

When a Heart Is Empty

By David Brooks



Damon Winter/The New York Times

On Dec. 26, 2004, the French author Emmanuel Carrère, his girlfriend and their respective sons were vacationing at a cliff-top hotel in Sri Lanka. Their relationship was dying and, feeling out of sorts, they decided not to go down to the beachfront scuba diving lesson they'd signed up for. It was a consequential decision, for that was the morning the tsunami hit.

A family they knew was staying on the beach. That morning the grandfather, Philippe, was reading the paper while his 4-year-old granddaughter, Juliette, happily played in the wavelets nearby. Suddenly Philippe felt himself swept up by an enormous wall of black water, pretty sure he would die, certain his granddaughter already had.

In his memoir, Carrère bears witness to the days of suffering and endurance that followed the wave. When Philippe tells his daughter and son-in-law about the death of their child, Juliette's mother, Delphine, screams. Her husband thought, "I can no longer do anything for my daughter, so I will save my wife."

Carrère had lamented that he had always been unable to love, but in those horrific days he and his girlfriend stayed with the family, searched among the corpses, enveloped the family with compassion and practical care. He observes how at mealtime Delphine's hand shakes as she brings a forkful of curried rice to her lips.

He is with Delphine when they come across a woman, Ruth, who was on her honeymoon and has lost track of her husband, Tom. For two days she sat outside the hospital, not eating or sleeping, convinced that if she nodded off Tom would never emerge alive from wherever he was.

"Her determination is frightening," Carrère writes. "You can sense that she's quite close to passing to the other side, into catatonia, living death, and Delphine and I understand that our role is to prevent this."

Carrère's memoir describes how a self-absorbed man is altered in crisis and develops a deep and perceptive capacity to see the struggles of others. The book is called "Lives Other Than My Own."

I thought of that book this week because the sensitive perceptiveness Carrère displays is the opposite of the blindness Donald Trump displayed in quotes reported by Jeffrey Goldberg in The Atlantic and Bob Woodward in his latest book about the administration, "Rage."

Goldberg says Trump told people that he sees the war dead as "suckers" and "losers." Trump can't seem to fathom the emotional experience of their lives — their love for those they fought for, the fears they faced down, the resolve to risk their lives nonetheless.

If he can't see that, he can't understand the men and women in uniform serving around him. He can't understand the inner devotion that drives people to public service, which is supposed to be the core of his job.

The same sort of blindness is on display in the Woodward quotes. It was stupid of Trump to think he could downplay Covid-19 when he already knew it had the power of a pandemic. It was stupid to think the American

people would panic if told the truth. It was stupid to talk to Woodward in the first place.

This is not an intellectual stupidity. I imagine Trump's I.Q. is fine. It is a moral and emotional stupidity. He blunders so often and so badly because he has a narcissist's inability to get inside the hearts and minds of other people. It's a stupidity that in almost pure clinical form, flows out of his inability to feel, a stupidity of the heart.

In most times and cultures, people realized that understanding a person or situation is as much an emotional process as an analytical one. In the Bible the word "to know" covers a range of activities, from having a conversation with, to having sex with, to entering into a commitment with and much else — all the different ways we come to understand each other.

St. Augustine's theory of knowledge begins with emotion. Love is a focus of attention. Love is a motivation to learn more about a person. Love is a reverence for the image of God in each person.

Through his own failures, Trump illustrates by counterexample that the heart is the key to understanding. To accurately size up a human situation you have to project a certain quality of attention that is personal, gentle, respectful, intimate and affectionate — more moving with and feeling into than simply observing with detachment.

Carrère achieved that quality of attention after the tsunami.

Maybe I spend too much time on Twitter and in media, but I see less and less of this sort of attention in America, even amid the tragedies of 2020. Far from softening toward one another, the whole country feels even more rived, more hardened and increasingly blind to lives other than our own.