Chapter 12
Epilogue

To Give or Not to Give: Confessions of a Humanitarian Aid Worker

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"You cry when you go and you cry when you leave."

—Frances Aboud, Canadian psychologist

One fact of humanitarian assistance is that there are always more people in need than resources to help them. If you are going to work in this business, you will have to learn to turn your back. Unless you can get to the point of being able to refuse to administer to a sick child, you will eventually leave, and to leave is to fail.

My first glimpse of this was in the 1980s. I was collegial with an elderly Catholic priest who had been working with street children in Kenya for nearly four decades. If he could be put into any classification of helper, it was not the bureaucrat or the do-gooder. Between the iridescent orange scarf wrapped around his neck that flowed to his knees and the open-sided jeep filled with street boys, he cut a clear, if atypical, picture. Each Monday night he rambled around the central district of Nairobi, looking for street kids to talk to, principally to explain what his programs had to offer should they be willing to join them. It was my pleasure (and learning) to accompany him.

Of the hundreds of *street workers*, which are what the people who go into the streets to help street kids, rather than those who stay in the offices, are called, he was without a doubt one of the best. In fact, at that time in Nairobi, street kids and his name were as invariably linked as apple pie and my country.

On our way home from this particular night, one that I already found noteworthy because of the persistent cold drizzle that I couldn't escape, we had just pulled up to a red light when a girl in early adolescence ran to us waiving her arms frantically. I could see she was not looking well; I thought she might be suffering from malaria. Behind her, in the shadows of a dim streetlight, were six or seven other girls of her age. As she approached the jeep, she pleaded with the priests to take her sick friend to the hospital.

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Without much of an excuse, he refused. He told her friends to take her to the hospital. All he offered was to check on her in the morning. As we sped off toward where I was staying, I was confounded. Why had he left the girl in such a crisis? He told me that it was past ten o'clock at night, and if he took her to the hospital, he wouldn't get home until past one in the morning. He had mass to give at six and a full day of street work already planned to do afterward: "I have to draw the line somewhere."

I felt betrayed. He wasn't living up to the standards of his religious calling, let alone the secular morality that is associated with humanitarian assistance. It took me several years to understand the priest's refusal to administer to this sick girl. I had to suffer more than a few doses of self-incrimination before I got to a place where I could draw my own line in the sand. What follows is my attempt to convey how I live with myself in situations where there is always less time and energy than work to be done and where the results of failing to meet the demands can be, and often are, significant.

In 1996, I went to Ethiopia on a 2-year contract to study the mental health problems of people displaced by the civil war. Most of my work was in a single camp, Kaliti, which was on the southern end of Addis Ababa, the capital. Kaliti on one dusty acre had a population density greater than that of the Warsaw Ghetto. There was no source of water, a single latrine, and no electricity. The people in the camp were allowed to work in the public domain, earning 3 kg of grain per day, per family, but because the average family size was nearly eight and because the grain they earned did not always arrive on time, they lived with little food and the constant fear of having none. When I arrived, they had already lived like this for 6 years.

Before they arrived in Kaliti, the men had made a decent living as civil servants; however, when Eritrea won the civil war in 1991, their wives—mostly women from the province of Tigray now in the new state of Eritrea—were given only a few hours to choose either Eritrean or Ethiopian citizenship. If they opted for Eritrean citizenship, they would be close to their families of origin, but they would lose their husbands and children, who were considered enemies of Eritrea. If the women accepted Ethiopian citizenship, they could continue living with their husbands and children but had to leave their families of origin, and to get to Addis, they were forced to trek through the Danakil Depression, arguably the most inhospitable spot on earth. There is no water, and the temperature can reach 50 °C in the shade (122 °F). Because they had been swept hurriedly from their homes, they left with only what they could carry in their hands and on their back and heads. Insufficient water became the rule, and before they arrived in Ethiopia, almost all of them bore witness to relatives and friends who had died from thirst.

In Kaliti, acute conditions were common, the depth of which was rarely encountered in the West. Typhus, typhoid, and malaria were common. TB and AIDS were endemic. I must admit that being exposed to this had its attraction. I was not there to be altruistic but to advance myself. What I learned came from finding myself a wealthy philanthropist. I was forced to take on a common man's dream, "what if you won the lottery ticket and with it millions of dollars, how would you use it for the betterment of humanity?" I found this an immense burden and did my best to

avoid taking it on, but correspondingly, I found an opportunity to come to terms with a part of myself rarely engaged in my work as a professor at San Jose State University, where what is expressed as unconditionally necessary is beyond comprehension to the absolute needs of the people in Kaliti.

