SURVIVAL: A GRACE … A DECISION

Pascale Dalcq

For Natalie, Patrick, Trish, Odile and Jean, and for the Sisters of the Carmel of Cyangugu, Father Modeste, the Sisters of Notre-Dame de la Clarté-Dieu and the monks of Notre-Dame d'Orval.

This song is for you,
Man of the Auvergne, who very simply
Gave me a few bits of wood
When I would feel the cold …
Just a bit of a fire,
But it warmed my body,
And it still burns in my soul,
Like a fire of joy.[1]

In these verses, full of tenderness and humility, the singer Georges Brassens pays homage to Marcel, the man who, with his wife, Jeanne, saved his life during the Second World War by giving him refuge. He speaks also of the simplicity of humble gestures that can leave a permanent mark on our soul, even when performed unconsciously. The imprint left by such signs of friendship is one of gratitude—a gratitude that needs to be expressed, so that the supreme value of such acts is not lost to human memory.

The story that I am about to share follows the same path. It is meant as a song of gratitude for the simplicity of those who literally

[1] Georges Brassens, 'Song for a Man of the Auvergne' (1954).

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saved my life, at a tragic time in the history of one country—a time which would indelibly mark my own life history.

Departure for Rwanda—The Call

Having been committed to the religious life for several years in a contemplative community, my life seemed, in the simplicity of a daily existence offered in prayer, to have a stability that would last for ever. In November 1992, through the grace of a chance encounter, I was led to discover the needs of our monasteries in Africa, particularly in Rwanda. One newly founded monastery required urgent help, and this seemed to offer me an opportunity to live out my ideal of mutual assistance, solidarity and sharing—values learnt long ago in a simple, ordinary family, where they were taken for granted. I had had the privilege of learning respect and love for all human beings, regardless of their differences, from my parents and grandparents. I was soon going to have to rediscover these values in a way that I did not suspect.

On 23 June 1993 I left for Rwanda, the country of a thousand hills, the country of perpetual spring. This departure had all the attraction of a door opening: the allure of an encounter with another reality, another culture, another world. Admittedly, I knew that the situation in Rwanda was not ideal. In an effort to gain a better understanding of the country before moving there, I had made contact with missionaries who had lived there for over thirty years and who had a deep attachment to the Rwandan people, and also with Rwandans

living in Belgium. All had described to me a profoundly likeable country and people, which had nevertheless been wretchedly torn apart, again and again, by lethal inter-ethnic confrontations. I knew about the start of the civil war that had been ravaging the north of the country since 1990, but this did not diminish my desire to help the sisters who were throwing themselves so generously into the venture of founding a new community.

The unreserved welcome that I received at my arrival confirmed for me what I had heard about the Rwandan people and gave me hope for a brighter future for the country—but it did not cause me to forget the tension in the air. Travelling across the country filled my eyes and heart with a wonder that lives in my memory to this day. Five hours of travel in a bus from Kigali to Cyangugu made me realise that the 'country of a thousand hills' really earned its name. And the location of the Cyangugu Carmel, on one of the hills facing Lake Kivu, only enhanced my wonder.

Gradually I learnt to live a new life, in the simple warmth of Africa: in the warmth of the climate and in the warmth of welcoming hearts. The monastery, which was still under construction, offered a prayerful atmosphere. Our life was organized around mutual assistance with other communities, and the income from our workshops made possible a modest but real solidarity with those in need. The door was never closed to those who knocked. Time passed by peacefully while our projects took shape. Every morning, the sound of life waking in the hills awoke us also to the beauty of a new day.

Menace and Sudden Horror

Without doubt, the tensions in the country were increasing as the months passed. Sometimes one heard whispers of terrible things concerning 'what was about to happen'. But who could have really thought the unthinkable? And then, one morning, it did happen.

When we woke up, the sounds over the hills had given way to silence: a heavy, brooding silence. The Congolese women who came down to the frontier, as they did every morning to go to the market, found themselves turned back by a fence that was suddenly closed to them. Then came the nameless horror. The massacres began all around us, as they did all over the country, with houses on fire, screams, gunshots. How many banged on the door of the monastery in the days that

followed? We were not counting. To these frightened strangers we would offer a bed in the hostel, a meal. Sometimes, in the time it took to go and get the meal in the kitchen, the person we had welcomed just a few minutes before would have already disappeared.

And now fear and sleepless nights began to take over, until we were forced to face up to the decision as to whether to shelter where we were or try to leave the country. What was really happening? It was genocide, as people had told us repeatedly for the last thirteen years, and, following close behind, the blind massacre of all those who refused to submit to a murderous ideology.

