

TESTIMONIALS

Throughout the pages of *Agunamakuash: When Crises Call for Redefining Courageous Leadership*, Piero Gandini guides us, lantern in hand, along two paths full of darkness and light that we should all have the courage to walk.

The first leads us through some of the most painful places in our world, where the suffering of victims of violence demands a response that can be effective and ethical, or inefficient and immoral, depending on who carries it out and how.

The second is an inner journey through prejudice, cultural differences, desolation, convictions, and hope—everything that shapes us, drives us forward, and, at the same time, limits and challenges us.

From these two paths, filled with anguish, tears, laughter, emotion, and effort—much effort—we emerge richer in experience, knowledge, questions, and clarity, and above all, more deeply human, more capable of guiding others along those same paths.

Gonzalo Sánchez-Terán (Spain)

Humanitarian Programs Deputy Director,
Center for International Humanitarian Cooperation (CIHC)

Joining the JRS project in war-torn Moxico, Angola, was one of the most daring experiences of my life. Piero entrusted me with the responsibility of ensuring we became a performing team—and in doing so, mentored me more than he probably ever knew.

Results-driven. Highly competent. Warm. Honest to the bone in his feedback—and then he would leave it at that. No grudges. It was rough, but it was rough with care.

That was Piero.

He took care of us in every sense—ensuring sufficient supplies, and even enough “priestly and nun outfits” to escape in when security deteriorated.

He made such an impact on my life that I asked him to be my best man when I married Mara, whom I met in Luena—the same place where Piero met Joka.

He will definitely have a chapter in my book.

James Nyawo PhD (Zimbabwe)

Researcher and Founder of Victoria Falls Regional Institute
for Strategic Studies, Based at Strathmore University, Kenya

I worked with Piero in India when he was Head of Mission. For many of us, he was a living introduction to what MSF’s independence truly meant—not as principles on paper, but as daily practice.

One moment has stayed with me: traveling to Brussels for MSF meetings, his young daughter got stuck on a play structure at the airport. Instead of lifting her down, Piero spoke with her, explored options together, and trusted her to find her way down—which she did.

That moment captured his leadership perfectly: calm, respectful, curious, and empowering. His leadership consistently reminded us that courage in crisis often begins with listening, humility, and trust in others’ agency.

Sunita Baskar (India)

Former board member MSF SARA
Family physician, Bangalore Baptist Hospital

Twenty years ago, as a 22-year-old nurse on my first MSF mission in Darfur, Sudan, I worked on a team where Piero was logistics coordinator and his wife Joka led field operations. In a place marked by conflict and uncertainty, they created something extraordinary: a sense of family and safety within the team.

In environments like those, caring for your team is not a leadership style. It is what allows people to keep showing up, doing the work, and staying human.

It was one of those experiences that quietly shape the rest of your life.

Agunamakuash: When Crises Call for Redefining Courageous Leadership is not an abstract leadership book. It is about leading when it truly matters—and the people who take care of the team are the ones who make the mission possible.

Stefan Van der Mussele (Belgium)

Former Humanitarian Aid worker

The leadership bookshelf overflows with handbooks and success formulas. *Agunamakuash: When Crises Call for Redefining Courageous Leadership* is different—it became a leadership book naturally, without trying.

I've shared bus rides with Piero, whiskeys in Amsterdam, ocean dives in Gran Canaria, and late nights on my sofa in Milan. I knew most of these stories already—and still found myself utterly absorbed.

Here, leadership isn't a quest or a posture. It's what emerges when you act with authenticity, courage, and joy—the essential qualities for leadership in our current era. The courage to navigate challenging times. The authenticity to show up as you are, admitting you don't have all the answers. And the joy to face even dramatic situations with positive energy.

Joy is Piero's signature trait—an unexpected force that will redefine what you thought leadership could be.

Dino Torrisi (Italy)

CEO, Futureberry

Crises and uncertainty are the most powerful spaces for learning and growth. When answers disappear and the path forward is unclear, human beings are pushed to develop new skills, deepen empathy, and reveal their best selves. In these moments, leadership is not about control or certainty—it's about presence, courage, and the willingness to learn while moving through the unknown.

