

The Authentic Encounter with Beth Benedix

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Christiane Wisehart, producer: I'm Christiane Wisehart. And this is Examining Ethics, brought to you by the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

On today's episode, we're returning to my interview with the religious studies and world literature scholar Beth Benedix. In her book *Ghost Writer*, she tells the story of a Holocaust survivor named Joe Koenig, whose testimony forms the foundation of her work. On the last episode, we talked through the ethics of her writing process--what it means to take the facts of someone else's life and create a story. On this show, we're diving into the ethics of encounter--of people coming face to face with one another in the space of a story.

Beth Benedix: Joe looked to be a man completely at home in the story he'd lived and others wanted him to tell. As our meetings went on, it became clear to me that he was so at home that sometimes he glossed right over the details in his telling, reluctant to mind them for deeper meaning, resisting his own reflections. And I, longing for a coherent narrative that I could give his family, for catharsis and epiphany for my own sake, would try to pin those details down, would try to coax meaning and lessons and clarity from them. Little did I know as I stood with Joe at this window thinking vaguely of my own father that my desire for clarity was a defensive tool, a posture I clung to, to protect myself from seeing all that was really there beyond and behind the details. Joe grinned, put his arm around me, guided me to the table, "All right kid," he said. "Let's get cracking."

Christiane: Stay tuned for all of that and more on today's episode of Examining Ethics.

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Christiane: In the first part of Beth Benedix's book *Ghost Writer*, she tells the story of Holocaust survivor and all-around badass Joseph Koenig. As a teenager, Joe lived in a Jewish ghetto in Poland during World War II. He faced death again and again, and each time, made a choice that would ultimately save his life. In the rest of the book Beth interrogates her process and the ethics of trying to tell someone else's story. We covered some of the ethical issues of storytelling in episode 38. Today, we're going to dive into a sort of parallel topic: the ethics of encounter. Beth's book is a story about telling a story, but it's also a story about encounters: Joe Koenig's brushes with death, his experience of the Holocaust; Beth's meetings with Joe; Beth's repeated encounters with Joe's taped testimony and finally, my encounter with this work.

These encounters are important to draw out, because they highlight the ways in which our behavior, our lives are not isolated practices in perfection. If we have a brush (or multiple brushes) with evil, that's going to shape the way we think about the world, and the way we see ourselves. If a writer meets her subject, that's going to affect the way she writes about him.

Beth met Joe and his family in the fall of 2008. And from their very first encounter, Beth knew there was something special about Joe and his story, something she wanted the rest of the world to see.

Beth Benedix: From the very beginning, the very first time I saw him, I just-- I felt very connected to him. It only became clear to me later, I think the longer we spent time together that he really felt like family to me. He was just so interesting. He has this twinkle in his eyes that to me, it was this puzzle that needed to be unraveled -- like how could a man who went through everything that he went through smile like that? [laughs] And I was captivated by him, and I wanted to be able to really, really capture him as well as I could.

Christiane: Meeting Joe was crucial to Beth, because it was in the space of their time together that his story began to come alive. Their conversation became more than an interview: it was an encounter. This idea that encounter is important runs through the work of a writer Beth studied for years before she ever met Joe. Beth had always felt drawn to Paul Celan, a Holocaust survivor and poet. I asked her to talk about the connection between her project on Joe's story and Celan's poetry.

Beth Benedix: I think whatever it was that was pulling me towards Paul Celan years and years and years ago, whatever it was that sort of captivated me about the ambiguities that he was trying to give voice too, also that's what captivated me about Joe. There's something in me that made me resonate with Celan, which gave me a framework that really helped me to understand Joe. It feels like a gift to me that I was able to have these two people come into my life in this way, that now they've been kind of tied together in my own heart.

{contemplative music}

This is a passage from Paul Celan's poem, "Sprich Auch Du" (Speak You Also).

"Speak you also.
 Speak as the last one have your say.
 Speak, but leave yes and no unsplit. [slight tearing up]
 Give your speech also this meaning.
 Give it its shadows."

All of the people that I used to speak about in an academic way have really kind of returned as humans. Paul Celan is one of them for me. He was a Holocaust survivor, very, very sad story. He ended up committing suicide. In this poem, it just captures for me everything. It's got to be about the sort of the ambiguities, the silent spaces. He talks about poetry as being en route. This is just so beautiful. It makes me -- This sort of sense that everything has to be this authentic encounter. He thought about his

own poetry very much in terms of an ethical obligation to facilitate that, headed towards that encounter. He really is looming over everything. At the end of the book, I finally articulate for myself what it was about that so-called academic material that's always lived and now lives even more strongly for me because it lives through Joe.

