

Witnessing and Bearing Witness.

On offering systemic consultations and practices of solidarity at the Uyghur Tribunal

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Abstract

The experience of offering therapeutic support to the Uyghur Tribunal held in London in June and September 2021 powerfully brought home the critical variations in the meanings of witnessing and bearing witness and what they entail. In this paper, we explore the role of witnessing through offering systemic consultation to those who have experienced human rights violations and those who have witnessed these accounts and discuss our observations about the healing power of acts of resistance/activism.

Keywords:

*Uyghur Testimony,
bearing witness,
witnessing,
People's Tribunal,
human rights,
narrative approach,
social justice,
imperfect ally*

We are four systemic psychotherapists, with a particular interest in narrative practices, and approaches that foreground social justice. With a concern not to become “failed witnesses” which Jessica Benjamin (2014) describes as “a failure of those not involved in the acts of injury to serve the function of acknowledging and actively countering or repairing the suffering and injury that they encounter as observers in the social world”, we attempt here to communicate our experience of witnessing and joining with, through practices of solidarity, those bearing witness at the People's Tribunal held to hear evidence about China's alleged genocide and crimes against humanity against Uyghur, Kazakh and other Turkic Muslim populations.

Citation Link

In this paper, we explore the role of witnessing through our experience of offering systemic consultations to those who have experienced human rights violations and to those who have witnessed these accounts and discuss our observations about the healing power of acts of resistance/activism. Our experience of offering therapeutic support to the Uyghur Tribunal held in London to investigate China's alleged genocide and crimes against humanity against the Uyghur, Kazakh and other Turkic Muslim populations in June and September 2021 powerfully brought home the critical variations in the meanings of witnessing and bearing witness, and what they entail. We are four systemic psychotherapists with a particular interest in narrative practices, and approaches that foreground social justice. With a concern not to become “failed witnesses” which Jessica Benjamin (2014) describes as “a failure of those not involved in the acts of injury to serve the function of acknowledging and actively countering or repairing the suffering and injury that they encounter as observers in the social world”, we attempt here to communicate our experience of witnessing and

joining with, through practices of solidarity, those bearing witness at the Tribunal. In so doing to also engage you the reader as further witnesses to these atrocities which have on the whole been neglected by the states and the media, and to open space and ideas for the development of practices of solidarity.

We entered the completely unknown terrain of the independent People's Tribunal with, as you may imagine, considerable trepidation, curiosity, and uncertainty about what such a Tribunal would entail for all of us taking part. The Chair movingly opened the tribunal by describing it as comprised of citizens who step up to fill the gap left by nations to challenge power, an inspirational statement which acted to welcome all of us as part of a solidarity team. Although the Tribunal had no legal powers, the rigour and formality of its process is considered to make its findings a credible resource for international governments to respond to.

We, the Refugee Resilience Collective which we set up in 2016 to offer therapeutic support based on liberation psychology, narrative and social justice approaches (Afuape & Hughes, 2016; Martin Baro, 1996; Denborough, 2008; Reynolds, 2010; Wade, 1997; Weingarten, 2003) to refugees and volunteers in Calais and Dunkirk (Burck and Hughes, 2018; Hughes, Burck and Roncin, 2020) had been approached by the Assistant to the Counsel to ask whether we might be able to provide therapeutic support at the Tribunal. One of their researchers had worked as a volunteer in Calais and learned of our work there. The tribunal organisers had come to see the need for and potential helpfulness of including access to psychological support.

Preparation

Our brief only slowly became clarified as we met with Tribunal members to introduce ourselves prior to the hearings. We experienced some uncertainty as to whether we would be there to support the Panel members, (chosen from the citizenry, each with their own professional expertise but with little if any experience of listening to accounts such as these), or whether it was just for those presenting the testimonies. It didn't seem possible to ask these questions in a straightforward way. Sir Geoffrey Nice, the Chair, came with a long history of listening to testimonies in his role at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia and leading the prosecution of Slobodan Milošević, former President of Serbia, his work at the International Criminal Court (ICC) and for various "victim" groups who had no recourse to the ICC. We ourselves wondered how the members of the Panel would be affected by the testimonies to which they would be listening without a professional framework or training to help them manage or a context in which they might process these impacts together as a group. We were also asking ourselves how we may best present what we might be able to offer. We sensed that there was an emerging narrative within the tribunal panel that they should be able to cope with this experience due to their comparative positions of privilege and safety.

