

On Becoming Witnessing Professionals

Robert Jay Lifton

I came to view my work with Hiroshima survivors in 1962 as not only a scientific study but a form of bearing witness to what the bomb did to human beings in that city. I tried to bring professional knowledge and experience to that effort, to become what I later called a witnessing professional. Nuclear and climate issues interacted in that early study, and have continued to be inseparable for all of us. I draw upon examples of witnessing professionals over the course of our struggles with these two planetary threats. In each case, they had to expose and combat the malignant normality, the dangerous prevailing assumptions and narratives, of their time. In that way, these professionals have contributed to important social movements. They have also deepened – as we too can – the ethical dimensions of professional work.

More than a half-century ago, during a period of six months in 1962, I was able to live in the city of Hiroshima, where I interviewed survivors of the first nuclear weapon dropped on a human population. I was intent on carrying out scientific research by rendering those interviews as systematic as possible. I tried to bring the ethical standards of my profession to that work by obtaining consent from those interviewed and remaining sensitive to their psychological state and avoiding any approach that might be harmful to them.

Yet there was an added ethical dimension I was aware of without quite having words for it: that of making known to the world what these survivors told me. This meant taking in as much of their experience as possible and retelling it from a psychological and historical perspective. I would later think of this as bearing witness as a professional to what I encountered in that city. I came to realize that the more disciplined I was in presenting my findings, the more scientific my endeavor, the more effective my witness would be. That witness could be summed up in six words: “one plane, one bomb, one city.”

Of course, my Hiroshima witness had to do with nuclear threat, not with climate. But these two threats have never been entirely separable. Consider the terrifying rumors that spread among survivors immediately after the atomic bomb.¹ All had to do with the Hiroshima habitat. The most persistent of these rumors, and for many the most disturbing, was that trees, grass, and flowers would never again grow in Hiroshima. Because of the bomb’s “poison” – its radiation effects – the city would be unable to sustain vegetation of any kind. Nature would dry up

altogether; life would be extinguished at its source. The rumor suggested a form of desolation that not only encompassed human death but went beyond it.

Hiroshima survivors' sense of a permanently destroyed habitat influenced my own research findings in ways I did not fully realize at the time. Just two or three years ago, an assistant found, among my papers deposited at the New York Public Library, an unpublished article entitled, "Hiroshima and the Ultimate Pollution."² Apparently written in the late 1960s, I used it in talks I gave, emphasizing our new capacity to destroy our natural world. I spoke of the "breakdown of ecological balance" and suggested that we use such terms as "poison," "deterioration," "degeneration," and "starvation." At that time, I had no grasp of work on climate change that scientists were only beginning to carry out. What I did sense was that nuclear weapons posed a profound threat to the larger human habitat.

To be sure, Hiroshima is the most extreme kind of destructive event, one that immediately lends itself to various forms of witness. But we have learned that the effects of climate change can be no less extreme. Scientists have identified some of those effects as very much present in our immediate world and as posing a threat to human civilization over the course of the century. Surely, the situation requires of us an ethic that confronts this threat to the human species and most other species as well. The ethic can emerge precisely from our knowledge as professionals, but must transcend previous ethical rules. That broader ethic enables us to confront truths having to do with the catastrophic destruction of the human habitat, and with ways of preventing or mitigating that looming catastrophe. In general, a witnessing professional both reveals profound dangers and seeks to combat them.

Here we must look at the context of such witness, and its connection with what I call "malignant normality." All societies impose what can be called cultural and social norms, patterns of behavior that are expected of people in various situations, even if the behavior is harmful or dangerous. This can include behavior in basic areas of life such as family, or education, or political or social authority. It can also involve choices of energy sources for sustaining life in the twenty-first century. Professionals tend to adhere to these norms, and even to legitimate and deepen them by means of their professional status.

