

## **Compassionate Research: Interviewing and Storytelling from a Relational Ethics of Care<sup>1</sup>**

Author: Carolyn Ellis

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‘And what is as important as knowledge?’ asked the mind. ‘Caring and seeing with the heart,’ answered the soul. Anonymous

“I understand on an intellectual level what you say about compassionate interviewing, but how do you *do* it?” the audience member asked after my presentation.<sup>2</sup> Her question and the discussion that followed have encouraged me to address how we as researchers do compassionate research that has as a goal to honor, care for, and support others we interview. What does it mean, how does it feel, and what decisions have to be made as we form relationships and relate to our participants moment by moment, situation by situation? What role does our own self-examination play in doing this well? Does compassion require that we bring agency or a sense of regeneration to the lives of our participants?

In this chapter, I approach these questions from a relational ethics of care. I begin with the discussion that took place after my presentation. For guidance in addressing the issues raised there about compassionate research, I call on work on ethics from feminist, oral history, and autoethnography scholars, as well as from those writing about relational ethics in health care. I discuss concerns that arise in doing research with those we already know or with whom we form relationships during the research process, as is the case in my work with Holocaust survivor, Jerry Rawicki. To open up a conversation about how compassionate research from a relational

ethics of care might take place in practice, I end with a story that portrays my relationship with Jerry as we visit Treblinka, where his family members were murdered.

### Relating Compassionately

“Your face,” Sarah says now from the audience. “It’s your face...” Jolted by Sarah’s comment, I turn and stare at my face, the frame still frozen on the screen.

As part of the talk I give at this conference, I show a raw footage clip we had filmed earlier at the Florida Holocaust Museum where another survivor had responded to Jerry’s description of the anti-Semitism he experienced in Poland:

Male Survivor: We were in Poland after 67 years. My wife and I were both born in Warsaw...I experienced a great deal of anti-Semitism as you did. What surprised me was that in the large cities...like Warsaw and Krakow, the younger people were very open. You didn't feel the anti-Semitism. But we were also visiting small communities—my wife’s father was a physician in a concentration camp in a place called Starachowice and he was murdered by the Nazis on the way to Auschwitz...We travelled through Poland with a film crew; they were filming my wife where the camp was.... And...an older Pole passed by, and talked to me in Polish. He assumed that I was another Pole watching, and made some very derogatory remark.

Jerry: (gasps) Oh....

Male Survivor: Anti-Semitism in the small communities is very much alive. Among the younger people in Warsaw and in Krakow, it’s a totally different story.

As I watch this clip along with my audience, I find it difficult to concentrate on the survivor's words because I am focused on my face, which looms large between the faces of Jerry and the speaker, sometimes crowding them out of the frame. *We must edit out my face.*

And now, "Your face..." Sarah says again. The intrusion of my face must interfere so much that this listener has called attention to it. *I hope the audience doesn't think that my being in this frame is intentional.*

"Its presence might embarrass you," Sarah continues, reading my mind or the expression on my face, "and I would guess you want to edit it out." I swallow and nod.

"But it's important that your face be there," she says, leaning forward. I feel my eyes open wide and my eyebrows rise, as I question the meaning of her comment. "Your face reveals so much. It lets us in on the compassion you feel."

I wait. "I mean it's clear from your expression that you feel compassion for Jerry and the other speaker. You are feeling with them and relating to them.

"I think you have much to teach us about the 'being' of relationship. What I want to understand better is: How does compassionate interviewing work in practice?" She settles back into her chair.

"Nobody has ever asked me that before," I say.

"Let me explain," Sarah continues, becoming animated as she talks about her own research. "In my work, I have examined how people communicate compassion through the activities of recognizing, relating, and (re)acting (Way and Tracy 2012). Recognizing requires paying attention to what is going on, seeing the whole person, reading the details of their emotions and relational cues, including nonverbal and silence, and trying to figure out what they mean (see also Kanov et. al. 2004: 18; Miller 2007: 235; Way and Tracy 2012: 301). (Re)acting means

responding to another's pain, trying to help the person live through it or get rid of it (see also Kanov et al 2004: 814; Way and Tracy 2012: 305). Responses also can include inaction, giving the person 'the gift of quiet, time, and space'" (Way and Tracy 2012: 306).

I nod for her to continue.

"Those two processes I have no trouble with," she says. "I can recognize when a compassionate response is called for. And I can usually figure out what needs to be done. It's the relating part I struggle with. Can you tell us how you do that?"

"First, tell me how you define 'relating' in your work," I say.

"In our article, we describe relating as 'an active communication process that includes listening, feeling, identifying and making connections with others in their pain and suffering. It means to reach a shared sense of the experience and of each other (Way and Tracy 2012: 304; see also Kanov et al. 2004: 813; Miller 2007). Relating compassionately seems to come naturally for you."

