

## In Pursuit of Justice

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, October 15, 2003

"Let me begin as it began for me: glimpsing evil in a man's soul."

Those words open a heart-wrenching book by foreign correspondent, Elizabeth Neuffer, on the pursuit of justice in Bosnia and Rwanda. "When people say they want justice after a war, what they really mean is that they want to be able to put the ghosts of their past to rest, to lay down the burden of their guilt, to unearth the truths they seek," she writes. Neuffer, who covered most major conflicts in the last decade, died this year in a car accident while on assignment in Iraq.

Elizabeth Neuffer is one of the courageous women correspondents being honored this month by the International Women's Media Foundation. The awards recognize female journalists worldwide who've shown exceptional bravery in the face of censorship, physical attacks and death threats.

Reporting from front lines is not a glamour job. "I'm always terrified," admitted Neuffer to National Public Radio last year, recounting her flight into Sarajevo. As soon as her plane touched down in Bosnia it was shelled. She dashed into an armored car waiting on the tarmac. She was "so terrified I slept in the bathtub that night," figuring bullets couldn't penetrate the tile walls.

She captured the stories not only of civilian victims of the ethnic cleansing and concentration camps of Bosnia, but also survivors of the Rwandan genocide, which wiped out one tenth of the population in three months. Through it all, she stayed in touch with the people whose lives she covered and, in many cases, whose lives were lost.

Elizabeth was the rare reporter who covered the blow by blow of conflict while plumbing the depths of the human spirit. She was unwilling to condemn people in groups and applauded the international tribunals, which replaced collective guilt with individual accountability. In her book "The Key to My Neighbor's House," she quotes Holocaust survivor Bruno Bettelheim: "What cannot be talked about can also not be put to rest; and if it is not, the wounds continue to fester from generation to generation."

As for the instigators of evil, Neuffer exposed the responsibility of a brute like former Yugoslav leader Slobodan Milosevic, now on trial at the war crimes tribunal in The Hague. She learned lessons from earlier conflicts that applied to Iraq, where she found people had no choice "but to stay in the darkness and avoid detection by a dictator like Saddam Hussein."

Neuffer was one of a small group of intrepid reporters who risked grave danger tracking down indicted war criminals on the lam, trudging through the underbrush of cover-ups and denials. She was nearly raped in Bosnia when her car overturned in a ditch on a rainy night. A group of drunken soldiers started to attack her, holding her male colleague at gunpoint. But Neuffer, in a "moment of insight," handed over the car keys to the soldiers, who immediately lost interest in her and started focusing on the car. Neuffer and her colleague sprinted to safety.

When asked about the perils of being a female war correspondent, Elizabeth Neuffer said that, while it had many drawbacks, it also had advantages. In Bosnia, she often sailed through checkpoints "thanks to a few choice compliments and a broad smile," while her male colleagues were left behind fielding a battery of questions. Elizabeth also found that grieving families were more willing to open their hearts to her, while outraged Serbs leaked evidence of their army's massacre of more than 7,000 Muslim men and boys at Srebrenica.

Boston Globe Editor Martin Baron, Neuffer's former employer, says the relentless search for truth by devoted journalists like her reminds us that "they are defenders of freedom and guardians of truth." In a day when media is criticized for aggressive coverage, "the hard and often unpopular business of truth-telling is not just a job, but a vital and virtuous enterprise."

Neuffer was a top-notch journalist, a keen observer, and a trustworthy friend. I served as ambassador to Vienna when she was covering the Balkan war. The evils we witnessed drew us together. Her recognition of a need for reckoning after the killings stop is essential to a secure future. It's too late to tell her that now, but not too late for us all to renew our commitment to the values of truth and justice for which she gave her life.