

The 2021 SoPHE Presidential Address

Toward Witness Consciousness: Journeying into Transpersonal Knowing and Being¹

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Introduction

In this time of collective sadness, deep social divides, unending pandemic, and global uncertainty, the SoPHE Annual Meeting is a welcome opportunity for connecting-in-community and dialogue. Concerned discussions about these troubling times have dominated this year's meeting, whether in the paper-panel sessions or the conversations over meals and coffee-breaks.

For myself, I have wondered, what is the source of this continuous, background stress and vague, unrelenting anxiety? Is it a sign that we have entered another of civilizations' Dark Ages or a planetary Season of Darkness? Overwhelming problems and crises plague every global infrastructure, from nature and the environment, to the food-supply chain and public health, to economic, political, and governmental structures. The problems are systemic and seem to be compounding and worsening. Are we now bearing the weight and consequence of generations of environmental abuse, unaddressed structural violence (e.g. racism, colonialization, discrimination), unheard grievances, and other forms of injustice and inhumanness? Are the turmoil and chaos deliberately orchestrated and engineered by a consciousness we are a part of, whether we know it or not? It would be too easy to attribute the stress and anxieties to the disruptions associated with the pandemic, or to blame those who feed the intractable, ideological polarizations that paralyze. After all, I contribute to my own (and others') stresses and anxieties every time such thoughts and emotions show up and occupy my mind.

These ontological and existential questions about being and meaning in present, uncertain times have taken center stage in my everyday consciousness and attention. In that context, I offer some reflections on these questions. I describe herein the metacognitive awareness of this searching journey, the discoveries of non-ordinary, *transpersonal* ways of perceiving, knowing and being in the world, and some suggestions of what "witness consciousness" could mean for educators and researchers. Although witness consciousness typically refers to the phenomenological, subjective narratives told by survivor-witnesses of past disasters, violence,

and traumas, it also refers to our present-day narratives, yours and mine, as we are indeed survivor–witnesses, of and in, these apocalyptic times.

Much of my address is predicated on a call to pilgrimage I received in 2015 and my *response-answerability* to it, which played out as my journeying over 500,000 air, sea, and ground miles from 2015 to 2021. Originally, I construed the meaning of the pilgrimage to be a “coming-full-circle peace pilgrimage,” but I have since identified it as a “pilgrimage into witness consciousness.”

Call to Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage is born of pain and promise.

—William S. Schmidt²

“Pilgrimage into witness consciousness” is a genre that integrates two pilgrimage types: actual traveling to historical sites or sacred spaces, and journeying into the interior world of mind and consciousness.³ My own pilgrimage destinations include memorials, museums, and other historic sites of profound loss. Additional opportunities for my own interior journeying were opened when travel bans emerging from the global pandemic were imposed beginning in early 2020. For me the pain and promise of my call to pilgrimage in 2015 references my visit to Hiroshima, Japan fifty years before, in 1965, when I saw the remnants of the atomic bomb dropped there, was overwhelmed, and had a meltdown.

My meltdown was a glimpse into *chaos*. I saw the hypocrisy of national narratives propagated, as I perceived and construed it, by the government, the military-industrial complex, the media complex, popular culture, and the schools. The narratives were insane, incomprehensible justification for mass violence, not only justification of the apocalypse of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945, but also of the then-raging War in Viet Nam in 1965. Reflecting on this now, I realize that this insanity applies today in 2021, as entrenched identities and deep beliefs about the inferiority of the “other” escalate to fear-peddling rhetoric, communication breakdowns, hard-lined political conflicts and power struggles, hate speech, and violence.

