FORGIVE AND FORGET

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SEARCH, MARCH/APRIL 2009

Rwanda’s warring population has a lot to account for, and a lot to reconcile. Can science point the way to understanding?

Alice Mukarurinda taught herself to write with her left hand in just one month. “My words were going left, right, up, down,” she says with a smile. “It took me five notebooks before I really got it.” Being a quick study is point of pride for her. Though her schooling was cut short, Alice is an educated woman. Not to be able to dash off a quick reply to a written inquiry—to be as stuck before the written word as those who can’t read it—is just one more way of losing a piece of yourself, and Alice has lost enough of herself already.

Alice is a survivor of the Rwandan genocide, the massacre of 800,000 Tutsis by their Hutu government and neighbors over three months. Alice’s mother and sisters were killed inside a church where they sought refuge; she and her husband ran from the church to the swampy marshlands near Nyamata, possibly the most inhospitable place in Rwanda, and hid there for two weeks. At the end of April 1994, a group of men discovered her hiding beneath the reeds. They took her clothes. They killed her baby. They swung at her skull with nail-studded clubs, and with one quick machete cut, one man lopped off her right hand.

That man is Emmanuel Ndayisaba. As Alice recounts what happened to her, Emmanuel sits next to her, looking down at his green plastic sandals. Just a few hours before, he was sitting in Alice’s home, sharing his gentle, sincere smile and joking with her four-year-old son. And a few hours from now, when Alice has finished telling her story, she and Emmanuel will walk the small dirt path toward their homes together, trading news about their families.

But at this moment, we are in the middle of the living past. In that story, Emmanuel is a genocidaire, a man who killed seventeen people in their own homes before he found Alice in the swamps. He is one of several men who “hacked her”—his words—until they thought she was dead. Whatever understanding they have come to in the fifteen years since the genocide, when Alice tells this story, there is nowhere for Emmanuel to look but down.

This is what reconciliation looks like in Rwanda: two people who would rather forget each other, bound together by their memory of the same atrocity, learning how to share a future. Not, one must note, because they necessarily want to, but because they’re too poor to have many other options.

Reconciliation is about people like Emmanuel trying to find peace where they can, through forgiveness—all the while knowing, whatever happens with the living, the dead will continue to haunt. “Even today, I see the faces of the people I killed,” he says. “I cannot ask them for forgiveness.”

It is about people like Alice, survivors who can be asked, hoping to find their own solace through granting forgiveness. “Of course I cannot put it behind me. It’s like a movie playing in front of your eyes,” she says. “But because I forgave Emmanuel, I don’t spend a lot of time thinking about it.”

In a country where very little makes sense to outsiders, this may be the most incomprehensible thing of all. In Rwanda, reconciliation is both religious message and public policy. When survivors like Alice say they have reconciled and moved on, it sounds suspiciously scripted, by either church or state, to those from liberal Western societies. Yet Alice and Emmanuel and many Rwandans like them insist reconciliation is working.

And like so many foreigners, I can’t escape incredulity. I’ve spent most of the last year living in Rwanda, talking with Rwandans about these issues. For all the empathy I can otherwise usually muster for individuals on both sides of a genocide story, I hit a cognitive wall when that story comes to forgiveness.
There’s a burgeoning literature dedicated to this question. Theologians and philosophers, conflict mediators and “peace builders,” sociologists and political scientists have all taken up the topic of reconciliation after mass violence. Each sees reconciliation as a tool suited to a variety of ends. But at its roots, reconciliation is a religious question, taken from the pages of the Christian scripture and built around notions of interpersonal and divine forgiveness. These are abstractions difficult to measure.

Unless you’re a scientist. The field of forgiveness research is still young, and the picture painted by its results so far remains impressionistic, but researchers across the scientific spectrum are finding proof that forgiveness is not just a state of mind; it’s a physiological reality. And, scientifically speaking, it’s good for us.