I came to the concept of malignant normality through my work on Nazi doctors.³ The German doctors I studied were not inherently evil. Most came to their murderous behavior by adapting to Nazi expectations. Like all professionals in Nazi Germany, they had undergone what was called *Gleichschaltung*, meaning the coordination or synchronization – that is, the Nazification – of their profession. That meant removing independent leaders and putting in charge those imbued with Nazi principles of biological purification. Those principles included the victimization of Jews in order to "heal" the Nordic race. When a German doctor assigned to Auschwitz "selected" Jews for the gas chamber, he was doing what was

expected of him, doing his job. When an individual doctor had difficulty carrying out that function, he was subjected to a perverse form of psychotherapy in which an older hand would be assigned to help him with his conflict, drink heavily with him, and encourage him to be stronger in doing what he had to do.

Nor are democracies immune from malignant normality. A dangerous example has been America's sequence of attitudes and arrangements concerning nuclear weapons. From the immediate post-World War II era, nuclear weapons have been viewed by influential American leaders and much of the American population as available instruments for defending our interests and values, for maintaining something we call "national security."

One can identify at least three waves of malignant nuclear normality.⁴ There was first what can be called positive nuclear outcomes, best expressed by the belligerent scientist/strategists Herman Kahn and Edward Teller in their narratives of fighting, winning, and generally achieving military goals by means of nuclear war. Kahn described how an American president might say to advisors, "How can I go to war – almost all American cities will be destroyed?" and receiving the answer, "That's not entirely fatal, we've built some spares."⁵

Psychiatrists brought their mental authority to malignant nuclear normality as part of a 1956 national civil defense panel that included other physicians, social scientists, retired military officers, and additional "wise and mature" individuals. The panel aimed at minimizing fears of the "threat of annihilation" lest these undermine American willingness "to support national policies which might involve the risk of nuclear warfare."⁶

Nuclear normality was imposed on children in the notorious duck-and-cover drills of the 1950s and 1960s, in which kids were told that they could protect themselves against nuclear fallout by putting their heads under a desk or a piece of paper over their heads. Six-year-olds were too intelligent to believe that, but, according to a study done by Michael Carey, a close colleague, many became deeply confused about authority in general and susceptible, years later, to recurrent nightmares involving nuclear war.⁷

A second wave of nuclear normality lent Harvard prestige to rendering the weapons part of the American landscape. With a theme of "living with nuclear weapons," a group at the Kennedy School of Government stressed the prevailing policy of "nuclear deterrence" and the role of the weapons in "just wars." Under some circumstances, the weapons would have to be used and there would be "some risk that 'just war' limits would not be observed." The Harvard group condemned as "emotivists" the most brilliant satirical takes on nuclear weapons: Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*; and Tom Lehrer's lyrics: "So long mom, I'm off to drop the bomb / So don't wait up for me." In contrast, the Harvard group offered its own "reasoning."⁸

The third wave of nuclear normality focused on what could be called the grandiose rescue technology of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), or “Star Wars.” Antiballistic missiles were to intercept nuclear missiles to provide what Ronald Reagan in 1983 described as “the means of rendering . . . nuclear weapons impotent and obsolete.”⁹ The trouble was that the SDI could never offer more than a partial defense, meaning that some nuclear weapons would inevitably reach their targets, and that the policy tended to encourage a first-strike mentality of “preventive” nuclear strikes among the possessors of the SDI who could consider themselves able to blunt a nuclear counterattack.