None of us knew anything about the history of the Uyghurs or their culture, and we were relatively ignorant about their situation in China other than the occasional mention in the news of "re-education" camps and surveillance. Our preliminary fact-finding from the web and Wikipedia revealed that the Uyghurs, a Turkic people, have mainly lived in an area of Central Asia, which they call East Turkistan, and the Chinese, *Xinjiang, which China had effectively occupied since 1949. About 12 million Uyghurs mostly Muslim live here. This region lies in the north-west of China, is mainly desert and produces almost a fifth of the world's cotton and is also rich in oil and gas. A small number of Uyghurs*

also live in the Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan.

We had no notion of how our ideas of what we might offer would be appropriate within the Uyghur culture or how we might need to respond and adapt to fit with their wish to give testimony to the Tribunal and their experience of doing so. We were also uncertain about how we would go about making ourselves known to those giving testimonies and explain ourselves?

We decided to attend the Tribunal in pairs, as we do in our work with volunteers in Calais. This would allow us to debrief and process together what we ourselves would be witnessing. On the first day we learned that several members of the World Uyghur Congress, a body striving to promote democracy, human rights and freedom for the Uyghur people world-wide, were attending to offer support to those presenting to the Tribunal. We met the group of individuals giving testimonies that day and some of the Congress supporters and let people know we would be available. We learned from the witnesses and their supporters that the formal setting in the Assembly Hall of Church House, Westminster was viewed as lending status to the Tribunal but at the same time added to the nervousness of those about to give testimony.

To set the context of the process of the Tribunal, there were two types of witnesses appearing: those giving testimonies of their own experiences and those presenting research and findings. All witnesses had previously submitted their testimonies in writing. Witnesses presented in person or via an internet link to the panel which comprised the Chair, the Vice-Chair, Counsel to the Tribunal, seven Jury members, Legal Adviser, Head of Research and Investigation, Assistant to Counsel and the Project Assistant, and were observed by a small in-person audience of which we were a part, as well as being streamed online to the public, with the link available on the Tribunal website. The Tribunal was open to the public, so anyone could attend, and many of the witness statements were also posted on the website (<https://uyghurtribunal.com/statements/>), some of which were anonymised. This meant that the proceedings were highly visible, including to the Chinese State, which greatly increased the risks and dangers to those giving testimony and their families. Counsel, the Legal Adviser and the Head of Research and Investigation in turn presented each witness and asked initial questions based on the written testimonies provided by each of the witnesses. Each Jury member had been allocated a witness for subsequent questioning, and others could ask follow-up questions. We joined the audience listening and bearing witness to all those participating in the proceedings to enable us to connect with anyone if they requested time to talk afterwards. It was arranged that tribunal support staff would alert us when witnesses became upset following their testimonies and requested a meeting. One could sense the heightened tension in the room. Each personal witness conveyed the momentousness of the occasion, the importance and the wish to do this for themselves and for their community. We found it profoundly moving to listen to individuals describing the most horrendous experiences of both physical and emotional torture and felt uncannily connected across time to distant historical trials, particularly to the Nuremberg Trials.

