

**I Don't Want You to 'Believe' Me.
I Want You to Listen.**

**I fear that the more I tell you, the less you will understand
who I am.**

Agnes Callard

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I am not a private person — quite the opposite — but I do have two secrets. The first concerns some Bad Events that happened to me long ago (yes, it's the sort of thing you are thinking of), and the second is an unrelated Fact about my neurological makeup.

Let me be clear: I am not ashamed of either of these things. Keeping them secret creates, in me, an uncomfortable feeling, *as though* I were hiding something, *as though* I were ashamed, and that bugs me all the time, like a scratchy tag in my clothing. But I can't tell you what The Fact is, because you won't believe me; and I can't tell you about The Events, because you will.

I have barely told you anything about The Events, but I suspect that you have already started believing. You want to be someone who believes women; you see this as the belief-challenge you have been waiting for; you want to rise to it. When I first told a therapist about The Events, she said: "Of course. In retrospect it makes perfect sense of so many things ..."

Later she apologized for this as therapeutic overreach. Even therapists can't help themselves — they are off to the races, believing and believing. On this topic, so much gets packaged into "being believed" that I fear the more I tell you, the less you will understand me.

I don't want you to think you know the meaning of The Events; I don't want to be classified as damaged; I don't want you to feel good about yourself for believing me; I don't want you to feel sorry for me; and most of all, I don't want you to praise my courage for "coming forward" or for "surviving." The prospect of receiving praise or honor for this revelation fills me with rage — when I imagine your admiration, I immediately imagine throwing it back in your face.

The Fact I'd like to tell you has to do with a difference between how we — you and I — think. But to get specific about this difference, I have to use a word you associate with people who don't talk, who can't take care of themselves, whose inner lives seem utterly obscure to you, people who harm themselves, people you struggle to see as human, people whose existence you see as a tragedy.

And you will find this comparison preposterous. You will tell me I shouldn't use "that word," you will helpfully offer me milder alternatives. You might acknowledge that I'm "quirky" or "idiosyncratic" — in a good way! — and that a few of those quirks may superficially resemble *those people*. But I have a professional career, a family. I *can't* be like them. (Ask yourself: how much knowledge would you need, really, to be certain of this?)

You might be willing to budge a little if you could hear it from some medical professionals — though one might not be enough. You'd need a second and third opinion. Notice that if I told you I had cancer or diabetes or depression, or for that matter that I was left-handed, you would not insist on seeing my papers. You would not be inclined to think I was faking my left-handedness by having trained myself to use my left hand; or that I resembled depressed people only "in some respects."

In the case of The Events, you are eager to assign victim status to me; in the case of The Fact, you are wary of assigning it to me. For you, there is only one question: how much suffering can she legitimately lay claim to?

You are so busy trying to answer this question — trying to serve as judge in the pain/suffering/disadvantage Olympics — that you cannot hear anything I am trying to tell you. And that means I can't talk to you. No one can sincerely assert words whose meaning she knows will be garbled by the lexicon of her interlocutor. I don't want privacy, but you've forced it onto me.

You might wonder why I have to tell *you* these things. Couldn't I find a supportive community of people who endured similar Events, and wouldn't I be believed by other Fact-Bearers? Yes, and individual connections of this kind are very valuable, but at the group level this kind of support has never worked for me.

Being surrounded by people who are supposedly like me inevitably leads me to feel maximally "different." Probably my failure to benefit from such communities is a sign that I have not suffered so much, and deserve very little victim credit. So be it!

Solidarity is not my thing, openness is. It is a consequence of The Fact, for me, that I lean toward transparency in all contexts: I have to consciously prevent myself from oversharing (even more than I do), and I am honest from necessity rather than virtue.

There is a reason for all of this, which is that I am bad — really bad, you cannot imagine how bad — at figuring things out on my own. If I take too many steps in reasoning without the intervention of another person, I go very far wrong. So I have accustomed myself to reasoning in public as much as I can, to making sure to expose my mistakes to correction.

I know that I don't know what corner assistance might come from. I don't want to confide in a select group of people who grumble among themselves about how you misunderstand "us." I want to talk to you, any and all of you, freely, so you can help me stop misunderstanding myself.

The truth is that I don't know the meaning of The Events, for my life. Isn't it at least possible that they simply don't have any meaning? Or maybe the meaning will change once I am allowed to speak them out loud? Perhaps I really am scarred for life, but do we have to assume that from the outset?

If I could talk it through, I might have a hope of figuring this out. Because that is mostly how I figure out all the difficult problems of my life: I talk about them to whoever is available, whenever the problems seem relevant to something else I am thinking about; I listen; I rethink; I write; I circle back and write something else; over and over again; and over time I develop a stable picture.

With The Events, I am at sea. For so long I did not even allow myself to speak them to myself. Now that I can, it chafes at me that you have decided that if I want to talk about them with you, I have to follow your rules, and let you trample all over me. Perhaps more people who have experienced Events would talk about them with you if they thought you would do less "believing" and more listening.

Factwise, this is what I want to know: what, if anything, ties together the “superficial” differences in how I dress, how I talk, how my mind jumps around, my repetitive movements, my sensitivities, the kinds of patterns I see and the kinds I miss, my obsessions, my literal-mindedness, my odd oscillations between needing to be alone and needing to be with others, between striking you as charming and coming off as unbearable. Why do I struggle so much to understand which emotion I am feeling? Why am I so bad at predicting what you will find offensive?

The Fact makes me part of a group of people whose boundaries are amorphous; we do not all recognize one another, and even when we do, we are not sure what we have in common. You would like to manage this situation in a very specific way: First, carve off what you take to be the “most severe cases,” and find a cure that prevents any more of them from arising.

Second, assimilate the rest — people like me — as “normal,” or as normal enough, so long as you are sufficiently tolerant and accommodating. But I suspect all the tolerance and accommodation in the world won’t make me normal. Do we have to pretend that I am? Is that the condition on which you are willing to engage with me? And couldn’t a group of people have something in common even if “degree of suffering” isn’t that thing?

I could use your help — not your support, not your approval, not your reassurance but your *help* as an open and thoughtful audience for these difficult questions. But you won’t help me, because you won’t listen to what I’m trying to say, because all you care about is how much victim status I deserve. You are really letting me down.

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