

Suffering in Their Place

How can we truly care about the millions of nameless strangers in the world? And even if we can care, what to do about it?

That's the question and the dilemma.

My father was a thief, my mother was a Russian, and I was the only smiling baby in the Kazakhstani orphanage.

For the first year of my life, I experienced severe malnutrition and neglect. Sunlight rolled through the windows. Orphanage-workers sometimes cooed at me in Russian. Otherwise, there was no stimulation. No one put toys into my crib. No one played games with me. They barely even changed my diapers.

I had never breathed in the fresh air of the outdoors. I had never felt the coolness of running water against my skin. I had never tasted solid food, and I weighed only thirteen pounds. In the economically-ruined former Soviet Union, my fate was common.

There were moments of happiness during my orphanage experience—the adoption-tapes showed me laughing, and gazing at the world with eager curiosity—but since we were left alone in our cribs for hours at a time, there was also a lot of suffering. Almost all of that suffering was silent because the babies barely cried.

A lot of them had given up thinking they could get anyone to answer.

Two Americans adopted me from a barren white crib labeled “#5.” The orphans who weren't adopted were sent to a larger institution where they would have been beaten, bullied, and abused. Meanwhile I grew up happily in the suburbs, learning to read, tell funny jokes, and make

friends. It was only when I began contemplating my origins that I started questioning: why should the suffering of people around the world matter to me? Why should it matter to others? And what is worth doing about it?

It all started in my senior year of college, when I finally processed what I'd been told for years: that, since my birth-father had stolen, he had gone to jail. My follow-up research revealed that in the Kazakhstani prisons of his time, many inmates suffered torture. Many still do. In 2021, a prisoner wrote about authorities beating a confession out of him that he'd stolen 20 bicycles when in reality, he hadn't touched a thing.

The likely implications of my findings didn't sink in until that October, during a field trip to the Metropolitan Opera's production of Shostakovich's "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District." It's about a woman who has an affair with a peasant working on her mill, watches her husband whip the peasant, helps the peasant kill her husband, and gets imprisoned in Siberia.

At first, the whipping-scene seemed almost laughable: the actor playing the husband made no attempt whatsoever to hide the fact that he was just slapping the whip against the table beside the actor playing the peasant.

Then I glanced at the other audience-members. They were all dressed in fancy opera clothes, and looked like they were enjoying themselves.

I turned back to the stage. The whip cracked. The peasant flinched.

For the first time in my life, I imagined them whipping my birth-father in prison, and found myself crying, in silence.

A day or so later, I read news about Uyghur Muslim prisoners being whipped, Ukrainian captives being beaten, Iranian protestors being flogged, and Guantánamo Bay hostages being tortured. While in the past I'd always felt some sympathy when reading such articles, they affected me much more strongly now. How could they not, when with every story I read about people being tormented, I now saw my birth-father suffering in their place?

My adoptive-parents didn't see my birth-parents' fate as being relevant to my life. They believed my birth-mother had been lying when she'd written about my birth-father's thievery. Yet when talking about their adoption-trip to Kazakhstan, they described shopping at supermarkets patrolled by armed guards.

"Why armed?" I asked.

"Because in those days, everyone was stealing," they said.

A pause.

"But you don't owe anything to Kazakhstan," they added. "It didn't do anything for you."

I understood their indignation. I even agreed with them to some extent. Yet I also felt it wrong of them to dismiss other people so easily.

My conversation with my adoptive-parents added another dimension to my ethical questioning: why should *they* be obligated to imagine the strangers who suffer around the world as some kind of family they never knew?

The obvious answer was that we should always identify with each other's suffering because we were all human. But that seemed too simple to me. There must have been a more nuanced explanation.

When reflecting on why I only used to feel vague sympathy in reading the news, I found that I hadn't even considered the people in the articles to be real. Thinking this way had made me feel in control. If those people were mere words on paper, then I could wish my world into what it should be—one without any unpunished cruelties. At that time, my own suburban world had seemed just and comfortable. Why shouldn't it stay that way?

Ultimately, it wasn't so much that I hadn't cared about others' pain. I hadn't *wanted* to care. If I'd wound up caring, then it would have made all the justice and comfort around me meaningless, because people existed who suffered unjustly. I would have wondered: what right had I to exist when I wasn't afflicted, too?

I would have inevitably become aware that I had a responsibility to help stop others' pain, and, if I truly wanted to be at peace with myself, to stop *everyone's* suffering. However, I would have also had to acknowledge that I really had no control, not over all the suffering in the world. And to acknowledge that I had responsibility without having control... well, it had been much easier to pretend the people I read about weren't real.

My reflections made me think of Jean-Paul Sartre's discussion of bad faith. In *Being and Nothingness*, I'd read his description of bad faith as a form of self-deception, and his idea that bad faith seeks to escape itself: "The very project of flight reveals to bad faith an inner disintegration in the heart of being, and it is this disintegration which bad faith wishes to be."

