



The face of healing in the Aftermath of the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda:

Personal Reflections by Eliane Ubalijoro

Introduction

The more I learn of positive community actions in times of disaster, the more hope I have that sharing in these results, will help nations heal. But what is healing and how do we know we are engaging in healing? Should we see healing as a destination as in the French translation *guérison* or would translate better in English as cured? Should we see it as a journey of mind, heart and action beyond the elimination of disaster? This paper is a minute view/mirror that represents but one experience of a woman from the Rwandan Diaspora on moving forward after disaster. I will share in this paper community and individual actions that are giving me hope that a way forward is unfolding that is growing the healing paths for Rwanda. The paper will be broken down into three sections:

- I. Individual and collective responses to regain dignity and compassion beyond disaster
- II. Incorporation of new technologies and novel design spaces, community engagement towards the post-genocide rebuilding effort
- III. Community and government dialogue on healing

For each of us participating in the upcoming seminar, whether as an academic, policy maker, practitioner or community leader, we all share the desire for our skills and life experiences to be of service to “Retrieving the Wisdom of Those in Need: Community Engagement and Healing in Times of Disaster.” But how do we engage and act in accordance with the lived experiences and dignity of others? As I look inward to find how best to approach this important space, I ask myself what do I bring to the collective that will meet. I am reminded of a story of a grandmother who was helping her daughter care for infant with a heart condition. After the operation, four doctors made their daily rounds into the room but would never talk or engage in eye contact with the family. They would come in and take note of the charts and electronic monitors. The infant died and now a mother and grandmother grieve the loss of a precious child but also the disconnect that separates their hearts from the minds, eyes, hearts and hands of the doctors that worked very hard to treat a medical condition. Can we open ourselves beyond our intellectual skills to feeling the pain of trauma without being lost? Would opening ourselves wide open to it make us more compassionate or less able to technically support the healing process? Can we engage effectively if we let others trauma become part of the fabric of our lived

experiences? The perspectives I present in this paper are forged from my grappling with disaster and healing, not theory but feeling, despair and hope. My wish is for my words to add to perspectives from academic theory and analysis, policymaking, practitioner and community views, for ~~protective~~ collective experiences to produce a community of healing wisdom.

I. Individual and collective responses to regain dignity and compassion beyond disaster

a. My own journey:

I was born in Rwanda in 1972. At the time, I did not know it but a persecution campaign ~~against~~ against Tutsis and opposition to the Kayibanda regime was going on. The tensions in the country led many Tutsis to

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Remembering April 1994

I watched

My father's books burn

I watched

The light go out of my mother's eyes

I watched

My childhood dreams fly away

Sinking deep into the mud of the banana groves

I watched

The air that used to fill with thperfumes of eucalyptus during the day and of fragrant flowering trees at night, be weighed down with cold, dying and decaying flesh

I watched

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Paul Kagame, I get to reflect within this group on the ways of bringing prosperity and healing to Rwanda. The PAC is a voluntary advisory group chosen by the President as a sounding board but does not represent, act or speak for the government. PAC members are united by the desire to see prosperous and peaceful Rwanda, in a prosperous and peaceful Africa. The opinions and views expressed in this paper are my own and do not necessarily reflect those of the PAC or the government. Being on the PAC has given me a privileged seat to observe how Rwanda's leadership is working on healing and development. As much as PAC has become for me a space for collective reflection on Rwanda, writing poetry opened me to grieving for the trauma of my homeland as my personal way forward very early after 1994. Another way forward has been taking in the lessons I learned from my mother, from youth and other Rwandans especially women who have shared with me their stories of despair and hope.

b. Lessons from my mother:

As a child, I never knew the depth of resilience and strength in my mother, I only knew the depth of her love and her iron discipline. As an adult, I discover

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A few precious photographs
They were left behind
In the banana groves
When everything else was taken
Or purposefully destroyed

You see my mom was scheduled
To be killed then
But fate decided otherwise
We were blessed with eleven more years
Of her presence on this earth
During these eleven years
She created opportunities for hundreds
In the form of a good word
Leading to a job
Employment on our home farm in Rutongo
Favors here and there based on trust
She used her business acumen
Not only to create jobs
But to strengthen a community
That did not dare believe in hope

