

Bearing Witness to Our World

Elizabeth Rabia Roberts

The work of a citizen activist is grounded in intimacy with people and places. I first learned this in 1965 when, at the age of 19, I left university to work in Selma, Alabama for one-and-a-half years with Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement. As I stepped off the bus that first afternoon, I realized I had no clue about the Southern experience—black or white. But over time, I learned it was possible to work for justice without making the ‘other’ into an enemy to hate and blame.

By the time I went back to school my narrow identity had expanded beyond my own private concerns. To show up, without judgment, to different perspectives was life-changing for me. Without leaving the country, I had learned the first lessons of ‘global citizenship.’

Since then I have worked for peace, social justice, and environmental sanity in Burma, Iraq, Syria, Iran, Palestine/Israel, Thailand, Nicaragua, Brazil, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. My roles in these countries have changed depending on what is needed or asked for by each situation I find myself in. I have used many identities over the years: women’s advocate, deep ecology teacher, peace negotiator, international citizen activist, pilgrim, and friend.

Through working across borders from Selma to Kabul, I repeatedly found that what I think I ‘know’ can be the greatest obstacle to my being fully present to what is, and thus what is possible. I have gradually come to think and feel beyond the narrow confines of a single identity. My cherished values and beliefs often have been left behind so that something new and more useful to the larger community can emerge.

In exchange for letting go of most of what I was taught about the world, I have learned to see more clearly how different cultures actually work, and the systemic way most change takes place. It is not a process to be controlled by one person, one political party nor one ideology. No one knows what a just and peaceful world looks like; it is constantly a work in progress. We need to learn to work organically, allowing each situation to show us how to proceed. I use an approach that I believe does this, called bearing witness.

Bearing witness consists of five simple-sounding human capacities. But like most of the important things in life, these capacities take some effort to develop. First, to be of service to a people or place, I need to show up to them. There is no way to get around this first requirement. To know what is possible, I need direct experience. Second, I listen to the stories of the people I encounter, however they want to tell them. I witness their struggle and their pain. Third, I ask caring questions and listen without comment or judgment. Council process is particularly effective in encouraging this deep listening. Fourth, I practice patience. I try to hold the focus



without driving the agenda. Fifth, if necessary (and it almost always is) I go back and listen more. I wait for the moment to ripen when right action, or the next step, is clear. It is an attitude more like that of a midwife than a CEO.

I have come to trust this process for peace building as well as for social change. It is the opposite of top-down, or all-at-once, planning. It is iterative and it gives time for trust to build and all voices to be heard. It is intimate and encourages honesty. With this approach you can't know at the beginning how it will turn out at the end, or what success will look like.

For example, over the last one-and-a-half years, I traveled to Afghanistan three times to listen to local women, women refugees, and the activists working with them. They emphasized that there could be no peace in Afghanistan until there was peace with Pakistan, and that would require polices based on greater trust with India. I brought these stories back to women funders in the U.S. As a result a new regional initiative is underway to bring women from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India together to develop a permanent network and to plan a larger international conference with women leaders and activists from other parts of the world to bear witness to their mutual security needs and social empowerment.

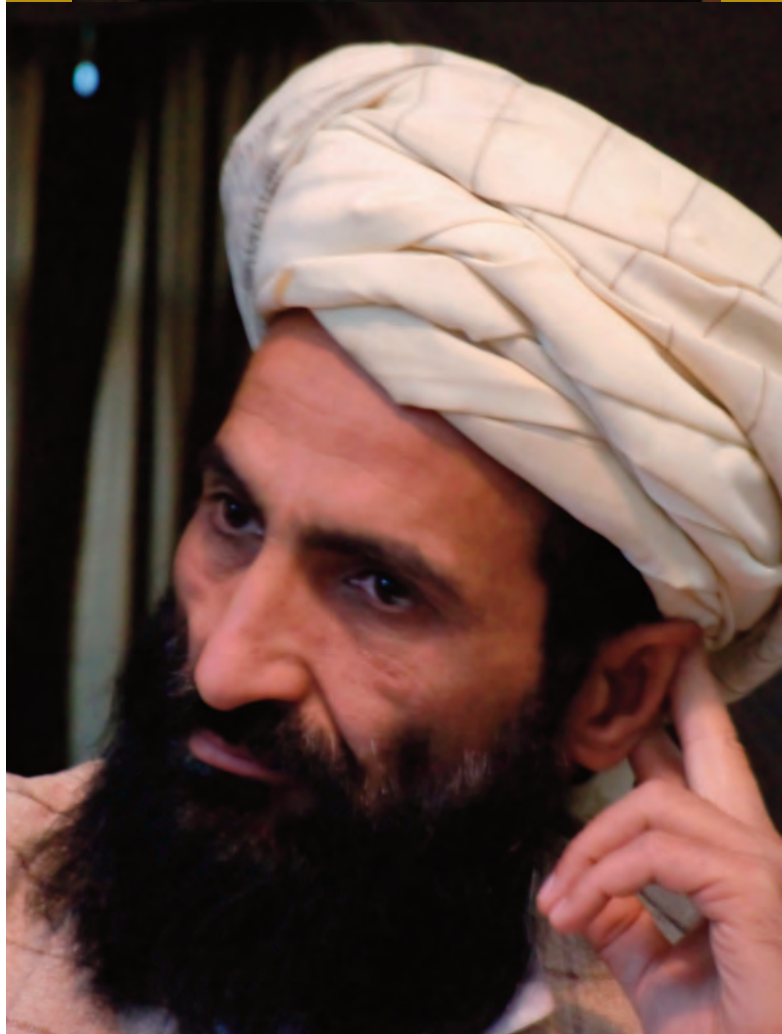
Through bearing witness I don't try to fix anyone, which only assumes they are broken and have nothing to offer. I don't tell people to be different than they are. I am even cautious of the word 'helping' because it has the connotation of superiority. I am simply there to be with them, in caring and compassionate concern for their well-being. This includes those I may not feel comfortable with at first glance: angry Arabs, dying women and children, armed soldiers, conservative imams, men in mental institutions, complacent officials—all have been part of my journey and my learning.

Through the process of bearing witness an essential intimacy arises. Every situation has its own unique intelligence, which is revealed through the many relationships that comprise it. By practicing deep listening, what is possible through these relations, and in the interests of the greater community, will emerge—if we don't stifle it with our own agenda.

This is a radical approach. I don't expect the State Department or the World Bank to start bearing witness to the pain and suffering of our world next month. But things are changing in many positive ways and this is the work of optimists.

The interconnected web of problems we now face may be called 'global' because of their planetary expanse, but they will be solved through millions of citizens working together in intimate relationships with others who are very different from themselves.

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(page 76 top to bottom) Men listening in Thailand; Rabia in Iraq; Rabie in Afghanistan; Rabia in Syria; (page 77) Rabia at Martin Luther King event; Taliban listening; Rabia in Syria.