Christiane: I've been thinking about this poem a lot lately. When I first read it in Beth's book, I have to be honest: I didn't really understand it, or why it was so meaningful to her. And even after our interview, I had a gut feeling that it was important, but I couldn't figure out why, or what it had to do with ethics. The more I let it roll around in my brain, and the more I listened and re-listened to Beth talking about it, the more I was able to make sense of it through my own framework. It made me think about my interview last summer with the philosopher Elizabeth Anderson, where we discussed moral inquiry, the process of figuring out what's right and wrong.

Elizabeth Anderson: We should think of moral inquiry as something we do practically in the world with other people, not as something that we can just figure out all by ourselves in the armchair just by thinking hard about it.

Christiane: If we're going to figure out ethics, if we're going to try and work out right and wrong, we need to do it with other people. These encounters will create ambiguity and messiness, but they might also be fertile ground for the work in progress that is morality.

As I continued to burrow deeper into Beth's work, of her interpretation of Joe's story, I realized that it wouldn't be possible without the repeated, in-person meetings between Beth and Joe. These meetings informed her writing, of course. But they also changed *her*.

Beth Benedix: Joe has schooled me in what matters. I mean, I'm really a very different person because of him. I always was a self-hating academic. I always had this sort of sense of like, this stuff that I care most about -- when it became disembodied and it became this academic exercise, it made me crazy and it made me just left with this feeling of "what the hell are we doing?" If we're not feeling this material, we're not living this material. This is not an academic exercise. But I also, you know, I'm a comparative literature person. I had a career of writing in an academic way. I carried that with me into the first part of my relationship with Joe, very much so. So much so -- and this all comes out in the book. I try to make this ... I try as much as possible to show how stupid I was, [laughs] to think that I could have possibly had any sense of credentialing when it came to this kind of story writing. The only person who has the credentials is the person who went through this thing. I think there is a conflict between the academic world and the world that Joe represents, the world of life, the world of authenticity, the world of living. And part of my evolution in writing this story was that now I get it. I don't want to live in that world anymore. I sort of changed everything in terms of the way that I teach the people I surround myself with. I live a very different life now than I lived nine years ago when this whole thing started.

Christiane: It's in these storytelling encounters where we build relationships, where we begin to care about who the storyteller is.

Christiane, in interview: I was trying to think of it from kind of ethics lens and the thing that I kept coming back to was that you are an academic, but what makes it not you speaking high

from your ivory tower is care, and I mean that in the ethics of care, care ethics sense, is that you've built a relationship with the person whose story you're telling. I'm wondering do you think that's a critical element to telling somebody else's story ethically is that element of care?

Beth Benedix: I do, very much so. Yes. I think we're here to protect each other. I'm a mother and it's very much the way I process my world. I'm a nurturer, right, somebody who wants people to not be hurting and it hurts me when I can't fix it for them. I think that's all right. I think I've gotten to the point where there's all the academics struggles that you go through when you're sort of being coached and what kind of relationship you create with your students and with the world around you. I think care is extraordinarily important and it's something that I see lacking in our world right now on a very grand scale. It's very sad to me. I want us to find a place where we can be more open and vulnerable.

Vulnerability I think is a word that comes into my head a lot when I'm thinking about what happened with Joe. It changes everything with regard to the depth of interactions that you can have with people if you make yourself vulnerable. I think most people want that kind of vulnerability. They want that kind of intimacy. They don't want to be living in this space that I feel that we're in right now -- the sort of the way we talk to one another and the way we don't care about one another. I don't think people want that. I don't think in people's hearts that's the space that they want to live in, but it requires becoming vulnerable and saying, "I don't have all the answers."

Christiane: All of this relationship-building, all of these authentic encounters give space for Joe and Beth to work through his story. But remember Paul Celan, remember "Speak You Also." Those authentic encounters between Beth and Joe reveal as much ambiguity as they do truth. Stories, for all the good they can do in helping us make sense of the frightening and chaotic world we live in, can also, sometimes, obscure the truth. Here's Beth reading a passage from *Ghost Writer* about hearing Joe's story from him.

Beth Benedix: "Joe looked to be a man completely at home in the story he'd lived and others wanted him to tell. As our meetings went on, it became clear to me that he was so at home that sometimes he glossed right over the details in his telling, reluctant to mind them for deeper meaning, resisting his own reflections. And I, longing for a coherent narrative that I could give his family, for catharsis and epiphany for my own sake, would try to pin those details down, would try to coax meaning and lessons and clarity from them. Little did I know as I stood with Joe at this window thinking vaguely of my own father that my desire for clarity was a defensive tool, a posture I clung to, to protect myself from seeing all that was really there beyond and behind the details. Joe grinned, put his arm around me, guided me to the table, 'All right kid,' he said. 'Let's get cracking.'"

