

00:03

Have you ever seen something and you wish you could have said something but you didn't? A second question I have is: Has something ever happened to you and you never said anything about it, though you should have?

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I'm interested in this idea of action, of the difference between seeing something, which is basically passively observing, and the actual act of bearing witness. Bearing witness means writing down something you have seen, something you have heard, something you have experienced. The most important part of bearing witness is writing it down, it's recording. Writing it down captures the memory. Writing it down acknowledges its existence.

00:59

One of the biggest examples we have in history of someone bearing witness is Anne Frank's diary. She simply wrote down what was happening to her and her family about her confinement, and in doing so, we have a very intimate record of this family during one of the worst periods of our world's history. And I want to talk to you today about how to use creative writing to bear witness. And I'm going to walk you through an exercise, which I'm going to do myself, that I actually do with a lot of my collegiate students. These are you future engineers, technicians, plumbers -- basically, they're not creative writers, they don't plan on becoming creative writers. But we use these exercises to kind of un-silence things we've been keeping silent. It's a way to unburden ourselves. And it's three simple steps.

01:50

So step one is to brainstorm and write it down. And what I have my students do is I give them a prompt, and the prompt is "the time when." And I want them to fill in that prompt with times they might have experienced something, heard something or seen something, or seen something and they could have intervened, but they didn't. And I have them write it down as quickly as possible. So I'll give you an example of some of the things I would write down.

02:21

The time when, a few months after 9/11, and two boys dared themselves to touch me, and they did. The time when my sister and I were walking in a city, and a guy spat at us and called us terrorists. The time way back when when I went to a very odd middle school, and girls a couple years older than me were being married off to men nearly double their age. The time when a friend pulled a gun on me. The time when I went to a going-away luncheon for a coworker, and a big boss questioned my lineage for 45 minutes. And there are times when I have seen something and I haven't intervened. For example, the time when I was on a train and I witnessed a father beating his toddler son, and I didn't do anything. Or the many times I've walked by someone who was homeless and in need, they've asked me for money, and I've walked around them, and I did not acknowledge their humanity. And the list could go on and on, but you want to think of times when something might have happened sexually, times when you've been keeping things repressed, and times with our families, because (In a hushed voice) God bless them.

03:42

(Laughter)

03:43

Our families, we love them, but at the same time, we don't talk about things. So we may not talk about the family member who has been using drugs or abusing alcohol. We don't talk about the family member who might have severe mental illness. We'll say something like, "Oh, they've always been that way," and we hope that in not talking about it, in not acknowledging it, we can act like it doesn't exist, that it'll somehow fix itself.

04:13

So the goal is to get at least 10 things, and once you have 10 things, you've actually done part 1, which is bear witness. You have un-silenced something that you have been keeping silent. And so after this, you're ready for step 2, which is to narrow it down and focus. And what I suggest is going back to that list of 10 and picking three things that are really tugging at you, three things you feel strongly. It doesn't have to be the most dramatic things, but it's things that are like, "Ah," like, "I have to write about this." And I suggest you sit down at a table with a pen and paper -- that's my preferred method for recording, but you can also use a tablet, an iPad, a computer, but something that lets you write it down. And I suggest taking 30 minutes of

uninterrupted time, meaning that you cut your phone off, put it on airplane mode, no email, and if you have a family, if you have children, give yourself 20 minutes, five minutes. The goal is just to give yourself time to write. What you're going to write is you're going to focus on three things. You're going to focus on the details, you're going to focus on the order of events, and you're going to focus on how it made you feel. That is the most important part. I am the guinea pig today, and so I'm going to walk you through how I do it. I'm going to pick three things.

05:37

So the first thing I feel very, very strongly about is that time a couple months after 9/11 when those two boys dared themselves to touch me. I remember I was in a rural mall in North Carolina, and I was walking, just walking, minding my business, and I felt people walking behind me, like, very, very close, and I'm like, "OK, that's kind of weird. Let me walk a little bit faster. There's a whole mall around me. What is happening?" They walk a little bit faster, and I hear them going back and forth: "You do it!" "No, you do it!" And then one of them pushes me, and I almost fall to the ground. So I kind of pop back up, expecting some type of apology, and the weirdest thing is that they did not run away. They actually went and just stood right next to me. And I remember there was a guy with blond hair, and he had a bright red polo shirt, and he was telling the other guy, like, "Give me my money. I did it, man." And the guy with the brown hair, I remember he had a choppy haircut, and he gave him a five-dollar bill, and I remember it was crumpled. And so I'm like, am I still standing here? This thing just happened. What just happened? And it was so weird to be the end of someone's dare, and also at the end to not exist to them. I remember it kind of reminded me of the time when I was younger and someone dared me to touch something nasty or disgusting. I felt like that nasty and disgusting thing.

06:57

A second thing I feel very, very strongly about is the time a friend pulled a gun on me. I should say former friend.

