

HONORING THE LIFE AND DEATH OF CAMILLE LEPAGE

Camille Lepage, a 26-year-old French photojournalist died on Monday May 12th, 2014 in Central African Republic.

I stare at these words in internet articles, Facebook posts, in conversations, and all I can think is that poor girl, that poor member of the journalist family that I didn't know. Because I've never known anyone who died in combat photography. It just doesn't happen outside of the Bang Bang Club.

Camille faced death so many times and always made it out alive. She was always going to make it out alive. And she wasn't just any combat photographer, she was Camille, my friend and hero.

Over the two years that we have known each other, I suppose I'm lucky that so much of our conversations were over email and Facebook messages. In those words are now a living testament to her life and her soul.

Maybe I'm lucky, too, that I never shot with her in a combat zone. Our conversations were idealist ones, about changing the world... always changing the world. She was my strength on those dark days that pushed me back to the light.

"You, as a photojournalist, are the messenger, you're not the one who will implement new laws on Human Rights in Russia or Chechen, you're not the one who will put rapists in jail, you will not cure Aids and won't give food to all of those who are malnourished, but you're the one, and that's essential, who is going to denounce those things. Your job, or at least that's how I see my role, is to make it as appealing as possible so people can relate to it and ideally put pressure on those in charge and whose role is to make things change!" – Camille Lepage, December 1, 2012

In January this year we slipped away to Mombasa for a vacation. She said it was the first time she had truly rested in years; she didn't even take her camera which she noted hadn't left her side in as long as she could remember.

Our last night together, we closed down the bar by talking with the Maasai guards who were there. It was quite a sight to behold. She and I and six Massai dressed in full traditional clothing. We must have talked for an equal number of hours. I remember how intently she asked them questions, about their culture, their families, if leaving their loved ones behind for work was hard. She asked nothing that would relate back to her. She was intent on knowing them inside their own context.

Meanwhile I was asking questions like, "How do you guys feel about tourists and white people in general?"

She looked outward for her questions. I looked inward.

I sat and listened most of the night. I watched her. And learned from her how to learn from people.

Earlier that day she told me, *"You need to not see them as different. See them the way they see themselves. Show them as if they were white. You need to look at them as if they were your brothers. Stop thinking about you, you have to think about them."*



Photo by Camille Lepage from the series "Vanishing Youth"

Some people are writing her off as a loose canon, which isn't true. I don't know that fearless is the best way to put it either. She had fear. She was scared at times. But she never allowed that fear to keep her from pushing towards telling the stories that no one wanted to hear. Maybe that's the difference between her and so many of us. She wasn't afraid of her fear. And she knew that her life was no more valuable than those who were dying around her.

She would be so excited about the international attention her life and her photos have now brought to the conflicts in CAR and South Sudan, but so devastated that it took a Westerner dying for people to pay more attention to the 10's of thousands of Africans that have died the same horrific deaths in the last few years. She would be appalled to know that her death is being given so much attention whilst so little is given to theirs.

In an interview for [Petapixel](#) in 2013 she said, *"I can't accept that people's tragedies are silenced simply because no one can make money out of them. I decided to do it myself, and bring some light to them no matter what.... I want the viewers to feel what the people are going through, I'd like them to empathize with them as human beings, rather than seeing them as another bunch of Africans suffering from war somewhere in this dark continent. I wish they think "why on earth are those people in living hell, why don't we know about it and why is no one doing anything?" I would like the viewers to be ashamed of their government for knowing about it without doing anything to make it end. The killings of civilians in the Nuba, Blue Nile and Darfur have been going on for 30 years, and yet all the governments are still turning a blind eye on them. I don't understand what makes it okay for Omar Al-Bashir to kill thousands of innocent people with no one saying anything!"*

These are statements that she communicated over and over again in our conversations. This is who she was and how she saw the world.

In 2012 I lost another dear friend to which Camille responded, *“I’m sorry for the loss of your friend... I hope you’re ok. But it really does prove that you should enjoy every moment in your life, as something might happen at any time and you don’t want to have any regrets”*

At 26, she lived a fuller life than most people I know in nursing homes will have seen. She told me, more than once, that she knew she was going to die young and it’s obvious that she lived her life with that in mind.

There are many other things I want to say about her. Many other experiences of hers that I would love to share. How many days we struggled in coming up with the title “Vanishing Youth” for one of her projects. How many times she told me to get off my ass and do something with my life. How many jokes. How much love. But that’s what friendships are about, unique moments shared between two people.

My hope and prayer is that we all honor her life and death with what we have left of ours.

Losing her has shattered my world. Living the way she did is the only way I know to bring the pieces back together. I hope I can bring further insight to the stories she felt called to cover. That I can shed more light on the issues of humanity. It shouldn’t take the death of one Westerner to get us to see that conflict is an ongoing injustice in Africa that must be stopped. That was her battle cry. We should make it ours.



“What matters the most is that you’re doing something to make the world a better place. And you have to believe in this. It’s important... you think with your eyes, and that’s all the world asks you to do” – Camille Lepage, July 26th, 2013