



Viewing Points

Rwanda: Escaping the Victim-Abuser-Rescuer Triangle

The following is an excerpt from an article from *Quaker Thought and Life Today*, written by Laura Shipler Chico who currently works for QPSW as the Peacebuilding in East Africa programme manager. For the full article see: www.friendsjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/remember/downloads/2009/HC12-51075.pdf

Solange is my friend and a highly accomplished facilitator in Friends Peace House's HROC program. She is 25. She was 13 when the Interahamwe, a Hutu paramilitary organization, tore the roof off her family's house, dropped down inside, and murdered her parents in front of her eyes. She survived because one of the murderers turned to her and told her to "*Get out, get out*" before the rest of the group turned to kill her and her sisters. She survived because Hutu neighbors hid her for two days in their house, and because of a million other small things that added up to the saving of a life.

Three days ago, Solange told me a story. A man in Kibuye, the lakeside community where Solange lives and works, wrote her a letter. He had been a participant in one of her HROC workshops, and he wanted to approach her but was afraid. Although she knew he had recently been released from prison, she suggested that they meet and talk face to face. And so they did. And he began to talk: During the genocide he and his wife had done terrible things, he told her. They killed many people—so many they were not sure how many—and when they were killing they did so with zeal. Forty bodies were found buried around their house. They had done terrible, terrible things. This man had heard Solange's testimony during the workshop. He knew what she had been through, and he knew that she did trauma healing work. He wanted to tell her his story. He wanted to tell her what he was going through now. He wanted to start to heal from all that he had done.

"It is something," Solange said, "to be trusted. That is something. Here in Rwanda, who can we trust?" Solange said she was afraid, but she sat and she listened. She listened deeply. She listened to all that this man had encountered since he was released from prison—his home had been destroyed, his land gone to weed. "These people," she said, "you know they have problems too. And so, even though I don't

have much money, I gave him 5,000 francs [about \$10]."

Here, the roles are becoming blurred —is Solange a victim, or is she a rescuer? Is the man an abuser or victim? Solange, with a grace as clear as cool water, recognized that this man was giving her a gift. He trusted her. And so, she wanted to give something back. She listened. And she gave him money to help restart his life. Our triangle is fading, blurring, mixing back into that tangled complexity that is human nature trying to heal.

When I asked Solange for permission to tell this story, awed by her capacity for compassion, her unwillingness to stay the victim, and her ability to see a man like that as a complex human being who abuses and suffers and saves like the rest of us, she said, "Yes. It's no problem. Please tell everyone you know. Because, to me, this man—it is not that I think what he did is okay, but now, this man, to me, he is a hero."

There is no clear path for untangling the corrosive and deeply ingrained roles of victims, rescuers, and abusers, but Solange has given us one possible way. It strikes me that Solange did not try to save this man, and he did not try to save her. Instead, they have subtly reoriented themselves so that now they are side by side, looking at their broken lives, looking at their broken country, together. They are each on a journey, and for a while they fell in step with each other—traveling companions; healing companions on a long, long road.

And this is a lesson for me. This work is not about saving anyone. It's about being together. It's about being angry together, overwhelmed together, hopeful together. It's about grieving together, seeking answers to impossible questions together, and allowing ourselves to be inspired by each other's hope as we muddle on. It's about humility and the willingness to set aside mutual exploitation in order to be fully capable of sharing what we have. It's about listening, learning, and teaching. I ought not to be here to help Rwandans rebuild and heal their country. I am here, instead, to help heal and rebuild our wounded world, together with my friends and colleagues—side by side; on a long, long road.

*This article originally appeared in the Fall 2006 issue of the AGLI newsletter
Peaceways*

Possible reflective questions to stimulate discussion:

1. If you had been in Solange's position, what do you think you would have done? Would you have met with the man? How do you think you would have felt?

2. Solange was very scared, but she met with the man anyway. Why? Why do you think she gave him the money?
3. Have you ever been in a position where you have been hurt and found it difficult to show compassion to the person who hurt you? How did you feel?
4. *'Time alone cannot heal'* *'We must forgive each other'*

Discuss these comments from the film. What do you think needs to take place to help people heal? Do people need to be able to forgive to move forwards? Do you think this is possible following genocide?

5. The roots of the 'tree of hope' were described in the film as: 'love, peace, reconciliation and acceptance'. What do you think needs to happen to help people grow hope in their hearts? What do you think people need to have inside them (qualities/beliefs/faith) to be able to show compassion?