Starting in the 1990s, researchers across the scientific spectrum began investigating the psychological, neurological, and physiological effects of forgiveness, most often by asking subjects to imagine forgiving a transgressor (or, conversely, asking a victim for forgiveness). At first inferentially, and then directly, these scientists have linked forgiving behavior with better overall health. Some studies evaluated forgiveness as a method of intervention in psychosocial problems and found that those who adopted the behavior experienced a decrease in grief, anger and anxiety. Further studies have linked forgiving to lower physiological stress, a risk factor risk in conditions like coronary heart disease.

These benefits are derived from differences only machines can measure: how much our heart rates increase or decrease, how much we sweat, how furrowed our brows become, or how much the muscles around our mouths twitch when we think about forgiveness. In fact, the health benefits of forgiveness work much the same way the ministers of my youth insisted the divine does: imperceptibly.

Believers will say they have long known what science is now discovering. But even the most zealous may be surprised at how closely the scientific research tracks religious platitudes. Science suggests that when it comes to forgiveness, it is in fact better to give than receive.

Charlotte vanOyen Witvliet, a psychologist at Hope College in Michigan who has studied the physiological effects of forgiveness on both victims and perpetrators, found that victims who imagine granting forgiveness reap the benefits of lower stress levels—but not perpetrators who imagined asking for it.

It’s possible the difference comes down to anger. “Having forgiveness denied by a victim may be more sadness-inducing than anger arousing,” she writes, while “bearing a grudge against a perpetrator is more anger-arousing than sadness-inducing.” Anger triggers the physiological changes—higher heart rate and blood pressure, increased production of stress hormones—associated with poorer health. Whatever it may do to the mood and the mind, sadness doesn’t so adversely affect the body.

But Witvliet wonders whether this difference may also be about agency. Both victims and transgressors reported that forgiveness made them feel like they had recovered control of their situation, but they come to that emotion from two very different places. Granting forgiveness is active, Witvliet notes, while receiving it is passive. And when the transgressors in her study were asked to imagine their victims responding with overtures of reconciliation—that is to say, an invitation to participate as an equal in a new relationship—they experienced more stress than they did when imagining the victim holding a grudge.

All of which is to say, forgiveness and reconciliation are work. They literally make us sweat. For those who have committed offenses, it is easier to imagine dodging the work and letting the victim hold a grudge than to even imagine, let alone attempt, rebuilding that relationship.

It bears noting that the scientific research so far has focused on cases of transgression that might seem mild next to genocide. Researchers have looked at survivors of different kinds of trauma, from war veterans to sexual violence victims, but rarely at genocide survivors or perpetrators. One psychologist, Ervin Staub at the University of Massachusetts, has conducted forgiveness interventions with thirty people, mostly Tutsis, in Rwanda that suggest such interventions are successful in reducing trauma, at least among the Tutsi participants. But research on forgiveness is young, and there is much to be learned by applying these observations to situations with most severe of transgressions. Still, the science suggests that Rwanda, in focusing on reconciliation, may be on the right track. And the experience of ordinary Rwandans suggests that reconciliation is more complicated than science has yet discovered.

In 2005, Emmanuel joined a cooperative in Nyamata called Ukuri Kuganze Guhariana Ubumwe n'ubwiyungye, or “Let the truth bring unity and reconciliation.” There, he met Alice for the first time since the genocide. She didn’t remember him, but he recognized her face immediately. “I kept her face in my mind,” he says.

Emmanuel wanted to ask Alice to forgive him, but he knew the question would be even more difficult because she didn’t know who he was. So he made his apology elaborate. He planned it for a day he, Alice, and two hundred others were to build a new home for a member of their group. He spent nearly $10—a fortune in this impoverished village—on sorghum beer for everyone; the crowd relaxed and began to dance.

Then he took Alice aside.

“He fell on his knees and asked me to forgive him, and I kept saying, ‘Why?’” Finally, he confessed to her that he was the one who had hurt her—and she ran away.

Years before, she had promised God she would forgive anyone who ever confessed to her. It was as much a bargain she struck to learn about the past as it was a religious commitment. But when the opportunity finally came, Alice says, she wondered, “Can I actually do this?”
Neurologically speaking, forgiveness is not one event. The brain doesn’t choose to forgive without first assessing the forgivability of an offense. Usually, we consider this a matter of morality or justice—how wrong was the wrong, and what does the person who perpetrated it deserve? Our brains may be decoding the answer to this question independent of our conscience.

