VINTAGE

A BED FOR THE NIGHT: HUMANITARIANISM IN AN AGE OF GENOCIDE

DAVID RIEFF

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About the Book

Timely and controversial, *A Bed for the Night* reveals how humanitarian organizations trying to bring relief in an ever more violent and dangerous world are often betrayed and misused, and have increasingly lost sight of their purpose.

Drawing on first-hand reporting from hot war zones around the world – Bosnia, Rwanda, Congo, Kosovo, Sudan and, most recently, Afghanistan – David Rieff shows us what humanitarian aid workers do in the field and the growing gap between their noble ambitions and their actual capabilities for alleviating suffering. Tracing the origins of major humanitarian organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, Doctors Without Borders, and CARE, he describes how many of them have moved from their founding principle of neutrality – which gave them access to victims – to encouraging the international community to take action to stop civil wars and ethnic cleansing.

Rieff demonstrates how this advocacy has come at a high price. By overreaching, the humanitarian movement has allowed itself to be hijacked by the major powers, at times becoming a fig leaf for actions that major powers take in their own national interests, as in Afghanistan, sometimes for their inaction, as in Bosnia and Rwanda. With the exception of cases of genocide, where the moral imperative to act overrides all other considerations, Rieff contends that if humanitarian organisations are to continue doing what they do best – alleviating suffering – they must remain independent.

About the Author

David Rieff is the author of five books, including the acclaimed Slaughterhouse: Bosnia and the Failure of the West. He continues to cover wars and humanitarian emergencies in many parts of the world. He lives in New York City.

ALSO BY DAVID RIEFF

Crimes of War
with Roy Gutman

Slaughterhouse:
Bosnia and the Failure of the West

The Exile:
Cuba in the Heart of Miami

Los Angeles:
Capital of the Third World

Going to Miami:
Exiles, Tourists, and Refugees in the New America

This book is for Alice Mayhew

David Rieff

A Bed for the Night

HUMANITARIANISM IN CRISIS

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Every document of civilization is also a document of barbarism.

—Walter Benjamin

A BED FOR THE NIGHT

I hear that in New York
At the corner of 26th Street and Broadway
A man stands every evening during the winter months
And gets beds for the homeless there
By appealing to passers-by.

It won't change the world
It won't improve relations among men
It will not shorten the age of exploitation
But a few men have a bed for the night
For a night the wind is kept from them
The snow meant for them falls on the roadway.

Don't put down the book on reading this, man.

A few people have a bed for the night
For a night the wind is kept from them
The snow meant for them falls on the roadway
But it won't change the world
It won't improve relations among men
It will not shorten the age of exploitation.

— Bertolt Brecht
Translated by George Rapp

Introduction

THIS BOOK WAS begun in 1995 in Sarajevo, while the siege was still going on and the snipers were working as diligently as ever, blowing people's heads and limbs off in the streets of the Bosnian capital. It was concluded in the fall of 2001, as the ruins of the World Trade Center continued to smolder, and as New Yorkers, of whom I am one, but of course not only New Yorkers, dazedly mourned their dead and wondered about their future. In other words, it is a book begun in despair and completed … well, in whatever state of mind that lies beyond despair.

I make no apologies for this. It should go without saying, but probably doesn't in an era that no longer can distinguish between cynicism and pessimism, that I hope this book will make some small contribution to awakening conscience about the wars, famines, and refugee crises that are its theme, and not make people more cynical or more resigned. But I will not deny that I see little if any empirical basis for optimism. When I titled an earlier book on Bosnia *Slaughterhouse*, I don't think I knew how apt a description it was of such a wide swath of the world. An eighteenth-century French aphorist said that one would have to swallow a live toad at breakfast to be sure of not encountering something more disgusting in the course of the day. Looking back, I often think that is what I have been doing over the course of the past decade—deliberately gulping down one live toad after another. To put it less histrionically, between the time I first set foot in northern Bosnia in the late summer of 1992, and followed far braver colleagues like Ed Vulliamy and Roy Gutman into the Serb

concentration camps of the Bosanska Krajina, and the night I lingered near the bottom of the six-story mound of rubble that had been the World Trade Center, watching as dust that included pulverized human beings as well as pulverized steel covered my boots, I have, at what cost I do not yet know and for reasons I doubt I will ever fully understand, done my best to rub my own nose in the horror of the world.

