

## Closing Thoughts

Over the years, these women have become an important part of my life, and I theirs. I've sat among them, stood before them, and shared a podium with them. We've exchanged e-mails, holiday cards, jewelry, journals, parenting tips, scarves, perfume, homebrew, jams, and strategies for changing the world. One week I might be calling Washington to bring attention to their proposed strategies. The next week we might be sharing grief over losses in each other's lives. These notes help explain how we fared as fellow travelers.

### My Path

RADA: *Good luck to you. I hope your book is a success.*

SWANEE: *Actually, I haven't thought of this project in professional terms. I just couldn't walk away from Bosnia with so many hundreds of hours of conversations with women like you, without preserving them for others.*

NADA: *Do you see?* [pointing to her kitchen wall] *It's the calendar you sent me with scenes of Colorado. I think of you every day.*

AMNA: *It was almost worth living through this war to learn who my friends really were, and the real meaning of friendship.*

Twenty-seven paths converge on these pages: those of twenty-six Bosnian women and mine. Never, in my wildest dreams, had I imagined myself a spokesperson for women of another country; but the progression that led me into the lives of Bosnian women is logical, even if the end point was unexpected.

I came to this study of a former communist country having grown up in the

household of an ardent anticommunist father, who devoted the last twenty years of his life to “saving the Republic USA from the mistaken enemies of freedom.” As a young child, I looked with great alarm on the communist menace, but by adolescence my attention had moved beyond our country’s borders. At church camp, I declared my intention to become a Southern Baptist missionary.

If my adult career in human services, diplomacy, and education turned out to be an unorthodox form of ministry, it was still driven by a sense of mission. That drive was reinforced when, long before I conceived this book, I immersed myself in the work of the Harvard child psychiatrist Robert Coles—sixty volumes and hundreds of articles—for my doctoral dissertation in pastoral care and counseling. I laid out the method by which Dr. Coles gleaned insights from “observer/participant” relationships, the basis of his vivid social critique, as he plunged into what I called “the socioethical dimensions of empathy.” He insists on pushing past too-easy categories, recognizes the unexpected in human experience, and honors everyday heroism. Those principles shaped my relationships with Bosnian women a decade later.

While finishing my dissertation in the early 1980s, I helped launch the Women’s Foundation of Colorado, which promoted economic self-sufficiency for women. The foundation proved the possibility, and value, of women reaching across lines of class, race, and experience to create solid alliances. I was inspired by the ingenuity of these women, often in extremely difficult circumstances, as they built their grassroots organizations. Additionally, for sixteen years in Colorado, I was involved in scores of initiatives tackling problems such as mental illness, teen pregnancy, illiteracy, poverty, violence, and racial discrimination.<sup>1</sup> I also witnessed the ordeal of resettlement when I took into my home Eritrean and Lao refugees; and I developed a sensitivity to the importance of having a home when I chaired the governor’s efforts on affordable housing and homelessness.

Through a mutual interest in domestic problems, I developed a relationship with Bill and Hillary Clinton. In 1993 President Clinton announced my four-year appointment as ambassador to Austria. I was a diplomatic neophyte among international experts dealing with the war. My colleagues were foreign policy stalwarts whose names—Holbrooke, Gallucci, Vershbow, Fuerth—were on the most prestigious foreign policy rosters. Each stepped into his Balkan role with decades of experience charting our country’s course in international affairs. I was younger (in my mid-forties), still learning to deepen my soft treble voice as I stood toe-to-toe in policy arguments with foreign ministers and four-star generals, cabinet members, national security advisors, and the president of the United States. The experience required every bit of self-confidence I could muster.

In contrast, among the women of Bosnia, I was at home. Instead of feeling drained by our encounters, I felt filled. Although our words often passed through an interpreter, we were close, having in common a love of home, a distrust of patriarchal politics, an almost desperate concern for our children, an understanding of the relationship of justice to inner healing, and the ability to communicate all this with our eyes or with touch when words failed. Most of the women I later interviewed had either known me or heard of me for years, since I'd become recognized as a friend of Bosnian women.

