinking is confused, perceptions and emotions are blocked, and the capacity to make meaningful decisions is disrupted (Rosner, 2017; Tick, 2014). This dehumanization is paralyzing: One cannot think or feel, and one is unconscious, like the numb state of the brutally tortured prisoners at Auschwitz who Agamben described as 'Musselman' (Agamben, 2002). The Jeju 4·3 Incident Investigation Report (Jeju 4·3 Peace Foundation, 2014), includes verbatim accounts of witness testimonies collected during the Truth Commission's investigation which commenced in 2000 and concluded in 2003.

The testimonies collected The Jeju 4·3 Incident Investigation Report are comparable to testimonies collected from the Holocaust for their graphic, gruesome, brutality, such in the catalog for Stiftung Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe (2016). In a testimony from a mass murder incident in Belarus in 1941, the witness transcript reads:

"...the firing squad consisted of about 15 Lithuanians who stood outside the pit, at its edge. In groups of ten, the Jews were forced to jump into the pit and lie down; the shooting commenced immediately. I did not hear a command. It was a scene of wild confusion. They shot with submachine-guns...The squad simply shot into the grave until there was no more movement..." (Stiftung Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, 2016: 233)

Mass murders were central in the contemporary testimonies by Ko Wan-soon and Hong Chun-ho, as they were in numerous testimonies included in The Jeju 4·3 Incident Investigation Report. The testimony by Oh Guk-man (2002: 172), age 70, is strikingly similar to that 1941 Belarus massacre

witness testimony. Oh recalls how the villagers in Pyoseon-myeon were murdered:

"When we were detained at Pyoseon Primary School, we were ordered to gather in the playground. It was 22 December, ... They split us into two groups: according to the family registry, one which had all of the family members gathered and one that didn't. At that time, my brother was missing, so my family was classified as 'a fugitive's family'... During that day, 76 residents were shot to death. The soldiers only covered the dead bodies with soil. Then the bodies were buried a year later. My father was identified by his tobacco pipe." (Oh Guk-man, 2002: 172)

# Objective Eye-Witness versus Subjective Bearing Witness

Witnessing has two meanings: being an eyewitness, and bearing witness. An eyewitness is when the spectators observe the event with their own eyes and in bearing witness, the spectator speaks subjectively about the lived- experiences (Oliver, 2004: 80-81).

An eyewitness is a spectator who observes the event with one's own eyes, and bearing witness asks a spectator to subjectively testify to a lived-experience. In eyewitness testimony, the speaker objectifies the episode in which the trauma occurred. Eyewitness testimony positions our speaker-witnesses in the experiential moment, the episode in which the trauma occurred. But in bearing witness the speaker must have a complete subjective grasp of the trauma experience; that is, to wrap one's full thoughts and emotions around one's own and others' trauma experience (Oliver, 2001: 81).

Unlike eye-witnessing, bearing witness cannot be objectively verified because this is an experience in the invisible realm of mind and consciousness. Kelly Oliver explains "that the witness is testifying to something that cannot be seen (subjectivity and the loss of subjectivity that comes from extreme oppression). In this sense, the witness is bearing witness rather than testifying as an eyewitness" (Oliver, 2001: 143)

However, it is possible to discern that the testimony is authentic and credible when the listeners are emotionally touched or moved, and can co-occupy the speaker's subjective space when engaged in their narratives.

In witness testimonial events -- conferences or forums -- audiences have noticed the strength in the survivor-witness voices. They speak with self-certainty: with no doubt, no question, no shame

about the authenticity of their lived experiences. The witness-survivor's certainty is a "transcendent knowing" that is beyond belief or conviction. The process of witnessing is not a testimony to observable facts, but rather to "a commitment to the truth of subjectivity as address-ability and response-ability" (Oliver, 2001: 143). The traumas are addressed with an ethical certainty, which can serve as resistance against re-traumatization.

# Audience-Listeners as Co-Witness Bearers

The witness-survivor accounts are of personally lived experiences, memories, thoughts and feelings. It is the subjectiveness of the narrative that touches listeners emotionally. The narratives move audiences, stir them, challenge them, and inspire them. In effect, the audience hearing the survivor-witness' narratives become witness-bearers at three levels: "the level of being a witness to oneself within the experience; the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others (the speaker(s)); and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself" (Laub, 1992:75).

At the first level, the listener is being a witness to oneself, even though one may not have been a participant in Jeju 4.3. The listener identifies with the speaker's memories and first hand experiences, as if they were one's own. The audience becomes a virtual witness bearer to Jeju 4.3 experiences as lived through the speakers' words. For Grandma Ko and Grandma Hong, they speak their autobiographical awareness as a child survivors. They had distinct and vivid memories of the places and people involved, and every word they spoke every action they took. They remember in minute detail, including the feelings and thoughts they experienced. They are personal, and "not facts that were gleaned from somebody else's telling them about what happened (Laub, 1992: 75). In the bearing witness process, trauma memories, including childhood trauma memories, are typically vivid, detailed and reported with certainty. At this level, listeners bear witness to their own experiences and memories, and identify and connect the speaker's narratives to their own personal memories.

