

Afterword:

MOVING TOWARDS FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION¹

Few will have the greatness to bend history, but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of a generation. It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped.—Robert F. Kennedy

When I look back on my story, I think of all that I have been through, and, despite everything, how fortunate I am. I survived. Time and again, I lived when others were killed: as a baby when my mother hid with me in the bush; as a child when I was saved by the drum in 1973; when I was imprisoned in 1990; when I escaped Rwanda in 1991 and was lucky enough to be outside the country when the genocide erupted, and again in 2000. Each time, death licked at my heels and, by the grace of God, I survived. But so many people—Tutsi and Hutu alike—did not. Rwanda is a nation of wounded souls. The last fifty years of cyclical violence have taken at least one million lives. And those who weren't killed carry the scars: murdered family members; lives in exile; physical and emotional wounds.

Ever since the genocide, I have asked myself how the nation could heal. How could we live together again in peace? I know this question applies not only to Rwanda, but to the many societies around the world where individuals have victimized others because of ethnicity, race, religion, or other identities. I have met people from Sudan, Israel and Palestine, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Burundi, the former Yugoslavia, and other conflict-torn societies— and they all wonder how former enemies can come together again and live in brotherhood and sisterhood. The answer is reconciliation.

Reconciliation brings enemies together to confront the painful and ugly past, and to collectively devise a bright future. It brings together communities in conflict to tell the truth about *all* past human rights violations and to create a society where they can live in peace with one another. It requires coming together and listening with compassion to one another's stories—something that is desperately needed in Rwanda, where the lives of Hutu and Tutsi are so intimately bound together.

Reconciliation is in many ways the hardest option, because it requires effort, humility, and patience—whereas revenge is quick and easy. Reconciliation is complicated. It cannot be reduced to retributive justice (“perpetrators must be punished”), as victims generally assert; nor to forgiveness (“the perpetrators must be forgiven”), as offenders and their families tend to assert. And reconciliation is far from being achieved simply through power-sharing between political parties, as politicians tend to believe. In Rwanda these perspectives have echoed

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loudly across the countryside: victims insisting that perpetrators be punished with the full force of the law; perpetrators insisting that their acts be forgiven and forgotten; leaders putting in place a power-sharing system (which unfortunately has been only cosmetic) and thinking that alone will take care of the problem. Reconciliation is a much more complex, delicate, and long process that includes several components: *acknowledgment, apology, restorative justice, empathy, reparation, and forgiveness*—and several accompanying measures, namely *democracy* coupled with *consensus, peace education, and international assistance*.

Acknowledgment of the wrongs committed by the perpetrator and the offering of a genuine *apology* are absolutely required. This applies to all offenses—from the most heinous to the least. No matter the gravity of the harm done, victims need their suffering to be recognized and for an apology to be offered, whether that suffering occurred at the hands of an individual or the state. In the context of Rwanda, the process of reconciliation would encompass both the genocide and other human rights violations. All offenses must be acknowledged and apologized for.

Fortunately, recent history has given us many examples of acknowledgment and genuine apology: The United States apologized to Japanese Americans for sending them to internment camps during World War II. The government of Australia early in 2007 issued a formal apology to the Aboriginal people for the decades of suffering they had endured, including the government program that took children away from their parents to be “educated” so they could better assimilate into Australian society. These apologies are acts of courage, humility, and goodness. They are reminders that we all make mistakes and are capable of horrible evils, yet as human beings we are also capable of tremendous goodness.

Sadly, very little acknowledgment or apology is taking place in Rwanda. Denial persists, which amounts to yet another victimization. Surely you’ve experienced a time in your life when you’ve confronted someone who has offended you, only to have your concerns dismissed. Maybe you were told that you’re imagining things or overreacting. You know the sting of such a denial. When this happens, reconciliation is impossible. At the U.N. International Criminal Court for Rwanda in Tanzania, almost every genocide suspect has denied his horrible deeds. And the acknowledgment and apologies that *have* occurred in Rwanda have unfortunately been more expedient than sincere, because perpetrators are given reduced jail sentences for acknowledging their crimes. As a result, many genocide suspects who had spent years in prison chose acknowledgment simply to ensure that they would spend less time behind bars. Kagame’s RPF is no exception: It has a hard time acknowledging the awful human rights violations it committed before, during, and after the genocide. In general, Rwandans, Hutu and Tutsi alike, tend to deny or minimize one another’s suffering, as if acknowledging another’s pain negates their own. So we eagerly recount our own suffering but are reluctant to talk about the tragedy our “enemies” have

endured. Until we acknowledge all that happened—without minimizing, exaggerating, or equating—we will obstruct reconciliation between the two communities.

But acknowledgment is difficult. Denial persists because of the shame and guilt that accompany an admission of fault. We fear the diminishment of our social status, or having the stigma of “criminal” or “deviant” associated with our names forever. It is particularly difficult to confess when the response to that confession will be mockery or punishment.

That is why in the wake of mass violence in divided societies, a conditional amnesty is often granted in exchange for truth and apology. While this might seem odd, the insistence on truth and apology is based on the fact that you cannot build a lasting reconciliation if the truth remains hidden and if offenders—whose numbers are staggering—do not buy into the reconciliation process. If there was another way of accomplishing that, it would be done—but none exists. The conditional amnesty approach was taken in South Africa, where many blacks and whites admitted to the crimes they committed during apartheid and apologized to one another, thanks to the pledge that the truth would not be used against them. If the same environment had been created in Rwanda for low-level perpetrators (not the leaders of the genocide)—if they had been told that the goals were truth and apology to help victims recover from the losses they had suffered—then there would have been a greater chance of successfully bringing people together in a spirit of reconciliation.

This is the essence of *restorative justice*, which holds perpetrators accountable in a non-adversarial manner—in a way that condemns the offense, yet cares for the offender. It encourages offenders to take full responsibility for their actions and allows them to tell their side of the story so their victims can better understand what might have caused them to commit evil acts. It helps them repair what can be repaired to the extent that they are able. It helps them reintegrate into the community—not because telling the truth and apologizing are “the price” for reintegration, but because it is part of the self-healing process and a kind of moral reparation for the wrong inflicted on others.

The ultimate goal of restorative justice is to stitch back together the social fabric torn apart by mass violence. What other form of justice would be realistic in Rwanda, where hundreds of thousands of people were involved in perpetuating the genocide? How can you possibly bring all of them to justice through conventional courts? I strongly believe that those who masterminded the killing and those who encouraged others to kill should be punished with the full force of the law, but those “smaller fish” who were the minions of the leaders should be dealt with through restorative justice, not retributive justice. It is impossible to prosecute every single Rwandan perpetrator.

In Rwanda after the genocide, *Gacaca*—a localized court system whose judges are ordinary people with no legal education—was implemented. This system encourages confession and apology in exchange for reduced sentences. It was hoped that this system would be more restorative than punitive, but sadly, *Gacaca* emphasized punishment over reconciliation. In fact, some perpetrators who confess and apologize can still face up to thirty years of imprisonment (some of which can be reduced through community service) while perpetrators who were between fourteen and eighteen years of age who confess can be sentenced to a maximum of nine years in prison. In addition, some lose their civil rights, relinquishing the right “to be elected; to assume high responsibilities; to become leaders; to serve in the armed forces; to serve in the national police and other security organizations; to be a teacher, a medical staff member, a magistrate, a public prosecutor or a judicial counsel.”² Further, the names of high-profile perpetrators are posted at the offices of the local administration in their town or village and published on the Internet. These punitive measures foster shame, which only encourages denial, rather than acknowledgment and apology. In the wake of mass violence, justice should be sought not for the sake of justice, but for a greater goal: healing and reconciliation.