"I've never thought about how I do this," I respond. "I imagine that much of what I do comes from how much I care about Jerry. We have worked together now for more than five years and I feel connected to him. I have grown to love him; he is like family to me. Though I don't think you have to love someone to feel compassion.

"I also try to pay close attention to him when we are together, so that he feels my interest. I think I give off cues of attention and compassion by leaning forward, making eye contact, presenting a calm body posture, and nodding. Sometimes I put my hand on his arm, and now I feel comfortable hugging him and verbally expressing my affection. One can learn this body language, but the storyteller usually can tell if your attention and feeling are authentic or not. Actually it's best not to think about how to do it, but just let your body and mind do it naturally."

“What do you mean by that?” she asks.

“I’m not sure I can explain it. I do know I try to listen deeply to understand what Jerry is telling me (see Ellis and Patti 2014; Patti 2015). I try to make my questions relevant to our conversation, though it’s best if I am not focused on what I will ask next and instead trust the conversational flow. Then I can focus on what he is saying. I also try to put myself in his place and feel what he is feeling, though I know I can’t. I try to read him, which means I seek to figure out what he needs in any situation we are in. As with the rest of us, he is not the same all the time. Sometimes he welcomes questions that bring up his emotion; sometimes he seeks to contain his emotions. I try to sense the mood to help determine the questions I ask him and the topics we cover (Field 2006: 152). When we are together, I often don’t take out the tape- or video recorder, because I sense that we need or want to visit solely as friends or that there is a pressing personal issue that Jerry wants to talk to me about. Or perhaps that day, we just want to have a good time together with no pressure.”

“But how do you keep from feeling hopeless in the wake of all that tragedy in the Holocaust?” Sarah asks.

“I think about Jerry and the Holocaust a lot, but I don’t agonize, dream about it, or have nightmares. I also don’t take the trauma home. I can still go about my business and live my life. It becomes important in deep listening for storytellers of trauma to feel you empathize but also to feel confident that you can handle what they are telling you. They don’t want to feel they have brought you down.

“You’ve given me a lot to think about,” I say, and nod to Patricia, who waves her hand and reads from the handout I have given out.

“You say here that your compassionate and relational approach offers ‘survivors the opportunity to tell and retell past and current stories in multiple and new ways, reflect on and analyze their meanings, and contribute to the richness and direction of stories told....Survivors say this storytelling process is healing for them...and in the telling, new plotlines and insights are discovered together’.”

“As an example, you mention that Jerry has said to you, ‘I thought I knew everything about the Holocaust, but our interaction brings out things that were buried by the overall tragedy. Some of the nuances we uncovered helped me understand what is happening now’.”

“In this passage and in the clips you showed us, Jerry is articulate about how his participation in your research has affected him,” Patricia says, glancing up. “But you didn’t mention in your presentation how you have been changed by this project. From your passionate presentation, I feel you have been greatly affected, but what you told us was how your appreciation has grown for your interviewees. What do *you* get out of this process?”

“Whew, another difficult but meaningful question,” I say, smiling. *This audience seems to want more of me in this presentation, not less.* “First, I get to feel that I am potentially doing something for Jerry in helping him to revitalize his life and find meaning in what we are doing.”

“I understand that,” she responds. “But that doesn’t address the issue of how you think differently about your life as a result of immersing yourself in this research.”

“I get to have a deep friendship with Jerry. And though we focus on Jerry’s life, we share experiences of loss and I find that comforting. I have been interested in loss and grief for a long time, and Holocaust survivors are experts in that arena. So I learn a lot. I also feel I am doing my part to remind people of what happened during the Holocaust. This gives me a sense of purpose, which also addresses Sarah’s question of why I don’t fall into hopelessness.”

“Jerry says he can look at his life differently and in a depth he has not been able to do emotionally before,” she says. “What about you?”

“I will have to think about that some more,” I say, realizing that I am still dodging what Patricia is asking. *I am not ready to feel as vulnerable in this space as talking about my own losses and anticipated losses would entail. Perhaps my reluctance is just a matter of needing more time to process these intense and intense questions,* I think, glancing at my watch and noting my time is almost up.

“Carolyn,” Melanie says, when I look in her direction, “how has your work in autoethnography and examining your own life helped you in this project?”

“We come to understand others through our self-understanding and we come to understand ourselves through understanding others, so it’s a two way street. I think that deeply examining my feelings and experiences helps me figure out how to work with Jerry in examining his. Writing evocatively and emotionally about grief and loss in my life has helped me write about his. It is harder to write about Jerry’s emotions than my own, because I don’t have the feelings in my body and memory to call on. I have to depend on empathy and on Jerry’s ability to convey what happened and how he was feeling almost seventy years ago. Nevertheless we go through the same process together that I go through alone in trying to conjure up my own experiences.”