07:04

(Laughter)

07:06

I remember it was a group of us outside, and he had ran up and he had the stereotypical brown paper bag in his hand, and I knew what it was, and so I'm a very mouthy person, and I started going off. I was like, "What are you doing with a gun? You're not going to shoot anyone. You're a coward, you don't even know how to use it." And I kept going on and on and on, and he got angrier and angrier and angrier. And he pulled the gun out and put it in my face. I remember every one of us got very, very quiet. I remember the tightness of his face. I remember the barrel of the gun. And I felt like -- and I'm pretty sure everyone around me who got quiet felt like -- "This is the moment I die."

08:00

And the third thing I feel very, very strongly about is this going-away luncheon and this big boss. I remember I was running late, and I'm always late. It's just a thing that happens with me. I'm just always late. I was running late, and the whole table was filled except for this seat next to him. I didn't know him that well, had seen him around the office. I didn't know why the seat was empty. I found out later on. And so I sat down at the table, and before he even asked me my name, the first thing he said was, "What's going on with all of this?" And I'm like, do I have something on my face? What's happening? I don't know. And he asked me with two hands this time. "What's going on with all of this?" And I realized he's talking about my hijab. And in my head, I said, "Oh, not today." But he's a big boss, he's like my boss's boss's boss, and so I put up for 45 minutes, I put up with him asking me where I was from, where my parents were from, my grandparents. He asked me where I went to school at, where I did my internships at. He asked me who interviewed me for that job. And for 45 minutes, I tried to be very, very, very, very, very polite, tried to answer his questions. But I remember I was kind of making eyeball help signals at the people around the table, like, "Someone say something. Intervene." And it was a rectangular table, so there were people on both sides of us, and no one said anything, even people who might be in a position, bosses, no one said anything. And I remember I felt so alone. I remember I felt like I didn't deserve to be in his space, and I remember I wanted to quit.

09:49

So these are my three things. And you'll have your list of three things. And once you have these three things and you have the details and you have the order of events and you have how it made you feel, you're ready to actually use creative writing to bear witness.

10:03

And that takes us to step 3, which is to pick one and to tell your story. You don't have to write a memoir. You don't have to be a creative writer. I know sometimes storytelling can be daunting for some people, but we are human. We are natural storytellers, so if someone asks us how our day is going, we have a beginning, a middle and an end. That is a narrative. Our memory exists and subsists through the act of storytelling, and you just have to find a form that works for you. You can write a letter to your younger self. You can write a story to your younger self. You can write a story to your five-year-old child, depending on the story. You can write a parody, a song, a song that's a parody. You can write a play. You can write a nursery rhyme. I've read -- I mean, these are theories, though -- that "Baa, baa black sheep, Have you any wool," "Yes sir, yes sir, three bags full," is actually about impoverished farmers in England being taxed heavily. You can write it in the form of a Wikipedia article.

11:01

And if it's one of those situations where you saw something and you didn't intervene, perhaps write it from that person's perspective. You know, so if I go back to that boy on the train who I saw being beaten, what was it like to be in his shoes? What was it like to see all these people who watched it happen and did nothing? What happens if I put myself in a position of someone who was homeless and just try to figure out how they got there in the first place? Perhaps it would help me change some of my actions. Perhaps it would help me be more proactive about certain things.

11:33

And with telling your story, you're keeping it alive. So you don't have to show anyone any of these steps. But even if you're telling it to yourself, you're saying, "This thing happened. This weird thing did happen. It's not in my head. It actually happened." And by doing that, maybe you'll take a little bit of power back that has been taken away.

11:54

And so the last thing I want to do today is I'm going to tell you my story. And the one I picked is about this big boss. And I picked that one because I feel like I'm not the only one who has been in the position where someone has been above me and kind of talked down. I feel like all of us might have been in positions where we felt like we could not say anything because this person

has our livelihood, our paychecks, in their hands, or times we might have seen someone who has power talking down to someone, and we should have or could have intervened. And so, by telling a story, I'm taking back a little bit of power that was taken away from me. And I have changed the names, and it's been a decade, so it's going to be OK. And it doesn't have a happy ending, because it's just me writing down what happened that day. And so this is how I use creative writing to bear witness.

12:54

At Lisa's going-away luncheon, I wanted to ask my boss's boss's boss if he's stupid or just plain dumb after he takes one look at my hijab and asks me where I'm from in Southeast Asia. I tell him that it's New Jersey, actually. He asks where my parents are from and my grandparents and my great-grandparents and their parents and their parents' parents, as if searching for some other blood, as if searching for some reason why some Black Muslim girl from Newark wound up seated next to him at this restaurant of tablecloths and laminated menus. I want to say, "Slavery, jerk," but I've got a car note and rent and insurances and insurances and insurances and credit cards and credit debt and a loan and a bad tooth and a penchant for sushi, so I drop the "jerk" but keep the truth. "Tell me," he says, "Why don't Sunnis and Shiites get along?" "Tell me," he says, "What's going on in Iraq?" "Tell me," he says, "What's up with Saudi and Syria and Iran?" "Tell me," he says, "Why do Muslims like bombs?" I want to shove an M1 up his behind and confetti that pasty flesh and that tailored suit. Instead, I'm sipping my sweetened iced tea looking around at the table, at the coworkers around me, none of whom, not one, looks back at me. Rather, they do the most American things they can do. They praise their Lord, they stuff their faces and pretend they don't hear him and pretend they don't see me.

14:42

Thank you.