Sadly, *Gacaca* proceedings do more harm than good to victims, perpetrators, and the community as a whole. Community members come into *Gacaca* with the goal of winning, not reconciling. During the proceedings, negative emotions run high as each side confronts the other. Participants emerge either winners or losers in the eyes of the court. They in fact emerge not made stronger, but weaker, with more anger and fear than before.

Although some truths are revealed during these proceedings— about who committed the murders, how the victims were killed, the weapons that were used, the location of mass graves—these types of truths do not lead to reconciliation. Furthermore, most perpetrators do not tell the whole truth, and victims remain unsatisfied with the whole process. Perpetrators, meanwhile, face a potential maximum sentence of life imprisonment, and yet are not allowed to have legal representation. In the end, Rwandans have received neither truth nor justice. If restorative justice—however imperfect—had been chosen I feel confident that the country would be on a path toward reconciliation, rather than a path obstructed with uncertainty and facing a risk of renewed violence.

In order for reconciliation to take place, victims and perpetrators alike must also *empathize* with one another. Empathy for perpetrators comes through active listening to their stories. It comes through the feeling that those who offended you are not evil people but people who engaged in evil behavior at one point in their lives. Such behavior is inexcusable, yet once it is put in context, we find that if we were in the same situation, we might have behaved the same way.

² Article 15 of organic law N° 10/2007 of March 1, 2007.

If we objectively think of the decades-long, poisonous situation Hutu were exposed to, we might feel empathy toward those who succumbed to evil. For example, when I was growing up in Rwanda, school children were insidiously taught that Tutsi had dominated the majority Hutu population for centuries and had mistreated them. They were taught that Hutu revolutionaries eventually ended the domination and the feudal system that oppressed Hutu, and that Tutsi still longed to retake power and resubmit Hutu. Needless to say, these teachings were toxic for Hutu and humiliating for Tutsi. Before the genocide, Hutu were consistently told, through radio and TV broadcasts, newspapers, and political meetings, that Tutsi rebels were responsible not only for launching the war, but also for the chaos that prevailed—and these accusations were not entirely false. The worst propaganda told Hutu that Tutsi wanted to seize power, kill Hutu, and dominate the survivors. So for a number of weak Hutu, killing Tutsi was “justified”—after all, the genocide was encouraged, and even mandated, by the government, local officials, and militia leaders. Given this, I imagine if a Hutu perpetrator told his victim this story of decades of brainwashing and remorsefully apologized, it would trigger empathy on the part of the victim and, most likely, forgiveness. After all, how many among us would have behaved differently if we had been exposed to such venomous rhetoric since our childhood? Until we have walked a mile in our offender’s shoes, we cannot know for sure how each of us would have behaved. This is in no way an excuse, but it is worth considering.

Sadly, some Tutsi have also committed atrocities. And likewise, Hutu would most likely feel empathy for them if they compassionately listened to their stories. I think of how Tutsi inside Rwanda were discriminated against, and how refugees were banned from returning home. In refugee camps, at home, or in military training camps, young Tutsi were intentionally or unintentionally exposed to a language that fostered mistrust of Hutu at best, hatred at worst—predisposing them to violence. Then, when Tutsi finally launched a war against the Hutu government for the right to return home, they were met with aggressive rhetoric and bombs. I can understand—yet disagree with—some Tutsi taking revenge on Hutu. Also, during the genocide, soldiers literally stumbled over the bodies of their fellow Tutsi as they progressed on the battlefield. I can imagine some Tutsi soldiers engaging in evil acts to avenge these deaths. I can also imagine a Tutsi soldier arriving at his family’s home, only to find them killed, and his rage and desire for revenge. Would you have behaved differently if you had lived that life and found yourself in the same circumstances? Those of us who were fortunate enough not to be on the battleground can criticize the actions of those who were there, but until we are tested, we cannot tell. Again, nothing can justify the killing of an innocent human being, but without empathy and mutual understanding, Rwandans will always remain on the brink of more violence. I believe we can do better. For the sake of reconciliation, we need to humble ourselves, apologize, forgive, and lift each other up instead of demonizing each other.

I also believe empathy toward Paul Kagame is possible. My own empathy toward him comes when I think of his childhood and youth: He fled Rwanda when he was a child to escape the massacres. He then grew up in refugee camps where life was hard and where his father, who was well off back home, died as a result of their poor life conditions. All of this indisputably affected Kagame. Like most refugees in poor countries, he was treated as a lesser person. In his twenties, he joined the world of violence in the form of an armed rebellion in Uganda, which helped thrust Yoweri Museveni into power. He participated in military training in Cuba. As a young man he served in intelligence, where crushing enemies was a duty. When Museveni won, Kagame took a high-level position in military intelligence, another dirty and brutal job. All of that sad experience shaped his personality. He later joined the RPF guerilla movement and fought for four years in a world where respect for human rights was fiction. When I think of his own tragedy, my feelings of pain and anger at the suffering he caused me are assuaged. Again, this cannot be an excuse for the suffering he has inflicted on a number of Rwandans, but it is a reminder that we need to keep in mind the role past sufferings play in shaping an individual's behavior. I wish Kagame had emerged from this tragedy with grace, but he was not able to. Yet reconciliation is still possible. If Kagame could embrace humility, tell the truth, remorsefully apologize, and allow for reforms, I believe that Rwandans would forgive him—at least I would forgive him. This would be a chance for peaceful political change and reconciliation.

Out of feelings of empathy, perpetrators would spontaneously participate in *reparations* for victims. Reparations would therefore not be a punishment, but a compassionate response to help victims overcome the consequences of the offender's actions. That would be a significant step toward reconciliation. Together, offenders, victims, the community, and the state as a whole must work side by side to help victims. For example, Germany provides substantial financial support to Israel as penance for the Holocaust. The two countries have become allies. The United States government gave money to Japanese Americans who were placed in internment camps during World War II. But reparations need not be only financial; they can also be policy-driven. Affirmative action in the United States is a sort of reparation for slavery and segregation, giving African Americans the chance to succeed in school and the workplace.

In Rwanda, reparations have not been made to survivors. Only in some cases has property that was looted during the genocide been returned, and a handful of houses have been built by prisoners as punishment, not as voluntary reparation. But it is not too late. As a nation, we could assist victims to overcome some of the hardships inflicted on them by their countrymen. The Rwandan government and the international community have spent more than a billion dollars attempting to bring perpetrators to justice and providing food and medical assistance to them. While this is not a bad thing, I think that similar attention should be paid to victims. And these victims are more numerous than we tend to think. They include not

only genocide survivors, particularly orphans, widows, and the disabled, but also Hutu whose loved ones were killed and whose property was destroyed and looted. All of these people also deserve our attention and help.

Despite the necessity of reparations, it's important to recognize that they can never fully right the wrongs that have been committed. No amount of money could ever replace my mother or father or siblings who were killed. But it is the act itself, not the money, that matters. In some situations, symbolic reparations are more appropriate. For instance, the offender can help rebuild houses that were destroyed, or help pay for the victims' children's schooling—gestures that would be greeted with genuine appreciation by the victims.

