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## Private, the Public, and the Published

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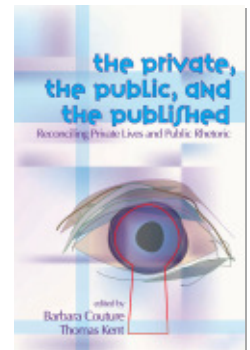
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## 12

### PRIVATE WITNESS AND POPULAR IMAGINATION

**Marguerite Helmers**

*Father, don't you see I'm burning?*

Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*

*Beck screamed helplessly as the wind blew his tent doors open, then blew the sleeping bags from his body.*

David Breashears, *High Exposure*

On May 10, 1996, a sudden storm stranded several climbers on Mount Everest. By all accounts, the mountain was crowded with over fifty amateur and professional climbers that day. The traffic caused slow movement toward the summit and a bottleneck of climbers at the Hillary Step, the last hurdle before the slope toward the summit. When the clouds lowered, the wind picked up speed, and the temperature dropped. It was already past the safe turnaround time for the climbers, the time that is imposed to avoid the hazards of climactic changes that are common in the mountains. No one knows why, but some climbers continued to ascend. By the time they began to descend, they were lost, blinded, and frozen. Six climbers were dead by the next morning. Two were professional climbers who lead groups of *clients*, the term for paying customers, to the top. Two succumbed to frostbite and lack of oxygen. Two had simply disappeared.

One of the clients on the mountain that day was a Texas pathologist named Beck Weathers. Weathers was an experienced, nonprofessional climber climbing with the New Zealander Rob Hall's team. Like the others in his group, he had paid \$65,000 to have a shot at the summit of Everest, the tallest mountain in the world and the legendary icon of dreams. Due to the storm and the incredible events that unfolded over the next day, Weathers became something of an icon himself.

Professional climber and photographer David Breashears notes in *High Exposure*: “If I can be one tenth of what Beck was that day, I will have been a worthy man” (274).

On May 10, on the way to the summit, Weathers had stopped climbing earlier than most of his team. A year and a half earlier, he’d had a radial keratotomy operation on his eyes to correct his nearsightedness. However, he remarks: “At high altitude a cornea thus altered will both flatten and thicken . . . rendering you effectively blind. . . . That is what happened to me about fifteen hundred feet above High Camp in the early morning hours of May 10, 1996” (Weathers 32). The team leader, Rob Hall ordered Beck to remain where he was and wait for the rest of the party until the afternoon descent, when they could return to High Camp together. Weathers did what he was told, but the hours dragged on with no sign of Hall, until in the dark at 6:00 p.m., with six other climbers, he began to descend, roped to guide Neal Beidleman. Within an hour, they were engulfed in a roaring wind and a wall of white clouds. Lost on the mountain, the group huddled together to stay warm. Search parties sent out from High Camp over the night and into the morning rescued five of the seven at this camp. Two clients were so badly frozen that they were left for dead: Yasuko Namba and Beck Weathers. With their faces covered by inches of ice, they were amazingly still breathing, but “were judged so near death as to be beyond help” (Breashears 270). It was an act of triage, part of the mountaineers’ code to leave behind those who are so close to death that a high-altitude rescue by physically exhausted and oxygen-depleted climbers would endanger other lives.

Yet Weathers did not die. He opened his eyes, struggled to his feet, and began stumbling forward in the direction he believed was High Camp. He fell repeatedly and began hallucinating:

Both my hands were completely frozen. My face was destroyed by the cold. I was profoundly hypothermic. I had not eaten in three days, or taken water for two days. I was lost and I was almost completely blind. (Weathers 52)

At camp, someone radioed down the mountain that “the dead guy” had just walked in, like the lurching Frankenstein monster of the old films. Recalled climber Todd Burleson: “This man had no face. It was completely black, solid black, like he had a crust over him. . . . His right arm was bare and frozen over his head. We could not lower it. His skin looked like marble. White stone. No blood in it” (Weathers 54).

Weathers was put into a tent. Climbers at High Camp were told to leave him there and not attempt to bring him back to Base Camp, as he was certain to die anyway. During the night, another storm furiously struck the camp. The wind ripped open the doors of the lightweight shelter and filled the tent with snow. The tent began to collapse around him. Alone in the tent, helpless from the frostbite and exhaustion, he cried out for help, but the wind roared so loudly that no one could hear his cries. At some point, as he fell in and out of consciousness, he was blown from the sleeping bag and left lying on the floor. The next morning, writer and climber Jon Krakauer popped his head into the tent. "What the hell does a person have to do around here to get a little service" Weathers yelled (Weathers 58).

