



PeaceWays AGLI

Healing from Slavery, War, and Genocide: Lessons from John Woolman and Friends in Rwanda and Burundi



By David Zarembka

Presented at the 59th John Woolman Memorial Lecture
October 22, 2006

African Great Lakes Initiative
of the Friends Peace Teams

John Woolman is my favorite Friend. My second favorite Friend is Levi Coffin. My worse favorite Friend is my daughter, Joy. Let me explain. When Joy was about 12 years old, she would come home with her “First best friend, her second best friend, etc.” and each day the “First Best Friend” would change. This constant rotation of friends annoyed and intrigued me so one day I asked her where I fit in this hierarchy of best friends. She replied, “You are my worst best friend.” Although as the parent of a 12 year old I was at the bottom I was pleased to have made the list.

These three favorite Friends have something in common. They all opposed slavery. Joy is director of the Break the Chains Campaign of the Institute for Policy Studies which rescues people from conditions of servitude and slavery—in Washington, DC no less. In his book *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy*, Quaker Kevin Bales of Free the Slaves reports that there are twenty-seven million people in slave-like conditions in the world today—more than ever before in recorded history! Hence John Woolman’s and Levi Coffin’s work to end enslavement is still with us.

Another trait they share is that they have written books. Levi Coffin’s *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin: The Reputed President of the Underground Railroad* does not have the literary quality of John Woolman’s *Journal*, but he surely lived an action packed life as he and his wife, Catherine, helped 3300 slaves on their way to freedom. Joy’s book about Black/White families in England, Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Jamaica is called *The Pigment of Your Imagination: “Mixed Race” in a Global Society*. As a biased reader, I will not comment on its literary merit, but I will say that I have read it about ten times. At this point I can probably quote large passages of her book, but that is another lecture.

Instead I want to start out with one of my favorite quotes from John Woolman: “It’s good for thee to dwell deep, that thou mayest feel and understand the spirits of people.” I like the “dwell deep.” This is why the African Great Lakes Initiative of the Friends Peace Teams—AGLI as we call it—sends people to Africa for five week workcamps. The purpose is to get to know people and their condition. Note that Woolman does not talk about language, exotic customs, and other external characteristics, but rather “feel and understand the spirits of people.”

In that vein, Joy has a nice passage on this issue in her book. She was visiting Kenya, where her mother is from:

I decided to head off to the McMillan Memorial Library to begin my research on race relations in Kenya and found that most of the relevant books were written during the colonial period. Books on race frequently came in the form of outdated how-to manuals on handling servants and poorly written travelogues by Europeans about the quaint customs of “primitive people.” Few books mentioned interracial offspring and those that did, predictably did so in a negative manner. One book published in 1916 professed that “contact between the races at an increasing number of points would lead not only to miscegenation, which between persons widely differing in origin produces a weak progeny, but also to the degeneration in the white community.” After several frustrating hours of reading repeated references to Africans as “backward savages” and “animals,” I felt an overwhelming need to leave the oppressive library for a breath of fresh air. I began thinking about the traits attributed to animals: the exotic, dangerous “other” to be observed from afar. Were the Kenyan photo models at the tourist hot spots seen, even now, as part of this animalistic stereotype? I figured the best way to calm down was to go outside and join the Kenyans sitting on the front steps of the library, enjoying their lunch. The melodic sounds coming from the mosque next door helped soothe my irritation and I took in the sights around me.

Within the first 15 minutes, five safari vans of sun-kissed tourists came down the avenue in front of the library. Each spacious van was equipped with an open-hatch sunroof that allowed the occupants to stand up while peering at the “exhibits.” I had not realized that the safari began in the city of Nairobi. The first van caught my eye because a man inside was capturing every magical moment with his video camcorder. People inside the vans were snapping photographs of market stalls, legless beggars, the mosque, and any other item of interest which could be described as uniquely Kenyan. I watched the video camera lens as it swept across those of us

sitting on the library steps. Was I the observer or the observed? Was I a spectator of the “exhibit”? Or part of the “exhibit”?

Let us say that these tourists were not “dwelling deep.”

In 1763 during the French and Indian War John Woolman visited the Delaware, or Lenni Lenape, Indians. How did he view his visit?

Love was the first motion, and then a concern arose to spend some time with the Indians, that I might feel and understand their life and the spirit they live in, if haply I might receive some instruction from them, or they be in any degree helped forward by my following the leadings of Truth amongst them.

