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Championing the  
World's Children

# AUDREY HEPBURN

live by my instincts," confides Audrey Hepburn. "I've had very little else to go by. I'm not terribly bright, nor have I had an enormous education, but I really have learned to trust my instincts." Hepburn smiles widely at this slightly disparaging remark made at her own expense. Wearing a navy Chanel suit trimmed with large gold buttons, the Academy Award-winning actress is seated on a cream-colored sofa in New York's Plaza Athénée hotel. As she shifts position, the mere act of crossing her legs is so graceful it seems as if she is about to dance.

Hepburn has not come to New York to discuss her film career. Since 1989, she has been Goodwill Ambassador for UNICEF and she has just finished attending the World Summit for Children held at United Nations headquarters. "I'm ecstatic about the conference," she says. "The 70 heads of state who attended came because there is such a big crisis, not simply because they love children. My mother always used to say that what you don't do through love you do through fear." A wry laugh follows as she mentions that skeptics have referred to the conference as just so many words. "The greatest changes in history have come through words," she observes.

Hepburn's voice is an arpeggio of rapidly shifting European inflections. She raises the volume for emphasis; then suddenly drops the pitch near the end of a phrase so that she is practically whispering. When her voice suddenly falls off, her fatigue is apparent. She looks fragile. But that appearance is deceptive.

At 61, Audrey Hepburn is a quiet vortex of energy whose presence and commitment have taken her far from the elegant heart of Switzerland, where she lives, to some of the most devastated and terrifying war zones in the world. Her first assignment in March 1988 was a trip to drought-ravaged Ethiopia. In 1989, she visited El Salvador.

"I was there to observe the Days of Tranquillity negotiated by UNICEF with the Salvadoran government, the Catholic Church and the rebels," she says. (During the Days of Tranquillity, warring factions lay down their arms so that children can be vaccinated.) "There have been Days of Tranquillity in Lebanon, too. Not many people know that about UNICEF," Hepburn explains, adding, "I am one of many who help raise money for the fund." To do this, she has put her life on the line so that she can "go and look and see and feel and observe, then come back and talk about it to raise awareness."

Asked where the problems of children are most severe, Hepburn replies in a solemn whisper, "Wherever there is war."

She understands all too well what it means to grow up in a war zone: Half Dutch, half British, she lived in the town of Arnhem in the Netherlands during World War II. One brother was in the Resistance, the other in the army. Her uncle was picked up and shot. "You learn to accept that there isn't food to eat and you can't do this or that and people get rounded up and taken to camps. You live with that very deep apprehension and constant fear of something happening," she recalls. After the war, there was no food in Holland, and Hepburn was one of the children who received aid from the newly formed United Nations Relief Agency (UNRA) and the Red Cross. "I can testify to what UNICEF means to children because I was among the recipients of food and medical relief. I have a long-lasting gratitude for its work," she says.

For Hepburn, war is "something in your stomach, a gut feeling that takes over." It can be permanently traumatic for children. "We cannot give a child back its limbs or its parents if they have been tortured to death in front of him," she says. "Let us never forget those children who do not know peace, who do not know joy and do not smile. It is for these children that I speak." □

Text by Laurie Nadel / Photograph by Roddy McDowall

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