

Do Not Forget Us

"If I can't yet mourn a million people who left this world in a single day, I'll start with one, and move from there."

These are the words of Barbara Kingsolver's character "Leah" from her ***Poisonwood Bible***—a novel set in Congo in the 1960s. And this is why I went to the Democratic Republic of Congo. A few years ago I heard about the horrific war that had been occurring there for the past decade with over 9 countries involved and a shocking death toll of over 4 million, more than all wars added together since WWII. Half of these deaths are children, hundreds of thousands of women and girls have been brutally raped and mutilated, and countless young boys forced to become child soldiers. I couldn't wrap my mind around it. I couldn't bear to think I had lived my life in oblivion to this atrocity and I felt I needed to go to see these faces and hear these stories first hand, to be a witness to their suffering. The statistics are mind numbing, but the faces are real. And if you can't yet mourn for four million people, maybe today you can just start with one and move from there.



About a year ago I met a wonderful Congolese man named Pakisa Tshimika who lives in California and runs a non-profit organization called Mama Makeka House of Hope, named after his mother, that focuses on peace building and trauma healing projects in the Democratic Republic of Congo. When I expressed my interest in joining him for his next trip to Congo he

explained to me that Americans always want to "help" by either sending money, or going to "do a project". But if you had a friend who had lost a loved one, you wouldn't necessarily send them money or "do" something for them...you would just go and be with them, grieve with them. He said the Congolese need people who are willing to come without an agenda and just be with them. They are in mourning. It has not been lost on them that most of the planet knows nothing about their crisis. They need their stories to be heard.

Listen to the haunting words of Salvatore Bulamuzi, whose entire family was killed in attacks on the town of Bunia, north-eastern DRC (As reported by Amnesty International):

"I am convinced now...that the lives of Congolese people no longer mean anything to anybody. Not to those who kill us like flies, our brothers who help kill us or those you call the international community...Even God does not listen to our prayers any more and abandons us."



So I went in January of this year and spent a month traveling in Congo, listening and learning and just being with the people I met. While there I became very aware of the problems of traditional humanitarian aid, often sustaining and sometimes even generating conflict. It also represents a certain white, western superiority that creates a hierarchy with the end receiver on the bottom, and I could sense the Congolese resentment about that. I saw very centralized aid, never making it to the poorest of the poor who really need it in isolated rural places. Many aid organizations are big, beaurocratic businesses in which money is passed through so many hands very little of it ever actually makes it to it's intended receiver. All in all I was confronted with the fact that most aid as we know it is at best ineffective and at worst harmful to the soul of a people. This was disheartening as I sought a way to be involved that was based on relationship and sharing.

Then I began to meet some amazing people who recognized the needs in their communities and were responding on their own in powerful and creative ways...



I stayed with a Congolese woman named Yvette Kalumuna and her family in Bukavu. She directs an organization called PAREC (for peace and reconciliation) that recognized one of the first obstacles towards peace and security in Congo is the fact that there are still so many weapons floating around in the civilian population. She helped develop a plan to offer highly prized bicycles or tin roofing in exchange for weapons. Once the weapons are turned over PAREC organizes a community gathering at which the weapons are ceremoniously destroyed as a real and symbolic act of peace. The destroyed weapons are then sent to a foundry where they are melted down, transformed into agricultural tools, and then reinvested in the communities they originally came from.

Yvette now has militia members and civilians lined up at the door ready to hand over their weapons, the only problem is that she doesn't have the funding to purchase enough bicycles or tin roofing to make the exchanges.

One of the places this program is sorely needed is in the Walungu district outside of Bukavu on the eastern border of Congo where the brunt of the violence has occurred. This area is still considered a "red zone" by UN Peacekeepers operating there and to this day the region continues to experience attacks from renegade militias including the Interahamwe responsible for the Rwanda massacre. In some areas I was told that up to 90% of the women have been raped. Many more than once. The attack on the women of Congo has been a pre-meditated weapon of war. In my eyes what has been done is a form of deferred genocide.





Women and even young girls have been gang raped and then mutilated to the point that if they don't die from their wounds they are left with a condition called *fistula* in which they constantly leak urine and feces and will never be able to bear children again. Due to the shame of rape and the unpleasantness of their condition most women are abandoned by their husbands and rejected by their communities. In this way begins the breakdown and eventual destruction of

families, communities, and ultimately a nation.



