



Forgive Them, Mother: Witnessing Impossible Forgiveness

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She holds my hand and places it on the scar the Hutu killers left on her right arm. The feeling of her soft skin, the motherly touch that comes out of her traumatized body makes my heart race with pain. She cries and tells me how much she will miss me. I promise her I will come back. Suddenly she takes out an envelope with the word “Why” written on it. I look at the envelope and wonder if I should open it now, in front of her. She demands that I open it later, on my way back to Israel. Right before the *moto*¹ driver takes me back to pack my bags, I ask her what to do with her story, with everything she has shared with me.

She asks me not to just tell her testimony about her past. Her story is not in the past; she is still surviving. She asks me to tell how, even with all her pain every morning, she gets out of bed. She asks me to tell about the risks she takes to tell her story, the future she gives her children, and her strength to move on when the killers of her family, the rapists of her sister, still live in the same city. Later I open the envelope and see her entire family, in coffins. It is a picture of dozens of graves covered with purple, the color of grief in Rwanda. On the back it says, “My family Tutsis (76 persons) 1994 NEVER AGAIN.”

Rwanda in Recovery: The History Before the Healing

The atrocities of the Rwandan genocide I carried home in that envelope have their beginnings before 1994. After years of colonization, the Belgians finally left Rwanda in 1959, leaving racist hierarchies in the low-income African nation. The colonization of Rwanda has contributed enormously to the division between the Hutu ethnic majority and the Tutsi ethnic group. Throughout history, the kings and queens of Rwanda were identified as Tutsis. Belgians favored the Tutsi and gave them better treatment than the Hutus, who were considered lower status farmers. The Belgians left the country divided and full of hate.

When I met with the Minister of Defense in Rwanda, he explained that the damage of division was so bad, the majority Hutu group sought independence from the Tutsi rather than from the actual colonizer. The Hutu majority took over and controlled the country. Since 1959, the Hutu policies

were full of hate and revenge towards the Tutsi minority. The conflict reached its genocidal peak in 1994. In the course of 100 days, April through July, nearly one million Tutsis were brutally slaughtered, tortured, raped and abused by the followers of the “Hutu power ideology.” During the genocide it became government policy for Hutus to kill everyone in the Tutsi minority.

The international community turned a blind eye and woke up too late to help. Too many orphans, raped women and damaged lives had already paid the biggest price, just because they were Tutsi. The primary killing grounds were the churches, where Tutsis thought their faith would rescue them, but faith too turned its back on Rwanda. The walls of the churches are still drenched with blood.

Though the wounds are still healing, the Rwanda of 1994 is not the same Rwanda I visited in 2009. It is a new country full of hope, full of people who have a vision for a new Rwanda that will never experience such disaster again. This country only fifteen years ago was an impossible country. But today it is healing, and I witnessed life moving on. I witnessed killers and survivors walking down the streets together painting and directing a new country.

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**National Narrative from the Personal to the Collective:
Iyo uza Kwimenya Nanjye Ukamenya Ntuba Waranyishe
If You Knew Me, and If You Really Knew Yourself, Then
You Would Not Have Killed Me**

The most amazing thing about the creation of this new Rwanda is that it learned the humanitarian legacy of its pain without placing its struggle as superior to any other nation's. As the granddaughter of a Holocaust survivor, this is not how I was taught to experience pain. In Israel, my grandmother's pain is the national pain; I was never able to experience my family's trauma on a personal level. Education about the Holocaust sends a nationalistic, militaristic message; we forget the humanitarian legacy and use our suffering to justify forced occupation on the Palestinian people.

The national narrative is told differently in Rwanda, and I learned what that meant through my work at the Interdisciplinary Genocide Studies Center (IGSC). IGSC's official goal is "to testify, to study genocide through rigorous cross-disciplinary scholarship, and to understand various mechanisms and structures of violence, with the goal of preventing genocide and mass violence."² We visited memorial sites, read books and witnessed crowded ceremonies. The commemorations of the genocide happen every year during the months of April, May, and June, and until July 4th, the liberation day when genocide officially ended.

