

Reading, Writing, Redemption, Rwanda

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On January 31, 2009, I lost my son. Eric was 19 years old and a brilliant scholar, musician, and student leader at Columbia University in New York City. Most importantly, he was a loving, kind, and compassionate young man who made a positive impact on everyone he met. He died from depression, the disease that had taken the life of my nephew just two years before and the life of my mother when I was 17.

After Eric died, the world became a dark place for me, and for awhile I felt that I would never experience joy again. My husband Jim had just overcome liver cancer and, miraculously, a liver transplant. He was struggling fiercely both physically and emotionally. Our daughters, Hillary, an attorney, and Ashley, a law student at St. Thomas University at the time, were also trying to cope, to make sense of the loss of their beloved younger brother. Fortunately, we clung together in our despair.

In addition to my family, my life was blessed with a strong church, supporting colleagues, and wonderful friends. One of those friends, Pam Pappas Stanoch, told me stories about genocide survivors in Rwanda who had overcome the horrific events of their past. I began to read books written by genocide survivors who through their faith, determination, and resilience reclaimed their joy and lived purposeful lives. These books helped me to heal and find the joy in my life again.

Open Sesame

When Pam suggested that we work together to send a memorial library in Eric's name to Rwanda through Books for Africa, I immediately agreed. I had been helped



This is Rwanda, where life must begin again following its 100 days of genocide against the Tutsi tribe.



tremendously by books written by Rwandans and could now express my gratitude by sending books that might impact the lives of Rwandans whose stories had helped me.

We started our first fundraiser on October 6, 2011, and were amazed that fewer than five months later, through the help of St. Thomas Academy and Visitation Schools, the MDA, and my church and Pam's, we had raised the funds to send libraries to two Catholic high schools, Catholic University of Rwanda, the dental school at Kigali Health Institute, and the Wisdom School, an amazing place that included schools for primary

students, deaf students, and children who were heads of households.

Thompson-Reuters, through Books for Africa, had developed a law library full of new law books that were specifically designed for emerging democracies in Africa, and we were able to include two of these libraries in our shipment, one for the Law School in Butare, and one for the Law School in Kigali.

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Doctors and patients; the best medicine.



Paul Kagame visits the Kigali Health Institute's dental facility.



An active classroom is a wonderful indication of renewal.

Meeting the Moment

The books were expected to reach Rwanda in August of 2012, so Pam and I decided to travel to Rwanda in September to dedicate seven Eric James Harms Memorial Libraries. Our expectations were high, but it could not begin to match the reality of our experience.

In the spring of 1994, in just 100 days, almost a million Rwandans were savagely murdered in an organized effort by the Hutu majority government to eliminate the Tutsi population as well as any Hutus who showed sympathy to the Tutsis. The murder weapons were guns, machetes, and sharpened garden hoes. Many victims were tortured, raped, and killed by their former friends and neighbors. Their bodies were frequently left whole or in pieces, for the dogs to eat. When the killing was done, the victim's property was stolen and their houses were burned. The goal was to leave no trace of the Tutsi population that in happier times had lived in harmony with their Hutu neighbors.

The causes of the Genocide are complicated, and in some ways resembled those used by Hitler in the 1940s. The extremist government

manipulated the population, murdered or discredited the moderates, and used every means at its disposal to dehumanize its targets. Tutsis were referred to as cockroaches and vermin who needed to be eliminated. Unlike the Nazis who, for the most part, carried out their genocide behind the closed doors of the concentration camps, the Rwandan Hutu extremists utilized the civilian population in partnership with the Hutu army to carry out the atrocities openly. The killings occurred in streets, homes, churches, and schools. No place was safe. Hutus had a choice: If they did not kill or support the killings, they would risk being murdered themselves along with their own families.

The genocide ended when the RPF, lead mostly by Tutsis, defeated the extremist Hutu government three months after the killings began. The government set up at that time survives today. Although there is still controversy in Rwanda, the government has focused its reconstruction on the principles of forgiveness and reconciliation, and the country is safe and at peace.

