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Professor Dudley Andrew

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations.—Justin Jannise

That Make the Strong Heart Weak

by Justin Jannise



“This is a picture of AIDS orphans. A young HIV-positive mother holds a photo of herself and her two children. She will die prematurely leaving her children as orphans.”

I do not remember the first time I saw this photograph. I only know that it must have moved me, since I saved it. Maybe I saved it because at the moment I could not find the words to express (to whom, to myself?) what it was that I was feeling. I am afraid that I have been trained to mistrust my sentiments, to always try to put aside certain initial feelings about any sort of artwork and to overcome the “affective fallacy” of expecting it to move me emotionally. But photography is different, I think. It *must* affect me if I am to continue looking at it, if I am to remember it at all. If the photograph has captured any sort of truth then it must stir me, as this

one does, every time I look at it. I need to see in a photograph all that concerns a human – love, death, time – and something more, something unique or foreign. This photograph, to me, is all those things.

Looking at it now, I am reminded, or perhaps I notice for the first time, that it is actually *two* photographs. The first is of a pair of hands, holding something special, surrounding it with tenderness as if to protect it from any harm. The hands are at this moment worn cushions, not necessarily old, but worn, used, creased in the same places any cushion would be, but each crease of these cushion-hands sinks deep in a relaxed, yet forced tenderness. The second photo, of course, is the object being held in the first. I will have to call it the inner photograph. Notice its relation to the hands that hold it. Notice how it sits there securely, how its hard edges pierce the soft, folded cloth of those hands. And what a glorious image it contains – one of love, perhaps, but not love tainted by words and language and rationalization, but love that only two children can share at this moment when all they have is the certainty of each other's existence, the tactile sensation of two lips on a cheek, of a cheek on two lips. Is it envy that I feel, or nostalgia, for such a purely childish love this photograph seems to have captured?

This mother evokes sympathy, but not only that, also a kind of circular unity. She holds the picture of herself and she holds her children with the same hands we see in the outer photograph, but our view in the inner is farther out, so that we get to see not really the hands, but a pair of strong arms firm in their support, arms that can bear weight and guide an infant's head toward a brother's reassuring kiss. Out of three faces in the photograph only one does not touch another. The face of the mother looks down, from away and above, with an expression that cannot actually be judged. Perhaps it is one of happiness, of knowing she has both her children with her. Perhaps it is one of frustration, of keeping the two bodies together long enough to have

the picture taken. Perhaps it is one of grief, of not forgetting that soon she will have to die and leave her children to what? With whom? *What can she do?* What can she do but hold them together for an instant and know that she was there; they were all there for a moment, a moment that passes as soon as the shutter clicks, but is preserved in a way, is *proven*.

Barthes might have commented on the tense of the photograph, of its Time. Death, he might have said, surrounds it. The mother, the woman with AIDS, who in so many ways consumes the picture, “is dead and ... is going to die” (96). We cannot forget this. The photograph does not let us forget the woman’s fate or her existence. We know she lived because we see the emotions folded into those worn hands – not just emotions, but somehow everything that is human, a kind of eternal struggle and an acceptance of frailty, failure. We see the pain, the poverty, the love, the tenderness, the hatred, the sickness, the begging possession in every line of her hands. And we know she will die, or that she has died. We do not doubt it for a second. We do not need to be told. We only need to look at those same hands to know it.

From her hands we get the sense that she, too, is fully aware of the fact that she will die soon. Her hands know it. They know it in the way that they grip the photo so selfishly but at the same time offer it up, asking someone to take it, to take it and care for it and give it a good home. Her hands plead, do they not? They ask for help, not for herself, but for her soon-to-be orphaned children. Not just for her children, but they plead for the picture, for the moment to be taken and saved and remembered. Her hands seem to say they cannot hold on forever, and yet, they do. But they are dead hands to us. They live, yes, but they have also already died.

The inner photograph is actually smaller than I sometimes imagine it. Though she holds it with two, it could easily fit into the palm of only one hand. Yet it maintains for me the size of something larger, perhaps the size of a larger family portrait, which it indeed it is, though not in

the usual contrived, *posed* way that some are, but in a truthful way it serves the function of a portrait by preserving the essence of their family – a mother holding her children who love each other and her. Where is the father? The photograph does not seem to answer, nor does it ask. It simply puts forth the idea that this was, and *is*, a family, by nature of their coexistence in this unit, both a unit of time and space, albeit a very small unit of each.

The children live in this photograph. I feel that there is life in them. They are not dead yet, are they? Or do they feel it too? Do they feel those outer hands surrounding them, tenderly cushioning the treasured fabric of their love for one another, and offering them up to anyone who will save them? The word to describe these children is *held*. In the inner photograph, each of their heads is held by the mother's strong arms. The photograph itself is held, albeit tenderly, possibly sacrificially, by the hands. And we hold them in our eyes, and, sentimentally perhaps, in our hearts, that we might remember this moment that was shared by two human beings we know so little about. We cannot actually hold them, touch them, no, but a camera at some point snatched them up so that one day they could be held.

But what is foreign about it? Why must the picture alone exist to me? Time is not the only boundary. There is also the boundary of space. The white "frame" around the inner photograph may as well be the Atlantic Ocean. This has little to do with physical location, but more with the *idea* of Africa, of poverty so harsh, of being orphaned and alone, that I will never understand. Even if I were to visit the continent I would know very little of it. The photograph is more truthful in its representation of a spatial, but more importantly a mental, barrier. How can I ever know what it is like to live in such a hopeless way? I cannot. This foreignness exists also in my knowing that the hands in the outer photograph are *diseased*, they possess a deadly virus communicated in their image, perhaps, but not transferred. I may touch the photograph of the

hands. I may allow myself to examine them closely enough to see their fingerprints. But in “real life” these hands are untouchable. I would not allow myself to feel their roughness nor their tenderness. The disease isolates the hands, and for that reason I am also afraid of them.

Yet I am always compelled to come back to that central image. When I think of the photograph in memory (not having it before me,) I think of that electrifying connection between the two children. The mother and her hands disappear. And I am left with an impression of impossible hope. Why hope? I feel that I defeat myself in trying to justify it, but the hope, I know, is there. Hope for what? I wish I knew – a better world; perhaps, one in which children like this are not so easily forgotten and the memories of them not so easily discarded. I am reminded of a few lines from Longfellow I must have once memorized: “There are things of which I may not speak; / There are truths that cannot die; / There are thoughts that make the strong heart weak, / And bring a pallor into the cheek, / And a mist before the eye.” Hope is what I feel when I observe the connection between these two children, perhaps because their connection is foreign to me – outside of space and time – but it exists wrapped in a kind of photographic package, one of hands that offers their hope to me. They do not speak, but I hear them. They are dead (are going to die) but the truth of their existence remains. And were I to cry, to allow my heart to break for them, it would not be because of any rational or empirical sadness, but because of a flicker of hope that I know exists in this moment that was captured, in this photograph I have remembered and do remember.

Works Cited

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<<http://www.avert.org/pictures/aidsorphans1.htm>>