My itineraries have been those of the wars and what we rather antiseptically and misleadingly call the humanitarian emergencies that scar our times. I have not seen all of them, by any means, and I have done far less, not to mention risked far less, both physically and psychologically, than many of my colleagues in this peculiar amalgam of voyeurism and witness that we all practice. I was not even present at a number of the most terrible of these catastrophes, though I discuss some of their implications in this book. I was not in East Timor, or Kurdistan, or Chechnya. But I have seen more than my share. I do not say this proudly, as I claim neither to be particularly intrepid nor to have any great fondness for those journalist-cowboys and the danger freaks who are. Before I left for Bosnia for the first time, the great historian of Africa, Basil Davidson, who spent World War II as a British Special Operations executive officer fighting with Tito's Partisans, warned me, "You don't learn anything from the bang-bang."

He was almost certainly exaggerating for effect. But after a decade of this work, I am aware of how skewed my sense of things became at times. In war, you experience all sorts of horrible things, and, to be strictly honest, some marvelous things as well, above all in the personal generosity of strangers that comes as close to fulfilling the Christian notion of grace as anything this vertebral nonbeliever has ever encountered. But learn anything worth communicating? Only if seeing people die, in your arms, at your feet, by your side, within your sight, while all

the while there is absolutely nothing you can do to save them or rescue them, constitutes learning. And it does not. It's just death and suffering in all their infinite variety, clogging one's nostrils and taking over one's brain until one doesn't know whether to dream of justice or flight, or simply of being somewhere else, where there is silence when you crave it, noise only when you need it, light, heat, comfortable beds, and cold glasses of good white wine.

I do not know if I have learned enough in the past decade to justify the life I have lived. I have watched, even when I didn't want to watch. I have written in defense of causes I knew to be hopeless. Of course, at times I have given in to hopelessness when, if only for the sake of the victims, perhaps I should have soldiered on. Who hasn't? The moral test of being an onlooker at other people's tragedies is one that few of us are likely to pass reliably. Only in the Balkan wars, where, uniquely in my experience of such conflicts, I believed that it was not just possible but imperative to take sides, was I confident enough about my political opinions to move from being a writer to being an activist. And even then, as is the case with all writers who are too skeptical by temperament, or perhaps too pessimistic to be comfortable in the activist's motley, there was no moment when I was not also a voyeur.

If I have a bad conscience about that, and choose to lay those particular cards on the table at the very outset of this book, almost inviting the reader to be on his or her guard, it is because, like everyone else who has covered the Bosnias, Rwandas, and Afghanistans of this world, I richly deserve to have one. In Sarajevo during the siege, they called the photojournalists who would congregate at particularly dangerous corners, where the Serb snipers in the hills operated to deadliest effect, "angels of death." But just because a writer does not have to point his or her notebook in the face of someone who has just been wounded, as a photographer must point a lens, does not

make the moral ambiguity (and this is putting it charitably) any less disturbing. The caricatural journalist, the one who arrives in some zone of atrocity pointing a microphone and asking, “Anyone here been raped and speak English?” may indeed never have existed outside the fouler fancies of Evelyn Waugh. But what of the Western journalist, photographer, or writer for whom, willingly or unwillingly, the dead of the World Trade Center carry more emotional and symbolic weight than the dead of Kigali, Aceh, or Kabul? We may all reject this logic of the double standard emotionally, but if we really are being honest, that includes all of us.

That is why I can only hope that what follows will represent some moral repayment for what otherwise could seem like a long and aimless ramble through the landscapes of modern atrocity by someone who always had the privilege of coming and going as he pleased, no matter how much he tried to make the sufferings of strangers his concern. There will, in any case, be no more of that. The shoe is on the other foot now. Less than forty blocks from where I have lived for most of my adult life, there is a smoking ruin in which the burned corpses of thousands of my fellow citizens lie entombed. It may seem like the most dreadful moral obtuseness, but it is only now that I am able even to come close to properly apprehending the degree of moral license we journalists and photographers from this small, rich corner of the planet have been taking all along as we ventured on our safaris to the wars of the poor world.