Christiane: Each time Beth encounters Joe and his testimony, it's not as though the story just exists in the ether, pure, unchanged and ready to be captured on paper. The humans involved in the encounter change the testimony each time they encounter it. Joe has told this story so many times he eventually becomes numb to the details. And then there's Beth, who is bringing all of her own baggage to the telling of this story. How then, could they possibly tell a story with any grain of truth to it? This isn't an issue that's exclusive to Beth and Joe. Tim O'Brien, a Vietnam war veteran, struggled to get at the truth of what happened to him in his book *They Things They Carried*.

Beth Benedix: His way of talking about it is that there's a seemingness of what happened and there's what happened, and there's a gap between those two things. All you can do is try to approach the thing as honestly and with a sense of sincerity, brutality -- a brutal sincerity. I sort of see it as like you're circling around the thing and you're letting it sort of reveal itself to you. In my conversations with Joe, in my hearing of those recordings over and over and over and over again, it was the circling around the thing, constantly looking at it from all of these different perspectives, trying to discern the seemingness of it. Trying to discern what to distill that would best capture my understanding of his experience. But there's always that gap and so to me, it was absolutely necessary to make explicit reference to that gap.

Christiane: There's a point in Beth's telling of Joe's story where the gap between what she wanted out of the story and Joe's own telling of the story seems especially wide.

Beth Benedix: There was this one moment that really was a tug of war between Joe's family and me and the writing of the piece and it had to do with this moment in Joe's story that to me was particularly cinematic, just fascinating.

He hides in Gestapo headquarters. It's unbelievable, right? And the way he is telling me about it, he's like, "I'm going into the lion's den." It's very gripping and I could not get over the fact that that was the choice that he made as a 15-year-old. He knew. He knew that that was the next right step to take. He was always finding a way to hide in plain sight, whether it was by changing his identity, changing his name, or literally walking up the stairs in Gestapo headquarters and not - you know - not even concerned that someone would see him. So he walks up the stairs. He puts himself in this broom closet and he waits there for the rest of the day while essentially the ghetto is -- there's a huge "action," as they called them, that day. Many people are killed and he is able to escape and wait the day out.

So when I was writing that piece, the way he told me that story, it felt very quiet to me. So he's sitting in a broom closet. He's got a headache. He's got a stomachache and he is just sitting there. In his telling me that story, he never told me, "This is what I was thinking when I was sitting there." It was just this very stark, "I'm in the broom closet, my head hurts, my stomach hurts." I wrote it the first way like that. I tried to capture that sort of sense of quiet. In a conversation that I had with Joe's sons, at one point, there were all of these details that didn't make it into the first manuscript that I had written, details that were very, very important to Joe's family. There was a bike that he had, a midnight blue bicycle, that he got right on the edge of the war and he had to give it over to the police and it became for him a sort of symbol of everything that he had lost. These were details that his sons very much wanted to be included in the story. We had a conversation and I made the decision to put them into that scene where he is sitting in the broom closet and he is having this sort of flashback. I let the whole thing sort of spin out.

Christiane: It's hard to figure out what's right or wrong with this flashback. Is it acceptable to use common storytelling devices like this, especially when the story isn't your own? This question has stuck with Beth.

Beth Benedix: Did I do violence to Joe and his story by enlarging that memory for him, by making him have a thought process that he didn't actually have in his telling me of the thing.

You know, when it's on the page and it's bound and all of that, you can't undo it. It's got this kind of finality to it. For me, the seemingness had to be-- to trying to get to that, it had to be, just making the possibilities side by side present to people, explicit.

Christiane, in interview: How do you feel about that choice now?

Beth Benedix: The choice?

Christiane, in interview: To add, to manufacture that moment.

Beth Benedix: I still feel ... I do feel like it was a betrayal. But I felt it was a betrayal by both me and by Joe's family. And this was part of that tug of war too. This is something that I sort of discovered as I go back and listen and listen and listen to those tapes. In that moment, to me, the literary sort of power of that moment, was how alone he was. And it was something that I kept hearing in his story, was his sort of insistence on his being alone. Which resonated with me because of what I'm bringing to this, my own story, my own sort of sense of that in the world.

I was imposing this kind of literary trope on his story so that I could pull out every moment at which he professes his aloneness. That to me was very important. But that was my own ... That was my choice to enhance that. Just as much as his family was imposing their wishes to have certain details exist, I was imposing an arc on Joe's story. I was creating in him an archetype of aloneness. In some ways, all of it betrays the original story but there's really no way of getting back to that original story. So I think that's why to me it became so important to just fess up to all of that.

{music -- drum beat}

Christiane: We've been talking about Beth's encounter with Joe and her shaping of his story. We're going to pivot to thinking about what happens when a reader encounters this story. When I read the book for the first time, I couldn't put it down. First of all, it's just an exciting story. But I have to admit: it was also fascinating to me because I enjoy dark stories.

