

**Acceptance speech by Mr. Rudi Vranckx,
Laureate of the Carnegie Wateler Peace Prize 2018
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Check against delivery

Thank you. When I heard I would be receiving this distinction, I was blown away. Even more so when I saw the row of honorees I would be joining here. Therefore, it is very important to realize that I can only accept this award in the name of so many colleagues who do my job, as well.

"War correspondent." It sounds exotic, but in essence, it is simple: we tell the story of regular people in unusual circumstances, giving a face and a voice to those who would not otherwise have one.

In the thirty years I've been doing this, I have learned that, at times, war seems like an inevitable law of nature, but that peace really can be achieved. That Peace isn't born of big conferences, and certainly not of social media, with vicious tweets. Rather, it is born here and everywhere, in the fabric of society. Educators, lawyers, doctors, human rights activists, families of victims... It is they who ultimately make the difference. After all these years, I still feel privileged every time I get to tell the story of one of these people. They are the everyday heroes of our time.

Recently, my thoughts have gone out to those who have died practicing this profession – this calling, actually.

Over the past 25 years, some 2,000 of my colleagues have died. This year, at the staggering rate of two felled colleagues per week. Dying to tell the story. Literally. That is important. It matters, because when they die, the story dies. The victims of war and violence die a second time. In silence.

Speaking of silence... That brings me to the people of Mosul, who were living under the so-called Caliphate. They lived

through the worst cruelty and violence, under religious intolerance... Six months after Mosul fell, I had to make my way through hundreds, perhaps thousands, of bodies, casually heaped together in basements, tossed from rocks, in wheelchairs... Some of them were children, their primitive toys next to them. *Vae victis*, woe betide the conquered. This must have been how Dante imagined his inferno. And at the same time, in that crushing silence, I found humanity. I needed that so much. We all need that.

So, let me tell you a story of true courage: imagine... Outside in the darkness, there is only the sound of shooting, the blasts of grenades, the screaming of torture. Then, in your basement, you take your guitar or violin and start to play quietly. You record it... post it on Facebook, knowing that the penalty is death, because music or any expression of human joy is prohibited. The strings of the guitar will be used to strangle your friends or to make booby-traps. One of the musicians, for example, was in prison for many weeks. He had to dig his own grave, and four times, he underwent a mock-execution. In such a world, the sound of music becomes an antidote to intolerance.

When passing by Mosul's razed music academy, I heard *Imagine*. This may be a naïve song from my youth, but what I really heard in the midst of all this destruction was HOPE. So, we decided to bring musical instruments to Mosul. We called this project of hope *Imagine Mosul*. Thousands of Belgians responded with enthusiasm. It struck a sensitive chord in our own society, longing for hope and action against polarization and hatred. It gave me strength, because even as a journalist, sometimes in the darkness, you need this glimmer of hope. First and foremost, journalism must deliver accurate reporting, but it can be more. Because journalism can also be a means to an end: a just and fair society, without violence or hatred. Reach out through the heart, into the minds. We all need an antidote.

The first victim of war is truth. This is many war journalists' motto, but it is only part of the actual story. Human rights – the rights we all share, as *people* – are buried right alongside the truth. It is easy to report on something when you are not directly involved, when the war is far from home. But what if the threat creeps closer? The more involved we are, the thicker the fog of war. For the past two decades, borders have shifted, bit by bit.

Chemical weapons, the horror of ISIS that is spread over the Internet, war propaganda in the form of fake news, blind terror in one's own country... The dangers and challenges are huge, and thus, so is the temptation to take the easy way out. This puts not only human rights under pressure, but also our own Western rule of law. That path leads to dehumanization, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Over the past few years, too many reports have appeared from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Doctors Without Borders... You name it. The organizations all around the world that bear witness to the horrors of war and the crimes against humanity that are committed. The evidence, the things they uncover: there are now too many of them to deny.

The wars in recent years have put our moral compass to the test.

This brings me to our own society. Let me start with a quote that keeps haunting me. It's from Amin Maalouf, an Arab, Lebanese and Frenchman, Christian and Oriental, straddling both worlds, East and West.

"We entered a new era without a compass. My worries are those of a follower of enlightenment. One who sees the light flicker, grow weaker and in some countries even go out. These are the worries of someone who cherishes freedom."

These are observations I feel every day in my work as a war correspondent in this century.

We live in a world where people live longer, and where more people get more opportunities and could be happier. But at the same time, it is a world where every two seconds, another person becomes a refugee. Tens of millions worldwide, more than any time since the end of World War II. In this world, I see old specters coming back to haunt us. Those of fear and hatred of others. It is like a wheel, which keeps on spinning and always lands on the same point. Some people remind us of the 1930s, but this isn't a case of history repeating itself. It is the mechanism of exclusion, human behavior in times of fear that remains the same.

We live in the age of polarization, of us against them. The "other" is back and dominates every debate, every election. War refugees are seen as taking advantage, their suffering secondary to the inconvenience to us. A fortune-seeker, if the disdainful tweets can be believed. Some of them are fortune-seekers, of course. Fleeing war, fleeing drought brought by climate change, fleeing poverty.

But may we make another distinction? Call a spade a spade and then look for a humane solution? Whoever helps a person who is drowning becomes an ally to human traffickers. Anyone who wishes to respect international law becomes an out-of-touch judge. Journalists are intimidated. Any and all nuance disappears. Sowing fear of the "other" is the bestselling product in the twenty-first century political market. Facts and solutions are being liquidated.

As a historian and a war correspondent, I know that war is waged every day with two weapons: hatred and fear. We are being threatened, surrounded, overwhelmed. The "other" gets the blame, becomes less than human and then even inhuman, until finally... No war can be waged without fear and hatred. Those who spread fear and sow hatred also lay the foundations for the war crimes of tomorrow.

"Never again" was the mantra of those who helped bring peace to Europe. They have wearied of the fight. The voice of a new

generation of politicians, who haven't the slightest notion of what war actually means, is now drowning out the rest.

But those who feed the belly of the beast with their testosterone-laden tweets will never manage to get the animal back in its cage. If history teaches us one thing, it's that populism, whether it is left-leaning or right-leaning, never ends well. These are simplistic remedies for complex problems.

Do I have a right to speak about this? Thirty years of war reporting are etched into my soul. I see how it begins, how it grows and just what beast it comes. Rwanda, the Congo, Somalia, Iraq, Syria... The list goes on and on. Conflicts bring out the best and worst in people. It is easy for us to judge in hindsight, but are we choosing the right path at the time? In our time. What is our moral compass? The French philosopher Sartre said, "Every word has consequences. Every silence, too." We are facing that choice. Every one of us. I've made my choice. Because silence is not an option.