What I knew only intellectually, I now know in my nostrils and on my skin. Doubtless it is well past time that lesson registered. And yet, if we are to be honest with ourselves, surely one of the most troubling consequences of the World Trade Center attack is that it reinforced the same moral hierarchy among victims of the world’s horrors. If anything, the fact that the death toll on September 11, 2001, was truly atrocious has only reinforced what had

already been in place for so long—the difference, even when speaking of the dead, between the West and the rest. In saying this, I am not suggesting Americans should have been more concerned about strangers than about themselves. Quite the contrary. That there could be so many deaths of people from “our” world, where death by political violence, let alone death on such a massive scale, had been almost inconceivable. It is hardly surprising that Americans looked to themselves, or cared more about their own losses than they had cared about those in parts of the world that are remote from their experience. Why should they have been expected to behave with some ahuman self-abnegation or to have transcended the natural and primeval claims of human attachment? After all, it has never been my experience that people in Somalia inquired after the fate of people in Bosnia, or people in Angola worried about people in Nagorno-Karabakh. Wounds breed self-absorption; that is simply human.

And it was not just human but appropriate that what Americans thought about in the wake of the attacks was how to respond to them—politically, militarily, and in terms of the measures needed to protect the country from future attacks. I do not share the view that one cannot fight fire with fire, as an antiwar demonstrator in London put it in October 2001. To the contrary, I think that violence is the only responsible answer to the Osama bin Ladens of this world. But this is not a book about terrorism and state power; it is a book about the dilemmas of humanitarian action. And in the context of humanitarianism, the deaths of September 11, 2001, must of necessity have a very different resonance and moral significance.

I mean absolutely no disrespect to the victims, who included two acquaintances of mine, when I insist that their deaths registered on us in a way that deaths in the poor world, no matter how lamentable we find them, do not. With regard to the former, we are psychologically and

politically unreconciled. With regard to the latter, we have had a tendency to regard them almost as a natural calamity, as regrettable but no more avoidable than deaths from an earthquake or a typhoon. In the aftermath of the World Trade Center attack, this double standard was evident. There was the story of *individuals* who had died in the Twin Towers and then there was another story—a humanitarian story—of undifferentiated victims in Afghanistan who were on the move, in grave danger, and needed to be helped. As described, these Afghans remained abstractions, as perhaps strangers always do, even though it is now possible to watch their sufferings in real time on television.

We have been changed in so many ways by the catastrophe of September 11, 2001. But while I would love to believe that these deaths will change what we do when we go out into what we have been pleased to call "the field"—that strangely distancing, Boy-Scoutish term, much beloved of journalists and aid workers, for what are, in reality, other people's countries, tragedies, destinies—or how we will feel when we return home, I don't believe it for a minute. On one level, it is true that the distance between home and field was shrunk that fine September morning when that beautiful, shining Boeing airliner banked in the brilliant New York sky, then came level with the horizon before flying with such amazing, terrifying velocity into the North Tower of the World Trade Center. As it hit, it blew up more than a building. The world we had known was dissolved in that fireball.

But the truth must not be made the first casualty of the catastrophe. Not just in America, but in many other parts of the world as well, people felt those thousands of deaths more acutely than any of the many atrocities of the previous decade. The eight thousand men and boys killed by Serb forces at Srebrenica, the eight hundred thousand believed to have died in the Rwandan genocide of 1994, the

tens of thousands who died in the refugee emergency that followed, and the more than one hundred thousand killed by Rwandan Tutsi forces in 1996, the capstone year of the crisis—the sad truth is that their deaths exerted none of the fascination over the world that September 11, 2001, did. Not everyone sympathized, of course. But even the way so many of the sympathizers of Osama bin Laden throughout the poor world reveled in what happened on September 11 was testimony to the fundamental inequality between the emotional charge of a disaster in New York and a disaster in Kabul.

