



# Letters Left Unsent

J.

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By J.

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*All photographs by the author.*

## Letters Left Unsent

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## Introduction

It would have been around February 2005, while I was deployed to Sri Lanka as part of the tsunami response that the original concept for this book first began to sort of coalesce in the back of my head. Although I was more than a decade into my own career by the time of the Asian tsunamis, I still felt young and cool, and perhaps even wet-behind-the-ears. But in those coordination meetings and after hours in my then employer's team houses, I began to find myself among the oldest and most experienced in the room with increasing frequency and regularity. Somewhere between my first fledgling leap into the aid world along the Thai-Burma border in 1991, and Ampara in 2005, I'd unknowingly crossed the invisible line between aid newbie and aid veteran.

As the tsunami response wore on, I also became slowly aware of another dynamic, another drama unfolding around me: the quiet, and often only softly spoken-of saga of aid workers' personal and professional lives going pear-shaped. The tsunami response surely wasn't the first time I'd seen it, but it was the first time that it sort of hit me in the face. We did sometimes heroic things for an utterly worthy cause, but many of us were wrecks as individual human beings.

Everyone assumes that aid work is difficult work, and it is. But few people have thought deeply about what it means to *be* an aid worker, a humanitarian. Doing aid work, and being an aid worker are two distinct things. And while there is a great deal of well-established theory and practice out there on the former, there is almost nothing at all out there on the latter. The overwhelming majority of us—myself included—have had to sort of fumble our way through the aid worker life, figuring it out by trial and error, sometimes getting very lucky, other times not so much.

What I saw unfolding in Sri Lanka (and in every disaster response deployment since, and also, in retrospect, every response prior) was precisely this lack of even basic good personal life advice, playing itself out, frequently for the worse, in the lives of my colleagues and friends, and even my own life as well. The tsunami response was hard, but not as much for the awful things we saw in the early days, the smell of death that seemed to never go away, or beneficiaries rioting at distributions. It was hard because the work took its toll on the personal lives of aid workers, both expat and local, when they weren't prepared for it and as a consequence had idea of how to deal with it.

This book is a collection of short essays which represent my own thinking and reflection as I have tried to make sense myself of those difficult questions around how to *be* an aid worker, and what it means in the context of our larger personal lives. Most of everything here has been previously published, mostly (but not just) on my old blog about aid work, *Tales From the Hood*, begun shortly after I returned from the tsunami response. It was a combination of rant and reflection written first for my own catharsis, and then committed to the blogosphere, very much like letters written for no one in particular. I've taken what I consider the best of the best, edited and revised, and then put it all here in book form. The end result is a collection of thoughts and advice that I wish someone had given me back when I was first starting down the humanitarian path. This is my attempt to get across the things I wish I'd thought about, or thought about more clearly as I muddled my own way through my first ten years.

This book is not career advice. I won't give away my secrets for the perfect aid worker resume, or share any deep thoughts about whether to take that internship in Darfur. There are plenty of other books, blogs, and commentary on these things. Nevertheless, it is my sincere hope that young, and young-in-their-careers aid workers will benefit from what's here. Yes, aid work is hard, and so is being an aid worker. But at the same time, they're both immensely rewarding. Or at least they can be. I hope that these articles and blog posts, like letters from a trusted friend, might point someone in the direction of a career in aid or development work that is balanced, fulfilling, rewarding, and above all free from regret.

*--April 2014, Amman, Jordan.*

*“You try to do your best at what you’re getting paid for.”*

– Sean Penn

## Kompong Thom

It was during the first few days of a trip to Cambodia in October of 1999 that I found myself at a remote health station in Kompong Thom Province leading a small technical team comprised of a community health consultant and two expatriate colleagues, based in Phnom Penh. It was one of those clear, intense, very hot days that you sometimes see in Southeast Asia during the late rainy season. My itinerary from Washington, DC had been tiresome: layovers in Chicago and Los Angeles, and an overnight stop in Bangkok, but with not quite enough time to sleep before checking in, two hours early, for a 7:00 a.m. flight to Phnom Penh. Three days later I was still fighting 12-hour jet-lag and general fatigue. I was tired, cranky, hot, and uncomfortable. I was fixated on my need for a shower, a square meal, and a few hours of uninterrupted sleep.

A muddy, pot-hole ridden, unpaved road was the only way in to the unremarkable health station. Inside it was a typical, quasi-open-air Third World clinic. Mosquito nets covered only about half of the windows. There was electrical power to only one or two rooms, one of which housed an ancient looking refrigerator and miscellaneous lab equipment, and another housed a couple of grimy PCs, presumably for keeping records. The two inpatient wards were just long rooms, each with six or so metal beds inside. No mattresses or bed clothing, just woven straw mats.

The general ward housed an assortment of wrinkled old people with IVs and bandages. Several recently delivered women occupied the maternity ward, breast-feeding newborn infants while assorted family members looked on. They looked exhausted. Flies buzzed through the open windows, the ground behind the laboratory was covered with disposable syringes, hypodermic needles and plastic packaging. The inside of the building had that smell so common in rural clinics in Southeast Asia in those days: a combination of body odor, sterile bandages, local cooking, and floors recently mopped with river water.

The director of the health station also seemed typical. He had once, perhaps only a year or two before, been energetic and full of desire to help the people of Kompong Thom, to be a part of the reconstruction of his country. Long days had run into long months and into years and the reality of probably never being invited to an administrative post in Phnom Penh had set in. He was also tired. Tired of the long hours, tired of explaining basic hygiene to illiterate peasants, tired of never having electricity to keep the few precious vaccines cold, tired of old malfunctioning equipment, tired of insufficient medicines, tired of working day after day and month after month with no perceptible improvement of any kind. Perhaps most of all—I could tell just from looking—he was tired of Kompong Thom.

Kompong Thom and innumerable districts like it from Latin America to sub-Saharan Africa to the depressed remote regions of the Former Soviet Union to the backwaters of southern and Southeast Asia are a nasty trick played upon energetic young medical students. They have dreams. Maybe they will travel abroad for professional upgrading or possibly vacation. More often than not, however, they end up in places like Kompong Thom, far from the capital city, delivering babies in the middle of the night, dispensing ORS packets, and explaining to iodine-deficient villagers why condoms are an effective means of preventing pregnancy.

And so, as the heat of the day was only beginning to wane and the round tropical sun was only then beginning to dip towards the western horizon, and as we were only then beginning to move towards our vehicle having concluded our conversation with the tired health station director, I first saw her being carried into the health station by her mother. She was no more than four years old, emaciated (even for Cambodia in 1999), feverish, listless, lying limp in her mother's arms. She was most likely suffering from dengue fever, or possibly malaria (both were endemic there, at that time). Her mouth hung partially open, her limbs flaccid, her eyes glazed and beginning to roll up into her head. There had been patients straggling in and out of the health center the entire time that we were there, but I remember this little girl and her mother because we not only passed them on the way out the front door, but also stopped to talk with them.

We—the director of the health center and our own health technical team—stopped to ask what was wrong with the little girl. How long had she been ill, what had the mother done? She was obviously dying—her breathing was labored and she was barely able to keep her eyes open.



The doctor on our team nodded in solemn agreement that without proper hospitalization she would most likely not last through the night. The mother had no money, no means of affording transportation to Phnom Penh. She had obviously spent too long doing the wrong things to care for her sick daughter. This visit to the health station was her last resort.

It would have been only about a three-hour ride to Phnom Penh and a facility able to treat the little girl. The sacrifice required by me to tell my local counterpart and the consultant that we needed to take them to Phnom Penh that evening would have been no more than a few hours of sleep. But I was tired, hot, stinky and dying for a bucket bath and an early retreat under the mosquito net. I was hungry. We were all ready to declare the work-day over.

And in the end we simply left. We concluded our conversation, climbed back into the company white SUV and began easing back over the awful road toward town.

\* \* \*

We humanitarian workers very often give in to the temptation to overstate our own importance. We often overestimate the value and the impact and the general “goodness” or “helpfulness” of what our organizations and programs and projects bring to the lives of those we genuinely want to help. And too often we overestimate our own individual roles in making those changes happen.

Aid and development workers are notorious for being self-righteous and smug. While I do not care for those labels, I also know that there’s some basis to them. We, and I include myself, sometimes wear our genteel poverty as a badge of honor. We are not like our materialist peers in the for-profit sector. We are on the right sides of all the issues. We are making a difference. We sit in the comfort of our homes and offices, whether in suburban America, spotlessly clean Europe, or upscale neighborhoods and apartment complexes in places we call “the field,” and we dole out paltry amounts of relief into a desert of human suffering.

I do not mean to say that we must be endlessly self-critical. There’s danger in that as well. I truly believe that the work we do does accomplish good. Real, objective good. But I am challenged to remain in a state of confident humility.

We must not just sit and watch while the problems of our fellow humans go unattended. There is something called the Humanitarian Imperative. When we witness that suffering, it is important that we do something, and do it with confidence. And we must do all of this humbly, too. We must go about the business of making the world a better place mindful of the fact that we are all still learning. We must keep in realistic perspective the limitations of what we have to offer, not just technically or intellectually, but as human beings, too. There are immense pressures on us, expectations by default based on what we supposedly do, for us to be so-called “good people.” Inevitably, though, we get slapped in the face by the reality that we’re not nearly as good as others assume we are. Sooner or later, most of us experience our own equivalent of driving away from the dying child.

There is a great deal written and published about how to go about the doing of humanitarian aid and development work. There is a growing body of theory and practice which covers the spectrum from detailed, context-specific aspects of certain interventions, all the way across to large, vexing meta-questions about the aid system, and the ethics and philosophy of it all. But as of this writing, there is precious little out there which helps us figure out how to *be* humanitarians. There’s hardly anything out there to help us navigate the rocky coastline of work vis-à-vis life. No one tells us that we need to be both confident and also humble, nor does anyone tell us what that all looks like in real life. This book is my attempt to make sense of exactly that. It is an account, not necessarily chronological, of my own search for those points of balance between the demands of the work and the demands of real life.

When I look back on over two decades of humanitarian work, it is very tempting to feel almost pride. Pride in grants successfully won, targets successfully achieved, strategies successfully carried out, promotions successfully attained. And in those moments I am kept humble by the memory of a time when I had the ability to make a difference, but did not do so.

The image of a thin, brown child lying listless in the arms of a haggard mother under a sinking Cambodian sun remains with me to this day.

## Not My Job

When I'm on the job, whether deployed as part of a disaster response team, or back at HQ, leading my team, I do my best to show by example that I will do whatever needs doing—even if it's not technically in my job description. I may try to delegate those tasks that fall outside of my competence (it's better for everyone if I don't prepare the budgets, for example) but even there, when needed, I can pinch-hit on occasion.

In those types of settings, you'll rarely hear me say, "Sorry, it's not my job to—"

\* \* \*

It's important to clarify early that this is not a happy book. It's also important to state plainly that *Letters Left Unsent* is a series of short essays, based on my own experience, my views, my opinions. That statement goes with a few caveats. First, my experience is a work-in-progress. From chapter to chapter you'll find an account of my very personal journey. I'm voluntarily making the choice to share. You're voluntarily making the choice to read. If you read on, you'll see that I can be strident and snarky one minute, introspective and intensely self-critical the next. This is the reality of people. If you want happy endings where all the aid workers wearily wipe the sweat from their brows while making good decisions, and where all the grateful beneficiaries line up quietly at the distribution site, then you need to be reading elsewhere; maybe following an INGO-branded blog or reading a book by a famous journalist or for-profit-CEO who became a humanitarian.

If you didn't know already, my day job—my *real* job—is about ensuring good aid to the best of my ability. This is what I do more or less all day, every day. And so *Letters Left Unsent* is your chance to get a look inside the life of an actual aid worker. I'm certainly not the only one writing. There are many memoirs and critiques written by aid workers that you can choose from. While this a personal account, and so represents one person's point of view, I will tell you that I *do* get a very steady stream of email, DMs, Skype conversations, and the like from other *actual aid workers* who confirm that I'm writing what they're thinking. So, while I again do not claim to speak for anyone else, anecdotally it seems that my views resonate with peers throughout the industry.

What this means for you, dear reader, especially if you're not an aid worker yourself, is that you're gaining access to information and perspective that you'll have a hard time finding elsewhere. I'm telling you things that almost every aid worker within my personal sphere knows to be "true," but which will never be said in meetings or exit interviews. This book is your equivalent of a quick, furtive peek through the door of the aid workers' locker room.

Bearing this all in mind, it's important to get this out:

It is not my job to cheerlead bad aid. Even bad aid implemented by nice people. It is not my job to affirm amateurs who are doing it wrong even though they might "mean well." It is not my job to indulge studied ignorance. If you're reading this, then I know you have access to the internet and so also have no real excuse whatsoever for not knowing that there is such a thing as bad aid. The field of humanitarian aid has been around since before WWII. It may be the first place you hear it, but ask any real aid worker: I am not saying anything particularly new.

If you want to be affirmed for just trying, or for having good intentions, or for taking ten years to figure out by trial-and-error what you could have learned in ten minutes on the ALNAP website, then you need to be reading a book by Greg Mortensen or Nick Kristof. We're talking about other people's lives here. It is time to get this aid thing right, and to stop messing around trying to fix poverty with high school volunteer groups, pet orphanages, and wacky projects dreamed up by well-meaning but clueless people.

It is *not my job* to give you warm and fluffy.

## “A Hole Beneath Our Hearts”

February, 2010.

As I write this, I’ve been in Haiti one day shy of a full month. And the truth is that I have spent the majority of my time here up to now shackled to a desk. Yeah, I’ve done a few field visits and been to a few cluster meetings, but the reality is that what was most needed by my team was someone to manage spreadsheets and convert quasi-coherent coordination meeting aidspeak in English prose. So that is what I did.

While I confess that while I was very willing to do it, I was also a tiny bit disappointed two days ago to find that what was most needed from me was data-entry. Not having deep, intense, heart-wrenching conversations with earthquake survivors, not making big decisions about big numbers, not negotiating complex partnerships with diverse stakeholders. Not even throwing down verbally with some guy at the shelter/NFIs cluster meetings who repeatedly showed himself incapable of understanding that the emergency shelter standard for Haiti right now is two 4X6 meter tarps per family (not one 8X6 or one 4X12 or one 1X48...).

Nope. *Data-entry*. Someone had to enter assessment data into an Excel spreadsheet. It is incredibly important to do it and do it accurately. And it’s also incredibly unglamorous. Me, my laptop computer, my iPod and a mountain of hand-written rapid assessment surveys.



Aid worker's-eye-view of data-entry.

\* \* \*

About two-thirds of the form was numerical, so entering that data got to be pretty mechanical after the first hour or two. But that last third was all qualitative stuff: open-ended interview questions where, at times, the respondents appeared to have rambled or gone on wild tangents. But it didn’t take long to see obvious patterns emerging in the ways that people in Haiti seem to view their situation.

If those surveys that I entered are representative of the larger sample, more than anything else, people in Haiti are scared and hungry. They’re scared of another earthquake. They’re scared to sleep indoors. Those from host communities are scared of all those coming in who they don’t know. Some of them are scared of evil spirits. Almost everyone is scared of evil people.

There are no jobs. They have no money. Frequently listed coping mechanisms included “begging,” “nothing,” and “wait to see what God will do to us.”

And they’re hungry.

It’s one thing to sit trendily in Starbuck’s, reading a book by Dr. Paul Farmer, and feel a kind of abstracted, intellectual sympathy for these people called “the poor.” But it’s something else altogether to encounter them close up, to see their faces, and hear their words. I surely did my own share of whining in the early days after the earthquake about the fact that there was really nothing for the response team to eat except granola bars, Guinness, and occasionally Pringles. But after reading survey after survey after survey where respondents had had but a single meal in the past day, where weakness, dizziness, and blurred vision from hunger were repeatedly given as reasons people couldn’t work, couldn’t make the walk to the hospital, or couldn’t repair their damaged houses, I felt acutely ashamed for having grumbled so.

For all practical purposes the earthquake put Haiti on the map. Right now (in February, 2010) it’s emergency response grand central, and the response is far from over. In fact, to the contrary, the emergency response overall is just now starting to roll forward. Anyone with any interest at all in starting or building or furthering a career in emergency response work or journalism is trying to get him or herself somehow attached to Haiti. In that respect, at least, it is totally the place to be right now.

But I think it is also important to remember that Haiti was basically a disaster before the earthquake.

I have been to a few hardcore places in my time, and I now include post-earthquake Haiti in that “hardcore” category. I am generally able to detach emotionally in the moment for the sake of getting through the task at hand. But this one seems different, somehow. Maybe I’m getting soft. For the past three weeks images of withered human limbs protruding from beneath piles of rubble in downtown Port-au-Prince have been coming back to me during the night. But those images, dramatic as they are, are now accompanied by the memory of a few lines of scrawled Creole (with English translation) on a smudged piece of paper. A description of chronic, always-in-the-back-of-your-mind hunger by someone who’d lost everything:

“The hunger is like a hole beneath our hearts.”

## Quiet Anger

A few years ago I visited a small, dingy maternity hospital in a small, dusty town in Afghanistan. It was a terribly poor place where maternal and child mortality statistics were through the ceiling, and where local economic statistics were through the floor. I was there to visit a maternal and child health (MCH) program, run by my employer in the area, which used that hospital as a base.

The waiting room was crowded with expectant mothers draped in blue, and miscellaneous kids wandered in and out of the recovery wards. Most of the light came in through open windows covered only by thief bars and lace that waved gently in the afternoon breeze. We poked our heads into the neo-natal ward to see thin babies being swaddled by a matronly nurse. In a recovery room we stopped to speak with a gaunt and exhausted looking mother who had delivered fraternal twins the day prior—one boy, one girl. The tiny newborn baby boy lay sleeping in the crook of her arm. The girl, our host explained, had been taken home by the woman's in-laws. They would care for the daughter, so that the young mother could devote her full attention to caring for the son.

We spent maybe 50 minutes in the hospital that day. During that time we heard two new babies come into the world. Twice we heard that distinctive newborn cry, low and soft, the sound of tiny lungs inflating for the first time.

But by the time we left—we were told—one of those two newborn babies had already died.

It is one thing to read about infant mortality. It is quite another to confront it face-to-face, *in situ*.

As we drove away, I remember feeling a kind of quiet anger. Quiet anger of the sort that makes your blood boil and your heart break simultaneously, accompanied by the helpless realization that there's nothing you can say, and there's precious little you can do. Quiet anger on behalf of another person who hasn't asked you to feel it for them.

It was not mine to feel, but I felt it anyway. I felt quiet anger at the economic and cultural, global, and local systems that would not just make this kind of thing possible, but would actually enable, and even cause it. Quiet anger at an unfair world where a child dies before the age of even one hour.

\* \* \*

Years after that encounter in Afghanistan, I spent several days in rural North Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo, visiting tiny local organizations that offer care and support to survivors of rape. They were typical in many ways of the local NGOs you encounter in this job. I remember small, mud-walled buildings with a few pieces of tired furniture inside, the smell of charcoal cooking fires wafting in through the open door, over the heads of small children straining for a look at the foreigners. Enthusiastic local counterparts talk about operations on shoestring budgets and their need for training.

The phenomenon of rape as a weapon of war is very well known in eastern DRC, among far too many other places. I'm not an expert on this issue, and so will attempt no analysis. We've all seen the journalistic coverage, some of it outstanding, some of it cringe-inducingly bad. Either way, the survivors' stories are beyond difficult to hear.

In one small, dimly-lit room the founder of the organization, herself a survivor, described the difficulty and, at times, impossibility of reconciling raped women with their families. She described the truly unfathomable conditions that some of the survivors were in when they'd arrive at her shelter. She talked about simple services that could mean the difference between life or death, and about scraping together the pathetically tiny sums that it took to make a huge difference in the life of a survivor.

One survivor, a young woman with soft eyes, told us in a voice that would make you weep about her own recovery still in-progress, and her hope to someday be reconciled with her husband and family. I try very hard to not bring my own issues and drama into settings like that one (more easily said than done), but I must confess that as she spoke I struggled to hold it together.

While she was speaking the founder of the center was called from the room. Two more, just recently raped women had just been brought to the shelter, and she needed to attend to them.

It is one thing to read about the rapes in eastern DRC (or other places). It is quite another to look into the eyes of someone who has been through it. It is another thing entirely to confront face-to-face the reality of what it does to people, and after that, to understand it is *still happening*.

It was weeks before I was again able to sleep through the night without seeing the faces of those women, or hearing their voices. They are permanent additions to the cast of faces that haunt me during the dark nights.

But that day in North Kivu, as we drove away, I felt quiet anger.

## Of Missionaries & Misfits

Once, on the way home from another international junket I had the misfortune of being stuck behind a family of five in an airport security line. It seemed obvious that this family had been out of the USA for some time. Long enough, at least, to have forgotten that the way to get through security in American airports is to have your belt and shoes removed, and your cell phone and keys in your bag before you arrive at the metal detector.

(Post-9/11 American airport security procedures, right along with travelers who, even in 2014, are surprised to learn that they must remove their shoes before going through airport checkpoints may be at the top of my personal list of travel annoyances.)

Based on their conversation and carry-on bags, out there in the open for all to see, this was a missionary family, stationed some place in Africa, and returning to the Midwest for home-leave. And the stereotypes were all confirmed. They might just as well have been the cast from a Hollywood remake of Barbra Kingsolver's *Poisonwood Bible*. Gaunt and rumped, sporting the fashions of about 1997, unable to clear the metal detector in a single pass, and equally frazzled by the crush of the line from behind and the terse directions coming from a burly, 20-something farm hand with a "TSA" patch sewn on to her uniform. The crowd began to murmur disapproval; the farm hand's pupils began to dilate; the youngest of the three kids began to whimper; the wife began to bark orders at the husband.

It was not pretty.

And I could not help but feel sorry for them, because I've been there. In late 1994 I returned home to the USA after a few years away to discover that in that time my cultural navigation system had become obsolete. Friends from university had gotten married, in some cases to people I didn't even know. My clothes were completely out-of-date. *People Magazine* covered celebrities I'd never heard of. Some new television drama (*ER* or something) was all the rage. The radio was playing music I'd never heard by bands I'd never heard of. "Grunge" had given way to "Alternative," heavy metal had become totally un-cool, and Beavis & Butthead had come and completely gone. Even the menu at Taco Bell had changed in the time I'd been away.

Culturally, I had no idea which way was up. As I reconnected and became re-acquainted with my old friends and even with my own family it became clear to me that there were subtle, and sometime not-so-subtle points at which we were just not connecting. We spoke the same language, literally, but were talking past each other. It was like being lost in the jungle at night.

Two decades later, based for the moment in suburban America, but dividing my time between home and various field sites that I support, there are still many, many days when I feel lost in the jungle.

\* \* \*

Most of my non-aid worker friends don't know what to make of me. They think I'm a little weird, or awkward. They approve of what they think I do. But they think that it's about the excitement of constantly going, and they use terms like "adrenaline junkie" to describe what they think I am.

And they're not entirely wrong. For the last few years it's true that much of my life in the USA has been about time between trips. I've either just returned from someplace, or I'm just about to head off to someplace. Getting on an airplane totally feels like work to me now. But more than two or three months *without* getting on an airplane bound for a distant port feels like just sitting around, and I begin to get restless.

So yes, there is something to the adrenaline rush bit, but not in the way that most people think. It's not that I'm all about the danger and mayhem. But once you've spent a few nights in northern Sri Lanka listening to the rumble of not-very-distant shelling, and after you do that repeatedly, you slowly lose the ability to perceive whatever edge there might be in suburban American life. Yet, neither the perpetual motion of frequent travel, nor the rush of some of the places I go can totally account for the feeling of disconnect back in the USA.