I nod toward Rachel, who says, “Don’t you think that embracing and accepting your own story and opening it up to others’ judgment and criticism enables you to enter others’ stories?”

“Yes. That process is part of autoethnography. Peoples’ responses to your story provide an opportunity to turn your attention to what their responses tell you about them and to enter their experiences through your own.”

“It seems to me there is something unethical—at least disingenuous—about exploring the depths of another’s life when you haven’t opened up your own to the same,” Rachel continues. I nod, acknowledging the importance of her point. “How can you have a sense of how that process might feel to another person if you haven’t examined your own life?”

“I’m not sure you can. Autoethnography requires you to do just that. You have the opportunity to feel what it’s like to put your life on the line and receive responses to your story.

“Clearly autoethnography taught me much about compassion and how to do this project with survivors in the most ethical and caring way I could,” I say, looking across the whole audience. “Thank you for your insightful questions.” I sit down, stunned by the thoughts and feelings this conversation has engendered about doing research compassionately and ethically.

#### Ethical Concerns in Having Close Relationships and Sharing Authority with Participants

All research—from surveys to ethnography and interviews—presents ethical issues for investigators. Survey researchers generally concentrate on whether their research is credible and valid and have concerns about confidentiality and informed consent. Less pondered is the potential distress of respondents asked to answer questions that tap into traumatic and personal concerns. As sociologist Einwöhner (2011) observes, even working with secondary data can present ethical conflicts. In a review of stories from Shoah, Einwöhner found herself eliminating real names and identifying people with numbers, which reminded her of how Nazis had treated Jews. As a Jewish woman who had lost relatives to the Holocaust, she came to feel that it was unethical to objectify her subjects by breaking up their lives into coded small segments.

Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), along with other ethics review systems, mandate that prior to doing our research we institute procedures to protect human subjects from harm, obtain

informed consent, maintain confidentiality, uphold honesty, and respect privacy. While designing ethical procedures prior to beginning our projects is a minimum requirement for doing research with human subjects, most questions and ethical dilemmas in qualitative research emerge during the research process, especially in studies of traumatic and sensitive topics. In most cases, IRBs provide little guidance on “process ethics” (also called “situational ethics” or “ethics in practice” [Guillemin and Gillam 2004: 4])—those unanticipated situations, dilemmas, and concerns that arise and demand immediate attention in the course of our study. Nor do IRBs offer direction about “relational ethics”—how to make good interpersonal decisions concerning our responsibilities toward those in our studies, especially when we ask about intimate and/or traumatic events that might engender strong emotions in respondents (see Ellis 2007). Relational ethics also include mindful self-reflection about the researcher’s role, motives, and feelings during the research process. This mindfulness extends beyond ourselves to the lives of our participants and communities in which they live, and includes reflection on how our work might contribute to them (see Gonzalez-Lopez 2011: 448-450).

While required, the focus on procedures by IRBs may lull us into thinking that we are doing ethical research if we have IRB approval and follow the procedures we have laid out. This orientation then may lead to an absence of sufficient concentration on those complications most certain to arise in the research process and in the relationships we form with participants. Anthropologists Davis and Holcombe (2010: 1) warn that there is a difference between ethical standards in protocols and guidelines and “the actual practice of ethics: the upholding of moral behaviours in face-to-face encounters.” Using indigenous research as their focus, they note that we need “a balance between regulatory compliance and institutional governance of ethics through codification and the practice of good ethical behaviours in actual settings” (2010: 9).

Writing about mindful ethics in her studies of sexuality and incest in Mexico, sociologist Gonzalez-Lopez (2011: 448; see also Yow 1997) advocates that we consider the histories and stories of those in our studies, and view them as complex people with “complex everyday lives characterized by unique social circumstances,” aspects that are important for “understanding their relationships with us as researchers.” IRBs do not come close to addressing the complex ethical issues researchers confront and as Kellner (2002:31) says, guidelines for human subject reviews often “fall far short of involving caring about the people being studied” (cited in Huisman 2008).

Especially complex are those circumstances in which we study people we know, develop friendships/long-term relationships with our participants (see, for example, Huisman 2008), or invite participants to share authority or coauthor with us (see High 2014; Sheftel and Zembrzycki 2013; special issue of the *Oral History Review* on sharing authority). These situations are foreign to most IRBs which view research as short-term, bounded, with strangers, and controlled physically and emotionally by the researcher who is separate from those studied (see Ellis 2004, 2007; High 2014: 27).