During my 1965 Hiroshima meltdown, I could not speak to anyone for three days, but when I came out of it, I knew my life would take a different course. It was five decades later, in 2015, as part of the call, that I became aware of a message seeded in my unconscious in 1965 when I was in that chaotic, altered mind-state. The voice said:

You were meant to come here to Hiroshima. Welcome. This is the culmination of your first peace pilgrimage. There will be many more in your lifetime. ... Now, we invite you to embark on a new pilgrimage.⁴

Both the 1965 meltdown in Hiroshima, and the 2015 voices calling me to pilgrimage are examples of out-of-the-ordinary, transpersonal experiences. The clairaudient transmissions were like the calls to pilgrimage documented by Alan Morinis,⁵ Jean and Wallace Clift,⁶ and Mildred Lisette Norman, an American pacifist and activist better known by the name Peace Pilgrim.⁷ In academic discourse the validity and legitimacy of non-observable, non-empirical, transpersonal experiences are still doubted. To a Westerner committed to materialistic philosophy and to the Cartesian–Newtonian paradigm, the transpersonal domain seems incredible and absurd.⁸ How does one know whether such voices are coming from the imagination, creativity, or fiction? Could they be hallucinations? Could they be false or distorted memories?

I recognize these criticisms come from the sense that such a “glimpse into chaos” in my own 1965 Hiroshima meltdown was also unbelievable to many. For many, it would be an existential threat to embrace a hypothesis of a broken world. The suggestion we may have entered a Dark Age might be judged as unfounded speculation, despite the large body of evidence of multiple, systemic, and persistent global crises.

Spaces for Witnessing and Reflecting

My pilgrimage destinations, which included museums, memorials, and other historic sites of profound suffering, served as sobering and sacred spaces for witnessing and truth-telling, for commemoration and memorialization, and for reflection and soul-searching. I experienced the exhibit rooms and memorial grounds as safe spaces where one could open to transpersonal experiences and insights, bear witness to suppressed memories, face difficult and unreconciled historical pasts, and experiment with mind frames for reconciliation and redemption.

My 1965 visit to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park and Museum in Japan served as a personal baseline reference point. Two National Peace Parks in Korea—the No Gun Ri Peace Park and Memorial Museum and the Jeju 4•3 Peace Park—were keystone sites for my transpersonal experiences and acute insights. The historical legacy and heritage of racial terror in the U.S. depicted at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, U.S. were instructive to me in highlighting and making meaning of present-day global apocalypse narratives.

The No Gun Ri Peace Park and Museum memorializes the July 1950 massacre early in the Korean War when U.S. soldiers killed an estimated 400 villagers by dropping bombs on refugee columns and firing on them while trapped at the twin-underpass railroad bridge at No Gun Ri.⁹ The Jeju 4•3 Peace Park, also in South Korea, documents a seven-year bloodbath which began on March 1, 1947, when police killed six demonstrators during an Independence Movement Rally. The killings triggered protests and demonstrations about police brutality. The protests escalated into violent attacks on government offices, police stations, and polling centers across

Jeju Island on April 3, 1948, which were then followed by a government crackdown, implementation of a “scorched-earth policy,” and a brutal counterinsurgency program. The island-wide crackdown, out of fear and suspicion that Jeju Island had turned Communist, led to an unstoppable massacre. Ultimately the conflict resulted in an estimated 30,000 deaths, 40,000 political refugees, and 95% of villages in the middle of Jeju Island being destroyed.¹⁰

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice was established in 2018 as the nation’s first memorial dedicated to the legacy of racialized terror in the U.S. It stands as sacred space for witnessing, memory, and reflection for “more than 4,400 African American men, women, and children [who] were hanged, burned alive, shot, drowned, and beaten to death by white mobs between 1877 and 1950.”¹¹

Transpersonal Experiences

Transpersonal refers to “experiences in which the sense of identity extends beyond the ego to encompass other aspects of reality.”¹² The transpersonal includes perceptions and cognitions which go beyond the five senses, beyond the sense of oneself as separate from the rest of the world, and beyond dualistic thinking.¹³ The transpersonal includes a broad sweep of psychospiritual development, “from our deepest wounds and needs, to the existential crisis of the human being, to the most transcendent capacities of our consciousness.”¹⁴

Transpersonal experiences provide entrées into *witness consciousness*, the ability to observe inner processes and the context of consciousness itself, one’s own and others’, in non-judgmental ways. Miri Albahari defines witness consciousness as mode-neutral awareness,¹⁵ not restricted to any particular sensory or cognitive modality like hearing or thinking. It has an intrinsic phenomenal character, an awareness that is always present but largely unnoticed in ordinary consciousness states.¹⁶