I am not saying this to score some cheap moral point. Any adult who does not understand that the world is an unjust place, *even* in its treatment of catastrophe, is a fool or a dreamer. And there are good moral reasons, not to mention instinctual ones that are probably hardwired into us, for why we usually care more about the fate of neighbors and fellow citizens than that of strangers. It may not be politically correct or morally reassuring to say this, but surely it is to be expected, because we are human beings and not altruism machines, that we empathize more readily with people who more closely resemble us and are near than with people who have very different customs, or are of a different color or a different confession and are far away. This may not be true for a small minority of people who can genuinely claim to be cosmopolitan in the best and truest sense of the word—people for whom flag, or tribe, or race, or religion really no longer are essential for their sense of self, and, indeed, may seem to them like atavisms that stand in the way of their self-realization. But for most people, the emotion-laden abstraction that is a national flag and the sustaining integument that is family and neighborhood are not so easily superseded.

Human rights activists, United Nations officials, and humanitarian aid workers tend to pretend as if things were otherwise. Think of the loose talk in diplomatic circles

about “the international community.” At the UN General Assembly, it has become part of the rhetorical boilerplate for almost every resolution to include phrases like “the international community condemns” this or “the international community welcomes” that. The recommendations of the 1997 Carnegie Commission report *Preventing Deadly Conflict*, which was a kind of apotheosis of the thinking of the Western international establishment on these issues, was encrusted with phrases like “the international community must champion the norm of responsible leadership” and “the international community must expand efforts to educate publics everywhere that preventing deadly conflict is both necessary and possible.” Or listen to the appeal by Kofi Annan, the UN secretary-general, who, in a speech to the General Assembly in 1999, insisted, “From Sierra Leone to the Sudan to Angola to the Balkans to Cambodia and to Afghanistan, there are a great number of peoples who need more than just words of sympathy from the international community.”

What decent person would disagree? But what thinking person can take seriously the idea that there is any such thing as the international community? Where are the shared values uniting the United States and China, Denmark and Indonesia, Japan and Angola, that make such talk anything more than an exercise in self-flattering rhetoric? Of course, there is an international order, dominated by the United States, and there are international institutions, like the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the World Bank. But the reality is that the international community is a myth and a way to conceal the bad news about the present in septic sheets of piety about the future. This should be clear to anyone who considers the question of force. As Sir Brian Urquhart, one of the key figures of the first four decades of the UN’s existence, once put it, “If there is a world community, then who is the sheriff?” Does anyone imagine that the United

States will act in the altruistic way such a mandate implies? And if not the United States, then who? The Russians? The Chinese? The reality is that the moment one taps on the idea of the international community it falls apart like a child's broken toy.

Despite the dreams of those who founded the UN, figures such as Gladwyn Jebb and Eleanor Roosevelt, there is no world consensus on most matters of importance. One has only to look at the kind of bribing and horse-trading the Bush administration had to engage in just to get acquiescence for American plans to go after the Taliban, Osama bin Laden and his followers, and the other terrorist networks. The international institutions—first and foremost, the UN itself—and international treaty regimes that exist are not the expression of community but of power. But just because these institutions exist does not mean any moral consensus exists, and, at least barring the institution of serious enforcement mechanisms, it seems unlikely that these regimes will ever have much force. I am haunted by the fact that the leaders of Rwanda who plotted the greatest genocide since Hitler's extermination of Jews and Gypsies were in many cases the same men who had been in power when their country signed the Convention on Genocide, which is certainly one of the great documents of civilization in our time.

But when the moment arrived to become a beast, those Rwandan members in good standing of "the international community" became very good beasts indeed. They were no more dissuaded by some shard of international law than a drug addict in the inner city is dissuaded from committing a robbery or breaking into a house by national laws. Indeed, if anything, the gap between what Jurgen Habermas has called facts and norms has grown alarmingly as international lawyers extend their reach and institute new legal regimes. This is not to say such efforts should not be undertaken, nor that, when occasionally they have an

effect—as with the trial of Slobodan Milosevic before the ad hoc International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague—such an outcome is not to be welcomed. But there will be no judicialization of the world, for the simple reason that there is no international community to uphold such a transformation.