Even some who support doing research with familiar others raise questions about the dual relationships researchers might have with those in their studies. While advocating an ethic of care, intimacy, and collaboration, feminist researchers, in particular, warn that friendship with respondents can cause problems for respondents as well as researchers. This closeness can cause emotional harm to participants, offered Judith Stacey (1988: 24), who wrote that “the greater the intimacy, the apparent mutuality of the researcher/researched relationship, the greater is the danger.” Many feminists have supported Stacey’s statement about the dangers of the ‘friendly façade’ that accompanies qualitative research (Patai 1991; Wolf 1996). Others have warned of

the emotional load on researchers who are not trained as psychotherapists (Brannen 1988; Edwards 1993) and the physical load on researchers who are considered to be friends. More recently, sociologist Huisman (2008) discussed how the Bosnian women she interviewed expected her to visit regularly and spend many hours with them. They told her their secrets and she feared violating their trust if she were to leave the field. She said, “I became increasingly concerned that my ‘reciprocity’ contributed to the exploitation” they had experienced during the war (386).

While “double vision” or having multiple identities might provide a wider vision, these roles also might conflict. For sociologist Jacobs (2004), the conflict she experienced was between data gatherer and bearing witness to the memories of suffering of Jewish women in the Holocaust, especially since she was Jewish. Huisman (2008) felt conflict in her roles of researcher and friend to the Bosnian women she had interviewed and responded by choosing to work with a team of researchers in her follow up project so as not to get so close to participants.

In spite of potential problems, many scholars do successfully occupy dual roles with those they interview and come to understand narrators’ stories differently when they get to know them better (see Zembrzycki 2013: 139; Owton and Allen-Collinson 2014). Qualitative researchers, particularly communication scholars who work from a narrative and autoethnographic perspective, interview family members and friends and become friends with those in their studies. For example, Tillmann (Healy), who made a strong case for friendship as a method (2003), interviewed gay men who had become close friends in her study of gay and straight relationships (2001). Later she accompanied these men to their hometowns and interviewed family members (Tillmann 2015). Adams (2011) called on interactions with gay friends and acquaintances for his study of coming out of the closet. Brooks (2006) collaborated with a friend

in his study of masculinity and male friendships. Hodges (2014) interviewed family members in his research on white working class, and Boylorn (2013) returned to her hometown to talk with family and others in the community for her study of Black, rural, working class women.

Prevalent among autoethnographers, these practices are becoming more common among other researchers as well. According to historian High (2014: 127), a “growing number of oral historians interview family members.” In High’s large scale study of people displaced by mass violence, *The Montreal Life Stories Project*, five members of his team interviewed parents (High 2014: 127). Afterwards they reflected together about the risks and benefits to themselves and to their families. Additionally, folklorist Norkunas (2013) and anthropologist Waterston (2005) interviewed their fathers about difficult memories.

Many oral historians and other researchers now “share authority” with research participants. Coined by Frisch (1990), this phrase means that the researcher gives up some control over the process and/or product of research. Oral historian Zembrzycki (2009), for example, interviewed her grandmother, her Baba, in her study of the Ukrainian community in Northern Ontario. She then shared authority with her grandmother in the role of co-interviewer in order to gain more access to the Ukrainian community and their stories.

As well, researchers, especially those dealing with trauma, build relationships and share authority with storytellers. Psychologist and playwright Greenspan (2010) has spent almost three decades in conversations with Holocaust survivors and has published a book that demonstrates the deep conversations he had with Agi Rubin (Rubin and Greenspan 2006). Communication scholar Patti (2015) told of being called to the bedside of a Holocaust survivor he interviewed, whose dying wish was to talk with Chris about sharing his story. In their edited book, *Oral History off the Record*, Sheftel and Zembrzycki (2013) included many oral history contributors

who spent years building relationships with their interviewees. Zembrzycki (2013), for example, wrote of the long relationship she built with a survivor, which culminated in their joint visit to the death camps in Poland. In my work with Jerry, we also built a long-term friendship characterized by compassionate friendship and shared authorship (Ellis and Rawicki 2013, 2015; Rawicki and Ellis 2011).

### Doing Compassionate Research with a Holocaust Survivor

I first met Jerry, a Warsaw Ghetto survivor, in 2009 when I interviewed him along with forty other survivors for a project with the University of South Florida Libraries Holocaust and Genocide Center and the Florida Holocaust Museum. Though Jerry, now 87 years old, and his older sister survived the Holocaust, his father died in a work camp, and his mother and younger sister were murdered at Treblinka. My initial exchange with him was in the form of a traditional oral history interview, based on the Shoah Foundation model, which posed questions chronologically about life before, during, and after the Holocaust. Aware that the last of our survivors were approaching end of life and there was little time remaining to establish testimony in direct collaboration with witnesses, I began follow-up conversational interviews with a small number of survivors as a way to elicit different and possibly untold stories. I believed that stories told conversationally in long-term and close relationships might present opportunities to tell new stories, revise, develop, and analyze them along the way. I also hoped this process might provide a positive experience for survivors.

Jerry became the first person I asked to participate in these conversations. We worked together well and quickly became friends who cared about each other, enjoyed spending time together, and looked forward to this work. A highlight of our time together occurred in June

2013, when I accompanied Jerry on his return to Poland for the first time since he left at the age of twenty-one. While in Warsaw, we produced a video, *Behind the Wall*, featuring Jerry in situ exploring his memory of his past and his feelings about forgiveness toward his homeland.

