

Different Kinds of Witness **by Davin “Dax” Franklin-Hicks**

Borderlands UU

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Good morning. It is good to be with you again.

I love the drive out here to Amado and had been anticipating it this past week. Knowing that I would get an hour in the car watching the desert become more expansive and open, still getting the benefit of the mountains to hold me.

I am a person in recovery and the mountains served as my Higher Power for a long time. The reason for that was a simple one, it seemed that the more my world became internal, and self-focused, the more the world disappeared.

When I would be in a time of centering myself as the primary point in the universe, when I would be lost in that negative and broken space, I would have these moments of reprieve. I now think of them as off ramps of my addiction, the times that Higher Power or some intuitive thought that I was not the center of all of living would break in. And the first thing I would notice were the mountains. They broke in. They broke through. They held me. They carried me.

And that off-ramp one day eventually broke into a wide valley of recovery that I have been experiencing with awe most days and discomfort the others. It is from that space that I long to talk with you today.

When I was invited back to be with you all, I was told that your worship arts focus for June had something to do with slowing down, self-care, contemplation, and discernment. And I have to say, those are beautiful words. They are also the kinds of words that sound easier than they are in the living. And isn't life so much about bridging the gap between how easy something sounds and how hard it is in the application?

Slowing down sounds lovely until we realize what catches up with us when we finally stop moving. Self-care sounds lovely until we realize how many of us have been trained to care for everyone and everything else first. Contemplation sounds lovely until silence gives our own minds room to speak. Discernment sounds lovely until we remember that discernment usually happens in a place where we do not yet know what to do. It is hard to be in a place where we do not yet know what to do.

So, I have been thinking about what we need when we are tired. What we need when we have been through stress. What we need when the world at large is in turmoil, and the turmoil enters our communities where we find refuge. What we need when our own inner life feels too loud, too heavy, too crowded, or too painful to carry alone.

And the word that keeps coming to me is witness. The kind of presence that can look toward what is true without turning away, and can say, “I see this with you.”

The kind of presence that does not need pain to become something neat and clean before it deserves compassion. Sue Monk Kidd has a line I have been carrying around. She writes, “There’s no pain on earth that doesn’t crave a benevolent witness.”

I really love that phrase. A benevolent witness, because it distinguishes what kind of witness we are talking about. We can agree that not every witness is benevolent. I remember when the world was coming on-line and we were starting to see parts of the world that we didn’t have the cultural or historical framework to understand. The collective consciousness started witnessing each other in real time. I attended a conference that talked about the psychological impact of witnessing things we are not equipped to understand and what it could do to our sense of connectedness. The crux of the talk was, “It ain’t going to be good.” It would invite the world to witness without connection.

Some people witness our pain in order to judge it. Others witness it to explain it away. Some people witness our pain and immediately make it about themselves. Others become so overwhelmed that we end up taking care of them. And one of the hardest for me is some people witness our pain and then use it later as evidence against us. So when Sue Monk Kidd says pain craves a benevolent witness, I hear something very precise.

Pain does not just crave attention or crave an audience. Pain does not just crave noise or analysis or commentary. It craves a kind witness. A safe witness. A witness that can bear to know something true without needing to control it or define it.

And I wonder if one of the hardest parts of being human is that we often discover our need for witness in the very moments when we feel least able to ask for it.

When we are doing well, we can be charming. We can be clear and articulate. We can tell the story in a way that makes sense.

But on our worst days?

On our worst days, we may not be able to explain ourselves very well. We may not know whether we need silence or company. We may be embarrassed by the size of our own feelings. We may be unable to bear even our own minds.

That is how I want to hear Mary Oliver’s poem “*The Poet with His Face in His Hands.*”

I want to read it as if she wrote it on the worst day. Not on a gently melancholy day where inspiration felt like a nice little balm and expression felt like a cleansing.

I want to read it as if she wrote it on one of those days when a person can hardly bear the contents of their own mind. Maybe you know something about that kind of day.

A day when your own thoughts become too loud, a memory will not loosen its grip. A day when regret circles back again and again. A day when grief does not arrive neatly, but floods in. A day

when you are not sure you can survive being alone with yourself, and yet being with other people feels impossible too.

