

Standing For or Standing By
by Rev. Michelle Collins
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The lessons I learned in seminary weren't always the ones that I had been intended to learn. This particular day was no exception. I was in my Educating to Counter Oppressions class, the one required class that we had at Starr King. The class started with an exercise from Theater of the Oppressed. Theater of the Oppressed is not related to acting but rather is an experiential activity based on the work of Paulo Freire where a group embodies some aspect of oppression and then reflects on what happened and how it felt. I only remember the set-up for the exercise that day. The class was instructed to sort ourselves into one of three groups, the one that we felt we most identified with – oppressed, oppressors, and bystanders. What surprised me was that the vast majority of the group sorted themselves into being bystanders. Now this was a group of about 30 seminary students, many of them long-time activists, many of them having identities of privilege as well as marginalized identities. Yet they self-identified as bystanders.

Looking at the enormous group of bystanders with many of them already having defeated and non-assertive postures, I remember thinking how disempowering that identification is. Being a bystander is taking oneself out of the possibility of action and responsibility for doing anything. By definition, it's disempowering.

I would guess that each of us can think of times that we have been a bystander, whether related to something happening right in front of us or something in society at large. I've walked past bikes being stolen and cars in the process of being broken into with some perhaps familiar sounding talk running through my head. "Don't get involved, Michelle. Don't look at them. What could you do? What might they do to you? Just keep walking, Michelle." It's an easier path, a safer path, and path that doesn't require as much of me. Like Thidwick the Moose¹ who didn't want to be rude, I can come up with rationalizations and plenty of reasons not to challenge or confront them.

Bystanding has a long and fairly notorious history. One of the earliest recorded instances of bystanding can be found in Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan.² The parable was Jesus's response to the question of who one's neighbor is. In the story, a travelling Jew is jumped by bandits, robbed, beaten, and left at the side of the road. As the story continues, three people pass him, one at a time, but only the last of those stops to help. First, a priest walks by, sees him, and moves to the other side of the road. Next, it's a Levite, who assist the priests in the tabernacles and temple. Now these are folks that one would think would be moved to help,

¹ *Thidwick the Big-Hearted Moose*, by Dr. Seuss.

² Luke 10:25-37.

right? But not in this story – he takes the path of being a bystander also and gives the beaten man a wide berth. Last comes the Samaritan, one of the social outcasts in ancient Israel, who stops to help the man. Two bystanders and one person moved to action. Makes me wonder what might have been going through the heads of the priest and Levite and whether it would have been similar to my own internal dialogue.

While this was just a story, it was based in realities that those who heard it could understand and relate to. And as we well know, our history of bystanding doesn't stop there.

There are a few examples that stand out.³ Some are large scale bystanding, like the Holocaust or the genocide of the Tutsi's in Rwanda that continued while much of the world looked on. Others are smaller scale. In 1903, Thomas Edison was hired to take down Topsy the elephant who had begun to prove problematic in her behavior. She had trampled and killed some of her handlers, including one who had tried to put a lit cigarette into her mouth. Using the technology of the alternating current from one of his rivals to demonstrate how dangerous it was, he electrocuted Topsy in front of an audience of over 1,500 people. Not a single word of protest from those looking on.

And there have been many instances of crimes and violence that have occurred with many people looking on, not calling for help or reporting what was happening.

Not getting involved is something that I think we do a good bit. And this can be for a myriad of reasons. I think making a choice not to be a bystander takes a mix of two things: empowerment and courage.

Empowerment is a term that gets thrown around a good bit and can have a lot of different meanings attached to it, depending on the context. For the workplace, empowerment has been defined as involvement or improvement of continuous performance or feeling free to take the initiative or increased motivation. But I would lean to a concept a bit larger than this. I think of empowerment in terms of personal power, of having a sense of control and of power to make decisions that affect one's life and environment. That's what empowerment means to me. And I see it near the tippy top of lists of hierarchies of human needs. We need to feel empowered.

I heard a story of growing empowerment in an oral history project done by the UU Fellowship of Berkeley. For the project, many elders in this historically activist congregation were interviewed about their lives and motivations. Here's the story shared by Syliva Scherzer. Listen for her journey from being a bystander to uncertainty and finally to action.⁴

³ <http://listverse.com/2009/11/02/10-notorious-cases-of-the-bystander-effect/>

⁴ *Stories Between Us: Oral Histories from a Countercultural Congregation*, edited by Lena Rebecca Richardson, 81.

“I was born on Susan B. Anthony Day in 1941. I grew up in Potrero Hill in San Francisco, which was very multi-ethnic. Because of left-wing politics, I have these lifelong friendships that taught me we all just have to help each other. During the war and after the war it was like we were fighting facism; we had to make the world safe again. There was a very camaraderie feeling that I've always had.

My parents were charter members of the KPFA radio station in Berkeley. It was really free speech. Allen Ginsberg, and all these things against the Vietnam War – it was always on KPFA. So then when they wanted to sell the station in the spring of 1999, I said, ‘No way!’ My best friend Florence, calls me up one morning and says, ‘I'm gonna get arrested today. We're trying to save the station. You wanna come along?’

She was always getting arrested with the anti-apartheid thing at Cal, and I would always go to court with her and be her witness. I had always been afraid I would lose my teaching credential. But finally I said, ‘They cannot take my station away, no. They cannot do that.’

