



FINDING OUR FUNDAMENTAL HUMANITY

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Jacqueline Whitt: Hello, and welcome to War Room. I'm Jackie Whitt, Associate Professor of Strategy here at the U.S. Army War College and Editor in Chief of War Room. I'm here in the virtual studio today with Sarah Petrin, who is an expert in humanitarian initiatives with a career's worth of experience in more than 20 countries all over the world. She is an author, advisor and speaker, and according to her website, she is a girl from Maine who has just been trying to fix broken people and places since she was 15 years old. And I've asked her to join me today to talk about a recently published book, [*Bring Rain: Helping Humanity in Crisis*](#). Sarah, welcome to War Room.

Sarah Petrin: Thank you so much, Jackie. I'm delighted to be with you today.

JW: All right. So I must say I'm a little bit intrigued by this background or the bio that's on your website. So I'd like for you just to introduce yourself to our listeners, talk a little bit about who you are, where you come from and what your purpose was in writing this book.

SP: Thanks so much. As you indicated in my bio, I have been working on humanitarian protection for more than 20 years, which is caught up in the question of how do we keep people safe from harm? And that question has been the organizing principle behind my humanitarian career. I studied international relations as an undergraduate and have a master's degree in refugee studies from Oxford University. And I worked in the field overseas doing cross border operations with the United Nations and international NGOs, and many very interesting and difficult places, including the Kenya Somalia border, the Thailand Myanmar border, the Afghan Pakistan border and in the Eastern territories of the Ukraine also. But my background for this book really comes from the title, which is *Bring Rain*. And I was born in a small African village in Kenya, in East Africa called Mumias and my parents were doing mission work, my mom was a nurse and my dad was a teacher and I was born in the year of drought, and I lived in this very remote village.

And so when I was born, my mom had an audience, the village chief brought his entire family to the mission hospital where I was born. And when they brought me back to the village, all the elders held a rain dance to welcome me back and prayed that I would end the drought and the dry season, and I would bring them rain. And I was only one day old, so I didn't have those miraculous powers to end the drought, but their hope for my life really served as an inspiration for my humanitarian career. And that's where the title of the book comes from.

JW: So interesting how our like origin stories can sometimes affect in some ways, maybe the trajectory of entire lives and choices. So you said you were one day old and didn't have the power to bring rain, what were some of the formative experiences from your childhood or young adulthood and then the choices you made about entering the humanitarian field?

SP: Yeah, I was so caught up in the story of my birth and I grew up in Maine, which is where my mother comes from. And when I was 15 years old, I raised money to help build a school back in the region where I was born. And at the time, the year was 1992 and I was in Kenya building the school at the same time that Somalia was having a lot of challenges with clan warfare. And when I was in Kenya, one day, we woke up to build the foundation of the school and all of a sudden hundreds of refugees from Somalia had come and squatted on the land. And this is what made me fascinated, not only with the United Nations, which came to try to count and assist the refugees, but also with the role of the security sector, because the Kenyan police also were trying to round up the refugees and get them to leave the land, which was private property.

And unfortunately, they were beating them into these large dump trucks and taking them North to Dadaab refugee camp. And here I was 15 years old and I woke up thinking that I was continuing to build this school and all of a sudden I was in the middle of a major refugee emergency and it forever changed the trajectory of my career and made me want to help refugees and fill those gaps that I was seeing in the way that people were treated, so inhumanely.

JW: I think one of the things that strikes me as I was reading part of the book to prep for this is your idea that at the center of so much of our life is this idea of shared humanity. And I'd like for you to maybe tell our listeners a little bit more about what your conception of this is and what you mean by this idea that we are fundamentally linked together.

SP: Yeah. Thank you so much. As a humanitarian, I have it ingrained in me the core humanitarian principles, which come from the Red Cross movement and one of those principles is the principle of humanity and another principle that isn't often used is universality. And a lot of that is about recognizing our common humanity and not discriminating against people who are different than us. Particularly when you think about refugees, a person is a refugee because they're persecuted based on their nationality, their race, their social group, their religion, their political opinion. And we see also that oftentimes these divisive social issues about gender and

sexuality and politics really turn people into this perceived notion of being the enemy of someone else. And humanity is such an important principle that if we just look at every person as being worthy of respect of human rights and dignity, just because they are human beings, I think we would have a less divisive and a less violent environment. And of course, in order to achieve this respect for humanity, we also need to build a more just and equal world for those who are marginalized because of bias and discrimination.