Sometimes, other interventions are necessary to put people on the path toward reconciliation, because not everyone who has suffered a trauma has the psychological or spiritual strength to move beyond their grief. It has been said that “some people have adapted to terrible life events with flexibility and creativity, while others have become fixated on the trauma and gone on to live a traumatized and traumatizing existence.”³ Those fixated on trauma are deprived of the capacity to interact constructively with their former enemies. In addition to their physical wounds, they may be haunted by images of the murder of their loved ones; the rape of their mothers, wives, or daughters; the burning of their homes. This makes some victims vehemently oppose reconciliation or commit evil acts themselves—not because they are intrinsically bad people, but because they have been wounded deeply and don't have the tools to heal those wounds and move on. When this is the case, intensive counseling and other psychological assistance are urgently needed to help these victims deal with their trauma and become receptive to the message of reconciliation. Everyone who has experienced the tragedy of war—whether directly or indirectly—would benefit from counseling, including our leaders. Unfortunately, this approach has been neglected in Rwanda.

Another necessary component of reconciliation, particularly in Rwanda, is intercommunity apology and *forgiveness*. When people have been victimized because of the community to which they belong, by people who belong to a different community, they rationalize their offenses against the other community as actions to avenge historical wrongs or preemptive attacks to prevent new victimization. Such community-driven victimization creates not only individual grievances among victims, but a collective grievance shared by members of the victimized community, including those who have not been directly hurt. That is why, even though they were never personally attacked, you can find Hutu who hate Tutsi and vice versa—or Sunni Muslims who hate Shiite Muslims and vice versa, or Jews who hate Arabs and vice versa, and the list goes on. They carry with them a

³ Van Der Kolk, B., and A. McFarlane. “The Black Hole of Trauma” in Van Der Kolk, B., McFarlane, A., and Weisaeth, ed. *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*, New York: The Guilford Press, 1996, p. 1.

collective grievance that is passed from one generation to the next. Such grievance can survive many decades and even centuries only to explode at a later time at the slightest trigger. That is why intercommunity apology and forgiveness is so critical. It requires telling the truth and reaching a common history that is then taught to children through peace education. With empathy and a desire to build a new Rwanda, we can face our awful past with courage and determination and pass on to future generations a reconciled nation.

All of these components of reconciliation—acknowledgment, apology, restorative justice, empathy, reparation, and forgiveness—focus on the past, which is important because “those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”⁴ Yet they must be coupled with a forward-thinking vision. We need to look at what we can do given our current circumstances to build a better future. No doubt one piece of this is building a democracy.

Democracy is a crucial accompanying measure to reconciliation. It can be said without hesitation that the major cause of violence in Rwanda has been the lack of democracy. In essence, this is a political problem. The solution, therefore, must also be political: building a democracy, specifically one that takes into account the divided nature of Rwandan society. Building democracy requires the establishment of institutions that foster equal rights and equal opportunities, individual freedoms and liberties, human rights as stipulated by international conventions, separation of powers and effective checks and balances, and fair and free elections. In other words, rule of law must be established—a rule of law that stems from the truth that we are all born with inalienable and equal rights, and that we derive these rights from the divine. Leaders have, therefore, the obligation to materialize this truth through democratic institutions.

When I was elected to parliament and became speaker, this was the thought that propelled all of my work. I felt that being in parliament was my God-given opportunity to foster the growth of democracy, promote reconciliation, and put behind us the culture of tribal hatred. Despite the friction with Bizimungu and Kagame, parliament was able to pass key legislation related to reconciliation, establishing a national commission for unity and reconciliation and a national commission for human rights and passing bills to reinforce accountability and rule of law.

Democracy also needs to translate into day-to-day fairness. This is why I tried to ensure that my decisions as speaker were always guided by a commitment to equal treatment, which is essential to promote reconciliation in a divided society. Some Hutu lawmakers thought when I became speaker that I would treat them unfairly because I was a genocide survivor. In fact, one lawmaker told me as much and then admitted his surprise when I didn't. But I

⁴ George Santayana

firmly believe that the suffering we endure should not be allowed to take away our kindness and our commitment to fairness. Imperfect as I am, I always did my best to treat others fairly. One of the simple ways I did this was by pushing to change the way parliament chose lawmakers to travel abroad for meetings or training. Because of the way we were reimbursed for travel, trips abroad were a good way to make extra income—something that was desperately sought after among parliamentarians who made very little money. But the criteria for selecting those who traveled abroad were arbitrary. In the end, most of the trips were made by a few powerful lawmakers, virtually all from the RPF and virtually all Tutsi. Recognizing this injustice, I proposed guidelines be established that would select who would make the trips based on competence, ethnic and political party diversity, and previous trips abroad—in other words, everyone should be given a fair chance to travel. Not surprisingly, the RPF wing leader in parliament, Tito Rutaremara, opposed the criteria under the pretext that they included ethnicity. Ironically, the lack of ethnic diversity was the thing I most wanted to correct. Ethnicity is sadly a fact of life in Rwanda. We cannot “play the ethnicity card” only when it serves us, and then deny it when it impedes our agenda. Despite this opposition, my proposal was overwhelmingly approved by lawmakers, because the vast majority, Hutu and Tutsi alike, found it to be fair and just. This is critical. Without fairness, there is no democracy; without democracy, there is no reconciliation.

That is why Rwanda concerns me so greatly. While Kagame’s regime sings, “Democracy! Democracy!” there is no democracy. His victory in the 2003 elections with 95 percent of the vote is evidence of his heavy-handed control over the political process. Rwanda moved from a single-party system under President Habyarimana to a cosmetic multiparty system under President Kagame. Before war broke out in 1990, Habyarimana’s regime was hailed as a model of development and stability in Africa. But that was an illusion. Tutsi’s grievances were ignored and suppressed; most feigned contentment publicly only to complain privately. Hutu from the south were also unhappy with the regime. Other Hutu innocently believed the situation was fine; still others were aware of the reality and chose to remain silent—out of fear or complacency—or actively propagated injustice. Reconciliation and peace were the prime victims, and we, as a people, eventually paid the price.

Similarly, today Kagame’s regime is hailed by the international community as a model of stability and economic development. Awards from around the world are lavished on Kagame. He met many times with former president George W. Bush, who in 2008 lauded Kagame as a “man of action who knows how to get things done, and who can serve as a model for other countries, like Iraq.” Former president Bill Clinton has also visited him regularly and expressed his admiration for him. Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair serves as his advisor. What these good people have in common is that they want to help Rwandans, but they’re not seeing the reality of the situation. When you look closely at what’s

happening in Rwanda, or when you hear from the few Hutu who honestly express their feelings, you realize that their situation is more or less equivalent to that of Tutsi before the 1990 war. In 2008, Kagame changed the terms for the president from five years to seven. He also put an end to life terms for high court judges. In addition, he changed the constitution so the president can only be brought to trial while still in office. So in essence, Kagame has given himself an unconditional and preemptive amnesty should he ever lose power. Again, some Tutsi are aware of this unacceptable situation and sadly choose to do nothing, or are afraid to speak out, or worse, intentionally whitewash the regime's repressive actions. Unless we understand that what harms Hutu harms Tutsi, and vice versa, and care for each other, we will continue to suffer.