The giving of testimonies

Teju Cole (2021) draws a distinction between the conventions of raising awareness and the more dangerous work of bearing witness. It was extremely dangerous work for those giving personal evidence here. It was really brought home to us how very brave these witnesses were when we learned from them details of the danger to themselves and their family members. Merely leaving the

country had put these individuals' family members at home in danger, at risk of being arrested and detained without charge. Their giving testimony acutely increased such consequences and worse. One witness told us after presenting their testimony, "I'm sacrificing myself. I know I'll be killed for talking but I must for the sake of our community". Another witness was racked with guilt when he heard that his cousin, who was in a camp in China, had died seemingly because of his giving testimony. Two of the witnesses who had attended the Tribunal in person made the decision not to return to China and try to seek asylum in the UK because they felt it was too dangerous to return home. Another man said he had to return to his home region and face the consequences, because he knew his mother would be made a target if he did not return and he would not be able to live with the guilt of this. We had never experienced first-hand such personal courage and sacrifice for the sake of the community's fight for justice, and which we wanted to honour with them. Some felt they had to resist, whatever the cost. A Han Chinese policeman who had fled China having been so horrified at what was happening and what he was being asked to do spoke about how he now lives in fear for his life. One Uyghur woman who had testified that her womb had been removed told us "I am dead already. I just stay alive to get justice". Alongside their testimonies themselves, this detail of the risks of witnessing profoundly brought home the level of persecution the Uyghurs were experiencing and it was challenging for us to appreciate what it was like living in conditions of such extreme oppression. In our listening and in our talking after their giving testimony we explicitly bore witness to their courage.

We want to communicate something of the scale of atrocities which were presented to the Tribunal despite how challenging these are to take in. One of the researchers presenting evidence described what the Chinese state was doing as "cultural genocide" and included such actions as: Uyghurs being forced to eat pork and drink alcohol against Islamic tradition; Arabic script being removed from public places; the destruction of mosques and Islamic shrines; Han Chinese cadres placed in Uyghur homes to monitor families; forced marriages of Uyghur women to Han Chinese men; Uyghur women made to remove their hijabs and dance for tourists visiting the region; forced sterilizations of Uyghur women; Uyghur people sent to forced labour camps and their children sent away to Mandarin only speaking boarding schools; and for those Uyghur people who resisted, internment camps where people are raped and tortured. A Uyghur woman giving a personal testimony online described how she had returned home to *Xinjiang* from abroad after having had triplets so that her mother could help her with them. She was detained at the border and was kept for 3 months in detention while her babies who she was breastfeeding were taken from her. Only two of her babies were returned to her. The third had died and the other two had developmental difficulties. Throughout her testimony she was extremely distraught and angry. We spoke with her following her testimony to continue to validate her experience and honour her willingness to testify.

For those giving evidence, it appeared to be a profoundly significant experience. David Denborough (2005) offers some explanation where he suggests that creating a record of abuses has several functions. It is a way of getting social acknowledgement and recognition of the injustices done; it can have a positive impact on those giving evidence and raises awareness; and it offers the chance to create a community of resistance. The Tribunal was an opportunity to gain recognition of the injustices and we also witnessed the creation of the community of resistance as the Uyghur witnesses listened to and supported each other.

A drawback for our ability to offer support was that we had no opportunity to be involved in preparing people for the process of giving testimony. In court settings there have traditionally been constraints

around helping to ‘prepare a witness for trial’ to avoid the allegations of ‘coaching’ but there are many ways to prepare those giving testimony in relation to the processes involved (Pinsent-Masons 2021) and we have thought this would be something to which we could usefully contribute. Nor was there a way to offer a follow up with witnesses after the end of the tribunal process which would have required involvement of interpreters and confidential internet connections. Because the idea of psychological support in the Tribunal context was a new one we and the Tribunal members were negotiating our role as we went along.