The second level of witnessing is the listeners' participation, not in the Jeju  $4 \cdot 3$  experiences per se, but in the account given of them, in one's role as the listeners (or interviewers).

"My function in this setting is that of a companion on the eerie journey of the testimony. As [a listener], we are present as someone who actually participates in the reliving and reexperiencing of the event. I also become part of the struggle to go beyond the event and not be submerged and lost in it" (Laub, 1992: 76).

In the third level, the audience-listeners are witnessing the process of witnessing itself. They observe how the speakers and themselves as listeners, "alternate between moving closer and then retreating from the experience with the sense that there is a truth that we are both trying to reach, and we together are trying to follow this beacon" (Laub 1992: 76).

The audience, like visitors or tourists to Jeju 4·3 Peace Park and other sites or memorials, are witness—bearers. They bear witness when they learn about the historical event, and listen to the survivor narratives and testimonies. To bear witness involves keen observation and empathic listening, such that the observer–listener feels as though "I know the experiences and feelings the speaker is describing, as if I had lived them, as if I too were there." To bear witness involves a deep empathy "to think and feel oneself into the inner life of another person" (Kohut, 1984: 82).

In deep empathy, the duality of self and non-self shifts to a direct intersubjective knowing. Thich Nhat Hanh identifies this form of knowing as "interbeing," referring to the interconnectedness of everything in the universe. Carl Rogers describes this deep empathy as a process whereby "it seems that my inner spirit has reached out and touched the inner spirit of the other. Our relationship transcends itself and becomes a part of something larger" (Rogers, 1980: 129).

Audiences listening to survivor-witness testimonies, as well as visitors to sites that memorialize Jeju 4.3, may experience intersubjective knowing. For example, the Jeju 4.3 Peace Park visitor is mystified and overwhelmed by the chaotic madness of the unstoppable cycle of terror and counter-terror (Tamashiro, 2016: 155). With 30,000 Jeju islanders killed, I am puzzled: Why do the media and the official government investigation refer to this sevenyear slaughter euphemistically as the "Jeju 4.3" Incident," instead of calling it a civil war, revolt, massacre, or genocide? The museum guides explain that members of the National Committee for Investigation of the Truth About the Jeju 4.3 Incident could not reach consensus about the name of the Jeju 4·3 events (Jeju 4·3 Peace Foundation, 2014).

The audience-listeners can experience intersubjective knowing when they listen to the witness-speaker without judgement or evaluation. It requires exceptional focus, openness, and empathy to accept the authenticity of the speakers' narrative

no matter how unexpected or unbelievable. In other words, listeners identify with the speaker's witnessing, and become co-witness bearers and co-owners of the trauma.

"... the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself he relation of the victim to the event of the trauma, therefore, impacts on the relation of the listener to it, and the latter comes to feel the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread and conflicts that the trauma victim feels" (Laub, 1992: 57–58).

When this occurs, the speakers and listeners become partners in the search for understanding and meaning. The speaker can feel less alone and isolated on the eerie journey of bearing witness (Laub, 1992: 76). It can be a step toward reconnecting with the community and the wider society.

# Witnessing and Identity Transformation

Over time, bearing witness to the inhuman can be an identity transformation process. Psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton explains that "bearing witness to history liberates us emotionally and mentally" (1998, 20). The identification may shift to investing in self as the "witness of my experiences and memories," hence not a victim of traumas, but rather as a witnesser of my own and others' trauma. One's identity is to be an owner of trauma experiences or a subject of trauma (Kwon 2016).

To identify oneself (and others) as witnesser of trauma experiences is liberating. In 'victim identity,' one feels ever-imprisoned, because this form of identity defines self as dominated, oppressed, targeted, disadvantaged, or disregarded. The position of victim is dependent on the non-victim (i.e. the oppressor) for recognition and existential validity. In contrast, the witnesser is autonomous. It is impossible for the atrocity of trauma to be recognized when the relationship between the trauma victim and the ones who caused the trauma (such as the military, the police or governments) is hierarchical, and is defined and governed by dominance.

"Certainly notions of recognition that throw us back into a Hegelian master-slave relationship do not help us to overcome domination. If recognition is conceived as being conferred on others by the dominant group, then it merely repeats the dynamic of hierarchies, privilege, and domination" (Oliver, 2004: 79)

The foreclosed trauma identity can be overcome, according to Dominick LaCapra (2001) by working through, in which one critically engages with the past, involves the repetition of trauma using different lenses and tools, such as writing, drawing, music or other form of performance and expression. This process transforms the understanding of one's own and others' traumas (La Capra, 2001: 148).

