

Witnessing cancer: The voices that accompany me

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Authors

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Abstract

This plenary lecture begins with an overview of who enters the field of medical humanities, and offers a simple typology of the work done in medical or healthcare humanities. The role of witness is discussed, and the conflicts between witnessing and analyzing are explored.

The lecture then turns to my own distinct background, as an example of how each professional in this field brings something distinct. I briefly describe the three basic principles of my work with narrative: the injunction to keep the stories in the foreground, the work of amplifying and connecting stories, and the need for generous interpretation.

The second half of the lecture tells three illness stories, describing their importance to me over

several decades. These stories are by Audre Lorde, Reynolds Price, and Stewart Alsop, dealing with problems of silences imposed on ill people, problems caused by physicians' perceived lack of time, and dilemmas of the end of life, respectively.

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About the author

Dr. Arthur Frank, PhD, is professor emeritus of sociology at the University of Calgary, where he taught from 1975 until 2013. He currently is professor at VID Specialized University, Oslo, Norway. He lives in Calgary. Trained as a medical sociologist (PhD, Yale, 1975), he is the author of a memoir of critical illness, *At the Will of the Body* (1991; new edition 2002); a study of first-person illness narratives, *The Wounded Storyteller* (1995; expanded edition, 2013); a book on care as dialogue, *The Renewal of Generosity: Illness, Medicine and How to Live* (2004); and most recently, a book on how stories affect our lives, *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-narratology* (2010). Dr. Frank has been visiting professor at the University of Sydney, Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto, Keio University in Tokyo, and the University of Toronto, and a visiting fellow in bioethics at the University of Otago, New Zealand. For many years he was book review editor of the journal *Health: An Interdisciplinary Journal* and among other editorial board appointments, he is a contributing editor to *Literature and Medicine*. Dr. Frank has been elected a Fellow of The Hastings Center and the Royal Society of Canada. He was the 2008 recipient of the Abbyann Lynch Medal for Bioethics, awarded by the Royal Society of Canada, and the 2016 recipient of a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Canadian Bioethics Society.