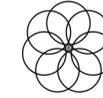


# Love during a Coup d'état



There are few questions that have haunted the hearts, minds, and souls of men, women, and children more than: *how can there be a God that would allow the terrible suffering seen in wars, let alone a God that would permit religions to send millions of people to kill one another in the name of God?*

Meanwhile, mystics of all religions throughout the centuries have written about a divine love so intoxicating that it could only be described through poetry.

Reconciling this vast conflict between a God of love and the horrors of war has been attempted time and time again by scholars and theologians. Yet, it is through the breaking of the heart a thousand times over and the relentless pursuit of the one Beloved that eventually one experiences a glimpse of peace as one's own true essence.

This has been my journey, one that seems so unlikely given that I was born and raised in rural Indiana; and that through a series of circumstances, my spiritual awakening came through falling in love with people in one of the poorest countries of Africa. While living in utter poverty, my African friends were rich in qualities of the human spirit, such as generosity, compassion, tolerance, and perseverance. When their world was shattered by a war fueled in part by a global economy, my heart was initiated into the excruciating path of seeking peace in a time of crisis.



Bobarino

One of the most dramatic instances of encountering the contrast between a taste of divine love and outer destruction came in April 2000.



I was in Monrovia, Liberia, a West African coastal country about the size of Tennessee. Liberia was recovering from one of Africa's bloodiest civil wars; between 1989 and 1996, an estimated two hundred thousand people died, over a million people were displaced as refugees, and thousands of children were used as weapons of war. The people of Liberia wanted to rebuild their

country, but their president was Charles Taylor, a man who would later stand trial at the Special Court for Sierra Leone for committing horrendous war crimes and crimes against humanity during the civil war in neighboring Sierra Leone.

Taylor had won the Liberian national elections in 1997 with people chanting, "He killed my father, he killed my mother, and I will vote for him." Liberians knew if Taylor lost the elections he would return to fighting. People in the United States and other Western countries did not understand the desperate act of electing a known mass murderer as president as an interim step toward peace.

Sitting in an air-conditioned office, I talked with three older, dark-brown Liberian men, all of whom had lived through the horrors of the war and were now part of Talking Drum Studio, a project that produced radio programs to promote peace and reconciliation. These men were wise and practical in designing insightful and entertaining radio shows that pushed the boundaries of ethnic healing and government accountability without drawing the fire of Charles Taylor.

I had gotten to know these African men over the previous three years during several visits to Liberia. Based in Washington, DC, my role with them had suddenly changed a few weeks earlier to that of being their supervisor after three colleagues had left our organization, Search for Common Ground, a nonprofit dedicated to transforming how the world deals with conflict. My colleagues had ill-advisedly joined Mondal Media, a dot-com company that would go belly up a few months

later. (The company's collapse inspired all three colleagues to eventually return to peacebuilding work via various U.S. agencies.)

I was feeling a bit anxious with the new responsibilities, especially since we were starting a new Talking Drum Studio program in neighboring Sierra Leone, a country in the midst of a tenuous peace agreement. I had just flown to Monrovia from Freetown, Sierra Leone five days earlier. In Freetown, I had been overseeing the construction of the new radio studio and had hired the first staff for Search for Common Ground.

My colleagues in Liberia were quite proud that they had been the inspiration for the new program in Sierra Leone. They talked about the fledgling Sierra Leone studio like parents watching over a newborn child. They also were protective of me, knowing I was not as adept in navigating deadly conflict as they were.

I was scheduled to fly back to Freetown in a few hours. One of the Liberian men, Joe, was a stout and serious man with a childlike smile that he would occasionally reveal. Joe kept telling me it was safe to go back to Sierra Leone; that there was nothing to worry about. As Joe talked, I reflected on a war story he had once told me of hiding in the bottom of a latrine for a week to avoid being killed by a roaming band of militia. I trusted Joe, though I was not keen on ever having to face what he had to endure.

As I was about to leave for the airport, the phone rang. It was John, one of my colleagues who had recently left Search for Common Ground. John was born and raised in Louisiana and lived several years in Liberia. He had a keen sense of politics and strategic thinking, along with a demented sense of humor from years of being exposed to war. John was relieved to catch me before the flight, as his contacts in the U.S. State Department had told him a coup attempt was imminent in Freetown. John advised me to stay in Monrovia and to wait it out. Being he had been evacuated twice from Liberia due to armed conflict, I listened.