Piero's encounter with Beatriz in Angola shows how quickly assumptions collapse in crisis, and how true leadership begins with curiosity rather than judgment. Double Tony's story goes further—leadership expressed through trust in human resilience, supporting dignity and agency when logic alone offers no solution.

Raw, generous, and inspiring—*Agunamakuash: When Crises Call for Redefining Courageous Leadership* stays with you long after the final page. Uncertainty is often where real leadership is born.

Jaime Galviz (Colombia)

Enterprise Vice President LSEG at Microsoft

My good friend Piero—Rossi, as I've always called him—has never stopped making brave decisions that have shaped the course of his life. From finishing high school together to the present, I've watched him move through remarkably different worlds: entrepreneur, several months as a seminarian, years immersed with deep conviction in humanitarian aid across four continents, and diplomat representing Colombia.

Each stage left a profound mark and provided lessons he now places at the service of others as a mentor—working from lived experience, not abstract discourse. Piero has always led by example—with courage and a joyful spirit that makes the journey itself meaningful.

Agunamakuash: When Crises Call for Redefining Courageous Leadership is proof that it is possible to serve, learn, grow, and truly enjoy the journey.

Enrique Ramírez R. (Colombia)

Dean, School of Business and Economics, Universidad ICESI

I worked with Piero on MSF projects in Angola and South Sudan—contexts that were challenging not only because of the work itself, but because everyone came from different cultural backgrounds. What struck me most was his ability to build real teams out of that diversity, creating a shared culture in those foreign places.

Working conditions were often demanding and the workload intense. Yet Piero managed to create an atmosphere of trust, openness, and mutual respect. Quite remarkably, we had a lot of fun along the way. That sense of connection made a real difference to the work.

Anyone who wants to understand how collaboration truly succeeds across cultures, languages, and circumstances should read *Agunamakuash: When Crises Call for Redefining Courageous Leadership*—it reflects lived experience rather than theory, and shows how leadership can turn diversity into a strength

Heike Kirsch (Germany)

Former Humanitarian Aid worker

I worked with Piero in India when he was Head of Mission. I kept working with MSF for more than ten years after that. He is still the best Head of Mission I have worked with.

That's not nostalgia. It's a reference point earned across a decade of missions and leaders.

What made him different was his ability to bring genuinely different people together and make something real out of that diversity—not as a management technique, but as a natural way of operating. *Agunamakuash: When Crises Call for Redefining Courageous Leadership* captures that quality—full of stories that go well beyond what the media shows.

For me, it is a fascinating book and a powerful reminder of why I am charmed by human engagement and why I keep coming back to humanitarian work despite immense challenges.

Jungsil Song (Japan)