On one of my first visits to Kaliti (and what was to become characteristic of my work for the next 2 years), I was taken to help Aster, a small dark-skinned woman in her mid-30s. She too was so acutely ill that she could not raise her head to acknowledge me when I entered her cardboard tent to take her history. She had a high fever and was dehydrated. Her friend Checkla told us that Aster had not eaten for several days. She said, Frazier, Aster's son, who was her only living relative, sat by her side, remaining with her night and day, bearing witness to her demise.

Among humanitarian workers in Ethiopia (and most probably in most places), there was a commonly debated question (and one that paralleled the welfare debate in the West): Should *material* aid be given to the poorest of the poor? Those who were against this type of help argued for teaching fishing instead of handing out the fish. They talked about "aid dependency," an argument common in developed countries as well.

My reasons for helping materially boiled down to the following factors: (1) by allowing us to conduct research in the camp, Kaliti people earned it; (2) by inculcating a therapeutic trusting relationship in our exchanges, our research and community counseling were facilitated; and (3) because we had it, they needed it, and no ethical alternative existed.

What was missing from the humanitarian debate in Ethiopia was the other side of the coin of aid dependency, aid fatigue. This condition focuses on the difficulty of helping and is far more complex and important to consider. First, as deep as my purse was, it was not sufficient to take care of everyone who needed help. Second, every attempt to help was diverted into a promise for full care, making it nearly impossible for me to get satisfaction for what I did give. And, finally, whatever I gave resulted, because of the endless need, in a lack of progress. Nothing is more debilitating than altruism without satisfaction.

Aster's immediate concern was that she didn't have enough food with which to take her medicine; each time she tried to swallow the medicine that would make her better, she vomited. Without food, she couldn't keep the medicine down. With a grunting physical effort that was more eyes than words, she pleaded with me for money for injections; injections can be taken without food.

I found that it is far more difficult to ignore the needs of a single known person in crisis than to refuse the fate of unknown traumatized multitudes. In this way, I was similar to how I observed expatriates refusing to help beggars in the streets of Addis. In spite of the opportunity to help the beggars, people didn't, because to give was to acknowledge the person doing the begging, while refraining allowed a way to avoid such dismal reality.

While it might seem surprising in the face of seeing someone so much in need, before it was possible to help that person, it was necessary to acknowledge one's own suffering. In the face of someone truly in need, like Aster, we are made uncomfortable by our powerful need to flee. Only by accepting that we too are in need can we stand face to face in the presence of someone else's begging for help.

The truth for me was that I had no choice; I simply was not comfortable being so close to people in need and being able to help and not doing so. My struggle was more on the other end: Did I give enough? Why did I not give more? What kind of person was I? Maimonides said, only a man with an evil eye would give less than 10 % of his wealth. I was not even close to this.

Faced with myself in this type of situation on a fairly daily basis, I found myself preoccupied with the diverting idea that the people of Kaliti saw me only as someone who gave them money or food or medicine. I thought they were not getting the best of what I had to offer. I had hoped to give from the base of my professional knowledge and any wisdom I had garnered from my experience in working in diverse cultures with individuals coping in difficult circumstances. After all was said and done, whatever the degree of destitution Kaliti people might have to face, I wanted them to understand that any basis for separating the resilient from the desperate had *more* to do with the human spirit than any material benefits coming from me.

But Aster, who had already spent all her resources on medicine, which, in fact, was bought with the money that was supposed to have been spent on food, had more immediate concerns. By my figuring, there were three ways for her to get money: (1) She could borrow it from a family or friend. (2) She could borrow it against her future grain rations. (3) She could get money from me. Her first option was no option. Her family had all perished except for her son, Frazier, who was already contributing as much as he could by doing child labor in an economy that had no jobs for anyone. And her neighbors already loaned her some money; they could give her more but only by jeopardizing their own lives. Her second option was also not viable because she had already borrowed against her future grain rations once. If she did this again, she would have no hope of being able to retire her debt and, upon her death, the debt might be passed onto her son. This left the third option: me.

When I put my hand in my pocket, I could feel enough money to pay for the food she needed and, for that matter, enough to keep death at bay for many people who I would come to see nearly every day for these 2 years—people whom I would come to call friends. Another diverting strategy I took, before accepting what I had and they didn't, was to watch myself through their eyes. They also had to deal with giving or not giving, in some instances having to choose between feeding one's own child and letting the other sicker one pass away.