In the book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth describes "the address of the voice" that "demands a response" (8–9). This is the *cry* of trauma. Caruth recounts Freud's story of a father's dream of a burning child, in which a child dies from a fever and the corpse catches fire from a candle left burning near the body. The father, asleep in the next room, hears the boy calling to him in his sleep, "Father, don't you see I'm burning?" (9). We should understand from this narrative, Caruth tells us, that "one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another" (8), that we must listen to the language and the silences of trauma, experience, and the cries of the wound. A trauma, Cathy Caruth posits, is a wound upon the mind, "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again" (4). Survivors of trauma must revisit and rewrite the events in order to give themselves a voice in the events.

Weathers's autobiography, *Left for Dead*, is a cry of the wound. It is, in Caruth's words again, a story that relates the crisis of death, but also the crisis of life for, having survived the terrible days on the mountain, Weathers is rescued by helicopter and returned to the United States, where he must reconstruct his body, his life, his profession, and his marriage. Readers of his autobiography are enmeshed in a personal narrative of overcoming the illness of his body and the lifelong mental illness that caused him to seek climbing as a refuge. I focus in this essay on Weathers's memoir because it is part of a larger discourse on high-altitude climbing, real-life adventure stories, and narratives of disaster in remote areas that has appeared as a major publishing trajectory in the last five years. Today,

the names of turn-of-the-century explorers Robert Falcon Scott and Ernest Shackleton are almost as familiar as the hard-boiled heroes of the films *Die Hard* and *Hunt for Red October*. Thus, Weathers's book fills a reader's need to know more and vicariously experience more from places that lie beyond the accessible regions of the earth. Significantly, the tales of Shackleton, Scott, and the Everest teams of 1996 are tales of misfortune and disaster. We read their tales as testimony to the endurance of the human spirit, but also as evidence of their pain.

As Michael Bernard-Donals has recently written, the truth of a person's testimony affects historical understanding, just as the witness has been affected by the cultural conditions of retelling. A testimony often relates to events that have been culturally construed to be significant to many people. "It is the point at which the event is lost that writing begins," argues Bernard-Donals (77). The writer "becomes an 'I' over against which the event can also be identified, given attributes, and finally named," entering into the interplay between language and silence that Maurice Blanchot describes as the writing of the disaster. Weathers's autobiography provides an interesting case for study because the facts of his story were widely known prior to his writing. If we follow Bernard-Donals's argument, then, it is up to Weathers to establish his character, rather than the facts, in the narrative. Weathers must take the events known to the public and provide his private reflections on them.

At least five accounts of the "disaster season" were published before Weathers's own work. In May 1996, e-mail dispatches were forwarded home from Everest through the NOVA/PBS Online Adventure (*Expedition '96: Everest Quest*). John Krakauer, a journalist for *Outside Magazine*, was assigned to cover the Everest climb but ended up covering the disaster. His account, *Into Thin Air*, was published in 1997. Anatoli Boukreev, one of the guides assigned to team leader Scott Fischer, published his own account of the disaster titled *The Climb* (1997). David Breashears, on the mountain with four climbers and an IMAX camera crew, published his memories in *High Exposure* (1999). The 1998 IMAX film, *Everest*, that incorporated the May 10 disaster into its story line was filmed by Breashears. These accounts served as indexes for the points of the disaster. Furthermore, Weathers's story was related in the national press, on television, and in the television "docudrama" *Into Thin Air* (1997). Thus, the facts and the general trajectory of the story line are known. Weathers is in the interesting position of writing a response to

the disaster. He is a witness as well as a survivor who offers testimony of the event. In Caruth's terms, his own trauma is "tied up with the trauma of another" (8). At the same time, Weathers is somewhat transparent. We gravitate toward his narrative in order to see through to the iconic moment he is representing, satisfying our public need for more information and for personal revelation.