Perhaps another dimension would be that, even among some of my traveled friends, the places I go are so vastly different from the places they go and more different still from back home in America. Projecting just a bit of my own experience on the missionary family ahead of me in line, I'm guessing they encountered a deluge of questions from friends and family—questions that they knew immediately they could not answer. Could not answer, either because the question itself made no sense whatsoever to anyone with real knowledge of where they'd been ("Were you in North Vietnam or South Vietnam?" is my favorite from my own Southeast Asia days in the mid-1990's, long after reunification); or because a meaningful, truthful answer, if given, would only confuse the listener more ("The tsunami was 4 years ago... Why is it taking so long to rebuild Aceh?").

With nothing but love for my family and acquaintances who ask such questions, I observe that they simply have no point of reference or context within which to understand whatever I might say about my deployment to Niamey. They would be as lost there as I was in Michigan in November in 1992.

What is more, people asking these questions frequently do not really want a long discussion. Perhaps this is simply because they don't know what they don't know: that the places we go are complex and challenging—nothing at all like vacations in Europe or manicured resorts in the Caymans. This was a hard lesson for me to learn back when I was first starting my career in humanitarian aid. Fresh home from the field, I was bursting to tell everyone, anyone at all about where I'd been and how the experience had changed my outlook on so many different things.

But eventually it did sink in. Even with pictures, you cannot really describe, let alone explain a place like Bangkok. Or Maputo. Or Sana'a. And for the most part, my neighbors do not really want to know much about those places. They ask because they're piqued or perhaps just to be polite. In some cases they are openly looking for confirmation of what they already believe: that they made the right choice by simply staying in America.

It is difficult to explain without sounding condescending or self-important to people who have not had similar experiences. But a big part of the disconnect back home has to do with the issues I deal with. Issues like poverty, food insecurity, human trafficking, conscription of child soldiers, mother-to-child transmission of HIV, UXO (unexploded ordinance) in school yards, protection of refugees, or humanitarian access in active conflict zones. After coming home from a few weeks spent doing focus-group interviews with Iraqi refugees in Jordan it is hard to feign emotional investment in a heated discussion about college basketball or to take a strident stand in some neighborhood drama. It becomes hard to hide true and deep disdain for many aspects of popular culture—media attention to mediocre pop singers or actors who stage public meltdowns. It is hard to balance the requirements of fitting in socially, after hours, in a setting where sports or PTA are of great importance, against a day job that essentially is about trying to scrounge resources to fix some of the basic problems of the human condition. Problems that many Americans—perhaps most, and definitely most of those that I come in contact with regularly—are too removed from to have any meaningful comprehension of.

And this is not meant to be anything against my family, friends, or neighbors. Good for them, really, that they can focus on raising their families and accumulating wealth, and generally preparing another generation of red-blooded citizens of whatever country they're from. Good for them that they can do all of this without having to also think through the issues of how to ensure that people living in the Sahel have enough food to eat in the context of global climate change. Good for them that they can tuck their children into bed each night without any specific or detailed knowledge of the threats being faced by children in other places. To be from a privileged demographic within a wealthy country and to also have direct and regular contact with the world's poor and disenfranchised—those people who comprise the extreme other end of the spectrum—represents something of an innocence lost. It doesn't make me better than anyone, but it means there is a great deal of my experience that it is just easier to keep to myself when I am not around those who have not had similar experiences.

What it means practically is that I have to divide my personality or identity (there's probably a psychological term for this), more or less as I divide my time between places. To my neighbors, acquaintances, friends, and even to some of my own relatives, I am one person. These days I rarely talk in any depth about my work or travel to non-aid workers. To these non-insiders I stick with brief,

predictable anecdotes about crazy driving and strange food. I've learned over the years to stay unobviously reserved with these people.

To my wife, colleagues and friends in the humanitarian aid industry I can be someone a bit different. In a room full of aid workers there is palpable release. These are people who understand. Maybe we won't talk about aid work (but we usually do). Maybe we'll discuss the latest TV drama or which teenage celebrity is living out a public train wreck. We attend home-owner's association meetings and neighborhood picnics. We barbecue and shop in malls. We consume western popular culture.

But still we feel like foreigners in our own countries, sometimes like tourists, sometimes like interlopers. Like the vampires in Anne Rice novels, we have learned to assimilate into normal society with such great skill that few can recognize us, but ourselves never able to forget that despite appearances we are no longer totally "from here." We live our lives fully inhabiting two very different worlds, never quite fitting into the one that most people think matters.

## On Death and Disaster Response

Someone in my family passed away in the summer of 2012. It came very quickly out of the blue. The person who passed away lived in another state, and my family (wife, children) spent basically the entire summer there, dealing with it. Afterward, I felt as if I'd just come off of a three-month hardship deployment.

The whole experience caused me to reflect on what it all means for me as a professional disaster responder.

**First, simply a renewed and deepened respect for disaster survivors.** I gained a new and profound respect for those who make it through to the other end of a war or natural disaster of some kind, alive, still picking up the pieces, and taking that sometimes shaky go at rebuilding. As professed, professional humanitarians I think we too often under-appreciate what survivors are going through. In the midst of our own often very real personal drama, it is easy to forget, or never know in the first place, just how hard it is for those we are trying to help, and how much strength and courage it takes for them to soldier on.

Over the summer I was repeatedly hit in the face with the reality of just how debilitating the loss of a family member was and is. And perversely just how much work—*actual* work—it is to deal with it all: the forms that have to be filled in, the long waits in lobbies or on the telephone, the lawyers who have to be dealt with, the documents that have to be filed, funeral arrangements, clean-up, not to mention the real financial cost of it all. All in a context with every conceivable advantage: rule of law, no rebel snipers or Apache helicopters shooting at us, a working banking system, access to modern communication, extended family nearby to offer support, the ability to take paid leave, a supportive community, clear land tenure and inheritance laws... The death of just one family member was almost paralyzing. I cannot imagine what it must be like to add to that the chaos of a war or disaster zone, and maybe the death of more than only one family member.

**Time is a precious commodity.** I'm not talking so much about "children will die unless you text to this number immediately," because in the majority of cases NGO disaster response does not stave off imminent death. I *am* saying that we need to not waste the time of disaster survivors. We need to not tie them up in meetings or lengthy mobilization; we need to move quickly from assessment to action. It's hard to overstate this. Time is something that disaster survivors just don't have a lot of, especially early on. They're searching for family members, looking for food, trying to find information, burying their dead, salvaging and protecting what's left of their property, trying to leave the area, watching over their children, or any number of other truly urgent things.

While I can appreciate that "long-term development" and "disaster response" overlap or closely link together theoretically and programmatically, they are worlds apart *operationally*. The days and maybe weeks (depending on the magnitude) following a disaster are not the time to bog down in lengthy assessments, analyses, or intensive processes which would normally be the standard in community development (do assessments and follow good process—just not lengthy ones). If we want to really help disaster survivors, we need to not waste their time. We need to get in there, make decisions quickly, and get the NFIs or the food aid or the cash transfers done.

**The importance of community.** It's been said many times before—and it's true—that the real first responders are neighbors. And in my case, for all of the help that we received from the government and from formal service providers of different kinds, by far the majority came from community that we were part of. Help came in the form of things like meals we didn't have to cook, watching the kids, or help schlepping furniture. This experience also got me to wondering whether, perhaps, we're overly focused on the individual beneficiary, as opposed to larger units of analysis (extended families, neighborhood clusters), particularly in our thinking around some of the traditional early recovery

interventions like cash for work, different kinds of livelihoods schemes, and even cash transfers. Something to ponder.

**New (for me) thinking on recovery.** Many have written about the importance of moving quickly from disaster response (some use the term “first phase”) into “recovery” or “early recovery.” We need to prioritize services that help survivors deal with their own issues in the early phases of a response. It should be more common practice in the industry to pay funeral costs, to set up services which enable survivors to make contact with relatives in other places (phone, internet), or to help them sort out the innumerable legal and procedural things survivors often have to go through.

As I wrote above, the amount of time that my wife and I spent in lines, in waiting rooms, and on the phone simply dealing with legal and estate issues was astounding. And again, all in a context where we had every conceivable advantage and convenience. I think that too often we envision “recovery” in the calculated sense of GNP and GDP and infrastructure. They’re important, of course, but we too often overlook those things which help survivors recover as members of communities, as families, as individual people.

**The futility of token gestures.** I was amazed by the number of people who made gestures of different kinds that, while perhaps well-intended enough, did nothing to help us, and in a few cases actually made our lives more difficult. There were many who appeared at the front door, demanding to see a dying person who was quite clearly in no condition to receive visitors, and who then became downright belligerent when they were not allowed in. These, and there were a surprisingly large number, made me think of the self-entitled disaster tourism, sometimes called “voluntourism” that I nowadays I see on a too-regular basis in disaster zones and poor communities around the world.

Then there were those who made donations to random charities in the name of the deceased, or organized convoluted prayer vigils, all while we were under significant financial strain, and could have really used help moving a piano. Their very obvious expectations that we would be grateful made me think of all of the cause-marketed, slactivist, #SWEDOW-dumping, awareness-raising distraction that so often passes for “getting involved”, or “doing something.” The person who died was well-known in her community, and I could probably have achieved a few tens of thousands of “likes,” had I set up a memorial Facebook page. But what I really needed was someone to help sort out the taxable versus non-taxable assets of the estate. We’re very often experts at making helping or caring for others all about us. I personally witnessed this phenomenon up close daily.

**Stuff.** It’s simply amazing how much angst and drama we attach to our stuff. The amount of random stuff—mismatched Tupperware from the mid-1970s, a cow-shaped salt shaker, mountains of clothing—that can be crammed into a small house is truly surprising and troubling. Even more amazing, the amount of effort we put out to deal with it. We sorted, priced, sat in the sun for hours during the “estate sale,” and haggled (was this ca. 1986 blender really worth \$7, or could we let it go for \$5?). I won’t admit to anything specific, but there *may* have been a local church charity collecting clothes for a sister congregation in Zimbabwe, and I *may* have allowed them to come take what they wanted. I’ve written before about this, too—how hard it is for many of us, for *me* to simply throw stuff away.

No words of wisdom on this last one, just confession.

## Oh! Sweet Nothin'!

Some days it feels as if I've wasted my adult life in the worst places on this planet. I achieve premier frequent flyer status most every year without any real effort, but it's not because I'm going to the Bahamas, Tahiti, or even Switzerland. I have spent the last two decades either living in or schlepping through some of the poorest, most depressed, most depressing, and most unstable places of the current era. Places that few have heard of and that fewer really care about: Cambodia in the mid-1990s, Nagorno-Karabakh, Banda Aceh, Herat, Huambo, Khartoum, Port-au-Prince (also before The Earthquake), Jaffna, Ha Giang, Mannerplaw, Zarqa, Pyapon. The list grows longer with each passing year that I remain in the aid enterprise.

It's not easy, but I make it work. Usually through some combination of me doing all kinds of penance with the family when I get back from a trip or deployment, (probably too much) alcohol, and lots of 80's hard rock and heavy metal music.

Which makes it all the more odd that, for reasons I still cannot quite pin down, as I boarded the flight to China not long after the Sichuan earthquake, "Oh! Sweet Nothin'!" by The Velvet Underground was playing in my earbuds.

\* \* \*

In early 1999 I did a couple of month-long, back-to-back trips to Guinea-Conakry, working with a consultant and local field team to plan and apply for a large USAID agricultural support grant (what used to be called a PL 480, Title II Food Security DAP). Our plan was to implement the program in a province called Sigui, in a region of the country called "Haute Guinea," which was, in turn, smack in the Sahel (the margin of the Sahara Desert). It was hot, dry, barren terrain, and one of the most abjectly poor places that I've been to.

If ever the words of "Oh! Sweet Nothin'" applied in real life, it could certainly have been in rural Siguri, ca. 1999.

Yet, the Malinke—the ethnic group that lived in that area—were as cheerful and generous as I've met anywhere. Memories of those visits to rural Guinea are to this day among the most vivid that I have from a life of relief and development work thus far.

It was one of those trips where the local country director, a French guy, was the only other white person I saw for several days. Even the bathroom in the simple guest house where we stayed lacked a mirror. And so after nearly a week in the field, when I'd catch the odd glimpse of my own reflection in the car window, it would be with a mixture of surprise and dismay that I recognized the gaunt, pale image as *me*. It was a rude awakening after several days of being surrounded by the exotic, rich dark-skinned Guinean Malinke, and somehow managing to forget that I was so very different.



Malinke kids, ca. 1999

In one village, a little old man insisted on giving me a bowl of goat's milk. It was a large bowl, and I don't know how he was thinking I'd ever get it back home. But he gave it. And try as I did to wiggle out of accepting what must have been a truly sacrificial gift for him to give, he would not be dissuaded. In the end we poured the milk very carefully into two empty 1.5 liter Coca-Cola bottles, and carried it away with us (I gave it to one of my Guinean colleagues, also from Siguiri, who was very pleased to receive it).

On another occasion I was standing in the middle of a group of farmers talking about the problems they were having with a rat infestation of their ground-level, mud-walled granaries. There was a crowd of kids standing around staring at the white man in the middle, something that by that time in my life I'd become quite used to. But compared with Asia, where the crowds of kids tend to be loud and boisterous, pushing, shoving, and pulling at me, these children kept their distance. And they were quiet.

I kept discussing the rat problem with the farmers. The rats were truly an issue—the stored peanuts and corn were being ruined, and that was causing hunger and hardship. I did not pay much attention to the perimeter of kids slowly, quietly closing in until I felt a very light touch on my hand. I looked down to see a little Malinke hand—as smooth and dark as expensive chocolate—lightly touching my own, pasty white one. The hand belonged to some of the biggest, roundest dark brown eyes I'd ever seen.

The farmers noticed that I'd become distracted, shooed the kids back, and motioned me over to see another rat-infested granary.

\* \* \*



In early 2009 I was in the Li Zhou district of Sichuan province looking at the cracked, crumbling remains of what had once been people's houses. I toured a boarding elementary school where my employer had been instrumental in providing temporary dormitory and classroom structures following the earthquake.

Something new for me on this trip was to learn that boarding elementary schools are common in that part of China. Many of the children stay in the dormitory and attend school while their parents work as migrant laborers in other parts of the country. This practice seems to have become even more prevalent since the earthquake destroyed so many homes.

After asking our questions, as we always do, we asked the kids if they had anything they wanted to ask us. One little girl, about eleven years old, tentatively raised her hand. She wanted to know if she could give me a hug. Of course I agreed, and she hugged me with such fervor that it was almost moving. Trying to make light in the moment, I asked through my translator if anyone else wanted a hug. One more young girl and two boys lined up.



At another boarding school we interviewed several of the children, all earthquake survivors. They recalled their fear as the ground shook and buildings began to fall with a kind of serenity that I have come to too-often taken for granted in Asia.

Following those conversations there was a time for open interaction with all of the children. It was a scene that I have seen many times. A hundred shouting kids, all clamoring for a look at the round-eyed foreigners (there were two of us). They didn't know English, and my Chinese colleagues couldn't possibly hope to keep up with translation. Those kids were loud, rowdy, intense, and all up in my personal space.

But in the midst of that cheerful chaos I couldn't help but notice a small, light-brown hand (very light, not like chocolate, but like tea with lots of sweetened-condensed milk) take hold of my own. And just like a decade earlier in a remote, impoverished corner of Guinea-Conakry, I looked down into another pair of dark brown eyes. Eyes that this time belonged to a little girl, 7 years old—the same age as my own daughter at that time—whose house had been destroyed by the earthquake, and whose parents were working in another city just trying to make ends meet.

I'm not naïve enough to think that I personally met any real need of hers that day. I know that I was probably more of a novelty than anything else, just a random foreigner who happened through her school. But still I couldn't help myself. This time there were no farmers to shoo her away, no rats-infesting-the-corn issues to distract me. I let her hold my hand for as long as she wanted.

\* \* \*

A mere two days after Li Zhou, I found myself on a plane somewhere between a continent and an archipelago, a full week to go before I'd see my wife and children again. I called home just to check in, to say hello. My wife sounded harried and tired. My son was sick—apparently there was a bug going around his pre-school. I'm out traipsing around disaster zones when I'm needed at home. As exciting as the aid-work life might sound to those outside of it, there are days when I honestly wonder if the weeks and months on the road, away from home, have been worth it. I wonder if I should have just been an accountant, or maybe a bus driver.

By tomorrow, I knew, I'd be in another country. Another place with lots of big brown eyes. On days when I feel more bravado I'll channel 80's metal. Maybe Bon Jovi. "Dead or Alive", or maybe "Livin' on a Prayer."

But right then, watching Indonesia drift slowly past, 35,000 feet below, I didn't feel that bravado. Maybe it was the jet-lag, or general fatigue, but in any case I caught myself thinking back to Sichuan, China, channeling the Velvet Underground.

*Oh, Sweet Nothin'!*



## Confronting the Demons of Ethnocentrism

Many of us in the world of humanitarian aid and development love to think of ourselves as liberal, open-minded, cosmopolitan, and multi-cultural. Because of our work, we are able to enjoy the feeling that we perceive The Reality. We are in touch with the real issues. We analyze and deconstruct and apply various psychological, political, and social science theories to what we hear in the news or encounter. We package the world and its problems into neat little categories and assign solutions that seem exceedingly obvious (e.g. Don't drop bombs on civilians; Don't cut people's genitals with sharp objects; etc.).

Some of us revel in being misunderstood by our neighbors or railed against by indignant right-wing radio evangelists. We buy free-trade coffee; we make our offices "paperless;" we boycott athletic wear companies who—we have heard—use sweatshop labor in Bangladesh or Ghana; we adorn our Jettas or Prius hybrids with bike racks and stickers that read "Give Peace a Chance." But there comes a point when it becomes (temporarily) impossible to maintain an air of open-minded relativism. At some point you will encounter another culture that drives you crazy, and it will not be pretty.

An accomplished professor of chemistry whom I had the opportunity to interview several years ago, sharing his perspective on a general lack of belief in God among his colleagues (he was a devout Christian) had this to say: "For staunch atheists I can think of only one cure: strip them naked and drop them off, without food or water, in the middle of a remote jungle. Within one week they will believe in God." There are many things that I can't claim to understand about God. I do, however, know what it is like to be stuck in the jungle. And whether that jungle is a literal one, a concrete one, or simply a metaphor for an impenetrable tangle of cultural signals, the effect is the same. Within a very short time even the most staunchly relativistic among us will doubt our beliefs. We *will* face the demons of ethnocentrism.

Oh yes. It is one thing to sit in the relative comfort, cleanliness, peace and quiet of a classroom on the campus of a liberal arts university and arrive at the conclusion that economic and social inequity in the world is, at the end of the day, the result of ethnocentrism. It is one thing, in such a setting, to feel exhilarated by one's own ability to deconstruct this ethnocentrism for what it is. It is easy to feel a sense of smug enlightenment. We understand what far too many of our elected leaders and non-elected peers have either never understood or are simply ignoring: that third-world poverty is the result of ongoing oppression and exploitation of less developed countries by more developed countries.

Yet, without recanting any of the above (because I really do believe those things), we would all be less than intellectually honest if we did not confess to battling the demons of ethnocentrism, and further, to losing more often than winning that battle. I confess that I battle the demons of ethnocentrism, and confess, further, that I do not always win. I confess that I often fail to find the internal logic that my anthropological predecessors described. With apologies to Clifford Geertz, I can tell you right now that there is often no "thick" description to be found, and with a nod of acknowledgement to Freud, sometimes stupidity is just stupidity. Those of you stuck up on the easy moral high ground of cultural relativism beware: the swirling muddy waters of ethnocentrism are not all that distant—perhaps only as far as the nearest McDonald's or Walmart.

It is one thing to bemoan the loss of indigenous knowledge, the disappearance of tribal languages in some parts of the world, and globalization in general. And it is quite another thing to confront local wisdom in the form of Friday afternoon rush hour traffic in a given third-world capital. There are days when few things can drive me over the edge more quickly than school girls on bicycles, five abreast, holding hands and chatting while wobbling through the swirling mass otherwise known as Hanoi traffic. Not far behind the schoolgirls would have to be the odd guy with a refrigerator bungee-corded to the back of his Honda "Cup 50." Somewhere there is a particularly perverse mutation of Murphy's Law which holds that, despite our positions relative to each other, before I am through the intersection he will careen into my path and I will have to execute a quick stop in heavy traffic and on well-oiled pavement in order to avoid hitting him.

It is swell to feel all warm and fuzzy and openly accepting of other peoples and cultures as valid and meaningful in their own right. But it is considerably less swell to assimilate to the culture of watching one's step in order to avoid treading in human poop on the sidewalks of downtown Luanda.

I have a friend who once shared with me a theory of ranking the relative development of various places based on the balance of consonants and vowels in the written language. Places with too many consonants end up with names like "Republika Srpska" and accompanying separatist rebels, snipers, hordes of starving refugees in the dead of winter. On the other hand, countries with too many vowels end up with words like "Narawaatwanchai" and accompanying astronomical rates of malaria, TB and infant mortality. I think he may have been kidding, or perhaps drunk and unfiltered, but I have come up with an alternate theory: That the level of effort required to avoid treading in human feces between, say, the carpark and the USAID office could very well be an indicator the overall state of things in that country.

It is one thing to pontificate on in the abstract about structures that reinforce inequity and the challenge of coping with corrupt governments. But then it is quite another thing to be detained for hours by inebriated policeman for no apparent reason in Conakry. Similarly, it is all good and well to talk about stability and maintaining the rule of law. But then it is quite another to have to submit, repeatedly, to the search of one's person by obviously iodine-deficient, Kalashnikov-wielding teenaged soldiers in Dushanbe.

It is one thing to want to bond with local people, to walk a mile or kilometer in their shoes, to consciously not choose options—open to you but not to them—which would further reinforce numerous disparities on multiple conceptual levels. And it is quite something else to find yourself stuck for five hours in the domestic departure waiting room of the Medan airport, in all of its noisy, stinky, disheveled, grimy, dingy, uncomfortable, and crowded state—filled to capacity with chain-smoking local men.

Go ahead. Get all righteous indignation on me. But there will come a day when, if you're really honest, as accustomed as you might be to all of those things, they will (in my case, especially the very last—the chain smoking) drive you just about over the edge. Perhaps it will be because you have been *en route* for the last 20+ hours without sleep on a bed or a shower, and you're likely to work for another 10, at least, before you get that sleep and shower. But whatever the case, in that dark moment, you may very well lose your culturally-sensitive self-control and indulge in mentally berating them, while simultaneously enjoying smug satisfaction in their increased statistical likelihood of erectile dysfunction down the road (I read somewhere that cigarette smoking does that).

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But then, at some point, you'll find yourself on an inter-disciplinary team whose task is to evaluate a program that went very well and was very effective. The villagers will tell you how much they appreciated this program and they'll thank you for doing it, and they'll be at least mostly sincere. There will be a celebratory feast of chicken testicles, dog meat, and green freshwater turtle hot-pot, washed down with rice vodka. Someone will sing a special song, and someone will give a speech. Certificates or pins will be handed out.

In that moment you'll feel as if those miles over terrible roads in a Niva, those sleepless nights under a mosquito net with Karaoke caterwauling coming from the floor below, those endless cups of tea drunk with combed-over former revolutionaries-turned-provincial-officials, and those bouts of giardia... have all been worth it.

And in your heart you'll ask the forgiveness of those people whom you mentally berated for doing nothing more than being themselves (as if you'd had the right to judge them in the first place).

And at least until the next guy with a refrigerator bungee-corded to the back of his motorcycle careens into your path...

The demons of ethnocentrism will have been banished.

## Same-Same

July 2008

At around noon today a bomb exploded in front of the Pakistani consulate, here in Herat, Afghanistan. I suppose that, as embassy bombings go, this one was pretty soft-core. Nobody was killed, and only two policemen and one bystander (a woman) injured. From my desk in the office I could only hear a loud bang and feel a slight shake. I remember a light shower of tan dust, jarred loose from the ceiling fan overhead, falling softly onto my computer.

