

Reflections on Worship: An American Quaker Visits Rwanda



Rwanda

Envision yourself in Rwanda, a very small republic in the Great Lakes region of east-central Africa. It is the continent's most densely-populated country, with 11.5 million people living in a land area the size of Maryland. The population is growing steadily, up from a sharp drop in 1994, when 850,000 Rwandans were slaughtered by genocide over the course of only 100 days.

Much is made of Rwanda's remarkable comeback since that terrible time nearly 20 years ago. In actuality, its story is composed of many contradictions that defy simple headlines. GDP grew by 8 percent every year between 2001 and 2012, for example, but annual per capita income is only 560 US dollars. Rwanda excels in meeting its health-related Millennium Development Goals, but life expectancy at birth is still only 63 years. A full 99 percent of primary school-aged children are enrolled in school, but UNESCO reports that the pupil / teacher ratio is 71 to 1. And despite strong denials by Rwanda's elected leadership, the United Nations recently added it to a list of five countries that are believed to recruit children as soldiers.



A Challenge

If you ever travel to Rwanda, here is my advice. Do not try to describe it in a tweet or put it in a nutshell or reduce it to a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down. You will miss its deep complexity.

And if you travel to Rwanda, do not expect to reconstruct the weekly patterns of your life as an American Quaker. Go prepared to create new patterns. Otherwise, you will miss an irreplaceable opportunity to get to know yourself better – your true self that exists independent of your customary routine. Worse yet, you will not be free to appreciate the wonder around and within you.

I thought I knew this on August 1 when I set out on my journey to Rwanda. But it wasn't until after I returned to the US five weeks later that I came to know what I was talking about.

I will share my learnings with you in three reflections: Worship, the Light, and Reconciliation.



Worship

I attended an Evangelical Friends Church in the Kicukiro area of the capital city of Kigali while I was in Rwanda. It occupies a one-story brick and concrete building at the end of a dirt road, with rocky grounds, and a separate building with rooms where visitors can stay a few nights. The meeting room is decorated with long banners of cloth – white and blue and orange – that cover the ceiling and some of the walls. Friends sit in rows of white plastic stackable chairs (a staple in Rwanda) facing the front, where choirs sing behind a mantle-like altar.

There are two worship services each First Day. The earlier one, at 8 am, is conducted in English, and is attended by visitors and members of the Meeting who are comfortable with the language. The 10 am worship, in Kinyarwanda, is livelier and louder than the first, with several choirs accompanied by music from an electric keyboard, a guitar, and drums. The lyrics are projected on a screen to one side.

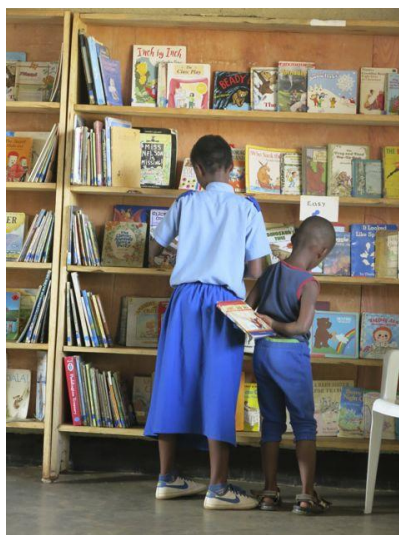
The program is very different from what we unprogrammed Friends are accustomed to. While short periods of silence are included, most of the service is conducted by members of the Meeting with prepared remarks. One person welcomes everyone. Another reads scripture. Yet another delivers the 15-20 minute message. Each time that I attended Meeting, these roles were filled by different people, all volunteers. The pastor delivered the message on one occasion, but, even then, his was only one part of a broadly participatory experience.

At the first service I attended, the Friend who delivered the message began by saying, “This morning, I would like for us to talk about two words: ‘worship’ and ‘praise.’ What do these mean and how do we know the difference?” And then he proceeded to draw many other Friends into the conversation with questions and reflections and probing. In the end, I believe many, like me, felt we had a better understanding of how we as Quakers open ourselves to God in a spirit of worship and how we act on the leadings that result.

The following First Day, a different speaker rose and began by saying “This morning, I would like for us to talk about two words: ‘worship’ and ‘praise.’” My initial reaction was to think: “Oh no, we already did that!” But then the Friend continued with his own unique approach to the question we had addressed the week before, again actively engaging those in attendance, and leaving us with new-found understanding.

Weeks later, I found my mind gravitating back to those discussions and how much I had gained from the opportunity to turn two concepts over and over again as part of a community exploration. On reflection, I realized that underneath the unfamiliar trappings of the service lay a wonderfully-gathered worship-sharing in which all were, as George Fox called us to be, priests.

Query to myself: Will I consistently go beyond the superficial distractions of form and style to that open space within, where I can truly see God moving among all who gather in worship?



In the Light

Near the rise of each meeting for worship, in a custom very familiar to us Americans, Friends were asked if there was anyone they would like the Meeting to pray for. I was humbled by stories like the one of a woman who didn't have enough food to make it through the next week, and an elderly couple whose caregivers had abandoned them.

But, interestingly, most of the prayer requests had to do with safe travel. Three factors seem to account for this. First, some people stay in the big city of Kigali because work opportunities are better, and they travel every few weeks back to the countryside to reunite with spouses, children, parents or other family members. Secondly, many extended Rwandan families are spread across multiple countries in east Africa – including especially Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi – because they were refugees in these countries before, during, or after the genocide. They must travel quite a distance to reconnect with those they left behind. Thirdly, many Rwandans have no personal automobile or they have a car (or share a car) that is not reliable on long journeys. And so they must take taxis or buses or “motos” (motorcycle taxis) that are notoriously risky.