Love at First Site

Pam and I arrived in Kigali with a

tight schedule of eight days to dedicate seven libraries: three in the central Kigali area, three in the southern Butare area, and one in the northeast "gorilla country" of Musanze. This seemed an impossible task to me, but Pam, a seasoned traveler and cross-cultural entrepreneur, had determined our schedule, and I knew from experience to trust her judgment!

Ultimately I wanted to understand how a country with such a tragic history could find a way for its so terribly divided people to work together to rebuild. I also wanted to understand how individual Rwandans who had lost everything could learn to trust and forgive the perpetrators.

It was explained to me by several aide groups that the Genocide was not a topic of polite conversation. I certainly understood that and realized that it would be unlikely in the process of dedicating the libraries that I would be able to engage anyone in a deep conversation regarding their past. I was wrong.

Our guide for Kigali and Butare was Fr. Reme Bizimani. Fr. Remy had lost his parents and his sister in the Genocide. He had been adopted by his aunt, an Anglican Canon, and uncle, a Baptist pastor.

His aunt and uncle had lost five of their seven children, and for 14 years thought that they had lost their infant granddaughter. In 2005, a prisoner confessed that the child had not been killed. Her parents, facing their killers, had the presence of mind to make a bargain. They would find and collect all of their money and exchange that for the life of their child. Once the money was given to the killers, the parents were brutally murdered, but the baby girl was spared and given to a Hutu family. After several years of searching for the child, she was finally found, living happily with a Hutu family. At 14, she was reunited with her grandparents and extended Tutsi family, and now lives with both families. I cannot begin to imagine the emotional complexities she must live with. I wish I could say that the experiences of Fr. Remy's family were unusual, but they are a common family history in Rwanda.

Father Remy and his family gave us the honor of taking us to the Murambi Genocide Memorial in southwest Rwanda. He had arranged a private tour for us. Our guide and three companions had all lost multiple family members in the Genocide. Pam and I walked the narrow path on the grounds of a former technical college where 45,000 people were murdered on April 21, 1994. Tutsis and moderate Hutus who had tried to hide in a local church had been led to the school with promises of protection, but instead were massacred. Most were buried in mass graves, but to ensure that the world would never forget — or worse, *deny* — what had happened there, the remains of close to 1,000 victims had been preserved in lime. Guns and grenades had killed some, but the vast majority had been slashed to death with machetes. As a testimony to the effectiveness of this killing machine, only a handful of the 45,000 who sought refuge at Murambi survived.

From Hutu/Tutsi Cooperative President in Musanze

After the Genocide, people were living alone. So many people were separated from relatives and friends.



The world was a mess, and the idea came that those people who had the same problems — Hutu and Tutsi women were both widowed, but for different reasons — could meet together to try to find solutions and hope for life for everybody. The first group was those who had the same problems and wanted to get together and heal. When people sit together and try to get the sense of hope for everybody, it helps everybody. We need to live after all properties were destroyed. We have to improve our lives, so all women brought anything they had and any skill they had and we brought those together to help each other. Other people came in later, but most groups came together to heal. The goal was to support each other and to survive. All women (both Hutu and Tutsi) brought together everything they had, and we put it together and bought food and clothing for our families. We are building houses together. We also know that we need information, so Elie (Nduwayesu) brought us radios, and now we get information about how to develop ourselves. We are proud of what we have accomplished, but we are still challenged to provide education for our children and other household needs.

As might be expected, few survivors described the details of how the killing of their friends and family was accomplished. But here, at Murambi, they did not have to. The final moments in the lives of these men, women, children, and infants were graphically evident. Arms and legs had been severed; skulls were crushed beyond recognition as human. Some had obviously been buried alive among the corpses of their family members; their arms reaching out as if trying to find escape. Many of the women who had been violated had foreign objects still protruding from their bodies. The visit to Murambi with these survivors was a great privilege, and one of the most sacred moments of my life. I will never forget it.