Media critic Joshua Meyrowitz has noted that the easy access to multiple types of *media* in American society, such as books, magazines, newspapers, television, and the Internet, allow access to previously remote or forbidden spaces and experiences. Places such as Mount Everest become demystified because people are familiar with these places through multiple exposures. At the same time that media allow us access to the remote places of human experience, they provide us with access to the interior spaces of the human psyche. Behaviors previously considered "private"—or what Meyrowitz calls "offstage"—become the focus of media. He cites the television program *Entertainment Tonight* as an example of the ways that media present "a wide range of personal expressions in addition to 'objective facts'" (177). Furthermore, Meyrowitz argues, the American audience has developed a "presumption of intimacy" by being exposed to these confessional media (181):

It now seems more acceptable to write books about the very personal lives of great people, to reveal old secrets, and to betray old confidences. Indeed, memoirs *without* such intimate revelations about the writer or others now seem stuffy and unrealistic. (179)

The premise of this book, *The Private, the Public, and the Published*, is that everything we say and do can be made available to nearly everyone who shares our access to media. Modern technologies—print, voice, and electronic—translate private lives into the objects of public consumption. "Contemporary life increasingly *deprivatizes* stories, displacing ownership from individuals to broader going concerns," write sociologists Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein (180). In this cultural milieu, Weathers's authority as an author is fragmented—and this fragmentation is reflected in his ghost-authored text (the book was written with the assistance of Stephen Michaud), spotted with reflections from his friends in Dallas and his wife, Peach. *Left for Dead* is the story of a wound and its healing, and like the recovery, the book represents the unevenness of healing. There are points of disruption, moments of silence, anger,

pain, and humor. Weathers's wound was suffered once in private and then reenacted in public narrative.

Bernard-Donals notes that a traditional view of testimony is that it contributes to the construction of history, transparently providing facts and details to the public (79). The American public has multiple ways to access personal stories, but as we will see, testimony is not a "window through which we see clearly the events themselves" (Bernard-Donals 79). Weathers chose to employ multiple narrators in his autobiographical account of his trauma in order to occupy different points in time and different attitudes toward the events. He intentionally destabilizes the events of May 10, 1996 by placing emphasis on the rescue efforts of May 11, 1996 and the subsequent recovery of his mind, body, and family.

The word *witness* is used as a noun and a verb in the English language. As a noun, it stands for evidence; as the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it, the oral or written testimony of an event is "an attestation of a fact, event, or statement." As a verb, the word *witness* indicates the active participation of a person who has seen and who can verify, "one who is or was present and is able to testify from personal observation, one present as a spectator and auditor." Steven M. Weine describes witnessing as being able "to see, to know, and to be engaged with an other's experience of traumatization":

Assuming many different forms, the phenomenon of witnessing occupies a central position in late twentieth-century Western culture. Witnessing encompasses more than the traumatic experiences themselves; it also includes the life that was shattered and the life of the survivor. Witnessing is concerned both with the individual and the collective. It is private, a confession embodying the survivor's spiritual, aesthetic, and moral essences. And it is public, a documentation of historical events and cultural traditions. The witness receives, processes, and transmits survivors' knowledge. Most important, witnessing strives to be consequential—for the witness, the individual survivor, the collective of survivors, and other witnesses to this witnessing. (168)

Weine stresses the importance of collective memory, which is a process of documentation. Yet the act of recording facts and events does not in itself constitute witnessing. The witness must be able to establish credibility, must be permitted a place and time to speak, and the tale must be remembered (Shay 222). In Shoshana Felman's book *Testimony*, Dr. Dori Laub points out that trauma is not *witnessed* until it is inserted

into language. Writing and language are essential to recovery from traumatic experiences because they overcome the silence that is “a place of bondage” to the trauma, the oppressors, and the events (58). Narrative also involves an audience, and, as Laub points out, “the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself” (57). Psychologist James Pennebaker has commented on the connection between writing and trauma as well, although Pennebaker disputes that an auditor or audience is necessary for the writer:

[L]anguage apparently plays a critical role in processing the trauma. One of the critical aspects [of recovery] may be that somehow in the process of writing down their deepest thoughts and feelings about the experience, people get to organize the experience in a very emotional way. . . . Another critical discovery was that it does not seem necessary for people to directly share what they have written with others. . . . I think our work is hinting that as a therapist you need to create an environment where a person feels completely free to reveal what they are thinking and feeling, and allow them to put things together. (King and Holden 359)