In my work with Jerry, I employ compassionate interviewing and storytelling (see also Ellis and Patti 2014; Patti 2013, 2015). In compassionate interviewing, researchers and participants listen deeply to, speak responsibly with, feel passionately for, share vulnerably with, and connect relationally and ethically to each other with care. In compassionate storytelling, researchers—sometimes with participants—write and tell stories empathetically and respectfully, accompanied by a desire to relieve or prevent suffering. In the recent past, I have used other similar terms to designate this approach, for example, intimate interviewing (Ellis 2014), relational autoethnography (Ellis and Rawicki 2013), heartfelt autoethnography (Ellis 1999), and collaborative witnessing (Ellis and Rawicki 2013; Ellis and Rawicki 2015). Though compassionate research signifies an orientation toward doing research more than a particular strategy, this approach builds on work I have done previously with collaborators on useful techniques, such as interactive interviewing (Ellis, Kiesinger, and Tillmann-Healy 1997) and coconstructed narrative (Bochner and Ellis 1995).

With Jerry, I have integrated my roles of friend and researcher so that they blend and complement each other rather than present conflict. Foremost in my mind is a consideration of our relationship (Gergen 1999), one focused on Jerry's wellbeing and the possibility of renewal and purpose in his life (and mine). I can do the research I do, which involves emotional sharing, because Jerry and I are close friends. Our friendship was formed around our interest in the Holocaust, trauma, and loss, but it now includes much more—caring for each other's families, other survivors, and day-to-day concerns and problems in living. Even if I were to end this work,

we would remain friends. But I have no intentions to leave the field, because I am committed to this work; besides there is no field to leave since Jerry is part of my life.

Jerry and I share goals for this research—to write stories, give lectures, and do work that has the possibility of bringing experiences to audiences that might make a positive difference. We seek to make changes one story, one life at a time (Ellis 2009), and reach the larger community of Holocaust survivors (see also Blee and Currier 2011; Gonzalez-Lopez 2011; Rupp and Taylor 2011). This approach adds a relational and emotional dimension to the research we do on trauma, such as the Holocaust, that enables us to learn from our interaction with others as well as from what our participants say. The focus on lived experience and storytelling then can add to what we know about trauma from work in history, art and literature, individual life histories, memoirs, and qualitative studies using snippets of life stories to tell a collective story.

My ongoing relationship with Jerry also provides an opportunity for us to try to understand together the perils and joys of being involved in a compassionate research process. While not many researchers have the time, inclination, and/or the personality to immerse themselves in relationships with participants or to study their own close relationships—nor do most research projects call for it—I offer this kind of immersion as an option to consider, especially when studying sensitive issues such as loss and trauma. Previous inquiries into the “ethics of care” and “relational ethics” provide ways of thinking through these relationships and accomplishing them with care and respect.

### Relational Ethics of Care

Following Gilligan’s (1982, 1988) and Noddings’s (1984, 1995) ethic of care and drawing extensively from Bergum’s and Dossetor’s excellent discussion of relational ethics (2005) in

health care, I employ the term “relational ethics of care” to emphasize the role of relationship and care in the ethics that guide my work (see also Ellis 2007). This approach is closely related to communitarian ethics, feminist ethics, ethic of care, and case based ethics, among others (see Christians 2000; Denzin 1997).

By a relational ethics of care, I refer to the “way people *are* with one another” in their various roles and relationships from moment to moment (Bergum and Dossetor 2005: 3-4). Following a relational ethics of care does not mean a rejection of an ethic based on justice. As Held (1995:3) suggested, justice sets the “moral minimums beneath which we ought not to fall, or absolute constraints within which we may pursue our different goals” while “[c]are deals with questions of the good life or of human value over and above the obligatory minimums of justice.” We need both justice and care, reason and heart. As Gilligan (1988) proposed, we need an ethics that is “fundamentally dialectical in the sense of containing an ongoing tension between justice and care...aspiring always to the ideal of a world more caring and more just.” Noddings (2002: 3) made a case for the close relationship between the two principles in her description of justice as “caring about” the welfare of others at a distance from us, which generates the motive and content of justice, while “caring for” involves relating face-to-face. As proponents of relational ethics in health care research, Bergum and Dossetor (2005:3) defined the focus of relational ethics as being “on people (whole persons) and the quality of the commitments between them. These commitments are experienced in a relational or ethical space...The shift is from solving the ethical problem to asking the ethical question.” Though some ethical issues can be anticipated, it is impossible to know ahead of time all the moral conundrums that might arise in any research project. As in any relationship, a researcher and participant must try to negotiate and resolve misunderstandings and disagreements that might result in moment-to-moment

interactions. Central to a relational ethics of care, the main concern is asking “what do we do now?” rather than declaring “this is what you should do now” (Bergum, 1998).

