

# LET ME REST A LITTLE, HUMANKIND

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**H**e must be a feather, the way his naked body rests so lightly, facedown, on the dirt. The portion of his face not obscured by his thin arm looks almost peaceful—eyes closed, blemish-free. He is not a victim of physical violence or torture; instead, his body is slowly, meticulously, shutting itself down. He is starving to death. One could mistake his big toe for a pebble. Dust clings to his skin. I fear that he might soon dissolve into the ground. But he is resting. The caption of Australian photographer Daniel Berehulak’s photograph taken during the 2005 famine in Niger, titled “Let Me Rest A Little, Brother,” informs the viewer that the young boy is resting, not dead, and that the even smaller boy standing above him, gazing into the camera with desperate, piercing eyes imploring help, is his brother. Legs dangling from a broken-down wagon with just one wheel is all we see of a third figure in the photo. I saw this image in an online photo essay and felt shock, sadness, anger. The onlookers in the photograph somehow, perhaps counterintuitively, augment the helplessness of the prostrate child, asking “What can we do?” The immobility of the wagon asks, “Where can we go?” The child’s small, dusty, naked body implies, “It is too late.”

The anger I felt at the injustice shown—at the inability of the boy’s family to help him, to feed him—followed by my longing to help him myself corresponds to sociomedical scientist Robert Sember’s idea that “the power of images lies in their capacity both to convey information and to evoke reaction, often in the form of a feeling or an impulse” (1626). Most would agree that photographs, especially those of suffering, almost necessarily evoke reaction. They are intrinsically shocking and saddening due to the nature of what they depict. A person’s reaction to a photo, however, can be many things—shallow, misinformed, under-informed, personal, biased. Sometimes there is knowing recognition. Sometimes the image is totally alien, unfamiliar. Either way, the viewer’s understanding of the photo directly influences his or her reaction.

Writer and activist Susan Sontag offers one perspective on the way people view images of suffering. She contends that “harrowing photographs do not inevitably lose their power to shock, but they do not help us much to understand. Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us” (94-5). The viewer feels shock and sadness but does not “get it.” This produces what can be called a “shallow” reaction, wherein the photograph simply does not reveal enough for the viewer to have a contextual understanding of the events portrayed. The image requires a narrative; perhaps a textual explanation of the economic, political, social, and environmental factors surrounding the food crisis in Niger must be examined before the full impact of Berehulak’s photo can set in.

Sontag's view contrasts with Sember's understanding of images as "a way of knowing, not in the narrow sense of containing information but in the more profound sense of making information meaningful" (1627). In his article, "Images in Public Health," Sember supports the addition of pictures to the pages of the *American Journal of Public Health*. He asserts that the photographs themselves underscore and strengthen the content of public health scholarship because they provide added depth to the issues. According to this argument, a photograph provides the context that a narrative lacks. These views are paradoxical when considered together, but neither one is necessarily wrong. Whether the viewer derives context and a greater understanding from a photograph or from a narrative is irrelevant. Highly relevant and important, however, is that the viewer does obtain a deep (i.e., "non-shallow") understanding of what he views, as contextual understanding may be considered an essential prerequisite for effective action, which is the next logical "feeling or impulse" (1626).

Berehulak's "Let Me Rest A Little, Brother" likely arouses in many viewers a desire to take action and alleviate the children's suffering. Those who saw the photograph immediately after publication were confronted with an image of urgent famine—the awareness that two hundred, two thousand, or ten thousand miles away, at any given moment, a child was starving to death. Those who see the photograph today know that the effects of a four-year-old famine have not vanished. Sontag acknowledges that the desire to take action against an atrocity is strongest when something can be readily done about the situation at hand. In discussing the photos of the My Lai massacre released in March 1968, she writes, "we could feel an obligation to look at these pictures, gruesome as they were, because there was something to be done, right now, about what they depicted" (95). This logic is compelling. After all, what of the adage "Don't cry over spilled milk"—things that can be helped are the things worth acting on. Surely this expression is far too caustic and insensitive—dismissing the importance of memorialization—but it does not fit for another reason as well.

Before discussing this reason, though, the concept of memorialization requires further explanation. In her piece "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory," Marianne Hirsch uses the term "postmemory" to describe "the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they 'remember' only as the narratives and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right" (9). She develops her concept of "postmemory" specifically with respect to the Holocaust. Hirsch espouses a different kind of photography-induced action—one as important to the discussion of humanely and productively viewing images as intervention-oriented action. The action of the postmemorial generation is to cope. In Hirsch's words, "the postmemorial generation—in displacing and recontextualizing these well known images—has been able to make the repetition [of the same Holocaust images] a mostly helpful vehicle of working through a traumatic past" (8). The two forms of action—let us say,

“interventionist” and “memorialist”—seem radically dissimilar, but really only differ in the sentiment with which the actor in each situation views a given image. In Sontag’s interventionism, action is taken to change a current atrocity from the outside. In Hirsch’s memorialism, action is taken to reconcile oneself with a past atrocity from the inside.

But these two forms of action can be reconciled. Images of suffering, whether of wars past, of current famines, or of violence, represent and depict events that are happening now or will most likely happen again. Truly singular events may seem like exceptions—the bombing of Nagasaki, the firebombing of Dresden, the effects of apartheid in South Africa. The systematic mass slaughter of European Jews in Nazi concentration camps during the Second World War put an indefinite moratorium on the use of the word “holocaust” in almost all discourse for a reason. But all of these atrocities had similar human effects. The Holocaust is unparalleled for many different reasons while, say, famine in Ethiopia has occurred at least four times in the past century and may very well happen another four times in the next, but their effects are alike (Kiros 16-19). Those affected by any aforementioned event dealt with heart-wrenching injustice, intense pain, and disabling sorrow. They all faced death. Berehulak’s subject felt the same hunger in Dououloukou in 2005 that a boy his age in a 1941 Warsaw ghetto felt. Because of this, the date of a given photo becomes tangential to our processing of its meaning.