The office was closed for the rest of the day, local staff members were sent home, and the expats were cloistered away in the team house.

That afternoon, everyone tried to act calm as we sat around the dining room table eating lunch. But you could tell that some were nervous and anxious. In typical aid worker fashion, we tried to release tension with dark humor. We all chuckled at the fact that it had, in fact, been a bicycle bomb. Other countries get car bombs. But in Afghanistan, the bicycle bomb is an “appropriate technology.” One colleague, a middle-aged German woman (with an accent exactly like the girlfriend of Dr. Evil) had been in Afghanistan for 4 years already. Her comment: “Ya... it’s so hot, they have no girlfriends... now they just blow things up...”

Chuckle-worthy one-liners soon gave way to war-story one-upping. Everyone shared yarns about other bombings or “ordinance related” experiences that various people in the room had previously in Afghanistan, or other countries. And even if only half of what my esteemed colleagues were saying was factual, the combined experience was still impressive. Everyone in the room had at one point or another had worked in, or in the line of duty been sent to or through, a war zone or place of ongoing civil unrest. Nearly everyone in the room had been shot at, been in the vicinity of an artillery or mortar attack, seen or been in close proximity to an act of terrorism, witnessed mob violence of some kind, seen tracer fire, mistakenly walked into a minefield, or some combination of the above.

This is not an easy crowd to impress with stories of snorkeling in Acapulco or office party hi-jinx.

I think the genuine sort of been-there, done-that attitude among aid workers towards the armed conflicts that we are often on the periphery of contributes to the surrealism of places like Herat. As years in the aid world roll on, every bomb blast or burst of AK-47 fire at once puts us more on edge and also further lulls us into a state of attentive resignation. Whether we live with this reality in the field full-time, or we travel regularly to these places as part of a job based somewhere else, this does become a reality to which we are accustomed. A friend of mine who spent time first in Somalia and then pre-earthquake Haiti once remarked to me that he’d been car-jacked enough times that it was no longer exciting. Another friend, in Sri Lanka, on hearing the rumble of yet another bomb blast, just turns up his TV a bit, rolls his eyes, and says, “Here we go again...” When you think about it, in terms of simply getting through the day without being kidnapped or caught in a crossfire, the food is really the biggest difference between here and, say, Freetown, Port-au-Prince, Tel Abiad, or Batticaloa.

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It was almost exactly 12 years prior (July 1996) that I sat in a grimy store-front restaurant in Phnom Penh eating greasy noodles and reading the local English language newspaper. One headline proudly announced that law and order was being restored and security was improving in the nation’s capital. The evidence was that only 70 foreigners had been shot or shot at inside city limits during the previous month. Apparently this was something of an improvement. A side box announced a new emergency toll-free number to call in case you were being robbed. It had only been a few weeks prior that two Australian journalists had been kidnapped by the Khmer Rouge south of Phnom Penh (they were both eventually killed). These days Cambodia is a slightly less-expensive-than-Thailand tourist destination; back then it was the Wild West.

Later that evening I passed a few hours at a local watering hole down along the Mekong River. Chunky expats quaffed watery beer, openly smoked marijuana, and flirted with Vietnamese hostesses. A local band labored through their version of Pink Floyd. Sitting there on the veranda, watching the afternoon's monsoon slow down to a drizzle, catching the odd whiff of pot smoke, and hearing the occasional distant gunshot through a marginal rendition of "Comfortably Numb" ("... just a rittle pin plick...") was the consummate surreal moment.

Then, this evening, after the sun had set and the anxiety of the day's bicycle bombing had begun to wane, a few of us loaded into the company Land Cruiser and made the weekly pilgrimage to Herat's expats-only mobile bar. About 30 expats, mostly NGO or UN workers, crowded onto a small veranda and an adjoining room. It was an odd mixture of Europeans of various ilks, a few Americans, three or four Africans, and one Iranian. Everyone sipped luke-warm scotch from water glasses or beer from cans, while discussing football (soccer), R&R in Dubai, and whether it was better to fly to Kabul via Khandahar or Jalalabad. After a while someone turned on some bad house music and a disco light. Five or six people went inside and began dancing, barefoot, on a large, beautiful Afghan rug, to the music. .

\* \* \*

Of course Afghanistan is a unique place with a complex history and millennia-old culture. And of course it's not *really* just like Kosovo, or Puntland, or Jaffna or [INSERT NAME OF THIS MONTH'S TRENDY WAR ZONE HERE].

Still, I find myself wanting to argue a little with news media and maybe some of the military and UN and even the NGO types who at times, it seems, want to make Afghanistan out to be some new thing. The new extreme. A new humanitarian challenge.

See, it's really not all that new. For as exotic and unique as it might be, in terms of the humanitarian issues (not to mention the surrealism) Afghanistan is boringly typical. We have seen this before.

Then, as the surrealism of the place and the day, topped by the evening at the mobile bar, began to sink in, I couldn't help but flash back briefly to that sultry evening in Phnom Penh, 1996. Although it was my first time in Afghanistan, I began to feel familiarity, almost nostalgia. And I couldn't help but think of Afghanistan in terms that one might hear, appropriately enough, in Cambodia.

*"Same same, but different."*

## Screw The Outsider

There's an important phenomenon in aid work that I have yet to see written down anywhere. We all encounter it, all experience the brunt of it, and many of us—at times—even benefit from it. Once I describe the behavior caused by this phenomenon, some of you will want to analyze it in Marxist terms, using the language of power relations, weapons of the weak, opiates, and such. Some of you might prefer a postmodern interpretation, thinking of me simply one of many subjective, contingent knowers. Others still will default to the language of structural-functionalism—“complex wholes” and how this thing that I'm about to describe is but one part of a multi-layered, multi-dimensional, multi-faceted system, a small cog in a large and complicated machine that cannot be properly appreciated without knowing the larger context. And perhaps you'd all be right. At least a little.

But my professional opinion as an anthropologist who has been at this aid gig for a few years now is that it's all much simpler than that, really. My theory is that when given the chance, people will almost always: *Screw the Outsider*.

I have seen “screw the outsider” in action in more countries and in more contexts that I can possibly remember at this point. It's important to understand that “screw the outsider” is highly situational. You can get screwed as the outsider by one group of people one minute, and then in an instant there will be a subtle change in the context, and *voila!* You'll be an insider, screwing some outsiders right along with the rest of them.

When you stand on the street corner in Jakarta or Bangkok, surrounded by motorcycle taxi drivers, you're totally at their mercy. Good luck getting a fair fare. *Screw the outsider*.

But then when the police stop the driver and demand to know where he's taking this foreigner and the driver, without knowing a thing about you, spins this wildly improbable story about taking you to some urgent life-or-death meeting upon which the fate of the world rests, and the policeman warily waves you on, and you know the tables have turned. *Screw the outsider*.

I have had beneficiaries and partners lie to me blatantly, even when there was no possible advantage available for them in doing so, as far as I could tell, for no other reason than that I was the outsider. Then, on other occasions, those exact same beneficiaries and partners lied to others on my behalf (I didn't ask them to), including me as one of them (that part was heart-warming). *Screw the outsider*.

\* \* \*

There was plenty of “screw the outsider” going on in Haiti, as well.

The local staff push back on the expats brought in to help kick-start the emergency response. And understandably so—they felt pushed aside, displaced. “This is *Haiti*. You can't run a response here the way you did in Nicaragua after Hurricane Mitch.” *Screw the outsiders*.

The emergency response team (local staff + expats) complained about, and gave the runaround to supporting offices in North America and Europe. “They don't get our context. They don't know what we're going through.” *Screw the outsiders*.

The Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) office was just down the road from our team house, and their positively massive fleet of impossible-to-miss Land Rovers (not Land Cruisers) clogs the road and doubles the amount of time it takes to get to work in the morning. “Wankers,” we'd mutter, and urge our driver to cut them off at the intersection. *Screw the outsiders*.

But then in the coordination meeting when some dude from ECHO got all snooty with the NGOs, we, and MSF, and all the other competitors for funding and beneficiaries felt righteous solidarity. *We* were actually out in the field doing stuff, not just sitting around in tents wearing name badges and being snooty with NGOs. *Screw the outsiders*.

In late January, 2010, the World Food Programme (WFP) had pretty much pissed off every NGO that mattered in Haiti by releasing a monstrous amount of food for immediate widespread simultaneous distribution, targeting women, with 50kg bags. My math is terrible, but by my count 50kg is something

like well more than 100 lbs—more than some of the women here weigh. And so the thought of distributing bags that weighed as much as the beneficiaries, for them to carry up to three kilometers home, seemed more than just a little bit ludicrous, and well, wrong. Suddenly we were all each other's new best friends. "What the hell was WFP thinking?!" *Screw the outsider.*

Then I'd get on the phone with some reporter who's obviously searching for controversy, trying to bait me with leading questions, wanting me to go on record with my frustration about this or that aspect of the overall response. Is coordination a problem? Are there a myriad organizations tripping over each other in the field? Are major donors responding appropriately to the scale and nature of the need here in Haiti? What do I think about the "Marshall Plan for Haiti" thing? Does the right hand really have any freakin' clue what the left hand is doing?

But I'd stay cool as a cucumber.

You've got to understand that this is a very complicated context, in many ways totally different from anything we've seen prior. Yes, of course there are many great challenges, but at the interagency level things do seem to be headed in the right directions. Everyone is trying their best. It's of critical importance that all the actors—Government of Haiti, UN, NGOs, MINUSTAH, local organizations—all remain committed to the response. Of course the level of need outstrips the ability of donors to respond fully. On behalf of the Haitian people, we're very grateful for all that we're given to work with (except the shoes, that is). People are amazingly resilient, and we're already seeing early evidence of long-term recovery strategies taking shape.

Nope—sorry, love. No controversial story here. Other than that fact that it is, you know, *a disaster*, everything's fine.

*Screw the outsider.*

## Oh, Little Town of Bethlehem

Christmas music makes me cranky. I don't know which is worse: idiotic pop let's-all-love-the-world mixes like, "Do They Know It's Christmas," inane songs about Santa Clause, or The Rat Pack crooning *ad nauseum* over what feels like every sound system in every public space in America.

I particularly dislike the American tradition of "Caroling."

\* \* \*

In the late fall of 2012 I happened to spend some time bouncing daily between Israel and the West Bank for work. One day, driving through Jerusalem, out the window of the white Land Cruiser, I spotted a sign indicating the way to "Rachel's Tomb." I want to see Rahab or Jezebel's tombs, but apparently they're not marked. The person hosting my visit (Palestinian) made a comment about how the location of Rachel's tomb in Jerusalem could possibly have been political. Who knew? But apparently, Rachel's tomb is really supposed to be in Bethlehem. Since The Wall, Bethlehem is forcibly and obviously part of the West Bank. And it would never do to have Rachel, the daughter-in-law of Abraham, father of the Jewish people, not buried in proper Israel.

\*

Then, a day or two ago, in an American shopping mall I happened past a troupe of Christmas Carolers singing "O Little Town of Bethlehem." Carolers, complete with rosy cheeks and bad sweaters, some members forgetting the words, are an expected sight this time of year.

It brought back my visit to the real Bethlehem, just a few weeks prior, replete with hordes of pilgrims at the Church of the Nativity, many weeping openly, some singing. But beyond the Church of the Nativity itself (which is a complete tourist trap), much of Bethlehem is bullet-ridden, non-descript and depressing. A far cry from what Robert Brooks must have been thinking when he wrote the famous song.

There is war and it is ongoing, and as we all know, Bethlehem is hardly the worst of it.

Then today one of the headlines on CNN was about how an Israeli archaeologist has discovered evidence that the Bethlehem in the West Bank is probably not the "real" Bethlehem where Jesus was supposedly born. The real one, according to some, is in Galilee, firmly in Israel—not the West Bank. Go figure. My friend must have been on to something. And all those pilgrims went through all those Israeli checkpoints for nothing.

\*

Peace seems ever elusive in the so-called "Holy Land." (As an aside, I believe that there are important historical sites there; not sure I believe the land itself is so holy.) Many people, much smarter than me, have long ago already commented on and attempted to analyze the irony of the fact that the home turf of the three major monotheistic world religions is some of the most blood-soaked soil to be found anywhere on the planet. A fact made doubly ironic by the vehemence with which all three claim to be religions of peace.

I really don't care all that much where Jesus was born. I don't care whether it was Bethlehem in the West Bank, Bethlehem of Galilee, or some other, as yet undiscovered, village or town also called Bethlehem.

Nor do I have any specific antipathy towards the song "O Little Town of Bethlehem"—no more than, say, "Blue Christmas" or "Here Comes Santa Claus." But let's remember the true meaning of "Bethlehem." It's not a song. It's a place with people in it. People who, like far too many the world over, live with fear, and for whom the threat of war looms large, daily.



Bethlehem, 2012



# Hallelujah

January, 2010.

It's Sunday. I really wanted to sleep in this morning. It's my eighth or ninth day in Haiti, and since arriving it's been 18-hour days. Up early, in bed late. The food is substandard and it's hard to get a good night's sleep.

Today was going to be a slower day, and I was really looking forward to sleeping in, even if only a little bit.

\*

Unfortunately for me, the hotel where I'm staying is very near the UN compound, and so also near the airport, and there are massive cargo jets and other aircraft landing and taking off, buzzing the hotel at what sounds like 30 meters until late, and starting up again early.

But after eight nights, with earplugs, I've gotten to the point that I can mostly sleep through the noise of the C-130s. I can tune it out, mentally, as background.

But this Sunday morning it wasn't the jets or the helicopters overhead, but rather the small evangelical church across the road that slowly wormed its way into my consciousness a solid hour before I wanted to get out of bed. You know how when you hear white background noise you can tune it out and sleep, but when it's noise that has a pattern to it, your mind wants to follow that pattern? That's how it was this morning: an electric organ and congregational singing that cut through the airport noise and my earplugs, and pulled me to that point of wakefulness beyond which there's no possibility of return to sleep.

I was born and raised in a conservative Christian home. And while there's much about that belief system and culture that I have left behind as an adult, at least I still remember the songs. I don't know Creole or French. But I recognized every melody.

*"All to Jesus I surrender..."*

If there is anyone on the planet right now who could be justified in doubting the existence of a loving, caring, God, it would be the Haitians.

*"Trust and obey... for there's no other way..."*

I've been seeing "Exode 14:14" (Exodus 14:14) painted on a lot of those wildly pimped-out trucks, called "tap-taps", that serve as public transit here in Port-au-Prince. Exodus 14:14 reads, "The LORD will fight for you; you need only be still."

For both better and also worse, this simple confession of faithful submission seems sadly apt. Here in Haiti, a place that for more than two centuries has been at the utter mercy of other countries, being still and praying for the LORD to bring better times feels at once naïve, and also a candid recognition of the fact that one has no other real choice.

*"Alleluia... Alleluia..."*

There's a lot that I can't claim to know about religion or understand about spirituality. Maybe I read too much into those hymns—almost plaintive over the din of constant air traffic overhead—based on my own upbringing and what I remember of what was once my own spiritual worldview. But fully awake, listening attentively for the next phrase from across the street, it might have just been a high passage. But I could have sworn I heard a voice crack. Then another.

The people of Port au Prince still mourn their dead.  
And today somehow the words of Leonard Cohen seemed more appropriate than those of John Sammis.

*Cold. Broken. Hallelujah.*

## One of Those Moments

It's been one of those moments. It's been one of those moments of epiphany when the heavenly bodies align, everything is ensconced in a warm glow, and you feel... *good*.

Or maybe it's been what addicts sometimes refer to as that fleeting "moment of clarity," when things snap briefly into focus and you analyze with incisive lucidity where you are. One of those moments when your mind quickly cuts through the pfaffing, and the window dressing, and the packaging, and you see things as they really are, for better or for worse, laid bare.

Recently I spent several days in a terribly poor part of southern Pakistan, beset with repeated natural disasters, doing one of those notorious HQ monitoring visits. I won't bore you with over-written anecdotes of bad roads or food that turns your insides into gurgling water, nor will I go on about the details of local culturally required ("exotic") protocol that preceded each and every encounter of substance.

I will simply say that the project I went to monitor is making a difference. It is making a measurable, quantifiable difference. This project is saving lives, literally. I don't mean to say that everything is awesome there, or that the next step will be cable television and BMWs for every family. But it is not an exaggeration to say in this instance that infants and small children are alive in the targeted area today as a direct result of my local colleagues and their local partners pitching up and doing their jobs every day.



The numbers say that this project made a difference. And the people who've benefitted from this project also say that it made a difference. The rate of infant death due to acute malnutrition is down—in layperson's terms, fewer babies are dying of starvations and nutrition-related complications like diarrhea.

It's one of those moments that become far too few and far between as you work your way up the ranks in an international household charity. It's one of those moments of intense gratification and even pride in the even small part that I can claim credit for contributing. It's one of those moments when it comes clearly to you that international aid can and does work. This is what gets me out the door, bound for the office in the morning.

It's one of those moments when you are reminded of the reality that individual, context-specific projects can, and very often do work. While by contrast, the grand theories, the ivory tower pontification, and the abstracted debates don't do very much at all to advance the state of aid industry practice. It's one of those moments when you reconnect with the fact that the way to make a difference is to implement straightforward, by-the-book, unsexy relief and development. In this case, local staff took the time needed to do this properly from the beginning; they followed good process; they listened to partners and beneficiaries; they didn't bite off more than they could chew, programmatically speaking. They didn't try waste the time of the poor with some goofy, irrelevant technology developed in a lab or garage by

someone who'd never been to this place. No, this project made the difference that it did because it was planned and implemented the old-fashioned way. Again, I'm not saying it was perfect. But this project was first and foremost about the poor and their needs, right from day one.

It's been one of those moments when I see with great precision what aid is, when I get how it works, and that it *does* work. Or at least *can*.

It's a good moment.

## Here I Go Again

April, 2009

I know it's super cheesy. But there was a time in my aid career when a personal ritual, every time the plane I was on would taxi for takeoff, was to crank up Whitesnake's "Here I Go Again" on my personal CD player (before iPods were invented).

\* \* \*

I write this from Amman, Jordan, where I am having a total déjà vu moment. After a several-year hiatus from grant-writing, I find myself once again starting the one-week sprint towards a deadline by which time I am supposed to have a grant proposal written and ready to be submitted to a very large and influential donor. This grant, if won, will fund activities that make life more a bit more bearable for a few thousand Iraqi refugees here. The project that my colleagues and I are scrambling to put together is a good one. It is one that responds to an actual need. It is one that will make a difference. And in my personal opinion it is one that we have something of a moral obligation to undertake.

In my experience, this kind of real-world clarity about what, how, and even why a project should be done, that this core team has is a rare bonus. Usually by this stage we would be second-guessing and trying to psycho-analyze the donor. But in this case we have a very clear and direct picture of what the donor wants. Usually there are some residual nagging questions—questions for which there are frequently no obvious right answers. Questions that very often come down to contrasts and comparisons: Why here, but not there? Why these people, but not those? Why this activity, but not that one? But in this instance, more than in many others, we have an unexpectedly unobstructed view of where we need to take this project.

And yet, despite this great advantage, I confess that it is tough going.

Winning this grant is immensely important to my employer. Beyond the Humanitarian Imperative to help those in need when we can, our success in pursuing this grant will directly influence the future viability of our branch office in Amman, and by extension, our programs (plural) in the region. The organizational stakes are a bit high on this one.

While we all agree more or less on the big picture issues of project design, the details of how to do it all are not necessarily agreed. These kinds of differences give way to a growing sense of pressure and urgency as the deadline draws near but we still do not have a complete proposal document.

As in most relationships, money becomes a key variable in determining the tone. And in this case money is tight. The amount available from this donor *sounds* significant. The number of dollars supposedly available is a number that ends with several zeros. But in both the context of Jordan, and also in the context of what we need to accomplish with it, there is not nearly enough to go around. We're in the seemingly impossible position of having a first draft budget that is nearly double what we can reasonably expect to get in grant funding, and we still have not included some core costs. There is no obvious fat to be cut. We find ourselves bogged down in heated discussions about whether all twelve community facilitators need cell phones, or if two can share one phone between them; we go around and around about the legal and financial implications of calling a local organization with whom we intend to collaborate on parts of this project a "partner" rather than a "contractor."

There are also the usual country office versus headquarters debates. Who should give what? Who should capitulate on what points? Who has the biggest stake? Whose needs get serviced first? Whose interests take precedence?

I get and agree that those conversations are all important in their own ways and must be had in order to move forward. But still it seems unfair and also a bit sad that the future of a large number of refugees in part comes down to our internal debates about staffing structures and budget categories. In the

wee hours, with a deadline looming, it is easy for the work to become primarily about a document and about getting the money—and at least temporarily less so much about helping refugees.

Finally, for all of the talented people working on this thing on both sides of the globe, there are still some pieces that we do not yet have, important elements over which we have no control. That adds stress as well. It is disconcerting to think that with so much effort already invested and with so much at stake, the whole thing could fall apart at the last minute. Aid work can be very fickle—completely straightforward one minute, intensely cerebral the next.

\* \* \*

I can't help but find myself missing a time when I was a little closer to the front lines on a regular basis. I miss the supposed simplicity of my job for the day being to somehow get five truckloads of something from point A to point B. I miss the days when fully half of my job was just the ability to deal with local food and sub-standard accommodation.

But the world has changed and in many ways become more complex, and aid work has had to morph and adapt along with it. Over and above these contextual changes, the roles I find myself filling in the aid world are increasingly about moving big pieces, more than on-the-ground ops. I get that.

A decade ago I was in a position where it was my job to go out to a country office with a laptop computer, prepared to do whatever it took, just to get the proposal written and submitted on time. On second thought, maybe the work hasn't changed so much after all.

I think back to when I used to pop in a pirated Whitesnake CD every time the jet engines revved, and I'd listen one more time to that overplayed but also brilliant piece of poetry set to heavy metal—a song that by itself, in my opinion, qualifies David Coverdale as one of the great bards of our time.

*“Here I go again.”*

## DO Something!

I could not help but be a bit amused in early 2011 by the smallish disturbance in the aid blogosphere over the fact that someone named Heather Armstrong (I'd never heard of her before) was traveling to Bangladesh to blog from location about her experience.

It's a narrative we've all heard before: send an inexperienced Westerner to an impoverished corner of the planet so that she can have an epiphany about poverty or whatever, and in the process raise awareness and perhaps some cash for a worthy cause. While I don't particularly agree with the approach it seems that the *Bloggers sans Frontieres* train has pretty much left the station, and so there's no real point in carrying on about this here.

Other aid bloggers and writers did decide to weigh in, and there was bit a rant-fest on some of the well-known aid websites. Then a mom-blogger who goes by "Liz", over at a blog called Mom-101 wrote an angry reaction entitled, *Here's an idea! Let's attack bloggers who do good things!*<sup>1</sup>

And what particularly caught my attention was this comment by "Cara":

*"...I haven't spent my entire career working in a developing country so my knowledge of what is most effective is certainly limited. But, here's the thing, even if "you're doing it wrong" YOU'RE DOING SOMETHING! And that's about a million times better than a lot of people..."*<sup>2</sup>

Between the original post and this comment there is plenty that I could respond to. International relief and development work is a profession, not a hobby. If a single, childless blogger was to muck about with parenting and childcare, and then blog about it all in simultaneously self-righteous, defensive, and authoritative tones, I think we all know what the backlash from, you know, actual parents would be. I have a tough time understanding why aid work should be any different.

