

We walk with Angels

Just stop rushing through your day for a moment. Stop your headlong flight to wherever you are going, just for 10 minutes. First let me take you on a journey through your imagination. Begin now. The place is Bosnia Herzegovina, 1992, 9.0 am in the morning....

Certain holes have appeared in the delicate fabric of civilisation: at least it seems delicate to you now: and your daily purpose has fallen through one of them into oblivion. Your home is just a blackened, burning void. Shell impact. You were lucky, the whole family were in the cellar when it hit. Your children, wife and parents are standing in the street, clutching a few possessions, many more lie scattered around, growing steadily saturated by an easy, soft rainfall. Cars fly past full of strangers carrying anything they can. Horns blaring, sirens wailing. Really hard confusion all around, hard like steel bars, like a bad trip. There are stories of eviction, rape and murder on every tongue. The atmosphere is hypertense, a million volts. It was not totally unexpected, but not like this, not at this scale - not here and now? Why here and now? You notice an unusual thudding noise. A man in uniform tells you that it is mortar fire and that you should move South. You haven't heard mortars for twenty years, not since you were doing your Service. You are all scared, bewildered, angry, so you leave, on foot, in the rain to find shelter. Shelter to the South. The children are crying, terrified, the entire world is crying. As you press swiftly along the road you become aware of other sounds. The crackle of occasional gunfire, and shouts, screams. A misshapen sack lies in a doorway. It couldn't be a body? One of the children is playing with something, passing it from hand to hand, squeezing it. You take it and are shocked to find that it is a person's eyeball. How?

OK. That's enough. Get the scene? Lets move on.....

Sally Becker has been saving children's lives in Bosnia Herzegovina. She has been called many things for her trouble; one of the better ones being 'The Angel of Mostar'.

I'm searching for the right word to describe this woman. More of an impression than a strict description - Normal - she seems normal. Remember when you were 15? Well, she's like your friend's mothers were. Remember? Just normal. Nothing else. She is aware that she has done 'A Good Thing', and also that you haven't. But she doesn't care about that. She is still far too concerned with Them. She wants to wake you all up and shout "Hey, you, Look at what is going on in these places, this should not and need not be happening". She doesn't mean the tidal surging of war and conquest or the sweet-syrup poison machinations of global politics. She means children with no legs and no hope, dying in dirty hospitals, like the doctors around them, from shells and shrapnel and bullets and bleeding bureaucracy.

Oh no, her experiences were not a Hollywood movie, or a phosphor-sanitised televisual bleat. This was real. Real like the page in front of you. Real homes, once warm and looked-forward-to-at-five-o'clock, real roads, rain, wind, sunshine,

voices, faces, snipers, mortars, deadly detonations and corpses in the gutter as unremarkable as the last bus you saw pass on the street outside your window.

Are they a breed apart, superhuman, these people who become involved in causes, or are they just in the right place at the right time? Sally Becker is clearly of the opinion that the majority of people are trapped in their everyday existence, job, mortgage, children, and that it is simply impossible for them to take direct action. She is, as always, most generous. How good of her to provide us with an excuse. Her own situation was one that enabled her to take action, she says. Freedom from the constraints that confine us, the majority. Her profession as an artist had meant living abroad extensively during her life. An absence of children of her own gave her the freedom to risk all to save other people's.

When Sally talks of her experiences it is easy to lose the sense of the reality behind her words. Her tone is so matter-of-fact. However, one cannot help but notice certain particular things in her speech, like the absolute dominance of the prepositions 'in' and 'out' when referring to Mostar. She talks of 'getting in' and 'getting out' of East Mostar, as though the experience were akin to taking a deep gulp of air and plunging headlong into a pool of hot tar. More than what she says, her manner of speech describes tension and effort; a blurring of vision; the sensation of eating oneself alive and of the distortion of reality in a world gone mad. A place where perversion equals normality.

She talks flatly of her second odyssey into East Mostar. Of being fired on by the Bosnian Army, while driving an ambulance, solo, across the one remaining iron-and-tyre draped ancient bridge. Stone, goat hair and egg-white under tank and bomb and blood. Of fulfilling promises and collecting children and of the return journey. Of arriving at the UN base at Medjugorje and of the UN's refusal to let her enter with the wounded. "They closed and barred the gate. I had these kids screaming in agony in the back of the ambulance, on drips and half blind, nursed by a mother who's five-year-old boy had been ripped apart by shrapnel just two days earlier. Then Sky TV turned up and started filming the scene; 'the closing of the gates' ". Anger showed on her face then and moves across her face now too, as we speak, like a dark cloud shadow on a hillside. Frustration and disgust, but above all sorrow at the memory of the suffering of the injured. Then all of a sudden her words begin to stumble and my own eyes fill in sympathy, my chest tight and an ache at the back of my throat; those physical symptoms of massive injustice done, and of that knowledge shared. Reality comes crashing in.

I ask her does she sleep well?. "I have nightmares that I am back there. I was trapped in East Mostar for a week and we were shelled day and night. I had to keep running past snipers sight-lines to get to the War Office to obtain exit documentation for the children. That was a nightmare. People were dying around me. Doctors tending the dying were being killed as well. Something is there inside my subconscious. I try to suppress it, but at night, sometimes, it comes out."

Screaming like a shell.

One senses that an amount of anger appropriate to her experience would be self-destructive. She has had the sense to divert her emotion into another stream. She has witnessed horrors but suppresses the explosion of

grief. We all like to think that we have witnessed horrors. It convinces us that we are strong enough to cope with everyday life with its hypocrisy and humdrum tortures. We haven't; most former servicemen will tell you that in fact, we can't really cope with horror at all. Our subconscious becomes a storm-tossed sea of nightmares and mental imbalance. Despite our posturing and bravado, inside we are soft, delicate creatures. Yet we put ourselves in hard, stressful, dangerous situations, knowing that personal damage will ensue. Why?. Because our intellect can override our instinct for self-preservation. In the service of a higher purpose, we can expand beyond our fragile, timid core and shine with our capacity for equanimity, magnanimity, love and compassion as we transform ourselves beyond that which we believed ourselves to be. The ability to re-shape and transcend oneself. That is what it means to be a Human Being. There aren't many of them around. There could be a lot more. Sally Becker is a Human Being.....are you?

Tim Hetherington 1994