Neuroscientists Tom F. D. Farrow and Peter W. R. Woodruff at the University of Sheffield have found that our brains may make neurological distinctions that we have tried to blur, with ethics or religion, when it comes to our behavior. The part of the brain most active when we practice empathy, for instance, is not the same part of the brain that assesses whether or not the person we are empathizing with deserves to be forgiven. It’s too early to say so definitively, but Farrow and Woodruff write that the research “suggest[s] that attempting to understand others (i.e., empathizing) is physiologically distinct from determining the forgivability of their actions.” They also write that there is evidence, from neurological studies of empathy and other social judgments, that “we [may] more easily forgive people we like.”

Cases in Rwanda support this: It took a week of prayer and soul-searching before Alice decided to forgive Emmanuel. She says forgiveness was possible only with God, but if the neurologists are right, it’s plausible she came around in part because she liked Emmanuel. They had built up a friendship working together on community projects, and their comfort with and admiration for each other is easy to feel. They speak with an ease, almost an intimacy; they are quietly protective of each other, empathizing with each other as they tell the story of their relationship. When Emmanuel explains that he was taught to hate Tutsis from the time he was a child, Alice chimes in and talks about the discrimination she experienced as a girl in school. The story suggests what she does not say: I know how it happened, and where it came from, and I can understand it.

When Alice reveals that her husband’s family urged him to leave her after her attack, Emmanuel defends him. “I admire her husband,” Emmanuel says, “for deciding to support her. Not all Rwandan men would do that.”

Alice’s husband does not like Emmanuel. In spite of that, Alice maintains a relationship with the man she has forgiven, careful to confine their encounters to outside the home, so as not to anger her husband. It’s rather a daring move in a society still openly patriarchal, especially in the villages. “I don’t always have to do what he tells me to do,” she says with a sly smile.

For all their empathy, there’s one thing forgiveness has not brought: trust. The morning of my fifth meeting with Alice and Emmanuel, Alice called my translator, concerned. This was to be the last of our almost twenty hours of meetings. I mainly wanted to check facts, but also I wanted to meet Alice without Emmanuel. Anyone who has worked here long enough knows that women carry burdens they cannot discuss in front of men, and I wanted to give Alice an opportunity to talk about the things she ordinarily will not.

But she was worried about Emmanuel. Over fifteen minutes of beating around the bush, which is how uncomfortable information is usually conveyed in Rwanda, it became clear to me what the problem was: Alice thought that, if Emmanuel spoke to me alone, he might change his story.

It reminded me of a conversation I had in 2005, during my first interview with a Rwandan villager about reconciliation. Her community was being held up as a model of reconciliation, where perpetrators initiated a project to build houses for the survivors of their crimes. Everyone there agreed they had found reconciliation, rocky as it may be. But trust?

“No,” one woman told me. “Absolutely not.”

In today’s Rwanda, forgiveness is more than a religious idea. It’s an institutional disposition, at the heart of the country’s reconciliation strategy and built into its relationship with its citizens. Before being granted a lenient sentence, prisoners who confess to genocide must ask forgiveness from their communities, their victims—and their government. It sounds like a heavy-handed manipulation to many Americans, whose political tradition imposes space between the sacred and the state.

But the government plays a more direct role in the individual moral imagination in Rwanda than in the United States. When perpetrators of genocide try to explain their crimes, they invariably begin by saying, “We had a bad government.” Many continue to say, “I didn’t actually kill anyone, I stood in the back of the group, I only manned a roadblock where we separated people, I never wielded a machete.” But even those, like Emmanuel, who acknowledge the full extent of their crimes, implicate the old government. It is as if Rwandans have looked—and, many would venture, still do look—to their political leaders for moral leadership, a glance we have become far too cynical to cast in America.

This may be in part because there are so few other places in Rwanda to look. The churches here were the sites of some of the largest massacres; the Roman Catholic Church, in particular, has been implicated by historians for its collusion in the promotion of discrimination between ethnic groups and, eventually, its tacit support of genocidal policies—to say nothing of the participation of some of its priests in the killings. Churches, then, are not the most obvious places of abdication.

