

*If you only have a minute:* Rooted and Unwavering is all about connecting deeply with ourselves, others and our service in the world. If humanitarian aid organizations are to truly help people across the globe, they must first acknowledge the dignity and humanity of the individuals they serve.

## Dignity Above All

*By Esther Groves and Hylke Faber*

What wisdom can we gain from people who have lost absolutely everything?

If you ask Valerie Bemo, Deputy Director at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, she will tell you, “People look at me and say, you are so good, you are giving so much, but actually they are the ones that give me so much. I am working for a generous organization and I bring resources but, actually, they fill my soul.”

Valerie is responsible for bringing humanitarian aid to people across the globe who have lost everything to war, famine and/or natural disaster. She observes, “[When] you go to some of these places...they are more giving than we are. They will give you the few things they have.”

Valerie recounts the story of a woman who belonged to a community that lost everything. When she received a bag of rice, she turned around and distributed it to her community. When asked why she didn’t keep the rice for herself and her family she responded, “What is the point for me to eat if the other people don’t eat?”

“What is important, Valerie says, “is that sense of love and sharing. I am always amazed at the generosity [of people] with not much.”

“A lot of the time you go with your material eyes and you feel sad, pity and then the next time you look at the person...you realize they don’t need your tears. They need your smile and you start looking at them as human beings; who they are at the center with their heart, with their hope, with their belief... it changes everything. When they sense that, you start having a conversation. You start connecting and you start being two human beings and the material disappears. That is the beauty,” she adds.

Valerie continues, “You have to remind yourself that before the crisis they were living their lives and as parents...they were taking care of their family and they love their kids...they want what’s best for their kids,” also after whatever disaster may have struck them.

What Valerie has realized is that rather than treat people like helpless victims and presume to know what they need, it’s about respecting their dignity as individuals - to give them access to the financial resources and allow them to make their own choices that work best for them.

“There are a lot of changes in humanitarian aid,” Valerie says. “Instead of distributing things to them, there is more discussion about giving them unrestricted cash and letting them make the decision about what works for them.” Perhaps food and clothing aren’t top of mind. Instead, their priority may be to send their kids to school or to start a small business to sustain them into the future.

“You don’t even have to bother about so many things. They are at peace, they are centered, rooted and you appreciate who you are, not what you have but how you’re centered and how your heart is.” –  
*Valerie Bemo*