We took to the road, desperately searching for a way to save our lives, and as we did so the facts became clear to us in all their horror: the unending spectacle of Red Cross lorries collecting corpses from the ditches; the countless road-blocks—necessary, we were ironically told, for the security of the country; frontiers that were hermetically sealed, and, above all, encounters with the killers, the all too numerous killers. For the killers were not soldiers in an army who had been trained to kill, or guerrillas engaged in a continuing armed struggle. The killers were people like you or me, simple, ordinary people, who had been living together as neighbours in the hills all their lives, just as rural people do all over the world. They were of all ages, even children who looked as though they were no more than twelve years old, and who would boast

Rwandan refugees

of having killed their own friends. How could this be? How had it been possible for human beings to be manipulated to such a point? The crazed expressions, filled with bloody hate, on the faces of such ordinary people who had been transformed into killers would be permanently engraved on our minds and hearts as survivors. This was the image of evil, in all its horror, that was imprinted on our memories as much as, perhaps more than, the unbearable fear of dying under the slash of a machete, or of agonizing sorrow for the fate of those we loved. Why? How? No socio-political analysis of the genocide in Rwanda will ever be able to answer these questions.

Walking in the Night

In the chaos I was separated from my sisters, and we lived many long weeks in uncertainty. My heart was imperceptibly closing up. There was no joy in having saved one's life when so many friends had not survived and when we had no news of so many others. The following months, in Africa and then back in Europe, were spent reading and rereading the lists of the dead, and establishing contact with survivors. At first, when we came together, we would exchange news, but we were gradually becoming shrouded in a deeper and deeper silence. This silence, which we were scarcely to break for a long time, was mixed with an equally 'opaque' feeling of isolation. What could we say, to whom, how? How could we express the unnameable, the incomprehensible? Little by little, the memories took away all taste and meaning from the life which was all that remained for us. The good wishes of our friends, the words of comfort … everything seemed derisory when, in some sense, our hearts had stopped beating.

And then, what was there to do? So many of us had left everything in a country that we had never intended to leave. How long was this chaos going to last? In July 1994, when I met my sisters again in Brittany, there was still so much uncertainty about the future. How long before we could imagine returning to Rwanda?

Throughout these months, we looked for somewhere where we could hope to rest and recover, but most of us became enclosed gradually in silence, solitude, depression. Even our closest friends found it difficult to be of any help to us, at least for a while. I had the good fortune to be received into an abbey of Trappist monks, nestling in the heart of a wooded valley, where the silence and beauty were at least

some balm for too many wounds. The respect of a fraternal and silent welcome also helped me to find the rest that I needed so much. But nothing helped me to find sleep, or prevented me from jumping at the slightest sound. All joy, all hope had left me.

Believe … in whom? In what? Between unspeakable anger and an oppressive feeling of guilt for still being alive, how could I rediscover any meaning, or even just a good reason for living? The desire to die was always there, and it would remain for a long time to come.

The Light of Life

All the same, one morning at the end of May, a ray of sunlight, a gleam of hope was to break open this apparently impermeable shell. While I was leaving the abbey church, two people with learning disabilities, who had been at the Eucharist with a Faith and Life group,[2] approached me: a woman and a man, whose names I will never know. Both took my hand in great simplicity, saying 'Hello, what is your name?' I smiled; then we had a brief exchange before they went back to their friends.

What happened inside me at that moment? Will I ever really know? The image that stays with me is that of a ray of sunlight after months of raging storm. When, years later, I tried to express the moment in words, I stammered it out like this: having survived a situation where hundreds of thousands of people were massacred because of their ethnic differences, I found myself approached with kindness by two people whom our own society does not hesitate to class as 'different', even when it does not simply reduce them to their 'differences'. Of course, society takes care of them, but it keeps them at a distance most of the time—sometimes this is an attitude of indifference, sometimes of outright contempt. If one thinks about it, these two people had every right to consider me to be 'different', particularly as I was a complete stranger to them. But all they wanted was to make contact with me, with a simple 'hello' and a hand offered in friendship.

A ray of sunlight after months of raging storm

Far from a world where treachery and death seemed to have gained the upper hand, two open-hearted people came to tell me that there was still room for life, that friendship and happiness were not dead.

[2] An association established in 1968 to set up fellowship groups among people with learning disabilities, along with their families and friends.

Other people like them were to come and say it again in their own way over the months that followed, taking my hand to invite me to continue my journey on the path of life. But at that very moment, the shadow of death moved away just a little.