Still my role was complicated. I walked into a room with the imprimatur of the world's lone superpower, the hope or bane of Bosnians, depending on their politics. In contrast with European policy paralysis, the United States maintained the sheen of a forceful player pushing for action. To the extent that the United States was instrumental in bringing an end to a pointless, terrible war, we were appreciated across ethnic lines, including by Serb women with whom I met.

In addition to the policy assumptions inherent in my position, the high status of the ambassador role was a barrier, implying not only power but also responsibility. At least I didn't look, talk, or walk like the stereotypic diplomat—a help, since Bosnians' feelings against the international community were often vitriolic. After lightly armed UN troops stood by, instructed “not to take sides,” as tanks and shells ripped apart lives and communities, many Bosnians had visceral disdain for the UN, sometimes spitting when a vehicle filled with “blue helmets” rolled by. They had similarly harsh criticism for international groups who housed and fed and transported thousands of staff to areas where citizens were still displaced, cold, and hungry. But as a relatively young woman, not wearing a gray suit, I was less a target of the distrust and frustration with which many of my diplomatic colleagues were received, rightly or wrongly.

I came for a week at the longest, then left again. My visits were high profile and often associated with a gift, such as a large collection of books for the burned National Library, or six tons of musical instruments to distribute among twenty-two schools, or fifteen hundred trees to replant the denuded parks. One day a young Bosnian took me aside on a Sarajevo street. “Those trees are more important to us than setting up the new central bank,” she said—a comment I didn't pass on to the visiting delegation from the U.S. Treasury Department, which she was staffing. Since I wasn't posted to Bosnia, I was free from the responsibility of carrying out foreign policy; I had the luxury of going where I wanted to go, doing what I wanted to do, with whomever I wanted. Several Bosnians told me that because women had not been doing the shooting during the war, it was easier for them to cross the lines when the peace was signed. In the same way, no

one had assigned me to Bosnia, so I didn't carry blame for foreign policy failures there. The Bosnians received my efforts as a gift from a visitor. My path had converged with theirs for a while, and I learned a lifetime of lessons on that stretch of journey. They, in turn, seemed glad for the company.

### The Conversation

KRISTINA: *I can't describe it in words. It has to be lived.*

ALMA: *It's very hard to put into words how war creates craziness . . . with no one asking your permission.*

IRMA: *You know, it's really hard to talk about this, because I've been trying these last years just to forget. It's so strange. It's kind of like the whole war is collapsed into one day.*

MAJA: *I can't talk about myself. Where I come from, it's up to others to judge us. My responsibility is to work and act in the way I believe is right. But I agreed to do this interview, just because it's run by a lady.*

VESNA: *We're women, so we understand each other.*

As I gingerly escort the women of Bosnia and Herzegovina onto not only these pages but also the stage of international affairs, I must thank them. Their disclaimers aside, Kristina, Alma, Irma, Maja, Vesna, and twenty-one others offer extraordinary insights into the problems and possibilities of women confronting violent conflict. They've worked hard on this project, enduring raw remembering, as well as logistical hassles of travel to interviews, translation checks, more travel, more meetings, editing—all the while tolerating the inefficiencies of a first-time author.

We've spent many hours together, building our relationships, then recording our conversations. Back home, I stared at the pile of transcripts from scores of hours of taped interviews. My subjects had, in stream-of-consciousness mode, relayed stories from before, during, and since the war. They'd spoken without preparation; my job was to create the order. Determining the layout of this work, I vacillated between wanting to follow the dramatic narrative of each individual woman, as a self-contained unit, versus wanting to give the reader the experi-

ence I've repeatedly had in Bosnia over the years: sitting in a room with a few friends, trading memories and opinions.

Looking back over the literature coming out of Bosnia, I decided the "portraits of Bosnian women" books had already been written, although they were generally about life as refugees or other victim themes. (Some are listed in the bibliography.) This volume, instead, has been laid out as a thematic interaction among women who could agree or disagree with me, with each other, or with common wisdom about the Balkans. The dynamism of the conversations has hopefully compensated the reader for the lack of comfortable continuity in each individual's narratives. In fact, that same dynamism was reflected in my own process; over the years my outline shifted as insights seasoned and connections emerged from the ocean of words.