Instead of going to the airport, a staff driver took me back to a hotel. The signs of war's aftermath were still apparent in the streets of Monrovia even three years after a peaceful election. Phone and electrical wires had been stripped from poles; people carried water on their heads, as the city water system had been destroyed. The streets were lined with open sewers as people walked to and from, many carrying small pans on their heads with items to sell. Most people, various shades of brown and dark black skin, wore tattered T-shirts and pants from the United States.

As we crossed a bridge, I gazed at a young man wearing only torn shorts. He was covered in dirt and had knots in his hair. His eyes were red and wide open, giving

him a crazed look. He was talking to himself out loud, stumbling and nearly falling with each step. The staff driver looked at me and said in a thick Liberian accent, "Former child soldier. Many of them have gone crazy."

A range of memories flashed through my mind, scenes of small remote bush villages in Sierra Leone where I had lived. I thought about my friends there, especially the young children and wondered if they were still alive. It was all so utterly absurd. How could the people I loved and a country that seemed so peaceful go through such horrific violence? When I left Sierra Leone in 1989, after four years with the Peace Corps, I had no idea that everything would fall apart, and that thousands of children, some as young as eight years of age, would be turned into killing machines.

We arrived at a gate with armed guards. Barbed wire and broken glass lined the top of a cement wall surrounding a series of buildings. One wall had sprayed painted on it "No Pee Pee here." Monrovia was renowned for people toileting anywhere, especially the beaches. The sound of a diesel generator filled the air, providing electricity for the hotel that was frequented largely by Western expatriates, wealthy West African businessmen, and young sex workers.

Thinking about Sierra Leone possibly returning into violence, about my friends in the villages, of Joe having hid in a latrine for a week to avoid being killed, my head began to spin. Would the violence ever stop? Would we ever get Talking Drum Studio up and running in Sierra Leone?

Once inside a bedroom in the hotel, I tried to relax by taking a shower. I marveled at the site of running water, aware that most people of Liberia and Sierra Leone did not have such a luxury. I kept the shower brief, thinking back to the young girls in the villages where I had lived and how they carried water on their heads, water that was often contaminated with giardia and/or amoebic dysentery; it was the lack of safe drinking water that inspired me to start a water well project while in the Peace Corps.

Feeling overwhelmed by the possibility of war erupting again, I did the only thing I knew to do: I prayed and then meditated.

As I sat in silence, I practiced a breathing and meditation technique. Slowly, I began to unwind, and my mind started to calm down. Several minutes into it, I sensed a presence, a familiar one. I was surprised She was there, and I could feel a tingling sensation go up my spine and settle in my heart. Tears began to form in my eyes as I mentally called to Her. The response was almost immediate, as a flood of love came pouring through me, saturating every cell of my being. All fears

disappeared and I had a profound feeling that everything was all right. The intoxicating love went on for over an hour. Exhausted from the immense energy and my mind cleansed of all thoughts, I finally passed out and fell into a deep sleep.

When I awoke the next morning, the staff in the hotel was talking about a coup attempt in Sierra Leone. I later learned that the house I would have stayed in was caught in the crossfire. CNN was filled with news about the fighting in Freetown and I knew my family back in Indiana would be concerned and that I needed to send a message to them. The good news was that the coup attempt failed, and the United Nations, British, and Sierra Leonean troops held control of Freetown and a large portion of Sierra Leone, which meant a possible stop to the violence. We would be able to set up a new Talking Drum Studio.

While I felt completely safe and relieved for the people of Sierra Leone, the dramatic contrast between the deep ecstatic experience of love and the harsh realities of war was hard to reconcile. The experience, and many others that were to come, provided an intimate exposure to the dualistic nature of the human existence — deep pain and suffering, an instinctive response to do something about the pain of others, and a growing, almost haunting, awareness of a transcendent state of being underlying it all. My heart was being ripped open, bringing me deeper into my own humanity and allowing something to flow through, something that would drive me nearly mad and into ever-deeper searching for meaning and peace.