In November that same year, a l'Arche group[3] was spending a weekend in the same abbey. I was invited to participate in their activities. Still 'convalescing', I accepted without much enthusiasm. One evening, as I came out of the church, I noticed Patrick walking up and down in the cloister. Thinking he was waiting for his friends, I was going to pass him by, but he was actually waiting for me. He hugged me, and said simply, 'You are sad, and I am going to comfort you'. The only reply I could make at that moment was to turn away in tears. But those simple words touched me so deeply that they opened the door a little wider to my return to life.

Since that weekend, I have also met men and women who have chosen, for a time or for the rest of their lives, to share their lives with handicapped people at l'Arche. Their witness confirmed what I was dimly sensing: that there were places where differences were a source not of death but of life, places where humanity and friendship had a right to exist. Other contacts with l'Arche during the following months (including living in a l'Arche household in Belgium for a month) let me gradually glimpse another way of life. I found myself relearning the values I had received from my parents and grandparents from people who were thought to be 'different', but whom I was discovering to be 'masters of life', endowed with incomparable wisdom. Solidarity, respect, sharing, welcoming others whoever they might be—all these I was rediscovering thanks to Juliana and many others.

Choosing to Accept a Life that Is 'Given Back'

Many more years were needed for me to learn how to live again, years largely taken up in rest and therapy; in time, my journey ended up bringing me back to l'Arche. I spent more than seven years at a l'Arche community, and I have been accompanied on the way by so many friends who have become very close to me. The capacity of people with learning disabilities to welcome others never fails to touch me and

[3] Founded in 1964, l'Arche creates communities all over the world where people with learning disabilities and assistants share their lives together.

challenge me. I know that the assistants, who come from all over the world, would say the same.

At the end of 2004, I was able to return to Rwanda. There I found my sisters, who had gone back to the country after six years in France. With the help of my Rwandan friends, I was able to find the courage to confront extremely painful memories in the very places where the drama had played out. We continue together on our path of forgiveness and healing. Gradually the silence is making way for words, words that grow calmer and calmer. In Rwanda, I witnessed many initiatives for reconciliation and forgiveness, many gestures of hope for the future. In the simplicity of daily life, faced with the amount of reconstruction that is necessary for the future, people are learning again to live together; or simply learning again to find some meaning to life.

I also met a Faith and Light community there. Several days a week, it receives up to 135 children and teenagers with disabilities, as well as their mothers. It offers the mothers a support and fellowship group, and activities (including some schooling) to the children and teenagers, as well as a meal. There, as in Belgium and Canada, I found the same smile, the same welcome, the same simplicity. With no hesitation, hands were stretched out to this unknown person of another race. Hands took hold of mine to invite me to discover something of their lives.

The genocide did not spare people with disabilities: they were massacred like the rest. For once, tragically, they were treated just like everyone else! In a country where there is so much rebuilding to be done, their situation is certainly not given a high priority. But there also

hearts allow themselves be touched and people reach out to listen to others in a common humanity.

In our 'developed' societies, we proclaim loudly our concern to take care of people with disabilities, our desire to respect their dignity—after having kept them isolated for centuries in institutions. In societies where the very notion of a person with a disability is difficult to understand (in Rwanda, you often hear them spoken of as 'sick people'), some people of good will have mobilised to offer them support and a proper home. When I think of these situations, I have just one wish: that people with disabilities be seen simply for who they are, human beings with a dignity equal to that of all other human beings, people with values like any other person, who have so much to give to their neighbours.

Every person's life is woven from joys and sorrows. We all have to make our own way between joy and suffering. It is never easy to bring life and humanity to our brothers and sisters. So it is important to listen to people whose 'handicaps' are different from our own, people who have usually not closed up their hearts even after experiencing repeated rejections. They continue to give an unconditional welcome to all those that life brings them to encounter. At the heart of the darkest human dramas, we surely need many forms of support, both therapeutic and of other kinds, in order to find the way to live again. But nothing, absolutely nothing, ever replaces the power of a smile and an outstretched hand.

On a path which could have led me to death, hearts that were open to life touched my own: choosing life again was given to me as a grace. But it is also true that the reality of all survivors is made up of decisions which are played out in daily life. It is also a grace to discover the life force which remains in one's own heart in spite of the images of death that have overwhelmed it. And it is yet another grace to choose to share with those whom life puts in our path the light of the life that dwells in us. Our own smile or our outstretched hand sometimes represents a real decision. As Marie Noël has written,

> Nothing is truer than loving. My soul a divine wind
> Carried you once to the fiery summit of the mountain.
> But every day, you must climb up the ugly, narrow and rugged path

Which takes you there step by step.[4]

Faithfully, we need to welcome life, so that in our turn we can share it with courage and fidelity.

translated by Ann Carr

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[4] Marie Noël, *Les chants de la Merci, suivi de Chants de Quatre-temps* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), 69.