JW: So as I listen, as I listened to that philosophy and explanation it strikes me that one of the challenges is taking that from abstract principle or abstract concept and thinking about it in concrete terms and concrete ways. So I'm wondering if you might share with us an illustrative experience or a case, or a moment that you think really demonstrates this idea and this principle and this core of humanity and universality that you're talking about?

SP: Yeah. I think that it's really important when you encounter another human being and you meet someone that you don't assume things about their background based on how they look or how you meet them. And I'll share a simple story that isn't in my book, but that I wrote about on a blog a while back ago, I was sitting in a restaurant in North Carolina and my server was clearly a young man from somewhere in Africa. And I had asked him about his name and he told me that his name was Charles. And I said, no, I want to know your real name because I knew that he had to have an African name. And he told me that his real name meant that he was born on a Tuesday and our conversation just led him to remember his native language. And he began to sing me a song about being born on a Tuesday.

And all of his colleagues in the restaurant had no idea that he had another name, didn't really know that he was from Ghana and everyone came around the table and listened to him sing. And it was a moment where we just realized that he had been hiding his true self because he was afraid of expressing his difference among his fellow American colleagues. And it's a small moment like that, where you can share a story, you can share a song, you can learn someone's language and just look beyond the face of a person and get to know the human side of their story. And it can create a sense of a shared appreciation that you might not have had for the person otherwise. So that's a very simple human encounter, but I think we can all have encounters like this every day in our lives if we open ourselves up to talking to one another and learning each other's stories.

JW: I think that's a really nice illustration of this idea that story and identity are deeply connected and that we can be connected with each other. I'm wondering right now, if I think about our listeners on a podcast that the name of the podcast is A Better Peace, that's one of the things that we are, I think striving for when we think about the national security and the international security community. But it's part of a podcast called the War Room, and so we have this contrast between the realm of war and violence and conflict, and this ideal of peace building

and peacemaking and a future that is different from the one that we live in now. And I'm wondering what you might say about that tension, especially for listeners who work in defense and security, where violence and the application of force is part and parcel to what they do. And yet we know that people in military communities and elsewhere are traveling all over interacting with other people all over the world. And it strikes me as an interesting maybe juxtaposition.

SP: Yeah. Thank you. Another example that I thought about that's also, unfortunately not in the book, comes from doing military training on humanitarian operations, specifically with NATO. I was involved in developing a serious game on civil military interaction in conflict zones and we were working to integrate gender analysis into this highly technological game where military officers were going to have to play an avatar, that was a humanitarian worker and humanitarian workers were going to play a military avatar and go through the different type of planning process and operational protocols, and see both sides of an operation. And all the guys I was working with said, we don't know how to do this gender analysis and how to integrate this into the game, we don't deal with women in operations we just take out bad guys. And so we took a break and we went to lunch and over lunch, a French officer said, "Well, there was that one time when I was in a forward operating base in Afghanistan, and it was a pretty isolated area, but one day a woman came up to us and she gave us her baby."

And I said, "What?" He said, "Yeah, a woman in a local village, came up to us and asked us to take her baby." And I said, "So what did you do?" And he said, "We took the baby into the FOB, the forward operating base." And they tried to figure out how to feed the baby and how to put a diaper on the baby. And I thought to myself, this is crazy because I can't think of a more unsafe place for a baby than a forward operating base and why they took the child in, when they're in the middle of an active fighting area. And this is our common humanity, that soldiers are human beings and someone gave them this small vulnerable child and they wanted to help it. And eventually they did have to give the child back to its mother, and then they tried to assist the mother.