Extrapolating to the broadest rhetorical terms, then, the traumatic experience deploys logical and emotional elements that affect teller, tale, and audience. Bernard-Donals warns readers and listeners that the narrative has the power to displace the events of the real into a representation, thereby making the events and their retelling uncanny because there is uncertainty as to their “true nature” (84). In other words, once a narrative of trauma becomes public, it assumes conventional constructions of public discourse that may mask its authentic nature. Laub and Bernard-Donals are both taking Holocaust testimony as their subject, while Pennebaker’s subjects were men and women who lost a spouse to suicide or car accidents. It goes without saying that there is a significant difference between Holocaust testimony and a narrative of illness such as Weathers’s. No one would willingly place themselves into a situation of extreme brutality and oppression, whereas people quite willingly climb Everest each year. Everest, the physical mountain, is extrapolated into an idea, and the idea feeds fantasies of glory and adventure, the stuff of Kipling and Stevenson, the epic of *Man versus the Elements*.

From an Aristotelian perspective, the ethos of the speaker or writer influences the reception of the work, although it is equally necessary



that the ethos of the listener be trustworthy. Ethos is described by Aristotle as the quality of the speaker's reputation. Ethos is an important—if somewhat intangible—element of rhetorical persuasion that determines how an audience reacts to a speaker. A witness to history must present enough facts to become veritable, and the degree to which he or she is able to reconstruct an authentic chronology of events and provide details of fact that are consistent with other reports is essential. In a study of autobiography and personal narrative that draws on Aristotelian rhetoric, Candace Spigelman notes that “[n]arrating the individual's deliberate choices or attributes of character and connecting them to moral principles help to establish an ethical character with which the audience can identify” (72). Using common emotional appeals as the basis for the narrative results in effects such as tragedy because the bond of sympathy is established between sufferer and auditor (72). I would like to add to Laub's, Bernard-Donals's, Pennebaker's, and Spigelman's conceptions of trauma, narrative, and audience in claiming that the ethos of the witness is also affected by general public attitudes toward the event, such as horror, dismissal, curiosity, or ignorance. Together, the witness and audience construct a third entity, the disaster, in a dialectic between fact and attitude.

Aristotle establishes the basis for studying rhetoric and trauma in his *Rhetoric* and his *Poetics*. In the *Rhetoric*, he notes that a narrator should establish “proof (where proof is needed) that the actions were done, [and a] description of their quality or of their extent” (207). Thus, the witness both represents the facts and offers an evaluation of their importance. Aristotle also points out that a narration “should depict character,” continuing: “One such thing is the indication of moral purpose; the quality of purpose indicated determines the quality of character depicted and is itself determined by the end pursued” (209). This observation is surprisingly contemporary when applied to mountaineering literature, for climbers often must address the question of why they risk their lives routinely in the search for high places.

Jon Krakauer, a climber and author, has no answers, but is acutely aware throughout his published work of the moral implications of climbing. In response to the terrible 1986 season on the Himalayan mountain K2 in which thirteen climbers died, Krakauer asks: “Should a civilized society continue to condone, much less celebrate, an activity in which there appears to be a growing acceptance of death as a likely outcome?”

(*Eiger* 161). The climbers' awareness of an audience that seeks a justification for their wanderlust or vivifies itself through its own thirst for danger is reflected in their prose. It occupies a large section of Weathers's own narrative, in which he describes his desire for high places and provides, as a counterpoint, his wife's aggrieved comments on his all too willing abandonment of the family.

In fact, Weathers's justification for his climbing is morally thin, indicating that his main purpose in writing was not to provide larger answers to the public. In his own words, he wanted "recognition" (6), he desired the test "against the ultimate challenge" (4), he "gained hard muscle" and "drank in the moments of genuine pleasure, satisfaction and bonhomie out in the wilds with my fellow climbers" (6). The story that is narrated by Margaret "Peach" Weathers within the pages of the autobiography reveals the consequence of the climb on the family:

[W]hen Beck left for Mount Everest in March of 1996—he spent our twentieth anniversary there—I decided this was the last time he would run away from us. Beck was living only for his obsessions, and I saw no further hope of making our marriage work. . . . Beck seemed selfishly determined to either kill himself or get himself killed. (69)