Our systemic positioning

We found it very challenging to listen to the excruciating details of individual experiences and to the alarming research findings. Listening entailed staying present with the testimonies being presented that were deeply shocking, anger arousing, frightening and at times difficult to believe. Our systemic training did enable our listening at multiple levels and across context – to the content and process of the giving of evidence, alongside the ways panel members posed questions and responded to testimonies. All the panel members were giving their time voluntarily. Besides our difficulty of listening to individuals’ experiences and research findings it was also problematic for us to listen to the interrogative style of questioning of some of the panel, and their apparent lack of response to the testimonies given. We were struck by the ways in which discourses from court proceedings concerning cross examination were drawn on. Some panel members gave little acknowledgement after hearing a detailed account of a physical torture, going straight on to their next question. We wondered what ideas the panel held about how to perform being a Jury member, of what it means to “be neutral”, a belief perhaps that showing any acknowledgement or human response would be prejudicial? Some of the questions posed almost seemed to imply that individuals could have resisted, possibly underpinned by ideas that a Tribunal needed to probe and test these accounts to enable them to be accepted as valid. However, we learned from several witnesses that this was not how they were experienced. Of course, testimonies were given of acts of resistance and of excruciating punishments, and we heard individuals talk of how tortured they still feel from wishing to prevent others being tortured and having not felt able to do so. In discussion with other supporters to the Tribunal, we contributed to composing feedback for the panel delivered to them at the end of the first day to invite them to reflect on the ways they asked questions and acknowledged evidence. We proposed that thanking individuals for their evidence and acknowledging the painful experiences they were describing were simple gestures panel members could adopt which would make a considerable difference to the witnesses without compromising neutrality. In the following days we could see that panel members were responding differently to these traumatic testimonies in this context. Ideas which the Jury members seemed to hold about what they themselves should be able to manage however were more difficult to challenge. Those panel members who worried that they may have been unhelpful or were concerned that they were not doing their best for this community who had suffered so much, felt they should just get on with it rather than allow themselves to take up a space we offered to acknowledge that these processes were upsetting, and could be helpfully reflected on. This mirrored the legal system more broadly which has been slow to take on board the effects of the work on the mental health of legal professionals (Fleck and Francis, 2021; Hickman, 2014; Hickman, 2022)

We met witnesses and their supporters prior to their giving testimony and said we were available to

meet anyone individually should they wish to do so following their presentation to the Tribunal to reflect on any aspect of the process. We had been allocated two small side rooms where we met with witnesses when they themselves asked or their supporters suggested it when witnesses became distressed following their presentations. Other Uyghur individuals who were present would always offer to interpret and we were able to also draw on the services of trained interpreters. These were mainly one-off meetings although a few people wanted to meet again during the four-day hearings. We also spent time chatting informally with witnesses, supporters, Tribunal workers over coffee and lunch breaks for people to get to know us and where we could also briefly acknowledge the power of the testimonies we had heard, and to check in briefly and remind others we were available for a reflective space should anyone wish this. Over the two four-day periods the Tribunal was held, the Uyghur community seemed to acknowledge us as a steady presence listening alongside them, greeting us when we arrived in the morning and acknowledging us both inside and outside the building.

David Denborough (2005) in his work about giving testimony highlights the importance of speaking and being heard as an act of resistance and healing. What are we doing when we witness? There were many levels of witnessing involved in the Tribunal: those who were bearing witness to the Tribunal, those of us witnessing their witnessing. Witnessing is not a neutral act. The way that we did this and the context in which it took place invited different responses in the people who were giving accounts of their experience. Witnessing can serve different functions:

Acknowledging injustice. We often started by acknowledging the power of the person's testimony and what they had suffered. There is a need to tell what had happened and have this recognised by others (Hughes, 2018). For example, one woman who had been repeatedly raped in an internment camp was distressed that she had not been able to give a full enough account to the Tribunal and wanted us to hear what she felt she had missed out. How we respond to accounts of injustice is important. Kaethe Weingarten (2003) talks about the importance of "compassionate witnessing" where we must stay emotionally present whilst acknowledging painful losses, and that staying with the difficult feelings of emotion and grief is important to counter the isolating effects of trauma and abuse. We made space to respond to the individuals with whom we met in this way. At the end of the Tribunal, the judgement delivered was a response to all who had given testimonies.

