

Between 2004 and 2006 I took three trips to Africa to see development projects being sponsored by Canadian donors there. As a way to contain the shock of my response, especially on the last trip to war-affected countries, I began to write poems. These were the genesis of this book. Once I returned and continued reading about the places I had traveled to, in particular Rwanda, the rest of the poems followed. In this introduction I have tried to fill in much of the context out of which the poems were created.

In the book “Heart of Darkness” the narrator refers to Africa in terms of “in the flicker”. After the trip I took to war-affected areas in 2006 that image haunts me still. The flickers of light in darkness. The flickers of hope that refuse to succumb to the dark horrors that are the everyday for so many on that continent.

Elie Wiesel, the Nobel Prize Laureate who was an eye witness to the Jewish Holocaust in World War Two, is quoted as saying “Even our shouts and blasphemies in the face of such evil are forms of prayer.” I did a lot of this kind of praying during that trip. Even now it is difficult to describe the anger and helplessness I felt in Northern Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo) and Rwanda when faced with facts like these:

At a rate of 6 people per minute as many as one million people were killed in 1994’s one hundred day blood-bath known as the Rwandan genocide. Even worse, possibly another million perished in the aftermath through reprisal and other killings both in Rwanda and neighbouring countries where up to two million Rwandans refugees sought safety after the war. While countless Tutsis were the main victims during the genocide many Hutus also died especially after the genocide.

As horrific as the genocide was in Rwanda twelve years ago similar horrors, but in even greater numbers, have been occurring right next door in the Democratic Republic of the Congo(DR Congo), an African country deeply effected by the Rwandan genocide. Rwanda was a major player in the DR Congo civil war from 1997 to 2002 and to this day armed remnants of Rwandan refugees, who flooded there after the genocide, continue to fight in the forest of eastern Congo. It is estimated that at least four million people have died because of the conflict in DR Congo since 1997 (above and beyond expected mortality rates for the country) and, although armed conflict is now restricted to its eastern territories (where up to 16 separate rebel or armed groups are still active), at least 1,200 people a day continue to die from war and its allies of disease and malnutrition. In addition, the rate of infant mortality and death by disease is among the highest on the planet. Sexual violence through rape, especially in the eastern territories, is widespread. A UN agency claims that DR Congo remains the worst humanitarian crisis experienced in the world since World War Two.

In Northern Uganda more than 1.6 million people remain stranded in desperate conditions in so-called IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) camps where they have been relocated for “safety” because of a 19 year-old conflict in the area that has caused at least 25,000 children to be abducted and forced to join the rebel forces in the area. Lack of water and disease is killing thousands of people in these camps every week.

I visited one of these camps at a place called Padibe (pa/DEE/bay) and witnessed a devastating fire that over a period of at least three days destroyed as many as half of the huts housing 41,000 people there. When I climbed up a water tower there (that had no water) to witness the devastation first-hand I gasped and recoiled when I saw the extent of the damage. Yet below me, when I looked out

over Padibe from the water tower, somehow, life went on in the dust and the smoke. Children played, mothers cooked meals in swept-out shells of burned out huts and already bundles of new thatch were ready for reconstruction. The fire only burnt itself out a few days later.

In Kitgum, south of Padibe, I sat under a tree in a new Canadian Food for the Hungry International (CFHI) centre that will provide shelter and education for young mothers and their children directly effected by the war and listened to a young mother called Beatrice tell the story of her eight year ordeal with the rebels. Abducted at 14, kept almost constantly on the move, given to a rebel soldier who fathered her two children, she escaped in 2003 and is doing everything in her power to be educated, look after her children and create a life that will provide a hopeful future for her family.

In Goma, DR Congo, in the eastern territories near the border with Rwanda I walked through an orphanage rebuilt on a bed of lava that destroyed most of the city after the nearby eruption of Mount Nyiragongo in 2002. Soon I was mobbed by many of the 60 children living there who had been orphaned by war and disease, then rescued by the husband and wife team of Mama Jean and her husband Prosper. I watched the smiling faces of two brothers who sang and danced for us. One had a scar on his forehead from a machette wound incurred during an attack on his village that killed his parents and left him for dead. I saw a baby , just a few months old, called Baraka or “Blessing” and her mother Chantel, 16. She was captured by six rebel soldiers and kept in the bush with them for six years. She escaped but was pregnant. She is being taught to read and write and to sew. When she is ready she will be sent back to her village to restart her life with new skills

In Goma I saw the hospital run by Heal Africa. The previous one

had been destroyed by the eruption in 2002. Under the leadership of Dr. Jo Lusi, a black Congolese and his white UK-born wife Lynn, Heal Africa has become a center for hope and change. Through its sponsorship innovative programs developed and run by the community are combating AIDS, developing new agricultural practices, providing counseling and care for AIDS and rape victims as well as widows. They also provide business loans so widows can make enough to send at least some of their children to school.