Peach is the Greek chorus of the book: she is both the editorial commentator and the exposition. There are points in the narrative that must be accounted for, details of which Beck himself is unaware, and it falls to Peach to provide these details. She is also a witness to the trauma, the one who listened, observed, and was affected by Beck's wounds. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle describes tragedy as "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude," which "through pity and fear . . . [purges] these emotions" from the spectators (230). Modern narratives of trauma, although they are represented—or "imitated," to use Aristotle's term—in many media, do not purge emotions but rather create secondary traumas that are worked through by the witnesses. Physical pain is individuated and resistant to language, Elaine Scarry tells us, but can be represented discursively, through storytelling. Although that storytelling can often be partial and fragmented, the listener plays an important role in witnessing the story, retelling it, and becoming a "writer" or "author" of the pain itself (Scarry 9). Thus, rhetorically, the story indicates its credibility through the reader's emotional reaction to the events.

Up to this point, I have focused on the rhetorical framework of the survivor's story. Each survivor is situated within a cultural nexus of attitudes and material structures that inform the nature of the trauma and the telling of the events of the disaster. In her analysis of women's rape testimonies, Wendy Hesford discusses how self-representations are negotiated with "prevailing cultural . . . scripts" (197) that sometimes overwrite the individual, or the personal, with dominating attitudes. Hesford asks how stories can be treated as individuated, authentic, and unique, while at the same time she provides a means for political interrogation of the structures that allow disasters to happen. "American mass media tend to focus on victims and perpetrators' psychological states rather than on the sociological, political, and material forces that facilitate and sustain violence," she notes (196). Writing about the deaths on K2 in 1986, for example, Krakauer indicts the publicity surrounding Reinhold Messner's ascent of the Seven Summits without supplemental oxygen as a "distorting" cause of the disasters. Messner himself is a brilliant climber with "uncanny 'mountain sense,'" Krakauer admits, but his amazing ability to ascend the high peaks "may have given unwarranted confidence to many climbers" who believed that Messner was setting new standards for playing "the high-roller's game," rather than recognizing the achievements as the apex of one man's outstanding personal ability (*Eiger* 161–62).

From a similar material perspective, Weathers's narrative must be understood as the story of a privileged white male: he has money, power, mobility, and education. His rescue from Everest was facilitated by the intervention of politicians and doctors who could easily draw on power, money, and time. Within the pages of *Left for Dead*, it falls to Peach to tell the story of the rescue. On May 11, when Beck was still breathing but was covered with ice and abandoned by his teammates, Peach was told that he had died. Hours later, when she was called again with news of his miraculous recovery, she brought together a network of friends and business associates. They began to make phone calls; she reports: "We were not worried about getting Beck off the mountain. We just knew he was in critical condition, and he probably was going to need better medical attention than what was available in Nepal" (75). Weathers's partners called worldwide for medical facilities, locating a medical center staffed with U.S.-trained physicians in Singapore and a frostbite expert in Alaska. They next called Texas senator Kay Bailey Hutchinson, "whom

several of us knew" (75), Texas governor George W. Bush, whose daughters went to school with Weathers's daughter, and Senator Tom Daschle (also a friend). As Peach recounts it: "Daschle contacted the State Department, which contacted the embassy in Katmandu, which assigned David Schensted to the matter, which resulted in Madan K. C. risking his life to save Beck's" (76). Beck's brother Dan flew to Katmandu immediately. The high-altitude rescue was not routine. Colonel Madan of the Royal Nepalese Army had never flown a helicopter that high on the mountain before, as the air is so thin at high altitudes that the helicopter cannot function. "However, nobody told Peach about this," Weathers comments. "Assisted by her bunch of North Dallas power moms . . . they proceeded to call everybody in the United States. If you did not personally receive a phone call from my wife or one of her associates in this effort, it was because you weren't home" (61).

In addition, because of his social position, he has access to publishing his story in ways that many victims of violence and trauma do not. Weathers has a voice because of the ways he is culturally encoded: the wealthy white male's power to speak and to represent. Unlike many sufferers, Weathers is not silenced. Rather, he uses the occasion of his trauma in order to advance another culturally coded narrative: that of the journey that leads to an epiphany, a deeper realization of self. On the mountain, stranded by teammates, frozen, in pain, he saw his family standing before him: "My subconscious summoned them into vivid focus, as if they might at any moment speak to me. I knew at that instant, with absolute clarity, that if I did not stand at once, I would spend an eternity on that spot" (51). At the tail end of the book, he comments: "While the story of what occurred during those few days on Everest clearly is of interest, the story of what happened when I got back home and had to rebuild my life—redefine who I was—became the story for me" (289).