Being an "imperfect ally" (Reynolds, 2012). It was difficult offering support in this context as our sense of impotence threatened to overwhelm us. But this is where ideas of imperfect allyship (Reynolds, 2012) were helpful. We could at least demonstrate that we were standing alongside people and our physical presence in the audience over the eight days of the Tribunal itself seemed to carry that message. Acting as allies across our differences of power and privilege highlights further the structures of social injustice, and constructs being an ally as a sign of privilege. As Vikki Reynolds poses the question, how were we going to "walk the talk", how to hold responsibility for action in relation to what we had heard?

Witnessing resistance to abuse. Allan Wade (1997) describes how people can be helped to identify "acts of living" – small actions which represent significant moments of resistance to abuse. In the case of those giving testimony, their actions were large and public, but there would also be a multitude of minor actions which signal their ongoing resistance to the injustice they have been subjected to. This included having focused on remembering details which they were now able to recount, ways in which they had talked to themselves to keep going, as well as looking after others at the Tribunal.

Holding reasonable hope (Weingarten, 2010). We needed to be mindful that feelings of hopelessness and despair signalled what had been violated and needed recognising and acknowledging - and as Tiffany Sostar (2018) warned, not to move away from this too quickly. Yet doing reasonable hope for another can be a way to accompany and witness someone's traumatic account, holding on to the idea that their testimony could make a difference to the judgement the Tribunal would make, and that the judgement could make a difference in the world.

Witnessing preferred versions of self: Talking with people about their preferred accounts of self and tracing the social history of these (Blackburn, 2010) was another way of witnessing. Most movingly there was talk about individuals' values and how they had held them dear and what this said about them and meant to their community. This felt particularly important in the context of the "cultural genocide" that was taking place where the identity and culture of the Uyghur people were being systematically erased by the Chinese state. Denborough (2005) describes how as therapists we can use narrative practices to connect people to their hopes and values for living and map the history of these to facilitate the person's connections with others who have supported the development of their values and identity. In our conversations with both Uyghurs and researchers, we asked about the values that motivated people to present to the Tribunal and what these said about what was important to them (White, 2005). For example, one man felt overwhelmed with guilt about the harm that had come to family members because of his activism. When asked what message he would want to give to his three children, he responded, "Keep trying and never give up". He then went on to talk about how this value showed in many different parts of his life and had been a guiding principle for him. One witness who had earlier given testimony in the most dignified way, began to experience considerable distress towards the end of the day and his Uyghur companions suggested he talk with us. He described that he had been overcome by a rage which he had thought that he had managed to leave behind in his life, but giving testimony had re-evoked these powerful feelings which he now feared he had to live with again. He was now regretting that he had agreed to give evidence and was extremely distressed. In our conversation we said we had heard his powerful testimony earlier and asked why he had thought it was important to him to give evidence. He talked with us about wishing to do this for himself and his community. Family members had died in detention. We asked him what he thought his father would say about his agreeing to be a witness and without hesitation he answered that his father would have been very proud. Eliciting the meaning of his giving testimony strengthened his sense of relationships, the link to his own and his community's fight for social justice, and the values they held in common and evoked the approval by and solidarity with his father. We discussed his hope for the outcome of the tribunal and the idea that he had contributed to make a difference.

Witnessing as a reflective space to honour the witnessing. We offered our meetings to enable a pause, a way for personal witnesses to ground themselves following the heightened emotionality and tension involved in presenting to the Tribunal and all that it evoked. Perhaps our witnessing in this space was able to offer a transition back into everyday life which in any case remained overshadowed by their experiences and those of their community.

Other witnesses' experiences of giving evidence encompassed some excruciating contradictions: its importance, the felt responsibility to themselves and their communities to make visible what had happened and was happening, counterposed with the dangers of doing so and more starkly poignant the dangers for their family members. Indeed, some witnesses and interpreters needed to remain unseen. Not all family members at home supported their decision. Individuals also had to face the fact