In a small office near the hospital I listened to a group of religious leaders describing their successful four-year AIDS prevention program called Choose Life. One of them, Kataka Tsongo, was the local Imam who explained how he was able, for the first time, to sit and share food with his Christian brothers and sisters.

At the Heal Africa hospital I walked into a ward of women who had recovered from fistula operations that repaired vaginal ripping from brutal rapes. They were singing and dancing and Dr. Jo joined in. One of the women, Yoeri Walongera, told her story. "I was taken by force," she said. "Forced to do whatever the soldiers wanted." But she added "We were lucky that we could come to Heal Africa for help. Now we are beautiful again." All these women, armed with new reading and vocational skills were soon going to go back into their villages as a force of change.

At Rutaka, a small village in the hills of Rwanda, I saw a tall woman proudly receive recognition with others in her community for their volunteer work with Food for the Hungry International (FHI) in educational and development programs. Only later was I told that she and her husband were the only Tutsi survivors of the genocide in this area. Their children were all murdered. Yet there she was a fully integrated member of that community, one that had betrayed her as it witnessed and was responsible for for

many deaths of her friends and family. When I talked to her after the ceremony we discovered we both had four children. But her children were her new family born after the genocide.

On a trip to Masisi, north of Goma, an area just recently cleared of hostile troops, I witnessed the jubilant official opening of a half way home for victims of sexual violence. On that trip I heard the story of Noella Katembo, a community leader. Three years earlier her husband was killed in front of their children by bandits in their house while she was recovering in hospital from giving birth to a daughter. A year later her house burned down. Her son Richard who never talked about his father's death afterwards had just recently asked to know everything he could about his father. He told his mother he wanted to put flowers on the grave and to tell him that they were all right. She was not sure that was a good idea.

However, a few weeks later Nouella changed her mind and took Richard, his brother and younger sister and visited her husband Deo's grave. Richard told everybody there he wants to be a construction engineer just like his father.

Bono, the well known singer and humanitarian stated at a prayer breakfast in 2006 in Washington D.C. that "Africa is in flames." I witnessed the literal and figurative truth of this. But there are lights flickering still from a different kind of fire. From a fire of hope and resilience that is hard for us in the West to understand or imagine. How else can I explain Zawadie. She is a seven year old rape victim I met at Heal Africa in Goma. When ever I saw her at the hospital she had an infectious smile and had to be encouraged not to dance with us! She was waiting for her fistula operation.

In 1991 an extraordinary Australian woman, affectionately known as Auntie Irene, founded Childcare International. Childcare runs

many programs but most importantly runs a school and vocational institute for 4,000 students in Kitgam, Northern Uganda. In the early days when Auntie Irene started Childcare under constant threat of violence and failure she wrote this passage in black letters on the side of her white trailer:

“I am satisfied with my present life and what I have. For God himself promises ‘I will not in anyway fail you, or in any degree leave you helpless, or forsake you or relax my hold on you’ Thus I am encouraged and I will confidently say ‘The lord is my helper. I will not fear or be alarmed. What can men do to me.’ “

When faced with the reality of the horrors in Africa, many which Auntie Irene and Dr. Jo and countless others I met on my trip encounter almost every day, it is difficult to know at times what to make out of a statement of faith written so boldly in a place of such suffering and death. But it is this which sustains the hope of many of those, black and white, doing so much good in Africa. I am challenged by them to do no less. After I wrote down the words of Irene’s I walked around a corner of the trailer to see hundreds of brightly dressed students being fed breakfast out of huge caldrons. This remains for me such an image of hope. Especially knowing, that until the rebels in Northern Uganda formally surrender, this area is still an active war zone.

It was much easier to see the hope when I visited Zambia in 2004 and 2005 – a country struggling with the usual diseases and poverty – but not war. I traveled three hours south of Lusaka to the remote Gwembe Valley to visit water wells drilled as part on an on-going program (almost 200 wells drilled to date) sponsored by the Colin Glassco Foundation for Children led by it’s Canadian founder Colin Glassco. As we visited well sites we were often mobbed by villagers who before this program had relied on unsafe

ground water. Thanks to the new wells the incidence of Trachoma (a disease that causes painful blindness) and stomach-related illnesses have plummeted.

During my first trip to the Gwembe in 2004 we reached a small village late in the day that was tucked away in a remote and narrow part of the valley. It was perched near the red sandstone cliffs on one side and looked out on the walls of the valley's other side which were bathed in the golden amber light. Coming back to our trucks after visiting a well site we came upon a group of women pounding maize into corn flour. Their pestles, made of a reddish black hardwood, were almost five feet long and about three inches thick.

My time with those women is captured in the poem, *The Gift*. When the darker memories of the other countries I have visited in Africa threaten to overwhelm me I remember these women, their glistening faces, their laughter, their singing and the light that made everything glow as if lit from within by some inner fire. The imperishable beauty of that moment burns on in my memory and will continue to light my way each time I return to the dark continent.

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