

Book Review

Another Day in Paradise: International Humanitarian Workers Tell their Stories

Author: Carol Bergman. Orbis Books, 2003. 256 pages. \$25.00 hardback

Reviewed by: Emily Carroll, L.C.S.W.

We rarely ask the question “what is a humanitarian? But we should because it is an interesting, even provocative question, and one that Carol Bergman answers for us in her wonderful book. Her use of “paradise” in the title is purposeful irony that refers to the innate beauty of the land and people who live in places scarred by war, famine, and disease, people who are refugees living their lives where nothing is normal anymore. Bergman brings us fifteen marvelous “stories” written with immediacy, emotion, and vivid observation.

Framed in straightforward first person narrative style, and written by people who worked with those who were suffering, the book is meaningful for all of us as social workers and caring professionals. The book broadens our ideas about the motivations to help others, showing where those motives begin and end, and registers how powerful their impact can be, both on the helper and on the one who is helped. Each story is instructive, accessible, and inspiring, but each has the potential to frighten, sadden, and bewilder us. After having read this book the reader will see with new eyes current dire world events and will better understand the magnitude of these realities.

Two recent pieces in *The New Yorker* magazine address the question of humanitarian motives. *Annals of Philanthropy: The Gift*, by Ian Parker (2004, August 2), tells the story of Zell Kravinsky, a philanthropist who donated his kidney to a stranger, and who plans to donate his second kidney and live his own life on dialysis. The *New Yorker* article questions whether these are morally sound or even sane humanitarian actions. Kravinsky’s ideas are described in his own peculiar philosophical terms as the means to a moral life. His feeling that he never lived up to his parents’ wishes connect poignantly to his quest for “forgiveness.” His friends and family try to stop his nihilistic actions to no avail. The piece is written in a neutral tone and leaves the reader to judge the merits

of Kravinsky’s quest. In the following issue of the magazine, letter writers question his actions because in addition to being life-threatening, they also entail potential harm to his wife and his four children as they threaten his ability to care for them. How similar is this story of emotional neglect and real abandonment of those at home to that of missionaries who move in to high risk communities or who remain unarmed and exposed in the midst of civil war? News reports of the massacres of missionaries and other humanitarian workers are all too common, and many of them do leave families behind.

The New Yorker also published a thorough report on the disastrous situation in Sudan, *A Reporter at Large: Dying in Darfur* by Samantha Power (2004, August 30), in which she enlightens us on the history of the region's problems and describes the inadequate international response to the situation. This piece covers the same territory as one of the stories in Bergman’s book and further explores the meaning of the actions of those who hold on to power in that country. After reading this account, which can be extremely grotesque and brutal in its descriptions, we can only wonder about the courage and strength it would take to offer help under such conditions.

In John le Carre’s forward to *Another Day in Paradise* he says, referring to humanitarian aid workers, “Some are what conventional society would call misfits, because the only true kinship they can feel is with the world’s victims. Some, by their own admission, are war junkies who live for the adrenaline rush of the front line ... (for others) there is a kind of terrible triumph in witnessing truths that the rest of us hurry to look away from.”

Carol Bergman assembled this collection of humanitarian workers’ stories over several years. It began as a magazine article and grew as she interviewed people and realized the power of their stories to reach out to the reader. Her parents were

refugees from genocide, and she has had a history of activism throughout her own life, which resonated with and enriched her relationships with these aid workers. Several had been students in her writing workshops at New York University, and others she knew socially. She describes them as people who are “compelling and complicated.” In working with them on their stories, she helped them reflectively examine their experiences. Beyond any personal gain from her writing expertise, as well as the catharsis in preparing their stories, was the opportunity to publicize widely the political ramifications of what they had seen. The book confronts this directly and boldly. NGO’s non-governmental agencies, the UN, the Red Cross, Oxfam and others are described in detail, and incisive judgments are made about their effectiveness and the political challenges to their existence.

The book is divided into three sections: Natural Disasters, War, and Fragile Peace. Bergman introduces each section with a thoughtful and informative few pages, and then the stories follow, the majority of them under War. Her introduction to the War section states: “When I began this project, I did not expect that most of the stories would take place in conflict zones. . . . As I write, almost one in five of the 191 nations in the world is at war—declared or undeclared—with another nation or within its own borders. In 2001 and 2002, 40 percent of all wars were being fought in Africa.” There were also border clashes, conflicts, and significant casualties inflicted in Korea, Kashmir, Israel, Palestine, New York, Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Colombia. In all three types of disasters there is chaos and suffering exacerbated by a history of poverty and environmental or governmental neglect.

The writers she chose are sensitive, intelligent, and strong people who write with candor about the situations they are in and how they struggle to help the indigenous people and themselves cope. Above and beyond the abstract and the conceptual, this book offers us a rich portrayal of the workers and their contexts. Written in diary format, these stories are all memorable and very different. One of them is particularly poignant as it describes a ten-year old boy who served as Patrick Dillon’s bodyguard in Huddur, Somalia, in 1992. Sent by Concern Worldwide, an Irish relief agency contracted by the UN to become its official NGO in

charge of food distribution in Somalia, Dillon went with a mission to help feed the starving refugees from nomadic tribes running from mortal danger in Kenya. The ten-year old bodyguard, named Muhammad Ali, carried a Kalashnikov rifle and took his job very seriously. He protected Dillon from several dangerous situations, but the story ends sadly for him. It is, however, a beautifully told tribute to heroic courage and the value of relationships in human life.

Much of what seems to be needed in the midst of chaos and danger is organization. College students who chose to go to Uganda for a Junior Semester Abroad from Colby College in Waterville, Maine were enlisted to participate rather than just observe a newly created commission simply because their management, organizing, and planning skills were better than those of the members of the new government. When the civil conflict intensified each side invited the students into their homes where they would be protected. The students were not allowed to stay, however, and returned to the U.S. with plans to return one day.

Sadly, the conflicts continue. There are also many unfortunate instances of war compounded by natural disasters. Countries included in the book are the Sudan, Ecuador, Viet Nam, and Chad, all of which suffered floods, drought, and famine. Rwanda, Somalia, Bosnia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, and Sudan suffered war and civil unrest; and Thailand, Angola, Afghanistan, and Occupied Territories (Palestine) continue to suffer the many aftereffects of war, e.g., landmines.

Carol Bergman has done a great service in offering this book. She has provided glimpses into what the aid workers experience when they descend into areas of destabilization and danger. She highlights issues facing our world and the challenges facing us as citizens of the world. She does not whitewash or avoid critics such as David Rieff (2003) who take a position of skepticism and pessimism about these humanitarian efforts. Bergman casts her vote with the humanitarian workers and their organizations, and she applauds the cumulative long-range benefits they bring to people in need. And as for the “motivating imperative” that drives these workers, Bergman sees it simply as a desire to work toward “a more peaceful and equitable world.”

References

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