



Taken from *Seeing Jesus in East Harlem* by José Humphreys.
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EL TESTIMONIO **GO AND SHOW YOURSELF**

If theology is contextual, it must certainly
be at root autobiographical.

JUNG YOUNG LEE

HEARD THE SOUND OF SIX GUNSHOTS from my tiny room in the housing projects.

A car screeched away via the East 10th Street roundabout, with high-pitched screams quickly following. In my neighborhood, these sounds were a warning that bad news was on the way. My neighbor Greg was shot during a drug deal gone wrong. Friends near the scene had picked up Greg's bullet-ridden body, driving him to a nearby hospital. But Greg would be DOA.

All in one flash of memory I remembered a lot about Greg. He lived two floors directly above me. Greg would bully me some days, but I remember the moment when he became a friend. That one time when I rode my bike by the forbidden zone known



as East 8th Street, a bully knocked me off my bike and stole the seat. Greg found out, went to 8th Street, and “bullied the bully” into returning my seating paraphernalia. I realized then and there that hood justice could be a complex thing.

On this night, Greg would not be returning to his apartment two floors above; instead he had become the victim of yet another drug rivalry in the Lower East Side, Avenue D, the exiled corner of Manhattan island—a place where violence was commonplace.

LES in the 1980s was ripe with opportunities for bodily harm, and there was a well-founded paranoia for one’s personal safety. This might mean walking with my security brigade (or as I affectionately called them, “my boys from the block”) or making some on-the-spot decisions to walk four blocks west of my junior high school just to avoid certain crews. It was not out of the ordinary for us to be leery that even a simple pickup game at the basketball court could turn into a group fight. If we weren’t on high alert for occasional dangers coming from neighborhood kids, we were just as afraid of having a run-in with the New York City Housing police.

Harm could also be hidden in the sporadic patches of grass, like that one time I fetched a sponge ball in the housing project patio. A hypodermic needle punctured my sneaker sole, running through it into my big toe. It was a terrifying moment when I believed I would get HIV/AIDS. Or at least that’s what I feared, since no one was really sure how the disease was contracted. I remember being scared stiff on that bus ride to Bellevue Hospital, questioning whether my life was over at fifteen years old.

In the midst of this the church was always there, praying. Our little Latino Assemblies of God church was located four blocks southwest from our home, on the corner of 6th Street and Avenue C. Here *las hermanas* would pray almost every day of the week. Their prayers were every bit as gritty as our block. Intercession went out for the asthmatic kids in apartment 5C, kids who were probably suffering from the unknown effects of lead-based paint on housing project walls. And prayers were lifted for women like Doña Figueroa, who was to have her foot amputated because of diabetes, the result of living with poor medical care and limited healthy nutrition in the food swamp that was LES.

Then there were the spontaneous, real-time prayers that would take place on a crowded Avenue D. Like during that hot summer night walking back home from church when we watched Benito, a neighborhood addict, in the throes of another high. Mom would stop and pray. Others would just stop and watch Benito, “a junkie,” doubling as street entertainment. The drug high would cause his body to contort, pulling off a gravity-defying stunt: his head drooping inches from the pavement—teasing, yet never quite touching it.

It was hard to name the veil of collective despair draped by NYC’s summer smog in my neighborhood. The old church discerned this unnamed reality as spiritual warfare, a cosmic battle between angels and demons—spiritual darkness in high places. And I see that much as true: a living dis-integration, conditions conspiring to create a form of exile.

Many things contributed to this breakdown in our ecosystem known as the hood, including a failed education system, lack of investment in local infrastructure, and extreme poverty, with few resources to support people to cope, much less thrive.

My story, though, is more than just another glorified hood tale. On many days there were signs of grace and hope. These signs were embodied in people like Ms. Brown, the head of the tenants' association. Ms. Brown planted a garden that would grow in the midst of NYCHA's signature red brick. She would also cuss us out with great zeal—especially if her heirloom tomatoes became casualties of our stickball games.

Spontaneous block parties and barbecues reminded us that even gated project patios were our back yard. With no green space, or “no trespassing,” there would be no problem. We would get creative with space in our neighborhood and arrange life on public places, namely our sidewalks. Community became a concrete form of resistance. One of the ways this was facilitated was through the neighborhood liturgists otherwise known as DJs. They would show up with their turntables and others with cardboard boxes, creating a party-in-a-box atmosphere. People were ready to “battle”—to dance and celebrate good music with superior dance skills.

In the air there was this sense of acceptance of one another in sharing a place together. People on the block tolerated and even loved this lanky Latino church boy. Everyone looked out for each other's children, and Mami had an open fridge policy for all my friends.

To ensure our continual safety, no stranger could enter the housing project unless Mr. Rodriguez from the first floor would approve it and Mr. Smith from the tenants association would second it.