MSF Supply Coordinator

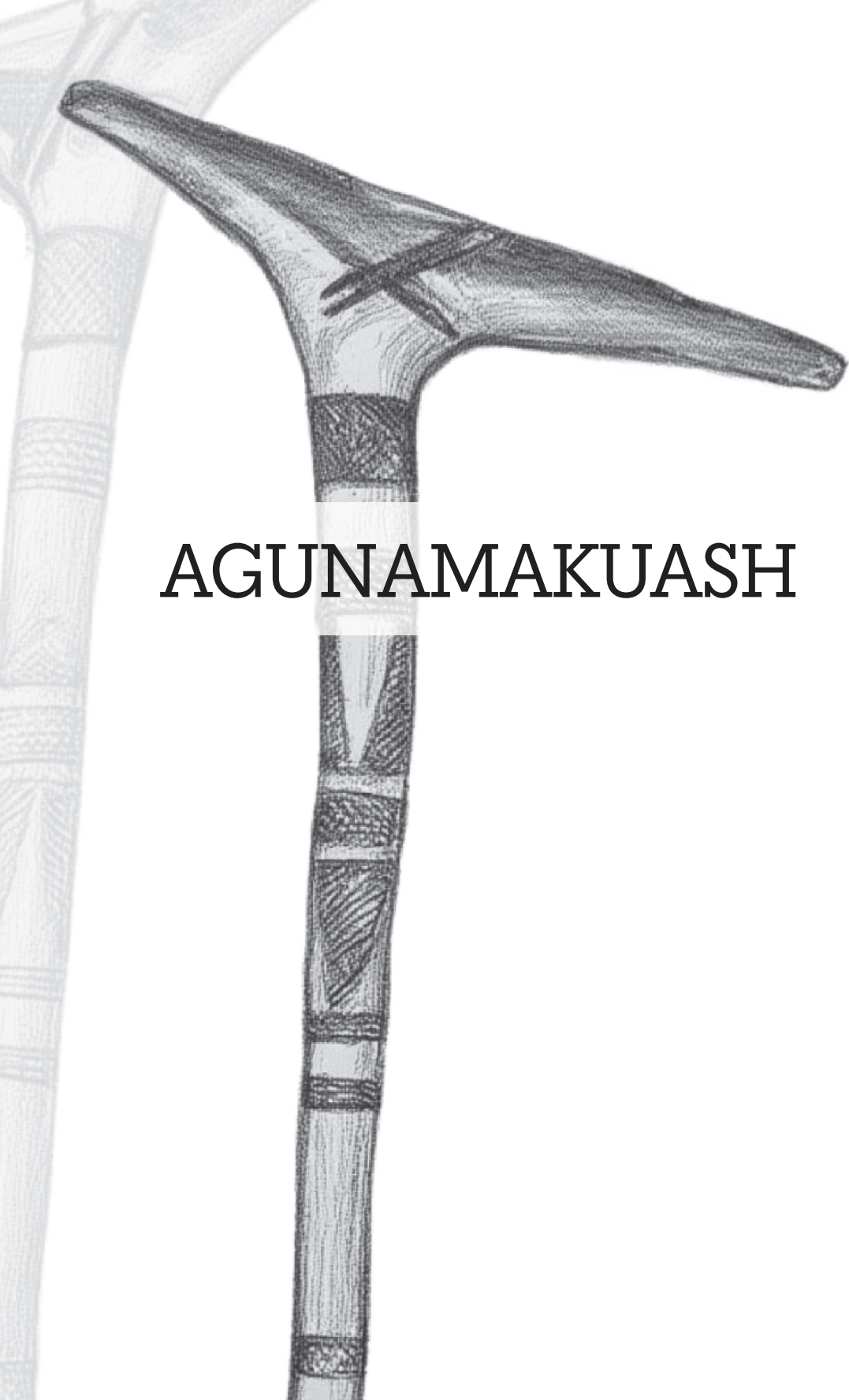
Piero and I were classmates at an Executive Creative Leadership course in Amsterdam. We weren't colleagues—we were peers in a room full of experienced leaders. What he brought to that space wasn't positional authority. It was authenticity, sharp thinking, and a sense of humor that made difficult conversations possible.

Eight years later we're still in contact, and grown into a real friendship built on honest exchange—the kind where you get challenged as much as you get supported.

