

The artful practice of testimony

Tara Hornbacker

Is there artistry in something as simple as telling the truth? Thomas Long reminds us that testimony in North American society usually refers to the statement a witness gives in court when instructed to “tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”¹

Consider the interplay of testimony and witness. In the Christian tradition, testimony is usually defined as talking about faith. Giving one’s testimony is the act of telling the story of how one came to faith or about the acts of the Holy Spirit in one’s life. But in the Anabaptist and Quaker tradition we are admonished, “Our life is our witness.” Not content to let words alone speak as our testimony, we believe the totality of one’s life is the true witness to the faith. Authentic witness is our testimony to a life lived with and in God.

According to Anabaptist understandings, testimony is artful living in community for the sake of the kingdom of God. What will such testimony look like in the twenty-first century?

Our stories attest to this understanding. The *Brethren Encyclopedia* recounts one such narrative, about evangelist Rufus P. Bucher’s encounter with a young man who handed him a tract entitled, “Brother, are you saved?” Bucher responded, “That is a good question and deserves an answer,” but he hesitated to answer it himself, lest his answer “be prejudiced in my own behalf.” He proposed that

the young man ask Bucher’s neighbors and family members, and the people he did business with: “I’ll be ready to let their answers stand as my own.”²

So common is this type of narrative in Anabaptist circles that many have heard a version of it told of other saints in the faith, be they church leaders or family members. These accounts testify to our conviction that the witness of one’s life is the most faithful testimony one can offer.

This practice stands in contrast to some Christian understandings of testimony as merely talking about the faith. It reframes the action of testimony in broader terms. If our life is our witness, how then does living in the twenty-first century affect the way we share faith?

Artful living in community

In her book *The Reenchantment of Art*, Suzi Gablik offers a parallel in the world of art. She writes that the art of the postmodern world will need to reflect changes from the formerly popular art world of modernity. She writes that the art world in the last part of the twentieth century represented the same disconnected individualism that chased after vapid consumerism prevalent in the culture of modernity.³ One of her main theses lifts up the purpose of art in shaping and forming community. Gablik is most interested in art with a “new aesthetics of participation.”⁴

Testimony as art in this new century has much in common with this new movement in the art world. According to Anabaptist understandings, testimony is artful living in community for the sake of the kingdom of God. The love feast as practiced by the Church of the Brethren is the unique, identity-bearing, participatory drama revealing artful living. The testimony, acted out by the gathered body in confession, washing each other’s feet, and a

shared common meal, followed by the bread and cup, is more than words. It is participatory communal action offering witness to our shared life.

When believers profess peacemaking and participate in community actions that bring together disparate groups for reconciliation, their lives display artful authenticity.

Artful authenticity

Authenticity is the buzzword of postmodern seekers. A life that is honestly coherent with one’s spoken words holds great attraction for people seeking to live artfully. When believers profess peacemaking and participate in

community actions that bring together disparate groups for reconciliation, their lives display artful authenticity. The believers church tradition exhibits many forms of coherent testimony of beauty and relationship. Faithful practice seeks relationship with others as a living witness to our relationship with the Holy.

In the mid-1980s, a Church of the Brethren farming family lost their barn in a fire. The farmer raised horses, and when the horse people at the track heard of the family's loss, they traveled to the farm to offer their condolences. When they arrived, they found people from the Church of the Brethren already there, clearing the foundation and getting ready to rebuild their neighbors' barn. One of the other horse trainers was so impressed that he began attending the church. Some ten years later, when his pastor asked him to give his testimony about coming to faith, he for the first time told the farmer and the church how he had experienced the love of Christ through their witness. A simple testimony of service and care changed his life, and in turn the lives of many more.

Artful improvisation

The practice of artful testimony is not a one-size-fits-all action. The life witness must be fitting to the person and to the setting. Like the words of the Apostle Paul in Athens (Acts 17:22–31),

Improvisation in ensemble is the testimony of the community to the world. Improvisation for the Anabaptist is never a solo act but rather a movement of the Spirit within and throughout the body of Christ.

the words we say and the life we live must be suited to the place and to our observers/hearers. The most authentic and most reliable witness to the gospel needs to employ the art of improvisation. The Apostle Paul improvised when speaking with the Athenians. As in other speeches, his theme was a call to repentance and to follow Jesus, but he related the story in a way that enabled his hearers to receive it. When the culture changed, he was able to adapt and improvise. Even in the most adverse situations, he could imagine

conversion as the outcome. As Samuel Wells so rightly observes of improvisation among the first Christians, the early church had “a constant need to find ways of staying faithful in constantly changing circumstances and environments.”⁵

Improvisation in ensemble is the testimony of the community to the world. Improvisation for the Anabaptist is never a solo act but rather a movement of the Spirit within and throughout the body of Christ for the sake of the reign of God. As a community of faith, we move and respond to one another and in the world so that all may be reconciled through the love of Christ. Like the

view from an overhead camera filming synchronized swimming, kaleidoscopic designs are created by the athletes as they change and accommodate one another's movements.

Artful imagination

The spiritual and physical needs of the community and the world flow into the heart of the communion. The response of the church is prayerfully offered as a consecrated desire to be people both gathered and sent in the name of Jesus. With the help of the Holy Spirit, the actions of the community of faith will be a creative

For our offered testimony to be efficacious toward God's purposes, believers must live attentively: attentive to the Holy, to one another, and to all creation.

improvisation appropriate to the place and time in which we live. In an agrarian society, witness and testimony came in the form of barn building. How does this testimony translate to the urban setting?

Imagination is key in the practice of testimony as an art form, just as it is elemental in improvisation. The community testifies to the love of God by the way we treat one another, and more importantly, by the way we

treat our enemies. One must imagine the other as friend, as loved by God. If this imagination, enlivened by the Spirit, is kept before the community, then the response to each opportunity to testify will be graced by fresh creativity. The translation to urban and global contexts of mutual care in community will take different forms. With imagination, the Spirit unleashes a creativity that cries out for various fitting expressions in the postmodern context.

Artful reflection of divine artistry

All testimony guided by a community of faith discerning the will of God reflects the beauty and artistry of the Creator. To do so will require that we practice discernment as a way of life. For our offered testimony to be efficacious toward God's purposes, believers must live attentively: attentive to the Holy, to one another, and to all creation.

Testimony properly practiced leads the believer into deeper observance of all the spiritual disciplines. Like an actor honing the craft of improvisation, who moves through exercises to increase her abilities to respond to others in the ensemble and the audi-

ence, so a believer can heighten attentiveness to God through the spiritual disciplines.

Practicing the art of testimony in the Anabaptist tradition is not an isolated activity for the Christian; rather, it is an element woven into the tapestry of authentic existence. Coherent with all of life lived toward God's purposes of reconciliation, the testimony of truth-telling faith is beauty and peace in action. All creation awaits our participation in this artistic endeavor.

Notes

¹ Thomas Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 28.

² *The Brethren Encyclopedia* (Philadelphia, PA: The Brethren Encyclopedia, Inc., 1983–1984), 461.

³ Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁵ Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 66.

About the author

Tara Hornbacker is associate professor of ministry formation at Bethany Theological Seminary, Richmond, Indiana. She is an ordained pastor in the Church of the Brethren and has served congregations in Indiana and Ohio.