It is axiomatic for rhetorical analysis to consider who is authorized to speak in certain cultures. Gubrium and Holstein draw on the insights of Michel Foucault when they ask: "Who is, or is not, entitled, obligated, or invited to offer their stories and under which social, institutional, historical, and material circumstances?" (179). On the mountain, the pool of authorized speakers is determined by money; it is, in other words, a self-selected population of privilege. Krakauer was authorized to represent the event because of his association as a writer for *Outside Magazine*.

Breashears was a well-known documentary photographer. Weathers is permitted to speak because of his money, of course, but he is primarily permitted to speak because of his survival and his prolonged need to be physically and mentally reconstructed. He is aware of the extraordinary circumstances that allowed him to survive and admits to a profound discomfort in seeing Yasuko Namba's family in the hotel after the disaster. Namba, recall, had also been left for dead with Weathers as the storm raged below the summit. She was left to die there. Unlike Weathers, she did not raise herself and walk toward camp, physically imposing herself upon those who had left her alone in the ice and cold. Unlike Weathers, her family was not politically connected enough to authorize a rescue. Seeing Namba's family in Katmandu, Weathers is stilled:

They very much wanted to know about her and her last moments. I really didn't know what to tell them. I searched for anything that might comfort them. But for one of the very few times in my life, the easy stream of words simply wouldn't come. At some level I felt guilty standing there, alive, when Yasuko was gone. I couldn't even offer meaningful consolation. (82)

In this moment of uncertainty, the two climbers who were once equals on the mountain, Namba and Weathers, are revealed to be profoundly unequal. Their inequality is not based on physical ability or personal aspirations; it is the power of American money and social position that divides them. Following this encounter, Weathers does not moralize. He does not reflect on the cultural causes for the Everest disaster in the way that Krakauer did in *Into Thin Air*. Krakauer searched for the underlying causes for the May 10 disaster, wondering "how could things have gone so haywire?" (264):

With so many marginally-qualified climbers flocking to Everest these days, a lot of people believe that a tragedy of this magnitude was over-due. But nobody imagined that an expedition led by Rob Hall would be at the center of it. Hall ran the tightest, safest operation on the mountain, bar none. . . . So what happened? How can it be explained, not only to the loved ones left behind, but to a censorious public? (272)

Earlier comments in this essay alone indicate that Krakauer is interested in the relationship of climbing to the greater nonclimbing public. Weathers admits in his epilogue that he has left the analysis to Krakauer and others. He doesn't engage in any musings about his potential

complicity in the tragedy. To what extent, then, is this also a material characteristic of his memoir? Hesford finds that feelings of complicity are a characteristic of women's narratives of trauma. For example, Hesford recounts one survivor's story of her rape that includes her ruminations that she was somehow responsible for the violence against her:

What happened at the door is that I let him in. I knew there was danger, and I didn't follow my intuition. I didn't protect myself. I let him in. For years, I have felt guilty about that. I thought that it was my fault. (200)

In *Left for Dead*, it falls to Peach, in her rhetorical role as chorus, to warn readers against not the physical but the emotional toll of mountain climbing. Perhaps unconsciously drawing on female narrative strategies, Peach sees the dangers to the extended family and not to the individual. Finally, it is worth pointing out that, although the Everest disaster of 1996 was unexpected on May 10, it was a common type of disaster in the mountains. Repeatedly, climbers tell of the need to acknowledge when you must turn around. The mountains are said to send warnings, and it is up to the sensitive to heed them.

Who owns personal stories? Gubrium and Holstein note: "Typically, the personal story is believed to belong to someone: someone's account is his or her story" (178). But ownership is socially organized: "A story may belong to its teller, in one sense, but features of narrative composition and local conditions of storytelling are also proprietary." So much of tragedy and atrocity is communicated visually from remote locations that it is difficult to say what the effects are on viewers. Laub asserts that witnesses are not only those who were there, but those who witness the pain of survivors. In the final section of this essay, I would like to offer some initial thoughts on issues of recent trauma. Who are the witnesses of the September 11 tragedies in the United States?