Where is the evidence, apart from the creation of new legal norms and the assertion and reassertion of the idea that the human rights culture is beginning to have a real impact on wars and famines and failed states, for the claims of the optimists who speak, like Michael Ignatieff, of "a revolution of moral concern"? Is there not in fact more evidence to support the opposite conclusion, at least at the moment? Here is Ignatieff, writing in 1997, on why there was no reason to despair. "For every society like Afghanistan mired in ethnic conflict," he wrote, "there is a South Africa making its arduous journey back from the abyss. As soon as the world pronounces some part of the world beyond hope—Central Africa, for example—leaders appear who seem capable of forging the strong and legitimate states these regions need if they are to lift themselves out of the pit of war. For every failed intervention like Somalia there is an Angola, where some hope remains that a durable peace can be brokered. Just when the world appears to be letting war criminals off the hook, some are brought to justice and the cycle of impunity is broken."

This is the kind of rhetoric that gives hope a bad name. Every sunny statement in the paragraph is open to question. South Africa is being destroyed from within by AIDS and crime, and there is no reason to be hopeful except because one doesn't want be dispiriting. And yet surely the experience of intellectuals who defended Communism throughout the twentieth century should make us wary of that approach. Toward the end of his life, Jean-Paul Sartre stunned an interviewer by admitting he'd

known about the Gulag. Why hadn't he said anything? the interviewer asked. And the great philosopher replied: "So as not to demoralize the French working class."

Some of the same spirit seems to inform many human rights activists. Sartre did not want the truth he was privy to about the horrors of Communism as it actually existed to stand in the way of the radiant future of justice and peace he believed the Communist ideals still had the potential to bring into being. Obviously, human rights activists are not the modern-day equivalent of Communist fellow travelers. But too often, they choose to ignore any bad news that goes against their repeated assertion that the "revolution of moral concern" is well under way.

Michael Ignatieff has been to Angola. He must know how little hope there is, at least if he means hope for the people, as I understand him to, not some new political settlement that slightly rejiggers the division of spoils among conflicting elites. And as for the notion that Central Africa provides a model for anything, the mind rebels. Leaders like Paul Kagame in Rwanda and the late and unlamented Laurent-Desiré Kabila in Congo did seem promising for a moment in the mid-1990s, and many of us, including myself, were far too taken in by them. But they have proven to be classic African "big men," active participants in the continued criminalization of the state from one end of the continent to the other, and ruthless in their pursuit of power. According to a recent International Rescue Committee survey of mortality rates in eastern Congo, the last three years—the period of the first general war in Africa since decolonization—have led to some two and a half million deaths. Almost all the deaths were civilian, and almost all of them were attributed not to combat but to the destruction of the medical and agricultural infrastructures on which these people depended for their survival. This is the accomplishment of

these leaders Ignatieff insisted were bringing legitimacy to the region.

That Ignatieff continues to hope against hope, to borrow the phrase of the great heroine of Russian dissidence, Nadezhda Mandelstam, may do his heart credit, but such optimism too often leads to misunderstanding. He is right to insist that the moral imagination of the West "has been transformed since 1945." Where he goes wrong is in believing, against most (though, in fairness, not all) of the evidence, that this shared human rights culture offers the way out of the horror that he knows so well. He preaches against disillusion, but the truth is, anyone who is not disillusioned has not heard the bad news. As Africa collapses before our eyes, strangled by debt, AIDS, and bad government, by bandits and apparatchiks, and weakened by a brain drain the likes of which has rarely been seen in human history, is optimism really the only legitimate moral stance? It consoles, to be sure. We may feel that with each norm established we move slowly toward more palpable commitments. And it is indeed a marvelous narrative. The problem, alas, is that there is no reason to think it's true.

