

Stories Matter

Von Jacqui Banaczynski

I want you to travel with me to a famine camp in Sudan, on the Ethiopian border. You have seen the dreadful television footage of the starving babies, their bellies bloated. Flies crawl in and out of their eyes and mouths, jealous for the last drops of moisture that cling there as long as these babies cling to life.

Now you are among them, as a reporter for a mid-sized daily newspaper in the Upper Midwest, charged with writing about a place you have never been before, about an event you can't possibly understand, for readers who will never go there and don't know what it has to do with them – beyond writing a check to charity.

You've been at the camp for several days. You walk its ground each day, stepping around and over 100,000 people who have come because they heard there was water. By the time they had arrived – some of them walking three weeks from their Ethiopian villages – the water was no more than a well of mud in a dry riverbed.

You watch the little girls walk to the river and dig in the mud, soaking their rags with moisture that they wring, drop by drop, into their plastic jugs. You sit in the clinic where the waiting line is hundreds long. Desperate fathers thrust their babies at you, thinking that because you are a khawaja, a foreigner, you must be a doctor. You must be able to help. But all you have to offer is a poised notebook and some questions – suddenly too little to accommodate this reality.

You wander to the edge of the camp, to the vast defecation zone where those healthy enough to walk go to heed nature's call. It is oblivious to the need for a little human dignity. Women squat inside their skirts, their heads covered in veils, trying to create some sense of cloister. You stumble to the rocky hillside where clusters of men claw at the hard earth, creating holes just deep enough to cradle the shrouded bodies they gently place there.

The holes don't need to be deep, for the bodies are very thin. They bury 75 each day, sometimes more. Most are babies. At night you retreat to the other side of the straw wall that encloses this awful world. You collapse — ashamed of your small and temporary hunger, of your selfish fears — on a cot, in a small straw hut. You're grateful that it's dark, that you will not have to look at things for a few hours, but you can still hear. You hear coughing and vomiting and whimpering and keening. You hear shouts, angry bursts of life, and rasps that rattle to silence as seventy-five more people die. Then you hear something else: singing. You hear sweet chants and deep rhythms. Each night, over and over, at about the same time. You think you are hallucinating. You wonder if you have gone quite mad from your fear. How could people sing in the face of this horror? And why? You lie in the dark and you wonder until the mercy of sleep claims you.

Daylight comes again, and you open your eyes.

I went to Africa in 1985 to report on the Ethiopian famine for the St. Paul Pioneer Press. I had never been outside of North America. The singing intrigued me. It took me several days to find out what it was. I had to go through several translators, until someone finally told me that

it was storytelling. When the villages in Ethiopia and what is now Eritrea finally got too parched or too bombed for people to survive there, they got up, en masse, and walked to the famine camps.

Then they settled, in whatever little huts they could find, as a village. They continued whatever rituals they could. One of their rituals was their nightly storytelling. The elders gathered the children around and they sang their songs. It was their version of school. It was how they carried their history and culture and law with them. It may have been my first conscious awareness of the power, history, and universality of storytelling. We all grew up with stories, but do we ever stop to think about how much they connect us and how powerful they are?

Even, or especially, in the face of death these stories live on, passed from elder to younger, from generation to generation, carried with as much care as those precious jugs of water. Events pass, people live and die, life changes. But stories endure. Several years after I went to Sudan, I stumbled across what has become one of my favorite books, Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. He writes, „Stories are for joining the past to the future. Stories are for those late hours in the night when you can't remember how you got from where you were to where you are. Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased and there is nothing to remember except the story.”

I asked Tomas Alex Tizon, who used to work with me at *The Seattle Times*, why human beings need stories, and he replied: Thank God for stories – for those who have them, for those who tell them, for those who devour them as the soul sustenance that they are. Stories give shape to experience and allow us to go through life unblind. Without them, everything that happens would float around, undifferentiated. None of it would mean anything. Once you have a version of what happened, all the other good stuff about being human comes into play. You can laugh, feel awe, commit a passionate act, get pissed, want to change things.

My friend and fellow writer Katherine Lanpher, who wrote for the *Pioneer Press* and is now with *Air America*, told me this about stories: Stories are the connective tissue of the human race, whether you are dissecting a school levy or South Korean politics. At the heart of every issue is a human element that leads to the three most beautiful words in the English language: What happened next? If you answer that question, you are a storyteller. They say language makes us human. That notion is being challenged as we discover that apes have language. Whales have language. I welcome them into our fold. I'm not threatened by them, quite frankly, because I think that stories make us human. Only by telling them do we stay so.

Stories are our prayers. Write and edit them with due reverence, even when the stories themselves are irreverent. Stories are parables. Write and edit and tell yours with meaning, so each tale stands in for a larger message, each story a guidepost on our collective journey. Stories are history. Write and edit and tell yours with accuracy and understanding and context and with unwavering devotion to the truth.

Stories are music. Write and edit and tell yours with pace and rhythm and flow. Throw in the dips and twirls that make them exciting, but stay true to the core beat. Readers hear stories with their inner ear. Stories are our soul. Write and edit and tell yours with your whole selves. Tell them as if they are all that matters. It matters that you do it as if that's all there is.