This is the same metacognitive awareness that one is engaging in the *process* of witness consciousness. Witness consciousness encompasses *bearing witness*, the mindful process of retrieving, facing, and acknowledging unbearable memories and traumas.¹⁷ Witnessing has two processes: to be an eyewitness, and to bear witness. An eyewitness is a spectator who observes the event with one’s own eyes. In contrast, bearing witness means a spectator is subjectively testifying to a lived experience. In eyewitness testimony the speaker *objectifies* the episode and positions the observer in the experiential moment. By contrast, in bearing witness the speaker must have a *subjective* grasp of the embodied experience, that is, to wrap one’s thoughts and emotions around one’s own and others’ experiences.¹⁸

Unlike eye-witnessing, bearing witness *cannot be objectively verified* because there can never be a true co-witness; bearing witness is an experience that occurs in the invisible realm of mind, memory, and consciousness, and

therefore the witness is testifying to something that cannot be objectively observed.¹⁹ To bear witness is to journey into the terrain of profound suffering, where the dignity of one's being is under assault, and where the meaning and value of one's life and existence are being squashed.²⁰ Studying survivor testimonies from Auschwitz, Giorgio Agamben observes that "human beings are human insofar as they bear witness to the inhuman."²¹ Mahatma Gandhi describes this extraordinary knowing: "To see the universal and all-pervading Spirit of Truth face to face," he writes, "one must be able to love the meanest of creation as oneself."²²

Brian Stevenson, the social-justice-activist lawyer and head of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) in Montgomery Alabama, writes:

We are all broken by something.... Sometimes we're fractured by the choices we make; sometimes we're shattered by things we would never have chosen. But our brokenness is also the source of our common humanity, the basis for our shared search for comfort, meaning, and healing. Our shared vulnerability and imperfection nurtures and sustains our capacity for compassion.²³

Agamben, Gandhi, and Stevenson all emphasize the consciousness of witnessing: to acknowledge the unbearable and unthinkable, which haunt us in our closeted memories, hidden traumas, and unreconciled historical pasts. It means having the courage to witness the brokenness in all of us which we do not want to know about, especially in ourselves.²⁴ In all, this is a process that opens a consciousness that is transpersonal, transgenerational, and transcultural in both collective remembrances and personal memories. It suggests a way of perceiving, thinking, experiencing and being in the world. We witness the universality of human suffering, the brokenness, and the struggle to defend dignity. We glimpse the possibility of peace by our souls, and equanimity in consciousness itself.

In our professional arenas of teaching and research, witnessing may become a framework for understanding the historical and philosophical meanings emerging from subjective, transpersonal, witness-bearing narratives, including the biographies and chronicles of lived experience and memories of the historical past as well as those of present-day controversies and conflicts. The learning process into witnessing can be described within themes such as the connected universe, historical regression, and encounters with the supernatural or supernormal. I prefer to call this a process of learning rather than "healing" to avoid the expectation that this is a cure, or that one's pain, grief, or suffering can or will be eliminated or avoided.

The Connected Universe

The connected universe is an overarching theme in opening transpersonal witness consciousness. As transpersonal experiences reach beyond the boundaries of ego and personal-body space, one can

identify or empathize with other persons, an entire group of people, or all of humanity. The sense of the connected universe “involves authentic identification with other people animals, plants and various other aspects of nature and the cosmos.”²⁵ The aim is to listen empathically to where the listener feels as though one is experiencing, if virtually, the memory the speaker describes. Psychiatrist Heinz Kohut explains that empathy is “to think and feel oneself into the inner life of another person.”²⁶ This acute feeling of connectedness, the very spirit of community felt in shared, common rites-of-passage is called *communitas*.²⁷ Thich Nhat Hanh uses the term *interbeing* to describe a state of inter-dependently co-existing and the consciousness of everything interconnected.²⁸