During those eleven years
She was a witness to two of her sons' weddings
Three baptisms of her grand children
As well as from a distance
Be part of two of her other children's weddings
Including mine
My mother died March 19th of this year
God gave us eleven extra years
Of her earthly presence
When she took in her last breath
My daughter was nine months

I still hear my mother
Whispering to me into the night
Be happy child of mine
Strive for the best
Persevere, and when all hope is gone,
Persevere some more
Because I will always be
A bright light

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had. Examples of courageous people who risked their lives to save others are displayed prominently at Kigali Genocide Memorial but sadly these efforts pale to the realisation that around 90% of the pre-1994 Tutsi population living in Rwanda was disseminated.

At Sonrise boarding school, in the area of ~~the~~ northern Rwanda where Interahamwe raids raged into the late nineties, Bishop John Rucyahana has created a haven for many orphans while giving them access to one of the consistently best performing primary schools in Rwanda on National exams since 2004. This year the first cohort was able to sit for the exams. As one of the 7 best primary schools out of 2000, Sonrise is now offering high school programs that have allowed many orphans (now 50% of the students there) to advance their education. They are being given empowering paths instead of the vulnerability of being sent back to fend for themselves.

d. Lessons from women's groups

While Rwanda was left in 1994 with 400,000 orphans, many women themselves widowed and in 250,000 cases raped and infected with HIV AIDS from the rapes they endured during the 100 days of the genocide. Many had to take on the roles that traditionally were held by men. Rwanda post genocide had a dearth of free men, many had been killed, fled or were now in Prison. The ratio of ~~one~~ women was 2 to 3. In a culture where women did not build roofs, they had to climb up on their houses, to bring back insulation to destroyed homes. At first, they did this at night because it ~~was~~ also, they later learned to wear pants underneath their

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a member of the FemStep research team I have learnt to use participatory visual methodologies to link their voices to forums that engage governing bodies into courageous dialogues about women and girls' roles in rebuilding society after deep collective trauma.

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no one would see us. But then someone found out and gave us pants to wear. Then we decided it did not matter if anyone laughed. We went out during the day. Development and Peace, a Canadian NGO, has funded Duhozanye projects towards rebuilding homes for its members, defending member property rights as well helping the association transform itself into a registered local NGO focused on helping extremely vulnerable women.

One critical element in Rwanda's early recovery I learned from Dr. Vincent Biruta, currently Rwanda's Senate President and former Minister of Health, was the establishment of a central agency that vetted all AID efforts and maintained Rwandan leadership in the establishment of priorities right after the genocide. This mechanism allowed Rwandans to take control very early of the reconstruction process without handing over the vision of the process to funders. This set the tone to build local capacity for decision making related to early humanitarian and later reconstruction efforts. Insisting on local leadership helped bring back dignity and trust in local governing bodies. When Post Genocide Rwanda was flooded by International NGOs wanting to help. This critical agency allowed Rwanda to take charge of reconstruction efforts and to ensure citizens would look to local leaders and not foreign NGOs for local leadership. Sadly, this institution was unable to influence the relocation of millions of Rwandans who were in DRC refugee camps controlled by Interahamwe to locations far from the border to minimize Interahamwe's capacity to infiltrate back into Rwanda. This constant threat from Interahamwe's in Goma, on the border of Rwanda translated into the terror campaigns in the late nineties that affected Western Rwanda. The legacy of having refugee camps so close to Rwanda's border was critical in the mayhem that took over Eastern DRC after 1994 and that still haunts Rwanda. What early participation in visioning a new Rwanda did do is promote the 15 000 associations or cooperatives active in the agricultural sector that employs most Rwandans. Women now constitute 40 to 60% of the membership of these associations or cooperatives. Becoming a member of an association and thereby gaining access to agricultural inputs (e.g. access to communal land or marshland as well as microcredit) and social support has been one of the successful legacies developed or used by many rural women to

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