Because of his more long-term involvement with slavery, Woolman’s journey to visit the Indians is frequently overlooked, but it was a most important peacemaking activity. Remember that fighting between the Indians and whites was ongoing. Many influential Quakers advised Woolman not to go—including a late night meeting the day before he was to set out. The journey took three weeks, was two hundred miles each way during rainy weather over trails, and was solely to be present with those afflicted by the war.

In 1998 I was the Baltimore Yearly Meeting representative to the Friends Peace Teams and we were discussing the latest crisis in the Balkans. I said something like, “Why are we always taking about the Balkans. Some of the worst wars in the world are happening in Africa and moreover they involve substantial Quaker communities and we never think about them?” Mary Lord then spoke up and said, “What do you want to do about that?”

I proposed that Friends Peace Teams send a delegation to visit Friends and others in Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi for the following purposes:

1. To find out how the various wars and genocide were affecting the Friends
2. To find out what peacemaking activities they were doing
3. To see if there were ways to partner with the African Quakers in their peacemaking work.

After I received approval, I wrote to all the African Yearly Meetings plus any other peacemaker that I could find. Many immediate replies came back. We sent a delegation of seven people. I went to Rwanda and Burundi. In Burundi I had an experience which mirrors Woolman’s visit to the Indians.



David Zarembka is the coordinator of the African Great Lakes Initiative of the Friends Peace Teams. He is a member of Bethesda (MD) Meeting but is sojourning at St. Louis (MO) Meeting. He has been involved with peace work in Africa since 1964 when he taught Rwandan refugees in Tanzania. He is married to Gladys Kamonya, a Quaker from Kenya, has three children, Joy, Tommy and Douglas and two step-children, Douglas and Beverly.

PEACEMAKING IS HARD WORK



BUT CONSIDER THE ALTERNATIVES

Philadelphia area. The late night meeting was to inform Woolman of recent massacres in the area he was going to visit. Lest you think this is ancient history, a similar event occurred in the summer of 2005. AGLI introduced the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) in Bukavu, eastern Congo. There has been a war going on since 1996 which has killed about 4,000,000 people—more than any other war since the Second World War. Mary Kay Jou, from New Jersey, was one of the AVP facilitators and wrote about the practice workshop they were doing with the newly trained Congolese facilitators:

On the morning of the day that we were scheduled to leave for the basic apprentice workshop in Bunyakiri, we received word that there had been a massacre there recently and six people were dead and many wounded. After much research and a visit to the local hospital where the wounded were brought, we found out that the massacre had taken place a week before and was in a village 12 kilometers away from Bunyakiri. The facilitation team using a consensus process, decided to travel to Kuniyakiri as planned.

When the team arrived we were warmly welcomed by a group of people who were happy to see us. [Similar to the lesson I learned above—being present is at times gift enough.] The church choir and the children's choir sang songs for us, and everyone prayed for a successful workshop...

There is a saying in Kirundi (the language of Burundi) “A real friend comes in a time of need.” I visited Musama Friends Church. It was up-country perhaps five miles off the main road on a very rugged, gutted dirt road. We went to visit this church because the youth of the church—meaning those under 35 years of age—had identified 97 vulnerable families in the community—the elderly, the blind, women without husbands. They rebuilt their houses when they were destroyed in the fighting. We stopped at the house of a blind man whose home had been rebuilt by the group four times. This was all done without outside support belying the common belief here in America that things only happen in Africa when funds are pumped in by us from the wealthy countries. They showed me their church and the clinic which was no more than a few poles and some plastic sheeting and spoke of their hopes for a better future.

But the important point was that they were so pleased that someone from the outside had come to visit them! They felt that someone recognized and remembered them. This gave them hope. I myself never did so little—all I did was look around, ask a few questions, shake hands with lots of people, and show some interest in their existence and well-being. The lesson here is that when there are conflicts in the world, we must be real Friends (capital “F”) and visit in the time of need.

The second lesson is that we ought not to let danger deter us.

Woolman’s journey to the Indians was considered dangerous—as least by his fellow Quakers in the

We should not put our concern for our own safety ahead of our concern for the afflicted.