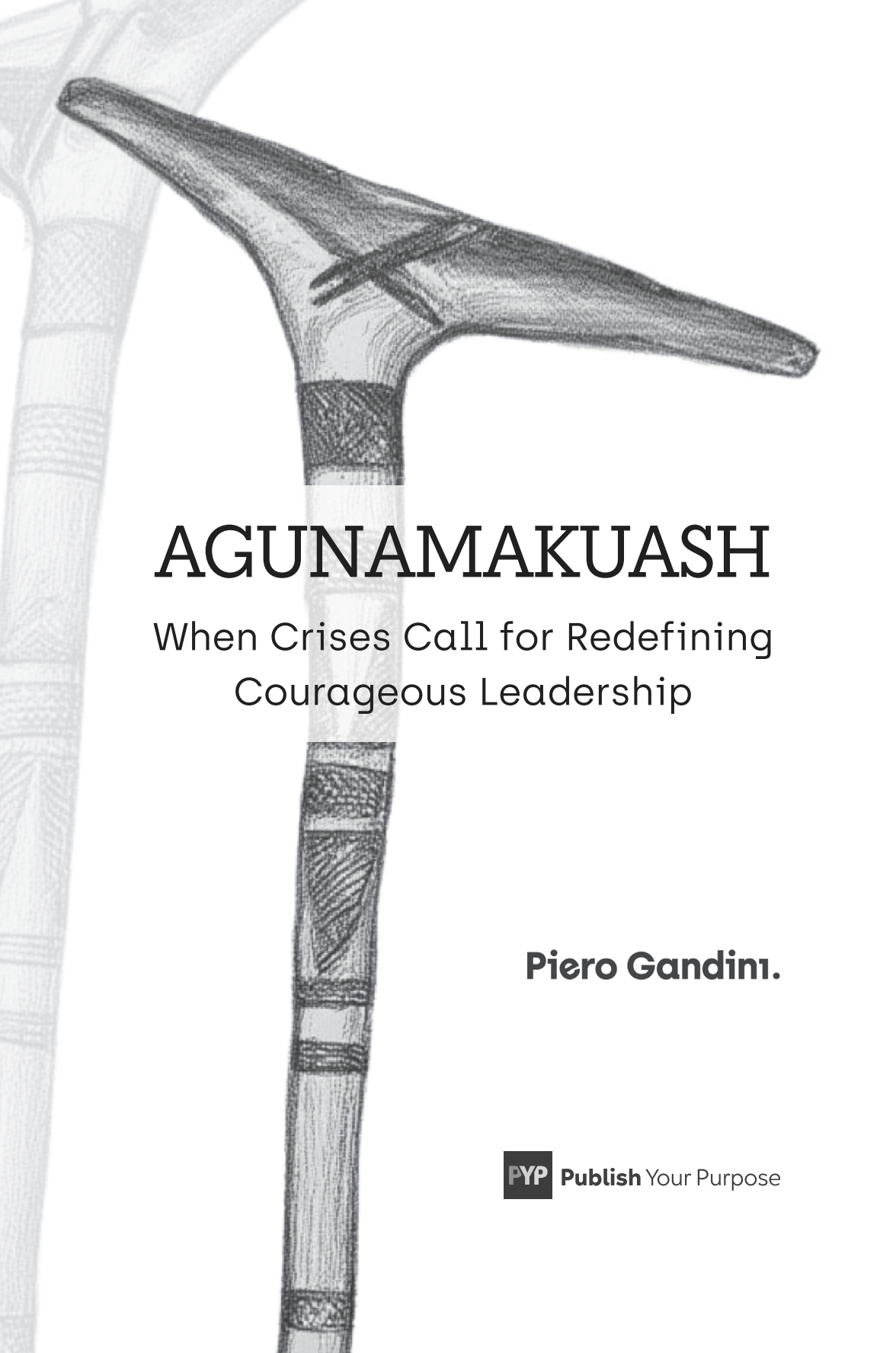
Agunamakuash: When Crises Call for Redefining Courageous Leadership carries that same honest tension. It will shift how you think about leadership—not because it tells you what to do, but because it shows you what's actually possible.

Bart van Opzeeland (Netherlands)

Leader and strategist in sustainable change



AGUNAMAKUASH



AGUNAMAKUASH

When Crises Call for Redefining
Courageous Leadership

Piero Gandini.

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DEDICATION

Joka:

Your love changed my life forever,
for what it was and what it would be.
I do!

Asiri & Alessandro:

Love took unimaginable dimensions with your presence
and gave my existence greater meaning.
The mind, the power is in the mind!

“I slept and dreamt that life was joy.
I awoke and saw that life was service.
I acted, and behold, service was joy.”

—**Rabindranath Tagore**

DISCLAIMER

This is a work of creative nonfiction. The events are portrayed as faithfully as memory permits. While all the stories in this book are true, some names and identifying details have been omitted or changed to protect the privacy of the people involved.

The views, opinions, and interpretations expressed in this book are solely those of the author and do not represent the positions, policies, or perspectives of any organizations the author has been affiliated with. These stories reflect the author's personal experiences and observations during his time in humanitarian work.

