

The Human Side of Storytelling

By Khushi Salgia, Global Santa Fe intern

“You don’t check your humanity at the door just because you have a job to do.”

The world is overburdened with chaos. Every time we refresh our newsfeed, there is something terrible that has happened. It’s hard not to become desensitized to these tragedies when there is a new one every single day. A traumatic experience is reduced to a headline, an event that will make history is reduced to a 30-second conversation, and a human life is reduced to a statistic. Many of us try to distance ourselves from these calamities in order to preserve a stable mental state, but what does it feel like to dive headfirst into disaster and feel exactly what the victims of humanitarian crises feel?

Margaret Traub, former executive producer at CNN and head of Global Initiatives at International Medical Corps, sat down with me just before her talk at a Global Santa Fe-hosted event to share her eye-opening experiences. “I was a burned-out executive at CNN and left in a fit of frustration,” she says. The large media corporations who are responsible for most of our news intake prioritize facts over feelings. They’re also focused on ratings and earnings and even the most important stories can be no longer than three minutes. Rather than becoming part of the story, a journalist has to observe, not get involved. It wasn’t until September 11, 2001, when Traub realized she couldn’t do this type of reporting anymore. Living near the second Twin Tower when it collapsed and still having to report objectively without involving emotions “was a traumatic experience.” This event was the catalyst for her changed views on journalism. “It was harder to be impartial, it was personal now,” she says.

In 2005, Traub was offered a job at International Medical Corps, a global humanitarian first responder, and accepted it thinking she might only stay there a year. Seventeen years have since passed. Starting off as the VP of Global Communications, she realized that being an active participant in telling people’s stories gave her more fulfillment. Traub often joins the emergency response team that deploys to a crisis. One of her roles is to capture stories about what’s happening on the ground to share with partners, donors and others for whom the information will be helpful. “You tell a better story when you are able to tap into people’s emotions, which everyone can identify with,” she told me. This way, the people listening to these stories view the victims of humanitarian crises as human beings rather than statistics. For journalists, it can be tricky to empathize with victims; it’s taxing and can affect their ability to be impartial. But for Traub, that engagement is more rewarding, for both the interviewer and the interviewee. She adds, “The best journalists are also human.”

Traub has also made some interesting observations about human nature. She talks about people’s “compassion quotient” for different humanitarian crises. For example, the heightened public concern about Ukrainians suffering in the war with Russia, versus, say, Syrians caught up in civil war in that country. This is why it is important for storytelling to be personal, so the public can empathize and relate to people who are different from them. Once we see other people’s humanity and recognize their side of the story, it is much harder to judge them. For this reason, Traub explains that she has “split cynicism and

hope” when it comes to human nature. She has seen firsthand both how cruel, and how kind, we can be to each other. All of us have potential to be either, and it is each person’s individual responsibility to make sure our kindness overrides our selfishness.

And this kindness can go a long way. Even the smallest gesture can remain in one’s memory for years to come. Traub recalls an experience in 2013 during Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines. Her team set up a medical tent, treating anyone affected by the disaster. A little girl came up to her, held her hand, and asked to go for a walk. Throughout the day, the girl would check in on Traub and hold her hand, even bringing her friends along. At the end of the day, when Traub had to leave, the girl came up to her with a necklace she had made, and said, “I will love you forever.” Traub told me, “Even at the worst moments of their lives, people still have the capacity to give.”