That is where I hear this poem beginning. It begins with a person bent inward. Face in hands. A person not just simply sad but overwhelmed by the self. Overwhelmed by the mind's ability to accuse, replay, measure, condemn, and despair.

Mary Oliver's poem "The Poet with His Face in His Hands"

You want to cry aloud for your mistakes. But to tell the truth the world doesn't need anymore of that sound. So if you're going to do it and can't stop yourself, if your pretty mouth can't hold it in, at least go by yourself across the forty fields and the forty dark inclines of rocks and water to the place where the falls are flinging out their white sheets like crazy, and there is a cave behind all that jubilation and water fun and you can stand there, under it, and roar all you want and nothing will be disturbed; you can drip with despair all afternoon and still, on a green branch, its wings just lightly touched by the passing foil of the water, the thrush, puffing out its spotted breast, will sing of the perfect, stone-hard beauty of everything.

Now, I know. This poem can feel a little rough at first. It does not immediately wrap a blanket around the grieving person. As a matter of fact, it is exactly the opposite of what I know I am looking for in a benevolent witness. There is something important, though, in starting in the universal place of deep sorrow, and *I've-Had-It-Up-To-Here-ness* to understand how to both create the benevolent witness within us and find the benevolent witness outside of ourselves.

On first reading of this poem, I was having a really hard day and went to poetry for comfort. I felt scolded by Mary Oliver in my suffering, "Jeez, Mary. I was just feeling sad. I'm trying over here!"

In reading it again and again, I started receiving it differently.

I think she is speaking to the part of us that has become trapped inside the smallest room of our despair. She seems to say: look up. She is not asking us to look up because the pain is unreal or because the grief is too much. I am not hearing the request to look up and around is because our mistakes do not matter or because the heart should simply get over it.

But because the mind, left alone on its worst day, can become a very small and dangerous room. And sometimes we need something larger than our own mind to witness us.

Sometimes we need the world. Her within her own landscape of the field and waterfall. We can join in our own landscape of the bird, the stone, the desert, the sky that does not flinch when we fall apart beneath it.

Nature becomes a kind of witness when the witness of the world is too busy with its own fears and troubles. The witness of nature is not one that will reach for some fix or explanation. It is a witness that receives us back into a world larger than our despair.

And that feels especially true here, in this place. In this sacred place of Borderlands.

The landscape itself has a kind of ancient patience. The desert knows something about survival. It knows something about heat and hidden roots. It knows something about what can look dead and still be alive. It knows something about waiting. It knows something about blooming after a season that seemed to offer little mercy.

The desert does not always comfort us in the ways we might expect. It is not soft in every way. It does not pretend that life is easy. But it tells the truth. It says: life adapts. It hides underground when it needs to. It opens when the rains come. Life rests and protects itself. Life returns.

And maybe that is one kind of witness we need when we are going through it.

The witness of the steady earth that does not panic because we are in pain and is larger than our own spiraling thoughts. Nature is not the only witness we need.

Because we are also beings who need one another. We are communal creatures. Even those of us who need a lot of solitude still need connection. This is where Sue Monk Kidd's line comes back for me. "There's no pain on earth that doesn't crave a benevolent witness."

At some point, most of us will bring our pain to another person and discover they don't have room for it. And this isn't because they are cruel, necessarily. Though sometimes they may be.

Mostly, though, sometimes another person simply does not have the space, capacity, courage, or presence to witness what our heart is carrying. And that can be its own kind of wound.

When we finally risk showing someone the grief of our heart, and they turn away, minimize it, rush past it, correct it, spiritualize it, politicize it, or make it about themselves, we may begin to believe that the grief itself is the problem.

Just because one person cannot witness our pain does not mean our pain does not need witness. Our grief deserves exile and we were wrong to long for presence.

This feels important to say gently because sometimes, especially in attempts to create and cultivate community, we can confuse someone's lack of current capacity with the final truth about our worth. Someone does not listen well, and we decide we should not have spoken. Someone becomes defensive, and we decide our hurt must have been unfair. Someone cannot stay present, and we decide our pain must be unbearable. Someone responds poorly, and we decide we should carry the whole thing alone.