Let me put it more starkly. Not only should our consciences not be clear, but because they are grounded in such a mistaken premise, the solutions and, worse, the confidence of human rights activists like Ignatieff and of UN officials from Secretary-General Annan on down constitute an offer of false hope to people who are desperately in need of rescue. "Keep hope alive," Kofi Annan has insisted time and time again. But when people in Bosnia or Rwanda or Angola see a blue UN flag or a white-painted armored personnel carrier, those people believe "the international community" has intervened, and that they will be protected. They give themselves permission to hope, but only because they are being encouraged to do so. But we saw time and time again in the 1990s how often they were wrong to do so. We have seen that such hopes—

in the UN, in “the international community”—were misguided, at times even suicidal. UN officials like to announce how many lives their humanitarian efforts have saved all over the world. And they are right to do so. But their presence has also cost lives by raising in people who might have succeeded in fleeing and saving themselves the false confidence that they would be protected. I have talked to scores of people in Rwanda, and not only in Rwanda, who lost their families because of such a waste of hope.

The point is not to bash the United Nations. Most people at the UN Secretariat today are well aware of the moral hazards of peacekeeping operations and are anything but content about the prospect of engaging in new ones except those “classic” operations that involve separating forces whose governments have already concluded a truce, as in Ethiopia-Eritrea in 2001. Rather, it is to ask whether it is wise to insist that the moral universalism championed by human rights activists is making enough headway in the world to make it safer for the victims of contemporary atrocities. Or whether, despite widely hailed new norms of international law, above all the supposed end of the inviolability of state sovereignty, populations in danger today have no more reason to count on being rescued than the populations of Auschwitz or the Warsaw Ghetto did in 1943?

This may seem an unfair exaggeration. To compare what is going on today to what occurred during the Shoah has something practically impious about it. And yet it is thought that two out of five children in the eastern Congo have died in the past three years. Even if such figures are wildly exaggerated—which they may be, since even the best mortality figures for such calamities are based on comparatively small demographic samples—do we not need to look skeptically on our own cherished moral assumptions, above all as they concern the reach of the human rights revolution and the reality of the international

community? How much longer will it be before people are prepared to consider with an open mind, no matter how demoralizing it may be, what, if anything, our good intentions, our new legal norms, and our faith in the binding nature of this new ethic of moral concern have accomplished in societies like the Congo that, whatever the precise death toll, are unquestionably in agony? How many more genocides will it take to shake the advocates' faith in their revolution of global concern?

There is a real question about whether we are analyzing what is going on in the poor world or extrapolating from what these new norms, above all the discourse of rights, have accomplished for the rich world. In this well-intended but mistaken account, the victims of a Rwandan genocide are sometimes equated with the victims of racial discrimination in the United States or anti-immigrant xenophobia in Europe. But while legal rights can go a long way toward securing and improving the situation of immigrants or racial minorities in the West, they are unlikely to help the victims of a genocide. Nor does the language of oppressor and oppressed, already a simplification when applied to Western societies, seem of much use in describing the reality of a Rwanda or a Kosovo, where today's oppressor is all too commonly tomorrow's victim. To say this is not to criticize the use of rights language in the West. Undeniably, that language has been good for us. We in the West have done the moral thing *and* helped ourselves weather the storm of mass immigration from the poor world by institutionalizing rights-based ideas about tolerance and diversity.

But in so many countries, there have been false dawns. While the best minds in the liberal West have focused on new rights and new international norms, struggled to create international tribunals and urged an end to impunity for tyrants and warlords, a 2002 World Bank study has shown that the income gap between the rich and poor

worlds has been widening steadily. And yet we are told that enormous progress has been made. Reality is elsewhere. Even in many of the countries, particularly in Africa, that have done all the things the neoliberal consensus demanded of them, and opened up their societies to free press debate and rights-based governance, the specter of AIDS promises to stop development in its tracks. I am sorry, but while I would like to believe the narrative of a Michael Ignatieff or of an organization like Human Rights Watch, I do not see how it is possible to say that in sub-Saharan Africa and in most of the Islamic world there is no reason for disillusion. Rather, it seems to me that too often the basis for their optimism is not an improvement in people's lives but an improvement in human rights norms. And to me it remains not just an open question, but a question that desperately needs to be asked, what this has actually accomplished for people in need of justice, or aid, or mercy, or bread, and whether it has actually kept a single jackboot out of a single human face.

