
BOOK REVIEW

Jill Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. Hardcover, 240 pp. \$55.

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The feeling of abandonment arises when a person feels alienated from the world. When the person has been totally forgotten by the world, or at least experiences their situation as such. Thought comes when it finds an opening, a space to fit in, if we are ready for it or not. Granting space for thought, we enable it to rest with us.

Following stories of survivors of torture and violence, Jill Stauffer writes about Jean Améry's experiences as he tried to rejoin the world beyond the concentration camp, the extreme loneliness he found himself in, emphasizing that it was the result not only of the tortures and dehumanization to which he had been subject but also the consequence of being abandoned by a society that failed to listen to his story – failed, that is, to acknowledge the injustice that had been done.

Survivors emerge from one injustice to discover that their society is not ready to listen to their testimony or is just unwilling to face it. Then all hope of redemption is lost. The suffering and torture remain permanent as there is no “other” the victims could share it with; no other to understand or help them forget; no one to ease their pain. It appears that the “other” does not exist as society is not ready to accept the victims and give them what they need – acknowledgment of their suffering and torments, justice for what they have gone through and eventual punishment for those guilty. They thus become subjects of social abandonment, which in fact is ethical loneliness.

Society needs to acknowledge that the nightmare the victims have gone through has really happened; that the victims have no guilt for that; and to welcome them as equal members of this same society to which they once belonged, not making them feel ashamed or outcast. What they experienced could have happened to anyone else.

What happened to Améry when he was beaten for the first time in

the concentration camp was that, with the very first blow, he lost all hope, all dignity and all meaning of what it is to be a human being. What physical abuse does, he says, is that it turns the human being into a body. There was something much worse than the physical pain he experienced. It was the sudden thought that he was all alone and there was no one in this world to come and save him. When a human being is deprived of his status as human being, a part of them dies that can never be brought back to life. Dehumanization is in fact loss of humanity and despair of all help.

That feeling he experienced was overshadowed by another one – the feeling of something *déjà vu*. When society refused to listen to his story it did it to him once again: only now the rejection was more bitter and lasting. Given the fact that people are prone to forget about injustice done and prefer to sleep calmly not having to face shameful truths that are unbearable, indifference is essential to assure this narcotic oblivion.

First to experience dehumanization by other human beings and afterwards not being heard or being ignored by “just-minded people” – this marks the way that violated and persecuted people live their past in the present. And this is beyond the capacity of the individual to choose or control. Social support is a very important factor as it gives the victims the comfort that even though they were once abandoned by humanity, they are now safe and injustice will never be done to them again.

Every story requires an audience or else it will be forgotten. The fact is that even audiences specifically gathered by political structures to listen to the stories of the victims of torture and violence, such as post-conflict trials and truth commissions, fail to hear the stories of the survivors. That is what makes the hope for justice, compassion and redemption fade. What it does is bring back the overwhelming feeling of abandonment purposefully done – a second one for the survivors – far surpassing the pain of the first.

Trials and truth commissions are designed to address grave harms and injustice on a local and international level. The examples which Jill Stauffer gives show the limits of the acceptance and realization of the scale of dehumanization done. Koudile will not forgive the murder of her son Sizwe – apprehended, tortured, poisoned, shot and burnt by the police in South Africa. Hanna F. maintains that she was brave in renouncing her Jewish origin in order to survive Auschwitz. Even though this is what society expects them to do, in the light of their own values –

the values of those members of society who have never undergone dehumanizing behavior. As another victim, Kalu, states, what made her angrier than the oppression was that they tried to dictate her forgiveness.

Society finds it more appropriate to bury the memories of injustice and diminish its significance by not declaring the harm done as “worthy of redress.” When, in fact, we need to lay ourselves open and hear the victims of wrongdoing and hear something we might wish not to, something that threatens the way we see the world as an orderly and ordered place. Our unwillingness to confront the harm done gives food to ethical loneliness, as willing ignorance and indifference to ruined lives, the attempt to reduce the injustice to something less dramatic and painful, something that can be more easily digested without leaving a bitter aftertaste.

In order to grant relief and justice to victims, trials should be supported by reparation efforts at the state and community levels. Survivors need to incorporate the story of their suffering into their life story, not solely to concentrate on the trauma as the defining event, so they need to speak and be heard. Silence will do no good. They also need their willingness or unwillingness to forgive to be recognized and accepted as justified.

By not listening to the real stories of the survivors and ignoring them, by refusing to grant consolation to those who have unjustly suffered for no reason at all, society dehumanizes them once again. That is what ethical loneliness is: a brutal separation from society leading to isolation and the inability of the victims to accept the injustice being done to them.

People like Jean Améry cannot and will not accept this. They rebel against the system that wants to seal their memories and even alter their stories so that they fit what we call political correctness; to assume the right place in the structure designed for it. And if it does not fit, there are mechanisms to cut and remove the ill-fitting elements so that everything is acceptable. It won't work for Améry and people like him who will continue to insist on telling their stories the way they experienced them. The revolt against reality consists in an annulment of time because only then is it moral. So what he seeks and demands is a time machine – he wants all the victims and perpetrators who wish the past was different to join together and declare that what happened should not have happened. He wants to regain the human status he was once deprived of; he wants a guarantee that the world will never again abandon him. Forgiving is

like amnesia – it's neither possible, nor just. So, time should be turned back.

In the case of Améry, what made it impossible to forgive and move forward was the fact that German society and the world did not adequately address the crimes done to him. What was done to him was a result of the cooperation of the individuals who tortured him and institutions and structures, most of which will never admit any guilt. If that condition is not met, then safety does not exist. The only thing left for him is to continue to resent.

Survivors of torture and violence have suffered the violation of their autonomy as human beings. The experience of listening to their stories by other members of society threatens the confidence that the world we live in is a cozy and safe place where wrongdoing cannot reach us. Society is obliged to provide a space for such stories to be heard and they should be heard on their own terms without interference; it has to find out what needs reparation and how this can be accomplished. Only then will it be possible to find a way out of ethical loneliness, leaving the unforgivable past to rest.