The events of September 11, 2001 are widely known. On that day, two commercial airplanes slammed into the twin towers of the World Trade Center, sending clouds of fire outward in enormous roiling balls and scattering glass, steel, and paper across the streets of lower Manhattan. Within the next hour, planes would attack the Pentagon, crash into a field in Pennsylvania, and the towers of the World Trade Center would collapse. Many Americans watched this horror unfold in *real time* on their televisions. In fact, witnessing took on new meaning as it divided

those who watched live media from those who saw the evening news replays. Yet, the act of remembering the disaster is accessible to everyone through print and electronic media. Within minutes, televised replays of the first plane hitting the first tower were saturating the networks and these spectacular, horrifying images would be replayed again and again in subsequent days and weeks. Newspapers and electronic news media (the Web and the television) began to feature chronologies of the events. It was immediately clear that there were multiple chronologies: there were the chronologies of the terrorists, who had planned the hijackings of the planes years in advance; there were the chronologies of the passengers on the planes, many of whom, the public learned, phoned home to say goodbye to their families; there were the chronologies of the media witnesses, who suffered in ignorance of what was happening and the relationship of one event to another; there were the chronologies of the rescue workers in New York City, who rushed to their deaths unwittingly as they enacted their practiced rescue missions. Following any of these chains of events entails a narrative, a process of anticipation and reflection, a balancing of what is *normal* against what is unexpected. Each of the survivors, therefore, will tell a different story, all of which have a relationship to the facts of the events, but which have a different chronology. For example, Phil Oye, on his way to work in Tower 2 of the World Trade Center on the morning of September 11, didn't know what was happening around him but used previous events as a template for his immediate experience. He immediately positioned himself within a well-known story, the terrorist bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993. Within the frame of the immediate chronology, he recounts that he saw smoke and he knew people were evacuating: "I thought there was a bomb in the basement like in 1993 . . . [then] I downshift into thinking that [it] was an accident." He exits the building and begins taking photographs. He sees bodies falling from the building, "appearing out of the smoke." He notices that people are "completely calm." His chronology, therefore, is not told from the perspective of the news networks or the terrorists. It is a simple account of walking: he leaves the train he has taken to work, he sees smoke, he takes an escalator upstairs, he exits the building, he circles the building to take pictures, he looks at the WTC, he hears an explosion. At no point does he know that there is a terrorist attack. That knowledge comes later and not only reorders his experience, it positions

him as a witness to history, a survivor, someone who can authenticate the horror of the day. Through Oye—and particularly because he recounts his story in present tense—the reader creates a subject space, a place to become the I/eye of the narrative.

Not many of these survivor stories have been published at the writing of this essay. A few have appeared in news magazines, online, or in newspapers, characterized mostly as “eyewitness accounts,” a journalistic term indicating that the witness is useful to establishing the facts of the story. This indicates that a period of reflection must ensue before the survivor’s story may move into the public sphere as a personal narrative. The significance of the events to the person must be understood and organized into a story. The narrative must have time to take on a culturally significant form, such as a tragedy or a romance. At some point, however, the story will change. Oye and others like him will come to see themselves taking part in an event of significance, actors in a larger drama. At one point in his chronology he notes, “someone says that a tower fell. I attribute this to sheer rumor.” Once Oye is familiar with the facts, however, he will dismiss the rumor. Photographs and the official chronologies will certify that both towers of the World Trade Center fell within the hour. His reaction will become a vestigial artifact of trauma, a personal narrative of confusion and distress. It will testify to his inner self but not to the wider events that make up the public history of that day.

Witnessing is both a private and a public act. Initially, the individual is faced with overwhelming and chaotic sensations. Eventually, these sensations are organized in public forms of discourse and, sometimes—but not always—published as oral or written testimony. The language of trauma and memory creates a factual relationship to events through description and chronology but is individuated and articulated to a sympathetic audience through emotional appeal and common narrative forms. Studying personal narratives of trauma, the researcher must enter into a multidiscursive universe of psychology, rhetoric, cultural criticism, and politics, as the narratives themselves shift from representations of occasions of magnitude for the greater public to recounting incidents of personal significance. They move between modes of discourse, from the intimate to the oratorical. Yet, at the heart of each narrative is a voice—a cry—and this is the public and private conscience, the voice of memory.