There are the poverty tourism and "Whites in Shining Armor" angles, too. Here again, though, I lack the emotional energy to really engage. It's all been said before. The world is getting smaller. It's possible for anyone with enough cash to get a tourist visa and ticket to Bangladesh (or wherever), and virtually nothing stopping them from blogging about their encounters with the people who live there. In general I think that more exposure, more knowledge, more contact with those very different from ourselves are all good things. But the one that I really cannot leave alone right now is the far-too-often invoked line of reasoning which says, as Cara wrote, *"even if you're doing it wrong" YOU'RE DOING SOMETHING! And that's about a million times better than a lot of people..."*

I genuinely struggle to understand how, in so many areas of life, we are so quick to say, "Do it right, or don't do it at all." Yet when it comes to the very complex, high stakes endeavor of alleviating poverty in the context of another culture we casually shrug off misguided attempts to "help" as perfectly acceptable because at least the person did something.

*Seriously?*

The argument which says "Do something. Just *do* something. Even if it's not particularly right, at least you're doing something, which is more than millions of others can say," is ultimately a bankrupt argument. Being deeply convicted that one means well and that every little bit helps does not mean that one is actually doing good rather than—you know—*harm*, and it is in no way a good enough basis for mucking about with the lives and livelihoods of other people.

And just so that we're clear, this is not professional elitism (which I very cheerfully embrace). This is me reminding you all of the reality that international relief and development are easy to get wrong. The fact that humanitarian practice is still growing as a profession is in no way a license for those who don't know what they're doing to go off someplace and sort of figure it out on their own in the name of "at least he/she is doing something." It takes specific knowledge and skill to get this right.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://mom-101.com/2011/06/lets\\_attack\\_bloggers\\_who.html](http://mom-101.com/2011/06/lets_attack_bloggers_who.html)

<sup>2</sup> [http://mom-101.com/2011/06/lets\\_attack\\_bloggers\\_who.html#comment-31393](http://mom-101.com/2011/06/lets_attack_bloggers_who.html#comment-31393)

We are talking about people's lives, here. Just because you won't be slapped with a malpractice suit if you get it wrong (although I do actually believe that day is coming) doesn't mean it's okay to "just do something" in order to feel good.

Relief and development work are actual professions. Don't try to do them in your spare time. And perhaps even more importantly, don't feel as if you *have* to. It's okay to just live your life in a simply responsible manner without trying to spin a contorted and over-the-top theory of how you're "supporting aid work" or "making the world more equitable." Do driving the speed limit, parking legally, and not shoplifting make you "part of law enforcement"? Of course not. They simply make you a law-abiding citizen.

Or do you feel the need to spend your summer vacation volunteering at a gynecological clinic? Or at Legal Aid? No? *Exactly.*

There are many, many good things that you can do. You can recycle. You can learn another language. You can invite your neighbor of another socio-cultural and/or ethno-linguistic demographic over for lunch. You can offer to babysit the child of the single mom next door so she can run errands. You can drink only free-trade coffee. You can give \$5.00 to the homeless person you pass in the tube station every day on the way to work. You can own a hybrid car. You can slap a "COEXIST" bumper sticker on your hybrid car. You can ride a bicycle to work. You can eat less meat. You can wear less leather. You can burn your Justin Timberlake CDs and only ever listen to Indie bands.

All good things to do.

And if humanitarian aid or development work are what you really want to do with your life, great. That's a very good thing to do, too. But if that's truly the case, then make the commitments and investments necessary to make this your career, your life.

Otherwise, very often, and especially if you don't know what you're doing, the very best thing to do is...

**Nothing.**



## Motivation

Someday soon, you'll want to ask yourself why it is that you want to go into humanitarian work (And let's not get hung up on semantics. I mean "humanitarian work" generally, to include disaster response, community development, international development, and everything else from internships with small start-up "local NGOs," to full-time consulting, to working for USAID or JICA or DFID, to wearing a UN name-badge in Geneva or Rome).

You'll want to ask yourself why, and you'll want to be as incisively honest in your response to yourself as possible. Why is this so important? Because right now, most of you are *not* being totally honest about the "why." If I'm not mistaken, most of you right now are thinking, "(Well, duh) I want to make the world a better place." Sure, I get it. You want to help people, you want to address issues of poverty, you want to bring dramatic change to a broken aid system, you want to give something back.

These are not bad things to want, and maybe you even believe yourself. But let's be very clear: these are not the only reasons you're interested in humanitarian work.

"What else could there possibly be?" I can hear you all ask.

Well, to start, let's assume you also want the life that you perceive the aid work life to be. You want to travel, maybe to a particular country or region, maybe anywhere, or maybe everywhere. You want to go to places in the news, like Darfur or Kabul. Maybe you want to be on the news yourself. You want to experience the genteel poverty of NGO expatriate life in places like Harare or Beirut or Nairobi. You want to get to the place where you can complain about hating airports and airplanes and having so many frequent flyer miles that you'll never be able to spend them all before they expire. You want to be a scruffy jet-setter. You want adventure. I sure as heck did.

In addition, you don't just want to help the poor, you want to meet them (and not as a tourist). You've read books like *Three Cups of Tea*, or maybe *Half the Sky*. You've read *Missionary*, *Mercenary*, *Mystic*, *Misfit*. You're self-aware. You get it. You won't repeat the mistakes of others. Yet you want, in some ways, to be like Greg Mortenson. You want to be the only foreigner in the room. Maybe you want to be the one who goes back and makes your community a better place than it currently is. You want to have emotionally draining conversations with child soldiers, earthquake survivors, or victims of torture. You want to ride the local busses with the farmers and their chickens. You want to sit with the elders and drink down three cups of tea while talking about "civil society" or why they should value education for girls. You want your Facebook friends and Skype contacts and Twitter and Instagram followers to be people from all around the world. You want the warm fuzzy feeling of being accepted by a host culture. You want that almost mystical experience of those a-ha moments out in the field when something clicks and you suddenly "get it," and you can see in the eyes of your local colleagues that they get that you get it, and at least for a few minutes you're all one happy humankind family.

I did.

But it's not all just fun and games. You want to make a difference. Not only that, but you want to somehow be recognized for having made a difference. Maybe by your employer. Maybe by beneficiaries, for the innovative and sustainable and paradigm-changing programs that you'll plan and implement. Maybe by your local staff or local partners.

Fair enough. So did I. Looking back on a career in humanitarian work thus far, my fondest memories are of times when things went well and that was recognized and appreciated by those the programs were meant to help. Maybe you daydream about coming back home after months or years abroad, trendily quirky/edgy after all that time immersed in another cultural context, deftly disabusing your family and friends of their ethnocentric preconceptions about aid and what it takes to really "help the poor." Maybe you'll become a well-known author, thinker or speaker (or all three) on international humanitarian issues.

And let me be clear once again. These also are not bad things to want. Many of them represent the bits of my job that I still enjoy the most. Some people want to work on Wall St., start a restaurant, or fix cars. You want the life of an aid worker as you perceive it. All good and well, but let's be honest with

ourselves. While those things are not bad, they are all more about *you* (or me) than they are about empowering local women, or making aid more accountable, or addressing root causes of poverty.

They are not bad things to want. But wanting them while failing to acknowledge them all—your full range of motivations—will set you up for the deepest kind of disillusionment down the road. There are always a discrepancies between what you think it's going to be like, and what it turns out to actually be like. This is true of any endeavor. But in the humanitarian sector there is additional danger due to the fact that this is all supposed to ultimately be about accomplishing some good in the world, and the immense emotional pressure that this puts on humanitarian workers.

Someone very smart once said to me that, “the reasons why you stay married are usually different from the reasons why you get married.” Very much like marriage, humanitarian work is one of those things that has its good days and its not so good days. Some days the cold, harsh realities of what it would take to affect meaningful change, whether towards one of the many problems we claim to want to fix or towards the supposed brokenness of the aid system, loom very large and seem impossibly daunting. If you get to that point, still somehow believing that, *really*, the only reason you're doing any of this humanitarian thing is to “make a difference,” you will become cynical, disillusioned, depressed.

As with marriage, the things that motivate us to stick with humanitarian work are often not the same ones that motivated us to get into humanitarian work in the first place. It's important to remember that when those dark days come—and they will—if you cannot articulate for yourself reasons for sticking with it other than “all I've ever wanted was to help the poor,” you *will* find yourself contemplating a divorce from aid.

## Aid Work Suitability Self-Test

I am regularly asked to speak to different people about how to get into aid work. At different times, college students, bored housewives, vaguely guilty for-profit execs, and a continuum of variations in between have all popped up in my inbox, wanting to know my secret formula for becoming an aid worker. How did *I* do it? How can others get in? Those are great questions. And it seems that aid work is the new trendy occupation for those who are too ADD to work for the government or have too much conscience to work in the for-profit sector. It's fun work and a great life. Who wouldn't want to get into it?

Here, at no additional cost, is a short quiz to help you determine if aid work is right for you:

First of all, ask yourself *why* you want to get into aid work.

**1) Is helping the world's poor is your *one and only* motivation?**

**Yes:** Go volunteer at a local homeless shelter until you're able to answer this question honestly.

**No:** Move on to question 2

**2) Which of these apply as secondary motivations?:**

*a* – You are independently wealthy through years of exploiting the poor and you now want to give something back.

*b* – You have recently had a traumatic experience (e.g. nasty divorce, had to sell BMW because of the economy, etc.), and now need to go somewhere to “find yourself.”

*c* – You hear the pay is pretty good.

*d* – You want adventure and excitement.

*e* – You are a glutton for punishment.

*f* – From what you've heard, aid-work beats flipping burgers.

If you answered “**a**,” go volunteer in a local food bank, and host a homeless family in your own house. Indefinitely.

If you answered “**b**,” wait five years and then take this test again. If you answer “b” again, wait another five years, and so on.

If you answered “**c**,” you're one of the most ill-informed people ever to take this test and you should consider another line of work.

If you answered “**d**,” “**e**” or “**f**,” move on to question 3, but be prepared for serious disappointment down the road, particularly regarding “d” and “f.”

Now you know you're not being totally *dishonest* with yourself about why you want to do aid-work. Let's see how committed you are, in fact.

**3) How much time do you envision yourself devoting to aid work?**

*a* – Two weeks per year.

*b* – Two months per year.

*c* – Weekends only.

*d* – Every other spring break.

*e* – For a week immediately prior to, or following my resort vacation in Acapulco.

*f* – It depends: More time if the assignment is a nice island in the South Pacific or Caribbean; less time if the assignment is a place that has winter and/or is in a country whose name ends with “stan.”

*g* – Full time, immediately, indefinitely.

If you answered anything other than “g,” you should probably focus on finding a great deal on a bigger TV, getting in shape, and paying off some student loans for now. Keep up your international street cred by watching *The Amazing Race*, reading memoirs and blogs by real aid workers, ordering margaritas during happy hour, and being nice to people who don’t speak English well. If you must “do something to help,” donate cash (not your old clothing) to credible charities and host a refugee family.

If you answered “g,” you’re probably reasonably committed. Let’s see if you’re qualified:

**4) Which of the following do you envision yourself doing when you daydream about your future aid career?**

*a* – Hugging orphans.

*b* – Sprinting into the demilitarized zone to help old ladies get across the border.

*c* – Staring down the local warlord, and securing permission to distribute food to the IDPs.

*d* – Being the one to teach basic skills like double-entry accounting, nutritious cooking, or breast-feeding to local villagers.

*e* – Sitting in meetings all day long with stinky aid workers and UN staff.

*f* – Getting carpal tunnel syndrome from the amount of typing/writing you do.

If you answered a, b, or c, sorry—this is not the movies.

If you answered d, it could come true, but you’d most likely be doing these in your own country/community.

If you answered e or f, move on to question 5.

**5) Do you have at least a Master's degree?**

**No:** don’t come back until you have a Master’s Degree.

**Yes:** go to question 6.

**6) Is your Master’s Degree in a subject relevant to aid work?**

**No:** Get a Master’s Degree in something relevant to aid work.

**Yes:** Go to question 7.

**7) Revisit questions 1-3. Are you *really* committed?**

Yes? No? Doesn’t really matter. More importantly:

Do you have a friend in an aid organization who is also the hiring manager for a position you’re interested in?

**Yes:** schmooze your friend relentlessly.

**No:** Blanket the aid world with your CV, and apply for as many jobs as you can.

## Professional

Some time ago, on the steps of a dusty team house in a foreign country that had just been slammed by a huge disaster, I sat and listened to a young woman with tears in her voice wonder aloud whether it had been a mistake to come. She was educated, articulate, and obviously intelligent. She'd put in a few years at HQ, worked her way up through the programs department supporting a small portfolio of small-ish programs in the field. She'd been to a few places, and while she was not the kind of battle-scarred aid worker that you often meet in responses like that one, neither was she a totally inexperienced first-timer.

I remember very clearly what she said (of disaster response work): "I've wanted this for so long... and now I'm here... and it's just so hard."

She was right. Aid work *is* hard. Often in ways you don't expect. And it's not for everyone.

\* \* \*

I understand that many people have a very intense need to believe that they can, without special training or any specific knowledge, without guidance or experience of any kind, go and do aid, do disaster relief, do development. Although few express it in these terms, they basically believe that what qualifies them is simply their desire to "make the world a better place."

It's an illogical perspective when you think about it. I mean, there are plenty of analogous real-world examples of situations where desire—even desire coupled with intense passion—counts for very little. Those who want to play professional basketball, learn very soon that while desire and relentless pursuit are naturally part of it, their actual performance on the court is what matters to scouts and recruiters. The music industry is similarly brutally honest about who "has it" and who doesn't. And the same applies to most any career or professional endeavor. Coffee shops are full of baristas who didn't quite pass the bar exam, high schools across America are full of P.E. teachers who didn't make the NFL draft, and the \$1.99 bin at Walmart is full of CD by bands who thought they rocked, but as it turns out, didn't. Any career or life path or vocation requires dedication at some level, requires the possession of specific knowledge, and requires the mastery of certain skills. In the United States, at least, if someone wants to be a junior accountant in an even marginally reputable company, he or she needs to have an accounting degree.

And yet, I am repeatedly amazed at how irate, indignant, self-righteous, and self-victimizing many people become at the suggestion that exactly the same should apply in the humanitarian aid world. Frankly, I am astounded at the amount of pushback on the suggestion that a Master's Degree should be a minimum for aid practitioners. Otherwise logical, intelligent people—people who would probably agree without hesitation that physicians need to have specific education and pass some kind of minimum-standards certification before they are allowed to diagnose and treat even one single patient—seem to think that it's okay to blithely go off and start an NGO or project in some poor community in a developing country where they then spend the next months or years sort of trial-and-error-ing their way through people's lives.

Such a perspective, in my view, can really only come from either stunning naïveté or bald arrogance.

Harsh? I don't think so.

In my experience, the vast majority of the time these people simply do not want to hear that perhaps they should do/have done things differently, or that the world does not need yet another small start-up NGO. Most of the time, the very best case scenario is that after a few years they may eventually come around to learning exactly the same lessons that the so-called establishment has known for decades. Lessons like: you can't exist without overhead (even if you don't call it overhead); accountability costs money and requires organizational bandwidth; Or, knowing when to remove your shoes, which parts of your body to cover, or being able to stutter a few phrases in the local language are not at all the same thing as being able to work effectively in the local context.

Aid and development are harder than they look. They need to be done by professionals.

\* \* \*

I Skype-chatted with the young woman from the team house just the other day. I know that that response was hard on her, but she did stick it out. She hung in there and she's doing great now. From what I hear, she's in another country with a high-profile disaster response going on, doing her job confidently and well. Her education and experience matter, and despite a few dark days, she has not lost her passion.

Good for that country. I know for a fact they've got at least *one* good program officer.

## Things I've Learned

**What I learned working for a huge INGO:** Relationships matter. More than you think. On top of everything else, you have to have good people skills in this business. Which makes sense, since this job is—after all—about *people*.

**What I learned working for a tiny little INGO that almost no one's ever heard of:** Acting and seeming, and actually *being* professional matter. Probably more than you think. Also, you don't have to be huge to make a big difference. You can do great, effective work with a budget in the tens of thousands of USD.

**What I learned during my first five years in the aid industry:** Things take as long as they take. Yes, meet reporting deadlines, keep appointments, follow-through on time-bound commitments. But build enough time in to projects, programs and strategies to do things right. Good aid does not happen overnight.

**What I learned during my second five years in the aid industry:** Don't judge people, places, or situations based on superficial appearances. Invest in understanding. It took me far too long to get this one.

**What I learned doing long-term development work:** We often get as much from the people we try to help than they get from us. This is true even when the project or program is extremely successful. This doesn't have to be a bad thing, or a reason to not do those effective, successful projects and programs. But always keep this in perspective.

**What I learned doing disaster relief work:** People need what they need, and want what they want. Just because disaster survivors or refugees have nothing doesn't mean that you can give them just anything. Just because the pressure is on doesn't mean that a crap response is good enough.

**What I learned from being the boss:** Be straight with your employees about what you can do and what you can't, what you know and what you don't. Admit it when you're wrong, apologize when needed. Get tough, throw down, clean house, lop off heads in private if you have to, but never ever *ever* throw your staff under the bus.

**What I learned from being an underling:** Good bosses are rare in the aid world. Know the difference between a good boss and a bad one. If you're fortunate enough to have a good one, forgive his/her foibles and pay the rest forward.

**What I learned from large, government grant management:** Cross the "T's" and dot the "I's." Learn to sense when the intangible cost of a government grant is too high, and walk away.

**What I learned from working with small, unrestricted private funds:** These can be gifts from the gods. Use them wisely. Also, don't make the mistake of believing that unrestricted funds are truly unrestricted: Every donor has an agenda, and every donation has strings attached.

**What I learned sitting in airport lounges:** Keep your voice down, don't diss other organizations or aid workers, don't boast about smuggling stuff into Myanmar or Syria, and always be respectful to airline staff (even if they don't give you your way). In other words, don't be a jerk. All this if for no other reason than that the person behind you might be a widely-read aid blogger/author who will call you out in a snarky post or tweet about you the next day.



**What I learned in coordination meetings:** Be nice. You can disagree without getting nasty. The aid world is a small one—an argument supposedly won in one relief zone can come back to bite you in another one.

## What Makes Good Aid *Good Aid*?

Good aid has five characteristics. Let's talk about those:

**1) Starts and ends with the needs of those affected by poverty, disaster, and conflict** (a.k.a. “the poor”, “aid recipients”, “program participants”, “beneficiaries”...). Some might want to articulate this point as aid needs to be demand driven, rather than supply driven. How we think about aid—how we rationalize it, how emotionally and intellectually honest we are about why we do it, and why we do it the *way* we do it—matters. But if we're to do it right, if we're to plan and implement good aid, our starting point needs to be those whom we seek to serve. If that starting point is anything else (for example, the needs of a particular donor, surplus of something...) then a recipe for bad aid has already been started.

**2) Follows good process.** To put it very simply, you start with what the need is, define the most logical good solution, implement that solution, and evaluate your program or project against what you defined as the need. Some call this Project Cycle Management (PCM). Of course in actual practice there is a lot that goes into each of those steps. Knowing what the need is requires commitment and follow-through on assessments first.

Defining the most logical good solution can require an amazing amount of organizational honesty and discipline—especially when an organization has defined its focus, capacity or niche very specifically. One of the most common mistakes which leads to bad aid is when an organization, project or individual defines the solution in terms of what they have to offer, rather than in terms of what the most logical solution is. (I call this the “solutions in search of problems” approach.)

Evaluation, like assessment, is very often glossed over. Amateurs typically focus on implementation (and of course good implementation is critical), but implementation outside of the context of and evidence base and general good process is meaningless.

**3) Is evidence-based.** Digging a little deeper into the assessment, planning, and evaluation steps of PCM, it is absolutely critical that assessments be done properly. If you don't understand clearly both the issue (problem) that you're trying to address, you can't design a workable response, and at the end you can't know if you've been successful.

Yet in my experience, this is the single most common downfall of small startup NGOs and projects run by amateurs: they skimp on assessments and evaluations, or simply don't do them at all. This is partially because those things require specialized skills, resources and organizational bandwidth. Sometimes where an organization or project defines its product very specifically (volunteer teams, 1,000,000 T-shirts, lots of shoes, etc.), there is little point in doing either assessments, planning, or evaluation because the implementers already know what they're going to do.

Good aid will be disciplined enough to go through the process of collecting and analyzing evidence, and then basing action on need, not on the surplus of a particular resource.

**4) Tool-box approach.** Expanding the above point with respect to action/programming, good aid will approach available resources and activity options as tools inside a tool-box. Which is to say that good aid will select the right tool for the job. Bad aid, by contrast, typically uses backward logic by selecting the tool—that is, the activity or intervention—in advance of having evidence.

Where an organization or project has only a few tools in its box, it can take real organizational discipline to say no to programming. Again, this is a very common mistake of small startups and amateurs: the desperate desire to act (or the real, survival need for resources) drive many to try to operate outside of their actual capacity or expertise.

**5) Learns lessons-learned.** While humanitarian aid and development are not as old as other fields (accounting or urban-planning), there is already a substantial body of experience and lessons-learned. Good aid does not repeat the mistakes of the past. While this sounds simple, in my experience this also can require an amazing level of organizational discipline. This is particularly the case for organizations founded on the premise of a specific kind of activity, and especially where that activity contravenes known best-practices. The existence still of foreign-run orphanages across the Third World is but one outstanding example in real-life.

Learning the lessons-learned also requires that an individual, project or startup NGO be aware of the history, be looped into the overall aid conversation, be current with industry thinking. This, also, requires organizational bandwidth and discipline. It requires that people prioritize thinking and learning along with doing. It requires that organizations dedicate resources towards participating in learning events. It requires participation in coordination specifically, and generally being part of the larger community of practice overall. While few people would argue against learning the lessons learned in principle, in actual practice the realities of tight budgets, scarce resources, and staff already working 18-hour days frequently mean that the lessons learned do not get learned. And the result is frequently that while as an industry we know what to do and how to do it, many individual entities within the industry don't.

**But what about “Local”?** I know that some of you are squirming in your chairs as you read this, itching to argue with or maybe even discard everything else in this book because I didn't include something about local knowledge or local NGOs as one of the five characteristics of good aid. There are two main reasons why I did not.

*Local is a cross-cutting issue:* In my direct experience in now more than two decades of practice, getting the above five things right invariably means involving local: local people, organizations, partnerships, knowledge, etc. When the above five things are done properly (*really* done properly), local happens organically.

*Local is not a magic bullet:* The five characteristics of good aid apply equally to local. And in my experience, local NGOs are just as prone as INGOs, local staff just as likely as expats, to get the above wrong. The concepts of needs-based planning, good process, evidence-based action, picking the right tool for the job, and learning from past experience are as important (and as easy to get wrong) for local NGOs as for INGOs.

## Ménage à Trois

Here's how aid works:

- 1) Someone pays for it. We call this person or entity a “donor.”
- 2) Someone else implements it. We call this person or entity an “aid provider”—usually, but not necessarily an NGO of some kind.
- 3) And someone *else* receives what the first one pays for and the second one implements. We call this person the “beneficiary”, usually for lack of a better term.

Some of us hold forth and discuss at great length the different kinds of donors. We debate the extent to which their level of understanding and their motivations matter, what their rights are or should be in the grand scheme of things, or the extent to which they should be allowed to meddle in the workings of aid providers.

Some of us argue stridently about the different kinds of aid providers. Who should or shouldn't be allowed to be one, what it takes to be a good one, the extent to which aid providers are or aren't unduly influenced by the motivations of their donors, or the extent to which they should be required to share certain kinds of information.

And then, some of us speak passionately about the beneficiaries. We go into great detail about what their rights are, what they can reasonably expect from donors and aid providers, what their capacities are, and the extent to which they have a role to play in the overall picture of aid.

These are vigorous, often vehement debates. And rightly so, as they all touch on important issues.

But just so that we're all clear, none—*not one*—of these debates challenges the basic aid formula. None of these debates address in any substantial way the global reality of aid: that it is a giant *ménage à trois* between donors, aid providers and beneficiaries, each of whom approaches relationship with diverse needs and expectations, and where the aid providers' role is primarily brokering the relationship between donors and beneficiaries.