In Rwanda, right from the beginning, I understood that the words "Tutsi" and "Hutu" are not always acceptable. It is not forbidden to say the words, but the general feeling is that especially an outsider like me should not say them very much. The country is getting rid of these divisions. Some Tutsi survivors I met really do not want to leave this aspect of their identity. On the other hand, many activists understand that for the future of Rwanda, they have to give up these titles or else they will be caught in them forever. Coming from a conflicted area makes it so clear to me how your national and ethnic identities define you; it was almost unbearable to digest the fact that many people in Rwanda have given up these titles of identity. I was constantly debating the truth of it.

My supervisor told me that it is so hard for the world to understand Rwanda's history because it is hard to understand the origin of Rwanda's division. "The most perplexing question running through Rwandan history," he explained, "concerns the origin of the Hutus and Tutsis and the dynamics of their relationship. There is not even agreement on how to describe them: as races, casts, ethnicities, tribes, or simply groups. What is certain is that for centuries they lived side by side, spoke the same language, obeyed the same laws, learned the same myths, and followed the same religion."³ My supervisor kept repeating that people do not understand

the genocide in Rwanda because the division between the Hutus and Tutsis is not clear; ironically, it is because of this unclear division that people are able to unite again.

In the memorial center in Kigali, two things amazed me. The first was the global section – a whole floor dedicated to atrocities and genocides that happened to other people around the world. Never during my many visits to Holocaust museums have I seen so much attention drawn to other people's disasters. It was inspiring seeing the memorial center connect what happened in Rwanda to a pattern of humanity's evil that needs to come to an end everywhere. The message of the whole memorial site becomes clear: the Rwandan cause is not only to end mass violence on its own land, but to end it *everywhere*.

I remember not noticing this section of the memorial in the beginning, and then somehow coming back to it. Testimonies of killers and survivors are written on life-size images. I stepped closer to a testimony told by a killer. The image portrays an expression of sorrow on his face, his eyes shining with sadness for what he did. He explains that the Hutu government told him and the rest of his Hutu neighbors that Tutsi soldiers were on their way to kill them, so they had to kill all the Tutsis they encountered. I read this, and I stopped. I stopped my observing, I stopped my walking and I stopped my writing. I started my thinking. The rationale of the killer is a public story. He is blaming the genocidal government, and the next generation will grow up believing that the lies of the Hutu government led the people to kill. I was standing inside the most central memorial site in Rwanda. All of the Rwandan children in schools visit here with their teachers at least twice a year. This is what I came to Rwanda for, to see how a nation, its individuals and its institutions, forgives. I imagined the pain of the survivors who worked on the memorial center, telling stories of those who killed their families. I know that this must be done for the next generation.

Forgiveness walks down the streets, on the ground and remembers everything.

"I like the word genocide"

I lived side by side with this next generation, and was surrounded daily by heroes and survivors of the Rwandan genocide. 75,000 children were left orphaned, 50,000 women were left widows – by far a larger number than

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widowers. Between 250,000-500,000 women were raped during the genocide, and up to 20,000 children were born as a result of rape. More than 67 percent of women who were raped during the genocide were infected with HIV.⁴ The feminist Mary Ann Tetreault writes that “the purpose of rape is precisely to shame the victim, her family, and her nation, and to terrorize her entire community.”⁵ Hutu killers who were carriers of AIDS were expected to participate the most in the rapes. Some women survived only because they were used for gang rapes. The rapes were a part of the Hutu power ideology to destroy the Tutsis.

I worked with the heroes and survivors of the Rwandan genocide, mainly women who had been raped and infected with HIV. Some of the women are a part of a sewing co-operative that provides them with medical care. Visitors in Rwanda who arrive at this co-operative expect to see sick and helpless women. But this is not the case at all; it is the happiest place, full of spirit I didn't see anywhere else in Rwanda. The sound of music, laughter and the smell of brewing African tea was always present. Dark, smooth hands of a mother on a sewing machine, one hand holding a piece of colorful African fabric. Their own product, their own handmade work supports the health of their bodies. The control and ownership over their bodies has been taken back after so many years through the products they produce. Forgiveness is beneath the fabrics, sewn with the gentle fingers of a mother who is trying to live with her memories.