In the interview process, my early training in counseling psychology was immensely useful. I didn't compose a list of questions for each woman; my primary task was to create an environment of trust, then get out of the way, letting the woman across from me go wherever her thoughts pulled her. My second task was to keep up, to accompany her to unanticipated corners, take sudden turns, and not try to predict the course. Only then could I stand back and look at where she'd gone, comparing how her path crossed or diverged from those of the other travelers.

The process of striking up a conversation turned out to be simple. Often in a hotel room, or in her home, I sat in a chair opposite my subject as my interpreter held a video camera. Sometimes the setting felt unnatural, in the corner of a spartan meeting room, with a lonely glass of water on a bare tablecloth, like a stilted prop. But the intensity of the topics and the thick trust between us melted away hesitation. Listening to the tapes afterward, I realized our exchanges were those of friends: NADA: *My husband and I would really love you to visit us, if you possibly have the chance. We have a nice house.* SWANEE: *Thank you.* NADA: *So you could come, your family and your children.* SWANEE: *I'd like that.* NADA: *So really, you can be our guest. There's enough room for everybody. We can put you up. Not as a repayment for anything, but from my heart.* [A year later, reading Nada's text to her for accuracy, we both smiled—I was sitting at her kitchen table in Derventa, three hours north of Sarajevo.]

The friendship between us was based on mutuality.<sup>2</sup> I wasn't interested in maintaining an academic distance. Jet lag, plus a long series of interviews, left me, at the end of the day, with droopy eyes. Then my subjects kindly offered to put me to bed. We were that kind of friends. I took GALINA at her word when she said,

straightforwardly, *I'm very fond of you. That's why I'm so open. I don't usually want to talk like this.* Still those comments surprised me when I heard them peppered throughout the recordings. I hadn't noticed as they were spoken but afterward realized they held a clue to our mutual trust and the depth of our conversations. Unsolicited affirmation came from MIRHUNISA. *You're the first woman to open my soul. I don't have a lot of time for emotions. In fact, given my work, I don't have a lot of time for me.* Mirhunisa's notion of an "open soul" was one I understood.

As free as I was from the role of diplomat, I was also free of the confines of a scholarly researcher. I could bring to the women a self beyond academic analysis. So when JELKA described to me her response to the death of her son, I felt tears rolling down my cheeks—but not from pity. I was joining Jelka, as I imagined losing my son Henry, or little Teddy. This wasn't therapy, and I felt no compunction to maintain a therapeutic boundary. Jelka and I were just being together. At the end of the interview, she remembered another meeting years earlier: *This is the second time I've seen you cry with me. It means so much.*

Reading through the transcripts, one particular exchange sums up our trust. KADA: *I feel like I've known you for years. If he were alive, my husband would say you're a lady, and I'd agree.* SWANEE: *Still, it's very hard for me to ask all these questions; because I feel like we're opening up more pain. And no matter how well I write, I can't capture the depth of your experience. On the other hand, you've said it's very important that your story be told, to get to the truth.* KADA: *Don't worry. You're like a very close friend, like a sister. Maybe you weren't with me through the worst, but you want to make it easier for me. That's what makes you my sister.*

That connection between Kada and me was reinforced by the provision that she, and all the others I interviewed, could edit out (or add) anything to the basic material from which I'd be drawing. Those were the terms of our conversations, and those are the terms of this book. In some cases, words spoken one year were edited as feelings mellowed over following years. For example, the cycle of fear became "difficult" to break instead of "impossible." "Ustasha forces" became "Croatian." The "Mujahadeen" who displaced a Serb tenant in a Sarajevo apartment became a "soldier from the Federation army." The "genocide" became "ethnic cleansing." The women understood that language not only describes; it also shapes the future.