It may seem both wrong and counterproductive to even ask such a question in the moment when the human rights movement has purportedly made so much progress, and when, in the words of a recent Canadian government–sponsored study, "The protection of human security—including concern for human rights, but broader than that in its scope—has become an increasingly important element in international law and international relations." Is one not giving aid and comfort to the ethnic fascists like Slobodan Milosevic, the racist skinheads, and the Islamic fascists like Osama bin Laden? Does one not risk becoming part of the problem rather than part of the solution? I can only reply that one does the poor and the oppressed no favor by misrepresenting reality, or by confidently offering up prescriptions for ills for which the sad truth is that there may be no cure. To the contrary, one consoles oneself

without succoring them, and, if one is not careful, one does indeed begin to traffic in false hope.

The cruelty of the world is so overwhelming, and hope—real hope—so hard to come by. That is what I have learned in the past ten years. In dozens of cities in the poor world, I have listened to officials of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) or to human rights advocates making a case for the end of impunity, or the beginning of grassroots activism, or—especially fatuously in places where people have no electricity and live on a dollar a day—the promise of information technology. “In a global world,” a UNDP official once told me, “there are global values, above all human rights.” Had we not been speaking in Monrovia, Liberia, the ultimate failed state, and one of the cruelest places on earth, I might have taken him more seriously. And this was years before September 11, 2001, when the promise of globalization as an engine of prosperity rather than mayhem suddenly looked far more doubtful.

Let me say also that if the optimists are right, and I am wrong, I will be overjoyed. Michael Edwards, one of the most intelligent writers on aid and development, states in a recent book that “a world that manages its affairs to mutual benefit is well within our reach.” He insists that if we can only learn to cooperate intelligently, we should be able to attain it, since we have “the resources, the technology, the ideas and the wealth,” and all that is missing is “the will and imagination.” And he adds that the moral obligation to help others escape from the constraints and limitations should be manifest to any decent person who thinks about the issue seriously. (As a veteran of eighteen years of development work with the British group Oxfam, he could, with justice, have put the matter far more harshly.) I agree to the extent that the world could be this way and certainly should be this way. Nonetheless, I cannot share Edwards’s optimism, for it is grounded in the idea that, as he puts it,

“in an increasingly interdependent world, no one has a future unless we learn to work together.”

There I am not so sure. It is of course true that we are connected in many ways we never were before—by the global economy, by the Internet and television, and by mass migration. If nothing else, what the attacks of September 11 brought home in the United States, a country where the passions of the rest of the world seem, for all the talk of our living in a global village, far away and abstract, was that there is no shelter from the chaos of the Middle East, or Afghanistan, or sub-Saharan Africa. America may not be obsessed with the rest of the world, but the rest of the world is obsessed with America. But chaos is not the same thing as interdependence. Nor is it clear that those, like the *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, who have claimed that the triumph of American-style globalization was both inevitable and to be welcomed, have bet on quite the sure thing they thought they had. Again, history is not a set of buzzwords. We may talk about the global village, but has the fact that ordinary Africans have grown poorer over the past ten years really been of any concern to ordinary Western Europeans or North Americans who have grown so much richer during the same period? I wish it had been, but I doubt it, and I am skeptical of a blueprint for political action based on the idea that somehow there will be such a radical shift in consciousness in the West that people here will pressure their own officials to do something for the poor.

An inchoate idea about witness, in the Quaker sense of the term, was what set me on my journeys to all those ground zeros. But the truth remains the ultimate obligation for any writer, no matter how much he or she may regret the political or social consequences of telling it. Of course, truth and justice are often on the same side, but sometimes they are in contradiction. Even some human rights activists admit that basic rights of the type Edwards and Ignatieff

call for need a legally administered cosmopolitan society. In other words, for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and all those other marvelous creations of civilization to mean anything, an international community—whether one envisages this as a UN that can enforce its resolutions, or as some other form of global governance—really has to take shape. And I see no prospect of that whatsoever.