Relational ethics of care are ongoing, uncertain processes. Often what is ethical to do in any situation may not be clear, but something must be done and/or decided. Sometimes researchers—similar to health care practitioners—do it right and sometimes they make mistakes or in hindsight see a better way of doing things. One is never finished making ethical decisions as long as interacting with others. Thus we must be fully present and continually asking questions about “what is going on here,” in particular “what is needed to make this interaction go well, to honor the other person, and to take care of myself?” Though we prepare ourselves for ethical dilemmas through reading, thinking, talking and imagining, most “ethical reflection occurs after the fact” as we consider what we have done and the consequences it produced, and try to learn to do things better (See Bergum and Dossetor 2005: 9, 24; Caputo 1989 as cited in Bergum and Dossetor 2005:9.)

Relational ethics of care focuses on the particular, concrete story at hand, not the universal, abstract and theoretical (Bochner 1994). Rather than relying on objective standards, acting ethically depends on engagement; it relies on building trust rather than drawing conclusions. As Bergum and Dossetor (2005: 128) said about health workers and patients, “Dialogic conversation involved give and take, back and forth, being strong and being vulnerable, listening to stories of pain and staying in pain, and confronting death and staying with the dying.”

This kind of dialogue involves paying full attention to each other.<sup>3</sup> Weil ([1951] 2000: 65, cited in Noddings 2002: 15) described attention: “The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth.” As Noddings (2002: 3) argued, the reception is relational: someone signals a readiness to receive and becomes a duality,

who sees though “two pairs of eyes, hear[s] with two sets of ears, feel[s] the pain of the other self” in addition to her own. The selves of both participants then have potential to be changed.

Since the researcher is part of this conversation, relational ethics requires the researcher to do a continuous “moral self-examination” (Jacobs 2004: 236), which involves interrogating and trying to understand self to understand the other and honor the space and dialogue in between (see Ellis 2007; also see Bergum and Dossetor 2005: 11; Jacobs 2004). We must explore our own issues as we explore theirs, be willing to reveal ourselves and be vulnerable as they reveal themselves vulnerably, care for ourselves as we care for them (see Fahie 2014), share our stories while they share theirs, because that is how relationships develop and that is what mutual respect means. We must be self-aware but not self-absorbed, all the while keeping the focus on them and their stories (Bergum and Dossetor 2005: 81-82). In the process we (researcher and participant) should have the possibility of coming to new questions and understandings about ourselves and each other, and our relationship, as well as the substance of our research.

In the process, we open up to the other, imagining the world through the other’s being, feeling close to what this person feels, knowing we can never fully imagine their experience, but trying with all our might anyway, and doing so without losing a sense of ourselves (Bergum and Dossetor, 2005: 55). As we try to become the other, we then have compassion for the other as we might have for ourselves. They, in turn, might have compassion for us, as our lives and goals intersect. We become a witness to the other and to ourselves (Laub 1992: 58).

#### Writing Compassionate Stories: Being With Jerry in Treblinka

To convey how a relational ethics of care might take place in practice, I offer a story about accompanying Jerry to Treblinka where his sister and mother were killed. This story serves two

purposes. First, rather than proclaiming what happened there, the story invites readers to imagine the moment to moment concrete experience Jerry had in Treblinka. It provides the possibility to feel with and for Jerry and other survivors like him. Perhaps you have had similar feelings or been in similar situations so that this is an opportunity to remember, empathize, compare, and understand what happened to you and to him more fully and more deeply. Perhaps you have not had a similar experience, and this story offers a chance to try to understand something unfamiliar. Whichever, you as the reader are invited to become a compassionate participant observer in opening up to and trying to understand life as lived in all its complexity.

Second, this story offers the possibility of putting yourself in my place, as a researcher negotiating the intersection of my roles as friend and researcher. You enter my feelings and thoughts, as I experience Jerry's grief and the grief produced of my own remembering. You are privy to my moment-to-moment decisions, as I do my best to take part fully in this important event with Jerry and give him my support, yet also preserve our experience for the telling. You become witness to how Jerry, his family, and I try to create meaning in our trek toward and away from Treblinka. In the process, you are called to your own meaning making.