Even the annual week of remembrance in Rwanda to commemorate the genocide deepens, rather than heals, the nation's wounds. It is a traumatizing event rather than a restorative one and, consequently, counterproductive to reconciliation. People watch gruesome films and listen to shocking testimonies from genocide survivors; the national media air sorrowful programs with melancholy songs and inflammatory speeches delivered by political leaders. Little to nothing is included to instill hope and resilience. Rather, the discourse plunges survivors into the abyss of the past, often further traumatizing them. Simultaneously, Hutu (even those who played no role whatsoever in the genocide) become fearful and ashamed. We should rethink remembrance and make sure it is guided by the goal of enhancing healing on an individual level and reconnection on the community level. We should inform Rwandans of what happened, yet emphasize our common bonds and the need to move on. We should, for instance, use remembrance to celebrate and hear stories of victims who were able to emerge with grace and forgiveness.

All of this reinforces the fact that, despite some real achievements under Kagame's rule, reconciliation is an illusion, just as it was under Habyarimana in the 1980s. I don't understand why President Kagame fosters the same type of regime that victimized him and his parents. I suppose he fears his enemies—of whom there are many—and what his fate will be when he is no longer in power. He also may well be afraid of the outcome of a classical democracy in a majority-minority divided society, which might well translate into a demographic election in which Hutu would overwhelmingly win. He may consequently fear that Tutsi's security could once again be in jeopardy, a view shared by most Tutsi I speak with, and for good reason.

But the legitimate desire for security among Tutsi and the legitimate desire for effective political participation among Hutu are not incompatible. Some Tutsi don't want to hear about anything other than keeping power by all means necessary for security reasons. Equally, some Hutu don't want to hear anything other than "majority rule." Both groups lose sight of a host of alternatives between these two extremes. The starting point for a viable solution is to understand that we are all human beings with the same fundamental needs,

notably security and self-realization. We need to understand that offending or failing to help one another is both immoral and ineffective.

And equally important, we need to understand that exclusion of the other eventually hurts us all. The Tutsi monarchy under colonial rule dominated the political arena until 1959 and ended in disarray, with the king himself fleeing into exile, where he still remains. The first Hutu president, Grégoire Kayibanda, failed to promote democracy and inclusion. His regime ended in tragedy and he died under house arrest. President Habyarimana's repressive regime ended in a catastrophe—himself dead and his innocent children forced into exile. All this seriously harmed Tutsi, but also Hutu. Incredibly, Kagame has not learned from this ugly past, and now, I worry that the current injustice will eventually hurt President Kagame and other Tutsi. This destructive pattern must end! Our heads of state deserve a better end. Our country deserves leaders who can transcend their victimization and serve all Rwandans equally. The good news is that together we can overcome what sometimes seems to be a predetermined fate. There is no obstacle we cannot overcome if we are united; if we remind ourselves of our shared humanity and common history.

One historian wrote: "Rwanda is once again at a historical cross-roads where its political leadership is faced by two clear options. The first is a continuation of the civil war, as those defeated in the last round prepare for battle in the next; the second is its termination through a political reconciliation that rejects both victory and defeat and looks for a third and more viable possibility."⁵ For democracy in Rwanda to prosper, the form of democracy must be carefully crafted to match the deeply divided nature of the society. Unlike most divided societies, Rwanda is polarized between two ethnic groups of uneven numerical strength (Hutu are at least 80 percent; Tutsi are less than 20 percent, and Twa are less than 1 percent).⁶ What's worse is that the two main ethnic groups have a long history of mutual victimization. Given this, majority rule as it is known in most Western democracies ("winner takes all") is inappropriate in Rwanda. According to a political scientist, "There is a surprisingly strong and persistent tendency in political science to equate democracy solely with majoritarian democracy and to fail to recognize consensus democracy as an alternative and equally legitimate type."⁷ The Rwandan context requires constitutional and legal arrangements that foster democracy yet translate into a win-win form of political representation. Otherwise, the likelihood of another catastrophe will remain dangerously high. Previous regimes have not understood this, nor does Kagame. It is time to be who we were created to be: people whose vision extends beyond our own egos and our own tribes.

⁵ Mamdani, Mahmood. *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism and the Genocide in Rwanda*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 270.

⁶ Because of unreliable census gathering in Rwanda, the exact percentages are unknown. These are estimates.

⁷ Lijphart, Arend. *Patterns of Democracy—Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999, p. 6.

While I was speaker of parliament, I proposed to Kagame an inclusive and reconciliatory form of democracy: *consensus democracy*.⁸ Imperfect as this solution was, my suggestion stemmed from my deep desire to achieve peace and reconciliation while meeting both Tutsi's and Hutu's legitimate aspiration to political rights. Without this, I worry that Rwanda will once again succumb to violence. As one leading authority in conflict transformation observed, "Rwandan history has shown that exclusion of one group or another over an extended period of time is a recipe for disaster."⁹ As long as one group "wins" and the other "loses," this translates into a permanent fear on the part of those in power that the other might recapture power. The winner's victory in Rwanda has always been like a cat's victory over a dog: one governed by perpetual fear, robbing the winner of whatever pleasure comes from holding power. Enormous resources, such as the military, police, and intelligence, are therefore used to protect the regime against its own people instead of being used for the common good.

But unfortunately, Kagame turned a deaf ear to my suggestion. I have not, however, let the idea go. In 2002, after I was forced into exile, I worked with some friends to create a detailed model for consensus democracy in Rwanda. We referred to the example of the United States where all states have equal representation in the Senate irrespective of the size of their populations, and proportional representation in the House of Representatives. This form can be adapted to represent Rwanda's ethnic groups. Switzerland and Belgium also have consensus models that we can learn from. There is no shortage of examples from which to devise a solution that addresses Rwanda's specific realities.

But while I think consensus democracy is necessary in Rwanda, it is not needed forever. It is possible that after some time, Rwandans will reach a higher level of consciousness in which respect for each other's rights and dignity is a given. In a civilized society, people don't care about the ethnic group or race or religion of those running for office; they care about character, beliefs, and competence. They care about who can best help them achieve their dreams and aspirations and lead the country to socioeconomic prosperity. Once we have leaders who can serve everyone fairly and citizens who demand competence and goodness in their elected leaders, *then* we can afford the Western style of democracy.

In the meantime, *peace education* should be provided to our children to shape their character and make them into a peace- and democracy-loving generation. As the preamble of the UNESCO constitution states: "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed." Peace education consists of teaching people how to prevent violent conflict, how to better handle conflict, how to cope with

⁸ See Chapter 8.

⁹ Lederach, John Paul. *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997, p. 177.

trauma, and how to reconcile when conflict occurs—which it inevitably will. Young people should be the prime recipients of this education. While adults can change, the anger and guilt that has been ingrained in them over the years makes it difficult. Children are much more receptive.