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FOREWORD

When we first imagined this book, we planned to write it together—two perspectives weaving through shared experiences, creating something for our children to hold onto, a window into the lives we lived while working in some of the world's most challenging places. But as life unfolded, Piero did what he has always done: he walked the talk. While I returned to the field with MSF, responding to the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, he sat down and made this book real. Not as a plan, not as a someday project, but as something tangible you hold in your hands now.

These pages are filled with what has always mattered most to us: people. Whether in a prison in Lima, a refugee camp, a conflict zone, or in moments of joyful connections between crises, it has always been about the humanity we encounter. The dignity we witness. The resilience that humbles you. The shared laughter that sustains you through darkness. In every story here, you'll find those encounters—the people who taught us, challenged us, changed us, and reminded us why this work matters.

Piero has always been a storyteller. At dinner tables that stretched late into the night, in letters sent home from distant places, in quiet moments of reflection—he has a gift for painting scenes so vivid you can sense the weight of a decision made in impossible circumstances. Stories that pull you in, make you part of the journey, and transform the extraordinary into something intimate and real.

Leadership weaves through these stories naturally—it always has. His leadership has never been about hierarchy or authority. It's bold and creative, rooted in joy, deeply human. It evolved through his life as he evolved as a human being—from his university days, through the legendary bar he owned in Cali (Colombia), his work with vulnerable populations in humanitarian responses with MSF and JRS, his time in diplomacy, the adventure of parenthood, and, recently, his work mentoring others through their own transformations. He leads by being fully present, by seeing potential in people they don't yet see in themselves, by making space for others to become who they're meant to be.

And the impact? It ripples outward in ways Piero himself may never fully know. Lives touched, perspectives shifted, courage found, paths chosen. The people who worked alongside him, the communities he served, the individuals he mentored—they carry pieces of those experiences forward. Just as others' lives have shaped him, his presence has left an imprint on countless others.

This book captures one chapter of Piero's life—the humanitarian years—but trust me, there are so many more stories waiting to be told. For now, walk with him through these pages. Let him take you to places you've never been, introduce you to people who will stay

Foreword

with you, and share moments that illuminate what it means to show up, to serve, to remain human.

With love,

Joka

Piero's partner in life

FOREWORD

Our favorite part of dinner has always been when we start telling stories. When everyone is done eating, we still linger at the table—after filling our stomachs with food, we fill the room with laughter. It has been like this throughout our whole lives, and it just feels weird to eat without staying at least 30 minutes more after finishing our meal.

The person who always has the funniest stories is Piero—our father. The stories you will read in this book have been part of our after-dinner conversations for years. We’ve witnessed how others react when hearing them for the first time—the laughter, the surprise, the silence, the moment something lands. We’re glad they’ll finally be shared with you. These stories are full of lessons that helped us become the people we are today.

With laughter,

Asiri & Alessandro

Piero’s daughter and son



PREFACE

On my second night in the remote, war-torn town of Luena in eastern Angola, I received my first dose of reality, which showed me how much I had to learn over the next two years of my first assignment as a humanitarian volunteer.

When I embarked on this new life, I felt equipped and ready for those years ahead. However, I was not fully prepared or aware of the dimension of human suffering I would witness, the role of creative thinking for the vast scope of endeavors I would face, and the immense learning experiences that would make me a better person, leader, and human being. And it never crossed my mind that I would find true and long-lasting love in such harsh and demanding environments.

I was confronted by violence, war-related injuries and trauma, malnutrition, and people dying of diseases that are easily curable and treatable in other latitudes. The resilience and bravery of the survivors of natural or man-made disasters was a sharp contrast to the dirty behaviors of humanitarian workers and other actors I witnessed, and the Western-dictated policies, projects, and interventions very

often did not include consulting, asking, or even considering the wishes or opinions of local populations. Yet I was also comforted by witnessing kindness and proper care for others among communities heavily affected by armed conflicts, natural disasters, epidemics, and injustices; by seeing life starting or continuing in places and circumstances unimaginable; and by stories of love, resilience, tears, and sometimes joy.