#### “Groaning from the Soul”

Arm in arm, we cautiously yet rhythmically make our way over the uneven cobblestones toward the memorial at Treblinka. To steady Jerry, I grasp his left arm tightly: his daughter-in-law Jo Anna does the same with his right. Three of Jerry's grandchildren and our guide traverse the path ahead of us. Jerry, Jo Anna, and I slowly follow the trail bordered by large egg-shaped stones symbolizing the bob-wired boundaries of the camp and alongside the row of railroad ties carved of concrete representing the path of the old railroad tracks. Momentarily, I conjure the

image of the trains arriving there during the Holocaust and of the peoples' terror as they were herded down the "road to Heaven" to their fates at this death camp—the men shoved to the right and the women and children to the left. "To be showered and deloused," they were told. From the exhibits at the small museum we visited and the history I have read, I know that approximately 800,000 people died in Treblinka, almost all immediately upon arrival. I visualize the crowds getting off at the fake train station, with the fake clock and fake ticket window casting a last ray of hope. How much worse could this be than the long journey in a crowded boxcar with dehydrated and emaciated people defecating and dying during the trip? They soon would find out.

I wonder if Jerry and Jo Anna are thinking similar thoughts as we walk quietly toward the monument. The silence feels overwhelming and a sense of tragedy permeates the air. A slight wind blows and birds chirp, but I quickly block them out, pushing away any semblance of peacefulness that threatens to permeate the edge of this dense forest on a summer day. The atmosphere and the slow, steady pace remind me of the many times I have walked the hill to the burial site in my home town where my mother, father, brother, and aunt are "laid to rest." Oh, how I miss them at this moment. I wonder, is there any "rest" here? I can feel Jerry's tenseness, apprehension, and sadness—through my arm linked with his, and I sense—and share—his desire and reluctance to approach the towering monument up ahead. Please may he find here some sense of what he is looking for—be it peace, connection, or release of grief. He may have no idea of what to hope for. I know I don't; I am just glad to be here, with him, on this journey. Though I think of videotaping, my camera hangs by my side. After quickly filming the entryway, I sense it is disrespectful to turn it on, to record this emotional, spiritual, and sacred experience.

After ten minutes, we see ahead the garden of approximately 17,000 multi-shaped and multi-colored stones ranging from the size of a hand to a large tombstone. I take a deep breath and imagine the piles of burning bodies in the crematorium. I imagine the women waiting in line, naked, their heads shaven, holding their babies close to their chests as long as they can, while the men are gassed first, their moans and screams shattering any remnant of hope. Fifteen to twenty minutes is all it took. Did it seem a lifetime or a quick moment to them? Maybe both. I imagine the women and children now herded into the crematorium after the men were shoveled out in heaps on the other side, some still gasping. I imagine the children—the ones who had not already been flung against walls, their brains splattering—tossed in on top of the women who were made to stand with their hands in the air to make room for more. Though I don't fully understand why, I must make myself imagine the horror, though I know, and am glad, that I really cannot.<sup>4</sup>

We talk quietly as we walk, commenting on what we see in front of us. Jerry stops several times to blow his nose. "I feel like I'm finally able to pay my respects," he says, "to come to their grave. If only there was a marker."

"Maybe we can find the Bodzentyn stone," I say, remembering that one hundred and thirty stones are engraved with the names of the towns of the victims. Bodzentyn is the location of the small ghetto from which Jerry's mother and younger sister were taken. Delineating the extermination camp, the symbolic gravestones spread out in a circular formation in front of us as far as the eye can see. I fear I have raised Jerry's hopes in vain. Still it's worth a try. If the stone is here, I'm determined to find it.

As we enter the garden, I begin scanning the jagged stones. Quickly, I see what appears to be Bodzentyn imprinted in large letters on a four foot high stone. Could that be? “Come this way,” I say to Jerry. “I think I see Bodzentyn.”

“What?” asks Jerry, cupping his ear.

Then, “Stay here a moment,” I motion, fearing I am wrong, and not wanting him to make the trek for nothing. I quickly approach the stone, and I see that, yes, Bodzentyn is engraved on its front.

“I’ve found the Bodzentyn marker,” I say to Jerry and Jo Anna when I return.

“Really?” Jerry says. His face lights up for a moment before the tears start to fall. “Where?”

“Over there.” Jerry walks fast in the direction I point, and Jo Anna and I rush to hold onto him.

“Bodzentyn, there it is,” Jo Anna says as we approach the marker. She and I support Jerry until he can lean on the tombstone shaped marker. He begins to weep, and we begin to cry quietly as he hangs his head over the stone and touches it reverently. We take turns gently rubbing his back, to let him know we are there, then move away, to give him a sense of privacy. Continuing to weep, Jerry lovingly traces each of the engraved letters with the tips of his fingers. His grandson, a Brother in the Catholic Church, approaches and prays aloud with him. I note the small pebbles that visitors have left on top of the marker, signifying permanence and a reminder to all who arrive that others have been here as well and that we are connected and continue through memory.

Our guide from Warsaw stands apart watching the scene. I think of our trip here and how the guide’s commentary was halted when Jerry said his mother and sister had died in Treblinka. The guide turned to Jerry and began asking him questions. If he has not identified Jerry as a

mourning survivor, he likely would be talking to us now, describing what we are seeing, as if we were tourists. Instead he gives us time to grieve on our own. He acknowledges the sacredness of our being there, that it is an event in need of no words.