And just like these fabrics, forgiveness too has many layers. I heard the word forgiveness at least six times a day, but it was with Tania,⁶ in her kitchen, that I saw forgiveness for the first time in Rwanda, standing and breathing next to me. We'd just come out of a yoga lesson and were preparing for an English lesson for Tania. I came to the kitchen to see if she was ready, and found Tania with tears coming out of her eyes. But she wasn't crying. Her body was still and sad, just as it had been since I first met her three weeks ago. I hesitated; we had never really spoken about her private life, but I asked anyway. She said her kids came back from school today asking if they were Tutsis or Hutus. She made a strong fist with her hand, closed her eyes and said, “Of course we are Tutsis, their mother is a Tutsi, and do you know the history of my family?”⁷

At that moment I became a listener. I listened to her pain and I listened to her survival stories. Being a Tutsi for Tania was why she paid such a big price in her life. It broke her heart when her kids weren't sure of their Tutsi identity. Tania often repeated how much she liked the word “genocide” because she felt her family in the word. She is very connected to her identity as a survivor of the Tutsi genocide, and her daily life

concentrates on that. Every day she wears purple to signify her grief, though it's a risk for a widow to publicly declare her testimony; many Hutu killers see public testimony as a threat, and might try to hurt her.

That day in her kitchen, we sat down and she told me about her sister, who was raped during the genocide when she was only 14. She became pregnant and had a child. They raised this child as part of the family, along with Tania's kids. She believed that God was testing them, to see if they would keep the child or not. Of course they kept it, she said, but then she whispered, “I have a Hutu in my house.” She had another three children of her own, born after the genocide. Her kids show the “Hutu” brother a lot of love. Tania and her sister are the only adults left from their large family. Tania survived by hiding in a mass grave. She told me that she didn't think she was alive at the time. She believes she came back to life after the liberation.

A few months before I arrived in Rwanda, Tania was shopping in the market in downtown Kigali, and saw the man who raped her sister and killed all her siblings. Seeing him brought her back, and she broke down. I felt helpless and useless when I listened to these stories. There was nothing I could give back when she filled me with her sorrow and took me places she didn't really want to go back to. So I just sat there and listened, while she took her heart out until I could almost see it in front of me: so revealed. She was not only sad, but angry. She told me very directly, “I do not forgive, I will never forgive.” If she told me these words, then why, I ask myself, do I claim that Tania showed me forgiveness? After she finished talking we both sat quietly and looked at the wooden table. I finally asked, “Tania, what did you answer your children after they asked if they are Tutsi?” She looked in my eyes and said, “I told them to go ask their teacher in school.”

This mother inspires me. With her strong identity, she can very easily pass hatred on to her children. But despite her pain, she chooses to let her children move on with the new education Rwanda offers. Her children are not learning how to recreate the hatred the generation before them suffered. Tania keeps her passion for maintaining her own family's commemoration without rooting it within the hearts of her children. Her children will not grow up feeling like victims.

As time goes by I continue listening to Tania, but I still feel useless, that I am unable to help after she opens herself up to me. It was only after a few weeks, when I traveled away from Kigali to Uganda, that I was able to physically feel like I was listening to her.

Drowning with Pain

The stream of the Nile River is becoming stronger and stronger; the rafting guide is asking me to get up and wear my helmet. I look at the upcoming strong rapids and I look deep in the water, scared but ready to be carried away. The water shows no mercy; it takes us around different corners of the rapids, not caring if we hit stones and rocks, as long as the water continues to flow. The stream is strong. There is no way to fight it; the water attacks you. When an especially strong rapid hits my raft, I try to hold on but instead I let myself go, lose my control and allow the water to take me. I fall off the raft and the water immediately carries me away. I have no control, I can't breathe, and I don't know if I'll be rescued.

