



Narrative Writing and Ethical Decision Making Sonia Nazario, Author of Enrique's Journey

Reporters often witness subjects in distress when they report stories. Whether the suffering is due to a civil war, an environmental disaster, poverty or crime, a journalist's job is to stay on the sidelines and report what he or she sees.

Most people accept that news reporters shouldn't get involved with a story they are covering. Yet some people apply a different standard to reporters following individuals, especially vulnerable children, over periods of time.

As a narrative writer who writes about difficult social issues, I believe that it is sometimes necessary to witness misery to be able to tell a story in the most powerful way. Your goal is to move people to act in a way that might bring about positive change.

A case in point is my story, "Orphans of Addiction," published in the Los Angeles Times in 1997.

My goal was to show, in the most "grab-you-by-the-throat" way, what it is like, day in and day out, for the millions of children who grow up with parents addicted to alcohol or drugs. I felt the best way to do this was through fly-on-the-wall reporting, to follow a few children for weeks and show their reality, to take readers deep inside the world I was trying to describe. I felt this narrative style would provide the greatest immediacy and power to the story. By getting readers' attention, I hoped to move readers and perhaps legislators to think about and act upon some of the issues highlighted in the stories. I believed that witnessing some suffering, even by children, was acceptable *if those children were not in imminent danger* and if I thought that the telling of their story in the most powerful way possible might lead to a greater good.

That said, throughout the reporting, I was clear in my mind about one thing. If I felt these children were in imminent danger, I would immediately report them to child welfare authorities. Yes, they were clearly being neglected. Yet I never felt the three children I spent time with were in *imminent danger*. This was my judgment based on many things I factored into the equation--factors that regrettably were not spelled out in the newspaper story.

For example, there were at least two individuals—a neighbor and a nearby pastor-- who kept a careful eye on the children. When the children got hungry, or needed help, they would often go a few blocks away to Pastor Bill Thomas in Long Beach and ask for food or assistance or advice. I asked the pastor to notify me if he felt the three children were in imminent danger. He agreed with my assessment that they were not. (Indeed, upon publication of the story, children welfare authorities in Los Angeles and Kern Counties concurred with my assessment in the case of two of the three children. Despite the huge play of the story, and public cry for action, authorities only felt compelled to place one of the three children in foster care.)

Calling authorities in to help the children likely would have ruined my credibility in their Long Beach neighborhood. Already, my manner and way of dressing meant that people assumed I was a social

worker or that I was working with law enforcement. If I had turned three children over to child welfare authorities, word would have quickly spread, making it very difficult or impossible for me to gain the trust of another family. Reporters have to be very careful to not be seen as an arm of law enforcement. People will not trust—and open up to—reporters who they believe are snitches or who they think are operating as an arm of law enforcement. Reporters who operate in this way risk becoming less effective, or being left unable to even report certain important stories.

Following publication of the story, I received over 1,000 phone calls and emails, a huge amount in 1997 when many people weren't yet using email.

Some readers' comments *were* blistering, condemning me for not having intervened, for not having dialed 911 and turned the children over to child welfare authorities as soon as I had met them. I had watched a girl go hungry for 24 hours and done nothing. I had allowed these children to be neglected. Someone who claimed to be a child abuse investigator called three times to let me know he had urged police to arrest me for what I had done. "How could you have lived with these people for months and not do anything to help these children?" one reader inquired. "Where is your conscience?" The reader added: "Was winning an award so important to you that you would risk the life of a three year old child to do so? Or is it that you thought this child was from and is trash and deserves such a horrible existence? I only hope that you win the award you so desire and place it somewhere everyone could see. A suggestion is the empty void in your chest, the place where your heart ought to be."

Was I a reporter, or a human being, some readers asked?

But the vast majority of readers praised me. "All of America's children should be grateful to you. I know I am," wrote Cynthia in one email. Some readers left voice mail messages, sobbing with gratitude and pain after reading the stories. One man thanked me on behalf of the three children I had written about. "You may have saved not just their lives, but the lives of millions other innocent children throughout the country."

Hundreds of readers wrote saying that they were now scrutinizing neighbors or friends' children more closely for neglect, and that the story had made them much more likely to intervene. Indeed, LA County's child abuse hotline registered a 45% increase in reports from the public of children being abused or neglected. Therapists called saying that clients with drug addiction problems were checking themselves into rehabilitation programs such as Betty Ford's, not having realized before reading my story how much harm they were causing their children.

