

After the Bullets Fly

I'd like to begin by describing some pages from my book of Liberian memories.

In my first memory, I'm walking through the hallway of a small hospital. The exact location is the Liberia Agriculture plantation and the year is 1990.

I'm there to see one of my students. He has been attacked by malaria and I must walk with my head stuck up. I have to avoid eye contact with young rebel soldiers lining the corridor. They have had their legs and hands amputated. And I hate them. Yes, I hate them.

I hate them because young rebel soldiers killed my brother Stephen. Stephen was trying to protect a man who was a member of a tribe that the rebel soldiers hated. They didn't hate the Bassa tribe, Stephen's tribe and my tribe, they hated the fact that Stephen would try to help someone who belonged to the Gio tribe.

Two weeks later I went to a home on the same plantation, and there sat a man with an amputated arm.

The young man called me by name and he greeted me. He told me that he had met me before and that he went to high school with two of my brothers, Stephen and Ernest.

Then he said, "I lost my arm in an accident. I was at the hospital when you passed me by. I looked your way but you passed me by."

I looked at him and I felt guilty. And I made up my mind to put aside hate.

In memory, it's 1992 and I'm in Monrovia. I've left Grand Bassa County in search of peace. But Charles Taylor has launched his deadly Operation Octopus. From every angle bullets fly. All that happens I now hate to recall, for the best thing to do is to count the blessings. Thank God I stay alive.

In memory, it's 1994 and I visit the city of Buchanan. I'm there to see family members who are enduring the fatigue of the madness: my 76-year-old mother, who barely made the 60 mile walk; my younger sister Henrietta, who wept and wept, for along the way she lost two children; and Jonathan, Henrietta's surviving eight-year-old son, who had an interesting request.

Jonathan wanted no more to belong to the Bassa tribe. He said, "Uncle Arthur, the soldiers that took all of our money to help smuggle us out of the battle zone were all Bassa, too heartless to save my dying brother. I'm tired. I'm thirsty. Can you back me, Jonathan?" But a soldier held his hand and walked him to death. They could have stopped. They could have made some effort to find him a drink. Wicked Bassa soldiers. I don't want to be a Bassa boy anymore."

Then I asked him, “Do you want to be Krahn, or Mano? Gio or Mandingo?”

He said, “God forbid.”

In memory, it’s 1999. I’m in Monrovia, and the city is on fire. Again bullets fly from every corner. People run helter skelter. And they pray, “Oh God! When will this stop?”

In memory, it’s 2000. I’m separated from my wife and children, and the fighting intensifies. News coming from where they are all seems so hopeless: no food, little water, young soldiers run the town. When I’m reunited with my family, they are all skin and bones.

In memory, it’s 2003. “Taylor must go now! Now!!” We hear this on state radio—the voice of the American president, President George W. Bush.

With the godfather of West Africa, Nigeria, taking the lead, Charles Taylor left the scene. After 14 years of terror, the guns became silent.

You may ask, “Why kill one another for 14 years?” Others may ask, “Why wait 14 long years before demanding Charles Taylor off of our backs?” But I think the most important question is, “Now that the bullets have stopped flying, what next?”

To move in the right direction, it’s important to consider the path that Liberians have walked so that our mistakes will not be repeated.

Liberia became independent in 1847. The country was established by the American Colonization Society to resettle freed American slaves in the land of their ancestors. Although the path of the nation (prior to 1980) seems peaceful to outsiders, volcanoes were building up. The indigenous peoples consisted of various tribes which were not friendly toward one another. Among the freed slaves who returned (also called Americo-Liberians) there were conflicts between those with dark skin and those with lighter skin, who saw themselves as superior and dominated the affairs of the states. This resulted in the assassination of President Edward J. Roye, a dark-skinned Americo-Liberian, in 1871.

As Americo-Liberians dominated, the indigenous people, who were not even considered citizens until 1964, became resentful. In 1980 Master Sergeant Samuel K. Doe from the Krahn ethnic group, along with others of the Krahn, Mano, and Gio tribes, staged a military coup and overthrew President William R. Tolbert, an Americo-Liberian. Several cabinet ministers, all Americo-Liberian descendants, were tied to a pole and gunned down. With pain and hate in their hearts, many Americo-Liberians fled the country and went into exile.

Master Sergeant Doe ruled as a dictator, getting rid of officials from other tribes who opposed him. In 1985 he rigged the country's first general election, which was widely believed to have been won by Professor Jackson F. Doe of the Gio tribe.

Well, here in the United States Charles Taylor, an Americo-Liberian, was sitting behind prison bars in Massachusetts waiting to be extradited to Liberia to answer charges of embezzlement. But in 1989 Taylor announced to the world through an interview with Robin White of the BBC that he had entered Liberia through Nimba County to unseat the Doe government.

The madness that engulfed Liberia was too great to comprehend, the wounds it created too deep to cure, the scars it left too large to ignore.

So where do Liberians go next, now that the guns are silent?

My opinion is that people are starting on the right footing, for many are turning to God. There are churches popping out in every corner in the city.