Given this, I find it odd that in most post-conflict reconstruction, countries invest billions of dollars rebuilding their infrastructures, but little to nothing teaching their children how to live peacefully. In Rwanda today, children learn math and other subjects, but nothing specific about peace and reconciliation. How can we expect them to understand how to manage conflict if we don't teach them? We would never expect them to understand grammar or geometry without education. And yet we expect them to understand nonviolent conflict management. From an early age, children should be shaped into forgiving human beings, who are not afraid to admit mistakes and make amends. But for this effort to succeed, teachers, parents, and the media must collaborate to prepare our young people to be a more peaceful generation. It is possible. As Harvard professor Martha Minow said, "If we can educate young people to respect others, to understand the cost of group hatreds, to avoid stereotypes, to develop tools for resolving disputes, to choose to stand up to demagogues and to be peacemakers, we might hope to prevent future violence."¹⁰

But individual countries should not have to do this alone. While countries can do a lot within their borders to promote reconciliation, the *international community* should be ready to help. In post-conflict situations, countries lack the resources and expertise to begin the reconciliation process. Further, the threat of extremists in war-torn countries can also derail efforts to reconcile. Countries that emerge from war are more likely to face renewed violence. Without help from the international community, reconciliation might be impossible and mass violence might once again lurk in the shadows. Violence has erupted in Rwanda four times: in the 1960s, 1970s, 1990s, and even in the early 2000s. And the threat of violence remains, especially with rebels continuing to be active in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Because of this, early warning signs of violence should be monitored in post-conflict societies. Like all mass violence, genocide does not come without warning. People do not awake one morning and say, "I am going to kill my neighbor because he is a different color from me" (or practices a different religion from me, or belongs to a different ethnic group). The path to genocide begins long before the first shot is fired or the first machete is swung. It builds slowly, first by categorizing people. One group becomes "us"; the other becomes "them." Then the "them" group is dehumanized. The old history of victimization is revived and distorted, and then propagated through the media. The training and equipping of death

¹⁰ Minow, Martha and Antonia Chayes, eds. *Imagine Co-existence: Restoring Humanity After Violent Ethnic Conflict*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003.

squads follow. History has shown us this time and again: Jews in Germany and the rest of Europe were forced to wear yellow stars on their clothes long before they were killed. Hateful propaganda was disseminated in Rwanda years before the genocide began. The United Nations knew of arms supplies in Rwanda three months before President Habyarimana's plane was shot down, igniting the genocide. At the same time, a U.S. government intelligence analyst predicted that if conflict erupted in Rwanda, "the worst case scenario would involve one half million people dying."¹¹ Former U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan said in 2004: "If the international community had acted promptly and with determination, it could have stopped most of the killing, but the political will was not there." When I read this I think of my parents, who were killed weeks after the genocide began. If the international community had acted, they would be alive today—but "the political will was not there." So the question becomes, how do you get the international community leaders to have enough political will to help? Who will hold accountable the superpowers on the U.N. Security Council vested with veto power? Ultimately, the ones who are most able to hold these leaders accountable are the citizenry that elected them. When these leaders choose to do nothing, it is the responsibility of that country's populace to be vocal in their outrage and exercise their right to protest. It is the people who have the power—a power that is exercised by organizing rallies, writing letters to legislators and newspapers, and voting out of office leaders who turn a blind eye to the suffering of other people. *That* is how the individual can make a difference.

But the true key to creating a more peaceful world is through peace education—creating a new kind of leader; leaders with the wisdom to see beyond national boundaries and beyond the color of the skin, beyond economic gains and self-interest; leaders who see that we all are brothers and sisters and deserve help when the lives of even a few fellow human beings are in danger. Our hope of preventing and stopping genocide lies in the younger generation.

But until that better educated, peace-minded generation takes hold, we need an international community strong enough to intercede when it is needed. Successful intervention requires a well-equipped and well-trained force. The current process for sending a U.N. peacekeeping force into a troubled area is long and fraught with challenges. In the time it takes to approve, fund, equip, and mobilize a force, countless people can lose their lives. That's why a strong, permanent U.N. peacekeeping force that can be sent to intervene on short notice is needed. A force like this would deter power-hungry leaders with the intent of committing mass murder. If they knew that disobeying international law would result in the quick presence of a well-equipped force, they might think twice about their actions.

¹¹ Power, Samantha. *"A Problem from Hell": America and the Age of Genocide*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2003, p. 338.

However, the use of force might not be necessary for some countries. In some situations, speaking forcibly against leaders of countries or rebellions that commit atrocities might suffice. I remember in 2003 President George W. Bush warned Charles Taylor, the former president of Liberia, that he should resign to give peace in his country a chance to take hold. After this warning, the president of Nigeria, Olusegun Obasanjo, offered Taylor exile. Under this strong pressure, President Taylor resigned and left for Nigeria, where he stayed until he was eventually brought before the International Criminal Court for trial.¹² A few years later, President Bush dissuaded President Obasanjo from changing his country's constitution to allow him to run for a third presidential term. This proves that the use of force is not always necessary. Most developing countries—which are the ones most prone to mass violence—are also the most responsive to international pressure. Many would change the course of events if they felt the international community would not tolerate their evil actions. Had President Bill Clinton forcibly talked to Rwanda's political and military leaders when the genocide started, it likely would have stopped, and hundreds of thousands of people would still be alive.

If the international community could now use its influence on President Kagame instead of being blinded by Rwanda's relative stability and socioeconomic recovery, Rwandans could hope for a peaceful tomorrow. Influential people close to him, such as Tony Blair and Bill Clinton, should encourage him to work toward a truth and reconciliation commission in which truth, apology, reparation, and forgiveness can take place. They should encourage him to engage in a genuine dialogue to build a strong democracy, and to launch a peace education system. This can be done while taking into consideration Kagame's legitimate concerns and fears. On the whole, Rwandans value peace more than the past. And that may be what saves us all.

The other thing that will save us all is embracing forgiveness not only on a national and community level, but on a personal level as well. This, too, is not easy. When I returned to Rwanda after the genocide, my heart was hollow and my faith in God was shaken. I carried with me a consuming anger toward those who had killed my family. Forgiveness seemed impossible, not just for me, but for my fellow Tutsi. How could we forgive the unforgivable acts our countrymen had committed? Like most Tutsi, I maintained that every single perpetrator of the genocide needed to be arrested and punished to the harshest extent possible—execution. Only then, I thought, would justice be served. Meanwhile, I would talk about the importance of reconciliation, not understanding that reconciliation without forgiveness is like an ocean without water. It wasn't until I traveled the country with a USAID consultant visiting prisons and witnessing the awful conditions in which genocide suspects were held

¹²As of the writing of this book, the trial is still underway.

that I began to feel some empathy toward them. It wasn't until then that I began to see that the enemy was not Hutu or Tutsi, but a lack of reconciliation over the years of cyclical violence and, more fundamentally, a lack of the virtue of forgiveness in each of us. I began to see then that reconciliation was not only a political process that should be embraced by government leaders, but a personal journey. I realized that each of us can find our own pathway to peace, regardless of what is happening on a national level. I believe that if reconciliation, which is a two-way process, is impossible, then forgiveness is an alternative.

Forgiveness can take place even when perpetrators stubbornly refuse to admit wrongdoing and genuinely apologize; when neither justice nor reparation have been realized; when repressive regimes still reign and human rights violations still persist; when democratic reforms are slow to come, which they usually are. Despite all this, victims can begin the internal process of healing and transformation, and forgive their aggressors.

Yet forgiveness is difficult for victims. In 2008, I saw author Michael Henderson speak at the School for International Training. As he observed, "Some withhold forgiveness for fear that they might easily become a doormat for others, or that justice might not be served and cruel people will literally get away with murder, or that forgiveness and apology, particularly in terms of injustices of the past, is just the latest caving in to political correctness." But in reality, forgiveness has a much broader meaning. Forgiveness means forgoing the human tendency to get even and harbor animosity toward those who have offended us. It means choosing to repair broken relationships rather than seeking revenge. It means recognizing the humanity in others and admitting that, under similar circumstances, we might have made the same mistakes.