Dori Laub, who is a Holocaust survivor himself, observed that shifting one's identity from victim to witnesser is critical for psychic survival. He named this an 'inner witness.' The inner witness is developed and sustained by dialogic and nonlinguistic communication interaction with other people. "Our experience is meaningful for us only if we can imagine that it is meaningful for others" (Oliver, 2004: 83). In this way, when Jeju 4.3witness-survivor oral histories and testimonies are heard by an empathetic audience, we glimpse answers to existential meaning questions -- 'who am i' and 'what does it mean to be human.' The answers apply to both the witness-speaker(s) and the audience-listeners: "I am a witnesser of human experiences." And, "creating or finding meaning for oneself is possible only through the internalization of meaning for others" (Oliver, 2004: 83).

From a phenomenological viewpoint, there are no true witness-bearers to testify or report on experience of death itself. Those who survived are considered imperfect proxies to those who fully experienced the torture, mutilation, and killing (Agamben 2002, 33-35). The 'proxy witnesses' the survivors and their descendants, observers, reporters, and scholars carry the impossible responsibility of providing testimony about an experience which they did not experience firsthand (Tamashiro, 2018a: 65).

Recognizing the imperfection of the testimony underscores the inhumanness and incomprehensibility of the massacre. However, to bear witness to this insanity and inhumanness bestows an "existential legitimacy" and honor to the experiencers themselves and to those telling about the experiences on their behalf (Tamashiro, 2018a: 66). "There are times ... when the highest honor, the greatest love is paid to another by simply bearing witness to his or her experience" (Johnson, 2011). What is revealed in the witnessing process may be morally unconscionable, cognitively unbelievable, and psychically unbearable. However, the witness bearers -- both the speaker and the listeners -- come to know and accept the "is-ness" of experience and memory, even as the narrative violates expectations and ethical imperatives of "what should be." Authenticating and "owning these truths" affirm and honor suffering as a valid, albeit difficult, human experience (Tamashiro, 2018a: 65).

Bearing witness contributes to the process of social healing, enabling individuals, communities and nations to at least partially relieve past and present wounds. This healing involves cultivating health by seeking historical truths, reconciliation, restorative justice, and dignity, while simultaneously addressing and attending to physical, emotional, spiritual, and interpersonal wounds (Tamashiro, 2018a: 65–66).

"Social healing is a paradigm that seeks to transcend dysfunctional polarities that hold repetitive wounding in place. It views human transgressions not as a battle between the dualities of right and wrong or good and bad, but as an issue of wounding and healing." (Thompson & O'Dea, 2012)

In witness bearing, the affirmation and acknowledgement of an experience-including those of suffering-relieves irreparable wounds, softens transgenerational trauma, restores the dignity that was shattered, and returns wholeness to individuals. Listening is a means of holding space, which makes pain and trauma gradually bearable and faceable. When such feelings are felt, expressed, and then heard and acknowledged, the experience can be intense, even explosive and retraumatizing (Tamashiro, 2018a: 66).

But as witness bearing continues, the stresses and traumas subside, and healing commences for both teller and listener. The emotional burden may be lightened and the dissolving of wounds may progress (Pikiewicz 2013). Witness-bearing is a sacred process that can bestow existential legitimacy to a traumatic experience and support social healing in a community. Bearing witness can deepen and fortify the soul and affirm one's humanity (Kumar 2014).

# **Conclusions**

Today, when Jeju  $4\cdot3$  survivors give their witness testimonies in public venues, audiences are hearing personal memoirs and lifetime lessons which have been incubating and 'working through' for more than seven decades. Jeju  $4\cdot3$  survivors are sharing much more than their lived experiences and memories of the historic event. Their narratives are now placed in the context of an entire lifetime of thought, reflection, meaning-making, and cultivated wisdom.

Contemporary witness narratives and testimonies emphasize the recollecting of memories and reporting them as bearing witness, especially bearing witness to the inhuman (Agamben, 2002: 212). Whereas eye-witnessing stresses objective reporting of facts and data which can be confirmed and corroborated, bearing witness highlights the subjective, lived experiences — the dialogic, the thinking, feeling, and perceiving — in the 'invisible' world of mind and consciousness.

The difficult work to bear witness to the morally chaotic is facilitated with tools that support psychosocial healing, witness consciousness, and identity transformation. Tools such as openminded observation, mindful attentiveness, and non-judgmental listening open the way to healing, to reconciliation, and to the rebuilding of the community. Bearing witness to the inhuman also makes possible a radical identity transformation: from imprisonment to liberation, and from dominated to autonomous, and from 'victim' to 'witnesser.'

Witness consciousness involves holding space with quietude that allows traumatic experiences and memories to be seen, known and understood in the paradigm of wounding and healing. This collective healing enables individuals, communities and nations to relieve personal and societal wounds and traumas. It can also soften transgenerational trauma, restore the dignity that was shattered, and return wholeness to self. Listening is a means of holding space that makes the pain and trauma gradually bearable and faceable (Tamashiro, 2018b).

Through bearing witness, it is possible for the survivor-witness-speakers as well as the audience-listeners to renew their claim to humanness, to know their inherent value and preserve their dignity. Healing from wounds and traumas can proceed as a result of being heard, being seen and being known. Witnessing renews a centered and mindful connection to self, to the community, to nature, and to the eternal.

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