But doing a gender analysis or doing a protection of civilians, analysis would have shown them the vulnerability of the entire village or the entire society, and maybe enabled them to identify other actors in the area that could have assisted the child or could have assisted the woman. But I thought it was a very interesting example of a very human response and saying we don't understand this big gender analysis stuff, but we want to help and we want to care for other human beings. And so that gave us a point of entry to do the larger analysis about what is going on in the lives of women and children, not only in Afghanistan, but in other areas of crisis.

JW: It's such an interesting micro versus macro question about how people respond in traumatic and crisis moments. I'm thinking about all of the historical pictures that we have of right service members interacting with animals and children, and the way we respond to vulnerable people

and creatures who are around us. And that juxtaposition between the violence of combat and the vulnerability of people and creatures that we see around us, I think is something that a lot of people are struck by and that we have to, in some ways, work to make sense of. And I think some of the things you're talking about here can help us make sense of those moments and big juxtapositions as well.

SP: Exactly. And I think we have the tools in place to help soldiers understand how their seemingly individual experience and their stories are related to this larger macro analysis of the dynamic of conflict and how it affects different people in the population. But a big part of my role has been to educate the military about the humanitarian community so that they understand the resources that are available, that they can refer special cases or specific problems to civilian actors who can assist the population in ways that they really don't need to, because there were other people there in the area of operations to do that.

JW: As I sit here in an apartment in DC, in, we're recording this in August of 2021, and I look around and there's an awful lot of mess in the world around us, we're in the second year of a global pandemic, variants and vaccines are the talk of the day. Climate change seems to be having demonstrable effects all over the globe, there are wars worldwide that continue, there's real political division, there's challenges related to immigration and refugees and internally displaced persons, there's persecution and all sorts of ways based on religion and race and gender and sexuality. And I imagine you see the same things that I do, this world is a messy place. And so I'm wondering how you envision the principles and the ideas that you talk about in your book and your call to activism as well, to make sense of the world that we live in and then to act in responsible ways in that world.

SP: That's a big question, Jackie, and I'm glad you asked it because really I wrote *Bring Rain* to help people understand the practical things that they can do in their everyday lives to get involved and to address these seemingly intractable conflicts and big picture problems in small steps and bite-size ways. And I think if there is a good news story out of all the challenges we see is that particularly for us as an American audience, I think the pandemic has been particularly humbling. And I also think that natural disasters and climate change is also a point at which we realize that the United States is not immune to crisis. And we have to recognize that there are things that we need to do domestically to make our society more resilient and more prepared. And this is something that is not just for security sector actors or for the military, it's even beyond the whole of government. You need a whole of society, meaning all people everywhere to have better preparedness and better response, to understand what's going on.

And so to me, I see this as an opportunity for us to recognize that we need to make our own communities stronger and make our country better prepared. And one of the chapters in my book talks about Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana, which was a real turning point for me in my own

career, because I had come back from working in Afghanistan and Pakistan and managing these huge refugee projects with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. And I was doing advocacy with a domestic nonprofit and when the levees broke in New Orleans and people were inundated by the water, and there were so many displaced people, someone in the White House called my boss and asked to send me down to do an independent assessment of the needs of evacuees in Louisiana.

And with the help of some military colleagues, I was able to access everywhere I needed to go. And I was just stunned at the lack of preparedness that we had within America, people passing out of dehydration, not having any water and trying to get water from FEMA and from the National Guard was a nightmare and it was very challenging. And we had the money and the resources for private military contractors to provide security in these evacuee sites, but I would go to these evacuee sites and I had elderly people passing out on me from dehydration and the only place we could go to for water were churches and community groups. And it was a very humbling experience for me to realize that within my own country, that it was so difficult to coordinate a humane and timely response.

And in Superstorm Sandy, we saw this also, I was in New York City and New Jersey after the storm and the shelter arrangements for the population were insufficient for the weather conditions. And yet we have all these plans, we have all these exercises and over and over again, we miss the human element of what people need when everything fails, when they don't have shelter, when they don't have water. And so I'm really motivated in my book to tell readers that even in the United States and our own communities, we have work to do, and there's so much you can do through volunteering and education to train yourself on how to be a first responder in your community, that I think there's something that everyone can do regardless of where you live.