But forgiveness does not replace justice. Pope John Paul II once wrote: "Forgiveness neither eliminates nor lessens the need for the reparation that justice requires, but seeks to reintegrate individuals and groups into society, and countries into the community of nations."¹³ It does not let the perpetrator "off the hook." Rather, it lets *you* off the hook because your life is no longer governed by the injustices you have suffered. You are no longer prisoner of the past, nor home to anger and bitterness. This does not mean that forgiveness extirpates pain or anger. I will always feel pain when I think of the death of my family. Rather, forgiveness lets you acknowledge that pain and then release it. I think back to those dark days after the genocide when I was consumed by anger. All I could think about was how gruesomely my family died; how terrified they must have been; how horrifyingly unjust it all was. I was obsessed with it, asking myself "Why?" over and over again. I felt like a caged animal, pacing back and forth but never finding a way out. Then, when I began my

¹³ John Paul II. *Go in Peace: A Gift of Enduring Love*. Chicago: Loyola Press, 2003, pp. 29–30.

journey toward forgiveness, it was as if the cage door swung open and I could walk away. By forgiving, I began to see the world in an entirely different light. I realized that I had the power to set myself free. We *all* have the power to set ourselves free.

To do this, however, requires a kind of inner transformation that is not easy to achieve. It requires a high level of consciousness. It requires you to look at the world differently than you have before. And I say *you* because all of us have been wronged. While you may not have had to suffer the horror of genocide or the murder of your family, no doubt someone has wronged you—an unfaithful spouse, an uncaring parent, an estranged child, a resentful coworker. Pain is a spectrum, and each of us has found ourselves at some point along that spectrum, and so each of us has the opportunity to forgive. Even the small infractions we face daily—the car that cuts us off, the rude sales clerk, the ungrateful boss—present us with the chance to let go of our anger and forgive. Through my experience, I have come to embrace forgiveness as a result of three motivations: to ensure *peace for future generations*, to care for my *physical and emotional well-being*, and to care for my own *spiritual integrity*.

Peace for future generations is possible only when we can forgive one another. In the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, it was easy to take revenge. A lawlessness and kind of implicit tolerance of revenge pervaded the country. Yet revenge perpetuates the cycle of violence. As Martin Luther King, Jr., said, “Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars.” One need only look at Rwanda’s history for evidence of this. In 1959, the masses hunted down Tutsi in retaliation for their political dominance under the monarchy. Every time Tutsi insurgents attacked Rwanda in an effort to capture power, the Hutu-dominated government took revenge on innocent Tutsi civilians. Then, in 1990, the government took revenge on Tutsi civilians after the RPF attacked Rwanda from Uganda. The RPF responded to this revenge by exacting revenge on innocent Hutu civilians. The evil of retaliation went on unchallenged and escalated. No one would have believed that the conflict would last several decades. Past generations could have spared us this cycle of violence. Had they only understood that revenge adds “deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars,” more than a million Rwandans might not have perished; hundreds of thousands of refugees might not be scattered around the world.

What’s more, retaliation in intercommunity violence rarely succeeds in killing the perpetrators. Instead, the perpetrators’ innocent ethnic kin are targeted. For instance, when Tutsi refugees attacked Rwanda in the 1960s, the Hutu-dominated government retaliated against innocent Tutsi civilians; the guerillas were rarely reached. When the Tutsi-dominated army attacked Congo in 1996, the victims were mainly innocent Hutu civilians, not the *Interahamwe* or former army members responsible for the genocide (who had the information and means to escape before the soldiers got to them). So more often than not, the

cycle of retaliation hurts the innocent among us: children, women, and the elderly. Witnessing this madness, I realized that until each individual who is harmed can learn to forgive, Rwanda will never be a peaceful nation. If we continue to play the game of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, we will all, as Gandhi once said, be blind and toothless. Forgiveness is the most rational response a victim can make if future generations are to enjoy peace.

Of course, the desire for revenge is embedded in human nature. It's an instinct we all share, a negative instinct that results in immeasurable suffering all over the world. But in order to handle it constructively, we must recognize that it is within each of us. I felt it in the wake of the genocide, and I still feel it in the instant that someone wrongs me. But as I gained a certain level of healing and inner transformation, I found that it disappears soon after it emerges. All I have to do is remind myself how low and useless it is, and then focus on how I can prevent it from happening again. I often think of how violence in Rwanda affected my grandmother, and later my mother, and then myself. This violence should not reach my children and my grandchildren; it does not have to reach future generations. Quite simply, we have a moral obligation to ensure that it doesn't.

Again, ensuring peace for future generations starts with the individual. It would have been so easy for me to continue to hold a grudge against those who killed my family. But what would that have taught my children? There is absolutely nothing I can do to bring back my loved ones, but there is something I can do to help build the foundation for peace for those who survived. In this way I can honor the memory of those I lost. A Rwandan proverb cautions that "unwise parents pass on problems to their children." I've watched Hutu and Tutsi children play together and seen their inherent goodness. No prejudices exist. I remember my own childhood and how I grew up blissfully unaware of my ethnicity as I played with my Hutu friends. If only our innocence had been spared adults' lingering resentments and bitterness, we would not have suffered the gruesome consequences of the cycle of violence: murder, exile, displacement, discrimination, dehumanization, arbitrary imprisonment, and political disenfranchisement.

By committing to peace for future generations, we generate a different way of looking at the past. We look at the past not to find evidence of how our enemies are evil, but to find out what went wrong and how to improve relationships. Since I learned to forgive, I no longer look back and complain that "my loved ones were killed" or "I was offended," but instead ask, "What can I do in this world to prevent what happened from happening again?"

As I said before, Rwanda is a nation of wounded souls. Yet wounds can heal. And while it may be that those who lived through Rwanda's tragedy will never forget, it is possible that their children and grandchildren will one day read about the genocide and other gross human rights violations and say to their Hutu or Tutsi friends, "Can you believe that happened?"

Can you believe that so much hatred ever existed?" That is my hope: that someday interethnic violence in Rwanda will be so out of the realm of possibility that future generations will read about it in disbelief.

The second reason we should choose forgiveness over anger and revenge is for our *physical and emotional well-being*. A Rwandan proverb says, "*Umugayo uvuna uwugaya uwugawa yigaramiye*," literally meaning, "The blame hurts the one doing the blaming, while the blamed person is enjoying life." In other words, anger or resentment toward the person who hurt you ultimately only hurts yourself. Although I had heard this Rwandan proverb since I was young, I never realized how true it was until after the genocide, when I suffered from painful, recurring stomachaches. They would intensify after I visited sites of massacres or meet genocide survivors whose lives had been devastated. Yet I did not think there was a correlation between my physical pain and the bitterness I held. Instead, I became selective in my diet and took medication to ease the pain. But when I started down the path of forgiveness, my stomach pains abated. I no longer had to take medication and could eat whatever I wanted. Letting go of my bitterness literally cured me. This made me realize that my anger was hurting only myself. The people who killed my family did not have stomach pain, or if they did, it was not because of my anger toward them—I alone was the one who was suffering.