The violent feeling of being thrown from the raft and waiting completely alone in the river allowed me to physically react to what Tania had shared with me. It was the first time since Tania opened up to me that I felt my body reacting. I felt attacked by the water, controlled by the water. Tania will never know that the whole entire day out there on the source of the Nile I was thinking of her, finding a way to cope with what she told me in Kigali. I'm not sure she'd want me to connect to her story through physical pain and the intense sensations of the water. But the source of the Nile River allowed me to grieve with her. Its water took me far and I almost drowned with her sorrow. It was the first time after hearing her testimony that I did not feel useless. Tania stood in the kitchen and told me her horrible memories. I felt helpless, useless. The river didn't help her, but it helped me as her listener.

The Nile brought me back to Kigali relaxed, released and a much better listener for her. The Nile emptied some of my frustrations, washed away my fear.

The Scar in the Eyes of a Mother

Throughout my work with the women I was not always listening to them alone. The story of Mama Elise came to me through a large group testimony. Mama Elise at first did not look at me, when I visited the women. They all looked at me except for her; she always looked away, as if she didn't notice my presence, or glanced at me as if she did not want me there.

I learned that after the genocide, she adopted nine children who survived in her extended family. The oldest one was "Elise," and that is how she became Mama Elise. She'd sit in the corner with the needle and thread, slowly sewing the next doll or bag to be sold. She'd check to see that no one was around before she got up to start walking. She could hardly walk and seemed ashamed to do so in front of

people, receiving their pitying looks. Day after day I became closer to all the women except for her. We all laughed out loud, they all gave me attention except for her; she did not want me there. She would turn away when I arrived so that our eyes could not even briefly meet. Whenever we told a joke, or the women would make fun of me in Kinya-Rwanda, I could see the spark of a smile on her face; I could also see her asking other women to hand her material so that she did not have to walk in front of me. Her eyes were so sad, and the scar on her forehead made it so that there was no doubt about what they did to her. The scars on the foreheads of some of the rape survivors were left by the killers on purpose, to leave the women with the shameful public mark of rape.

During the fifth week of my internship, I brought the American student participants of the IGSC conference and the theater group to meet the women. I didn't really know what to expect or whether the women would even like to share their testimonies with the wider group, but my objective was mainly to make a network and have the Americans buy the crafts made by the women so that they could support themselves. As soon as we got there the fabrics and beautiful crafts the women produce amazed all the American students. It took a while to get everyone to come sit outside.

The amazing thing about this women's co-operative is that some of the women who work there are widows of genocide victims, while some were married to Hutu killers. They have an amazing way of understanding each other because they are all going through the AIDS treatment together, and they do not view themselves as enemies. Only the women who were widows of the genocide stepped outside to meet the group and tell their testimonies. We set up the chairs so that the women were facing the students. The women asked me to sit with them; this request was followed by confused looks from the American participants who didn't realize that I was so close to the women.

At first I regretted even doing this. I suddenly felt as if I'd brought strangers into the women's home. We all waited quietly, not knowing who would share with us and what would be shared. The women thanked us for coming and supporting them. Then they moved to a brief explanation about the center and what they do. I was very nervous and unsure what exactly would happen after the introduction.

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Suddenly, Marie, the director of the women's center, brought over a big chair. I saw Mama Elise struggling, limping, and with the help of two women, sitting on that chair. As she sat down, the first eye contact she made was straight at me. I could not breathe; her look was so warm, motherly and familiar, as though she'd looked at me a thousand times before. But this was the very first time our eyes had met. With this look I felt her telling me that today, she had something to tell me, today she would share not only with me but also with the group that I brought. She trusts me and the people I brought here to listen. I hadn't experienced this demonstration of trust towards me so strongly in all my life. Mama looked down and began her testimony in

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Kinya-Rwanda. The tears came even before the first breath. Twelve men raped her, over and over again. They infected her with HIV. They killed all her children, her husband, and all her siblings, leaving her with nine adopted children who survived from her family. Mama was left with no children of her own, and that is why the women always give her the respect of telling her testimony first.