Christiane, in interview: There's a moral failing in -- that I consider in myself, which is that I am very attracted to true crime.

Beth Benedix: Me too.

Christiane, in interview: I love watching documentaries on Netflix about all sorts of terrible things like murder and abuse. And I don't like that about myself. I try to resist the urge to consume those things, to look at the accident on the side of the highway, but sometimes I can't. And I -- I also have felt a similar resistance to ingesting too much of Holocaust memoirs because I feel like it touches or it satisfies that urge and that doesn't feel right to me, like that ... It feels like it cheapens the whole thing and it feels like I am reading it the wrong way. I'm wondering like, how do you ingest these horrible stories in an ethical way?

Beth Benedix: Can I ask you a question? Can you articulate for yourself what it is about true crime or what it is about these memoirs that you find so compelling?

Christiane, in interview: I...There's just some drive inside of me to look darkness in the face. And I don't want to say that in too heroic a way, because I don't look darkness in the face and then decide to do something about it. I just want to look darkness in the face and I feel like that kind of... that desire doesn't feel right to me. That desire without any other kind of framework doesn't feel right to me.

Beth Benedix: I'm the same way. I'm really captivated by all of that space and I..I don't know if it is something that is to be judged as much as it is to be acknowledged, right? It's sort of the Buddhist way of watching the thoughts, you know? They happen, and to judge them doesn't get us anywhere. To be able to acknowledge them and say there's something very human about this, about this desire to see. In my view, it's something about the aberration of it all, which gets to maybe my idealistic view of human nature, is that it's an aberration. I think there's something on the other side about these Holocaust stories, these stories of survival. These are poles that work off of one another. When you can see a person who has looked that in the face and it has meant their survival or non-survival and they've been able to find a way to combat it, I think that's remarkable. It's something to be just marveled at that a person could survive.

Christiane: If we're going to look at bad things, if we have a desire to watch and see evil play out in front of us, it might be better to do that with guidance, with some sort of framework.

In Beth's book, she writes about the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC. She struggles with the way the museum frames their material. Upon entry, you get an ID card with the story of someone who experienced the Holocaust. Some of people whose stories are on the cards survived the Holocaust, but of course many didn't. It's intended to personalize the Holocaust for visitors, but throughout the book, Beth resists visiting, because she can't bear the thought of encountering this sort of exercise in person. She doesn't want to run into a group of teenagers going through this exhibit and treating it like a game. As you'll hear in this next passage, though, she changes her mind.

Beth Benedix: Because it's starting to seem to me that maybe we need places like the Holocaust Museum precisely because there are people who would storm into them in a murderous rage, precisely because there are people who deny the event that they were built to memorialize. These places bear witness to truth. They defy resistance to that bearing witness. They grant our desire to see suffering and they provide a framework to bestow that suffering with meaning.

Christiane, in interview: Do you feel like you're providing a framework for Joe's story?

Beth Benedix: Hmm. I guess I am. [laughs] I never thought of it that way. I guess I am. But I still do struggle with the idea of -- to give meaning to suffering is to potentially fall into the trap that there's a reason that the suffering happened. And I don't believe that's the case -- I believe the reason was that there were, there were horrible human beings who visited the suffering upon people. Any kind of theological framework, and there are many attempts to justify that, to me is horrendous. I'm really nervous about the idea of bestowing suffering with meaning.

Christiane: Places like the Holocaust Museum or stories like Beth's can provide a useful framework for understanding the evils of fascism. However, there's a psychic cost to hearing stories with so much darkness, and it can be tempting to simply not share the story in order to protect people from encountering so much evil. Joe himself resisted telling his story for that very reason.

Beth Benedix: He didn't want his kids to have to carry this with them. I mean, he was really, really protective, I think, of their mental health, was the way that I think he thought about it. That, for him to kind of dwell in this space, is really unhealthy psychologically. He really wanted to protect them from that. But then in a certain point, you know, it has to do with his sort of his own experiences. He had a heart attack that was really scary, and he hadn't yet told the story. I think for him that was really a moment of "There's a story here that needs to be told and my family needs to know." More than just my family, the world needs to know that other humans are capable of treating people this way.

Christiane: This is an important story, one that Beth didn't want to get wrong. And neither do I. Just like Beth, I've learned that storytelling is scary territory. You risk not only telling a bad story or producing a boring podcast, but also hurting your subject. But as much as I fear screwing up, as messy as working with other people can be, I've learned the importance of wading through the messes and ambiguities. It's only when we meet each other in the space of these stories, when we have that authentic encounter, that we can begin to sort out our values.

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If you want to know more about Beth Benedix's work, check out our show notes page at examiningethics.org, where we have links to *Ghost Writer* and some of her other scholarship.

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