

One Person's Suffering

WARNING: The following true story contains graphic descriptions of torture and extreme violence. The events took place in 1993 in Bosnia.

A twelve-year-old Muslim girl who would not or could not give her name recounted to a Red Cross doctor what soldiers had done to her and her sister-in-law. She was chained by the neck in her former schoolhouse and raped by six to eight men each night for a week. She watched her parents and brothers have their throats slit and their tongues cut out. Her nineteen-year-old sister-in-law who was nursing her baby boy was also repeatedly raped. When the sister-in-law's milk ran dry she asked for water. Her baby was taken from her and beheaded before her eyes, his head being tossed into her lap. The girl was again raped and her face slapped and smeared with her nephew's blood. When the sister-in-law began shrieking, she was shot twice in the mouth.

The girl had turned up at a Red Cross tent, frostbitten and wearing only a soiled slip, with some of her hair yanked out and her teeth broken.

Commentary

Everyone who contemplates the above true story will take action. It may only be to reflect on the existence of evil, or wonder about God. It might be to recall the political or historical situation. Or maybe you will simply take your own problems less seriously. It might be to contemplate your own capacity for evil. You might pray, or send money to aid the Muslim refugees, or others in similar situations. Or maybe you'll just excuse your own inaction. Nevertheless, most responses can be put in one of three categories: inactive responses that don't go very far; responses that make a temporary difference, such as sending a donation, whether for food or weapons; or responses that can make such situations less likely in the future.

The third category of response has the most possibilities for creativity and beauty. Progressive efforts that involve people in personal growth or community building are good examples. People have adopted villages, or families or sponsored children. Churches here and abroad have become sister churches. You could be sitting there with an idea that no one else has thought of. Ask a friend to join you and you're on your way.

The story is not over because history is not over. You and I are still alive. The torturers and the girl, now a woman, are probably still alive. Future torturers and victims are also alive.

Going Further

There is great power in rereading the story one sentence at a time, visualizing the events and imagining the women's emotions. The details add to the horror. One detail is having this all take place in your former schoolhouse. Another is experiencing this nightmare in the presence of someone you know, and experiencing their horror on top of your own. And only now, years after reading the story, do I wonder how the girl escaped, and why the men didn't kill her. It seems that their most sadistic act was to let her live.

Stepping back from the event, I'm fascinated by the many ways the story can be used. It could be used politically to raise money for guns, or for medicine. It could be used politically to organize women to protect themselves against men's basest tendencies. If it weren't so violent, ministers could use it in sermons to shock some of the faithful into wondering how a good God could permit this. And someday a TV news magazine may try to find the girl and at least one of the men for a "ten-years-later story" about what the event has meant over the course of their lives. We may then be treated to a round of "How awful!" and have our emotions stimulated. Meanwhile, advertisers can have their commercials viewed and indirectly make money from the girl's story. The girl's story was even turned into a poem by Christopher Nicholas and collected in *The Best American Poetry of 1995*. That's how I learned about her.

My use for the story is to say that people tell thousands of these kinds of true stories every day to motivate audiences to one kind of action or another, from righting wrongs to selling laundry detergent. You may read a story about suffering, and even do something

about it. But tomorrow, there will be another one of these stories with other people in need. It will probably be legitimate and stimulate empathy. But no one can respond on the emotional level to *all* of these instances of suffering.

Step back and take in the whole situation. Person *A* becomes a victim. Person *B* becomes emotionally caught up in their suffering. Person *B* does a good thing by organizing some group to either help Person *A* or prevent future victimization of this type. In doing this, Person *B* had also made a sacrifice that may be noble or tragic, depending upon how you look at it. Person *B* has put some or all of their own life on hold. You and I are Persons *C* and *D*, the ones who Person *B* wants to have take action. As a result of Person *B*'s efforts, we will feel vicarious emotion and be stimulated by the story of *A*; and we'll either feel better about the world and ourselves if we act, or worse about the world and ourselves if we don't act. That is, unless we've learned to feel nothing at all.

But why feel nothing when you can *enjoy* the process of: 1) Being moved to feel empathy or righteous anger. 2) Being reminded that God has spared *you* this suffering, and feeling grateful for that fact. 3) Being flattered that you have the power to affect other lives in a positive way, giving your life more meaning. 4) Finally acting and getting the feelings that come with completing a productive action: a sense of power and significance. There are also the bonuses of not having to think about your problems for a time, and being admired by others for your charity.

These are legitimate feelings that you've earned through action. And you can look forward to the emotional lift again and again, since the merry-go-round of suffering and addressing the suffering need never stop. But maybe you are getting sick of the endless merry-go-round and tired of all the emergency appeals, the walk-a-thons and charity fundraisers. Maybe you'd rather live more of your own life.

If you do, you can benefit from *Group Genie's* set of upgrades that are more intelligent and strategic ways to do good and prevent future suffering. One of these upgrades is called the CLEAR method and its power is based on the following ideas:

1. It's more forward-looking and strategic to become aware of the root patterns of suffering and attack the roots.

2. It's more powerful to regularly build your time, money, energy and skill so that you have more resources to "spend" on yourself and others.

3. Once you learn about patterns of problems, it's usually much more efficient to ask yourself what the *best* use of your volunteer hour is, rather than wait for someone to ask you to volunteer for their cause. One reason for this is that their problem has probably had a lot of time to grow and spread while they organized to fight it, and your resources would be better spent nipping other problems in the bud.

4. You'll prevent more suffering if you allocate some of your time to support *others* to learn to do the above: build-capacity, investigate roots, choose and act. Doing this makes you a link in a chain reaction of goodness.

People expect compassion and empathy to be part of goodness, and they are. But there is a point where compassion and empathy interfere with goodness. Imagine an emergency operating room. The surgeon, nurses and surgical techs must be clearheaded and efficient. These people save lives and reduce suffering day in and day out. Too much emotion would be a dangerous and exhausting distraction.

There will always be a place in the world for charities that manipulate people with stories so that good will be done. That's because there will always be people who are at the stage where they must have their emotional strings pulled like puppets before they will act. But there is a less self-indulgent and more grown-up way to do good. It's more efficient and it leaves time for you to live your own life drama.

Some readers will be angry that I used the word *manipulative*. Others will be insulted by the word *puppets*. Other people may say that my approach to doing good is cold and hard because it didn't offer the stories and emotional stimulation that they had been conditioned to expect. They will claim that emotions are a natural part of the process—and that is true, but so is learning and growth. That's why some readers will be ready for a more mature, forward-looking and strategic approach. These people will be like

surgeons, and that is why I sometimes call them *world surgeons*. They will operate on the world by operating on their own lifestyles, and then by supporting others to do the same.

It will be the beauty and elegance of their actions and the greater good they do that will take away any sting these words have for those who think I am criticizing without offering something better. Imagine how shocked or awestruck people will be when they realize that these world surgeons are changing the trajectory of human history.

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