The harsh experiences people endured and the risks and obstacles we faced as humanitarians in bringing our projects to remote, isolated, and insecure places were extremely challenging. I never imagined I would need to build an airstrip, nor to learn about water treatment and distribution, supply chains, team management, landmine threats, medical terms, new therapies for forgotten diseases, security analysis, context awareness—or the networking power of football. Creating temporary medical structures for thousands of refugees and internally displaced people in the middle of the desert was never a thought in my mind. It was a permanent learning and challenging environment for a journey that began one night in our house in Luena.

My colleagues and I were having a farewell party for my predecessor, the person leading the project, after his two-year mission. It wasn't a big party, but the room was filled with more people, drinks, loud music, and food than I expected in such a remote and war-torn place. We were all sitting in the living space. Some people were dancing Kizomba, others were drinking, and almost everybody was laughing loudly to compete with the music. At one point, when the music stopped before somebody changed the CD (this was way before online music), a man looked at a girl in a beautiful green dress

Preface

and said, “Beatriz, go and start cooking.” She immediately stood up and went outside to the backyard.

I felt terribly uncomfortable and outraged to witness such a rude and misogynistic attitude and manner. The macho culture was in full swing, which irritated me. The party continued, business as usual. Not for me.

After a few minutes of internal silent raging, I decided to go out to check whether Beatriz was doing alright. I encountered her adding water to a huge cooking pot she was about to place on one of the three single charcoal stoves she’d just lit. I sat close to her, observing her as she poured corn flour into the largest cooking pot and then chopped onions and tomatoes at an improvised table. She didn’t seem angry or disturbed by having to cook while the others kept enjoying the party.

At one point, I couldn’t resist anymore and asked her, “How do you feel about this man asking you to leave the party and cook for us?” She looked a bit astonished by my question, so I followed it with something along the lines of, “Do you feel mistreated?”

She replied with a big smile and pride visible on her face, “I am delighted that they told me to cook, because that means they think I am the best cook among all the guests, thus trusting I would do a marvelous job.” Then she continued her cooking duties, smiling, singing, and dancing at the same time.

I remained silent but was very shocked and disturbed inside. The reason wasn’t the man’s behavior nor Beatriz’s acceptance of her duties. It was because I felt bad and out of place for not being curious enough and being judgmental in my approach to this specific situation. I was seeing it through my own reality filters and

experiences and wasn't open enough to other perspectives. I recall making a decision right there: "Piero, better to shut up for the coming weeks and start being open to observation and learning about the culture of the community you're entering." I smiled back at Betriz, thanked her, and moved back to the party.

That short and profound moment, which was undoubtedly my deepest learning experience, thoroughly moved me and has since framed the way I approach life, regardless of the job I'm doing. That night, a new Piero was born, one that began to put aside judgment and instead be kindly curious—an explorer, open to learning and being confronted with both the differences and the similarities among the societal, organizational, educational, and familial cultures I'd encounter.

There are many incredible stories I was part of during my fourteen years as a humanitarian worker, a great majority of which I lived together with Joka, my life partner in crime. Often when we shared anecdotes with other people, they wondered why we didn't want to write a book about them. For a long time we didn't feel like doing it, but a few years ago we finally decided to put some of our stories in writing as a gift to our children and their future descendants (if any).

The stories are narrated in the first person because I can express the situations from that perspective without filters and makeup. Everything written here happened to us; there are no fictional lines. We lived each story with intensity, and each is unique and has deep meaning. Some names and locations might appear too short, too vague, or not be mentioned at all. I've done so to respect the privacy and intimacy of our friends and colleagues and to ensure the security of the people I refer to.

Preface

This book is about humane encounters. All the stories are centered on the people involved. We were only the spectators, the triggers, the rebels, the companions, or simply the witnesses of such unforgettable moments. And I am very grateful for that.

I want to convey the emotions of each situation so that you, dear reader, can feel near me in each of them.

Enjoy the trip.



INTRODUCTION

The main objectives of the humanitarian aid system are to save lives, alleviate suffering, and restore dignity. It does not address the roots or structural causes of the situation; it merely provides services and delivers goods to a population in distress due to a sudden event that has destabilized and disrupted their lives.

