But for one accidental conversation with the head of Doctors Without Borders in January 1999, I might not be here today on anything like these terms. In fact I may have been dead from leukemia.

I was talking with the executive director. We were lamenting Sudan’s invisibility, and she said something to the effect, “Sudan needs a champion.” And um, she was not thinking of me—I’m absolutely sure she was not thinking of me. Her eyes were looking toward Washington or somewhere. But I said words to the effect, “I’ll see what I can do.” And I can’t have known what I meant. I can’t recall what I meant, in any event, but what I meant turns out to have been my life became consumed by the overwhelming human suffering and destruction that defined Sudan then and defines it now.

The reaction is overwhelming. The e-mails I’ve received from Sudanese declaring me to be their voice to the world are too numerous to count, and they’re too moving to try and summarize. But this is the response I get from Sudanese, from the South, from Darfur, all the time.

It’s not that we don’t know, its not that there aren’t journalists out there giving us what we need. It’s not as if there are not reams and reams of reports by human rights groups, think tanks, and others, humanitarian organizations. The information is there. There has been superb journalism.

I lecture at colleges, universities constantly. And one of the things you discover about students—when you are not teaching them Shakespeare but rather talking about a contemporary issue—is that they are very impatient. They want action now. And one of the things I think that has not been sufficiently highlighted in the news is the success of Darfur advocacy. I myself believe half a million people have died, two and a half million plus have been displaced, most losing everything. The U.N. estimates that more than 4.2 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance. That’s a catastrophe by any standards. At the same time, without humanitarian presence of the sort that was pushed for by Darfur advocacy, hundreds of thousands of additional people would have died. Now that’s a tough way to take satisfaction in advocacy work—to say, well, hundreds of thousands have died but more hundreds of thousands would have died if we had not worked as hard as we have.

It’s really a question of my leukemia. I know that I face another really tough battle. I’m not really in remission. The leukemia has come back in ways that make it very likely within the year I’ll need to undergo a significant regimen of chemotherapy that will push me very very hard because it will be preparatory to a transplant procedure.

I feel in some ways—this will sound strange—that Sudan has saved my life. And I say that because when I was in Sudan in January 2003, I was there long enough that it became pretty much inevitable I would get a bug. When you go into southern Sudan you
go to the travel clinic and you ask for all the shots. The lineup is just incredible. And so on the flight home, actually, I felt myself mid-flight starting to come down with something. So I go get it checked out and I saw my personal physician, who’s also a very close personal friend, and he said, “well, lets do a complete blood count”—which I hadn’t had in a long time—looking for disease. But it was that complete blood count, CBC, that revealed the leukemia.

The honorary degree really feels as though it’s a moment for me to say to Smith as a community that I’ve missed you. It’s been difficult. And I’m very glad to be here to tell you that this is a place that’s meant an enormous amount to me. And so this honoring is particularly meaningful. It’s Smith saying to me, “We know where you’ve been.”

One thing about working on Darfur is that there is the immediate sense that everyday I do this meaningful work. It’s not that teaching is anything or has ever been anything but meaningful for me, but there’s an urgency—there is a way in which my life is fulfilled by virtue of doing this intensely meaningful work. I’ll never leave Sudan—even though my immune system is such that I’ll probably never be able to go there again.

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