Does anyone know who Theoneste Bagasora is? I have never yet had an American give the correct response to this question. He was the “mastermind” of the Rwandan genocide, presently on trial at the International War Crimes Tribunal for Rwanda in Arusha, Tanzania. He was the leader of a group called “Hutu Power” who thought that the majority Hutu should rule Rwanda and that all Tutsi should be eliminated. Their theory was even more diabolical than that used in Nazi Germany during the Holocaust. Their

idea was to force every Hutu to participate in the genocide of the Tutsi so that there would be a Hutu solidarity of silence and impunity. If everyone was guilty, then no one could be tried for any murders committed during the slaughter. In one hundred days about 850,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu were killed,—organized from the top down by Bagasora and others in a most effective manner. This was about 75% of the Tutsi in the country at the time. The attempted power grab failed and the Hutu leaders, rather than ruling over an ethnically “pure” Rwanda, are now on trial in Arusha. Many of the worst perpetrators of the genocide have fled to the Congo, thereby creating a lot of conflict and killings there, while over 120,000 accused of participating in the genocide have spent more than ten years in jail with no chance of even an unfair trial.

Theoneste Bagasora’s theory of genocide may have failed in Rwanda, but it succeeded here in the United States where we are heirs to a policy of silence and impunity. The Lenni Lenape Indians who John Woolman went to visit no longer exist as an organized group—in 1867 its remaining remnants joined the Cherokee Nation and now live in Oklahoma.

Their demise was not pretty. Here is one quote from the War of 1812 when they had been pushed into Ohio. An American militia from Washington, PA attacked a group of Lenni Lenape Indians who had converted to the pacifist Moravian Church.

On the pretext of leading the Indians to safety, they [the American militia] gathered together the residents of Salem and Gnadenhutzen in the latter village. When the Indians were assembled, they were formally accused of being accessories to murder, and were sentenced to death. March 8 was set as the day of execution, and while the Indians sang hymns taught them by their pastors, prayed, pleaded for their lives, and protested their innocence, they were beaten to death with mallets and hatchets, and scalped. According to Moravian records, 56 adult Indians were killed (29 men, 27 women) and 34 children of various ages... (The militia) burned the buildings at Gnadenhutzen to the ground, including the structures in which they heaped up the corpses of the victims. The also burned to ashes the neighboring villages of Schonbrunn and Salem and then

loaded their horses with the spoils of the raid, which they divided and took home with them. [Pages 316 -317, The Delaware Indians: A History, by C A Weslager].

It strikes me that we Quakers ought to visit the remnants of the Lenni Lenape Indians first to ask them how they are doing and second to apologize for our failure in helping them to survive. As Woolman says, “[I have for] many years felt love in my heart toward the natives of this land who dwell far back in the wilderness, whose ancestors were the owners and possessors of the land where we dwell, and who for a very small consideration assigned their inheritance to us.”

We need to stop denying our extremely violent past and present—to the Indians, to those who were in slavery, and to others. Let me give you a current example.

Over ten years ago when we were trying to ban handguns, there was a demonstration at the Capitol in DC. Twenty thousand plus pairs of shoes were displayed state by state representing the people killed the previous year by handguns. This was the year after a Japanese high school foreign exchange student had been killed by a handgun while trick or treating with friends on Halloween night. His parents had come for the demonstration and so the shoes of those killed by handguns in Japan the previous year were also displayed. There were fifteen pairs of shoes.

The third lesson is that we must address the roots of this violence in the US. It is my conviction that our



societal and domestic violence is closely tied to US international war-making violence.

I now want to turn to the conflicts in Africa.

Let me begin by giving you a one paragraph history lesson. During the genocide in Rwanda, the hate radio station told people to throw the bodies of the Tutsi into the river so that they would go back to Ethiopia. As a result where the Kagera River enters Lake Victoria, the Tanzanians pulled out over 20,000 bodies. They were afraid that the dead bodies would poison the whole lake. Everyone in Rwanda and Burundi speaks the same language, has the same culture, lives next to each other, and sometimes intermarry. The Belgian colonial rulers needed a divide and conquer strategy so they codified the existing groups—Tutsi were supposed to be tall, thin cattle herders who came from Ethiopia while the Hutu were the shorter, stocky farmers. Why is there this connection to Ethiopia? According to early twentieth century race theory—remember Joy’s comments on her research in the library in Kenya—, the Ethiopians were the southern most branch of the white race. Consequently if the Tutsi were from Ethiopia, they would be the ruling class over the Hutu. The Belgians gave the Tutsi all the benefits—education, jobs, government positions, and required them to rule over their Hutu neighbors. The Hutu were into forced labor gangs, controlled by the Tutsi with whips. This is how the many roads in these mountainous countries were built. A few generations of this type of overt discrimination and favoritism made these two groups bitter antagonists.

