

**“What have we lost along the way?”***Pierre Brunet • Écrivain et humanitaire*

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This text by Pierre Brunet found its way into the humanitarian microcosm after its publication on the website *Défis humanitaires*. It is certainly no coincidence that it has generated so many positive, enthusiastic, and maybe even grateful reactions. Indeed, it powerfully coalesces the concerns, disappointments and perhaps disenchantments that the NGO world is experiencing. Pierre Brunet surely knew how to put into words the sometimes confused, untold or withheld feelings. May this text trigger a reflection about our own drive, and on what we refuse to become.

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**F**or someone who – like me – became involved in humanitarian work in 1994, halfway between the French Doctors’ 1968 work in Biafra and today’s industrialised, standardised, professionalised humanitarian aid, there is a growing feeling of not being able to see signs of our past heritage, or promises of the future. This is not a complaint and a claim that “it used to be better”, for we all know that it wasn’t always better. This is about asking ourselves whether or not we have lost what is essential along the way. And if we cannot find it again, will it make us disappear by the sheer force of its absence?

Words often precede us. Or at least they slip out to transform reality before we even know it. When they come out of our boldness or outrage, they might herald a lasting human adventure of the kind that accomplishes necessary things. However, if they come out of our fears, they pave the way to annihilation. Human history has seen many different momentums and movements, countless struggles and ideologies; and many things that seemed eternal to us have crumbled and simply vanished. Humanitarian aid is not eternal by nature. The world can continue without this active, efficient and committed solidarity movement. Without it, the world will be far more inhuman, more cruel, unjust and hopeless, but it will be, at least so long as the ecological conditions allow it. Humanitarian aid, for this reason, is the acting and voluntary expression of a human impulse, not a planetary necessity. Its existence is thus hanging by a thread, the thread of our sincerity, our desire, our will, and our courage. And that is where words tell the truth, however unintentionally. Why are the words “boldness”, “outrage”, “commitment” or even “mission” demonetised in the humanitarian world today? What have we lost along the way? And with what have we progressively replaced it?

These devaluating terms have been replaced with words like “professionalisation”, “management”, “annual performance assessment and productivity bonuses”, “processes”, “guidelines”, “reporting”, “donor accountability”, “profitability”, “project manager” or “country director” instead of “head of mission”... I have even heard that humanitarian aid must adopt a “start-up mindset” (without any explanation as to what this means precisely, other than the fact that everything else is simply old news), or that we must “uberise” ourselves (once again, this vague expression seemed to mean that humanitarian aid was only a service, a performance obeying market forces, a market which as we all know, must give in to ultra-liberalism and deregulation for our collective happiness). Words have meaning. Thinking in terms of profitability, the decision to start a project is based not on the needs of human beings, but according to the profitability imperative, as has already begun to happen. In the same way,

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projects are shut down because they are no longer “profitable”... with no second thoughts. Second thoughts are increasingly scorned in the humanitarian world, and I find this concerning, but particularly meaningful. When there is no longer a Head of Mission, but a Project Director or a Manager instead, this may mean that we no longer feel that we are on a mission.

Being on a mission is to act only in the interest of the human beings that we help or rescue. Is this still the case when all young, or not-so-young, humanitarian aid “managers” have completely bought into the fact that, for today’s NGOs, the essential, primary, founding relationship is not the relationship with the beneficiary, but with the donor? Historically, the beneficiary has gradually evolved from being the “subject” of humanitarian aid to being the “object” of a transaction. In this transaction, NGOs acting as “aid contractors”, “sell” to donors a particular number of beneficiaries that have been cared for, fed, sheltered and given drinking water, for such a duration and such a price... And humanitarians in the field have frequently become contracting managers.