In a pilgrimage experience, one first witnesses fragmentation and disconnectedness before experiencing connectedness. For example, at No Gun Ri Peace Park, one bears witness to the brutality and inhumanness of 70 years ago, from the massacre of 400 refugees, to the U.S. government’s report that exonerated all military wrongdoing—this despite Air Force policies to strafe refugees and orders to attack and kill civilians. We bear witness to U.S. President Clinton’s statement of “regret,” a self-contradictory message that acknowledges U.S. troops killed civilians, yet all-the-while denying the validity of government documents that authorized those killings. We bear witness to the U.S. government’s refusal to offer reparations, redress, or restitution to survivors.²⁹

We also learn about Park Seonyong, now aged 95, who witnessed her five-year-old daughter and two-year-old son killed and was herself shot in the side and arm. “Looking back, I still feel terrified,” she says. “Imagine how painful it was to see your own kids dying before your very eyes. It is terrifying to see people bleeding and dying. It was horrible.”³⁰ We bear witness to Park’s unending pain and sorrow. How does remembering and witnessing the suffering proceed to redemption, restoration, repairing, and reconciliation? Watching the video of her with her son, Dr. Chung Koo-do, repeating this story I felt like a co-witness to her sadness, my sense of *interbeing* connection with her, with Dr. Chung, with her two children she lost, and with the souls of all who died there. This moment felt like a vast knowing of what it means to be in *communitas* with the human family as a whole, an “all-over-the-body” free and joyous feeling of a common bond of vulnerability and spiritual resilience which united everyone and everything across geographies and generations.

When the Associated Press story published her story in 1999, it was healing for Park to know that her accounts were finally corroborated by U.S. witnesses. “I have never been happier before,” she said. “Now I can rest in peace when I die.”³¹ Park’s pain and sorrow becomes a legacy for all global citizens to own; we are all connected in humanity’s legacy of suffering. Through this witnessing experience, we each become a keeper of No Gun Ri’s memory; we collectively become keepers of No Gun Ri’s

memory. I come to know—we all come to feel and know—how we are all connected as global peace ambassadors for No Gun Ri.

Historical Regression

In historical regression, temporal boundaries are crossed. It is possible to “know” the lives including the suffering of our ancestors, of other cultures and historical periods, and of past lives or previous incarnations. Historical regression is a part of C. J. Jung’s theory of the collective unconscious.³² “This vast repository of ancestral, racial, and collective memories contains the entire historical and cultural heritage of humanity.”³³

At the Jeju 4•3 Peace Park, the guide pointed to five monuments, like gravestone sculptures, bodies without heads. “The monuments represent those who perished in Jeju 4•3,” she explained to my student group. At that moment, five crows appear, circling above us, cawing loudly. Afterwards, I said to the students:

The crows were crying the enormous sorrow and horror of Jeju 4•3. But they were also bringing strength, compassion, gratitude, and affirmation. The crows declared, “Thank you for coming to Jeju and learning about what happened here. We are happy to see you, young adults, blessing you to go forward in your lives as peace envoys.”

The students nod in quiet recognition.

According to Korean legend, crows are messengers from the other world. In a *Hankyodreh* news photo³⁴ taken on the 70th anniversary of the Jeju 4•3 Massacre, crows stood on the headstones of victims at the Jeju 4•3 Peace Park, as though each to say, “I am the spirit of this person named on this tombstone. *Kamsabammida*, thank you for coming here.”

At No Gun Ri, butterflies traverse the worlds. We witness the butterfly’s message of rebirth in the sculpture entitled *Coexistence of Incompletion*. In this sculpture and in No Gun Ri’s rose garden, butterflies console the pain and sadness of a divided nation—the divided nation here refers to North and South Korea. When villagers at No Gun Ri departed the physical world, they found their being in another dimension where they live in full awareness and know how really to fly and dance. The places themselves become sacred ground. The buildings, the ground, nature all around speak the legacy and the hope.