that once embarked on the journey of bearing witness there was no turning back. In the words of one man we spoke with, "Once you speak out, there is never a way back. It affects your whole family. Resistance has consequences." For some, they had to live with family members' anger as well as the thought that they might have contributed to their family members' detention and even deaths. And yet the value of doing so was applauded by those from the Uyghur community who were present at the Tribunal, providing support and "compassionate witnessing" to the witnessing. Many testimonies resonated strongly with the Uyghur audience and took a toll on these observers, and particularly on the interpreters who had to embody the words they translated. Kaethe Weingarten (2003) identified that compassionate witnessing also helpfully reactivates the capacity to witness oneself, and we were witnessing a community "thickening" of stories through the experience of doing this with others (Denborough, 2008, 2021) which itself has an interventive impact. Michael Ungar's (2012) research has highlighted how resilience is relational, is a multi-systemic concept, an interactional process between individuals and also with their environments and how important therefore it is to ground resilience in community. The focus on resilience moves the focus away from the language of deficit and damage and enables the accessing of positive versions of self, relationship and community. Bringing forth moments of resistance, hopes, desires, commitments and connections in conversation or exchange with others builds, thickens, honours and confirms resilience.

Complexities arose for individuals as memories were evoked by hearing others' testimonies. One person asked to speak to us as he had been reminded of a very troubling experience when he had been asked to carry the bag of organs following an organ harvesting operation and felt haunted that he had somehow "taken part" and even worse had not felt anything at all. An exploration of his powerless position and ways in which we can "cut off" from feelings as a survival strategy enabled different meanings to be considered.

The need to tell one's story, to recount all the details, and the desire for acknowledgement of the atrocities and for accountability are very powerful elements to giving testimony. Chinese authorities had declined the invitation of the Tribunal to take part and released statements labelling it a "kangaroo court" and the witnesses as unreliable persons with mental illness histories or even actors. One witness who asked for a meeting with us had become very distressed by the Chinese authorities' response to her personal testimony in which they set out to undermine her credibility. We spoke together about what she had imagined their response would be, and who she thought the tribunal members would believe. She did think that they would believe her. This connected her again to the reasons why she had given her testimony for herself and for her community.

When one of the presenters of a research report asked to meet with us we learned how these carried the same weight of responsibility for the presenter with accompanying anxiety about whether they would do justice to their research team's work as so much depended on this. We discussed with one presenter who was due to give a further presentation on ways they could ground themselves prior to and during their presentation, focusing on their breathing, asking panel members to re-phrase their questions, and giving themselves time to think of how to respond well. They went on to give a clear and articulate account and dealt well with the panel questions and felt they really had done justice to their research.

We also witnessed each other's witnessing. The accounts to which we were listening were the most extreme we have ever experienced and yet there were resonances with our work together in Calais - state violence, stark power inequalities, powerlessness and intolerable living conditions, managing

our privilege, which we drew on and we had built trust over time to be able to reflect together at moments throughout the days and at the end of each day. The evocation of second world war genocide (the Holocaust) and other atrocities (Japanese prisoner of war camps) was excruciatingly painful as it brought the experiences very near. And yet our ability to be able to offer some words which made small differences in the face of extreme distress and to be privileged to witness a community standing together in the face of genocide enabled us to value the experience profoundly and wish to develop this kind of work further.

The delivering of the judgement

On December 9th 2021, the Uyghur Tribunal delivered its judgement.

Sir Geoffrey Nice noted that Article 1 of the Genocide Convention of 1948 laid out a duty to act when genocide has been proven, and that a disinclination to act has meant that the allegations of genocide had to date not been taken to court. As he stated, in the judgement this is a matter which would be more appropriate being dealt with by governments or international organisations but “governments have no courage to do such things; neither does the UN where a powerful state is involved” (p57) and is the reason why the People’s Tribunal found it a necessity to assess the allegations which remained unresolved. He also wanted to make it clear that the tribunal had not come with negative assumptions about the People’s Republic of China and that it held respect for the ways in which it is doing good for its people. He then summed up the written and oral witness evidence the Tribunal had considered reliable and had applied the highest bar of proof - “proof beyond reasonable doubt” - in relation to the criteria for genocide and crimes against humanity.

