

Personal Accounts from the Rwandan Genocide

Left to Tell was not a lighthearted summer read. However, it is a great place to start our discussion of world literature. Over the last three years, you have learned a great deal about the nature of human relationships through literature. You have read many stories about characters who, like you, hurt and are hurt by one another. You have weighed the hard choices faced after acts of violence and evil weakened the ties that once bound people together. Think of Hester's relationship with Dimmesdale after the Puritans scorned her. Think of Macbeth's relationship with his wife after King Duncan's murder. Think of Bertha's relationship with Rochester after she was banished to the attic. Think of Jane's relationship with Mrs. Reed as the title character grew into maturity. These iconic stories prepared you for the memoir you read this summer.

Immaculee Ilibagiza's story is incredible, but she is not the only person to choose forgiveness as the path to liberation in Rwanda. Together with your small group, read and discuss the personal account you are assigned. Consider the character traits present in the people involved, and discuss whether you would be able to respond in a similar way. Ask yourselves, "What will we do now that we know this story?" Be prepared to summarize the story you are assigned for the class.

Story One: This account was told in Remera Central Prison in November 1999.

Genevieve boarded the van and headed with us for the prison where we go with a group of Good Samaritans each Thursday and Sunday. Shortly after our ride began, Genevieve shared that she was feeling particularly sad that day. She hoped that she would not be needed to give any testimony. She simply wanted to be there quietly today.

Genevieve was on the Ivory Coast when the genocide broke out which violently took the lives of her parents and siblings. She never learned who her family killers were. Alone and distraught after returning to Rwanda, Genevieve joined the Good Samaritans to seek a way with others to forgive and reconcile.

As the visit with the prisoners began, the service proceeded with songs, dance and biblical readings. Then, it was time for personal witnessing, where both visitors and prisoners share their experiences of pain and violence during the genocide. At that point, a prisoner stood and walked over to Genevieve, knelt down before her and said: "Genevieve, I have asked God's forgiveness and I am ready to accept the consequences of the law, but now I must ask your forgiveness. I killed your mother and your father."

Stunned beyond belief, Genevieve shouted out, "Charles, how could you have done such a thing? You ate at our family table. You played with my brothers and sister. How could you have done this terrible act?"

While Genevieve was crying out her pain, she looked up into the tear-stained eyes of Charles, who was looking down into the agonizing face of Genevieve. At once, the two of them fell into each other's embrace in an act of incomprehensible forgiveness and wholehearted repentance.

The entire prison and the heart of every onlooker were flooded with light and grace that afternoon, an incredible gift which no one will ever forget.

Story Two: This is told from the point of view of a guard who worked at Remera Central Prison in November 1999.

For several years after the genocide I had been working as a guard at the Remera Prison. I was hard-hearted and arrogant, looking with scorn on the Hutu prisoners, whom I treated with a disdain I felt they rightly deserved. Filled with pride and self-righteousness, I kept myself at a safe distance, regarding these imprisoned Hutus as the vicious killers they were.

Then, one Thursday afternoon in late 1999, with little else to do, I listened in on a prayer service the Good Samaritans were leading. These crazies, as I called them, came every Thursday and Sunday to meet with the prisoners. In my own way, I mocked them too, but let them do their thing, thinking they were causing no harm.

That day, I witnessed an incredible event. A prisoner confessed to one of the visitors that he had killed her mother and father. Within a few minutes they were holding each other and crying together, as they seemed to share a similar pain and a similar care. It was all hard to comprehend and yet harder to deny.

At that moment, something broke open inside of me. I was overwhelmed with a sense of my own hardness of heart and actually felt my heart soften. I learned that day my own need of repentance. Over the next months, I asked forgiveness of many of the prisoners I had mistreated. Now, I look ahead—down the road that we must walk together to a new, kinder humanity and a new, reconciled Rwanda. So, here I am today, a member of the Good Samaritans, trying to pass on the mercy and forgiveness that were shown to me.

Story Three: A Tutsi woman named Speciosa shared this story with a traveling teacher.

I lost thirty-two members of my family, including my husband, four children, my mother, father and several siblings in early weeks of the genocide. I was so weighed down by inner turmoil following their brutal deaths that I was found myself unable to raise my head.

Much of it came from the fear and disgust I felt in looking into the face of a Hutu. I could not do that because in every one of them I saw a terrifying monster—one whom I both feared and despised. As I was being eaten up by rage and a desire for

revenge, I struggled to find some inner calm by looking for places of quiet and prayer.

Little by little, I began to feel deep within me that God still loved me, despite my intense feelings of hatred. Could it be possible, I wondered, that if God still loves me despite my hatred, that God loves the Hutus as well? The question itself began to change me. Over time, I noticed that something began to shift inside me. I began to see the Hutus differently. Rather than inhuman monsters, I began to recognize in each face another grieving, shame-filled human being, like myself. I saw myself in them and a Great Love who held us all with tender mercy.

What lessons can we learn from these stories?

- Love has no borders.
- We are called to cross over those places of division in our own hearts and lives where we shut others out.
- We are to meet others there in justice, truth, mercy, and peace.
- Other lessons?

How do the lessons present in these personal accounts relate to the Cherokee story of the two wolves within every human heart?

The Cherokee say that two wolves live within every human heart. The one is violent and aggressive, ready to strike and devour at any moment; the other is gentle and humble, full of love and care. The wolf who wins is the one we feed.

Resource:

Catherine T. Nerney – From Thinking to Practicing Reconciliation: Telling the Stories of Rwanda