

# The Worst News in the World

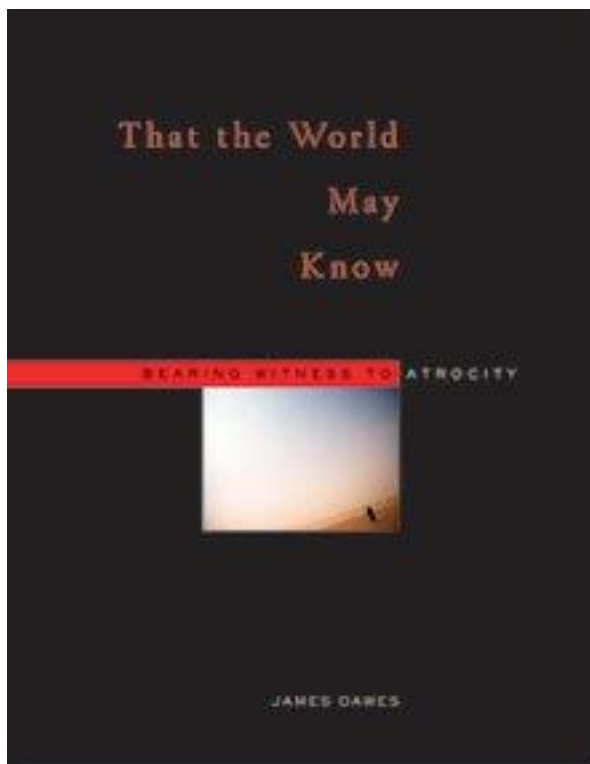
by Tom Palaima

Published Fri, Feb 8, 2008 at 12:00 am CST

Anyone concerned with human rights—with humanity in general—will come away from James Dawes' *That The World May Know* troubled and well informed. Dawes considers humanitarian aid and human rights work, and examines the ways in which news of such work has been disseminated and received during and after the world's worst atrocities. During the last 30 years, Americans have seen images of or read about genocide, torture, and violent political repression in Bosnia, Rwanda, Somalia, Darfur, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Haiti, Nigeria, and Argentina. Dawes' book asks us to think about how stories of atrocity are told, who gets to tell them, how those stories affect us, and ultimately what good they may or may not do.

Dawes relies on the experiences of aid workers, peacekeeping soldiers, journalists, authors, legal experts, forensic scientists, NGO and United Nations staff, refugees, and physically and psychologically scarred survivors, through their writing and firsthand interviews. He lays out the ironies, moral ambiguities, and psychological traumas experienced by those who try to inform the rest of the world—mainly the privileged, developed world—about the brutality and injustice they have witnessed or attempted to alleviate.

We learn that many who confront atrocities develop serious doubts about whether what they do is worth the effort, and whether true justice can ever be obtained. Journalists wonder whether their stories make enough difference to justify the risks and personal tolls involved. Many express concerns about how their audience—us—filters the stories they file, and what we choose to do with the information when we get it.



Dawes' honest discussion of these issues has the narrative force of tragedy, moving us to pity and fear for our fellow humans caught up in atrocities. Most tragic, perhaps, are the surviving victims of torture and violence. They ask the same question as Job: "Why has this happened to me?" Days, months, or years later, they may be retraumatized when forced to recall nightmarish experiences

as they try to answer the questions that aid workers, refugee screeners, and investigators for human rights commissions and international courts of justice are required to ask. In dealing with atrocities, almost every action leads to unforeseen consequences. Nothing is black and white.

Take, for example, the terrible Rwandan genocide of 1994. Dawes helps us to see how it took place, how Western countries and the United Nations allowed it to take place, and how the Western world has since reacted to its failure to stop the genocide. The subsequent quest for justice through the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda has not been clear-cut. Dawes interviews Peter Erlinder, president of the tribunal's defense-lawyer association. Erlinder has created controversy by calling into question what most, by now, take as a given: that what occurred in Rwanda was in fact genocide.

Erlinder argues that there "was no plan for genocide, only a spontaneous, organic movement of violence, explicable by a long history of colonial manipulation." In his opinion, "genocide has a particular definition. A war is not a genocide. Killing civilians is not a genocide—it might be war crimes, but it is not genocide." By his reasoning, when the Hutus with machetes killed and maimed Tutsis in large numbers, they were not committing genocidal acts. Critics have called Erlinder's position genocide denial.

Imagine being an aid worker or a survivor or Romeo Dallaire, who served honorably as force commander of the U.N. assistance mission to Rwanda in 1994. You are called to testify at the tribunal and are faced with such legalistic

arguments. What would it do to your sense of justice and your belief in right and wrong?

Remarkably, Dawes makes us see that Erlinder is not using mere legal sophistry. In the context of international laws and conventions, it is necessary to employ concepts and definitions precisely. Otherwise, the very framework of civilization threatens to unravel. Violence destabilizes the ordered world and destroys confidence that the world makes sense. So, in its own way, does overly broad indictment.

For example, workers visiting prisoners for the International Committee of the Red Cross have a strict charge. They keep records of detainees, restore contact among families, and in some cases provide emergency medications. They do not and cannot make judgments about the guilt or innocence of prisoners. Strict adherence to their limited mandate depoliticizes their work. It is the main reason that repressive regimes let them operate in the morally contaminated environments in which they're often most needed.