How were the Quakers in Burundi affected by the conflict which began in 1993? How were the Rwanda

Quakers affected by the 1994 Genocide and its aftermath? As I give you some quick biographies of Friends in Burundi and Rwanda, do not dwell too much on their ethnicity, but look at them all as human beings.

Because his story illustrates the ambiguities of the Tutsi-Hutu divide, I’ll start with Adrien Niyongabo. He was born in Bujumbura and at age seven his father left his mother and went up-country. His mother was a Tutsi so Adrien grew up thinking he was a Tutsi. As a teenager—like teenagers everywhere—he decided to seek his roots. He went up-country and found his father. Lo and behold, his father was a Hutu. No one can be mixed—one takes the ethnicity of the father. So Adrien became a Hutu. Here is his story in his own words:

In October 1993, the death of the first Hutu elected president gave rise to a new round of massacres between Hutu and Tutsi. The night of the 23rd, the governmental military attacked my suburb. The Hutu were forced to leave the area to hide themselves. As many others did, I followed the queue toward the hills surrounding Bujumbura. Unfortunately, after just one mile, I was stopped by two men with guns; stopped and forbidden to follow the others. Before I could even ask why, they added that I was a Tutsi—the stereotype because I was tall and thin. They said I was following the Hutu who fled so that I could investigate how things were settled and maybe go back to tell the governmental Tutsi army. “So, we are going to kill you,” they said. I kept quiet, waiting, expecting to see God in a few seconds.



Memorial to the eight Quaker theological students and others killed in 1993



Sizeli immediately remembered that God is a God of Peace and decided to seek reconciliation



In a short time, a man came up to where we were and asked them what I was doing there. They answered him the same way they had told me before. And the man said, "Please, I know who is his Father, who is his Mum. He is a Hutu as we are. Let him join the others." One of the two men asked him: "Do you know him really?" The man responded by saying, "Yes, yes!!!" Turning to me, the two men with guns said, "You are saved, guy. You can keep on following others!" Could I believe it? The dark night looked to me like a new morning. My life was given back to me again. Praise the Lord!

Adrien's brother-in-law, Charles Berahino, also a Hutu, was attacked with machetes in Bujumbura at the same time by a group of Tutsi youth. As they were about to kill him, Charles, like a good evangelical Quaker, loudly said his final prayer to God. One of the attackers then one attacker said, "He's a Christian. Let him go."

David Niyonzima, the former General Secretary of Burundi Yearly Meeting, was the head of a small Quaker theological school in up-country Kwibuka mission station.

In revenge for the killing of Tutsi in the area, the Tutsi army came and attacked the theological school, killing eight of the eleven students, two ironically enough were Tutsi. David was there and had a key to the garage behind the school and opened the door and hid in the well. A soldier came to the window and he could hear his superior asking if anyone was in the garage. David told me his heart was pounding loudly. The soldier replied, "No one is in there." David hid there the rest of the day and during the night fled to his parents' house.

David is a Hutu, and his wife, Felicite Ntakaruka, is a Tutsi. They were afraid that Hutu would kill her in retaliation so the next two weeks, David's family hid Felicite.

Felicite's sister was a secondary school student at that time. When the soldiers came to her school, they told the Tutsi to go on one side and the Hutu on the other.

Felicite's sister and one other student stayed in the middle, declining to join one group or the other. She was killed by the soldiers.

Remember that while we know the stories of those who were saved by miracles, we know few stories of those where a miracle did not happen.

Let us now turn to Rwanda.

Cecile Nyiramana is a Tutsi and during the genocide she hid under a bed for a hundred days. She was pregnant. She was hidden by friends of her husband who is a Hutu. In 1998 he was accused of participating in the genocide and has been in jail ever since. Cecile is founder of a group called, Women in Dialogue, which brings together Tutsi survivors of the genocide with Hutu women whose husbands are in jail accused of being perpetrators of the genocide. She is from both groups! Cecile will be one of the evening plenary speakers at the Friends General Conference Gathering next summer.