Everywhere I traveled in Congo I saw that it was women, or the “mamas” as the Congolese call them, who were holding their families and communities together. It is the



women who work the land and cook the food, they collect the firewood and sew the clothes. They are the primary caregivers for their children and across the board are doing everything they can to secure their children's health and education, and therefore the future of this nation. Due to the rapes women now live in fear of going to work their fields which is resulting in food shortages and starvation.

Congo is being held up on the backs of women and for them to be affronted in this way is to pull the rug out on the whole society. Whatever politicians may refer to this as, I call it genocide.

Recognizing this great need in their community the Walungu hospital staff sat down with Pakisa and I to talk about how they would like to be able to care for their community, particularly the women in their community. Congo is separated into health zones, which is one of the only remaining infrastructures still in place. So there is a centrally located hospital which acts as both a health care and community center of sorts for each region. Women in the Walungu area have been among the hardest hit by the sexual violence, yet there are no doctors at the Walungu hospital that know how to perform fistula surgery.



Women are left with no option other than to travel long distances over dangerous territory to get to one of two hospitals in Eastern Congo that provide this surgery. They must be physically able to travel and have the financial means which excludes many. But even if they meet these criteria most choose not to go because they have children they need to care for at home.

In meeting with the Walungu community we came up with a plan to raise funds to be able to send a volunteer doctor to teach the doctors in Walungu how to perform this important surgery.



But physical healing is only the beginning for these women. The emotional and psychological trauma they have experienced is equally if not more wounding. There are simply not enough counselors in Congo to address the needs of these countless victims. So we have begun developing a plan to offer a peer counseling program. Women who come through the hospital for the surgery will receive some trauma counseling and then may volunteer to learn some basic counseling skills in order to reach out to the next women that come there for assistance.

Finally, it became clear that these women then need a way of supporting themselves and their children since many of them have been abandoned by their husbands. The nurses at Walungu hospital have already begun to develop a micro-credit plan in which small sums of money could be borrowed to help women build their already existing small businesses. And for those without an income generating skill, the hospital has a workshop with one sewing machine to help women learn how to sew. These nurses just need the seed money to get the microcredit lending program going and a few more sewing machines and supplies for the workshop.



From healing towards empowerment, we are calling this project “Beauty From Ashes” based on the biblical themes from the book of Isaiah chapter 61 that talks about binding up the broken hearted, providing for those who grieve, and bestowing on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes.

What I love about this Walungu project is that it is initiated by Congolese people responding to their own community needs. It is not a big, fancy program dictated by white westerners from afar.

This is a cross-cultural collaboration of small peace and justice organizations, churches, and individuals in DRC and around the globe.

These are people that I’ve gotten to know and trust, and funding that is sent will truly go directly to the work, instead of through the endless chain in big aid operations. It is a project based on relationship and working together, not condescending charity.



But I am also reminded by Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous words that being a "good samaritan" is not enough:

"A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand, we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth."

Indeed these acts of mercy must be fortified with voices crying out for justice in Congo. Congo has a long history of political and economic exploitation by most of the rest of the planet due to its rich natural resources. (In fact you most likely own a small piece of Congo in the form of a mineral called Coltan used to make semiconductors in cell phones.) I believe Congo is a key to the empowerment of the entire continent of Africa. As Human Rights Watch put it, ***"If you want peace in Africa, then you have to deal with the biggest country right at its heart."***

Congo must no longer be viewed as the 'heart of darkness' as some have referred to it, but instead as the **hope** of Africa. Along with our giving must be the important work of advocacy demanding economic justice for Congo. War is just the end result of many injustices, so while we work together to provide healing to this torn land we must also seek to end the reasons why this war happened at all. And to remember that indeed our own liberation is tied up with Congo's. As Aboriginal activist Lilla Watson warns, ***"If you have come to help me you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is tied up with mine, then let us work together."***



As I reflect on my journey to Congo I am constantly reminded of the beautiful people I met who shared their stories of loss and devastation with me, but then danced and sang with so much passion and hope. They taught me so much about life and love and true hospitality. And always, always as I said goodbye I heard the same refrain...

Do not forget us.



Do not forget us.

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I know I never will and I hope you won't either.
So let's start with one and move from there...