However, by sticking to such blinkered views, committee representatives open themselves to accusations, leveled by disaffected activists and radical critics, that they're not doing enough to effect justice, that they are effectively "prison tourists." Dawes balances such criticisms with the perspectives of former prisoners and holocaust crimes prosecutor Eliahu Abram.

Nelson Mandela speaks for prisoners, stressing how the small improvements in conditions brought about by Red Cross prison visits during apartheid proved morale-sustaining for the prisoners. Abram prosecuted Ivan John Demjanjuk, the former SS guard known as “Ivan the Terrible” who was living a routine life as a naturalized citizen and Ford mechanic near Cleveland, Ohio. Speaking of his work’s psychological cost, Abram says it’s impossible not to ask, “What kind of human being am I if I’m dealing with this horrible information in such a practical, matter-of-fact way?” Still, he adds, “You have to distance yourself from the human aspect and deal with it as a technical matter in an extreme way.”

Other forms of criticism are raised by Dawes’ discussions with journalist Philip Gourevitch, author of *We Wish To Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families*, about the Rwanda massacres. In Gourevitch’s opinion, most Westerners did not want to know what was going on in Rwanda in 1994. Gourevitch argues that news coverage used words like “unspeakable,” “unthinkable,” and “unimaginable” as coded ways of telling readers it was OK “not to speak, think, or understand.”

Gourevitch brings a sense of black irony to his recollection of the comfortably firm stances taken against the World War II Holocaust, 50 years after the fact, at the 1993 opening of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. There were declarations then that Americans would never let something like the holocaust happen again. A year later came Rwanda, and 10 years later, Darfur.

Dawes sees irony in the current American moral righteousness about our willingness to admit our culpability for failing to intervene. He cites Bill Clinton's famous apology to the people of Rwanda during a brief visit to the Kigali airport on March 25, 1998. Dawes does not quote from Clinton's speech, but it can be found on the Web site of the Clinton Foundation. It is worth reading.

In it the president addresses an audience of "genocide survivors and assistance workers." He is careful not to blame the United States and its leaders explicitly for not taking action. His characteristically careful parsing of language is paralleled in the statement, cited by Dawes, of State Department spokesperson Christine Shelly two months into the Rwanda massacres. She explained, with clear embarrassment, the inaction of our government at that time by referring to the Clinton administration's "official formulation that Rwanda was experiencing 'acts of genocide' rather than 'genocide.'"

Dawes also explores the motivations and experiences of individual humanitarian and human rights workers. Many are drawn to this work because of strong moral feelings, a healthily narcissistic sense of righteousness, and self-confidence about what they hope to accomplish. Some bring deep human sympathy acquired through trauma they have suffered.

Dawes learns from interviews that these positive qualities can have a negative side. Michael Ignatieff, former director of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at Harvard University, stresses the "dangers [of] strong moral feeling" and the "catastrophic consequences to such good intentions." James Guy, president of

an institute that offers “psychological and spiritual counseling to humanitarian workers dealing with critical-incident stress, vicarious trauma, and burnout,” says that high levels of idealism make individuals working for humanitarian and human rights causes “more vulnerable ... to being disappointed and then discouraged and then frustrated and then burned out.” Mark Walkup, writing in the *Journal of Refugee Studies*, says, “Some aid workers experience the ‘limits of their effectiveness’ as a kind of failure—a failure which begets guilt, which begets blame: blame at the government, blame at the bureaucracy of their organization, even at the aid recipients themselves.”

Likewise, many moral and caring human rights and humanitarian workers are frustrated by what they view as the American public’s unrealistic demands for results.

Other aid workers, while tending to the overwhelming needs of atrocity victims, find themselves losing sight of the big picture, including the fundamental resilience of humankind. They may feel guilty for not doing enough, or for abandoning “their victims” for another assignment. But Dawes gives a fine example of the determination of some survivors to rebuild their lives on their own terms, using their own resources. Two victims of the Rwanda genocide, both of whose families were massacred, decided to marry each other. The groom-to-be, Mr. Bizimuremyi, asserts, “You have to rebuild your life. I want to start a family again. Otherwise, what do I live for?”

Many experienced aid workers and journalists covering atrocities or their aftermaths ask similar questions. What are *they* living for? How are *they* spending their lives? Whether giving medical assistance to a few of the thousands of survivors of atrocity, identifying the bones of a few of the many victims of massacres, or deciding which persons qualify for refugee status according to international conventions, they concentrate on the task at hand. They deal single-mindedly with the malnourished and dehydrated baby, the skeletal remains, or the desperate, displaced human in front of them; and they hope that their small actions make a difference. Journalists, meanwhile, try to get their stories out to anyone who might offer some help.

Many victims of atrocity and aid workers have told their stories to journalists or human rights commissions. Some have written their own stories. But mostly they do not know where their stories go, what meaning they have, or how they serve the cause of humanity and justice.

One place their stories have now gone is into James Dawes' remarkable book, which helps readers see things as Rony Brauman, former president of Doctors Without Borders, sees them: "When one speaks of a failure, one implies that there could be hope of success. I have a hard time imagining what a humanitarian success would be in situations where violence is itself a sign of failure. As humanitarians we inscribe ourselves in failure."

Brauman's outlook is not so much pessimistic as pragmatic, even existential. If we know the worst, really know it, and persist nonetheless in trying to help



others in the worst of circumstances, we succeed in preserving some part of humanity, theirs and our own.

*Tom Palaima is Dickson Centennial Professor of Classics at the University of Texas at Austin, where he teaches seminars on the human response to war and violence.*