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“THINKING ABOUT DIAMONDS”

Ed Zwick, Producer *Blood Diamonds*

I have spent the better part of two years thinking about diamonds. Before presuming to make a movie that might be seen by millions, I felt an obligation to try to better understand my subject. And so I've studied their science, their history and their commerce. I've visited mines, read spread-sheets and secret memo's, peered at rough stones through microscopes, traveled throughout four continents to talk to jewelers, smugglers, dealers, politicians, captains-of-industry, mercenaries, NGO do-gooders and corporate spin doctors. And what I learned was as complex and rife with contradiction as Africa itself: as faceted and mysterious, one might even say, as a diamond. A thing both rare and yet abundant. A beautiful object that is sometimes born of ugliness. Something indestructible that has also caused so much destruction.

But when Martin asked if I might speak today, I wasn't at all sure I had anything to contribute. I'm not an industry insider. I have no particular expertise, and certainly no stake that rivals those of you for whom diamonds are your livelihood, your passion or your crusade. Then again, of all those here, I may be the one person with absolutely no agenda. So I hope, in this spirit, you will indulge me some personal reflection, a few observations, as well as some idealistic and no doubt intemperate conclusions. After all, mine is the world of emotion, not P & L statements or government briefings. I tend to see things as my audience does, in terms of right and wrong, and most of all as a set of moral choices.

For me, I guess, today represents some kind of closure. My film, whether it appealed to you, offended you, excited your curiosity or bored you to tears, will soon be gone from the theatres. The dvd's will be gathering dust on the shelf and I will be obliged to become passionate about something else entirely. We story tellers are notoriously promiscuous by trade. We have our way with you and move on. Having directed films for over twenty-five years now, I have become hardened, or at the very least, resigned to this reality.

But Africa was unlike any experience I have ever had. Every day brought forth some new confrontation with myself, and with my intentions. To behold the natural grace of God's greatest gifts – the beauty and vastness of the land, the grace of animals, the faces of children – and then to see it all juxtaposed, at every turn, with unspeakable human misery...it was just overwhelming. Because it was truly hard to understand how the immensity of such goodness had also created such fertile ground for the expression of evil. How it could be at once a feast of innocence and also a catalogue of human suffering. The drama of such violent juxtapositions rocked every complaisant notion I might have had about man's capacity for cruelty and for joy. For twenty five years I had presumed, as a dramatist, to understand something about man's nature and purpose, but never before and nowhere else had the essential divine apathy of the human circumstance been so starkly revealed to me, while at the same time confirming some essential and private theology, of the extremity of things and feelings, of the imminence of life, and the glory and sadness of its brevity.

How could I feel all this and still engage in making a film intended for profit and self-glorification – without utterly exploiting those whose suffering was its subject? After all,

what resource is more valuable than one's story. And how different was my situation, really, than those willing who plunder a country's natural treasure and then give nothing in exchange. My first reaction was to despair. This turns out to be a pretty standard response among those of the privileged world who confront such contradiction for the first time. Seeing the kind of things one sees, day in and day out, inevitably engenders a certain hopelessness... and then to have to devote myself, as I was obliged to do on the set, to the depiction and recreation of such cruelty and horror -- the rape of villages, the shattering of families, the debasement of children... well, all I can say is, I honestly wasn't sure I would get through it.

But then a curious thing happened. The more people I met who had endured this calamity -- Sierra Leoneans who had lost everything, former child soldiers, amputees -- the more I realized that what I was feeling was essentially selfish, that my feelings had absolutely nothing at all to do with the reality of their experience. All around me, everyone else was involved in the business of living -- of getting on with it -- of doing whatever they could in the epic, even heroic challenge of getting through the day. Their circumstances may be appalling and squalid, but their behavior was energetic and industrious and full of all sorts of odd and unexpected dignity. Even of laughter and joy. Whether fashioning bits of scrap metal into toy cars to sell, laying out a few withered vegetables on a street corner, or carrying huge jerry cans of water on one's head for miles, they were doing what they can. And after a certain amount of watching this, I couldn't help but ask myself, what was I doing? And so, tentatively at first, and then with growing enthusiasm and commitment, I began to consider what it was I could do, what task, what contribution, what portion of good was within my ken to accomplish.