Deep Memory

I will also never forget the Rwandan Collectives. Tutsi women whose husbands had been killed in the Genocide had joined with Hutu women whose husbands had done the killing and were now in jail. They had put aside their differences and focused on forgiveness and reconciliation. Each collective determined the type of work they would rely upon. Many made traditional crafts, sewing or weaving baskets. One of the collectives we visited in Musanze was trying to secure micro-loans to start a business that would distribute coal in their village in a more efficient way. These women were amazing. Pam and I bonded with them immediately.

There was, unexpectedly, much joy and laughter in these groups.

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Teach and they will reach for more.

In Musanze, we were greeted with singing and dancing. When we were about to leave, the women began their singing and dancing again and brought the two of us in to join them. I have to admit that I am not much of a dancer. In seventh grade, my sister told me that I wasn't very good at it, so I pretty much stopped dancing at 13. In America we dance for enjoyment, but also to be seen and show our talent. In the Rwandan collectives, they dance as an expression of joy. You can almost feel the joy coming out of the fingertips of these women. By the time we were done, I could feel the joy coming out of my fingertips. Joy is contagious. With such a horrible past to work through and lives lived in such stark financial poverty, how could these Tutsi and Hutu women dance together with such joy? In answer to such a bewildering question, I found myself thinking, When it comes to joy, I think we are the ones living in poverty.

Hold a Book, Hold the World

The dental school was located in Kigali, and, although the books had not yet arrived, we were warmly greeted by our host, Dr. Muhumuza. I have since learned that the dental school has been disappointed in the past by donations that were promised but never delivered, so his hospitality was even more impressive. Dr. Muhumuza gave me a tour of the school, and I was impressed to see a



CPD sessions.

small but modern clinic. There was even an advertisement for orthodontic aligners. The students were a bit shy, but after a little questioning, they opened up and answered some questions. I was impressed with how similar they were to American students. They seemed to like similar foods, they chose dentistry as their profession in order to help people, and many wanted to return to their hometowns to practice. In some ways, nevertheless, they were different from their American counterparts. One difference I noticed was the size of their families. Many had five or six siblings. I remembered that American families, in the time of my grandparents, when the death rate for children was higher, also had large families. I was struck, however, with the number of these young people who were orphans. Most were small children when the Genocide occurred, and these young men and women lived firmly in that shadow.

In Butare, we dedicated two complete and new law libraries specifically designed for emerging democracies in Africa. These libraries, donated via Books for Africa through its Law and Democracy Initiative, were sponsored and published through Thompson-Reuters. The Dean of the Law School told us that lawyers were heavily targeted during the Genocide, and when it ended there were only 49 left in the entire country. The country had to rely on local community courts

(called gacaca courts) to provide justice. The law school had few books, and was very grateful for these libraries. I was able to talk to the law students, most of whom wanted to go back to their own communities to practice. I left the law school thinking — “They need more books!”

We were also able to dedicate libraries at Catholic University and a local high school and visited a Catholic church where thousands of people and five Catholic priests had been killed.

The Wisdom School

In Musanze, “gorilla country”, we brought books to The Wisdom School. Genocide survivors Elie and Bernadette Nduwayesu, both psychologists, founded the Wisdom School. Initially they used their own funds to start an educational facility for the many children orphaned in Musanze. They currently have more than 700 students, including 68 deaf students, and a training program for children who are heads of households. We fell in love with the beautiful children there, especially the deaf students. The training program, based upon love and compassion for the students, was amazing. Most of the students live at the school, but many walk miles every day to get there. The biggest challenge Elie and Bernadette face is raising money for food to feed so many children.