The Tribunal made the following findings of crimes against humanity, all “proven beyond reasonable doubt”: deportation or forcible transfer of population; imprisonment or severe deprivation of physical liberty; torture; rape and enforced sterilisation and which may include other forms of sexual violence; persecution; enforced disappearance of persons; other inhumane acts. Due to the public discrimination of the Uyghurs, perpetrators knew their acts were part of the widespread systematic attack against the Uyghur part of the population.

In relation to the Genocide Convention, the Tribunal finds it “incontrovertible that the Uyghurs are a distinct ethnic, racial and religious group and as such can be defined positively and as a protected group for the purposes of the Genocide Convention.” (p53). The Tribunal then considered whether there is evidence establishing any or all of the five prohibited acts, necessary for proof of genocide, and on the basis of evidence heard in public, “the Tribunal is satisfied beyond reasonable doubt that the PRC, by the imposition of measures to prevent births intended to destroy a significant part of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang as such, has committed genocide.” (p57)

Witnesses’ testimonies had been acknowledged and validated and the Tribunal found accountability for genocide. “The Tribunal is satisfied that President Xi Jinping, Chen Quanguo, the Chinese Communist Party Committee Secretary of Xinjiang, and other very senior officials in the People’s Republic of China and the Chinese Communist Party bear primary responsibility for acts that have occurred in Xinjiang.” This was a profoundly significant finding for those who bore witness and the Uyghur people as a whole. The judgement was received in concentrated silence. At the end there was a palpable sense of relief at the outcome. Witnesses and Uyghur community members and supporters

hugged, tears and smiles. A step taken, something had been heard, recognized, validated. It is just one step on the road to justice and that struggle is ongoing. This now opens a way and there are hopes that countries will take these findings forward to court.

Conclusion

Where does that leave us as witnesses?

The Chair ended the judgement by stating “From the needless suffering of fellow citizens anywhere in the world it can never be right to look away”. We, British systemic therapists, were not in the danger facing those giving testimony in attending the Tribunal, a stark example of power inequalities within the processes, and were extremely moved by many witnesses’ fear but who testified anyway for themselves and for their community. Listening to accounts of atrocities is an experience that changes you. We cannot not know this now, and now that we know, we feel responsible. There is ongoing trauma in the Uyghur communities in *Xinjiang* and their diaspora. This bearing witness has taken place in the context of intimidation, threat and actions. Trauma and abuse are not in the past.

This experience contributes to our ever stronger belief that all systemic practice is a political act and we all need to decide which politics we will enact and how we want to use our systemic ways. Just as “we cannot not communicate”, we cannot not communicate our morally informed positions and principles when we practice systemically. We have been aware of the dilemma that Kaethe Weingarten (2000, p. 393) talks about – how to convey what we have heard as witnesses without exploiting or betraying those who are telling their account, when the price of speaking out is so very high. The witnesses we spoke with had already made their testimonies public. Our attempt here has been both to draw attention to their testimonies and to highlight the cost of their doing so, and to elaborate some of the ways in which we attempted to offer support witnessing in the process of the Tribunal and hope we may inspire others to take up other opportunities. People lost their lives as a result of relatives speaking out at the tribunal. Was this a price worth paying? It will depend on whether countries act on the finding of the Tribunal and whether citizens will insist that they do so.

This is of course not the only context in which atrocities are occurring, we are all very aware that atrocities are being committed in Ukraine, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Yemen, Palestine... many other parts of the world as we write, nor the only context in which systemic support and imperfect allyship could be offered to those trying to bear witness. As a result of the 1939-45 genocides where the world did not act to prevent those deaths, the Geneva Convention on Human Rights was set up with the requirement that countries should intervene if Crimes of Genocide are proven. Sir Geoffrey Nice is currently chairing a group of lawyers, the Yazidi Justice Committee, who are aiming to prosecute three countries for failing to prevent the Yazidi genocide because “states have a responsibility to prevent, prosecute and punish the crime of genocide.” (Wintour 2022). But still countries watch. It is left to courageous individuals who stand up to power as the Uyghurs have done at this Tribunal.

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