Before she ran out of words, she slowly rose from the chair, showing us how difficult it was with no help. She took one step, then asked, "They already killed our husbands, kids and parents. Why did they have to rape us and leave us with the infection, and leave me with this scar?"⁸ She stepped down then, crying and leaving us breathless. She sat down, and even though the silence was intimidating and one cannot be sure

what to do after a testimony, I immediately hugged her and cried with her. After weeks of wanting to speak with her, we finally sat together. Mama called one of the group counselors to translate from Kinya-Rwanda:

"She wants you to know that she never looked at you and never spoke to you because every time you would come here it would make her sad, you see, you remind her of her daughter. You look just like her. Now she wants you to come to her house and see the children she adopted."

Her most fragile and intimate story, told in front of a group, brought her closer to me. Only then did I understand the importance of telling and the acknowledgment of pain. I did

not know the women were so eager to tell their stories. The women who do not have a chance to give their testimony are devastated. But the fact that I brought people to listen to them made more of a difference than just listening to them myself.

Mama Elise is the most important and most worthy teacher I will ever have. She is not a victim, not just a survivor, but a hero. "Mama Wawe" – *my mother*.

Never again, never again and never again – she says it three times, once for every month of the genocide

I was meant to be in Rwanda in the summer of 2009, to meet women like Mama Elise and to tell the world stories of forgiveness. For the first time, I left my conflict in Israel, and traveled to Rwanda. I am not proud of how the memory of the Holocaust is used within the national narrative in Israel. The memory of the tragedy in Israel is sometimes manipulated to give more legitimization to Israel's existence. But I grew up on a different narrative than the mainstream Israeli one. My parents raised me in a mixed community where Palestinians and Jewish families live together equally. I grew up seeing the other side as well. I grew up watching the mainstream Israeli narrative ignore the Palestinian suffering, or any suffering other than Jewish. Having these thoughts and feelings within Israeli society is not an easy thing. Even though my family directly suffered from the Holocaust, many Israelis would view me as an outsider just because I am seeking another way of telling and remembering suffering, not just Jewish suffering, but human suffering. Israeli journalist and historian Tom Segev was asked in a BBC interview about Israeli identity and the commemoration of the Holocaust. His words resonate with me:

I feel that Israeli society has not learnt the full humanitarian lesson of the Holocaust as we should and I feel that if we had given more attention to the humanitarian legacy of the Holocaust, we may act differently on the occupied (Palestinian) territories.⁹

With this passion in my heart to change the way my country uses memory, my main attraction to Rwanda was to witness the possibility of forgiveness. I wanted to be among the narrative tellers, to find out what tools they use to keep the national memory of their atrocity as a bridge for a different future. For most of my life I have been living among peacemakers, among Israelis and Palestinians who work constantly to bridge the gap between the people on our land, but it was in Rwanda where I witnessed incredible humanity and compassion I had never seen before.

NOTES

1. Moto: A motorcycle providing taxi service around Rwanda.
2. "IGSC Rwanda." IGSC Rwanda. <http://www.igscrwanda.net/> (accessed November 4, 2009).
3. Kinzer, Stephen. *A Thousand Hills: Rwanda's Rebirth and the Man Who Dreamed It*. New York, NY: Wiley, 2008.
4. "Statistics on Rwanda | Rwandan History | Resources | Survivors Fund." Survivors Fund, supporting survivors of the Rwandan genocide. <http://www.survivors-fund.org.uk/resources/history/statistics.php> (accessed November 4, 2009).
5. Tetreault, Mary Ann. *Feminist Frontiers IV*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1996.
6. Name of survivor changed for privacy reasons.
7. Field Notes: June 24th, 2009
8. Field Notes: July 15th 2009
9. Plett, Barbara. "BBC NEWS | Europe | The Holocaust and Israeli identity." BBC NEWS | News Front Page. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4211761.stm> (accessed September 17, 2009).