As I stood there in front of Aster, I told one of my colleagues we would have to take money out of our budget to start a fund for this kind of emergency. Then I walked on to continue my rounds thinking that if I take care of Aster at the beginning of the day, then where would I find the resources for the next Asters that I was sure to see before the day closed? I couldn't blame them for their demands, yet I found I couldn't stand up to helping them.

One way I made it through the day was keep the people in Kaliti shrouded in abstractions of misery. The truth is that real tangible misery is something that affects me personally as it did the few times someone in my family was in trouble, like when my wife's malaria was on the verge of taking her over. These people were objects of study, allowing me a "professional," "objective" view.

In this context, I asked: Did the people in Kaliti grow accustomed to suffering? The answers from my Ethiopian colleagues were not conclusive. But I did learn that parents believe that children have their own God who takes them when the time is right. Parents leave a single tuff of hair on their children's otherwise shaved heads so that God can easily take them. Do these beliefs make it easier to lose your child?

A few weeks later, Aster was admitted to Mother Teresa's home for AIDS victims. Aster's friend Checkla, who took her there, was staying with her because Aster needed constant care. Patients were not allowed to enter Mother Teresa's home without providing for their care. Unfortunately, a problem emerged—since Checkla would be away from the camp caring for Aster, she would not be able to work for food, and who would take care of feeding Checkla's two children?

To keep myself afloat in this work, I was going to have to see how far the following questions apply to me: Am I my brother's keeper? Were the people in Kaliti foreign in nearly every aspect of my life, sharing only the abstraction of humanity? Could I learn to operate from the stance that they did share full brotherhood? Or, would I draw a line of continuum—much for my blood brother, less for my extended family member, and so on?

After Aster spent a week or so at Mother Teresa's, the level of conversation about who was going to take care of Checkla's children escalated. At one point, the conversation became heated. Amharich, a flamboyant, overly charged, stout middle-aged woman, screamed at me to get out of the camp. We were not helping them, she shouted, only causing more problems. Why should she give up her grain ration for Checkla's two children when I could give them money?

I am thinking that if I support Checkla's children when would I stop? Would I wait for Aster to die before I stop? Or should I save my resources for Checkla's kids? If I didn't help, at what point would the community stop helping because they think Aster was going die with or without help? Was this argument they were having their way of talking about this, of dealing with the dilemma of not having enough to live up to their own standards of generosity?

The conversation about how to feed Checkla's two kids reached such ferocity that I announced I was leaving to visit Aster. I take along with me a couple of colleagues from Kaliti. On the way, one of them tells me that Checkla's motivation for helping Aster is financial. She is behaving altruistically by betting that we will give something to her kids if she is not around to feed them.

When I get to Mother Teresa's, I discover that Aster died that morning. Back at camp, the conversation streams in two directions. One is Fraizer, her surviving 8-year-old boy. Another one of Aster's friends, Lumlum, agrees to take care of Frazier until something more permanent can be worked out. What will I do with helping Lumlum take care of Frazier? Before I can deal with this, an argument commences about what to with Aster's body. Some argue that it should be left at Mother Teresa's, which would mean that Aster would not receive a proper burial. This position is based on the costs of bringing the body back to Kaliti. Would it not be better to use all the resources that Aster had (she had some 100 pounds of *teff*, the ancient wheat species endemic to Ethiopia, which is the dietary staple) for taking care of Frazier, now an orphan? Amharich wants Aster's body returned to Kaliti and

prepared for a proper funeral. She claims that since Aster has been in the camp with the rest of them for 6 years, she should be buried among them.

Often, helping has less to do with whether or not I was going to give than with the logistics. Behailu, the chairman of the elected camp committee, steps in and says Aster deserves a proper burial. The conversation stops and we drive into Mother Teresa's to get the body. On the way, I decide to pay Lumlum for taking care of Frazier even though I knew she might skim a bit off to feed herself. I also thought she might find a way to do the same for what she got from selling Aster's *teff* that was originally supposed to be used for the burial and for the priest who will bury her.

When we get to Mother Teresa's, we discover—without going into the details of how we come to learn this—that the body doesn't fit into the car. We need another one. If I use the money for transport, there will be nothing left for the burial. And so it goes. Each time I give, I know that one takes the money and spends it in a way that does him benefit. The other complains of not being considered equally. If I chose to give to my friend, after all what are friends for, the elected committee complains, but those in charge are more selfish politicians than trustworthy administrators.

