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Finding Hope

Hope is something in life that allows people to dream the impossible. It gives them the courage to live on when they could just as easily give up. It makes each night bearable because when the sun rises life might just turn around. Hope eludes some; they see no reason to keep living because they feel the future holds nothing for them. Others have hope in abundance, and they seem to almost exude it wherever they go. Often, it is difficult to even see hope in tragedies, like the Rwandan genocide. In 1994, nearly one million Rwandans lost their lives in less than 100 days, due to a complex web of lies and hidden motives. Two books, *Left to Tell* and *Deo gratias*, contrast one another with two opposing views of hope amidst one single horrific event. The first is a woman's story of how her faith and hope helped her through a personal hell. The second depicts a young man trying to make sense of this genocide, but all hope seems lost.

Left to Tell, narrated by Immaculée Ilibagiza, is the account of her experiences in the Rwandan genocide. She starts with her childhood; Rwanda was her paradise. She continues through her school years, explaining the tensions that began to form between people due to the differences in tribal ethnicities. Then the genocide starts. For 91 days she stayed in the cramped bathroom of a Hutu pastor's house with six other women. During this time of great terror, fear, and doubt she drew closer to God than

she had ever imagined possible. Her faith in God gave her hope, which permeated every part of her life.

Before her time in the bathroom, Immaculée learned a tough lesson about hope. It can be a double-edged sword. At the very beginning of the genocide she tried to remain optimistic about the outcomes, but this gave her family a false sense of security. Her brothers became upset with her, and they almost felt betrayed by her optimism. Immaculée said, “Both of my brothers looked at me as though I were insane...’The killing is going on all around us. We passed dead bodies on the road coming here, and most of them are people we know! *We’re trapped*” (Ilibagiza 63). The killings had started in her own neighborhood. Her father sent her to Pastor Murinzi’s house for safety, and that was where she spent the majority of the genocide. As she drew closer to God, she gained a hope in Him that nothing could shatter.

This hope allowed her to dream the impossible and achieve it again and again. She survived the genocide, even though there were killers looking for her specifically. She reunited with old friends she had long thought dead. She met new people who became a family for her, providing her with a place to heal and a support system to be there for her when she needed them most. Her friend Sarah fit into both categories, offering Immaculée the comfort of a familiar face and a place to stay.

Sarah was so special to me, and her offer so generous and inviting that I...moved into her parents’ house that very day...I couldn’t have asked for a more peaceful and loving home than Sarah’s...It was the perfect place for me to reestablish my close personal connection with God... and the perfect place for me to mourn my family and begin to heal. (Ilibagiza 191)

With this new place to stay and heal, Immaculée was able to continue rebuilding her life. She learned English, and the United Nations hired her after she took a few computer proficiency and English tests. She even fell in love, which she never thought possible after dealing with so much hatred and pain in her life, and had two children.

This hope also gave her the ability to do one more thing; it allowed her to forgive. When she met the man who had killed her mother and brother, the man who had hunted her, she forgave him. She knew that in order to continue living her life, she needed to forgive this man for his actions. She struggled with forgiveness throughout the entire genocide. It was too difficult. Finally, though, she realized that if she wanted peace in her life, forgiveness was the only option.

Her ability to forgive these people gives others hope. At the end of her story she said, "He left me to tell my story to others and show as many people as possible the healing power of His love and forgiveness" (Ilibagiza 209). Through her own story, she wants to bring healing to the world one person at a time. She even ends her story with this simple statement of hope, "I hope my story helps" (Ilibagiza 210). Hope pervades this entire book, showing a light in an otherwise dark situation.

In Jean-Philippe Stassen's graphic novel, *Deogratias*, hope is difficult to find, if it even exists at all. Deogratias was a young man, probably no older than sixteen. Unfortunately, he faced more in the 100 days of this genocide than most do in a lifetime. The reader learns through his flashbacks what Deogratias had experienced and the consequences he had to endure. He had to deal with the turmoil of losing almost everyone he held dear. The church was his family, and one by one he lost them.

Extremists killed some; others chose to leave the country. Left all alone, Deogratias couldn't cope.

He became addicted to Urwagwa, a banana beer they served in Rwanda. When night came, and the stars came out, Deogratias became a dog without the alcohol to numb the pain. Stassen not only depicted him as a dog, but Deogratias truly believed that he was one; he became less than human. Even at the end of the novel, when a soldier asked Brother Philip if Deogratias was a friend of his, he replied, "He was a creature of God" (Stassen 78). When he was sober he was unable to cope with the destruction and death that surrounded him, and so his humanness slowly slipped away from him. As the novel progressed, he started to become a dog in the middle of the day, no longer able to keep a hold on his sanity in the sunlight.

At the end of the book, Deogratias revealed to Brother Philip that he actually poisoned three people. The first was a nameless French soldier. Deogratias had known this man during the genocide, and he returned to Rwanda as a tourist after the killing had stopped, when it was supposedly safe. The other two were members of opposing parties. One was Julius, an extremist Hutu; the other, Bosco, a member of the Rwandan Patriotic Front. The French found a bottle of poison on Deogratias, and arrested him for the murder of their fellow soldier, nothing else. Brother Philip asked them what was happening, and they replied, "He assassinated a French tourist. The Embassy's physician did an autopsy and determined the cause of poisoning. It's the product farmers use to fight parasites on cow's hides." (Stassen 77). Despite the fact that he killed at least two other men, he was only facing punishment for killing a white man.

This novel seems to be devoid of any hope. Deogratias saw everyone he cared for dead. He even saw the dogs eating their corpses, and he was unable to stop them. These were graphic and appalling images Deogratias could never stop from rolling through his mind. At the beginning of the novel, he even tried to save the life of a literal cockroach because he had seen so much death around him he couldn't stand to see any more. Every life mattered to him, even the life of an insect.

Unexpectedly, this novel does bring hope. The story itself may not, but the actual book does. This book provides hope because Stassen wrote it. It includes an aspect that most other books omit; it shows the reader the human side of the Hutu extremists. It's difficult to see people as human when they claim that their killing is good and just. Extremists tried to explain away their actions by saying that they were "...working with God. God loves justice" (Stassen 59). Deogratias was among these killers, it was possible he was even a rapist.

Lost and confused, Deogratias was a young man trying to make sense of a world that had lost all order. Yet, it's difficult to see him as an evil person, unlike most of the other extremists. Most saw the extremists as monsters because of their cruel actions. Deogratias assisted the Hutu extremists, but tried to keep a Tutsi girl safe. When this girl tried to leave his room he said, "It's much too dangerous...I'll save you in spite of you: every morning, I'll lock you up!" (Stassen 63-64). These actions seem contradictory, but they just prove that committing evil deeds doesn't necessarily make someone evil. Deogratias was human, but sometimes he became even less than human. This allows the reader to experience an unexpected feeling for a killer: pity.

Hope appears in an assortment of forms, and some are easier to see than others. While *Left to Tell* talks of forgiveness and love, *Deo gratias* only shows loss of human life and loss of humanity itself. Hope can lead to disappointment and pain, but it can also lead to courage and strength. It enables people to make it through a living nightmare because they know that it will eventually come to an end. Hope allowed Immaculée to give her life a new meaning and purpose. *Deo gratias* allows the reader to hope because the Hutu extremists can now be seen as humans and not just monsters. Even in a tragedy like the Rwandan genocide, hope exists.

Works Cited

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