And so you'll forgive me, gentle reader, when I come off as more than just a tiny bit jaded with the rhetoric coming out of some of the famous academic pundits or development think tanks on supposed game-changing innovations.

I get jaded because none of these forums or discussions addresses the basic nature of the aid formula. The *ménage à trois*. What the Gates Foundation calls “innovative financing”, isn't. It's simply the latest attempt to modify the parameters of how traditional donors work and maybe change up the kinds of strings attached to donor funding. It's also the basis for a lot of talkfest workshops, meetings, and junkets. If you want truly innovative financing for foreign aid, find a way to pay for it that doesn't involve donors. Simple as that.

If you want to truly change the way aid works, you need to find a way to change the *ménage à trois* formula. Public-Private-Partnerships (PPP or P3) and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) are just new kinds of donors. Mixing bilateral aid with traditional development aid, government to government capacity-building, and all of that simply adds complexity around who is a donor, who is a provider, and who is a beneficiary at the ground level. Technological and programmatic innovations (awesome as they might be) simply re-tool the ways in which aid providers continue business as usual. Humanitarian accountability and basic good process are “musts” (and I sincerely believe that they make aid better). But let's not delude ourselves into believing that they confer any real change in status to the beneficiaries of aid.

We don't need more gadgets, workshops. You want to be game changing? Find a way to change up the *ménage à trois*. Otherwise, you're simply using new words to describe the same ol'.

## What do the poor deserve?

What *do* the poor deserve? Ask yourself.

How you answer will depend at least a little on why you think they're poor. Why *do* you think the poor are poor? Do you think they're poor because they're lazy? Is their poverty part of cosmic retribution for wrongs committed by their ancestors? Do they *deserve* to be poor?

Maybe you think is poverty something imposed on them against their will, from outside? Are the poor simply the pawns of evil people who perpetuate global systems of oppression based on race, ethnicity, class, culture, language, and geography? Are they innocent, yet nonetheless helpless victims?

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I've already said that how we think about aid and rationalize it emotionally matter. What's been said less often before is that how we think about aid is inextricably bound up in how we think about poverty and about "the poor." More specifically, how we think about what good aid is and how to do it, where we'll cut corners in the name of expedience, or whether or not we'll hold the line on technical standards and insist that our staff meet minimum qualification requirements before we hire them, all come back to why we think the poor are poor.

If we think the poor are poor in some way due to their own negligence, then it is far easier to justify poorly planned and implemented aid as "good enough." If we think, even in a small way, that the poor are poor because they deserve to be, then how we market aid, how carefully we manage our analysis of what constitutes CSR (corporate social responsibility) programs, how rigorously we evaluate not just the value for our balance sheets but also the raw need for our GIK, or sending a troupe of Western teenagers to spend two weeks "doing disaster response" all become less important. We may not articulate it to ourselves in these exact words, but let's be clear on this point: Our collective tolerance for bad aid—from the amateur orphan-huggers, all the way on up through NGOs and INGOs and BINGOS, to the UN, to the hallowed halls of USAID and ECHO, to the gilded halls of the humanitarian capitals—is in direct inverse proportion to what we think the poor deserve from us.

I don't believe that anyone of us is competent to pass judgment on what anyone else deserves in any kind of cosmic, universal sense. But I think that it's important that we ask ourselves this:

*What do the poor deserve?*

Do they deserve our cast off clothing, our old shoes? Do they deserve our discarded bicycles and gently used soap? Do they deserve our church youth groups coming to practice on them for two weeks? Do they deserve us shutting them out of our planning processes or delivering aid based, not on their priorities and need, but on the priorities of donors, foreign governments or for-profit corporations? Do they deserve celebrities popping in for a few days of "humanitarian assistance", perfectly coiffed, cameras rolling? Do they deserve foreign journalists plastering their faces on mass media in the name of "raising awareness"?

Whether as amateurs, as students hoping to enter the industry workforce, or as professionals who have been in the game for a while, we most commonly rationalize and justify our participation in the humanitarian endeavor in *our* personal terms. That is, we explain it in terms of what *we* feel compelled to do. *Our* motivations. It's about us. We want to make a difference, see the world, atone for something, maybe accrue some good karma.

This has to change. We have got to begin talking about relief and development work in terms of what the poor, the vulnerable, those who survive wars and disasters need. Or if you will, what they *deserve*. Not what they deserve in the sense of something they somehow earned. But what they deserve simply by virtue of the fact that they're human beings. Personally, I believe that the poor,

survivors of conflict, disaster, and poverty deserve the best we're capable of, if for no other reason than simply by virtue of their humanity.

## Caricature

This always happens: I'll be off the clock in some informal, social setting and the subject of what I do for a living comes up. There will be someone there who's very eager to let me know that they've just donated what for them is a sizeable sum to an utterly useless NGO. I know the organization they're talking about because I've seen their programs in the field, received their promotional material in the mail, and perhaps even interviewed their would-be escapees for open positions on my team. The person will be clearly hoping for my approval and I'll feel socially obliged to affirm them, even though I know that their donation was, at best, most probably wasted.

Maybe it will be someone just bursting to regale me with the details of their own start-up NGO, or perhaps the fact that they went with part of a church volunteer group to "help" at a high-profile disaster. Maybe they collected a bunch of shoes or made dresses from pillow cases for Africa, or any one of what feels like a bottomless well of cringe-worthy aid ideas.

It is precisely in many of these moments that many aid workers—even the hardcore, seasoned, professional ones—usually demure. We don't want to be seen as mean or arrogant or—heaven forbid—elitist. Most of the time, in social settings, I simply do not have it in me to call out and deflate those in my own extended social network who donated their used skateboards for Afghanistan or bought an ugly piece of overpriced cause-marketing kitsch to supposedly "raise awareness." They're good people, right? They shouldn't be slammed for trying to do something good. Why go for the jugular over something that, in the grand scheme of things, is probably pretty innocuous?

The core question here, whether it comes through overtly or not, is this: *Is any harm really being done?*

And here I'd be remiss if I did not say that in my sincere opinion, yes: these kinds of projects do cause harm. Actual harm.

I'm not saying that our friends who made pillow case dresses or sent in their gently used sneakers are bad people. I don't mean that a recipient of a donated skateboard is in some way directly harmed as a result of their (most probably genuine) generosity. Nor is it likely that there will be some kind of systemic failure, a *The Gods Must Be Crazy*-style meltdown, in a community somewhere because they did what they did.

Rather, the kind of harm being done is the perpetuation of bad aid. By indulging these stories, we contribute to the perpetuation of stereotypes and assumptions about who the poor are, what they need, and—importantly—how they should be helped.

It's important to understand that the ways we think about aid and development matter. The ways we think about aid and development have an effect on the way we do it. Bad thinking (wrong thinking, incorrect thinking) about aid, begets bad aid itself. And in exactly the same way, bad fundraising and bad awareness-raising also beget bad aid. It's not enough to simply raise awareness. Awareness has to be raised properly. Why? Because if you raise awareness wrong, then you understand the problem wrong; and if you understand the problem wrong, then you'll inevitably envision the solutions wrong. If you're a potential donor who's awareness has been raised wrong—that is, if you were made aware of the issues in the wrong way—then it makes sense that you'll support organizations that go about addressing the issue wrong, thus perpetuating more bad aid.

I'm not suggesting that we should publicly take down the nice lady at the neighborhood BBQ who talks about how she went to build a church in Mexico. But at the same time, let's understand that bad aid which goes unchallenged simply turns into more bad aid. Unchallenged bad aid—even bad aid implemented by super nice, well-meaning people—further entrenches and perpetuates those stereotypes about poverty and the poor and what it takes to address, if not fix, it all.

They're like racial stereotypes, like saying all African-Americans like watermelon and fried chicken, and have rhythm in their blood. Or that all Chinese are short and polite and good at math. While none of those are particularly bad things *per se*, to characterize a group of people in that manner essentially turns them into caricatures, cartoons of themselves.

In the United States during the 1950's and 1960's being able to caricature people of other races allowed far too many to go for far too long without having to think in any deep or meaningful terms about who those people of other races really were. Those two-dimensional, supposedly benign, and seductively simplistic images—in some cases literal images—helped keep institutional racism in place, again for far too long (and no, I'm not naïvely thinking that it's all peachy now).

And in a similar way I would argue that by continually retelling the stories of the amateurs who maybe got lucky and didn't cause a chaotic meltdown, or the nice neighbors who sent a sea container full of Spam to Aceh, or [all the other examples] we too often let ourselves and others off the hook from having to think through the quiet horror of poverty, the messiness and complexity of what keeps it in place, and the difficult road ahead if we're ever to do anything about it. Gushing, feel-good stories about the high school students who collected clothing and then distributed it all in-person at the orphanage in Nepal, or the nice old couple who sent 37 refurbished bicycles to Zambia keep ingrained in our psyches the incorrect notion that fixing poverty is easy, that the needs of the poor are uncomplicated, and that the key challenge is simply around *volume* of need.

I would argue that poverty, like institutional racism, is held in place at least in part by our inability to see it for what it is. I'd argue further that our inability to see poverty for what it really is, is itself at least partially due to the fact that we continue to caricature poverty, and even the poor themselves, rather than seeing them as real, whole, people.



## Elitist

I get tired of people who accuse humanitarian aid workers of being elitist. Perhaps more precisely, I get tired of people who accuse humanitarian aid workers of being elitist as if that's somehow a bad thing.

I mean, no one complains that neurosurgery is a terribly elitist field of practice. Or what about commercial aviation? Those fields are both dominated by a very small and, for lack of a better term, elite group of practitioners. And for very good reason, as I think most of us would agree. There are horrible consequences for even the smallest error while a patient is under anesthesia on the operating table. Similarly, one small detail overlooked by an airline pilot, or one miscommunication in the cockpit, can result in the loss of hundreds of lives.

It seems to me that the stakes are no lower in humanitarian aid work. In fact, I'd argue that the stakes are higher. What we do affects not just a single individual, but entire communities, regions, in some instances maybe even nations. And yet, somehow we think that this is a field of practice where any random well-meaning person with a "heart for the poor" can be relevant to the conversation? Are you kidding?

By no means do I mean say that the humanitarian aid industry as we know it currently is perfect. Or even adequate. It very obviously is not. There are glaring deficiencies, as there are glaring inefficiencies, and allowing these to remain unacknowledged and unaddressed is not an acceptable way forward in my view.

But it needs to be recognized and acknowledged that while humanitarian aid remains unregulated like, say, neuro-medicine, law, or law enforcement, this is still a professional field.

It is possible to do aid wrong. Imperfect a profession as it may for the moment be, aid does require particular skill sets, a knowledge base, and experience to get right. It takes experience and specific knowledge and wisdom and sound judgment to be able to walk into a disaster zone or project site and know how to respond. Not just anyone can do it. And not just anyone should.

From where I sit, humanitarian aid is the opposite of elitist. It is incredibly porous. As a professional community, we tolerate a level and quality of "input" from individuals who should be bodily removed from our offices. We waste a ridiculous amount of time and effort considering and doing "due diligence" on utterly preposterous ideas for "innovation" that would be plain laughable in any other field with the reach that we have into the lives of actual, living people. Pick your large, high-visibility natural disaster of the last decade, or impoverished country with nice beaches, and you can see real live evidence that pretty much anyone who wants to badly enough can go in and muck around "doing aid."

Maybe it's time to make aid *more* elitist.

## Text Bitch

At one point early on in my aid career, I was based in an HQ cubicle but traveled frequently to the field for the express purpose of writing primarily USAID grants. It was one of those jobs that was all about “customer service” out to our country offices, “local empowerment,” and “flowing accountability downward.” Which meant, basically, that I was the fresh-faced, fresh out of grad-school, fresh meat thrown to the country office wolves on a regular basis.

One colleague, based in a barren and mostly godforsaken country that I found myself getting repeatedly sent to, took obvious delight in the fact that it was my job—not his—to craft the proposal language, develop the theory of the argument, ensure good flow. He was good with the numbers and so would look after the budgets and tables, he explained. But the word-smithing was my territory.

He dubbed me the “Text Bitch.”

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If you want to work in aid, as much as anything else (and more than many other things) you need to be able to *write well*.

Yes, you need to have an advanced degree and some technical or general skills related to aid, and you need to get experience. But when it comes to the actual day-to-day work, more than anything else, you’ll find yourself writing.

Very often the tangible outcome of aid work—at least the tangible outcomes that stick around for posterity in head office files—are written documents. And those written documents—those briefs, those evaluation reports, those strategy documents, those white papers—all have to be written by someone. In the aid world (but not just), written documents are currency, and the ability to write well frequently translates into power. It is easy to take for granted the ability to write well until what you need is 10 pages, or 5, or maybe just one page of well-written text.

Writing, that act of transferring the substance of conversations into text, whether those conversations happen in a board room, around the coffee makers, or at the pub; that act of magically solidifying ethereal concepts into tangible form is very often seen as the grunt labor of aid work.

Everyone wants it to be his or her job to have deep conversations with traditional healers under the mango tree, to look appropriately dusty and haggard on CNN, to help fleeing little old ladies make it across the border, or to pull typhoon victims from the rubble. By contrast, no one really wants to be the one whose job is to miss happy hour in order to hunch over a keyboard pounding out a report or budget or opinion paper. No one reads *Emergency Sex* or *Chasing Chaos* and then daydreams about sitting in a dank, fluorescent-lit room, tapping away on a keyboard. Writing has become menial labor. Something to be weasled out of whenever possible. Writing has become something we try to push onto the desks of our text bitches.

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Once you have a few years of grant-writing on your CV you can never totally escape from it. Or once you gain the reputation as someone who can generate a coherent report in less than average time, it can be tough to not always be the one tasked with writing reports. You become one of those in your organization to whom people come when they need something written.

You can have the greatest idea in the world, but if you can’t get it written down it’s practically the same thing as not having it. You can have the most astute, penetrating insights on, well, anything. But if you can’t somehow turn that analysis into text, it benefits no one. I’ve sat through innumerable fascinating discussions, led by sometimes absolutely brilliant people, many of which for all practical purposes might as well have never happened once the first after-hours round began to take effect. Because nobody wrote any of it down.

I've been a lot of places and held a number of different positions since that colleague out in the desert gave me that inappropriate nickname. I am not the least bit disappointed that my current job does not require me to write proposals for large institutional grants. I've been a technician, a manager, a team leader, an advisor. At different times it's been my job to explain budget deviances, to persuade boards, to negotiate with host governments, and to finagle agreements with partners. Sometimes I'm a cubicle nomad, sometimes I'm a globetrotter, sometimes a cowboy. But the constant across all of that is writing: email, reports, proposals, strategies, white papers, Skype conversations, Facebook updates, this book.

Don't you dare call me "text bitch."

But I'll always be a writer.

## Hands-on

Unless I miss my guess, based on talking and writing to more aspiring aid-workers than I can specifically remember, one thing that the majority of you seem to have in common is that you want to do hands-on work. You've made it very clear that you're not so interested in sitting at a computer with spreadsheets or Word documents open in front of you, tasked with making sure that the cells are calculating properly or meeting a reporting deadline. By contrast, you are *very* interested in working "with the people," "on the front line," "in the field."



What we all want to do.

*I get it.* If you're the kind of person who'd seriously consider a career in humanitarian aid or development, you're probably not the kind of person who aspires to a 9-5 office job where the dress code is business casual. But as blogger Alanna Shaikh once wrote, "Most development work is office work."<sup>3</sup> and in another post, "We can go days without seeing anyone who is helped by our work."<sup>4</sup> She may have been writing about expats working on development programs, but let's not quibble about terminology: these statements are absolutely true for relief workers, too. I flew in to Port-au-Prince in a 6-seat plane on day 10 after The Earthquake, but for most of the first month I was chained to a desk. And while of course there are some expat roles which inherently include more need for field time than others (being the M&E coordinator typically gets you out to the field more than being, say, the finance manager), you need to prepare yourself for this, too.

There are chapters and even entire books which could be written about why this is the way that it is. For now, I'll briefly point out a few of the more obvious reasons:

**More and more is being done by qualified locals.** And rightly so. *They're* the ones with language and cultural skills. It takes years and money for a foreigner to become competent just on the language and culture (to name only a few crucial skills).

**More and more of the hands-on work is highly specialized.** The work of interacting with beneficiaries is increasingly around specialized skills—things to do with people's health or medical well-being, things around livelihoods or economics, very sensitive areas like human reproductive or safety and protection issues, to name just a few. Most NGOs now require that those who engage in this sort of interaction have degrees which qualify them to do it. We're talking about people's lives and livelihoods, here. It makes no sense and it's unethical to put an inexperienced person on these tasks.

**More and more of the hands-on work is casual labor.** It's somewhat paradoxical, given my point above, but it's true. Much of the work that many, perhaps even you, envision doing when you

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<sup>3</sup> <http://bloodandmilk.org/2009/04/18/the-bare-bones-of-prepping-for-an-international-career/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://bloodandmilk.org/2008/10/29/this-job-is-not-always-fun/>

envision humanitarian work is more or less menial labor. Building buildings, schlepping bags from the warehouse to the truck or from the truck to the distribution zone, cleaning up rubble or debris, distributing food or NFIs. It makes zero sense to send expats to do this work, and not because the work is menial and it's below internationals, but because there's simply no need. Besides, local people depend on this work for their livelihoods, too.



What we spend most of our time actually doing.

Most aid, development, and relief work is office work. Even in the field, the majority of the actual work that needs doing is around managing data and information and the flow of resources. This is the real front line, hands-on work office work—just often in places where the offices aren't as nice or where connectivity is poor or where it might be dangerous to walk outside. I won't try to put a percentage on it, but as you consider a career in the aid world, you do need to understand that you will do a lot, if not mostly, if not almost exclusively, office work. If you want adventure and exotic travel, sign up for an adventure tour. But if you want to make the world better, get the reports in on time (properly formatted), and make sure the spreadsheet cells calculate properly. Humanitarian aid and development can for many be an intensely rewarding career, I very strongly recommend that you adjust your expectations according to this reality.

## Things No One Tells You

This chapter is a short collection of miscellaneous advice and sage wisdom of the kind that almost never gets written down. My own spin on the best of the best of what has been passed on to me by the various aid-worker alpha males and females whose orbit has at different times overlapped with my own. In no particular order, and for what it's worth, here goes.

**NGOs are “the establishment” (even the small ones). Adjust your expectations and behavior accordingly.** NGO work is “working for the man.” Granted, “the man” might be a pretty cool man, or even a woman. But you get the point. NGOs are political environments where power matters, backs get stabbed, and careers are made and lost over dumb things that have nothing whatsoever to do with how much you know about sector X or region Y. Don't let yourself become disillusioned by the fact that politics happen in charitable organizations.

**Learn to schmooze.** The aid world is one big good ol' boys network. If you don't believe me, look at how much dead wood gets recycled. And look at how hard it can sometimes be for genuinely qualified people to land something other than menial admin support work. Get on the bad side of as few people as possible. Hang out with other NGO staff as much as possible. Cultivate the reputation of being someone who is “fun” or “cool,” but also “smart” and “good at his/her job.” Don't be high-maintenance. Shamelessly insist on buying a round for NGO staff who have the words “director” and/or “senior” in their titles. Aim to be on a first-name, exchange-humorous-emails, they-know-it's-you-on-your-blog basis with at least 10 people in at least 5 other NGOs. Wantonly prioritize schmoozing staff from big NGOs (more potential jobs) over small ones.

**Go to Cambodia.** Everyone says “get field experience... volunteer... whatever. *Just go!*” but they never say where. I'm telling you now. Go to Cambodia. Skip Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Central Asia, Latin American, even Africa. Don't bother with Vietnam or Thailand. For goodness sake, don't even think about Myanmar or Timor Leste. Go to Cambodia. There is comparatively very little regulation of the humanitarian sector there and a gazillion NGOs to choose from. It's fair to say that almost anyone can get a job working for an NGO in Cambodia. All you need is to be non-Khmer, speak English reasonably well, and know how to turn on a computer. Play your cards right, and a year in Cambodia can set you up in the aid world for life. Play your cards poorly, and, well, what the hell—start up a coffee shop in Phnom Penh and hang around for a while.

If you can't get a solid lead on an aid/development job during the life of a tourist visa to Cambodia, you lack the tenacity that this line of work requires. Change careers immediately.

**No one knows how this will end.** I have yet to hear a coherent statement on what the end result of development is or will be. Where does it end? We talk about working ourselves out of jobs, but I don't see that as actually likely any time soon. The number of new NGOs is growing. This sector is growing. More and more people more stridently assert their knowledge and relevance to a process for which there is no clear, obvious, or—failing “clear” and “obvious—at least a widely agreed upon product. What *is* the final indicator? Every round mud house in Ghana has a Stanley® electric garage door opener? Every kid in Guatemala has an X-box? At what point will we declare in a given country, “You have now achieved development. Live long and prosper.”? Exactly. No one knows.

**Plumpy'Nut THIS.** Ever eaten a high-energy biscuit? How about CSB porridge? Ever drunk water that used to be nearly raw sewage but has had the contents of a PUR sachet swished around in it? No? I didn't think so. Try some of that before handing it out to disaster or famine survivors with the attitude of Michael the Archangel.

**No, you're not "one with the poor."** So stop trying to front as if you are. It doesn't matter if villagers tell you that your Laotian is stellar. It doesn't matter that Palestinians say you're "practically Arab." Nope, the fact that you can eat *biriyani* by hand without getting food above your second knuckle doesn't prove anything other than that you can eat *biriyani* by hand. Draping your white self in colorful fabric doesn't make you Ugandan. Don't be getting all high and mighty in coordination meetings or on your blog. You're a foreigner, an outsider, just like the rest of us.

**Bottom-up is the new Top-down.** Has it occurred to anyone else that by insisting on "bottom-up" approaches we simply impose another kind of top-down approach? It's like we walk into the village saying, "Yeah, see... actually, you *will* be an empowered stakeholder..."

**Accept the fact that you will never be able to retire on goodwill generated by not riding in a white Land Cruiser.** [Somewhere, I'm not sure where, it got to be all trendy for some journalists, bloggers, and amateur do-gooders to be critical of professional aid workers, working for funded NGOs, seen riding in white Land Cruisers. A white Land Cruiser (or other SUV) has become symbolic of the antithesis of local, community-focused not-donor-driven aid.]

We all (or most of us) at one time or another took a low-paying job as a means to an end. But at some stage, the whole point of staying employed, even in aid, becomes a matter of personal livelihood and future security.

That is absolutely acceptable.

You should receive fair and adequate compensation for the work that you do, even when doing work that is supposed to make the world better, help the poor, and all of that. Despite the one-upping rituals of hipster aid worker hangouts, the point is not to suffer as much as you can or deprive yourself of as many comforts as you can. Don't let some misguided soul down the bar from you who voluntarily works for a pittance with zero benefits make you feel guilty about your housing allowance, home-leave package, and 403(b). Buy him or her a drink, offer him or her a better job (if you can), be a sympathetic listening ear. But don't feel guilty.

## The Arse-End of Nowhere

Once, very early on in my humanitarian career, I spent what felt at the time like an eternity living in and going to some of the most out-of-the-way, infested, grimy, uncomfortable, downtrodden, and generally impoverished places you can imagine. Once during that period, I ran into a British guy passing through the town where I was living. It was drab, dusty settlement in the bend of a dirty, slow-moving river. He described that place as “the arse-end of nowhere.”

For humanitarian workers, it is a point of pride to say that we log our share of time in the hard places. The tougher, more remote, and more dangerous the location, the better. We love being at the arse-end of nowhere, whether it is an urban center recently decimated by a huge natural disaster, a high altitude community with no access or services, or a tiny island with no airstrip or harbor. We love to tell ourselves that we love to suffer in those obscure places where the power always goes out, where there’s no water and we get sick from the food, where dogs yap all night, or where we can hear gunfire off in the distance.