Sizeli Marcelin, a Tutsi, is the Coordinator of the Friends Peace House in Kigali. At the beginning of the genocide his whole family was killed. He was hidden in the rafters of Kucikiro's Friends Church for a few days until the Hutu hiding him told him he had better leave. Sizeli spent a night traveling the short distance to the Amahoro Stadium which was being (sort-of) protected by the UN. He was so angry that he decided he would join the Tutsi army to get revenge, but then he heard a Christian group singing a song which had the sentence, "Only God can seek revenge." Sizeli immediately remembered that God is a God of Peace and decided to seek reconciliation which is what he has been doing at the Friends Peace House.

Sizeli told me this story in 1999 giving me the exact dates when he learned that one son and one daughter had survived the genocide. The son is named Patrick Mwenedata. Here is part of his story. Patrick was 13 at the time of the genocide. When his family was killed, he became the head of a "family" of seven children. As he was running near the Church, he was holding the hand of his three year old cousin. He heard a

grenade. explode. In order to run faster, he picked up his cousin. “Blood was flowing everywhere. I put him on the ground, covered him with a few leaves and ran on.” His little cousin had already died in his arms.

Later an *interahamwe*, the militia responsible for much of the killing during the genocide, caught him by the coat. He slipped out of his coat and ran into the forest. As they were running, another person who had been hiding in the forest began to run and the *interahamwe* ran after the other person. In other words, Patrick is alive because someone else probably is dead. In these days of anti-Muslim rhetoric in the US, it is important to note that Patrick was hidden by Muslims in a mosque for part of the time of the genocide.

Solange Maniraguha was also 13 at the time of the genocide. On the first day of the genocide the *interahamwe* broke through the roof of her house and killed her parents. Then one of them said to Solange, “Get out, get out!” which she did. So the person who killed her parents saved her life. Some Hutu neighbors hid her for two days. Two hundred and fifty thousand Tutsi survived the genocide and most of them were saved by one or many Hutu. Life is much more complex than “good” versus “evil.”

These, my friends, are the Quakers of Rwanda and Burundi. Today all are extensively involved with peacemaking, reconciliation, and community healing. What lessons can we learn from the work these Quakers do?

AGLI partners with Burundi Yearly Meeting and the Friends Peace House in Rwanda on a program we are developing called “Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities”—HROC, pronounced “He-Rock” In these workshops, ten Hutu and ten Tutsi are brought together for three days in order to understand their trauma, grief, anger, and to rebuild trust. After one of these workshops in Mutaho, Burundi, Agnes Ndyishimiye, a Tutsi from Mutaho, Burundi, whose husband was killed during the violence, attended one of these workshops. In this region of Africa, people are often afraid of being poisoned. Giving a person food

and accepting it is therefore a sign of forgiveness and reconciliation. The Hutu administrator held responsible for the killing of the Tutsi, including Agnes’s husband, was now 25 miles away in the Gitega prison. At the end of the HROC workshop she said:

I am happy that I leave this workshop with a new dream that there will be a special day. That day, I see myself going to the Gitega prison where our former administrator is kept. I will ask to see him. I will be bringing him food. I will hug him. He will not, maybe, recognize me. I will tell him that I come from Mutaho Internally Displaced Persons camp. I will show him that love has replaced hatred. I will be happy that day.

During the follow-up day a month or so later, a group from the workshops decided that they would visit the prisoners. It took some time and much negotiation for this to happen, but it did. Here is a picture of the group that visited the prison. Adrien Niyongabo interviewed many of the people present and Aime-Claude, the drive who took the group from Mutaho to Gitega said,

Understand that you are called to do good to the one who did wrong to you. In that way, instead of pushing the person away from you, which will put all of you into isolation, you bring the person back to you, which will put all of you into communion. May all Burundians follow this excellent example.

Wouldn’t it be nice if all Americans followed “this excellent example?” We push two million Americans away each year by putting them in prison, we push the “terrorists” away by trying to kill them, we isolate anyone whom we label as “bad” or “evil,” we push away those who are homeless, addicted, or mentally ill. We push away those who are on the other side of social, moral, or political issues. What would happen if “love replaced hatred?” Our lesson is that we need to work to restore that of God in those who have done bad things.

Understand that you are called to do good to the one who did wrong to you. In that way, instead of pushing the person away from you, which will put all of you into isolation, you bring the person back to you, which will put all of you into communion.

Although the HROC program deals with community healing from trauma, we find many testimonies such as this one:

I would have been the big loser if death had taken me away before having attended this HROC workshop. I had seen how happy are those who came from these workshops you are organizing and I wondered what they were given. I was overloaded with my bad feelings and this workshop has been an opportunity for me to put down some of them. More, I had been quarreling with my wife and many times I used violence over her. Thank God that I have learned how I can manage my anger. I am ready to change and bring peace in my family.