These young students seemed happy and excited to see us. They sang and danced for us. At the deaf school, we met a young boy, ZuZu, who had been hidden by his parents in a single isolated room. His parents had AIDS, and it was considered a disgrace to their families for them to have children, as any children would almost certainly be orphaned. ZuZu's father died first, and then his mother. When family members came to bury his mother, they heard a noise, and were surprised to find ZuZu, alone and uncared for,

climbing up the walls in a remote bedroom. Because he had never been talked to, he developed no language. He had no means of communication. They called him a feral child. It was during our visit that ZuZu ran to Elie when we arrived at the deaf school, hugged him, and began actually talking to him.

Deaf students in Africa are rarely educated, and live their lives without a method of communication. They are rarely able to take care of themselves. The Wisdom School is not only teaching them sign language and reading, but they are taking the rare step in Africa of attempting to mainstream students who are doing well into the classroom with hearing students. These students now plan lives similar to their hearing classmates. They want to be teachers, shopkeepers, hotel managers, and computer programmers. What an honor it was to provide books for these children who, once they can read, have the whole world opened to them.

Home Again

As Pam and I began our journey home, we could not believe how our lives had changed in just eight days. What had originally begun as a plan to build a single library had turned that imagined edifice into eight. Fr. Remy had dedicated space for a future Eric James Harms Memorial Library at his school. This was to become our “senior” project. Pam planned to look for ways to fund micro-loans for the cooperatives, and I was to focus on fundraising for more libraries and helping the dental students in any way I could.

As I write this, I am reminded that tragedy, grief, and suffering occur universally. Yesterday, 26 students and adults were senselessly killed in a school in Connecticut. My heart goes out to all of those affected. There are many who will find themselves in that

Postscript: It has been three months since our visit, and God has opened many doors. In three weeks our second shipment of 20,000 books will leave the Books for Africa warehouse in



Georgia. Merck, whose goal is to get Merck Manuals into the hands of as many health care providers as possible in Africa, is sending some in the memory of Fr. Remy’s adoptive father, who died just before our visit. We have two new libraries: St. Etienne’s Cathedral and the Isaro Foundation. Student Thierry Tuyishimre from Oklahoma Christian University partnered with us to help send books and add to our library count. A dental student at Harvard University, Jungsuk Cho, is working with the dental students in Kigali to investigate student partnerships. My friend and fellow ADA Consumer Advisor, Dr. Edmond Hewlett, Dean of Diversity and Outreach at the dental school at UCLA, has asked me to present a proposal for student educational collaboration with the Rwandan dental school. Quintessence Publishing and Gordon Christiansen have made generous donations to our dental library project. Elie at the Wisdom School so enjoyed the music books sent to him from Eric’s personal library that he requested some keyboards to introduce music to the children. We sent them to him. Ryan Strand, a family friend and graduate student in music at Northwestern University, is working with the Wisdom School to help develop a music curriculum. Eric would be so proud.

dark place of despair and confusion. When you lose a child, you not only lose the physical presence, you lose the tactile joy of giving them a hug. You lose the spontaneous joy when they give you a unexpected smile. You also lose all of the hopes and dreams you developed for them from the moment they were born. There will be no more holiday celebrations, birthdays, weddings, or grandchildren. You lose part of yourself. The grief that follows is a difficult journey.

Hopefully, at some point and in their own time, the survivors in Connecticut and other survivors of tragedy and trauma will be able to look up and see that they are not alone. There are others who have suffered similarly and who would be honored to help.

Our country has been blessed with relative peace and financial security compared to the rest of the world. Perhaps for this reason we are frequently in denial when it comes to the presence of evil, and our lack of control over it. Rwandans looked evil straight in the face on an unimaginable level 18 years ago. Yet through their faith, as well as their ability to forgive the crimes, reconcile with the perpetrators, and still hold them accountable, they provide us the wonderful gift of their example. No matter what happens to us here on earth, emotional survival is possible, peace is possible, and eventually, even joy is possible. After facing 100 horrific days in a country gone mad, the survivors of the Rwandan Genocide have taught us that. ■