However, the messages of many of these churches disenchant me. It's all about prosperity. If you want a car, come to God. If you want money, come to God. He has all the money.

You see, I come from a background where we sang, in *Mansion over the Hilltop*, "I'm satisfied with just a little cottage below, a little silver and a little gold." And such a poverty gospel many now don't want to hear. My fear is what if Liberians don't get all they are longing for? What if the material success doesn't come? What if their stomachs are half-full? Will they go back to the guns?

When the bullets stop flying, find God.

Liberians have woken up to the realization that education is their key for better living on earth. Although they love Oppong Weah, they couldn't give this former soccer star with no college education the presidency. It had to be given to Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the Harvard-trained economist. Ellen now as president wants to work with the cream of the crop, and if you have a degree from a university in the U.S. your chance is great. So a few people are now getting resentful. They make sour-grape excuses such as, "What's so big about getting degrees from America? Some have it and they can't do a thing." Others complain that these people don't use their paycheck to salvage Liberia. Instead they use it for their mortgages in the U.S.

The step to take to bridge this gap is to provide for every Liberian child quality education, a task too great for a government inheriting the burden of the effects of 14 years of civil war. That's why a Minnesota-based organization called Family of Hope has moved in. For more than five years they have been supporting

Gianda Elementary and Junior High School in Zondo, Grand Bassa County. Family of Hope provided the funds for building materials, and members of the local community volunteered their labor. This partnership has resulted in a building where more than 500 children receive free holistic Christian education.

Our goal is that our students will become people who love mercy and act justly, people who will be willing to live humbly with their God.

We are hoping to educate men and women who won't wish to deny their Bassa heritage. We are hoping to educate women and men who don't say "God forbid" when asked if they might want to be Gio or Mano or Krahn or Mandingo. We are hoping to educate women and men who resolve conflict peacefully, who work with other tribes and with Americo-Liberians to heal, teach, and sustain the country. We are hoping to educate men and women whose love for mercy and justice will result in ideas expressed through words instead of bullets expelled from guns.

At our school, we find that this is not an easy task. Finances are one obstacle. Although we are a public, government-approved school, we receive only a pittance of government funding for our teachers. William V.S. Bull, Sr., Ambassador of the Republic of Liberia to the United States, stated last month in an address to The Africa Society of the National Summit on Africa that "More than 175 schools have been constructed or renovated throughout the country [Liberia] and free primary education has been enforced," but a simple inventory of the children selling water or food or whatever plastic trinket they can find on the streets of Monrovia during the "school day" will demonstrate that even in the capital city children are not in school.

A trip to any rural farm might demonstrate an even harsher truth: few of these new schools are in rural areas, and nearly every school that existed before the war was destroyed--looted, burned, or simply left unattended to be overrun by termites and broken down by the rainy season. For instance, right now Gianda Elementary and Junior High School is the only school in our entire district. Children from smaller villages walk up to two hours to come to the school.

Yet the rural areas are tribal lands. If there is no school for children in these areas, we may find that the murmurings against U.S. educated members of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's government will erupt violently a few years from now. Children who are unaware of the vile effects of the previous war will be easily recruited into new armies of child soldiers who are stirred to tribal hatreds and provoked by continuing Americo-Liberian/tribal economic and educational disparities.

We face another obstacle in Zondo. Girls are still routinely denied educational opportunities equal to boys'. In many cases, economic realities rather than an organized denial of schooling are the root of the problem. According to a May 26, 2010 article in the Inter Press Service News Agency, "Despite the 2005 election of

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Africa's first female president, and the introduction of free and compulsory primary education, many young girls in this post-conflict West African nation continue to drop out of school to cook and clean for their family, or earn a meagre living selling food or fresh water on the streets. They face discrimination, sexual violence, family pressures, early pregnancy, forced marriage, and harmful traditional practices. Three out of five Liberian women can't read."

We have responded to these family pressures by hiring a social worker to act as house mother to a small group of girls who live in the school building. Because local residents provide food for them, the girls' families allow them to stay at and attend the school. If the girls stayed at home, the economic burden of feeding them would cause the families to keep the girls at home to farm. We are in a unique situation because of the support we receive from the U.S. Other rural schools are run only sporadically, when teachers who rarely are paid can afford to take a bit of time away from their sustenance farms.

You see that when I say that we hope to educate women and men who love justice and act justly, there are reasons that we must say "women and men" and not simply, "people."

I want to finish the memory book I began to describe at the beginning of my talk today.

In memory, it's 2005. I make the decision to leave two teaching and administrating jobs in Monrovia to reutrn to Zondo. There are no structures except for traditional huts and decaying pre-war buildings. Oh, and one partially-constructed school.

In memory, it's 2009. Our students tell visiting Americans that they will grow up to become doctors, nurses, and even the president of Liberia. I absolutely believe it.

I look forward to adding new pages to my memory book. In the future, my students read and write and love mercy and act justly in the service of Liberia, in the service of Bassa and Krahn and Gio and Mandingo and Mano and Americo Liberian and Christians and Muslims. The bullets have stopped flying altogether.

Thank you.