

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 46 – Piko Ewoodzie – Participant Observer

Bearing Witness

And now a personal word,

When I asked Piko Ewoodzie about how he feels being able to leave behind the marginalized people whose stories he tells, I opened up something raw and very emotional in him. There is a cost to the work he does immersing himself in the lives of other people and then returning to his own life. It is a cost that very few people know about. It is a cost he bears to make sense of the world and to change it for the better.

Piko has spoken publicly about living for months among different classes of African Americans in Jackson, Mississippi. In a presentation he gave to the Southern Food Alliance, Piko reported on the social forces that impact the ability of African Americans to get something to eat. He used the term “foodways,” shorthand for food availability, food choice, and food consumption. He embedded himself for several months among groups of homeless people, the working poor, and middle-income and upper-middle class persons. He spent all of his waking hours participating in and observing their lives. Piko’s talk to the Southern Food Alliance focused on his time living among homeless people in Jackson. The questions that drove him were: What is the price homeless people pay to eat? Piko’s answer: The homeless give up their lives. They have to give up who they once were to nourish themselves now.

Piko spent months at a local shelter with homeless people. He met Smack and Lee, who schooled Piko on how to live on the streets, and Charles, who told Piko his story of how he became homeless—a story of drug use and addiction, of being in prison, of losing jobs, of shame and disgrace, of fouling out, of Satan having a hold on him, of no longer having hope, of becoming broken and docile in order to stand in line at a soup kitchen.

Piko stood at the podium at the Southern Food Alliance in front of an audience and brought Smack and Lee and Charles to life. He became their voice. He helped listeners understand them and themselves.

Ethnography is field-based research. It employs participation and observation and interviewing to investigate social forces and practices. Ethnology compares cultures in as natural a way as possible. The data is descriptive. The work is narrative. Ethnographers tell stories.

Many years ago I read *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* by Barbara Ehrenreich. The book is a memoir of Ehrenreich's field work surviving on minimum wage, living as a waitress, hotel maid, house cleaner, nursing-home aide, and Walmart clerk. The book exposed the plight of the working poor, economic injustice, and the underbelly of capitalist exploitation.

On my bedside table is *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* by Matthew Desmond. A Harvard sociologist, Desmond lived in the poorest neighborhoods of Milwaukee, investigating the housing crisis engulfing poor communities. Desmond tells stories of renters and landlords, of the effects of evictions on mental health and on the fabric of entire neighborhoods. The book is a landmark ethnographic report on the affordable housing crisis in America.

In *Evicted*, Desmond wrote this line about the emotional toll of his work: "I feel dirty, collecting these stories and hardships like so many trophies."

I don't know how Piko Ewoodzie or Barbara Ehrenreich or Matthew Desmond reconcile the conflicts inherent in their work. And there are moral conflicts as many ethnographers profit from the stories they tell about marginalized people. But I do know this: Piko and Barbara and Matthew and sociologists in the field are brave. They are bearing witness. Their reports are acts of love, with all the emotional turmoil and conflicts that love often entails.

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