The arse-ends of nowhere are those remote places where life is tough, where progress is hard to achieve and see. These are places where even the smallest gains are incredibly fragile and can evaporate in a split second over issues that would be nothing in the outside world. At the arse-end of nowhere information about the external context is hard to get. When you’re at the arse-end of nowhere, things that seemed straightforward and obvious from the outside, suddenly become entangled and messy. Logic and reason go out the window at the arse-end of nowhere. People from there, with little or no external worldview, frequently make ludicrous assumptions about how things are or jump to wild conclusions about causes and effect.

Everything takes longer, too. Tasks that an outsider might think should be simple can in reality take all day, or maybe even longer, at the arse-end of nowhere. And there’s sometimes danger. Sometimes just getting through the day without being kidnapped, shot at, driving on a landmine, or falling over the edge of a cliff can be an accomplishment of significance at the arse-end of nowhere.

When you’re at the arse-end of nowhere you have to consciously lock yourself into a mode of thinking which says, approximately, “I will do what I have to do to get by, to survive, to function effectively in this environment.” Maybe you have to dress differently in order to accommodate local sensitivities. Maybe you have to eat different food, because that’s all there is. Maybe you have to summon every ounce of patience that you possibly can when working with local staff and partners—not that they’re not nice people, and not that you dislike them as people, but because their core beliefs about what you’re all there to accomplish and what your respective roles in that process of accomplishment are so vastly different from your own that there is almost no common point of reference. Sometimes the only thing that you have when it comes to local working relationships at the arse-end of nowhere is a shared meal and maybe a cold beer at the end of the day.

Working at the arse-end of nowhere can sometimes feel like an endless string of capitulations in an apparent total vacuum of logic and reason. You can spend an awful lot of time not really knowing what’s going on at the arse-end of nowhere. It can feel like—and often is—a seemingly endless cycle of returning to square one, re-establishing basic consensus, laboriously moving on to square two, establishing basic consensus, putting a tentative toe ever so lightly onto square three... and... it all crumbles. And you’re back to square one, again.

There are reasons why the arse-end of nowhere is the arse-end of nowhere.

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Don’t get me wrong. I love aid work, and I get that it—almost by definition—includes NGOs. But as I look at how hard it is for aid organizations to stay on track, or by contrast, how easily we get



distracted, entangled, and muddled, it becomes tougher to fight a growing sense of despair with the system (punctuating moments of brilliance, obvious good that gets accomplished, notwithstanding).

In an odd way, at the same time, when I sit at HQ or in a regional office, or even a large country office, and look at the amount of energy and effort that goes into just keeping the machine chugging along; when I consider the amount of angst, drama, and endless discussion involved in simply keeping the ship steered in one direction; when I look at the amount of work that it takes to achieve consensus on even the basic, no-brainer kinds of decisions, before even one piece of relief has reached even one disaster survivor; when I look at the number of meetings that have to be not just attended, but *called*, I begin to feel nostalgic. I feel nostalgia for times and places where I could at least claim a little street cred for having survived a supposedly difficult environment. I've said it many times: "Give me the Khmer Rouge, or the Taliban, but rescue me from the marketers, fundraisers, and NGO bureaucracy."

Because as I think about it, the substance of what it takes to make progress in the field is almost point-by-point identical to the substance of what it takes to make progress in an NGO context. It's the same battles, the same painful processes that derail in the end, the same boondoggle, the same sidetracking of meaningful discussion about what needs to happen with utterly illogical and very often self-imposed restrictions in the name of corporate culture or identity. Sometimes it feels that the NGO world gets so wrapped up in its own spin on reality, so closed off from external conversation, so unable (or unwilling) to consider substantive change at a paradigmatic level, that we really might just as well be in an inaccessible mountain village with no electricity or water.

Don't let the nice cubicles and conference rooms fool you. It's an awful lot like being at *the arse-end of nowhere*.

## Buyer Beware

About 15 years ago I worked quite closely with a guy whose career was flagging. Everyone knew it. He'd started out strong, back in the day, when two of the key qualifications were English as a first language and the stamina to not miss work even while in the throes of amoebic dysentery (or any one of a myriad of other equally indelicate illnesses). But the world had changed and he had not kept pace. Maybe he shared an unpopular opinion too stridently and/or too publicly, fought the wrong fights, or bet on the wrong political alliances. Maybe he thought the distinguished service of his early years would be remembered a decade later.

He went from being a short-listed internal candidate for a senior administrative position, at one point, to a succession of lateral moves and incremental demotions. He was shuffled around into increasingly irrelevant roles where, we were all officially informed, someone with his "depth of experience" would be better able to "add operational value." Everyone knew what was going on. It was painful to watch. It became awkward to work with him.

Although he and I have not had the same logo on our business cards for more than a decade, I do keep tabs on him. I know that he retired not long ago, a white-haired old man with grown children. He retired from an essentially junior position, still wondering what it was exactly that he may have done wrong.

He was an adult. Surely he could have seen what was happening and taken charge of his own destiny. He could have sent his CV around and at least been seriously considered for more senior, certainly more *interesting* positions in another aid organization. However, he did not. And in the end it was his choice.

\* \* \*

Not long ago I got word that yet another colleague had finalized divorce proceedings. This person is a veteran of several "big" disaster responses: Kosovo, Darfur, Tsunamiland... He was married for most of those. Now he's not.

In theory, at least, no one had to tell him what he was potentially in for. There was ample precedent in his own immediate circle—he needn't have looked very far to see what could happen. No one should have had to tell him that while theoretically marriage could survive the kind of deployment schedule he was on, we all already know, on the basis of having seen the same scenario play out time and time again, that this was not the most likely outcome.

Who knows exactly what it was that made it all unravel? Time apart for any reason and under the most benign circumstances takes its toll on a relationship. Whether for the one staying at home or the one going to the field, the first year of rapid onset disaster deployment or field work where the needs of "the poor" come first is romantic. The second is a labor of love. After that it becomes an unwelcome chore that increasingly builds resentments on *both* sides of the relationship.

My friend started his career in aid work knowing full well that he was signing up for weeks, sometimes months, away from home, stuck in the pressure-cooker of disaster response operations where it can very often feel in the moment as if the rules have changed or don't apply. Large disaster zones are notorious as places where things run badly amuck in the personal lives of the aid workers who inhabit them. But even beyond what may or may not have transpired during lonely evenings back home or in at the ill-reputed team house parties, I think the larger issue is that my friend allowed himself to be set up for personal failure.

Surely he knew what was happening. He could have taken a leave of absence or even just resigned to go home and sort things out. It would probably not have affected his hire-ability down the road, and at a personal level no one in the agency or the responses he was on would have thought any less of him for it. In fact, some would have applauded him. But he didn't take time off or quit.

He was a big boy who made his own choices. I'm not saying they were all the wrong choices. But every choice has consequences, and he's now dealing with the results of his.

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Many people idealize aid work. Not the tasks so much, although perhaps those, but the industry community, the supposed sense that we're all in this together after the same things, the mistaken notion that we're all well-looked after because aid workers are all good people with nothing but love for all humanity.

But it is important for you to understand that just like almost any other endeavor in life, humanitarian aid will take everything you have and give you nothing back if you let it. Just like the rest of the world, the aid world is an unfair one where a single ill-considered email message might be held against you for life. The aid world is an unfair world where your contribution, no matter how significant, is simply seen as "doing your job" and might very well be completely forgotten before even the next internal re-structuring. You need to understand that no one will stop you from self-destructing personally or professionally, so long as your expense reports are done properly and you meet internal process deadlines. You need to understand that, just like in the rest of the world, people with less skill and maybe even less experience than you will be promoted past you or get perks that you think you deserve more than them for no apparent reason.

Understand that this work will take as much as you have to give it. It will let you choose to work rather than spend time with your family. It will let you choose to deploy rather than to work on your relationships. It will let you spend your hard-earned pittance on therapy or medical bills not covered by insurance. You will not get a gold watch when you retire, and there will be no memorial for you when you die.

This is not cynicism. It is simply the way the world, including the aid world, works.

Nor is this a list of reasons why you should not choose the life of an aid worker. I have chosen to remain an aid worker, and pretty much all of my friends have, too.

Just, *buyer beware*.

## Violate

Not long ago I signed on the dotted line and committed a large number of something out to the field on behalf of my employer. This commitment represented both a sizeable financial investment, and also a large number of a particular item that was to be distributed a large number of beneficiaries. It's something that we use from time to time in the context of relief responses—if I said the name you'd likely recognize it.

But to be dead honest, I signed on that line believing that this intervention, this item would not help anyone in this particular case.

I can sleep at night because that item will not harm anyone, either. Truly. No one is going to die or get sick from using it. It's not going to cause an environmental catastrophe of some kind. But still, at the end of the day, it's going to be a lot of personnel hours spent doing a lot of paperwork, setting up a logistics supply chain, running internal controls (you say "bureaucracy", I say "accountability"), writing a glowing EOP report. All for something that in the end will simply make no difference.

Why would I ever do such a thing? I can hear you asking. I could write paragraphs getting into the weeds about the context and the chain of events that led up to me signing that line. But you could summarize it all as pressure to service the needs of an important donor.

I know the party line. We give a little now, do this thing that's maybe not the greatest, but once we have the trust of this donor we'll be in a position to educate them about good aid.

But I'm thinking we're more like the awkward teenage girl in high school who lets the jocks get to third base in the hopes of being asked on a proper date later.

\* \* \*

In a moment of jet-lag induced melancholic clarity, it once occurred to me that in the past twenty years I have in some way violated every value and principle that I hold dear as a humanitarian and also as a person. With one exception: I've never taken the life of another human being.

I do not mean to say that I live a life of wanton, heartless sin, corruption and evil. Not saying that I walk the earth self-flagellating. But I can pinpoint specific instances in the past where I have suspended my ethical and professional conscience, somehow, it seemed at the time, on behalf of the greater good.

Stick with aid long enough and you will both use and be used by the system, by the industry. You will dilute true excellence in favor of mediocrity. You will be conclusively aware of abuse of some kind and even though you can prevent it, you won't. Stick around long enough, and you will target aid on the basis of priorities other than need alone. You will violate a trust. You will bend to the will of local political interests. You will use people. You will do the opposite of what your assessment tells you should be done because you believe that you know better. You will break your word. You will let your pride take precedence over the needs of the poor. You will make decisions that go against your principles, fully believing that this is your only real option.

You may not do them all every day.

But you will do them.

## Some Days

The world of humanitarian aid will eat your soul if you let it. Stick with this job, in this industry long enough, and you will see not just the good, the bad, and the ugly, but also the very bad, the really awful, and the grotesque. It is possible to spend your days consumed by the abundant and very real wrong here. It is possible to become deeply cynical about the realities of what could be done but isn't. It is possible to become disappointed or enraged by the realities of what actually happens in the field versus what is said in fundraising and PR materials; by the discrepancies between what pictures seem to portray and what you see and hear as you walk through the refugee camp. Not to mention that fact that this is difficult, largely thankless, and very often dangerous work.

These are all present realities in the aid world. And for me, the essence of staying sane here comes down to how successfully one maintains the balance of perspective between what *is* and what *is possible*.

If we allow ourselves to lose our grip on the reality of what is—the incredibly, depressingly ugly brokenness, messed-up UN and INGO idiocy of the aid system—we will become complacent and ultimately ineffective as change agents inside a system that very clearly has to change. If we lose sight of the unpleasant what is, we end up in a space of heady naïveté where it's all good because we all mean well and just that alone makes all the little brown babies gain weight and the villagers all smile and say “thank you,” like they don't seem to mind that our overhead calculation is whack. Unpleasant as it sometimes is, we have to stay connected with the facts of a ramshackle and frequently dysfunctional aid system.

On the other hand, if we lose our vision for what is possible, based on an honest understanding of past success—and there *are* successes: Despite its dysfunction and at times questionable motives, the aid system as we know it *has* accomplished a great deal of very real good—we also become ineffective. If we lose sight of what is possible, we can become deeply and irretrievably cynical. We'll be in a space where not only is it all bad, but where there's no point in even trying to make it better. The aid workers I know personally who spend too long in this space become depressed. Some leave the industry. Some abuse substances. Some live with mental health issues. Some commit suicide. It's not a good place to be.

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There are days when it feels as if all I do is argue with people dumber than me. There are days when it feels as if all I do is explain, yet again, the most basic principles of good aid to people who, for reasons I am not able to fathom, seem patently incapable of getting it. Some days the weight of a dysfunctional system feels very heavy. Some days the dark specter of “what is” threatens to consume “what is possible.”

The hardest part of this job is not seeing awful things in the field. It's not repeatedly witnessing the suffering of others and being able to offer little as a remedy, dealing with corrupt district officials, getting sick, or spending too long away from one's family too often, hard as those things truly can be. No, the hardest part of this job is simply dealing day after day with the crushing weight of a system that fundamentally lacks real incentives for getting right what it claims as its core purpose. And by the same token, the most dangerous part of this job is not armed militants, or bad drivers, or blood parasites. No, the most dangerous part of this job is the humanitarian world itself. It will eat your soul if you let it.

Some days it is about just getting through the day. Some days it comes down to a conscious decision to invoke—almost as an act of faith—the “what is possible,” in order to cope with the “what is.” Some days it's about identifying spheres of influence, focusing my efforts in those places where I know I can make a difference, and letting the others go. Some days I have to consciously reassess where I fit into

the big picture and adjust accordingly my expectations of what I can feasibly contribute. Some days it's about finding that Zen place. Some days it takes a conscious act of dogged will to stay.

## Fired

It was in the late 1990s that I started my first HQ job with an organization whose main office was in the Washington DC area. I was young and cocky, a few cumulative years of experience as a low-level staffer in Southeast Asia under my belt, the ink not quite dry on my graduate degree. Just a few weeks into that new position with a new organization, I was assigned the task of managing an internal project, one element of which included me having to supervise a consultant who was much older and had many years more experience in the industry than I.

There is no really nice way to put this: He was a pompous, belligerent old bastard. He was crusty, cranky, jaded, cynical, and field-hardened. He was prone to sweeping generalizations and ridiculously extreme pronouncements. A lifetime of aid work had taken its toll on his body and on his personal life. He'd been divorced a couple of times and had some chronic conditions of the sort that you tend pick up when your life is spent in or bouncing between impoverished places, always a little bit ill, sleep-deprived and far from family for weeks and months on end. He'd been around and had a strongly developed set of opinions about what worked and what didn't. And he wore his disdain for me and my bright, new ideas on his sleeve.

I won't bore you with the details of how things went except to say that after a predictably explosive three weeks together in rural India, I chose to escalate our issues up the chain of management, and basically got him fired. Not just fired, but effectively blacklisted for future consultancy with my then employer. And, as the aid world often acts like, and often really is a big good ol' boys network, being blacklisted by one NGO can quickly turn into being blacklisted by many. The actual quality of his work was of secondary relevance, I told myself. He was so offensive and difficult to work with that it outweighed the value of his actual performance or contribution to the project.

While I didn't keep in touch with him, via my own networks I stayed loosely aware of how things went for him after that. And they didn't go well at all. His consultancies started to dry up, and he eventually retired early to make a living selling real estate.

For several years thereafter, in my heart of hearts, I'd occasionally congratulate myself for having indirectly made the world a better place by helping him find his way out of the aid industry.

\* \* \*

Not quite as long ago, this time in the field as a Country Director, my finance department presented to me evidence that one of the local project managers—someone I supervised directly—had essentially embezzled funds from the organization.

The actual amount in question was not large. Moreover, as we looked carefully at the circumstances surrounding the embezzlement, I also understood that while a clear and intentional violation of policy had taken place, it was also in some ways not entirely cut-and-dried. It was one of those odd but not-nearly-as-rare-as-you-might-think situations where *one* interpretation of what had happened, could be that he was simply doing what was culturally accepted and even *expected* in that context.

It was a situation that I wrestled with. In terms of effect on the project that he was running, the diversion of those funds he'd embezzled was of no material consequence. Outputs and targets would be achieved on schedule, impact and sustainability prospects would not change one iota.

Moreover, I could not shake the human element: I liked the guy, and prior to that had been quite pleased with his performance. He was a young man with a young family—a pretty young wife who'd insisted on playing the perfect hostess each time I'd been at the project site; a dribbling baby daughter, less than one year old who'd bounced on my knee on several occasions.

Taking the action required by company policy in this situation would have serious negative repercussions for my employee and his family. Putting that family through hardship seemed exactly opposite to my entire purpose for being there at all in the first place. All made worse by the fact that I knew them personally.

But in the end, despite some very deep emotional reservations, I fired him.

It was a straightforward, letter-of-the-law policy decision. It was about maintaining a “zero tolerance” stance on fraud or corruption in any form, and setting the right precedent in the office. My employer’s policy required that I do it, and the labor code of the country we were in allowed for it under our particular circumstances. It had to be done.

\* \* \*

We all change over time. As I look back through old correspondence, I’m often surprised to see the ways in which my thinking has evolved over the years. My first five years in aid showed the most significant change. While some ideas and ways of thinking become even more solidified, others—things I’d previously taken as self-evident truths—ended up going out the window.

I think back often to those two situations where I made similar choices but for very different reasons, and I can’t help but be struck by the fact that what seems crystal clear right now, with a year of hindsight can change 180 degrees. Today’s morally indignant vitriol is very often tomorrow’s self-doubt. This is made all the more troubling by the fact that very often we have more power than we think we do. Very often what we do in the course of doing aid—even things that seem small—matter more than we think it does. Whether we like it or not. All too often we’re unaware of the impact of it all until long after the fact, by which time it is far too late.

What happens when you base large, far-reaching decisions on assumptions and opinions that you later come to realize were dead wrong?

You do this job long enough and you begin to accrue an account of stains on your soul. Do this long enough and your dark moments come to be haunted by the faces of beneficiaries you’ve had to turn away; by the memory of communities not necessarily made better by a pet project that maybe served your interests at the time, or worse, one that failed miserably; by the memory of actions taken in fits of self-righteous self-empowerment but later regretted; by images of those you’ve had to injure in some way, perhaps in the name of the greater aid good.

\* \* \*

There is often tremendous unspoken pressure on humanitarians, both imposed on us, and also, perversely, self-imposed. The pressure I’m talking about is the pressure to be good people, because we do supposedly good things. We do good in the world, or so the reasoning goes, and so we must also be good ourselves. We can feel this pressure from our neighbors whose eyes well up as they affirm what we do; we feel it from the journalists and bloggers who accuse us of being blind or calloused to the needs of the poor, and cite the facts that we live in team houses or ride in white SUVs as the evidence. We feel it in our own nagging guilt when we do things which contradict our notions of “good.” It is important to understand and articulate in as many words that being a good person does not qualify one to be a competent humanitarian, any more than being an effective aid worker qualifies one as a good person. I do not in any way intend to convey that we have license to live lives of wanton excess and abuse. Of course, we should all strive to be good people. But we need to recognize that personal life failures do not make us less humanitarian, or vice versa.

The belligerent consultant with whom I traveled to India was truly a mean, nasty person who should not have been hired for that job in the first place. To this day that is my sincere and honest opinion. But thinking back on those two events, almost mirror images of each other, separated by nearly twenty years of experience, I am now challenged to consider workplace actions more deeply before taking them. I believe the balance is in understanding that the fact that we’re all supposedly working toward a big picture good, in no way releases us from the responsibility to deal fairly and justly with the small pictures.



## Noble Savages

On the way back from my first deployment to Haiti I couldn't help but notice the two guys in matching T-shirts printed with the logo and website of a medical relief agency, carrying matching duffel bags, also bearing the logo and website of the same agency. As they stood next to me at the luggage conveyor belt in the arrival terminal at LaGuardia, another passenger from the same flight, obviously a tourist and obviously a bit tipsy came up to them anxious to begin a conversation the likes of which I have heard many times:

"Were you guys just in Haiti?"

"Yes..."

"What were you doing there?"

"We were on a medical mission, helping earthquake victims..."

(Effusively) "Wow, that is *awesome!*" (Then, visibly tearing up) "That is such a wonderful thing that you've done. I'm serious, man. Keep up the good work. Bless you. *God bless you!*"

\* \* \*

One of my colleagues is a young mother, very bright, exceptionally good at her job. She's a long ways from "the field," both literally and organizationally. She sits in a cubicle in Europe and does a lot of writing, a lot of consensus-building internally, and a lot of networking externally. The world is probably a better place as a result of her doing her job diligently. But most days it would be tough to explain to someone not in the aid industry exactly how what she does translates into more resources in the hands of the world's poor.

One afternoon, midway through a week of genuinely important meetings in the capital of an emerging economy nation, we take a break and sit for a few minutes, sipping cheap-for-us/expensive-for-them cappuccinos at an outdoor café. We'd both rather be out in the field, you know, helping the poor a little more directly. In a voice laden with rueful irony she makes a joke about "fighting world poverty from Geneva." At that moment the waiter shoos away a beggar—a bent, old woman with gnarled fingers. We call them "panhandlers" in North America. Everywhere else they're "beggars."

Neither my talented colleague, nor I do anything to stop the waiter, nor do we reach into our wallets.

\* \* \*

I once stayed for while in a team house in a mind-numbingly poor and often very dangerous country. It was a place where the diet of poor, rural families was predominated by onions and garlic, and where kidnapping foreign aid workers for ransom accounted for a measurable portion of the national economy at the time.

A typically poor, middle-aged woman from a peri-urban neighborhood had been hired to cook our food. She prepared three meals for us each day, buying in the market and then cooking what must have seemed like a positively massive quantity of unbelievably expensive food.

But some of the expats didn't like her cooking. They'd fill their plates with rice and vegetables, take two bites, declare that they "didn't like it," and leave partially eaten portions of food on the table.

I later learned that after we'd left the dining room, our cook would scrape those partially eaten plates of food into a plastic bag. Later she'd carry it all home, where she'd feed it to her children.

\* \* \*

An expat from a very small, very evangelical mission/aid organization once berated me for living at a level of comfort high above the local standard in a very poor place. He and his family had dedicated their lives to living as close to the local standard as possible, including refusing many of the benefits offered by their employing organization (he sent his two children to the local elementary school, for example, rather than to an international school even though his employer would have covered that cost).

He insisted that aid work was not merely a job but a *calling*, and that someone like me—someone who accepted the benefits of being a comparatively well-compensated foreigner in a very poor place—could never be “one with the people,” could not be true to that calling, was somehow less of a humanitarian.

It is important to understand that *sometimes* aid work is a calling. *Sometimes* aid work is about the giving of oneself to a cause, to that greater good. *Sometimes* aid work is about very real personal sacrifice on behalf of others. *Sometimes* aid work accomplishes some real good.

And then sometimes aid work is just another job.

\* \* \*

On those rare occasions when I discuss my work in any depth with ordinary citizens, I typically encounter one of two general reactions. One is a kind of superficial, simplistic, ethnocentric know-it-all-ness (“The *real* problem with Africa is that they just don’t value human life the way we do here.”). The other is an equally simplistic and typically emotional affirmation of what I do. Little old ladies behind me in line at the supermarket well up with tears and pat my arm. “Oh, that’s such a good thing that you do for such a noble cause.”

It was easy to see through the first. But it took me a little longer to really think through why the second—the affirmation—bothered me.

Our work makes a difference. But as people we’re just as selfish and self-centered, ruthless, hard-hearted, sometimes even as shallow and vain, surely as *human* as anyone else. Aid workers are famous for their often self-righteous, smug, holier-than-everyone-else attitude. Let’s be clear: This is not a good thing. We may accomplish great humanitarian feats. The world may be objectively and measurably better because we show up for work every day. But as individuals, we’re all just as broken as everyone else. Maybe more. And we’re definitely not noble.

Over the years it has become my personal habit to never wear clothing with NGO logos or use NGO branded luggage when I travel. Sometimes I even lie about where I’m going and why to the person sitting next to me on the plane or at the luggage belt. I find it helps to keep things from getting weird in airport lounges and supermarkets.