There are nonprofit organizations of various sizes, backgrounds, orientations, and areas of interest. I worked for two humanitarian organizations. The first was a faith-based organization called the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), a nongovernmental organization (NGO) established in the 1980s by a religious community to respond to the plight of Vietnamese refugees fleeing their war-ravaged homeland. Its values are to accompany, serve, and advocate, and the primary focus is working with refugees and internally displaced people in the areas of education, food security, livelihood training, reconciliation, and health. I volunteered with them for two years in Angola.

The second organization is well-known globally, not just in the humanitarian sphere. Founded in 1971, Médecins Sans Frontières

(MSF) provides health care in conflict zones and during emergencies and crises such as epidemics and the aftermath of natural disasters, and it also tackles some neglected diseases. Its values are neutrality, independence, and impartiality. Joka and I worked with them for several years across Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America.

It all started during my final year studying at the Jesuit high school, where I participated in a week-long leadership training program that had a profound impact on my life. It was a before-and-after experience. I am and always have been a privileged person, born and raised in a middle-class family in Cali, Colombia, with European roots, and I'm a heterosexual, cisgender male. During that week, I discovered my purpose: to dedicate my life to serving people in need, those suffering injustices, and those affected by economic disparities and political turmoil. It was the most marvelous insight I've ever had and the trigger of a monumental change in my behavior, marking the beginning of a journey to use my skills, knowledge, enthusiasm (and later, experiences and expertise) to serve underprivileged people in need.

I was seventeen years old when that flame ignited, and it burned inside me during all the years I pursued other things I was passionate about and good at. But those things seemed like distractions from my purpose, and it was impossible to extinguish the flame. It was always there, reminding me of my purpose and challenging me as I surfed the waves of privilege I grew up with while being surrounded by friendly and beautiful people, living *la vida loca*, and aiming for a successful life according to capitalism's standards (money and material things). At one point on that path, I decided to be more courageous and follow my intuition, indicating that radical change was needed.

Introduction

I was twenty-six years old the summer I felt it was essential for my personal, professional, and spiritual growth and development to leave Colombia after I'd fulfilled my dreams and goals there. I'd planned on having my bar for three years and my restaurant for two, leading teams in the private sector, opening a nonprofit organization to support underprivileged communities, falling in love, and generally living an extraordinary life surrounded by deep-rooted friends and a lovely family. I began to close all my entrepreneurial activities, I quit my stable and well-paying job, and I ended a sentimental relationship that wasn't harmonious or enriching. I also put extra effort into finishing my university studies in management and business administration, which took longer than average due to all the businesses in my life at the time. To be honest, it was also due to my lack of interest in many of the subjects because instead of a human-centered approach, they focused on business growth, revenue, income, and productivity.

I vividly recall the evening I decided to enter the world of humanitarian aid. While conversing at my restaurant with Caliche, my good friend and inspiring role model, we drew a plan that felt so natural and coherent to what I was feeling inside: Let's finish our studies, learn English, then work in refugee camps in Africa with the JRS, of which Caliche was the director in Colombia. That plan felt so right that everything else fell into place smoothly, and it soon became a reality.

My decision to join the world of humanitarian aid wasn't something I shared with my parents, sister, and extended family. They weren't ready to imagine me going so far away to live among people suffering the calamities of conflicts, natural disasters, and epidemics. To avoid endless, fruitless conversations trying to show me all the

negative angles of my decision, I had to rationalize the information and share it only when it became real. In previous years, I'd learned this approach was more effective for them to deal with my growth mindset and my commitment to following my intuition and gut feelings. That's why, according to them, I was leaving Colombia to pursue the American Dream.

In reality that was only the first (and necessary) step to learning a language that would facilitate communication and working relations in other contexts. The initial stairs of the plan led to a door called Knoxville, Tennessee, where I took a course in English at the University of Tennessee campus.

I remember hugging my parents and sister at the airport, saying goodbye, and promising to discover the world. With his fantastic sense of humor, my father replied loudly, "Is the world aware and ready for you?"

Waving to them, I entered the immigration office with tears in my eyes. They were tears of simultaneous nostalgia and happiness because I was taking my first step on those first stairs that would open several doors . . .



AIRPLANES AND AIRSTRIPS