

**Dispatch from the Pandemic #11:
Witness
by Barbara Lyghtel Rohrer**

JULY 23, 2020 — I feel like I am in my own little purgatory these days, though I don't know why—global pandemic, systemic racism and economic uncertainty aside. I have a home. I have work. I have my health. I have loved ones.

Yet, as I wrote to a friend the other day, I find myself agitated, easily annoyed by what others are saying or doing. I am even more irritated and confused over my own thoughts that are less than kind and loving. I trust this is all part of being human, particularly in times of the social stress under which we are all living, yet it is not a comfortable place to be. It's as if I can feel the whole world moaning, and I am joining in with my own moans.

So here I am in this state, when I come across the words of Episcopal priest and author Cynthia Bourgeault from her book, *The Meaning of Mary Magdalene: Discovering the Woman at the Heart of Christianity*.

“All four gospels insist that when all the other disciples are fleeing, Mary Magdalene stands firm. She does not run; she does not betray or lie about her commitment; she witnesses. Hers is clearly a demonstration of either the deepest human love or the highest spiritual understanding of what Jesus was teaching, perhaps both,” writes Bourgeault.¹

These words lead me to reflect on the idea of witness. What does it mean to be a witness, particularly in these times?

Being the voracious reader that I am, I then come across this line in Alice Steinbach's *Without Reservations: The Travels of An Independent Woman*: “Throughout my life I have found one of the things most worth doing was to cultivate the habit of close observation.” The author is quoting Gertrude Jekyll, a renowned nineteenth century garden designer.²

Surely cultivating the habit of close observation is to witness. I decide to start with my current life, witnessing my experiences of late to see if they contradict my discontent.

Yesterday, I witnessed the sun coming up over the treetops early in the morning as I helped my neighbor walk her four dogs. I witnessed these same dogs turn excitedly onto the gravel drive that branched off the end of the road, the drive that leads to a cut in the woods that they know we would follow to the creek where they could cool their feet and have a drink. And that made me smile.

Later that day, I witnessed, through my ears, my friend's amusement, belatedly so, when she discovered that the vibration in the steering column of a loaner car did not mean she was about to die on the expressway from a mechanical failure but instead was experiencing the lane assist technology built into new cars. And that made me laugh.

Last evening, I witnessed the graciousness of my brother and his wife, who set up chairs, one spaced appropriately apart, in their driveway to visit with me, knowing I would not be comfortable going into their home. The familiarity of it all brought me comfort.

This witnessing makes me realize all is not as a I feel. And while I will not deny my feelings, I will make room for these other realities of my life.

And what of the lives of others?

I hear of marriages failing, of struggles with addiction, of the heart-wrenching pain from the sudden and violent death of a loved one. These I hold sadly in my heart. And my prayers become a witness, acknowledging to the God of all the deep wounds of my fellow human beings.

I hear of the offer of a job long sought, of finding just the right apartment, of my nephew's excitement as he looks to college—all the sweeter for the challenges overcome when his senior year ended without the pomp of graduation. This too I hold in my heart and my gratitude gives witness.

While my physical presence is not always needed to serve as a witness, I must remain attentive if I am to truly see. I cannot let myself be consumed with only my own challenges. To do so is to block the act of witnessing.

Just as Mary Magdalene did not turn away from Jesus as his other disciples did, we need to stand firm in our witness both in our own lives and in those of others.

“Mary Magdalene ...[was] the first [witness] to the resurrection because [she] remained present for the entire process, from death unto new life, exactly what is necessary to witness resurrections in our own lives as well,” says Franciscan priest and author Richard Rohr.³

We cannot be a witness and turn away at the same time. Witnessing means to be committed to seeing, and in seeing, to be committed to the truth in front of us. It also means we must allow ourselves to be the subject of witness. We are not to hide.

As Bourgeault notes, to be a witness takes a commitment. A commitment to others, as well as ourselves. A commitment to love.

Whether we are physically present or not, a commitment to witness is to stand with another, to not turn away when the experience is painful or disrupts our own sense of reality. Nor is it to ignore an experience that gives balm when we long to hang onto our own dissatisfactions.

Witnessing teaches us how to be better humans.

¹ Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Meaning of Mary Magdalene: Discovering the Woman at the Heart of Christianity* (Shambhala Publications: 2010), 16.

² Alice Steinbach, *Without Reservations: The Travels of an Independent Woman* (Random House: 2000), 140.

³ Richard Rohr, Daily Meditations: July 22, 2020 (<https://cac.org/category/daily-meditations>)