

Rwanda - Gods and Ghosts

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by

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‘The heartbreak in the heart of things’.

William Gibsen 1878-1962

What follows are my own observations and emotions. They may or may not conform to the views of the ADF. Without the teamwork of my ‘lost boys’ who were constantly with me ‘over the wire’ and in the Displaced Persons camps many things would not have been possible. I salute them.

I was born in Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa and as a child travelled extensively with my parents in Sub-Saharan Africa, so when the opportunity presented itself to go to Rwanda it was a dream come true. I speak fluent Zulu and Kiswahili (Swahili) the trading language of Central Africa, so it was not a great step to being cognisant of most words in Kinyarwanda. Alas this dream was not all that pleasant, but as time heals old wounds, I now recall with humility the lessons learned from a disparate people and their suffering. When we first arrived in Kigali there were no birds, nor did the people sing in the time honoured charming tradition of Africa. It was much later that they would sing, first in payment for treatment then when we all joined in for the sheer joy of shared music.

Set virtually in Africa’s centre of gravity, Rwanda is also known as the ‘Land of a Thousand Hills.’ For centuries the Rwandans have patiently cleared the land for livestock and cultivation. It was almost impossible for them to continue in their traditional ways due to the menace of constant civil war between the Hutu and Tutsi nations and the ever-present threat of land mines. Yet as we drove into the countryside, Shambas (plots of tilled land) would appear with bananas and a few heads of corn. The will to live is fundamental in us all.

The primary task of my team was to render humanitarian aid in the Kigali Central Hospital, an area separated from the UN Hospital and also in the Displaced Persons camp at Kibeu. I was scared, dirty, dusty or wet depending on the season constantly tired and often had head lice from crawling into humpies to check on mothers and babies.

The hospital ‘over the wire’ as the non-UN Hospital became known was a challenge to say the least. It became clear early on that we could only render ‘Band Aid’ medicine, which is very difficult, when all your senses scream to ‘do something worthwhile.’ What is worthwhile? Many years ago a prophet said that ‘a cup of cold water given with love was sufficient unto the day.’ We went to the hospital to teach the nurses a semblance of sterile techniques, and succeeded in them having at least use two forceps when they did dressings. One clean one to remove all the dressings the other clean one to reapply the clean dressings. Remarkably the rate of sepsis dropped. Why, I don’t know? Imana the local god also works in strange ways. Perhaps like so many gods he pities nurses and those who strive albeit in ignorance, but with good intent. The Rwandan nurses taught me patience and an acceptance of ‘interference’ in their hospital and wards that I am sure I would not have welcomed with such humour and equanimity had our positions been reversed. Nurse Ancilla was the first to trust me and we learnt together. I found

an old 'MIMS' and she looked up the action of KCl. This empowered her and we became equals in our battle against pus, and disease, 'over the wire'.

At times it was difficult to maintain a logical perspective especially in the Displaced Persons' Camps. We were in a land ravaged by war, yet were isolated within the UN compound when not at work. Most often it was the children with their large soft brown eyes that made contact with the people possible. Like children everywhere they responded to kindness and lollies (candy).

Nothing in my own African heritage had prepared me for the Displaced Persons (DP) camps. Here I found a spectrum of human emotions that will live with me forever. The Rwandans in the DP camps were people in a vacuum. Their only chance at survival was to take everything available. There were the pathetically grateful ones who would beg me on their knee to use my 'powers' to heal them or their loved ones. Mostly they were moribund by the time they reached us. All that I could do was touch a withered hand or feel for a feeble pulse before passing on to another that had a better chance of survival. Conversely there were the 'difficult' one who demanded all we had to give and then more. I pondered on these people to whom, with our wealth and medicines, however limited we seemed inordinately rich and I could not help a rueful smile. On many occasions I wonder how I would react in their circumstances?