Galina in particular was upset by the Bosnian edition of this book. She felt I unfairly described her as sometimes sounding like a Serb apologist. She said the book was one-sided and her words were taken out of context, and that much of her work to promote democracy, tolerance, and trust had been omitted. Disillu-

sioned when she read that I had supported NATO's bombing of Serbia during the Kosovo conflict, she was unhappy that President Clinton had written the foreword to the book. We have remained friends, negotiating a number of changes in the manuscript for the English version.

For other women, some topics were too painful to see in print: a love affair broken off. *He went to his side, I went to mine. It was, after all, such a time.* One woman expunged a lengthy and dramatic description of her love affair with a married man. Another struck her allusions to domestic violence in Bosnian society. One deleted her description of political parties as being totally dominated by men. For another, the edits were necessary because of a political situation involving a family member for whose safety she feared.

As close as we might be during the interview, there were challenges our trust couldn't overcome. The husband of one of my early interviewees was an indicted war criminal, awaiting trial at The Hague. She was convinced of his innocence. I'd pushed long and hard for apprehension of those accused of atrocities; but as I listened to the woman across from me describe taking her two sons to visit their father in prison each month, I could connect. I told her I'd grown up in a family many demonized as right-wing extremist. In response, my new friend leaned forward and, staring at me intensely, said in a low voice, "*I will tell you, woman to woman. . . .*" Then she poured out her story. When he was convicted, she drove six hours to explain to me her decision not to be in the book.

In hundreds of such "woman-to-woman" hours, the topics of our conversations ranged widely: from philosophical tenets to plans for projects, from concerns about the economy to hollowing losses, from political questions to romantic memories. We might compare our husbands; other times we spoke of our children, sometimes commiserating, or exchanging advice, or encouraging each other. In one interview, three generations were present as we connected our lives across time and culture. VALENTINA: *I'm sorry, but I had to bring my son.* SWANEE: *I've done it a hundred times with my kids.* VALENTINA: *Mothers understand each other.*

"Mothers understand each other" turned out to be an element in my research method: the assumption of shared experience that allowed for confessions of success and failure, private hopes and grief—and a tremendous wealth of information. The crux was not actual mothering; several of the women were, in fact, not mothers. Mothering was more a metaphor for myriad ways we found to connect. Still, we had a division of labor. This was their story to tell, but mine to shape.

EMSUDA: *A lot of observers haven't understood, so they've said things that aren't*

right. *They've hurt us because of their ignorance and misunderstanding.* SWANEE: *I'm afraid of that with this book.* EMSUDA: *That's OK. We're used to it. We won't take offense.* I must rely on Emsuda's offer of understanding, and even forgiveness, as I accept the task of telling her story and others'. However creative the framework, how does one capture, in a logical progression, "accessible" for the reader, the onslaught of madness? How to edit into convincing and concise prose the terror of trying for months to protect a young daughter from gang rape in a concentration camp? As Emsuda says, simply: *It's very hard to describe. Almost every day was like a novel. It can't be summarized in a few sentences. There's always something very important that remains unsaid. That's why it's very difficult for me to speak about my experiences. Some things just have to be lived.*

As I moved around the pieces of the mosaic to organize the women's words into a pattern for the reader, something else happened for the women. Whenever I reviewed with them passages in the manuscript, they often cried as memories were reawakened. But in our final review, when I showed them the outline I had now imposed, their responses caught me off guard. JELKA's was typical: *You've taken my experience and put it in a framework. I couldn't make sense of all this, but you have. What a gift. Thank you. . . . Thank you more than I can say.* I wondered for a moment at Jelka's emotionality as she spoke, then I realized she was trying to tell me that this book isn't just an arrangement of various accounts. The words on paper represent a heavy, dense burden. They are loaded with questions of fidelity in relationships, of religious values, of good and evil, of place in the world, of purpose in life. This book repackaged that burden, making it easier to carry. That was the gift I could give back to the women. And that's a great satisfaction.

KADA: *Thank you for telling my story. What's written down will last. What we try to remember will probably just disappear with us one day.*