As I contemplated his idea, I found myself drawing connections to Robert Nozick's Experience Machine. In *The Examined Life*, Nozick asks: if we could choose to be forever plugged into a machine that enables us to experience an illusionary world of happiness, would we? He argues no. We wouldn't want to live in a world that only pretends to love us: "What [a person] wants, though, is not merely to take pleasure in [positive experiences]; he *wants them to be so.*"

I concluded that Sartre's explanation of bad faith and Nozick's Experience Machine both expressed the same concept: lying to ourselves diminishes ourselves, falsely stunting our existence. Yet I found myself extrapolating further: to ignore others' suffering stunts *their* existence in our minds, dehumanizes them, renders their affliction irrelevant, and as a result, contributes to the *real* pain they experience.

Put very simply: our ignorance is a lie we tell ourselves that *worsens* others' suffering; our indifference is immoral.

It was one matter to understand the immorality of indifference. But what to do when confronted with others' ongoing indifference?

This question grew more harrowing to me in the weeks after my Metropolitan Opera trip, when I read Elie Wiesel's *Legends of Our Time*. In it, he writes about feeling ignored by the world while in a concentration camp. Other countries' indifference "poisoned the desire to live. If this is the human society we come from—and are now abandoned by—why seek to return?"

His words made me think about a memoir I'd read about him the previous summer, called *Witness*. This book is by Wiesel's teaching assistant at Boston University. In one chapter, I'd read how Wiesel's own suffering let him empathize with and seek to help end others' pain,

“due to his fierce commitment to ensure that his own experience of suffering and abandonment would not be repeated.”

But Wiesel is dead, I thought now, and atrocities keep happening. The history of suffering seems destined to keep repeating. What to do about it?

That December, I attended a forum on American prison-reform where the majority of panelists referred to life-ruining incarceration and torture as an “issue.” At the end of the event, a supporting organization awarded one panelist, an ex-prisoner-turned-advocate, because he “didn’t skip a beat” in reliving his trauma for the sake of his work. While the man in question greatly deserved the recognition, I felt that ending the event in such a showy way seemed demeaning, like placing a tidy bow on a mass of unfathomable suffering.

Meanwhile, I’d told one of my friends that I was from Kazakhstan.

“Ah, Ka-*zakh*-ah-stahn!” she happily mispronounced. “Like Borat!” Then she laughed.

Her reaction was typical. Few people I knew mentioned widespread torture when it came to Kazakhstan. The people who *did* speak about torture inside Kazakhstan weren’t taken seriously. I found that the international community didn’t yet pay enough attention to such people to do more than “call on” Kazakhstan to stop torturing its citizens, and to schedule a 2023 visit by the UN torture prevention body. It was better than nothing, but I couldn’t see how just a call and a visit could truly help prevent more torture.

I discovered that meaningful action didn’t always happen even in more prominent cases. When I read that the UN had finally “recommended” that China stop committing genocide against Uyghur Muslims, I was jubilant, but later my elation vanished as I read about continued atrocities. It turned into disgust when I learned how American auto companies keep importing

parts made from Uyghurs engaged in forced-labor, ignoring US government bans and officials' demands for these companies to shift their supply-chains out of Xinjiang.

When publicly confronted with evidence of their complicity, the car-companies in question refused to comment, or gave mere remarks like, “We expect our business partners and suppliers to follow our lead to respect and not infringe upon human rights”—statements that, to me, expressed unwillingness to do anything to help stop the suffering.

You can't “visit” countries into ceasing torture, and you can't “recommend” your way out of a genocide. But when the whole world is filled with strangers who could be suffering like the father you've never known, what is to be done? Send emails pleading for the UN to make more “recommendations?” Sign anti-automobile petitions that will go ignored? Or give in to despair?

In the face of all the suffering that's been, all the suffering that is, all the suffering that inevitably will be—and in the face of how little people truly seem to care about any of it—is there even any reason to bother?

Of course not, I thought.

And yet...

I remembered a friend I'd had back in middle school. She'd once told me about sitting in Spanish class and contemplating how she could end her life later that day. Her teacher noticed that something was wrong, and asked her if she was feeling alright. Did she want to go wash her face in the bathroom?

My friend trudged to the bathroom, washed up, and came back to class. On that day, she didn't kill herself.

The teacher's small show of compassion had saved her life.

In the grand scheme of things, those questions were meaningless—my middle school friend will inevitably die, either of old age or of other causes. Yet the teacher's compassion wasn't—it saved my friend from dying before her time.