One could say that this is what he was expected to say and that he is still “using violence” over his wife. Here is a testimony from the wife of another man:

After the workshop that I attended, I wished that my husband would get this extraordinary chance too. Fortunately, God answered my prayers! He participated in the last one you conducted. My home has become a paradise! Before we attended these workshops, my husband was always furious. He was treating us as slaves. My home was a hell. Since he had participated in the HROC workshop, he has now time for the children and me. When he comes from work, he greets us, tells us how things have been for him and asks us how we have been doing too (what he never did before). Now he consults me before making any decision. You understand that there is reason for me to be this joyful woman.

There are so many testimonies like this. I think we have gotten things backwards when we say that peace must start in the family, then the community, the nation, and the world. Family violence is the result of societal trauma as people take out their anger and frustrations on those closest to them. There is too much domestic violence in the United States which we attribute to personal problems. We need to look at the conditions in our society which make it so violent and then begin to address the roots of this violence. Is not one of these roots our greed of obtaining the American Dream at

the expense of others both in America and the rest of the world? Woolman outlines clearly in “The Plea for the Poor” and elsewhere that if everyone lived modestly there would be enough for everyone. I think this is still true. Should we not focus on the “World Dream” where everyone would have clean water/sanitation, health care, food, shelter, and education?

The fifth lesson is that we need to address the roots of violence both here and elsewhere to reduce societal and domestic violence.

Laura Shipler Chico has just finished a twenty month tour in Rwanda with AGLI and she wrote in a report:

Is it the Quaker notion that there is that of God in each of us that gives the Friends here [in Rwanda] such gall? Is it that unwavering hope that even a man who has butchered and hated and thieved can be redeemed? Or is it simply a thirst that comes out of raw hurt, to find each other again? Whatever it is, Rwandan Evangelical Friends, through Friends Peace House, are doing something that very few other groups in Rwanda have tried. They are bringing killers and survivors together. They are inviting them to sit down and look each other in the eye.

To illustrate this, let’s hear part of a report of a recent workshop by Theoneste Bizimana, the HROC coordinator in Rwanda. I should explain that if a person grew up in Uganda, this means that they are Tutsi refugees who returned after the genocide.

The workshop was very good even though at the beginning it was difficult for the group to feel free and open, to trust each other. We were with two social work students from Butare National University who are doing their practicum in Friends Peace House. They wanted to participate in our work in the field. This was the first time for them to attend a workshop like this one even though they had learned some theory. Both of them grew up in Uganda and they didn’t see what happened in Rwanda. They could not imagine how survivors and people who killed their relatives can sit together again and share food. I remember when we were

sharing what we learned from the workshop, one man from the jail said that he killed ten people and three were from the family of one person who was there. Sarah one of those students wanted to flee or to get out, she got fear! She told me she was thinking that he can do that again.

Or as one of the released prisoners said after confessing and being released:

I have accepted what I did in the genocide and I have been released. Through this workshop I see that I caused trauma to many people, especially those whose relatives I killed. I traumatized myself because I had an animal heart. I had done that, but I repeat, I ask pardon. Forgive me. I did bad to you, to all Rwandans, even to myself. I believe since now we become brothers and sisters, we can all say together, "NEVER AGAIN."

Joy has a younger brother, Tommy. When she was little, she might say, "Tommy is a bad boy. He hit me." I would reply, "Tommy is not a bad boy, but rather he did a bad thing." Woolman's approach to the slaveholders was not to degrade or demonize them, but to speak with them with respect, indicating that he believed their holding of slaves was contrary to "Eternal Wisdom." Recently a woman called me on the phone who couldn't remember who killed who in the genocide. She asked, "Who are the bad guys and who are the good guys?" I responded that life is much more complicated than that.

Do you remember Solange, the thirteen year old Tutsi girl whose parents were killed by the interahamwe who then told her to "Get out"? She is now one of the main HROC facilitators in Rwanda. After a Hutu released prisoner attended one of the workshops, he asked to speak with her. Here is how Laura Shipler Chico tells the story:

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....

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 OK—but now, this man, to me, is a hero."

Yes, this man did some very terrible things. But he is alive in this world and he still has that of God still within him and can become a caring person. Regardless of what bad things someone did in the past, we must believe that they can be transformed and act upon those beliefs. If Rwandans don't do this, how will they ever heal their country? Can we do this in America? Her lesson for us is that we must be brave enough to bring enemies together face to face to talk and reconcile.