There were many delightful characters, but my particular favourite was an old lady who was inordinately fond of banana beer. She arrived at the DP clinic claiming to have five ears, which had become her primary organs of respiration. As she talked I felt myself drifting like a lotus-eater on the fumes. I set about her very gingerly with a stethoscope in order to gain time and breathed through my own ears so as not to inhale too many of her beer fumes. Being a mere muzungu (white person), and a fairly woozy one at that, I could only see two ears on her head, but by then I was breathing through my own ears so could not judge too sensibly. I then told her I could cure her but only with her co-operation and my magic pink pills. I proceeded to give her two pink coloured Vitamin B tablets, and a cake of soap which, as I watched with some irritation, she immediately flogged for more beer. She was to return daily for the vitamin pills, and that she did so still remains a mystery to me. On day three she ceased to breathe from her ears and was quite rational. Alas! I am not a sangoma (witch doctor), the banana beer ran out until the next time, but for a while we were both cured.

Monotheistic religions have a God who is a supreme being; the creator of heaven and earth. The gods of Africa are many. They are wild, untameable and unknowable. They don't reside in man's reason but move perpetually in passion. The people are a breath in the sphere of the gods. They are the leaves in the gods' forest to rest or be blown at will. Ancestors of the living are revered and called upon in times of sadness and joy that they may join with the living in sharing these emotions and offer their wisdom. The joys and sorrows of the living are the work of these restless gods. The winds that blow represent the moods of the gods. In this belief lies the very essence of Africa in all her savagery and beauty. I wish I could comprehend it. Like the Rwandan people, we in the United Nations Missions Assistance In Rwanda (UNIMIR II) also felt tossed upon the gods' winds of fear and change.

Images of people dying in the filth of a war-polluted earth, covered in their own excrement is difficult to forget. The squalor and stench of the DP camp was dreadful, but somehow the fear, avarice and hatred of these unfortunate

people was more difficult to bear. It is only now that I vaguely comprehend just how greatly their souls hurt. I suffered with those I saw suffer, but I can't grasp the dread reality of being forcibly removed from my home and watching my loved ones murdered and having to scavenge for my very existence.

There was a nameless woman who will remain a part of me forever, who but for a quirk of birth could have been me. She had AIDS and had been given a blanket by the British Hospital but, as she was incurable, there was no bed for her. Her condition was further exacerbated by dysentery. Her family were all dead so there was no one to care for her or bury her when the time came. The people in the DP camp were so traumatised that I could not shame or cajole them into giving her shelter, not even the treasure of a blanket. We couldn't bury her as we did not know where the land mines were, and if we had, there were so many others we would have become a permanent burial party instead of doctors, nurses and medical assistants. Although this poor woman looked eighty she was closer to my age. All I had to give her was my water bottle and hope that the next day she would be dead. The gods were cruel until the last. She did not die for three days. It was another two days before someone buried her. All the while she lay beside the dirt road near our clinic and for three days I gave her water. That was all she asked. I railed against heaven and our inadequate facilities. We could only stay in the DP camp during the day. My friend smiled and said 'thank you my sister' and wiped the tears from my eyes with her dusty trembling hand. When I touched her she was cold and dry as parchment. This dying woman comforted me as I lived. I never knew her name, she could not speak much to anyone, but I will always remember the 'woman with the blanket' who had a dignity greater than I will ever have. She will live in my memory as one of the most remarkable people I have ever met. We are forever linked in the common bond of humanity. She need have no fear of being forgotten as an ancestor, she is my sister as surely as if we were born of the same woman.

I went to Rwanda keen to share my practical nursing knowledge. Local people filled the hands I held out-stretched with love, humour and the sadness that only the people of Africa know, accept, and so generously share with all who are willing to feel. The lure of Africa is her, eternal beauty and challenge.

The Rwanda experience was perhaps more stressful for me than for the other members of UNAMIR II. I could communicate with the people in a common language and was aware of their fears, suspicions and taboos. I was once more the Child of Africa listening to Mama Tomloh (my nanny) exploring the wonders of this our great but sorry land.

Was Australia's time and effort in Rwanda dispensing 'Band Aid' medicine a waste of time? Let history be the judge. For me the answer will always be a resounding NO. You can't look into the face of human suffering and not see its alter ego - pity. For a very short time we were able to try to make a difference to the lives and deaths of the people entrusted to our care. At the end of the day we can only say we each did what we could in the best way each knew how.

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