My experience is not unique. Research has proven that forgiveness has immeasurable health benefits, and that unforgiveness—which is characterized by anger, bitterness, and the desire for revenge—does untold damage to our physical and emotional well-being. According to Dr. Frederic Luskin,¹⁴ director of the Stanford University Forgiveness Project, medical and psychological studies have shown for years that anger and hostility are harmful to cardiovascular health. These studies, he notes, show that people who have difficulty managing anger have higher rates of heart disease and suffer more heart attacks. In fact, according to the American Institute of Stress, stress-related disorders are responsible for up to 90 percent of all visits to primary care physicians in the United States.¹⁵ This is because negative emotions release hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol, into the body that, in turn, can trigger the development of a host of diseases.¹⁶ As Dr. Don Colbert, who writes about the link between the body and mind, notes, "If you choose not to forgive someone, I guarantee you that your emotions of resentment and hatred will continue to poison your system. Not only will your body suffer, but also your mind, spirit, and general well-being." Conversely, letting go of that anger and resentment enhances your well-being. Simply put, the power of positive thinking can literally improve your health.

¹⁴ Luskin, Frederic. *Forgive for Good*. New York: Harper Collins, 2002, p. 78.

¹⁵ American Institute of Stress, in Dr. Don Colbert, *Stress Management 101*. Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2006, p. v.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. vii.

Forgiveness improves cardiovascular and nervous system functioning. This isn't hard to imagine. Think for a moment about the tension you feel in your body when you are angry: a clenched jaw, taut or quivering cheek muscles, a furrowed brow, a strained neck, a racing heart—all of which makes it difficult for blood to circulate and, consequently, impedes your cardiovascular and nervous systems. If you continue to carry this tension with you, it manifests itself as chronic fatigue, headaches, backaches, high blood pressure, respiratory diseases, a flaring temper, sexual dysfunction, insomnia—and the list goes on. If the causes behind these symptoms are not treated, the consequences can be fatal.

In addition to my stomach pains, insomnia haunted me in the years after the genocide. Ever since I was young, I could easily fall into a deep, undisturbed sleep. My sleep was seldom disrupted, except when I had a serious problem, such as the days I spent in prison in 1990 and the night before I fled Rwanda in 2000. But after the genocide, sleep became elusive. I would spend hours in bed at night tossing and turning; playing over and over in my mind the killing of my loved ones; wondering what in the world made our Hutu neighbors kill my mother, father, sisters, stepmother, and countless others. I would think of everyone I knew in Rwanda and tick off in rapid succession the names of all who were killed. My mind would even fly back to my school days, where I would think of my former classmates and go through the same sad exercise of listing all who were dead. By the time I finally fell into a fitful sleep, I was seething with anger at all of the loss I and so many others had suffered. The next day, I would awake feeling tired, distracted, and nervous. My productivity was poor. When I think back to those nights, I wonder if I would have survived had my insomnia persisted. Surely my cardiovascular and nervous systems would have eventually suffered.

Also in the wake of genocide, I found myself easily angered by my wife and two older children at any mistake they made—or any mistake I *thought* they made. I then realized that my bitterness was not really directed toward them, but instead at those who had killed my loved ones. Once I realized this, I began to understand that I had to stop feeding my mind with negative thoughts and replace them with positive ones. Instead of dwelling on death and injustice, I would remember the happy events of my life: when I graduated from high school; when my first son was born; when I saw my wife in Burundi for the first time after almost a year of separation. In every life, even the very difficult ones, there are moments of happiness that we can return to and mine for comfort during times of stress. I would also think of the extraordinary courage and kindness exhibited by so many people, such as Kamegeri.

Kamegeri was a Hutu from my area who was poor and had no power to stop the genocide—and, in fact, would have best protected himself by participating in it. But instead, he risked his life by taking Tutsi in his canoe and rowing them across Lake Kivu to safety in Congo, saving many lives. I would also think of our Hutu neighbors who hid my family and

me during the violence of 1973, or of the Hutu military officer who secured my release from prison. When I thought of these people, I was reminded that goodness sometimes broke through the seemingly impenetrable cloud of evil and shed its light on those who were suffering. With this reminder, my physical pain would ease.

Of course, I am not the only Rwandan who suffered from physical problems related to my anger, and many still suffer. A great number of Rwandans continue to be angry—at their fellow citizens who harmed them, at Rwandans who stood by and did not speak out, at the international community that failed to help. Of course they're angry; they have every right to be! Tutsi and Hutu alike are angry at and devastated by the consequences of genocide, war, exile, and other human rights violations. People have lost their loved ones, their property, their livelihoods. I understand them, but by holding on to their anger, they are suffering twice: first from the pain inflicted by others, and also from the pain they have inflicted on themselves.

I remember a conversation I had with a Tutsi friend of mine twelve years after the genocide. I asked him if he was still angry at the people who had killed his loved ones. "Of course I am!" he replied.

"I understand," I said. But then I asked another question, "Do you see yourself someday forgiving them?" "No," he simply said. "How can you forgive such people after the evil they did?"

"But that means the people who hurt your family a dozen years ago are still hurting you," I said. I explained to him that holding on to anger only ate away at himself. The people who had killed his family were still alive; they were still living their lives. They had their own demons to live with, but my friend's anger toward them did not affect them. It did, however, affect my friend, just as mine had affected me.

Ultimately, forgiveness retrains our brains to think more positively. It replaces anger with love; despair with hope; the desire for revenge with empathy. If we train our minds to focus on our blessings and our dreams for the future instead of our curses and a painful past, we become happier human beings. If we keep our friends and our family in our thoughts instead of our offenders, we become more forgiving human beings. We are not able to avoid the past, but we can choose to make only short trips to the past, to learn from it, and then return to the present. Otherwise, we become hostage to the past and suffer physically and emotionally.

The third reason to embrace forgiveness is for our own *spiritual integrity*. Every religion in the world preaches forgiveness over revenge. Christianity tells followers: "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other as God in Christ forgave you"

(Ephesians 4:31–32). Islam says that “he who forgives, and reconciles with his enemy, shall receive his reward from God”; and “of those who answered the call of Allah and the messenger, even after being wounded, those who do right and refrain from wrong have a great reward” (Koran, Chapter 3, verse 172). Judaism states: “When asked by an offender for forgiveness, one should forgive with a sincere mind and a willing spirit... forgiveness is natural to the seed of Israel” (Mishneh Torah 2:10). And Buddha said, “Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned.” Also, the Dalai Lama strongly calls for forgiveness, not revenge. He notes that dwelling on the past feeds anger and resentment that then give rise to further disturbances in our minds and cause our continued unhappiness.¹⁷ And Hinduism professes, “Splendor, forgiveness, fortitude, cleanliness, absence of malice, and absence of pride; these are the qualities of those endowed with divine virtues” (Bhagavad Gita).

Those who engage in revenge, condone retaliation, or sermonize hatred against their offenders are not true believers. Suicide bombers who claim to kill and die in the name of Allah do not represent Islam. Those who kill in the name of God work against their religion’s teachings; they betray their faiths. I find it a great wonder that all faiths, regardless of their differences, share a belief in the golden rule: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. For instance, Judaism says: “What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow man. This is the law: all the rest is commentary.”¹⁸ And Islam teaches: “None of you [truly] believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself.”¹⁹ The golden rule is, in essence, the incarnation of goodness, and it compels us to ask ourselves before we act, “Is what I am about to do—whether justified or not—what I would want done to me?”