## Lessons Learned

Once, in a desolate part of West Africa, I was part of a small team doing the planning for a large-ish, multi-faceted program, one component of which was supplying credit to female entrepreneurs—i.e. women. Despite weeks of planning and community preparation, and despite lengthy explanations to the local support team, on the day that we began actually walking into villages in the proposed program area, local colleagues and village leaders alike seemed genuinely surprised to learn that we would at some point during the assessment need to talk to actual women.

Consternated murmuring ensued in every community where we pressed this point home. Brows were furrowed and hands were wrung. After one particularly painful pause, a weathered farmer stepped forward with a solution:

“I can tell you whatever you need to know about the women in my village. Ask me your questions so that I can answer.” The 10 or 12 other elders standing around nodded in solemn agreement. Even my own local counterparts (all were men from that region) seemed to think that the one farmer speaking for the many women of his village was a perfectly acceptable arrangement.

It was not easy, but through a combination of persuasion and persistence I did eventually manage to conduct focus-groups with actual, live women in that area.

This is but one example. I am continually amazed at how regularly I have to reiterate this very basic principle, and how frequently it comes across as a surprise to local counterparts and colleagues alike: you should consult the actual people for whom an aid project or program is intended during the planning process.

Even when it looks like a lot of standing (or sitting) around talking, aid is difficult and often intensely cerebral work. It is about bridging cultural and communication gaps between people and between communities, and the only way to do that is by investing in time and patience. There are no shortcuts or “game-changing” new innovations. It is as hard as it is, and takes as long as it takes.



\* \* \*

Once I led a small team doing a community assessment in a remote district in Southeast Asia. It was one of those places with lots of Communist propaganda-looking billboards and plaster busts of the local hero on stands in every meeting room. To outsiders like me it felt very closed and controlled.

Near the end of a particularly frustrating day of seemingly being stuck talking only to cadres, I found myself walking through a small village with a white-haired little old man wearing a green uniform with red epaulettes and lots of medals with sickles and hammers on them. He was the chairman of the local Communist Party. I finally blurted out, in a tone far more strident than I should have ever used, something like, "Okay, so I will need to speak to real farmers at some point while I'm here."

He gave me a funny look and then said, "All right. I'll get a real farmer for you to speak with. Wait here." He climbed the ladder up into the house we were standing in front of.

After about five minutes he came back out, wearing a tattered T-shirt, shorts, flip-flops and the kind of straw hat that every farmer in that area wears for working in the fields. He said, "Here I am. Ask me anything you want, and I'll answer as a farmer." It turned out he was a farmer, too. A real one. Farming was actually his day job, and being the chairman of the local Communist Party was something he did on the side.

Know who you're talking to. Nobody is just one thing. People almost always have more complex roles in communities than is immediately obvious to an outsider. Things are almost never what they seem at first to be.



\* \* \*

I once got sent to support a relief program in a small, poor country where everything was written in Cyrillic and more powerful neighboring countries vied for influence by building progressively larger and more ornate mosques in the centers of towns.

Some misguided person in the Gift-in-Kind (GIK) department back at headquarters had sent an entire 30-ft container full of used clothing that was literally bundled in 50 kg bales. The local team had tried on several different occasions to distribute the stuff, but no one wanted it despite the fact that the area was desperately poor. I saw local people, faces pinched and visibly shivering in the frigid high-desert winter, walk straight past clothing free for the taking, without so much as a sideways glance.

One of the local staff came up with the idea of selling the clothing, rather than giving it away. They simply set up a per-item charge system. Children's clothing was one price, everything else another price. Either way, it was an amount that almost anyone in that province could afford. Everything in the container was sold within a few weeks. The cost added to this donated used clothing had a specific name in the local language. It translated into English as "the self-esteem tax."

When it came time to report back to the donor of that container full of used clothing, my colleagues put together a report that explained the self-esteem tax and included some nice photos of people cheerfully paying what amounted to a few pennies in exchange for the opportunity to walk through the container and look through the bales for something they wanted. However the donor was quite unhappy. They'd meant for the stuff to be given away, not sold. Their written response said something like, "if we'd wanted that clothing to be sold, we could have just had a garage sale here in America."

In this case I'm glad those people got clothing, even if it was used, on terms that allowed them to keep some feeling of self-respect.

But...

If donors are clueless or misguided, then we have to educate them. And if we can't educate them, then we have to stop accepting their support. And, once more, aid has got to be about the recipients.



## Oooooh-Rah!

It's that time of year again. And no, I don't mean Christmas. It's time for employee performance evaluations.

Just as you might expect in an essentially liberal field of work in a postmodern age, a key part of employee performance in many humanitarian aid agencies is the "employee self-appraisal." It is important, we tell ourselves, to internally apply those same principles of community development that we apply in the field. Just as we go to lengths to work with our beneficiary communities to ensure that program goals and objectives make sense in the local context, and to confirm that strategies for achieving these goals are culturally appropriate, so we must define and measure progress among ourselves, as individuals, in individual terms.

All to say that last week I found myself an empowered co-owner/stakeholder in a dialogic and participatory process, designed to establish mutually acceptable and intelligible indicators of achievement against concrete benchmarks. Basically, my employer wanted to know how many grant proposals I'd had a part in writing during the past year, and of that, how many had received funding. But there were other categories of interest as well.

I was particularly piqued by the category entitled, "Work/Life Balance."

It is good and well and appropriate for humanitarian aid agencies to care about the personal well-being of their staff. On good days I genuinely believe that they do care—at least most of them, even though they do not always act as if they do. After having been a hiring manager many times over, I can attest personally to having cared deeply for the well-being of my staff, to genuinely wanting the best for them (not in a paternalistic way), and to going to some trouble on their behalf.

But I am struck by the paradox of the work/life balance for aid workers.

Looking down the lists of contacts in Facebook or Skype, I see name after name of aid worker friends and acquaintances who have made significant, difficult choices in order to do the work that they do. I see people who have, given up, in many cases permanently, the option for a life that most people back home would associate with the term "balanced."

For most of us, aid work is not a job that we can leave at the office after 5:00 p.m. This is true regardless of where we might be based or what our exact job is. Thanks to smartphones and tablets, it doesn't really matter where I am physically, whether I'm at the office or watching my child's Christmas Pageant. I remain connected and in touch and engaged with what is going on out at the point of delivery. Whether I am polishing up my Harley out in the garage or watching prime-time television with my wife, glass of wine in-hand, I'm never too far—at least mentally—from what is going on in Syria or Dafur or [INSERT NAME OF CURRENT CRISIS].

As I reflect on that list of aid-worker friends—people with whom I have argued with over budgets, huddled with in the cold of high-desert winter, or with whom I have slogged through mosquito-infested monsoons, I think of another paradox. These have got to be some of the most intense and opinionated, while at the same time the most laid-back, mellow and open-minded people I've ever come across. On one hand totally unassuming and unglamorous and, well, nerdy. You won't recognize them in airports, unless is by their inch-thick, tattered passports. But then you get to know them and they can be the most engaging and interesting and totally over-the-top crowd you'll ever roll with. Aid workers partying in relief zones make state university fraternities seem contemplative by comparison.

Aid work is often very fun, almost never boring. But definitely not what most "normal" folk would call "balanced." It is probably not a life that many would define as "having quality of life." Living in or frequent travel to unstable places, constant exposure to dangers ranging from violent attack—whether as a direct target or as collateral damage—to disease or infection, to simply an extreme environment where excesses of various kinds is frequently the norm all take their toll. As do months or years away from one's family and social support; days on the road, living out of a suitcase and eating street food.

For as much as we talk about improving the quality of life for our beneficiaries, we seem to be incapable of managing our own work/life balance. Sometimes it's guilt that keeps us from taking paid R&R after a long, difficult deployment, but more frequently it's simply self-neglect. Far more often we simply neglect our own quality of life. We get caught up in the rhythm, and whether we're talking about changing organizations, changing jobs, leaving town, marrying the girl (or guy), taking that two weeks of vacation, or simply turning off our computers for the night, it just never is quite the right time. One deployment or contract or posting leads to the next. Tomorrow never comes. It can be a tough situation to think one's way out of.

\*

Some burn out. Some fade away. But most of us wouldn't dream of doing anything else. We very often simply redefine "quality of life" to reflect the reality of the moment: A night with air-conditioning. A secluded corner of the airport to curl up in for part of an 18-hour layover. A ride in an enclosed vehicle. The withdrawal of rebel troops from a relief zone. Internet that works ten hours per day. An unexpected upgrade.

\* \* \*

As the humanitarian aid industry becomes increasingly professional, I find myself more and more often trying to fit into a for-profit professional paradigm elements of this life and work (if the two are even separable) that resist a natural fit. And so, as I clicked my way through the "Work/Life Balance" section of my online self-appraisal form, I couldn't help but chuckle out loud and wonder if the authors of that questionnaire actually knew what I do for a living. While I might be harder on myself in some of the other sections—sections that correspond to areas where I want to grow professionally—in the "Work/Life Balance" section I was totally confident. The grading scale went from 1 to 5 (5 = "excellent"). I gave myself a "5" for every category and in the comment box simply wrote:

"This job rocks. *Oooh-rah!*"

## Sacrifice

I meet many people who think of humanitarian work as a “calling.” Maybe they’re called by God. Maybe they feel guilty for having been born into wealth. Maybe they want to “give something back.” Very often they see the life of a humanitarian as a series of sacrifices that they somehow feel compelled to make.

I’ll be very direct: I find this logic quite troubling. First, in my experience, these are the ones least likely to be honest about their other motivations, like adventure, deep conversations with refugees, or absolution for previous sins. Second, they’re typically the least open to the conversation about what good aid is. Why? Because to them this is all about them and their sacrifices.

\*

In its basic form, sacrifice is making a trade-off: You sacrifice this in order to get that. You love Big Macs, but don’t eat them. You sacrifice in order to stay in shape.

But sacrifice is also much more than simple trade-off. The language of sacrifice or calling imply moral high ground. Ascetics are called to live lives of chastity, poverty and obedience—they sacrifice—in order to secure a better afterlife. Parents remind their grown children of sacrifices made in years past in the attempt to avoid nursing homes. For all of its apparent virtue, in human relationships “sacrifice” very often boils down to attempts to control and manipulate. Making sacrifices is a way to accrue social capital. In the humanitarian world it often looks like this:

*“I would have been totally justified in staying here in suburbia and living a comfortable life, but I’m making the sacrifice of moving to Costa Rica where things are tougher, just so that I can help the poor and make the world better.”*

Making the humanitarian sacrifice makes you better than those who do not, or so the logic goes. They’re staying home and getting rich off of other people’s misery; You’re taking a low salary, or maybe no salary, and living a life of deprivation for some vague notion of greater good. To use the language of sacrifice is to attempt to establish entitlement. Because of your sacrifices, you are somehow entitled to something from those who did not make similar sacrifices. Maybe it’s respect. Maybe appreciation. Maybe a raise. Maybe a break on your check-in luggage fees.

I can think of few things that are more detrimental than thinking of humanitarian aid work as a “sacrifice.” Few things set the tone for an imbalanced power dynamic between you and the poor you say you want to help; few things are more bald attempts at manipulation of your donors and constituents and even colleagues than thinking of your work as a sacrifice.

Further, few things will set you up for disillusionment and burn-out and bitterness in the future. If humanitarian work is a choice you’re making out of a sense of “being called” to “sacrifice,” I can promise that one day you *will* regret that choice.

\* \* \*

You can’t have everything. Making tough choices between two or more things that you really want is simply the reality of being an adult.

I like the way that aid-worker and blogger Meg describes the thought processes around her choice to stay in Battambang, Cambodia<sup>5</sup>.

*“...But when I looked critically at how I was trying to make decisions, I didn’t like what I saw. When I moved to Battambang, it wasn’t as a career move, I came because I loved Battambang, I loved my friends here, and I saw an opportunity to join the community for some very cool projects.”*

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<sup>5</sup> <http://planningtheday.wordpress.com/2011/03/20/staying-put/>



I may have made a different choice myself, but there is refreshing honesty in her description of thinking through exactly what she wants to spend her days doing. And if I were to give you all, dear readers, advice on this point it would be to do as Meg has done (although I don't mean move to Battambang, necessarily): Make your decision to pursue humanitarian work based on what you actually want to *do*. As in, what kinds of activities do you actually want to spend your days doing?

Moreover, understand that you cannot have it all, and not because humanitarian work equals a life of deprivation, but because this is simply the way that life is. You most likely will not be able to have a humanitarian career and also park a Ferrari in the garage of your summer home in the Hamptons. You have to choose one. Make the most informed choice you can. And understand that it is, in fact, a choice, not a sacrifice.

Let this be your response to the disdainful critics and the doe-eyed enthusiasts alike.

## Family

One thing that drives me insane very quickly is the perky, cheerful career expat family who insists, apparently of one accord, that nothing is better than relief and aid work, while married with children. To hear them tell it, they traded nothing in exchange for a lifetime of humanitarian work. They regale dinner guests with stories of their kids being born in bamboo or mud huts under the care of a local midwife in some far-flung corner of a remote country. They all, quite predictably, speak French plus two obscure tribal languages. Their favorite comfort food is a species of grub found only beneath the bark of an exotic bush which grows only on Madagascar. The kids spend summers doing internships with the UN while still in high-school, and as a result will land absurdly senior positions by the time they're out of college. The parents have high-profile roles in major emergency responses for many years before becoming full-time free-lance consultants who specialize in high talking-to-doing ratio subfield like "humanitarian policy" or "peace building." They charm dinner guests with quirkily heated family debates over whether to spend Christmas on Zanzibar or Denpasar.

The hard reality for most of us who do humanitarian work, though, is that we have made, and continue to make trade-offs in other areas of life—in some cases very costly ones—to be here. But, these trade-offs are not always obvious. They sneak up on us and insinuate themselves into our life framework without our awareness until too late, and we wake up to find that we've made choices we don't remember making.

Maybe I'll attend a week of workshops in Bangkok or Dakar, where I spend the days deep in conversation with my older, married colleagues. After the day's discussion winds down, ties loosened, and conversations turn to personal things, it is common for me to hear them wonder aloud, perhaps only half joking, whether keys to the front door will still work upon return. While I'm not specifically aware of any statistics on the likelihood of marriage success or failure among aid workers, my own anecdotal observation is that this work is hard on relationships. The number of my own friends and acquaintances whose marriages have dissolved under the pressure of a field setting at least equals those who have made it through marriage intact.

Even so, among my single colleagues, marriage and relationships are the most common question. How does it work, being in relief or development work while being married? How do *I* do it? After two decades of humanitarian work, married for more than three quarters of that, there are still days when I cannot answer this question coherently in my own head.

The nature of the aid industry is such that despite (often genuine) attempts to the contrary, humanitarian organizations—NGOs—must sometimes move their people around like pawns on a chessboard. Further, even when both partners are aid industry professionals, positions are almost always for one person, not two. Which inevitably means that one must leave her or his job and life and friends, and uproot for the sake of the other, to a context where the unknown is the most reliable constant. Over time, with repetition, this pattern leads to resentment.

Being based in a developed country, but with frequent travel, is not necessarily better. No matter how many tickets I purchase for my wife with frequent flyer miles, no matter what exotic gifts I might bring back, and no matter how many times I call home per week or per day while traveling, the conversation about the dates for my next trip is always a difficult one. Beyond the purely logistical challenges of managing a home, dealing with children, and generally keeping up with all the things that need to be kept up with, there is also the very real mental and emotional toll of having a family member absent, or being absent from one's family. When the length of time at home between travel is regularly counted in days rather than weeks it becomes increasingly untenable to argue that quality time together is as good, on balance, as quantity of time.

\* \* \*

Then I go to the field for a few weeks, meet my younger, single colleagues—those edgy 30-somethings who, I like to believe, remind me of *me* back in my glory days. We share war stories for a

while. I hear them talk about what they have already given up or might give up in order to keep doing humanitarian work: Maybe relationships, maybe office jobs. I hear them wonder aloud if they've made the right choice, or if it's too late to make the other choice. I see trade-offs quietly inserting themselves into the lives of my younger friends. I wonder if, in the end, these friends and colleagues of mine will make their trades consciously. Or maybe, before they've barely had a chance to think about it, another massive rapid-onset disaster will slam an impoverished corner of the earth, and they'll be on to the next deployment. And then that deployment will lead to another, and eventually the trade-off will surreptitiously make itself for them over time.

Maybe a proposal of marriage will come and they'll accept (or maybe they initiated it), and suddenly, before they even know what's happened, they'll find themselves as an accompanying spouse, or perhaps negotiating the bruised feelings of an accompanying spouse. Over time that, too, will morph and transpose from selecting posts based on the high profile of the position to selecting posts based on the availability of western education in a secure capital city somewhere. Evenings will be spent, not out drinking G&Ts and swapping stories of wild escapades on the Jalabad road, but at home pouring chocolate milk and reading *Thomas the Tank Engine* books. And another trade-off will have quietly made itself.

Myself at 25, slogging it out in southern Vietnam, my girlfriend a couple of borders away in Thailand, I was convinced that I absolutely could not go on without the promise, or at least reasonable assurance of the warmth of marriage and the stability of a family in a picket-fence home. But then, at 45, as I sit listening with a tiny bit of secret envy to my single, edgy 30-something friends one-upping each other with stories of their exploits in the field, and me, the silverback among them with house and family in North America—exactly what I'd wanted at 25—let loose for only a few weeks at a time, the thought that flashes briefly in my mind is, *What have I done?*

As I listen on to those same single 30-somethings contemplating their options, it strikes me that no matter what which option one might choose on any of it—aid work, or something else? Relief, or development? International posts, or cubicle farming? Married, or single? Children, or not?—you will one day wake up and wonder if you made the wrong choice. No matter which choice you make, there will come a time when you envy those who chose the other.

I don't mean to say that you will live a life of deep regret, plagued by unrequited longing for something else, pining back to an opportunity not taken while it still was an opportunity. I love my family fiercely, and as I write this have precisely zero regrets about how things have turned out. But I do mean that no matter which way you go on such choices, there will come a moment when you, too, ask yourself, *What have I done?*

And that, for me, is the point that needs to be made. Simply an acknowledgement that, as cliché as it may sound, it is true that the grass can often look greener on the other side of the fence. And to acknowledge as well, that others often look across the fence to *our* side to see greener pastures where we stand.

Life in general, and perhaps the life and career of a humanitarian in particular, is movement through a series of points beyond which there is simply no return. Sustained, committed relationships—marriage, in many cultures—along with the establishment of family, is one such point. Getting married, having children, having a family, all permanently alter the array of options open to aid workers, regardless of where they are in their careers. It's important to understand that there's no right or wrong path. Either way works, and either way can be tough. I know successful, effective career humanitarians in every possible permutation of marriage-family complex, just as I have friends and colleagues whose personal lives and careers have fallen apart, both married and single. Neither guarantees career success or personal happiness. Yet, there is probably no other aspect of the humanitarian experience—one's own personal relationships, including family—that has a more shaping effect on both career and life.

The flip side, of course, is that humanitarian aid and development are not jobs that many of us can leave at the office. Whether we like it or not, aid is one of those professions which winds inextricably through our personal lives. It colors every aspect of who we are. This is neither positive nor negative, necessarily. It just is. But it's one of those things which we absolutely must think through, eyes-open.

If family is what you want, that's fine. It's doable. The important thing, in my opinion, is to make your own choices. Learn from the experiences of others, but don't feel pressured into believing that what works well for them will necessarily work well for you. Understand that being an aid worker with family, regardless of whether you take the life of an expat or someone who is based somewhere and deploys frequently, requires difficult choices and concessions on both sides.

## Never Here

I was late checking-in for my flight today. No matter how convenient the time that I need to be at the airport and no matter how far in advance I know that I'll be traveling, the morning of there is always some extenuating circumstance, some reason why I rush out of the house at the last minute.

\* \* \*

It's not easy to balance aid work and a family life. When, for a variety of family-related reasons, it becomes necessary to come back home, to relocate to a first-world city for an HQ job there's the expectation that things will be somehow easier.

But they never are.

You're here, but your real work is over there. Your heart is over there. You're constantly torn, pulled in multiple directions. No matter where you are physically, there's a nagging, tormenting notion that you should be somewhere else. At home, you need to be out in the field; out in the field, you know you should be home. If you even know where home is.

\*

My wife puts up with a lot, bless her. It can't be easy being married to me. Or to any itinerant aid worker, for that matter.

I scheduled this trip after a previous one fell through at the last minute. Apparently the generals in Myanmar didn't see fit to give me a visa to their fair country. At least not this month.

And it's a good thing. See, if I'd gone to Myanmar, I would have missed Halloween.

Not that Halloween is any big deal. Until it seemed that I would miss it. And then there was drama. My daughter (8-going-on-15) had a meltdown. Apparently I'm *never* there. I miss *everything*.

And then the trip to Myanmar fell through and all was well. Until this trip—the one I'm on as I write this—came up. I knew about it and discussed it a full ten days in advance. There was full disclosure on this one. No ambiguity, no, “Well, I'm still sorting out the ticket.” And so, after some discussion and *finally* booking a ticket at the last minute—one that departed and arrived at decent hours—and after a day of all being well, and then an evening of watching must-see TV with my wife, I confess that I was a bit grumpy when at 11:03 p.m. she looked at me with the “you're never here” eyes and demanded to know why I'd booked travel to be away on my son's thrice-annual parent-teacher conference.

I am currently overseeing more than ten grants in eight countries. I meet every reporting deadline, get the no-cost-extension paperwork in on time. I meet my in-house administrative obligations, too. I submit my electronic labor-accounting reports, I do performance appraisals of those I supervise, I review and give meaningful feedback on proposals and strategies and plans and policies. People depend on me for a lot, and I follow through for them. I am dependable. I can deal with the big picture without losing the details. I get stuff done.

But at 11:03 p.m. last Wednesday, I had no answer for my wife. No excuses. I'd totally forgotten about that damned conference.

\*

I think I'm a pretty good dad. Okay, maybe not as over-the-top involved-in-the-minutiae-of-their-child's-lives as some. But, still, I'm a heck of a lot better than many.

Sometimes, though, I need to weigh in as a parent. Sometimes meals just have to be eaten, baths taken. Sometimes Sponge Bob has to be turned off so that homework can get done. And very often those are moments when my sweet little daughter (8-going-on-15) morphs into the Wicked Witch of the West.

In the course of a single week I might make financial decisions equivalent to the gross annual budget of some smaller NGOs. I make recommendations on strategies for entire regions that will affect

hundreds of employees, thousands of beneficiaries. I participate in discussions in different forums that are relevant globally. I have hired and fired people who depended directly on me as their supervisor for their livelihoods. I have handed relief items to refugees fresh from a third-world war zone, haggard and frightened. I have personally made decisions about where hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of aid would go and not go.

But when my daughter doesn't like what I want her to do, I suddenly become a nobody. And I have to swallow a level and quality of attitude and disrespect for which I am utterly unprepared.

\* \* \*

One of the hardest parts of this job, hands down, is just trying to stay balanced, being a whole person, and not totally losing yourself in the work. You learn, soon enough, that we are required to inhabit multiple worlds simultaneously. There's the world of aid: The high stakes, the pressure, the intense debates, the even more intense subject matter.

Then, there's the world outside of aid. Family, friends, acquaintances, neighbors who cannot begin to comprehend the stuff that we see and deal with. Not because it's so complicated or technical, but because it is so heavy. I long ago stopped trying to explain what I do to the neighborhood parents on the sidewalk outside my daughter's school while waiting for the bell to ring. If the subject of my travel comes up, I stick to stories of shopping, weird food, and crazy traffic.

I think this is the least acknowledged paradox of aid work: The fact that we do have to inhabit those multiples worlds (some of us more expertly than others). We act globally in the full sense of the term, hopefully for the better, as our job. And then, after hours, we're extraordinarily mundane.