I recently read an article about Ukrainians in the Russian-occupied city of Izyum before its liberation. One woman said that just finding out through radio broadcasts that Ukrainian soldiers were making advances to free their city helped her tremendously. She said, "Hearing good news on the [US-funded radio program] gave us hope. We learned that Ukraine needs us, that they have not forgotten us." Learning that they were not forgotten helped restore the Ukrainians' morale. It affirmed their faith in humanity. It let them know they had not been forsaken.

If a simple radio broadcast could be a conduit for such compassion, and if it could help hope survive even in the face of such senseless violence as the Russian occupation, maybe the case for despair isn't as strong as it seems. Yes, I thought, history would repeat and suffering would be inevitable, but compassion could prevail in spite of this repetition.

Hopelessness isn't justified. Taking action is. And when I can see my birth-family's probable suffering reflected in the anguish of so many others, doing so becomes a moral imperative. Anything less would betray them and where I've come from. Anything less would be to betray myself.

By now, the babies who'd been left behind in my old orphanage are likely grown-ups embroiled in near-hopeless battles to wrest housing and jobs from the Kazakhstani government.

My birth-father has probably been released from prison and is trying to make a new life, whether of recidivism or of redemption, I don't know. And around the world, so many people continue to suffer.

I sometimes feel compelled to read every news-story I can about their plights, so I can affirm their existence in my own small way. Yet it's easy to get sucked into a vortex of suffering. I know I shouldn't give in to despair, but the truth remains that I can't save the world.

I remember how, in *Witness*, Wiesel advises us to consider helping just one person: "You don't have to go far away, you just have to notice who is around you, in your street, in your family, among your friends."

Well, there's one half of my family that I love and help however I can. Yet there's the other half of my family, the half whose suffering I see enacted throughout the world, that I can never ignore. To me, sometimes considering just one person feels wrong, because how can being good to one half of my family help the *other* half? It can't.

So how to act?

We could fill our social media accounts with links to fundraisers for those being oppressed, and this might help raise money, but we'll never truly know if our actions have caused any change in the world.

We may try to rescue hundreds by giving directly to charity. Donations are good, unless our money winds up paying for charities' overhead costs, or worse, inadvertently funding corrupt institutions abroad.

We might embark on annual service-trips, handing thousands of aid-packages to refugees fleeing violence. Taking action this way would at least assure us that we're making a real contribution. Yet despite our efforts, there will still be millions whose suffering goes unassuaged.

These speculations remind me of a friend I have, who once told me about donating to a cause only to be left feeling vaguely dissatisfied. His unfulfillment didn't come from a perceived inability to save the world, but from something else that he couldn't quite name.

Even if we were able to rescue everyone, I realize, we might still feel dissatisfied. But why?

Maybe it's because of our insistence on trying to save people. If we perceive others as helpless masses longing to be rescued, we may reduce their suffering, but in the process, we also reduce the full richness of their *humanity*.

How real can such people be to us if we envision them as only existing for the sole purpose of being saved? How likely are we to just drop a twenty-dollar bill into a donation bucket, pat ourselves on the back, and forget about them and their ongoing plight? And if we've already forgotten them after one donation, how meaningful can our actions truly be towards them?

That must be it, I think, and again consider those who suffer around the world. It's impossible for me to save everyone, but this doesn't mean I have to stunt their existence in my mind. Instead, I can show genuine regard for them.

When I say, "genuine regard," I don't mean "regard" in the self-justificatory sense of the American auto companies' psychologically-distant and willfully-ignorant remarks about Xinjiang. I don't mean it in the prison-reform forum's self-congratulatory sense of romanticizing those who've suffered by placing them on dehumanizing pedestals. I see "genuine regard" as meaning that the certainty of afflicted peoples' humanity resonates through me, despite persecutors' attempts to torture them into casting away their own belief in their worthiness to

exist. In other words, if I hold those who suffer in my memory and consciousness, then their existence remains meaningful.

If we were to *all* hold those who suffer in genuine regard, then the meaning of their existence, continually-affirmed, can never truly be stamped out. And so, just as it's impossible for one person to end all the suffering in the world, it'll also become impossible for all those who persecute others to succeed. Because they will *never* be able to destroy the world's knowledge of, and belief in, the humanity of those who suffer.

Yet genuine regard without action could leave us feeling just as dissatisfied as action without genuine regard. We may also fall into the trap of complacency, thinking about those who suffer without doing anything to help alleviate their anguish.

That's why it's important for us to also channel our genuine regard into tangible efforts to help people, both near and far. For me, I intend to advocate for them by writing their stories to share with the world. Others may take different approaches. The exact method doesn't matter as much as actively working to help ease their pain.

I will never be able to stop imagining my father suffering in that place. But I also know that I'll never stop imagining him, or those who suffer like him, as human beings. I know that I'll never lose my genuine regard for them, and that I will keep honoring them in my daily life, and doing what I can to help alleviate their anguish. And while hope alone can never stop atrocities, I do try to imagine what more we can do to let those who suffer in silence know that we somehow see them.

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