All faiths also believe in the capacity of human beings to be transformed and free of prolonged anger, hatred, and violence. Buddhism calls this enlightenment—when a person chooses to relinquish anger and hatred in order to free himself from suffering. Eckhart says, “Enlightenment consciously chosen means to relinquish your attachment to past and future and to make Now the main focus of your life.”²⁰ In other words, you can forgive and transform yourself only when you are capable of freeing yourself from the past. Enlightenment, therefore, makes people grow in consciousness and reach a level of goodness characterized by love, forgiveness, and compassion.

A similar transformation is possible in Christianity. One of the core beliefs of this faith is that individuals can dramatically change from a state of sin to one of grace. Christianity tells us that we can relinquish our habits of hatred, revenge, verbal and physical violence, and mal-

¹⁷ Dunchunstand, Eileen Borris. *Finding Forgiveness: A 7 Step Program for Letting Go of Anger and Bitterness*, New York: McGraw Hill, 2006, p. XII.

¹⁸ Talmud, Shabbat 31a.

¹⁹ Number 13 of Imam “A-Nawawi’s Forty Hadiths.”

²⁰ Number 13 of Imam “A-Nawawi’s Forty Hadiths.”

ice to grow and embrace the goodness embodied in love, forgiveness, and compassion. With this transformation, we become new creations.

My spiritual beliefs have been crucial on my journey toward forgiveness. Without faith, I don't think my other motivations (peace for future generations and physical and emotional well-being) would have been strong. In my case, forgiveness, as a way of life, has been sustained by my faith. In fact, strong faith represents a powerful foundation from which forgiveness instantly flows; it provides a new way of seeing the world; a new way of looking at the sufferings we go through; a new way of looking at our offenders.

I grew up in a Christian family, attending the Seventh Day Adventist Church. Almost every Saturday, we would go to church and I would worship as I had been taught. But when I was a child, going to church was more for fun than worship. Still, I internalized some verses that no doubt shaped at least part of my adult behavior, including the verse from the New Testament that reads: "Do not repay anyone evil for evil" (Romans 12:17). This clearly is a command not to take revenge. God said: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay." In other words, the offender will pay, but we, the victims, should not take justice into our own hands. Doing so would only lead to anarchy and to the cycle of violence among God's children.

As part of my faith, I believe that God does indeed repay offenders, even if we don't always see it. I think of all the genocide leaders who are either in prison or in hiding. Theirs is not a happy life. Many members of the *Interahamwe* were killed. Even murderers who go free, who never acknowledge their crimes or express remorse, in some way suffer—if not in this life, in the next. Regardless, it is not my place to take revenge, not only because my faith condemns it, but because it is ultimately useless. When you seek revenge, you are simply following the steps of your offender's dance. I remember when I became speaker of parliament a friend told me that I should use my position to take revenge on those who killed my loved ones. "If revenge was the right thing to do—if it somehow drove away my bad dreams—if it was solution to the endemic conflict between Hutu and Tutsi, I would do it," I told him. "But it's not."

Opting for kindness in the face of evil is often mistaken for weakness, but in truth, it exhibits profound strength. It is easy to lash out at someone; it takes great fortitude to restrain yourself and act with kindness. The Bible tells us: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink" (Romans 12:20). I often think of this when I remember my encounters with the mayor of my family's village in prison. By giving him money and showing kindness, rather than bitterness, I acted in accordance with my faith. As Martin Luther King, Jr., said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." When we respond to hatred and aggression with love, we help bring in the light.

Imagine that while participating in a peaceful demonstration, you are beaten by a police officer. The same officer arrests you and escorts you to jail. As he walks you to your cell, he sneezes. What do you say? As angry as you might be at him for his unjust behavior, you should turn to him as you would a friend and tell him, “Bless you,” or whatever other kind words you choose. No matter how he responds, even if he ignores you or rudely tells you to “shut up,” you have demonstrated grace, and that act increases the amount of good available in the world.

It can also unwittingly change the behavior of the perpetrator. At the very least, showing kindness toward an offender will puzzle him and most likely decrease his or her animosity. Offenders live in fear of revenge—it is what they expect. So when the victim demonstrates love instead of hatred, it often compels the offender to re-evaluate himself and his life. It brings some light into the offender’s heart. It can lead to an apology that otherwise would never have come, and consequently lead to healing and reconciliation. In fact, perpetrators are often so ashamed and so fearful of revenge that they cannot take the first steps toward reconciliation. It is therefore up to the victim to help the offender begin that journey. To borrow from Martin Luther King, Jr., this is in essence the paradoxical power of the victim to restore the offender’s blighted humanity.

I was once asked by a student, “Can you forgive the people who killed your parents?” I responded that it is the genocide that is unforgivable, not those who perpetrated it. Of course, I wish I could receive acknowledgment and genuine apology from the killers of my parents. I would then forgive them from the bottom of my heart, as my faith has predisposed me to do. Yet even though I have not received an apology, I don’t carry any hatred or bitterness against my parents’ killers. When I was speaker of parliament and visiting my parents’ village in Kibuye, I saw the mother of the men who are believed to have killed some members of my family. When she saw me, I could see the shame in her eyes. I could have turned away and said nothing, or spewed words of anger and hatred toward her and her sons. But this was also the woman who helped hide my father during the violence of 1973. And I knew that she also had been hurt by the genocide. Her husband was in prison and most of her children had fled the country. She was virtually alone. She, too, had suffered. When I saw her, I saw her not only as the mother of my family’s killers, but also as the protector of my father. So I embraced her.

We should all embrace forgiveness. And in doing so, we must understand what that means. Forgiveness is not just a sacrifice one makes to rebuild a healthy relationship between a parent and child, a husband and wife, or even two communities—it is beyond that. Forgiveness is not just a practical means of preventing the physical and emotional harm unforgiveness wreaks—it is beyond that. Forgiveness is not just a way of embodying one’s spiritual beliefs—it is beyond that. Forgiveness opens our hearts and allows us to be better human beings.

Each of us can reach a place of forgiveness in our own lives. As I said before, because we all have been hurt, we all have the opportunity to forgive. As difficult as it is, it is possible, and once forgiveness is embraced, it becomes second nature. Where negativity and anger once took up residence in our minds, we instead find acceptance and peace. Over the years, I've learned how to nurture forgiveness within myself. I equate forgiveness to a flower: It grows only if I water it. I nurture it by, for example, practicing positive thinking, kind speech, good manners, empathy, and reflection. When we do that, forgiveness is no longer a sacrifice or challenge, but a way of life; a lifelong journey. I am still on that journey, and always will be.

Children already live this way. When children get mad at one another, their anger can be quite fierce, but they quickly put it behind them and come together again as friends. There are no grudges, no lingering animosities. They live in the moment. Their life is not governed by what happened ten months ago, or even ten minutes ago. So any wrongs done to them by their playmates simply dissipate. Sadly, as we grow up our lives become less and less about *now* and more and more about *then*. We dwell on all the negative events in our lives and lose the ability to forgive. Our bodies might grow up, but we lose that childlike goodness. We become un-grown-up adults. But we can find that childlike place in our hearts again. We can return to it and banish the cycle of blame and revenge. We can transform ourselves—and in so doing, we can transform the world.

Robert Kennedy once said, "Few will have the greatness to bend history, but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of a generation. It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped." It reminds us that our individual acts—the small kindnesses we show to one another as human beings—can in fact change the world. We all have the power, and the responsibility, to do it. Start now.

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