

LIFE SUPPORT / *LIVE TO TELL*

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Torturers around the globe obliterate the sanctity and integrity of the individual—the essential oneness of body and mind—for the crudest of political motives. Yet, even after the most horrific harms, in the direst of circumstances, it may just be possible for human dignity to rise. A decade ago, I waved farewell to a New York performance career to become a dance/movement therapist with a mission of empowering persons and communities whose bodies and spirits have been broken by torture or war, helping them recognize themselves as survivors, not only as victims. It has been an awesome privilege serving women whose villages have been decimated, boys who have seen their families slaughtered before their eyes and have gone on to commit atrocities themselves, men who have been tortured day after wretched day. In each case, I strive to help these sufferers identify the resources, whatever they may be, that supported their survival. This realization can usher in a resurgence of meaning and possibility, such that the mind and body begin to work together again as one.

For 21 months, beginning in January 2005, I was blessed to coordinate a community healing and trauma recovery initiative, run by the Minneapolis-based Center for Victims of Torture, in Sierra Leone's Kailahun District. Like other countries suffering the consequences of a prolonged and devastating war, Sierra Leone established an official Truth and Reconciliation Commission to produce an impartial record of the war's history. Beginning in March 2005, with the event described below, CVT sponsored a series of meetings for people to learn about the TRC, its conclusions about the causes behind the conflict, and its recommendations for ensuring sustainable peace and reconciliation. In hopes of sharing the TRC's findings with remote communities that might not learn much about them otherwise, Witness, a New York human rights group founded by Peter Gabriel and others, produced and distributed an audiovisual record, *Witness to Truth*. It was this video that we screened for groups small and large across Kailahun.

When our program succumbed for lack of funds last September, it was heartbreaking to say goodbye to this place and its people. Staying on and sustaining a dedication to healing in the aftermath of terror are the two dozen paraprofessional counselors I helped train and supervise. Today, with the formation of their new Community Association for Psychosocial Services, they press on, heroically endeavoring to fulfill the awesome task of reintegrating body and mind in postwar Sierra Leone. As for me, I observe from a distance, and begin writing a book from my experience that tells, like the passage below, how in patience human hearts can rise at times above the worst of human madness.

Buedu, Kailahun District, Sierra Leone, March 2005 Some forty women have gathered for our first screening of *Witness to Truth*, a documentary describing the horror of the Sierra Leone war, as investigated by the nation's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Looking back together at events that are agonizingly fresh, everyone is riveted to the screen throughout the hour. At moments the brutalities are far too much to bear, even for me—the only person in the hall not in Sierra Leone during the decade beginning in 1991, when the people of this country were plunged into hell.

With the end of the video, our facilitator, speaking Kissi in reassuring cadences, asks for a moment of silence for those lost during the eleven-year war. Asking for silence is scarcely necessary. No one says a word after the visions of nightmare. Although silence is always difficult to interpret, there is strong nonverbal evidence here that the atrocities described and made visible in the film have reawakened memories harbored deep below the surface for some time.

We ask if anyone wants to speak about the film, share her reactions to it, tell what it may have animated within her. Throughout, our staff of six shows in action as well as word that we are in no hurry. Sharing is welcome, but not obligatory. If you have something to say, it is made clear, you are welcome to speak here—or to visit one of our trauma counselors in private later—to tell your story; to describe how you endured the war, or what your hopes are for the future. Our counselors' experience at holding people's pain and grief is manifest. As their supervisor, I'm so relieved to see they know what they're doing.

For several minutes it seems that the dusty women's center will hold tight to the agony without giving voice to it. Then an elder stands and paces forward to face those gathered. She speaks slowly, hauntingly, and everyone is right there with her, determinedly listening, holding her for this time in our hearts. She tells about the men who captured her, how they killed more than twenty members of her family. She is alone now, and frightened often. They stole the corrugated zinc, she says, leaving no roof on her house, and the rainy season is coming quick. The nods cascading across the room tell us others have the same worry. In this post-conflict zone, fear of being inadequately sheltered is no paranoia, and even the best counseling won't cure it.

There is a long silence before another woman begins to talk. She speaks in hushed tones of being captured on the nearby Liberian border, tied to a stake, and raped all night long by one fighter after another. Not content to possess her in this way, some chose to mark her as damaged goods. They blistered her arm, scarring it with smoldering metal, essentially branding her. She weeps quietly, trying not to wake the baby in her lap. It is clear that all of us gathered are sitting *with* her and the sorrow she carries for everyone. The silence is taut. Yet there is a profound patience here, borne of the shared experience of enduring the unthinkable, that affords the gathering an almost palpable buoyancy to balance the weight of the collective pain. As elusive and fleeting as solace may be, I see that our team steadies this equilibrium respectfully, with solemnity and purpose. I'm proud to be one of them.

Writing now about these gatherings, it hits me what a remarkable honor it was to be there and take part. I remain in awe of the counselors I supervised, especially considering what they themselves had suffered. Each one had survived the same kind of anguish that pervaded that screening. They told me later of living in a community completely terrorized, where machine gun-toting combatants would push wheelbarrows piled with the body parts of dismembered corpses down village paths. The occupying rebels literally forced people to buy the human flesh as ‘meat’—as if to annihilate even the idea of common humanity; to prove that through deliberate application of absolutely monstrous cruelty they could reduce the population to any depths of depravity. Powerlessness thus became the very currency of terror.

Like everyone else in the area, my counseling team lived through these unspeakable horrors—not for a few hours, but for years. Even so, every one of them made it to the job each day. Most of the time, despite all odds, they worked tirelessly to help people navigate the torment of their memories—honoring their pain, that all might in time move forward, once again restored to meaning, to dignity, and hope.