We got there at 9 o'clock. They'd already arrested nine people. The police came and said, ‘We want you to move out of the way,’ and we just stood there. I had this big knee brace on my knee from my recent surgery. I didn't know what to do. One of the guys looks me in the eye and said, ‘Are you willing to get arrested?’ I said, ‘I don't know; I haven't decided.’

Around noon, it wasn't the police that arrested us, it was a station manager. June 21 was the longest day of the year. But it felt so good! Again there's that solidarity. We had ten thousand people on a march!

About two days before we were gonna go to trial, the acting general manager dropped the charges. Almost every day we met here at Berkeley Fellowship to talk about strategy. The Fellowship just opened its arms to us. Totally. And we were just persistent, persistent, persistent.”

Before this had happened, Sylvia hadn't been willing to take this step and risk. She'd been afraid of losing her teaching license – an understandable fear! There can certainly be risk involved with action. I think the moment that I can relate to the most in her story is when the police officer asks her if she's willing to get arrested, and she's just not sure yet. “I don't know; I haven't decided” is what she says. Now one could argue that she had already decided since she came to the protest, but I can relate to her moment of hesitation and uncertainty. I don't know what brought the police officer to ask her that, but I appreciate his honesty and hers. I've spent a lot of time myself not knowing what I might do until I'm actually faced with the choice, and sometimes not even then.

When I was preparing to speak about empowerment, I thought of doing a search for what the elements of empowerment might be. I'm of the google can answer nearly anything mind-set, or at least anything of a certain type. Part of me thought the answer would exist like a little magic list where if you have these four things then, poof, you feel empowered. It won't surprise you to learn that I was NOT successful in that endeavor. Now I did find a list of the four elements of empowerment, but then I found another totally different of another three elements, or another seven elements of empowerment. In the end it probably totaled up to more than 60 different elements of empowerment. If you're curious about what I found, I made a word cloud⁵ of all of these elements, with the ones that occurred more often being larger. I'll have copies at the back of the sanctuary after the service if you'd like one.

Empowerment is a complex and multi-dimensional concept that I think depends a lot on both the individual and the context. There are a few of these elements of empowerment that relate specifically to feeling empowered to not be a bystander.

There need to be choices available. Sylvia had choices – she could go to the protest, she could support her friend at the protest, she could be involved with some other action that was being planned, for instance in the group that met at Berkeley Fellowship that she was talking about. She had choices available that she felt like she could take.

Some sort of partnership or solidarity also is essential, and the support of a community. Sylvia and her friend both went to the protest and the repercussions together, and were surrounded by other people there. It always seems easier to join with someone else than to be all alone in doing something. Accountability made its way into many of the lists of elements of empowerment – I wonder if a sense of accountability might have changed the actions of some of those bystanders that we talked about earlier. From our story earlier, about Garrett and his experience riding on the military convoy in Sri Lanka. He said he felt paralyzed and could do nothing but watch what the soldiers were going to do to the villagers. While he was certainly courageous – I think anyone committing to service in the Peace Corps is – he was missing many of these parts of empowerment.

Anger is another element of empowerment that I think is more crucial than we might realize. Anger can be a real benefit when used productively, as a driving force for our passion. A classmate of mine in seminary once shared about her own learning about her anger as a motivating force. She had once decided to take an out-of-the-box approach to what she decided to give up for Lent. She had decided to give up anger for those 40 days. But she quickly realized that she couldn't keep it up. Not because she couldn't give up the anger – she did that quite effectively. But what she found was that anger was a foundation for her and that she had lost her motivation and passion when she gave it up. In Sylvia's story, anger was a

⁵ Using wordle.net

turning point for her – it was her anger and outrage about the potential loss of her radio station that fueled her choice to act. Anger was a key part of Sylvia’s empowerment.

Having hope and a sense of the potential impact are also counters to barriers that get in the way of involvement. My rationalizations that leave me as a bystander are often riddled with “what difference would it make” or the it’s just a drop-in-a-bucket sentiment. Especially with seemingly huger issues, like race and mass incarceration or environmental vulnerability and degradation – I feel dwarfed by their enormity and stymied into inaction. But it’s possible to not be a bystander. With regards to these two issues, there are some right here in our church who are not only taking action but are leaders of action in those areas. They are empowered and courageous in their taking a stand for those issues.

Thinking back to the exercise in my seminary class, of self-identifying as oppressed, oppressors, or bystanders, I want to propose a fourth choice, an alternative path of empowerment rather than disempowerment. Rather than being bystanders, or oppressors, we can choose to be allies. We can support and be in active solidarity with those among us who are oppressed, in our community and outside of it. This is a path of empowerment.

Now I know it would be impossible to be an ally about everything all of the time. There’s just too much. But we can still shift ourselves. I want to challenge each of us to examine how we’d identify ourselves and to find one way that you’d call yourself a bystander and find how you can be an ally instead. Maybe it’s about mass incarceration or environmental work – there’s groups here at the church that work on those. Or it could be about anything else. Find one way that you’ve been a bystander and find how you can be an ally instead. Figure out what you need to feel empowered – it’s different for everybody. Find an accountability buddy. Whatever it might take for you. Find your sources of empowerment to be an ally. We talk about wanting to transform the world through loving action. This is a place where we can start. May it be so.