Our reaction to Berehulak’s photo ought not be necessarily more profound than our reaction to images of famine in India in the 1960s, for example, though the latter happened “in the past.” Our intervention will be more conventionally fruitful in Niger, affecting change in an ongoing situation, but the mere fact that images of famine exist, past and present, makes the matter continually pressing. This is not to say that all atrocities depicted by images of suffering are the same; it is enormously important to recognize the different contexts of suffering, to obtain understanding. But distinguishing events only to establish temporality of suffering is harmful. Events are temporal, but suffering is tragically mired in perpetuity. As such, images should not be looked upon solely to work through trauma of the past, or to understand why events happened, but instead should always be regarded with the consciousness that events that produce the same or similar images are recurring or could recur. This explains why the aforementioned adage fails to apply—the milk is never spilled, *it is always spilling*, so long as there is war, violence, hunger, hatred.

Interventionist action, addressed by Sontag, works because it provides concrete results. But a certain limitation almost always comes with interventionism. People are compelled to act on what they see from the “outside.” The sympathetic viewer of an image of suffering wants to do something, but approaches his intervention the first way he can think of, as an outsider. “He” will help “them.” This incurs certain dangers. Arthur and Joan Kleinman write in their essay, “The Appeal of Experience; The Dismay of Images: Cultural Appropriations of Suffering in Our Times,” that famine

(and for our purposes we can add other sufferings—violence, war, etc.) is culturally presented in a way that misrepresents the affected populations (7). They find that the portrayal of famine as “the experience of a lone individual” leads to labeling localities as “irrational” or “self-destructive,” which finally results in the local world being “deemed incompetent, or worse” (7-8). Their solution is to “humanize intervention,” but crafting the humane responses Kleinman and Kleinman seek requires a different approach to images.

Hirsch, through her discussion of the postmemorial generation, provides this new approach. Members of the postmemorial generation, because they are the children of victims, find more significance in photos of their parents’ suffering than do others. The bond between the two generations bears enough strength that members of the second generation do not view images with an outsider’s eye, but in fact work through trauma themselves. In essence, postmemorial viewers look at images of suffering with empathy. They feel a real, visceral sorrow for the victims they are seeing, a sorrow with which they *identify*. They are on the “inside”—not because they suffered themselves, but because their empathy with their parents’ suffering is so profound. This is different from the feelings of other viewers, of Sontag’s interventionists, who feel a profound sympathy for those suffering before the lens, but who can truly only feel for them. As Sontag puts it, “We’—this ‘we’ is everyone who has never experienced anything like what they went through—don’t understand. We don’t get it” (98).

Therefore, the danger in “outsider” intervention can be eliminated if people conscientiously place themselves in the role of a member of the postmemorial generation without actually having family members who have experienced the situations they are viewing, and yet still maintain their gut reaction to intervene. A person attempting to view images of suffering in the most humane and productive way possible, in the “right” way (as in rectitude), must go much further than simply to react sympathetically to photographs of victims. He must make the decision to intervene according to his means—through contributions or even on-site humanitarian work, of course, but as importantly, through advocacy and support, education, political participation, basic discourse. And most of all, he must make the effort to intervene as if he has a personal stake in the results—because he understands that he actually does have a personal stake in the results. He puts himself as close as possible to the people he is trying to help: in sentiment, in thought. He has no prideful sense of philanthropy because he feels that he is on the inside. He is generationally connected—not by blood, but by the bond of humanity.

Achieving this perspective is not necessarily easy, though Susan Sontag provides one method of accomplishing this by an example from her own life. In 1993, Sontag lived in Sarajevo during the siege, where she directed Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. After the opening performance, Sarajevo’s mayor declared her an honorary citizen, conceivably for taking such a profound interest in the people of the city when much of the world remained indifferent. In a 2004 interview, Sontag said that “it’s

hard to make that effort to think how the other person feels. But that's really what a moral life is, and ethical life is" (qtd. in Moyers). With these ideas of "honorary citizenship" and "ethical life," Sontag shows a method by which one can achieve a postmemorialist perspective on the suffering of peoples everywhere. Empathy can be achieved by acknowledging the necessity of "putting yourself in someone else's shoes."

The most productive and humane result will come of viewing images of suffering when we attain this position, either how Sontag did it or in some other way. Better yet, Kleinman and Kleinman's idea, cited by Sember—that "images will be used for sentimental effect, a form of privileged catharsis in which a swell of sympathy for those who are less fortunate than ourselves is an end in itself" (1628)—becomes very unlikely if people place themselves in a hybrid interventionist-memorialist position. Combining elements of both, the viewer can intervene in atrocities while respecting "the interpersonal space of suffering, the local, ethnographic context of action," effectively from the "inside," because the atrocities are so shocking to him that they eradicate any haughty, or even modest, conceptions of "us" and "them" (Kleinman and Kleinman 18). Shock translates to sharply perceptive empathy, not tidy sympathy, because the viewer of photography of war, famine, or violence feels more than an obligation to help the people suffering. He feels that, in a way, he too is suffering. This hybrid position, albeit idealistic to expect of all, can provide a greater sense of humanity to the conscientious viewer—one that ties him or her to every other individual in the world in memorial sentiment and in obligation—so that Sontag's notion, of the "breathtaking provinciality" of speaking of reality as spectacle, becomes unthinkable (97).

Daniel Berehulak photographed a starving child in Niger and titled his piece "Let Me Rest a Little, Brother." It almost makes me cry. I feel a little ill. I want to help him because I can, and because I must. Because that "Brother" is me.



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