The genocide left Rwanda a moral vacuum, a country with a history whose only hope for heroes are the rebel militia that invaded the country and fought the *interhamwe*, the Hutu militiamen, from hilltop to hilltop even as the international community dithered about how to use the peacekeepers
already on the ground. The leaders of that military fight became the leaders of the new government.

So it's not actually that strange that when Emmanuel, haunted by the memory of what he had done, sought forgiveness, he went to the courts. In 1996, two years after the genocide, he turned himself in to a district judge, confessing his crimes with such hasty speech that the judge wondered if he'd been blackmailed into contrition. "No," he insisted. "I only want to ask for forgiveness."

"Whom are you asking?" the judge retorted. "You have killed everyone."

"That's why I've come to you," Emmanuel said. "I am asking for forgiveness from the government because I killed its people."

The confession didn't keep Emmanuel out of jail. He (and his father, who also participated in the genocide) were sent to prison in 1996; his father died there, and Emmanuel was released only in 2003, when the president of Rwanda, in an effort to save a penal system overwhelmed by 120,000 accused genocidaires, agreed to free those who had confessed. They would still have to publicly account for their crimes and ask for their communities' forgiveness.

That happens in a process called gacaca, a Kinyarwanda word that means "justice on the grass." Before the country was colonized, gacaca meetings sorted out small-scale community conflicts. After the genocide, Rwanda adapted the practice as a progressive kind of restorative justice. Over 12,000 communities hold gacaca trials once a week; the breadth of these courts, and the frequency of their meetings, has allowed the country to process a backlog of cases it says would otherwise have taken over two hundred years.

But gacaca is also supposed to promote reconciliation, by bringing the perpetrators before their neighbors and, if they so choose, giving their confessions. Contrition is part of the ritual: Every guilty plea must include a bid for forgiveness from the victims' families and the state. On the grasses of gacaca, judgment and reconciliation go hand in hand. Even confessions are presided over by nine inyangamugayo, or "persons of integrity," elected by the community to serve as both judge and jury of the accused.

Among the inyangamugayo at Emmanuel's gacaca trial was Alice. She schooled him in the process, advising him that if he lied, even a little bit, they might send him back to jail. She arranged for the file from the district court system, in which Emmanuel had confessed in 1996, to be brought to gacaca as proof of his contrition. When the court accepted his confession and apology, she leaned on the inyangamugayo to give him light community service work. Instead of quarrying stones or building roads, as other confessed genocidaires do, Emmanuel delivers the gacaca summons to the accused whose turn is next.

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The science, so far, says that it is as important why you forgive as that you forgive at all, at least in terms of health benefits. The psychologist Witvliet found that the motivations of those who choose to forgive can affect the physiological elements she measured. Together, these observations saddle the science with a hefty question: Is it really the forgiveness that's good for us, or the state of mind we bring to it? And if it's the latter, can we reap the benefits while withholding absolution?

That is not an idle question in Rwanda. For every pair like Alice and Emmanuel, there is an individual like a friend of mine whom I'll call Bernard. Bernard is a young man who lost his entire family in the genocide. He thinks most confessions in Rwanda are a concession to societal pressure—albeit a necessary one.

"If you are the doer of bad things, you have to search for reconciliation," he says. "You have to be the end of the bad things you created."

But the benefits the science has found don't come from perpetrators approaching their victims; they come from victims forgiving their perpetrators. Unless the circle is completed, forgiveness both sought and granted, it's unclear whether any real healing can happen, biologically speaking.

The same seems to be true of spiritual healing in Rwanda. Optimists say it takes hard work by both parties; pessimists, like Bernard, say it's impossible.

"Maybe if people here in Rwanda had been killed by foreigners... but seeing your neighbor that you've been feeding every time, that sometimes you've been late to school fetching water for him—seeing him cutting you, your family, with machetes?"

No talk of the science of forgiveness—of lobes and cortesxes or blood pressure and pulse changes—can sway Bernard. What happened in the past is, for him, simply irredeemable.

"Survivors have been disappointed. Those people were our brothers. They were like our family members. How can you forget and forgive that foolishness?" He shakes his head incredulously.

"No. It's nonsense."