Sometime during this imbroglio, I visited Sister Mary, a middle-aged Italian nun with a sharp smile and an oversized crooked nose, who had spent some 20 years feeding the indigent in Addis Ababa. I was interested in how she had managed the logistics. Each Wednesday, mothers would bring their sickly children to her, and she would attach color-coded flags to their wrists that ranked just how sickly they were. She strictly constrained her feeding program to fifty children and their mothers, despite pressures to take on more. I asked how she dealt with the pressures. She told me that I must realize "the desire to help could never be totally consummated." There was only so much she (or anyone) could do, and it was best to define (and limit) one's offerings.

In fact it is not divisible. The most important Ethiopian Orthodox legal document, the *Fetha Nagast* (*Law of Kings*), written in the seventeenth century and still used for ecclesiastical law today, stipulated several rules pertaining to the responsibility of giving to the poor. If a person gave to the poor, that donor earned the support of God. The more one gave, the more likely he or she would gain God's favorable attention. God not only gives a place in the kingdom of heaven to everyone who gives to the poor but also the poor provide an opportunity for the wealthy to grow closer to God. This is a two-way street.

When I was leaving Sister Mary's compound, a young Oromo woman with a small child stood at the gate, waiting to see the Sister. The little girl had been burned over her face, body, and arms. Wound around the child's head was a soiled piece of white cotton cloth, wrapped as if she had a toothache. An alarming red pimple protruded from the cornea of one eye. In reaching out to touch the Sister, I could see the little girl's fingers, burned to stubs. Yet, Sister Mary welcomed the child in her arms, neglecting the striking blemishes, and admonished the mother only about the girl's runny nose. To keep at this work, she had found a way to ignore the obvious and enjoy the unexpected, and she had developed a philosophy based on her own caveats, personal judgments, allowing for plenty of exceptions, and more than an occasional breaking of rules.

Well, Aster's body is brought home. She is buried properly. Checkla returns to her two kids. Frazier goes to live with Lumlum. We look for an orphanage for him but get bogged down in bureaucracy. Lumlum, a widow without children, doesn't want him to leave. Several months later, she thanks me for allowing her to take care of Frazier. I am ecstatic that my original fears, that Lumlum only offered to care of Frazier to feed herself, had some altruistic motive.

As I left the camp for the last time, my friend's friend, whose leg was broken in a soccer game, asks me to help him with the medical care that will allow him to walk again. When I try to explain to him that I have nothing for him, he asks, although clearly it is meant as rhetorical, "What kind of a humanitarian aid worker are you?"

Now, several years later, I would like to say to him: I accept that that instead of being applauded for what I did, I could be harassed for not doing enough, but feeling harassed stopped me from giving any more than I did. I admit that to the extent that I took care of "others," I was also taking care of my needs to be a worthwhile person, but there was more to it than that. It was a two-way street. I also helped because it gave me a chance to live deeply, perhaps being religious, perhaps living in God's name. What I tried to teach them was to increase their level of citizenship and found instead that they taught me (like Sister Mary) to reduce mine. Likewise, they taught me the value of spirituality, while I tried to impress upon them to become less dependent on God's will. In the end, each of us decided what, if anything, there was to learn from the other.

What all this self-exploration revealed to me about giving—and what I learned in talking with people who had discovered how to sustain inner resolve in helping (as well as to those who had dropped out)—proved to be elegantly simple: The only way to continue giving is to drop any pretense of impartiality, even fairness, and just accept one's desire to help whichever people one liked for whatever reason. The formula may not be politically correct, but it works, and in the end, the needy will fare the best from its application.

I want to tell humanitarian workers not to withdraw from the overwhelming need, even knowing that resources will be inadequate to solve all the problems and that the demands are never ending and often self-serving. Find a way to enjoy what you can offer, and ignore the rational reasons for not giving. Also, don't assume that the degree of giving is stable over time or place. It appears to be as much of a state as a trait. My openness to giving is not the same in America as it was in Ethiopia. In fact my experiences in Ethiopia have led me to see American beggars here in the context of Ethiopia, which doesn't do much for them.

In Kaliti, the good and the bad coexisted. Illness and disease provided the awful drama of slow and tortured death as well as the opportunity for love and caregiving. In observing the many acts of kindness characterizing the relationships around me there, I came to understand how important the very act of caring can be.