JW: So Sarah, as you were talking, it strikes me that the complex relationships between individuals, communities, institutions, and infrastructure is one thing. Even if we were to imagine perfectly working, all of those working in concert, we still have places where individual institutions say the military are running up against local or State or municipal or federal rules and regulations and policies that don't always account for things. Can you talk a little bit about what might be required at a human leadership level to make some of this work happen?

SP: One thing that I think is a common denominator between the situation I described earlier in Hurricane Katrina response in Louisiana and the situation we face with COVID today is we see this competition between different levels of government and different levels of authority. So there was a lot of debate between municipal leaders, state leaders, and federal leaders about the right strategy and the nature of the response and in my view, this prolonged human suffering, both for COVID and for the response to Hurricane Katrina. And one particular situation that I

think of as a leadership dilemma that I describe in my book was when I realized that there were so many people without water who were passing out from dehydration, I went to the National Guard to try to see if they would release their water to me. And inside the command center, I could see thousands upon thousands of bottles of water stacked high from the floor to the ceiling.

And when I asked whether or not those particular cases of water could go right outside, less than one mile away to where literally we were losing American lives, who were dying from dehydration, the answer I got was no, we can't release these supplies to you because they are internal supplies for our sustainment. And even though that may have been true, that may have been the case, that's the type of situation in which perhaps taking the decision up the chain of command would have been something that could have resulted in truly saving lives. And certainly in my view, if the military didn't not have any more water, they would have found a way to quickly be resupplied. Whereas we could not bring those lives back that were at the convention center once people had passed out from dehydration, a lot of people died.

And so it's very difficult because you look at the news and you think, well, how come there's no water there? And there actually was water there, but it just wasn't for the people. And so I think for individual leaders, you have to ask yourself, what can I do to be the person who's willing to coordinate and to cooperate and to go the extra mile and to maybe do something different or non-traditional in order to perhaps make a decision that would improve the overall situation.

JW: Yeah. And you can imagine the complexities that people are facing when they've got all of these competing demands. And I think one of the things that your work asks us to really consider and think about is the way that shared humanity comes into that decision-making process. And to think about the lives of the people who are around us and affected by the choices that we make.

SP: Exactly. And I think even if something doesn't seem feasible, I think in today's type of crisis, we have to think of the art of what is possible and that is part of what leadership is, is finding a new way of doing things. And certainly I think that is something that we all need to think about. How can we do things differently? Whether you're in government or the military, or the private sector to try to meet the great needs we see in the world today.

JW: Yeah. Thinking about the desirable and the possible and the tensions, and then making those hard decisions is certainly something that we ask our War College students to do day to day as they're in the classroom. And then as they leave us and go on to positions of leadership throughout the services, their governments and all over the world, really.

SP: Yeah. And I can think of also an example from a fellow student that I met at the War College, who was involved in Hurricane Maria response in Puerto Rico. And they ran out of water for their sustainment for the base and they actually had to break into a private aqueduct in

order to pump out water for the base. And this was one situation where they didn't ask for permission, but they asked for forgiveness later and were able to get the water they needed for their own sustainment. So again, this takes leadership. Sometimes you're in an impossible situation and you have to be willing to take a risk, to do something unorthodox, to make things work.

JW: I feel like I've learned a lot today in just the few minutes that we've had together. I've thought about the relationship between all sorts of things, individual action, and community strength and resilience, institutions and infrastructure, and all of the things that bind us together in our experiences through this world. So as another episode of A Better Peace comes to a close, I'd like to thank you, Sarah, for joining us today, it's been a real pleasure. And I'd like to thank our listeners as well for listening in, we'd like to invite you to send your comments on this episode or any others and send us suggestions for future episodes as well. We're always interested in hearing from you. We hope you'll subscribe to A Better Peace and when you're subscribed on the pod catcher of your choice, we hope that you'll also rate and review the program to tell other people about it. We look forward to having you join us again soon. And until next time, this is Sarah Petrin and Jackie Whitt signing off for War Room.