At the Friends Church, I joined in praying for many safe journeys. But when it happened to me, I hardly knew how to handle it.

One day during the last week I was in Kigali, I visited a sixth grade classroom at Kagarama Primary School, where I read a book aloud in English to the children, who are learning the language. After the reading, the librarian asked the children some questions about the story in their native Kinyarwanda. It seemed that they had been able to keep up fairly well with the story told by a strange speaker like me, although it clearly had required much effort and concentration for them to do so. When the discussion was over, the librarian told the students that I was going to be traveling back to the United States soon and he asked them to pray for my safe journey. He called on one little girl, who rose from her seat to compose and say the prayer.

At first, I was embarrassed because I felt that I was not there to have attention focused on me in this way. I had come there to *give* something, not to *receive*. Then I actually experienced pain as I heard this soft-spoken 11-year old struggle to articulate a message in a new language on behalf of the whole class.

Only after I left the classroom did I understand, with great humility and gratitude, how earnestly and unconditionally I had just been held in the Light.

Query to myself: Can I move my ego's needs out of the way so that when someone offers me the gift of Light, I can fully receive it?



Reconciliation

Just before I left Washington for Rwanda, I filled the last few inches in my suitcase with the good books stacked on my bedside table -- the ones I had been intending to read for some time, but had never gotten around to.

It turned out that, in the end, I only read one of them – the shortest one.

That is because while in Rwanda I was completely drawn in a different direction, to a fascination that so defied my experience and understanding that I pursued every book, every article, every opportunity I could to learn more about it. I was awe-struck by the reality of reconciliation.

The Rwandan genocide is remarkable among the awful evil acts of history in that the perpetrators of the violence were almost as numerous as the victims. The slaughter was carried out by friends who turned against friends, neighbors against neighbors, trusted community leaders against those they were supposed to serve -- all caught up in a frenzy of hate-fueled propaganda that was broadcast on the streets, over the airwaves, in the newspapers of Rwanda. When the most concentrated period of killing was over, more than 850,000 Rwandans were dead, hundreds of thousands more had fled, families were destroyed, and the people who survived were wrecked by fear, anger, hurt, and shame.

How is it possible to repair the human heart and rebuild communities after this? I, with my own petty grievances and grudges, considered it impossible. But it is happening. Slowly but truly, it is happening. These are the stories that I could not stop reading, because I could not – and still cannot – comprehend.

Here are the words of a woman who witnessed a man kill her two brothers with a machete and her younger sister with a spear during the genocide.* She spoke these words 12 difficult years later, when she attended a workshop called “Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities,” which was organized by the

African Great Lakes Initiative of the Friends Peace Teams. These workshops bring equal numbers of survivors and perpetrators together for three days. The man who killed her siblings was in the workshop with her. Listen:

“Before the workshop, I didn’t think I could ever forgive the killers, but when one of the released prisoners told the whole truth in the workshop I was able to forgive and gained many things. The killers asked for forgiveness. They got down on their knees and asked God, the government, and the survivors for forgiveness. Many of my friends in the workshop forgave the killers. ... My anger has diminished. ... I remember the ‘trust walk’ [group exercise] when the person who killed my family was my partner. I was shaking before because my partner was a known killer and very strong. I thought he might throw me down, but he also had fear and he took me gently, kindly. I asked him ‘will you lead me in peace?’ After the trust walk with him, I felt it was not good to stay in my grief and had no fear against him.”

Here is another story, this one about a man who was a convicted killer and who also attended a workshop. It was recounted by one of the AGLI facilitators.

“It was the second morning of a Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities Workshop, and the tension between the genocide survivors and the released prisoners was slowly beginning to melt.... A few minutes earlier, the facilitators had instructed everyone to think about a person they loved, and one by one the participants were standing up to tell the others about their older sister who had been killed or a neighbor who had kept them safely hidden during the genocide. When it was his turn, Francois ... rose to face the rest of the workshop participants. ‘The person I love is in this room,’ he said with both profound sorrow and a small glimmer of pride. A known killer who had spent seven years in prison for murdering two people and leading another five to their deaths, Francois now looked toward a woman on his right and quietly told her that she was the one he loved, because she had forgiven him for doing the unforgivable and taking away the family she once had. It was her mercy and benevolence that had transformed Francois, which gave him the power to love.”

Is it any wonder that every meeting for worship I attended while in Rwanda included a reading from Acts 16: 16-40, the story of Paul and Silas in prison – a tale of betrayal, bondage, chains, swords, fear, earthquakes, prayer, Almighty intervention, human change of heart? Rwandans live in a place where these themes are larger than life (they *are* life), where love and peace are not niceties, but states of being that are hard-earned, difficult, and inter-reliant.

Query to myself: Am I willing to surrender to the reality of others so completely that my heart breaks open, and a fuller, deeper understanding of peace can grow in the place of what was there before?



A Challenge

If you have ever been to Rwanda, perhaps you can relate to these reflections in some way. If you have not been there, I invite you to join me on the journey that I began once I returned home.

We can travel by means of queries such as the few I have suggested here. Queries are one practice that brings Quakers everywhere together on a shared path – whether we worship as evangelical, programmed, or unprogrammed Friends.

Blair Forlaw

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* The stories on page 6 were taken from *PeaceWays*, the newsletter of the African Great Lakes Initiative of Friends Peace Teams. Fall 2007. Volume II. Issue II. *Now I Am Human: Testimonies from the Healing Companions Program in Rwanda and Burundi.*