What we ended up doing was little enough... insignificant, in fact, relative to the immensity of the need. But a film company has certain resources. And so we repaired roads, dug wells, improved sewage drains, built classrooms. More important, we injected forty million dollars of cash -- in the form of jobs -- directly into local economies, where the money stays and is turned over, again and again. The truck driver gives his pay to his wife, who pays the butcher, whose wife buys clothes for her children, and so.

We were there for less than a year.

But the diamond industry has been in West Africa for almost a hundred years. And, as best I can tell, relative to the bounty it has taken, it has done next to nothing at all. I'm not talking about Botswana -- which has become the poster child of all the good your industry can do. And, with all due respect, it's beside the point to the contributions to education or AIDS prevention in South Africa. Because the nations of West Africa that still languish at the very bottom of the HDI have been abused, abandoned, and forgotten. To suggest that we no longer buy their stones because of the inherent corruption is to go deeper into the same denial that created the situation in the first place. Forget about Charles Taylor, or whether it was this company or that one who maintained a buying office or knowingly bought conflict stones, forget whether it was top management, middle management, or middle men who truly knew what was going on while thousands were killed, millions displaced, and whole countries laid waste. Forget whether you worked in sorting, cutting or polishing, and forget even whether your role in retail, wholesale, distribution or advertising created a plausible deniability between your profit and the suffering of so many others. The fact is, every single member of the diamond industry, consciously or not, benefited from the very stones that ruined Sierra Leone.

And now, after all the hue and cry in the media, after all the images of severed limbs, the fears, real or imagined, of the NGOs threatening a boycott, after all the negotiations with governments, it turns out that the Kimberly Process has been good for business. Retail sales have risen every year since 1999. By declaring you no longer trade in dirty West African stones, you hope to wipe clean the slate of an unsavory past and replace it with an altruistic face. To say, 'that nasty business in West Africa is ancient history, the Kimberly Process has solved everything,' or 'We've changed. We're an "ethical" industry now. None of us even knew it was even happening' – is to miss the point. Complicity is not just a phrase of art.

Many of us in this room are Jews. How many of us would accept the argument that those in Nazi Germany who stood idly by and watched the slaughter of six million are free of blame because they now claim not to have known what was happening.

At the end of World War II, as Japan lay in absolute ruin, brilliant minds led us to understand the moral as well as the political obligation of restitution. We realized there was an intrinsic value to building up a society we had destroyed, in the creation of alliances and trading partners out of a former enemy. Amid the hopelessness and apparent passivity of millions of people, there is an incalculable energy that has yet to be felt by the rest of the world. The question is, will we harness it as a force for productivity and good, or we will continue to allow it to turn inward, often violently on itself – until the day comes that its rage is manipulated toward we who have been instrumental in its suffering. How many times has it been proven in other parts of the world that a violent ideology finds its most fertile expression among the dispossessed. It is at our peril that we assume Africa is not ripe for the same kind of exploitation.

I am encouraged this morning to have heard so many capable people focus their considerable intellect and experience on the welfare of a place whose need has been ignored for too long, and also to sense the willingness of each of you to listen to the other. But the diamond industry needs to do more than listen. I don't mean coming up with some clever marketing scheme that confuses responsibility with publicity by making a corporate line-item out of helping people...like offering to make a \$10,000 charitable contribution in order to convince some clueless actress to wear bling at the Oscars. I'm talking about a paradigm shift, about re-imagining an entire industry as a force for good, not waiting for a development partner, but becoming a major development partner yourself; not to be defensive but rather to lead. What would happen if the industry decided to dedicate a portion of every single African diamond sale – to the rebuilding of infrastructure and the creation of sustainable development? The Red Campaign is doing it with Gap t-shirts and jeans, American Express is using credit cards, what's to stop the branding of West African diamonds.

I know how idealistic this sounds, and probably how unrealistic. But one more thing I have learned over these two years is that there is really no such thing as the "diamond industry." No institution is a monolith, it's a community of souls. Of people, thousands of individuals who, deep in their hearts, if given the chance, would like to do well by doing good. To all of you, I say, if you truly believe that diamonds represent love, what greater love is there than that of one's fellow man?

And the irony is, if ever such a marvelous thing could come to pass... it would probably end up being good for business. Imagine how a woman would feel to know that, in being given a diamond, not only that she is loved, but that she is giving love in return.

It was a privilege to be invited here today and I thank you for it.