But from the beginning there emerged witnessing professionals exposing and contesting malignant nuclear normality. The first group of these consisted of scientists involved in producing the bomb, seeking to prevent its use on a human population. One of them, the biophysicist Eugene Rabinowitch, told of walking the streets of Chicago in the summer of 1945 and “imagining the sky suddenly lit up by a giant fireball . . . skyscrapers bending into grotesque shapes . . . until a great cloud of dust rose and settled onto the crumbling city.”¹⁰ He and others prepared urgent petitions that the bomb only be used in demonstrations and not on human targets. They were not able to stop the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but they provided the origins of the scientists’ movement which, after the war, devoted itself to bearing witness to profound nuclear dangers. There have been many other nuclear witnesses, but the physicians movement, in which I have participated, has considered itself a successor to that of the scientists. As medical professionals, we have had a very simple message: This time we can’t patch you up, help you recover. We’re doctors, we would like to do that, but hospitals will be destroyed, there will be no medical facilities or equipment, and in any case you will probably be dead and so will we. The movement has included Soviet and Chinese physicians in calling upon professional knowledge on behalf of a planetary ethic.

Turning to global warming, we may say that malignant climate normality encompasses everything in our physical and psychological existence. We are born into it and nothing in our lives is outside of it. Potential consequences of global warming lack the world-ending suddenness of nuclear catastrophe, but can be just as apocalyptic. Here we human beings encounter an ultimate absurdity of a kind we have never previously faced. By merely continuing with our present energy practices, especially our routines involving fossil fuels, we will increasingly harm our own habitat, the portion of nature we require to survive, and ultimately destroy our civilization. We needn’t start a war or make use of ultimate weapons. We needn’t do anything other than what we are already doing to endanger the future of our own species, and much of our civilizational destruction will take place within this century. Can there be a greater absurdity than this?

No wonder some psychologists and neuroscientists look for an explanation of this behavior in the wiring of our brains. They claim that our brain function and psychological capacities enable us to deal with immediate threat but not with prospective possibilities. I believe this view to be half-true, and highly misleading. We are surely better at taking in a direct experience than imagining events of the future. But a distinguishing characteristic of the remarkable evolutionary entity we call the human mind is precisely its capacity to imagine what has not yet happened. All the more so when those anticipated catastrophic events have already begun to occur. Misleading claims about imaginative incapacity deepen our malignant climate normality.

Climate scientists differ from their nuclear counterparts in having done nothing as a group to create the problem. But like nuclear scientists, they have done everything to identify the danger: the crucial human contribution to climate change through the promiscuous use of fossil fuels. Climate scientists were at first quite alone in their witness, both in their efforts to make known the dire significance of their findings and to convince others of the necessity to act. A number of contributors to this volume – including Naomi Oreskes, Antonio Oposa, and Robert Socolow – have been leading witnessing professionals in combatting the malignant normality of climate change. A watershed moment in American consciousness was physicist and climate scientist James Hansen’s 1988 testimony before a Senate subcommittee on global warming. Unfortunately, Hansen has since come out strongly, and more intellectually loosely, for a large-scale nuclear energy solution, which suggests that valuable professional witness can be followed up by less disciplined and potentially harmful advocacies.

The good news is that general awareness of climate change has deepened, as demonstrated by various polls and by journalistic and political attention. I speak of this as a “climate swerve.”¹¹ The term *swerve* is as old as Lucretius, and has been used over centuries to suggest a shift in the way people experience their world, as eloquently described by the contemporary humanist Stephen Greenblatt.¹²

One way of understanding that climate swerve is to note a shift from fragmentary to formed awareness, terms I originally used in connection with nuclear threat. *Fragmentary awareness* consists of images that are recurrent but fleeting: pictures in our heads that go from an unprecedented heat wave in one place, a drought in another, coastal flooding in another, and a severe hurricane in still another, without a clear grasp of their relationship or larger significance. *Formed awareness*, in contrast, includes recognition of cause and effect, so that the heat waves, droughts, floods, and severe hurricanes come together in ways that strikingly question previous faith in climate normality. Formed awareness does not guarantee climate wisdom, but is necessary to it. Formed awareness, when widespread, becomes part of a social dynamic, built on climate truths, a basis for constructive action.