On yet another leg of my pilgrimage I visited Montgomery, Alabama, a community shaped by slavery. I felt the legacy as I walked the streets and stood by the river, a portal for the U.S. domestic slave trade. I felt the heavy energy, and I heard the sounds of that era in the buildings, on the streets, and on the riverbank. I experienced and identify with what Stevenson explains:

It felt like I could hear the sounds of enslaved people coming into that river. . . . I can hear it. It’s the sound of suffering. It’s the sound

of agony, the sound of misery, and when you hear that misery, when you understand that, it will push you to do things that you won't otherwise be able to do. There is a history of untold cruelty that hides in silence, and there are things we can hear in these spaces that can motivate us.³⁵

Encounters with the Supernatural or Supernormal

Rites of passage, symbolic rituals, and spiritual imagery can evoke a sense of communication and connection with spirit guides, deities, the deceased, or other archetypal figures or symbols.³⁶ For example, in *A Little Pond*, the 2009 docudrama based on the No Gun Ri Massacre,³⁷ two whales swim across the sky as the refugees trek their way over a bridge across a wide river. The lyrical calm feels like a peace blessing, a premonition of the mysterious tranquility that would come on July 29, 1950 when the shooting stopped and U.S. troops left. On that same afternoon, North Korean soldiers arrived, offering comfort to the survivors at the tunnel, showing them a safe path home and giving them food. Of this afternoon Suhi Choi writes, "This was the most ironic moment of the No Gun Ri incident. Refugees fleeing from a North Korean advance were liberated by the very troops from whom they were fleeing."³⁸

The Earth remembers. In the Community Soil Collection Project based at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, individual victims of lynching are memorialized by containers of soil collected from lynching sites and by the creation of a memorial that acknowledges the horrors of racial injustice. Citizens of the community are invited to participate in this bearing-witness ritual by collecting the soil.³⁹ The project involves volunteers in engaging and reckoning with the memory of the racialized terror of lynching. The jars of collected soil are displayed in Montgomery at the Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration, the Peace & Justice Memorial Center, and at the EJI office. Lynching's history of terror and suffering are made tangible and visible when these jars of soil are displayed. The lives of the forgotten people who were never protected and never honored are thereby resurrected and recognized. For, "There is sweat in that soil, the sweat of enslaved people. There are the tears of people who suffered when they were being brutalized and lynched. There's the blood of these victims. But there's also hope in that soil."⁴⁰ The soil carries the pain and sadness of the suffering as well as the inspiration and opportunity for new life, a chance to grow something hopeful, and healing for the future.

Returning to Hiroshima, the buzzing song of the cicadas dominates Peace Memorial Park.⁴¹ Their singing envelopes the ringing of the peace bell and becomes the heartbeat for mediation among the visitors who come to pay tribute.



Journeying into the transpersonal, witness consciousness reveals that there exist dimensions of reality of which we are not normally aware. Reflecting and meditating on these dimensions give us deeper insight both into who we are and the nature of reality. Reflecting and meditating reveal options to consider in one's self-concept (i.e. identity), and one's worldview, including the material, social, and metaphysical dimensions. This knowledge raises the question, Will we accept and own our vulnerability and brokenness? If we do, we will be stronger, not weaker, with more capacity for compassion that heals, and for energy and will to transform the narratives of racial and gender inequality and dehumanization? Owning our vulnerability is to feel the need to remember more. To remember more is to bear further witness to the inhuman in our unreconciled pasts, so that we can recover, so that we can restore, and so that we can script a different future.

Will we be able to consider and reflect on the present chaos and brokenness in our world? Will we be able to transcend intractable ideological polarities? By opening ourselves to witness consciousness in our own life journeys first, we might grasp the "universal and all-pervading Spirit of Truth" Gandhi describes and "to love the meanest of creation as oneself."⁴² Such openness may further inspire us with the hope, *interbeing*, and *communitas* needed to face the turmoil, bear witness to the inhuman, and together walk the path toward justice restored.

Endnotes

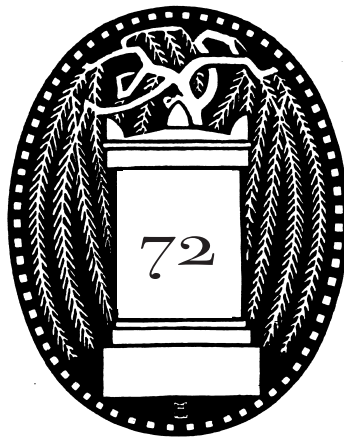
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