Is that cynicism? I don't think so. I think it is reality, no matter how much we might wish things were otherwise. La Rochefoucauld says somewhere that no man can stare for long at death or the sun. But if there is anything to what I am saying, and if I have not simply been cauterized by my experience and my anguish, then is it not time to face up to the possibility that things will go on over the course of the next twenty years much as they have since the end of the Cold War, or even get worse? Of course, there will be a plethora of reports produced by commissions of eminent persons suggesting how things might be ordered differently. The Canadian government-sponsored study that I quoted earlier, "The Responsibility to Protect," is a recent example of the genre. But there is absolutely no reason to expect any other fate for such reports than that they will be ignored by the great powers whose consent and support is needed to set in motion the reforms that almost everyone agrees the international system desperately needs.

One has only to look at the UN's self-examination in the aftermath of the peacekeeping disasters in Bosnia and Rwanda in the mid-1990s to see this process in operation. That peacekeeping had failed miserably on those occasions was clear to everyone who was paying attention, whether they were within the UN system or outside it, supporters of the UN or critics of the institution. To his credit, Secretary-General Annan asked Lakdar Brahimi, the former Algerian foreign minister and one of the most brilliant diplomats of his generation, to write a report on how peacekeeping could be reformed. The report was serious, careful, and, to

anyone who knew anything about peacekeeping, eminently commonsensical. Hailed upon its release, the Brahimi report engendered a series of working conferences held all over the world. Finally, it was said, both the UN and the major powers were going to get serious about peacekeeping. But privately, UN officials conceded there was no chance at all that such reforms would be permitted. They would simply have involved powerful states giving over too much power to the UN and that was—that is—unimaginable in any useful time frame.

Is that the way the world should be? Obviously it isn't. But bear with me and assume not only that this is the way the world is, but that this is the way it will continue to be. If I am right, and the future we face is as bad as or worse than the present, then how is one to serve those in need—the refugees, the war victims, the raped women, the people without shelter—from Afghanistan to the Congo? In other words, what is to be done if Ignatieff's "revolution of moral concern" fails, or never really takes hold to begin with, and my account of a world of moral desolation is closer to the mark? It was that question that brought me to humanitarianism. The defining point for me was when I heard an official of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), who had served in the worst places in northern Bosnia, say that his job was "to bring a measure of humanity, always insufficient, into situations that should not exist."

The ICRC is the oldest of the humanitarian organizations. It is the richest and the best organized, and its mandate is the clearest. By international treaty it is the custodian of the laws of war. It is also committed to an austere and sometimes morally troubling conception of neutrality that, during World War II, allowed its senior leadership to decide not to make public what it knew—and it knew a lot—about the Nazi concentration camps. The anti-Semitism of upper-class Swiss society from which the

ICRC leadership mostly came (and still comes) doubtless played a role. But the rationale for the decision, which was that to go public would imperil all the other activities in which the organization was engaged in Nazi Europe, was the same one used almost twenty-five years later by ICRC officials during the Biafran war. Then, too, they refused to compromise their neutrality and go public, despite reports that the Nigerian federal government was attempting a kind of genocide by starvation of the Biafran rebels in the southeastern part of the country.

I am not sure which side of the debate on the ICRC's stance in Biafra I would have taken, since it is by no means as clear as it seemed at the time that the Nigerian authorities were guilty of creating a famine. But knowledge of the ICRC's shameful conduct in Nazi-occupied Europe had always made me skeptical of the organization. (The ICRC itself now grudgingly admits it should have behaved differently during World War II.) And yet I remember that when I heard the words of that ICRC delegate, with his simultaneous expression of an ironclad determination to act and his seeming acceptance of the fact that these "situations that should not exist" were unlikely to stop existing anytime soon, I thought that my doubts were misplaced, and that these people, these humanitarians, were the real heroes of the refugee emergencies and genocidal wars of "ethnic cleansing." I still think so today, although few of my friends within the humanitarian world, including the ICRC, would subscribe to the stark and resigned credo that attracted me in the first place.

For an American writer, the humanitarians were interesting in part because they came from Western Europe, Canada, and the United States and seemed, whether willingly or unwillingly, to have become the rich world's designated consciences in all these landscapes of disaster. By humanitarian organizations, I do not simply mean the ICRC. I mean relief groups, most of which are