Ours was a resilient community with God's image all over it. There were divine signs and snapshots of beauty. It was quite reminiscent of James Baldwin's Harlem experience when he wrote, "Perhaps we were, all of us—pimps, whores, racketeers, church members, and children—bound together by the nature of our oppression, the specific and peculiar complex of risks we had to run; if so within these limits we sometimes achieved with each other a freedom that was close to love."

Today, when I visit with my mom and dad, they refuse to leave LES. Whenever I attempt to convince Mami to move to Puerto Rico, she becomes adamant, saying, "No. No. *Manhattan es mi isla.*"

Presently Mami's neighborhood is a mostly gentrified, fancy restaurant-laden, university-inhabited neighborhood. The poverty and drug activity is now hemmed farther east, mostly into one avenue, while boutiques and trendy bars have replaced bodegas and barbershops.

Gentrification, they say, has good intentions, on paper at least. But there are unintended consequences that come with such so-called development. If neighborhoods continue to be "discovered" in a form unchecked, without nuances in neighborhood policy, gentrification simply creates a new form of a hipster-ghetto, hidden in trendiness, cut off from a history that once was. One

will simply find an alternate numbness in the same hood. The elite become less whole when disconnected from the neighbor who is unable to make rent next door. Unjust transactions happen when systems profit from someone's inability to stay in a place.

Historically, certain political groups within our country have attached upward mobility to morality. If a person isn't somehow able to climb out of poverty, they must be too lazy to scale the ladder. I noticed that when I found a few more rungs on this elusive ladder, the world began to see me just a little bit more. The more visible someone becomes, somehow, the less "ghetto" they are. To live what is deemed a "respectable" middle-class existence can somewhat make one feel removed from one's beginnings—but not totally.

As migrants from Puerto Rico in the 1950s, my parents worked hard to see their children educated to make an impact in our world. My parents always grounded us in care for our neighbors as an extension of a feet-to-the-ground kind of faith, always reminding us in one way or another how relative privilege can easily become a brittle platform the moment we see ourselves as better or different from others.

Most importantly, my parents left me a great inheritance through *Cristo, mi salvador personal*, who I met at the storefront Pentecostal church on 6th Street. *Cristo* was a healer and teacher, one who walked the streets of the cities, towns, and countries, looking for those who are down and out. *Cristo* continues to make everyday invitations to show up, to stay with me, to help me see the world differently.

Being a follower for most of my life now, I find that this cosmic Christ is located in many, many more places than I could've imagined. One sign of this personal formation is an ever-expanding testimony of how Christ's love pursues me even through the personal ruptures of my being, undeterred by the real-time messiness of my given realities.

I find that when Christ shows up, our stories become integrated into the life of Christ himself. In the mutuality of our lives, Christ shows up in both places of wholeness and places of unraveling, and we see his grace and mercy everywhere. Christ repairs the breaches so our personal and societal narratives become complete. He frames our stories so that we show up infused with meaning, dressed to life's party as our redeemed selves.

Knowing what these breaches look like—what I have come to know as sin—has been vital for an ever-growing testimony. It's the story of me, the story of us, but it was also the story of Adam and Eve in a garden. Our stories are just some of billions of minute marks on the human storyboard, billions of small narratives among the many more that continue to unfold over time. Our human family as a whole holds a history of wounds and trauma that come from broken exchanges between people, rooted in the breakdowns caused by sin in our world. Wounded people, wounded systems, wounding others over time and place.

For each tear in the fabric of God's intended wholeness, there is, or can be, a testimony of a gospel that repairs those breaches, with grace working specifically and uniquely at each place. But to construct a more whole testimony is to realize how (1) sin

causes breakdowns that are relational and (2) Christ's redeeming embrace invites us to show ourselves in the world as image bearers, with our testimonies as a holy work.

SIN IN OUR STORY: AN ECOLOGICAL BREAKDOWN

Testifying about Christ's goodness often means locating the ruptures in life, the breakdowns caused by sin, where Christ meets us. When I teach about the breakdowns that come from sin, there is rarely an apathetic response in the church pews. For some it is a top-ten, favored Christian topic, and for others . . . not so much.

A handmade knit scarf is an unlikely but best picture by far for describing sin as a breakdown in relationships. When Abuelita knits your six-year-old son a scarf, it's a labor of love that, regardless of the season, he is obligated to wear with pride. But what happens when your little Juancito pulls the loose thread? Abuelita's knitted labor of love becomes unraveled. The beauty, character, and integrity of what was to be worn is now tattered.

Abuelita's knit scarf is one of many ways to look at the effects of what we call sin. Cornelius Plantinga describes sin as an "unraveling of shalom." If shalom is the quality of wholeness, harmony, and flourishing in God's creation, sin is a violation of it.

