

Witnessing murder

By [David Henson](#)

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With unprecedented intimacy and frequency, Americans are becoming witnesses to murder.

With the videos of beheadings and the footage of black people being murdered by police, we've begun watching real people die violently in real time, often from the palm of our hands or from the screens in our laps. Most recently, we streamed the disturbing body camera footage of Samuel DuBose's murder on our phones. We watched video of Tamir Rice's death, transforming untold scores of people surfing social media into witnesses of the real-life murder of a child. We saw in unedited and gruesome detail the beheadings of innocents at the hands of extremists.

By now, almost all of us are witnesses to a murder. Many of us have seen more than one murder. Some of us have watched dozens.

Take a moment and think about the past year.

How many people have you watched be murdered?

How many people have you watched die violently?

The numbers can be staggering. While some say they refuse to watch any of the videos, many I spoke with say they have watched at least three to five people murdered this year. Still more count ten, twenty, or higher.

What's troubling, though, is how little reflection I've seen people of faith give this development. While there is plenty of concern about fictional violence in the media, less has been said about the real-life violence people now have access to at the tips of their fingers.

Imagine for a moment one of your friends, parishioners, or fellow church members witnessed a violent murder. Now imagine they had witnessed a half-dozen or more murders in the span of a year. You would be rightfully concerned about their emotional well-being, wanting to provide them as much spiritual care as possible,

visiting with them, listening to them, and praying with them. You might even encourage them to seek counseling.

Given increasing ubiquity and frequency of these videos, it is time to start thinking seriously about and discussing honestly the [psychological trauma](#) that can come from watching people be murdered. Now, before dismissing this post as one giant experiment in concern trolling, even researchers and scientific [studies suggest](#) that watching these kinds of videos can cause many [of the same symptoms we see in people with post-traumatic stress disorder](#). In fact, one study found that [repeated exposure to videos and stories](#) in the media of a [traumatic event like the Boston Marathon Bombing](#) can cause more lasting psychological trauma than the people in the community where the tragic events took place.

Now, many religious folks might prefer to debate whether we should watch these videos. Some might say it desensitizes us to violence. Others will say it sensitizes us to ongoing violence and injustice we have previously been ignoring. But I'm honestly more interested in the effects of watching than the ethics. As people of faith, we don't need a prescriptive response but a pastoral one. These videos aren't thought experiments in a classroom, they are real life and real violence.

And these videos aren't going anywhere either. People aren't going to stop watching them. They are part of our new normal. In fact, with the rise in body cameras for police officers, we will likely see more not less of them. Not only are these kinds of videos poised to become more frequently and more readily available in the future, but there may well be increasing pressure to watch them as they fill social media.

So instead of telling people to watch or not to watch these kinds of videos, I think we would be better off helping each other make healthy, informed choices and provide support to those who are emotionally raw because of these videos.

As religious people, we can remind people that the decision to watch videos of murder is a serious one. Not because it is inherently right or wrong but because it *does* affect us psychologically and emotionally. It's is not the same as clicking on a funny cat video on Facebook. It is *not* entertainment, something to view to while away some free time.

By clicking on one of these videos, we are consciously choosing to watch a person be murdered when we do not have to. Interrogate our reasons for doing so, if we haven't already. Encourage people to take the time to pray or meditate about

whether to become witnesses to (another) murder. And help them be prepared for what it might do to them emotionally or spiritually.

Watching the traumatic death of someone will leave a mark on a person as well. If choosing to watch these videos, be aware of the symptoms of secondary or vicarious psychological trauma. Consider talking to a counselor, a pastor, spiritual director, or a psychiatrist, especially taking into consideration the cumulative nature of all these videos over the past year. Find (or *offer if you are a religious leader!*) a private support group to process emotionally in a safe space.

In other words, before choosing to watch these videos, ask how we will care for ourselves, both in the short-term and long. Ask ourselves what we will do with the images we consume of someone's death. And if we don't have good answers or haven't even thought about it at all, then perhaps we should reconsider clicking play for the moment.

It is a choice to become a witness to murder. No one has to watch these videos to be fully informed and fully outraged by it all.

But even if we are among those who don't chose to watch these videos, we must be aware that many, many people are choosing to watch. Many are choosing to be witnesses to violent murder and executions. And many of them might be or will be traumatized by it.

So look around your social media feeds and timelines, your communities and your cities, your family and your friends, and your church and in your pews. Consider for a moment just how many witnesses to murder you probably know. Think about the emotional and spiritual burden of witnessing the violent death of another human. Those images and the feelings associated with them just don't go away.

How can we respond in a more healthy way to people who have experienced trauma?

How can we take seriously the trauma of being murder witnesses?

How should the church respond to the trauma so many are experiencing from these videos?

I've long been convinced that the church needs to be a place that calls people to protest and prophetic action on issues like police violence and violence against

people of color. But I'm becoming more and more convinced that even as it calls for action the church also needs to be a deeply pastoral place of healing, restoration, and support for the trauma and emotional damage that might come with such prophetic action. In fact, offering a pastoral place for processing the effects of witnessing the videos of these murders might actually open up spaces to encourage constructive and prophetic responses in ways simply preaching and teaching on police violence can't.

Without a doubt, the church needs to be forming more than protestors, activists, and accomplices.

Maybe, in the face of witnessing such trauma, it also needs to be forming chaplains and building safe spaces as well.

Because with unprecedented frequency and intimacy, Americans are becoming mass witnesses to murder.

And, by and large, we aren't even talking about it.

Originally posted at [Henson's blog](#)