Let me be perfectly clear. I am not naïve. I have had responsibilities in the humanitarian sector, both as a field officer and at headquarters. I still do. As such, I have find myself at the centre of this financial constraint, of this vital “money as the sinews of war” issue. I have always accepted it. I also know about the size, volume and organisational constraints, which are key survival issues for NGOs, and I accept them too. I also know that today’s “industrialised” humanitarian system has the capacity to support – in terms of volume – the needs of a lot more people than before. I simply notice that the stakes have gradually changed and overtaken us. What mainly occupies and preoccupies us, what we find outrageous, what we’re obsessed with, is no longer the survival of people in need, but our survival as NGOs... The necessity – which I do not deny – to find and develop the means to keep existing as organisations has gradually induced the fear of disappearing. This fear often speaks instead of our humanitarian commitment. It has slowly eroded our boldness and our uniqueness. Through both our inferiority complex and our fascination with the business world, we have thought to ourselves: “Since our constraints and challenges are similar to those of a business, then we must now think, organise and function as businesses, for this is the key to our survival”. I firmly believe that this is a mistake, a suicidal one. Humanitarian aid will only remain irreplaceable if it stays founded, driven and organised according to values, principles, mindsets and purposes that are radically – and I insist, radically – different from those of private enterprise, the quite respectable purpose of which is profit making. In other words, the more we look like businesses, the less valuable, useful and necessary we are because what we do, and how we do it, can be emulated by the business sector, which is still the best and most competitive when it comes to lucrative service delivery. And we will have sacrificed our most precious added value, this capacity shared only by authentic humanitarians to “go where others will not”, to rescue the “last-mile beneficiaries”, to offer “tailor-made solutions”, especially in complex, interwoven environments and contexts. In short, our capacity to respond to the needs of those who are not “profitable” but who often have the most acute needs...

Of course, for a time, we will ensure our short or medium-term survival, but in the long run we are surely working toward our own extinction. Our future relies upon our difference. This original difference, born of the outrage over our human brothers’ distress, fuelled by boldness and commitment, has transformed humanitarian aid into this great human adventure which for millions of people in the world, makes that precise difference of surviving rather than dying; living rather than just surviving...

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The whole difficulty, the entire challenge for humanitarian aid today is to adapt realistically, effectively, and with pragmatism and determination to a globalised, industrialised, competitive, standardised, supervised, and in a word more constrained humanitarian system. And we must do so while retaining its true added value of this selfless commitment, this sincere drive that pushes us to act not for oneself but for others, because essentially “the other” is us... this conscience that the human species is one, that what happens to others happens to us too, that solidarity is consubstantial with humanity. Knowing that money is needed, and also that there is a “critical size” for continuing action, but not acting with just this constraint and financial results in mind. Professionalising even further, why not? If it means greater competence, discipline and effectiveness. But we need to go back to our boldness and outrage whenever possible and necessary. Humanitarians’ growing risk aversion, which has been visible for years now, is essentially logical; why take risks when the only point is to provide a service in order to keep an organisation going? Risk is not very profitable; it regularly requires costly adaptation, logistical and financial management efforts, as well as additional negotiations with donors. For security reasons it sometimes interrupts programmes and funding, and creates risks for field staff, risks that are also costly in terms of crisis management and sometimes justification to the aforementioned donors. Risk makes it difficult to establish good multi-year business plans. It is easier to look for a better “market”, meaning a more profitable, safer, more comfortable country, where the same types of services can be sold... with less risk.

In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy wrote a sentence that often comes to my mind: “Man cannot possess anything as long as he fears death. But to him who does not fear it, everything belongs”. I believe that this is true of humanitarian NGOs. Fear of disappearing is worthless to them, and only the unhindered and bold pursuit of their “mission” will give them purpose in the future. What if we set off on another mission?

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*Translated from the French by Benjamin Richardier*

**Biography • Pierre Brunet**

Born in 1961 in Paris to a French father and Spanish mother, Pierre Brunet began his career as a freelance journalist. In 1994, he joined the humanitarian effort, volunteering in Rwanda, devastated by genocide. He set off early in 1995 for a humanitarian mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina, then torn apart by civil war. There he was responsible for coordinating programmes in Sarajevo, and then worked as Head of Mission. On returning to France in late 1996, he joined the French NGO Solidarités International at its headquarters and started writing. In January 2006, his first novel *Barnum* was published, inspired by his humanitarian experience. In September 2008, his second published novel *JAB* told the story of a young Spanish orphan girl who grows up in Morocco and as an adult, becomes a professional boxer. In 2011, still involved in humanitarian work, he commits fully to his writing and dedicates most of his time to his work as a novelist. In March 2014, his third novel *Fenicia* is published, inspired by the life of his mother, a young Spanish orphan during the civil war who sought refuge in France and later became an anarchist activist, a seductress who died in a mental institute at the age of 31. In late

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August 2017, his fourth novel *Le triangle d'incertitude*, in which he “travels back” (as in *Barnum*) – to the Rwanda of 1994 to recount a French officer’s trauma after Operation Turquoise. His novels are published by Calmann-Lévy. Pierre Brunet is the Vice-President of Solidarités International.

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