Perhaps discernment asks us to slow down before we come to that conclusion.

I think discernment invites questions instead of conclusions:

What kind of witness does this pain need right now? Does it need the witness of my own honest attention? Does it need the witness of another person? Does it need the witness of community?

Does it need the witness of nature, because human words are too much today? Does it need silence before speech? Does it need rest before repair? Does it need a therapist? Does it need a trusted friend? Does it need a walk under the evening sky? Does it need to be written down before it is said out loud? Does it need time? Does it need breath? Does it need beauty? Does it need someone who can say, “I believe you”? Different kinds of pain need different kinds of witness. And different seasons of healing ask different things of us.

There are times when speaking is sacred. There are times when silence is sacred. There are times when solitude is not avoidance, but medicine. There are times when community is not optional, but necessary for survival. There are times when we need to be witnessed by someone with skin on. There are times when only the mountain can hold what we are carrying and bring us back to center.

And maybe the work is learning the difference. Maybe that is part of what slowing down is for.

The same is true when we are witnessing pain in our own communities. Slowing down enough to ask: what is actually needed here? What is needed in me? What is needed between us? What is needed in this community, for this time? What kind of witness would help us move toward healing and belovedness? Because a community can witness pain in many ways. I have been involved in **community** [expressed with angst] and I have been involved in *community* [expressed with invitation]. I have contributed to **community** [expressed with angst] and I contributed to *community* [expressed with invitation].

A community can witness pain by rushing to assign blame before it has understood the wound. It can witness pain by going silent and hoping time will take care of what courage has not. It can witness pain by demanding that everyone move on before the truth has been honored.

But a community can also learn to become a benevolent witness. Not perfectly. Probably not quickly. But intentionally.

A community can learn to say:

We will not make pain invisible just because it is uncomfortable. We will not require every wound to become public before it is honored. We will not confuse speed with healing. We will not confuse silence with peace. We will not confuse conflict with failure. We will not confuse tenderness with weakness.

We will practice listening. We will practice rest. We will practice returning to the larger world. We will practice making room. We will practice asking not only, “What happened?” but, “What kind of care is needed now?”

That, to me, is one of the gifts of being in community together.

A community named Borderlands seems to hold a space that affirms life happens at edges and at thresholds. At meeting places. Between cultures, landscapes, languages, and histories. Between belonging and not belonging. Between what has been and what is becoming.

And perhaps there is a spiritual wisdom in the borderlands that says: more than one thing can be true at the same time. We can need solitude and connection, accountability and gentleness. We can need rest and repair, truth and patience. We can need human beings and the more-than-human world. We can need to be alone and not abandoned. We can need to speak and not be rushed. We can need to grieve and not be swallowed by grief. We can need to look honestly at pain and also look up.

That is what I hear Mary Oliver asking of us. Look up. Please don't deny what is inside you or shame the mind that has become overwhelmed. Please don't silence the grief, but remember that the grief is not the whole world. The despair is not the whole world. The mistake is not the whole world. The conflict is not the whole world. The wound is not the whole world.

There is still water. There are still fields, birds and desert and sky. There is still mountain. There is still breath. There is still the possibility of a benevolent witness despite whatever witnesses there have already been.

And that is what I hear Sue Monk Kidd offering us. Your pain deserves kindness and presence. Your pain deserves a witness that does not turn away. And if one person could not offer that, may you not mistake their limitation for the truth. May you keep seeking the kind of witness your heart needs. May you find it in a friend. May you find it in silence. May you find it in this community. May you find it in therapy. May you find it in art. May you find it in the desert at dusk.

May you find it in the life that keeps living around you, even when you have forgotten how to join it. And may we become that kind of witness to one another.

Carefully. Humbly. With boundaries. With mutuality. There is a gift here. If we each work toward becoming benevolent witness, another thing emerges up around it. Benevolent witness collectively leads to beloved community. May we be gentle in its forming.