Genesis tells the story of God's good creation. It also tells the story of humanity's desperate grasping after forbidden fruit, and the hiding that happened as a result of taking more than what God intended. Resultantly, the first man and the first woman would no longer see each other the same way. Somehow the

image of God was obscured in their viewing of each other. Bodies became objects of shame; the being-ness of showing up naked and unashamed was lost.

In the unraveling of human relationship with God, the whole creation felt its effects. Adam and Eve not only experienced a breakdown with God but compromised the conditions for relational flourishing through their sin, because flourishing happens in connection to God *through* people, including through their work. God provides people with work as one means of communicating God's own love to the world.

Relational breakdowns can happen when a person's desires are misappropriated or disordered. Grasping for more than what God has for us has become a continual sickness of the soul and our world. You can trace these breakdowns through the Old Testament, which makes any episode of *Game of Thrones* look like an episode of *Full House*.

In her book *The Very Good Gospel*, Lisa Sharon Harper sums it up well:

In the Hebrew conception of the world, all of creation is connected. The well-being of the whole depends on the well-being of each individual part. The Hebrew conception of goodness was different than the Greeks'. The Greeks located perfection within the object itself. A thing or a person strove toward perfection. But the Hebrews understood goodness to be located between things. As a result the original hearers would have understood *tov* [the Hebrew word

for good] to refer to the ties of relationships between things in creation.

Since the garden, people have been grasping for a fullness or harmony between things that, to date, has evaded our best efforts through systems such as education, governments, the courts, or even technological advancements. While human ingenuity is a sign of God's image, we've seen many of these advancements and systems fall short and become signs toward a witness of a world deeply divided.

It wasn't just my theological training that provided me clarity about how these breakdowns unfold in the world, but my social work education, through a theory called the Ecological Perspective, which borrows from elements of biology (and, one could say, creation). It's helpful for seeing how our world is interconnected through different systems. Whenever we speak of things unraveling, it's due to "dysfunctional transactions between people and their physical and social environments."

Our world consists of micro systems such as individuals, families, and religious systems. These micro systems are connected to larger systems like schools and communities, and macro systems like economies and governments. And when any of these systems break down, it can cause a pervasive ripple, leading to breakdowns in the health of other systems. We call this the classic ripple effect.

Evidence of a disrupted ecology can be found in so much of our everyday twenty-first-century world, demonstrated in the

life of our varying systems from institutions to families and individuals. The effects are far reaching, even passed down from one generation to the next.

Breakdowns exist in relationship to our bodies through highly stressful environments. This is demonstrated in epigenetics, a field that researches how a person's genes can be altered by trauma, stress, and even poor diet. These can actually create constitutional changes in genes passed down to younger generations.

An interview in *Psychology Today* describes how PTSD from Holocaust survivors was transmitted to younger generations, both through secondary trauma (listening to the stories of their traumatized parents) and through altered genetics. Stress hormones such as cortisol can have significant effects on a person's physiology, leading to constitutional changes in DNA. In a related interview Dr. Rachel Yehuda discusses how the children of certain Holocaust survivors were "several times more likely to develop post-traumatic stress disorder, if they were exposed to a traumatic event."

These physiological stresses due to larger systems and forces (Hitler's government) demonstrate the collateral consequences of sin and how these consequences can be transmitted from one generation to the next. Similar collateral consequences can be found in neighborhoods with extreme poverty or in the breakdown of families due to overpolicing and a punitive prison culture—leading to trauma passed down across space and time.

Indeed there are a multiplicity of breakdowns in both our personhood and our society. More than ever we need to recover a

more robust gospel that engages this expanse. Paul said, “Where sin increased, grace increased all the more” (Romans 5:20). The collision between God’s good news and our places of unraveling becomes the basis of our testimony.

In light of this, could it be that our understanding of the gospel needs to be redeemed? For as many breakdowns that exist, Christ redeems, repairs, and continues redeeming through a multiplicity of signs and wonders, pointing us to a place of righteousness, justice, peace, and joy—heaven.

In the Scriptures, each of Christ’s miracles pointed to a whole gospel for the whole world, yet was localized for particular needs. That’s what made Jesus’ ministry holistic, restorative, and integrative: each sign and wonder tethered people back to God, with those who experienced miracles becoming a sign to others of God’s wondrous work.

Christ’s miracles were each distinct in recognizing the multiple ways that the tears in the fabric of shalom can label people, separate them, or keep them apart. From freeing a demon-possessed man and sending him back home to testify, to healing skin diseases that made exiles of people, Jesus’ works addressed the issues that would cause people to hide or be outcast.