There were systemic reforms as a result of the stories. The LA County Board of Supervisors ordered an audit of the county's child welfare agency. It led to, among other things, a wholesale re-vamping of the county's child abuse hotline and operations after reports surfaced that four separate individuals—including a doctor—had reported Tamika's situation to the hotline and nothing had been done by authorities to help her. A task force with representatives from 20 county agencies was set up to put in effect measures to better identify these children through the schools and police. Because of the publicity, the county obtained more federal and state funding for programs to treat addicted women and their children. Schools in the county changed policies to better detect children such as Ashley and Kevin who had dropped out of one school but had never been enrolled in another.

Child welfare systems from as far away as Alaska called to tell me they were setting up better systems to identify and help such children.

The story, in short, put a spotlight on a nationwide problem that had largely been hidden, and led to real reforms that helped many children.

Just as important, the story helped the children profiled. Tamika and Ashley and Kevin would never have come to the attention of child welfare authorities had I not sought them out. Putting their story on the front page of the Los Angeles Times ensured—in a way a phone call to authorities would not have done—that these children were properly investigated and, in the case of Tamika, placed in a foster home cherry-picked by the director of LA County’s child welfare agency. Readers from as far away as Edinboro, PA, offered to adopt Tamika.

As one child welfare agency supervisor told me on the day the story was published, “With the details you put in the story, you gave us a roadmap to find these children.” Authorities picked up Tamika that very day.

Her mother, Theodora, got free drug rehabilitation treatment at a residential facility whose director had read the story. She lived there for free for 1½ years and was grateful that the story had given her this opportunity. Ultimately, as often happens with addicts, Theodora self-sabotaged and went back to using drugs just weeks before she was to get her daughter back. She had been clean and sober for about 18 months. Her daughter was ultimately adopted by a foster care family.

If I had sought out a child living with alcohol or drug-addicted parents and immediately reported them to child welfare authorities, there would have been no story, and none of the changes this story inspired.

That said, I should have done some things differently.

- I should have tried to write the story more quickly after reporting it.
- I should have taken greater care to drop in on the children and monitor their situation more closely during the writing phase of the story.
- In an effort to offer greater transparency to readers, the LA Times should have run a note explaining to readers the rationale for why I chose not to intervene. (In a subsequent story, *Enrique’s Journey*, which won two Pulitzer Prizes in 2003, I wrote and the LA Times published 7,000 words of footnotes in an effort to provide greater transparency.)

The response to *Orphans of Addiction* prompted me to be much more methodical in thinking through potential ethical dilemmas and how I would react. For a series called *Enrique’s Journey*, I rode with children up the length of Mexico on top of freight trains, a dangerous odyssey. Before doing so, I thought about every possible ethical dilemma that could arise. What are the worst things that could happen? How would I react in that instant? Sometimes, bad things happen very quickly, so it’s important, I realized, to know how to respond in the moment. (For example, in *Orphans of Addiction*, the Los Angeles Times photographer witnessed Theodora’s boyfriend using Theodora’s toothbrush to clean Tamika’s teeth. Theodora is HIV positive. The photographer, regrettably, didn’t intervene. Some angry readers sent me toothbrushes in the mail and a suggestion of what I should do with them.)

Despite the intervention dilemmas I faced, I would have reported and written the story in much the same way today. It is critical to tell these stories—and to write them in a way that makes people think about an issue and act.

Sonia Nazario is an award-winning journalist whose stories have tackled some of this country's most intractable problems -- hunger, drug addiction, immigration -- and have won some of the most prestigious journalism and book awards. A fluent Spanish speaker of Jewish ancestry whose personal history includes living in Argentina during the so-called dirty war, Nazario spent 20 years reporting and writing about social issues for U.S. newspapers.

She is best known for "Enrique's Journey," her story of a Honduran boy's struggle to find his mother in the U.S. Published as a series in the Los Angeles Times, "Enrique's Journey" won the Pulitzer Prize for feature writing in 2003. It was turned into a book by Random House that became a national bestseller and is now required reading at hundreds of high schools and colleges across the country. A Young Adult version of Enrique's Journey was published in 2013 aimed at middle schoolers and reluctant readers in high school.