The last testimony I wish to present is my favorite.

I am a Tutsi living in the Internally Displaced Person's camp. I was around ten when the war reached our area. I remember that day when Hutu beat my young brother to death. My mum asked our Hutu neighbor to escort her so that she could take my brother to the hospital. Pitilessly, he told her "Don't you know where you have buried your husband? Take him there too!" Hopelessly, my mum and I went to the hospital but my brother died in mum's arms

before we could reach the hospital. We turned back and took the trail to the cemetery. Only two of us, two females, buried my brother. After we were done, we went home crying. Since that time, I considered the Hutu man as a monster as well as his wife and children.

After the HROC workshop I attended, I used to sit and meditate. One day, I decided to rebuild the destroyed relationship with that family. Unfortunately, the man had died. Still, I went to his daughter, who is almost my age, and told her my sad story. I openly told her that this was the only reason that I hated them. She was very sorry to hear what her father did to us. In tears, she humbly asked if I would be eager to forgive her father though he had died, her family and her too! I responded to her that that was my aim for coming and talking to her. We are now friends, real friends. I have forgiven! Without HROC workshop skills I am not sure if I would have come to that decision.

What I like about this testimony is that it seems so natural. Here in the US, we heap our woes and misfortunes on a single, defining individual—Osama bin Laden, for example. We speak of that of God in every person, but do we act upon it? This young woman—and John Woolman—did. As Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.” The last lesson is an old one as we need to stop judging people as “good” or “bad.”

To end, let us review the lessons I have learned from these various people:

1. Rather than run from those in conflict, let us visit them.
2. Do not let danger deter us.

3. Let us confront the violence in the United States so that we lessen the wars, conflicts, and economic exploitation that the United States brings to other parts of the world.
4. Let love replace hatred. Let us restore that of God in those who have done bad things.
5. Let us address the roots of violence in order to reduce societal and domestic violence.
6. Let us bring enemies together to “look each other in the eye.”
7. Let us stop judging people as “good” or “bad” but answer to that of God in absolutely everyone.

And the unifying lesson:

8. Let us dwell deep that we may feel and understand the spirits of people.

Twice each year I visit the AGLI sponsored HROC programs in Rwanda and Burundi. People frequently ask me if it is depressing to visit places with such recent violent histories. There is no doubt that Rwanda, in particular, is not a happy place—people are tense, reserved, cautious, and wary rather than open, welcoming, and happy as they are in Kenya, for example. Yet I always come back, not dejected and sad, but rejuvenated and optimistic. Each time I see how Adrien, Solange, Theoneste, Sizeli, and so many, many others are working to heal the gashing wounds in their society, to bring reconciliation and even friendship to enemies, and to restore their society to a peaceful whole. Frankly when I return to the United States and see this country moving so, so swiftly in the opposite direction, that is when I feel discouraged. My calling is to work with Friends in the Great Lakes region of Africa. I have to leave it to others, like each of you who have been so kind as to listen to me this afternoon, to bring healing and reconciliation in this country.

Let us review the lessons I have learned from these various people:

1. Rather than run from those in conflict, let us visit them.
2. Do not let danger deter us.
3. Let us confront the violence in the United States so that we lessen the wars, conflicts, and economic exploitation that the United States brings to other parts of the world.
4. Let love replace hatred. Let us restore that of God in those who have done bad things.
5. Let us address the roots of violence in order to reduce societal and domestic violence.
6. Let us bring enemies together to “look each other in the eye.”
7. Let us stop judging people as “good” or “bad” but answer to that of God in absolutely everyone.

And the unifying lesson:

8. Let us dwell deep that we may feel and understand the spirits of people.

African Great Lakes Initiative of the Friends Peace Teams

The African Great Lakes Initiative (AGLI) of the Friends Peace Teams strengthens, supports, and promotes peace activities at the grassroots level in the Great Lakes region of Africa (Burundi, Congo, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda). To this end, AGLI responds to requests from local religious and non-governmental organizations that focus on conflict management, peace building, trauma healing, and reconciliation. AGLI sponsors Peace Teams composed of members from local partners and the international community.

For further information about AGLI, please contact
David Zarembka at:

dave@aglionline.org or
(314) 645-0336

Or visit AGLI's website at www.aglionline.org