My 8-going-on-15 year-old daughter helps keep me very well-connected with that reality.

\* \* \*

My flight left late this morning. Around 11:00 a.m. Enough time for me to walk my daughter to school, about two blocks away. She walked on ahead. Didn't really want to talk with me, beyond a few strongly-worded directives about how I'd *better* be back for Halloween.

The bell rang, I called out to her, she looked embarrassed and ran inside. 8-going-on-15.

I wanted to hurry back, but my son was busy shuffling through the leaves piled up along the sidewalk. I stifled impatience. I know I'm gone a lot. *I'm never here*. I don't want his childhood memories to be of me being on his case to hurry up so that I can leave.

## On Being Expat

Do we “live like them?” It is a perennial question and debate within the global community of expatriate aid workers. When we live in another country, as expats, how far do we go to try to live like local people? Do we live in the expat part of town, or do we live in a local neighborhood? Do we hire a housekeeper in the name of “supporting the local economy”, or do we insist on doing our own laundry and mopping in the name of “solidarity with the poor”? Where do we draw the lines, and why? Should there even be lines?

I’ll confess that I certainly spent my share of time as a younger, greener aid worker traipsing around the villages of rural Southeast Asia, trying to dress like a Cambodian farmer or take my *som tam* with as many green chilies as the residents of Ubonratchathani, somehow believing that these things made me “local.”

There was a time when I ritualistically endured long local bus rides across the Mekong Delta, when I could have taken a company car (we had the budget for it), all for the sake of showing my “solidarity” or “oneness” with people who I would in all likelihood never ever see again. And oddly, but not uniquely, somehow also believing that doing these things made me “better” than the well-coiffed expats wearing white shirts, safe in their air-conditioned offices in Ho Chi Minh City or Bangkok. I was practically Vietnamese/Cambodian/Thai (or so my local friends told me) and those others, but well-paid interlopers.

In the intervening years, though (and there are more of those intervening years than I care to acknowledge), I feel like I’ve come to understand better what it means to live and work in another place. In particular two things:

First, no one expects us to “be local.” And even if they did, we couldn’t. We very often place unreasonable burdens of expectation on ourselves while living in or visiting foreign places. Obviously we have to respect local culture and local laws, and obviously there are places where these have an effect on how we might dress, talk, eat, interact with others, and so on. But while of course we have to learn to be polite and dignified in other cultural contexts—maybe cover our heads, use correct personal pronouns, or reach into the food bowl with the proper hand—this is not at all the same thing as becoming local. Very often our staff or colleagues or neighbors in a place foreign to us will say things like, “Oh, now you’re practically Ugandan/Burmese/Australian/Ecuadoran...” But even if they say this (and there are few things expats cherish more than being told they’re “practically local”), we’re not. And they don’t expect us to be. More to the point, they expect us to be different. Because we *are* different.

This is the reality, no matter how much we like our local friends and their culture, no matter how well we speak another language, no matter how convincingly we dress in local clothes or how delicious we find local cuisine. We can develop deep, lasting friendships with local people (we might even date or marry one of them—I and the majority of my friends are in interracial/intercultural marriages). We can gain understanding and immense respect for local culture. We may even find particular aspects of local culture that we want to adopt permanently into our own lives and behavior.

But our attempts to “be local” are misguided. Rather, our emphasis needs to be on finding ways to live appropriately—in a manner that allows us to do what we have to do, but/and that doesn’t offend or offput those with whom we must work. I can’t say exactly what that means in every instance. It’s one of the things that we all have to figure out for ourselves. I personally believe that we as expats attach far more importance to things like what kind of house we live in or what kind of vehicle we ride to work in than do our local colleagues (in my experience, they’re usually far more interested in whether or not we’re actually competent to tasks we’ve been hired for, and whether we treat them with respect and fairness). But in any case, trying to “be local” essentially distracts us from our core purpose as expat aid workers and makes us look like fools to the real locals who know better.

Second, we have to live simultaneously in multiple worlds. It's very common to meet expats in the field who have become so immersed in all things local that they've essentially become less able or maybe even unable to work effectively with or in the "outside" world. Very often this is worn as a badge of honor, and it's among the most frequently emulated behaviors by new aid workers. But it's ultimately a mistake, and perhaps even a performance issue (depending on the person's actual job). By simple virtue of the fact that we're expats as well as the nature of our jobs, we have to simultaneously live and be functional in two or more separate worlds. In fact, I would argue that ability to successfully navigate multiple worlds simultaneously is one of the few things that expats, by direct virtue of their expat-ness, (potentially) bring to the table that actually adds real value in the aid/development enterprise.



The author's daughter. Clearly expat.

It is important that we manage carefully the extent to which we abandon or ignore one in favor of the other. We do have to inhabit multiple worlds—a local world with its own customs, demands, needs; the NGO/aid world with its own language, politics, currencies and dynamics; and the world of our personal lives. Our families back home, with us in the field, or elsewhere, and the very real responsibilities and obligations that invariably come into play. (And it is the world of our families and personal lives that we most frequently underserve, almost always to our extreme detriment, although we usually do not recognize it until it's too late.)



## Trauma

Not so long ago a very close aid worker friend of mine confided that she was contemplating leaving the aid industry. Her reason: Too many of her friends had died in the line of duty. She didn't want to have that happen again. Her number was higher than mine, but then even one is already too many.

A little less long ago some grad student found me—I'm not sure how, exactly—and asked if I'd participate in a study on PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) among humanitarian workers. I agreed. It was an online survey and a telephone interview, total time commitment, about 90 minutes.

Obviously my analysis is not a clinical one. It's based on casual inferences from the questions asked (the fact that I answered a moderate or high "yes" to almost everything), but it seems that I have nearly all of the symptoms, at least to some degree.

"...recurring dreams."

"... feelings of irritability or hopelessness..."

Many aid workers have had experiences far more traumatic than anything I've ever experienced. I've never been abducted or violently assaulted, for example. But I've been around. And after twenty years, even those less violent, less immediately traumatic experiences take their cumulative toll. The near misses, the bomb blasts, the checkpoint stops that went sideways, those friends who deployed and never returned. It all adds up.

Like I said, it was not a clinical diagnosis by any stretch, but it was a moment of clarity, a moment of sober truth for me.

\* \* \*

As the years go by, I find myself answering more and more email from aspiring development and relief workers, high-school, college and university students hoping to enter the aid world one day. These days I find myself with greater frequency accepting invitations to sit in a cubicle or coffee shop or Skype window and dispense career advice to newly-minted aid workers.

I'm happy to do this. I think it's important. No one gave me advice when I was starting out, really.

But I get the sense as I talk to them that they almost long for the trauma and cynicism, the angst, the horror. They seem to think that these things are somehow what make them real aid workers.

And if I could be indulged to dispense one piece of advice on this point, it would simply be:

Be careful what you wish for. Don't aspire to cynicism and trauma. Don't worry—stick around long enough and those things will very possibly happen organically. (I personally believe that both are very likely, hard to avoid, even, for those who are in long enough.) But for all of the joking, aggrandizing, and bravado of the silverbacks, these are heavier burdens to carry than you think. This is not some proud thing for us. For all of our tough talk, we're usually much softer than we let on, even to ourselves. Don't wish for the trauma.

## Curse, Drink, Shag

Most actual aid workers I know personally sort of sneer at the whole premise of Elizabeth Gilbert's best-selling memoir, *Eat, Pray, Love*. It's the story of a newly single former housewife who embarks on a journey around the world to such famous tourist destinations as Italy, India, and Bali. For most of us, though, India sounds like a lot of work, Italy is an airport, and Bali is a place for R&R and life-saving meetings. But the truth is that most of us embarked on the aid journey in some way as our own, twisted *Eat, Pray, Love* tour.

\*

**Curse.** Few things have caused me to question and sometimes abandon my beliefs about the spiritual nature of human beings or the universe as has a life of humanitarian aid work. It doesn't matter what agency logo is on your name-badge (faith-based or non-faith-based) or what your personal worldview is. Stick with this job long enough and you *will* question what you think you know about God or god or gods, the universe, and the place of humans in all of it.

For many of us, aid is almost a religion, and the disappointment and frustration at discovering the wide gulf between what we at first believe humanitarian aid capable of, and the reality of what it in fact delivers is indescribably deep. Whether we are up against organizational bureaucracy, impossible operational obstacles, aid-resistant cultures, or bandits with guns, the realization that we can actually do far, far less than we thought we could is *our* spiritual awakening. It is betrayal. It is the concession of vulnerability in the face of almost certain ravaging. It is a moment of innocence lost. *And it is why so many aid workers curse like sailors.*

**Drink.** No one tells you that aid work is basically a drug. Especially in the field. It often feels, living and working in the aid world, as if it is not a "real" world. Unless you are very careful—and most of us aren't or weren't—the aid world seduces you into believing that what goes on in the aid world doesn't matter as much in the real world. It becomes an ominously safe space in which you feel liberated to do things you would never do in the real world, maybe even things that you would never even think of doing or want to do in the real world. You believe that since it's [DISASTER ZONE DU JOUR] no one can see or cares what you do in and with your personal life. And the more time you spend in that space, the more you want it, and the harder it is to function outside of it.

Aid workers are notorious for all manner of self-destructive, addictive behavior. As expatriate lore says, "'Social drinking' in the field is called 'alcoholism' back home." And anyone who's ever attended a weekend's worth of NGO parties in the field knows that this notoriety is rightly earned. But the copious amounts of alcohol that get consumed at aid worker parties and team houses are more symbolically important than they are actually important (and don't forget that some aid workers are teetotalers). *It is the life itself to which we've become addicted.*

**Shag.** Just in the past six days I've been made aware of three aid worker acquaintances whose marriages have only recently or are about to split up. It is not easy to live the life of an aid worker and also care for a family. It is impossible dilemmas, opposing tensions, and what some days feels like a string of lose-lose propositions in having to choose between one's work, one's family, and one's own sanity. Years ago, myself moving up the ranks as a young NGO staffer, I was advised by older aid workers, essentially: *Don't ever marry. Never have children.*

Some of them had clearly come to the point where they were ready to stridently choose, family or aid career, one or the other. Even today I know many, many aid workers who have this same perspective and have made the same either/or choice.

But then I go out to relief zones around the world and talk to aid workers of all ages who still cling to the hope of a family back home. They wistfully talk about how after that next deployment they'll

settle down in a suburban neighborhood somewhere. I see them at (those notorious) expat parties and hangouts looking for love. Or, failing that, a good shag. Or, failing *that*, at least an okay shag.

\* \* \*

We all go into humanitarian aid work out of mixed motivations, some good, some less so. But it is often difficult to admit to others our personal motivations—it's supposed to be all about making the world a better place. Few of us anticipate the toll that the work takes on us in our personal lives. The very nature of humanitarian aid and development work seem to confer an answer-having status on us. And so it's probably no real surprise that few of us would ever dream of admitting that we're all in this searching as well for our own answers.

## Testify

By now you're probably wondering why I got into this aid thing, and perhaps more vexingly, why I stick with it all? Do I get depressed? How can I spend my days thinking about the seamy underbellies of all the worst places in the world and remain at all normal? Here's your answer:

The "why" of why I got into humanitarian work is easy. It was coincidence, an accident. I was in the right place at the right time. There was an opening that matched my meager skills and it beat the hell out of returning to suburban North America.

I was unusually fortunate. There was an older, experienced aid worker who took the time to talk to me about indicators and what the differences between good program design and bad program design were and the importance of local participation in every phase of project cycle management (although we didn't have the term "PCM" back then). It made sense. The pieces all fit, even if in retrospect my understanding was painfully simplistic. It felt good to be "doing good." It was also fun as heck, traveling around the world becoming something that I didn't even know the name for at the time: an aid worker.

That was in 1991 and I have not looked back since then.

The "why" of why I stay in humanitarian work is a bit harder. I'm older, now, and more cynical. I've seen the dark side of the aid industry up close. There's certainly plenty to dislike, even to loathe about being here. So why do I stay?

***If not aid, then what?*** I'm deep enough into my career now that switching to another line of work would be risky. What else would I do? My entire professional life has been spent here. Where would I go? How would I make a living? I think my dreams of being a famous guitarist in a heavy metal band are pretty much never gonna come true. So that's out. "You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave." That's certainly one powerful incentive for staying. I've thought about changing careers many times—for about 20 seconds. At the end of the day I cannot imagine doing anything else.

***I enjoy it.*** There. I've said it. I make my living thinking about human suffering and trying to put in place measures that will reduce it or alleviate it. Measures that we all know, from the get-go, will never be enough. And yet, in a probably perverse way, I enjoy it. I enjoy the work. I enjoy the crazy, quirky people (aid workers) I work with. I like going new places and meeting new people. I work with some amazing local colleagues in a number of countries. I like them very much as people, and I also like the diversity of my diverse range of friends in its own right.

And yeah, I enjoy the rush of deploying. I enjoy the chaos, texture, and intensity of the first month of a disaster response. I enjoy the complexity and challenge of transitioning from relief to recovery months later. I'm not saying that every minute of every day is awesome. This path has taken me through some very dark times, both personally and professionally, and there are absolutely moments when I wonder what the hell I've wasted my life on. But on balance I enjoy it.

***I still believe.*** I'm not blind to the paradoxes and internal contradictions and inconsistency and straight-up dumbassery of the Aid Industry. I get it. There's a lot that's wrong and in desperate need of redress. There are some glaring issues which, barring a massive shift in thinking globally within the sector, will probably never be really resolved. The tortured and absurdly power-charged *ménage à trois* between aid providers, aid recipients and aid donors, for example. Or the extreme glut of incompetent practitioners in the sector, both formal and informal. It's possible to become deeply cynical and disillusioned, and on many days I succumb to this temptation. And yet, I also see the positive day-to-day. I see how what we do as humanitarian practitioners matters. And by "matters," I mean specifically that we do make life better for survivors of disaster, conflict and extreme poverty. No, of course it's not enough. But for all of the messed up-ness, my honest opinion is that there's more good than bad happening here. No, I can't prove it—it's an opinion. But it's why I stay on.

## Church of Aid: An Incantation

From human emotions as diverse as love and greed, Aid is driven by impulses as opposed as responsibility and hedonism. It ennobles, just as surely as it corrupts. It gives meaning and it gives hope. Yet for all of the good that happens in its name, the promises it makes are too often not kept. Too often it is little more than a drug that dulls the pain of a symptom, but falls short of curing the illness.

Many speak of Aid with great authority, and many claim to speak for it. Aid is open to all, but few truly understand it.

It brings together people of all nations, kindred and tongues for a common good. It is a dividing wedge that turns father against daughter, mother against son, and it is a sword that separates flesh from bone.

Aid is a monument.

Aid is a crumbling temple.



“in the name of Henri Dunant, Florence Nightingale, and the Humanitarian Principles...”

\* \* \*

To practicing clergy, to the priests and programmers, Aid is both blessing and curse: it is mastered and refined over a lifetime. And yet, understanding its inner secrets is innocence lost, like the taste of fruit from a forbidden tree. Aid is a path not easily turned back from.



“forgive us, survivors of disaster, war and poverty, for we have sinned...”

\* \* \*

Aid holds up the promise of a better world. A just world, an equitable world. It intimates the promise of a world of peace and prosperity, where human rights are not trampled underfoot and where widows and orphans are clothed and fed.

To faithful followers, it holds the hope of absolution in this life, salvation in the next. It is a Heaven into which earthly treasure is laid up. To its acolytes and novices, Aid is the purest of pursuits—a Holy Grail, intensely tangible, yet chimera, a mirage on the far horizon.

It is a candle in a dimly lit room.



“Do you solemnly vow that you will faithfully uphold the Code of Conduct, practice humanitarian accountability, and apply Sphere standards?”

\* \* \*

If we learn anything at all from the past forty years, it should be that for all practical purposes *Aid is a religion.*

## Between Arrogance & Defeat

One very hot day in February 2010 I was in an NGO-branded minivan with five colleagues, about half way between Port-au-Prince and Fond Parisien. As those who have also been down that same road know, some areas in that region of Haiti look like desert. There are some moments when you could almost just as easily be in parts of Jordan or Arizona. It was a harsh looking place under a harsh sun, the nearest towns four or five kilometers away in either direction.

As we crested a small rise the colleague riding in the front passenger seat spotted what looked at first like a corpse, a dead person crumpled in a heap on the dirt shoulder. As we drove past the body moved. Our driver stopped and backed up. A few of us piled out and went back to see if we could help.

The gaunt, old woman told us that she had been trying to walk from one town to the next to visit her sister. Too long without enough food or water, she'd been overcome by exhaustion and the heat, and had simply collapsed. Her arms trembled violently as she tried to raise herself up off the ground, and her knees buckled as a colleague and I helped her to her feet. She was terribly thin, cheeks sunken, eyes glazing.

I'm no doctor, but it looked to me as if she was close to death.



IDP camp near Fond Parisien, Feb. 2010.

\* \* \*

I cannot recall that encounter on a lonely stretch of Haitian highway without almost immediately also flashing back to *another* encounter under the hot sun, on another continent, more than a decade prior. An encounter that, more than most others (and there are many), continues to haunt me. The encounter that I wrote about in the first chapter in this book.

\*

I've also written in other chapters about how one of the hardest things about being an aid worker is simply finding balance in one's own life. And it's true that we are often driven to extremes of different kinds. But I'll update this statement now to include that one of the hardest things about aid *work* is keeping a balanced perspective on the work itself, as well as the issues that we have to deal with in the course of doing that work.

It is a constant struggle to keep the extremism of the *life* of aid work from spilling over into substance of aid work. It is easy to feel at the end of a week that you have done nothing but argue all day, every day. After enough weeks like that, weeks during which you repeatedly feel as if you have only two

options—fight to the death, or full capitulation—it can be exceedingly difficult to choose well which battles to fight and which hills to die on, which to negotiate, and which to simply let go.

For all of the (I believe) good made possible, in part through the application of principles like impartiality, practices like participation, and standards around good process, one of the great paradoxes of aid work is that as aid workers we come to the humanitarian enterprise constrained at the outset by the self-same beliefs and values that drive us. We endlessly, it seems, remind ourselves and are reminded by others of how little we know, of how shallow our understanding of the cultures and communities where we work is, and why, because we are outsiders, it can by definition be no other way. Yet we cause immense, sweeping, far-reaching change, with almost cavalier naïveté. We promote what we've done in superlative, inclusive language in well-designed websites or interagency working groups where consultants are teleconferenced in and interns brew free-trade coffee.

By contrast we also routinely go to the worst places on the planet, engage directly with the most abused, most disenfranchised, most marginalized, most forgotten people there are; we come face-to-face with objective evil, whether in the form of genocidal regimes, horrible practices like human trafficking and slavery, or myriad ways in which medieval practices used to subjugate and disfigure our fellow humans are justified in the name of “culture.” Yet, we feel timid, unable to speak out, or to act, for fear of being or appearing ethnocentric. We too often hesitate for fear of being called out on some small detail of history or linguistics that we may have missed. There is always complexity and often chaos, but even so there are times when both the problem and the remedy are crystal clear, and when redress is within our power, even if only on a limited scale. We allow ourselves to become bogged down in discussion and semantic hair-splitting and some nebulous kind of “reasonable doubt.” Far too often we lack the confidence to say the hard things, to take decisive action when decisive action is needed.

By the same token, we are often slow to call out examples of bad aid, organizations whose founding assumptions are flawed, or those programs which continue despite real evidence that they enable (if not directly cause) harm. Yet at the same time we are often quick to quibble and nit-pick any time a fellow aid-worker makes a simple declarative statement without a lot of fluffy caveats and self-abasement. An unqualified opinion uttered or written in anything other than bland dispassion or tentative backpedaling is too easily received as “strident” or “harsh.” Beyond personal self-deprecation the language of aid speak is increasingly devoid of middle-ground expression.

The culture of our industry continues to erode away the already narrow and precarious space between arrogance and defeat.

\* \* \*

It's trendy right now to be either stridently critical of the aid industry or to sort of mindlessly cheer it on. I am trying to find and stay in that precarious, paper-thin space between the two. I don't think that aid is failing or that it is irreparably broken. Nor do I think that it is a smashing success. There are some successes, to be sure. But there is also a very long way to go to make it better. “Aid is a big, flailing machine,”<sup>6</sup> whose output (in my opinion) is simply mediocre overall. On balance, neither horrible nor awesome.

In the very first chapter of this book I wrote that “we must go about this business of making the world a better place, mindful of the fact that we are still learning. ... we must do it humbly. And we must do it confidently...” I believe those words more now even than when I wrote them, several years before I got around to publishing them as a post on a long-forgotten blog.

Many people more intelligent than me analyze and write about what's wrong with the structures and dynamics and economics of the aid industry. They have their views about what needs to be fixed and how. But for me it starts with attitude and perspective at the individual level: how to find the balance between acknowledging one's own limitations with doing what one knows must be done; how to clearly appear and also to be in fact open to new thought and perspective without compromising the value of

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<sup>6</sup> <http://bloodandmilk.org/2010/08/01/change-hurts/>



experience and those hard-won lessons about what works and—perhaps even more importantly—what *does not*; how to make the hard decisions, say the hard things, take the difficult and perhaps unpopular action, knowing full well that it will be misunderstood, but without going so far as to *revel* in being misunderstood; how to be equally honest and uncompromising about the successes as about the failures.

In short, how to manage the opposing tensions of arrogance and defeat and find the sweet spot of *confident humility*.

\* \* \*

The last I remember of the thin old woman was the sight of her being helped into a tap-tap. We'd given her food and water, and after a few minutes she'd revived enough to stand. We'd flagged down the tap-tap and given the driver cash, plus a little extra to take her directly to her sister's house. He'd readily agreed, and while this is far from any objective measure, he had an honest face.

I can't take any personal credit for anything. Any of my five colleagues in the car would have insisted on stopping and helping. Nor do I overstate the importance of what we did: with nearly three hundred thousand dead, more than four million homeless, and untold millions of dollars in aid to Haiti, one person and maybe a few dollars' worth of tap-tap fare was a drop in the ocean.

But still, it is one person we had the chance to help... and *did*.

And right then, flashing back to another blistering hot day in rural Cambodia, watching a frightfully thin child grow smaller in the distance, it might have been just the heat getting to me. But I could have sworn I felt the universe say something like, "don't get feeling all high and mighty, now. But you're getting there."

THE END

## About The Author

J. is a full-time professional humanitarian worker with more than twenty years of experience in the aid industry. He currently holds a real aid world day job at a real humanitarian organization. He writes about humanitarian work in his spare time with a personal computer because he enjoys it and because he believes that there is not nearly enough popular culture out there specifically for aid workers.

Many have asked how J. *can ever find the time?* (Most aid workers take great pride in reminding as many people as possible that *they* are [much too busy](#) for endeavors so frivolous as writing something other than grant proposals or reports). His response is that everyone, even aid workers, finds the time for what's important to them. Some play fantasy football, some get good at yoga, and some put cute pictures of kittens on Twitter. J. writes about humanitarian aid.

In a previous blogosphere life, J. wrote a blog about aid work called *Tales From the Hood*. These days he blogs at AidSpeak ([aidspeak.wordpress.com](http://aidspeak.wordpress.com)), is half-owner/blogger of the uber-awesome *Stuff Expat Aid Workers Like* ([stuffexpataidworkerslike.com](http://stuffexpataidworkerslike.com)), and one-third owner of *AidSource: The Humanitarian Social Network* ([aidsource.ning.com](http://aidsource.ning.com)).

Follow the author on twitter: @talesfromthhood

Follow the author on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/TalesFromtheHood>

J. has written two humanitarian novels: The aid industry satirical cult classic, [\*Disastrous Passion: A Humanitarian Romance Novel\*](#), and the much more serious, but equally lauded [\*Missionary, Mercenary, Mystic, Misfit\*](#).

*Letters Left Unsent* is his third book, and first work of non-fiction.