In Luke 17:11-19, Jesus demonstrated this restorative and integrating approach on the road to Jerusalem. Ten lepers had come running to him for healing. Jesus told them, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went forth in faith they were healed. To show oneself to a priest was to receive a blessing of integration back into the social fabric, a place among the people.

Of the ten lepers, one would return to Jesus with gratitude, recognizing from where his true restoration and insertion into the life of the world came. The one who returned in gratitude—the Samaritan—was the only one of the ten who showed himself to Jesus, the true high priest. Together, like this Samaritan, we Gentiles today continually show ourselves to Jesus and others in gratitude, singing the old gospel song for the world to hear: “Look what the Lord has done. He healed my body, he touched my mind. He saved me, just in time.” We’ve been enjoined into God’s good plans.

We participate in the practice of fellowship, we create and hold spaces where we can show ourselves as an exercise of faith, as a measurement of maturity. Through our collective vulnerability in Christ, others can hear this message and become uncoiled from their own exile and hiding.

TESTIMONIO: AN INTEGRATING PRACTICE

In my work as a church pastor, if I had been simply focused on church sustainability and mega-growth, I would’ve missed what signs and wonders could look like in our context. But when one is measuring success at the breakdowns, the idea is not just creating permanent structures but locating the fruit that will last in people. In 2 Corinthians 3:2 Paul reminds us that the greatest testimonies are not made of brick and mortar but people’s lives for the world to see.

Recognizing the practice of testimony as a mark for both personal and communal growth is vital. Our church has only

recently begun to recover this practice from the old Pentecostal church as a form of shaping memories of God's goodness and a way of honoring God's activity in the simplest and most profound of ways. Sunday services are not always set up for this kind of intimacy. Even small groups at times can become more of a heady exercise than not. But our ongoing testimonies carry a real-time story about God working in the here and now. As theologian Eldin Villafane writes, *testimonio* is one way of locating the Spirit's activity through the church in the world.

Church gatherings have been and can still be spaces where testimonies can break down educational and class barriers, where even the woman with the third grade education can stand up in the authority of God, naming God's miracle at the breaches. I once heard a woman proclaiming how her son had been a drug addict, but now was liberated from heroin. He encountered the power of the Spirit in church and became instantaneously free from his addiction. No symptoms. No signs of withdrawal. No rehab. God's liberating gospel bringing forth an instantaneous mending.

Take it from this skeptic—my eyes have seen this and are challenged again and again. *El evangelio* (the gospel) brings in a new announcement of lives now under the jurisdiction of Jesus. We stand today with the many *hermanas* in the church who were planting the cross, a tree, in the ground of grace. They were claiming God's authority as they described the work of *Cristo* in their own language—*Cristo* who was working within their story in their time and place.

Testimonios curate momentary snapshots of a more enduring wholeness to come, of the healing envisioned in the book of

Revelation where the exiled apocalyptic pastor wrote, “The river of the water of life . . . [flowed] down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.” The great promise of heaven is that God will take the distinct particular pains of each nation and bring healing. Each story will be included. No one’s pain will be minimized or classify him or her unworthy. People’s primordial wounds will be healed through the grace of the Ancient of Days.

But for now, all we have are our testimonies pointing to God’s activities. The more we see how sin contextualizes itself in our lives and takes root in the life of society, the more we can become discerning in our dealings at these breakdowns. This is why we need to train our people to practice testimony, to recount what God is doing in their lives across multiple facets of life. To detect God’s loving presence at the breakdowns is the basis for the practice of testimony.

As I have shown up with others, others have shown up with me. Together we’ve witnessed God’s work in several forms that will expand through the following chapters. We need the Spirit’s power for a sustained engagement that will allow us to see God’s work again and again in real time. We can practice a discipleship that earnestly engages the breaches, testifying to how God has rebuilt our disconnections.

Jesus’ redeeming love draws us to God and turns us outward to the world with the face of the church. The church then

proclaims a gospel that addresses both personal and systemic unraveling. If not robust in this manner, our gospel will do a disservice to discipleship, encouraging an overly personalized testimony, which inevitably turns people inward.

To recover a full gospel is to see Christ in more places than ever, tethering the breakdowns in self and the world, locating God's web of grace that holds us and heals us, encouraging us to show ourselves again and again.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Describe your first encounter with faith and Christ. If raised in the faith, what beauty did you find in your own faith narrative growing up?
2. What was your understanding of the gospel when you first received it?
3. How has your understanding of Christ, the gospel, and the work of the church expanded over time? Where do you see places of greater awareness and expansion?
4. What is your own story of personal breakdown?
5. What are the ruptures or breakdowns in your neighborhood or city?
6. How is your understanding of the gospel connected to this breakdown?
7. What are the signs that God is at work in the breakdowns?
8. How have your eyes continued to open and your testimony continued to develop?

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