From a respectful distance, the guide takes video of Jerry at the stone. Jo Anna also steps back and snaps a few iPad photos of Jerry. With that, I feel I have permission to record the scene and Jerry, though I too move away and film for only a short time. Listening to the video later, I hear weeping and sniffing, and it takes a while to recognize the sounds as mine. Even as I write this, I sigh and feel deep sadness, which I experience as a heaviness in my body, an emptiness in my stomach, and tightness in my chest.

Jerry turns away from the stone and signifies with a nod that he is ready to go. “Finally I have been able to grieve,” he says. “Before I didn’t have a place to come to, no cemetery, nothing.” Jo Anna and I link to his arms again and we wander with no purpose around the cemetery, commenting on the names on the stones. We walk toward the tall monument in the center of the garden. Standing at the site of the former gas chamber, the granite tower is shaped like a tall tombstone with a crack down the middle, and capped by a mushroom shaped block covered with carvings of a Menorah and Jewish symbols. Without a word, we then turn back, forgoing a visit to the pits of mass graves, the stone arch that marks the location of the crematorium, or the labor camp section of Treblinka.

We start the long trek back to the car, along the same railroad tracks that brought Jerry’s mother and sister to their deaths. Jerry will say later that “the railroad tracks were the hardest part, as I imagined my mother and sister arriving in the boxcar. The death itself,” he will add, “was swift; at least I hope it was. And I hope they already had lost their minds from shock so they did not know what was happening.”

When Jerry sighs with relief, I consider turning on the video camera. But that would be intrusive, I think, and might interrupt the solemn and contemplative mood. Besides, I can't point the camera toward him and continue holding his arm. It is most important to be with Jerry, to support and feel with him. I feel honored that he invited me to be part of this experience. It feels irreverent to risk making a spectacle out of his grief. I know now that my decision to forego bringing a film crew on this part of the trip was the right one.

We walk a ways in silence. Still wanting to have a record of this moment, I think that perhaps Jerry and his family might want one as well. I turn on my palm-size video camera, and continue walking with it pointed toward our feet, to unobtrusively record the sounds of our steps and our words. After a while we begin to talk—about suffering, ongoing genocide, relief from suffering through death, and Treblinka as a memorial. When Jerry says he wishes he could pray better, Jo Anna replies that prayer is “groaning from the soul—it's not the words that matter.”

“When I left Bodzentyn I knew I would never see them again,” Jerry says, a moan escaping from deep in his throat. “I feel close to them now being here.”

“They must be smiling,” I say.

“What?” asks Jerry.

“Your mother and sister. To have you here with your daughter-in-law, your wonderful grandchildren. It signifies that their deaths were not in vain. You survived. *You* survived,” I repeat with emphasis on ‘you.’ “And through you their memories live on.”

Jerry nods. Then “Do you hear the birds?” I ask Jerry, suddenly becoming aware of the chirping. He says yes. “Their song is beautiful,” I say and he agrees. We walk and listen quietly to the serenade. <sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This talk, entitled “Collaborative Witnessing and Documentary Research: Working with Holocaust Survivors,” took place at the 2014 Ethnography Pre-Conference at The National Communication Association meetings organized by Shirley Drew.

<sup>3</sup> See Freeman 2014 for an insightful discussion of the importance of attention—being there fully for the other—as a major component in considering the priority of the other.

<sup>4</sup> The information in this section about Treblinka comes from online sites including: “Treblinka Concentration Camp: History and Overview” <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/Treblinka.html#what>) and “Symbolic Cemetery at Treblinka” <http://www.scrapbookpages.com/Poland/Treblinka/Treblinka05.html>

<sup>5</sup> Later, I give Jerry some photos and tell him about the footage. He says he is glad we have images of Treblinka, and asks me to send them to his son who could not be with us that day. I write to Jerry: “I want to make sure you are okay with the story I have written about Treblinka. I have pretty explicit description in one paragraph of the murdering there and I am afraid it will unnecessarily upset you. Once I looked up information on the internet about the plane crash my brother was in. I was able to hear the conversation of the pilots and the cockpit sounds when the crash happened, and it was really disturbing to me. I don’t want that to happen for you. My inclination is to take out that paragraph before I send it—its absence won’t interrupt the story.”

Jerry writes back: “Carolyn, do not delete a single syllable in your paper. Though the pain will never cease, by now I’m inured to all the tragedies of the Holocaust. Nothing will ever assuage the memory of the night in Starahowice after trekking there from Bodzentyn, when I realized I would never see my mother and sister ever again. So please make your writing as vivid as you possibly can, even as you have to draw on your personal tragedy the way you described it in your *Final Negotiations* [Ellis 1995], or as I remember the airplane plunging into the Potomac River from your story about your brother’s death [Ellis 1993].”