From Bystanding toward Engaged Witness

The emptier our hearts become, the greater will be our crimes. ... It is a terrible and inexorable law that one cannot deny the humanity of another without diminishing one’s own: in the face of one’s victim, one sees oneself.

(James Baldwin, 1961, p. 66)

Bystanding

While many of those oppressed have described the intrapsychic wounds that are spawned by the dislocations and culture-cides of colonialism and globalization, those who have profited most from colonialism and transnational capitalism have had disincentives to reflect on the psychological correlates of being involved in oppressive structures. In large-scale industrialized societies, it has been hardest to recognize, describe, and begin to address the pathologies of bystanding. These pathologies are often normalized. Their cultural roots are unacknowledged; their dynamics largely unexamined; and their societal function unnamed. Bystanding allows status quo distributions of power and privilege to go unchecked, giving rise to what Arno Gruen (2007) has called the “insanity of normality.” To question the psychic damage exacted through bystanding often requires unflinching examination of the psychic cost of privilege. Perhaps, if the mutilations of self that bystanding entails were more widely recognized, the courage could be gathered to confront the situations to which one otherwise capitulates. For those in colonizing cultures, colonial ideologies have contributed to dissociating the personal from the political, building a sense of private interiority that is strangely disconnected from historical and cultural context.

While there is a long history of individuals and activist organizations that have compassionately witnessed and taken a stand against oppression and marginalization in colonizing countries, many people have also been deeply socialized to be bystanders, taking retreat in a focus on the personal and a
pursuit of happiness carried out within a very narrow range of life with family and friends. For those raised in educational systems that stress individualism, it becomes difficult to formulate ideas about the way one’s own social environment and those of others affect one’s well-being. Many cannot imagine themselves speaking out publicly or rocking the boat by asking painful and difficult questions. Bystanders may have been taught that protest is ineffective, that authorities know better, that getting to the roots of unjust power is impossible, and that the systems that manufacture injustice and violence are beyond one’s control. Bystanders avoid talking with others with different points of view that might challenge their normalized perspectives.

Who and what profits from this level of psychic disenfranchisement? What psychic toll is paid by such retreat from necessary outcry and creative efforts to shape the environments in which one lives? What feelings lay unclaimed? Habitual bystanding is pernicious because its psychological toll goes so unacknowledged. It is as though there is a chronic illness of which one is unaware. To heal it, one must begin to experience it. Yet it is this very difficulty in experiencing it that is part of the illness. It is only by looking compassionately and deeply at oneself in dialogue with others—and not through the prism of guilt—that one can begin to make out the contours of the landscape one is living in.

To break out of bystanding is sometimes dangerous to the status quo in one’s familial, work, and community relationships. It takes courage. It can result in the loss of jobs, marriages, friends, cultural capital, freedoms, and even lives. Ervin Staub (2003) describes moral courage as the “ability and willingness to act according to one’s important values even in the face of opposition, disapproval, and the danger of ostracism” (p. 8). Yet, not to break with bystanding is injurious to one’s sense of self and of solidarity with others. Psychically being a bystander to injustice and violence breeds disconnection, passivity, fatalism, a sense of futility, and failures in empathic connection.

Bystanding leads to very particular and intense symptomology that we want to explore in the light of depth psychologies. In the next part of this chapter, we will describe 12 symptoms of socially sanctioned bystanding that have been widely reported but rarely analyzed in connection with structural issues in social and economic environments. We will analyze the functions of these symptoms to mask privilege and history, to normalize violence, and to defend the status quo, as well as their capacity to anesthetize individuals from painful knowledge in ways that are sometimes adaptive, but more often devitalizing. In the final sections of this chapter, we discuss paths out of bystanding that allow one to be active learners and witnesses to the suffering that has attempted to announce itself in symptoms.

When bystanding intersects with privilege, the psychic costs are often offset by various kinds of profit from the current arrangements of power. In a chilling contrast between economically and educationally privileged White American