The international event that epitomized the climate swerve was the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris in November and December 2015. Whatever its failings, that conference was an expression of species unanimity. Rather than legally bound commitments, its greatest achievement may well have been its collective state of mind, its near universal witness to the threatened state we share as members of a single species. From the time of that meeting, those supporting malignant climate normality have been on the defensive, so much so that President Donald Trump has experienced fierce national and international responses to his efforts to extricate the United States from that agreement. His efforts were met with outrage throughout this country, including that of mayors and governors, and with equally strong protest from leaders and officials throughout Europe.

One may now say that climate normality has its own increasing instability. No longer is it possible for anyone, not even Trump, to avoid knowing in some part of his or her mind that climate threat exists. Many suppress and resist these truths because they contradict their worldview, their identity, their party's policies, and their donors' demands. It is more a matter of climate rejection than denial, but that rejection has become politically risky and increasingly difficult to sustain. Hence the recent efforts of some Republicans to find a way of at least minimal acknowledgement of human-caused climate change.

Finally, let me return to the concept of witnessing professionals by saying a bit about historical currents in professionals in general. As early as the twelfth century, there emerged the idea of “professing” one’s religious convictions, one’s vows as a member of a religious order.¹³ But over the centuries, as society became more secularized and more technicized, there was the formation of professional guilds and societies devoted to perpetuating craft and technique rather than religious faith. So much so that this technical emphasis came to be associated with ethical neutrality. Modern professionals could become hired guns, serving the highest bidder. The development of what we call “professional ethics” has imbued our work with standards of decency, but has in no way addressed the threat to human civilization. Our ethical task now is to extend that “decency” to our species, which we can only do by committing ourselves to preserving it, and preserving other species as well.

That ethic continues to make use of our technical knowledge while “professing” our commitment to humanity. Rather than hired guns beholden to powerful forces, our “sponsor” is all-encompassing human civilization. We are by no means creating a new entity but are drawing upon the history of professionals to express an ethic necessary for our era.

Many have pointed out that it is late in the game to do so, and that is true. But there is an important sense in which, with climate issues, it is always late in the game and yet, in mitigating potential catastrophe, never too late.

I close with a quotation from a Viennese neurologist. Sigmund Freud was notoriously skeptical of human agency, expressing in his works the conviction that we were driven by instinct and emotion. Yet toward the end of his life, he said this: “The voice of the intellect is a soft one, but it does not rest until it has gained a hearing.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Robert Jay Lifton, *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991 [1968]), 16–17, 67–72, 73.
- ² Robert Jay Lifton, “Hiroshima and the Ultimate Pollution,” Robert Jay Lifton Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library, notes, 1962–1963, box 95.
- ³ Robert Jay Lifton, “Preface to the 2017 Edition,” in *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2017 [1986]), vii–xi.
- ⁴ Robert Jay Lifton, *The Genocidal Mentality: Nazi Holocaust and Nuclear Threat* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), 37–50.
- ⁵ Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), 641–642.
- ⁶ Lifton, *The Genocidal Mentality*, 40–41.
- ⁷ Michael J. Carey, “The Schools and Civil Defense: The Fifties Revisited,” *Teacher’s College Record* 84 (1) (1982): 115–127.
- ⁸ Albert Carnesale, Paul Doty, Stanley Hoffmann, et al., *Living With Nuclear Weapons* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 253–255, 233–235, 156, 62, xvii; and Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Nuclear Ethics* (New York: Free Press, 1986), 52, 111, 12.
- ⁹ Lifton, *The Genocidal Mentality*, 47.
- ¹⁰ Eugene Rabinowitch, “Five Years After,” in *The Atomic Age*, ed. Morton Grodzins and Eugene Rabinowitch (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 156.
- ¹¹ Robert Jay Lifton, *The Climate Swerve: Reflections on Mind, Hope, and Survival* (New York: The New Press, 2017).

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¹² Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012).

¹³ *Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1913–), 2316; and Robert Jay Lifton, *Home From the War: Learning from Vietnam Veterans* (New York: Other Press, 1973), 412–414.