

## What does it mean to transcend victimhood?

My work in armed conflict resolution has enabled me to meet tremendous human beings, who have reshaped my own definition of courage, and generosity of the human spirit and showed me that *anyone* can be powerful, no matter what their life conditions were. The common ground with the people that I've met is that they've made a decision to face what most greatly angered, terrified or hurt them, and turn it into a source of inspiration and transformation for all of us. The situations that many of these people have come from truly represent the darkest places of humanity, the depth of violence that we wreak on one another. And from the depths of this darkness, they have made the choice to be a light. Even more, they have taken their experiences of darkness; of violence and suffering and turned it into the very source of their own transformation.

At first I felt deeply humbled to presence the courage and the strength of the human spirit in these people. But in my experience I came to realize that this source of strength and courage is our human legacy, though it may lie untapped by many of us. It is my experience that through listening to the stories of others, we can be inspired by the possibility to move beyond the stuck places in our own lives where we have not yet seen our own power to create something different.

One of these inspirations was Elias, who had been a political prisoner on death row for 18 years in Uganda, and was released a few years ago. This man, after sharing his story of liberation, reminded me: "You are so lucky my daughter, to have a gift and do so much with your young life. Now take the bull by the horns... don't waste one second of it. And share it, share it with as many people as you can."

This is the possibility that I am stepping into. In my work I seek to share the message that the courage and possibility for transformation exists in each one of us. It is for this reason that I know I must share these stories, to turn them into a book and even a documentary film, so that the vastness of human potential that I have experienced can be source of inspiration for all of us.

### The first stories

I began to reshape my idea of what it means to be a victim when I went back to Colombia in January of 2006 to research for my MA dissertation about non-violent resistance communities. I went to visit the Peace Community of San José of Apartadó. The members of the community are people who had faced guerrilla and paramilitary attacks on their homes and communities, who had become victims and sought refuge as "displaced persons" in the local municipalities, living off of government assistance and begging. They then came together in the radical stance that they refused to be victims, and also refused to fight, and decided to return to their lands to live and work in peace. Twelve years later they are still holding their ground nonviolently, with the help of international peace building organizations who accompany the community as "unarmed bodyguards". Still, over 170 people, mainly leaders have been killed since the community's formation. When I spoke to Esperanza, leader of the community council, I asked her if she was afraid for her life. She smiled and shook her head. "I prefer to die here, with my dignity, than live the life of the *desplazada* (displaced), with no dignity. We don't want people's money. We don't want the government to re-locate us and build us houses and give us food. We just want to be left alone, to work this land, to take care of ourselves."

In 2006 I began giving workshops with victims and ex-combatants in Colombia, offering yoga and other tools for healing and inner peace. I was invited to participate in the first international conference on reconciliation in Colombia, and there I met Father Michael Lapsley, an Anglican priest from South Africa who was active in the anti-Apartheid movement. While he was serving ANC members in exile he was sent a letter bomb that caused him to lose both of his hands and an eye and shattered his eardrums. I listened to Father Michael reflect on learning how to live his journey from victim to survivor to "victor" as a quest to be more fully human. He speaks of the two hooks that now replace his hands, as a visceral example of how all of us human beings are "damaged" but in recognition of our own "brokenness" we can find a deeper connection to our own humanity. While acts of violence and war cause suffering, from this suffering it is possible to find a way forward. Because of my own experience of "brokenness" he says, I can help more people to heal, in a way I have become more fully human.

I found a great connection to Father Michael and inspiration in his story, and he also resonated with the healing work that I was doing with the ex-combatants and victims. He invited me to come later with one of the ex-combatants that I was working with to a conference that was being held in South Africa. The conference, entitled Healing of Memories, brought together people from all over Africa, and the world, united by the experience of violence and the paths of healing from it.

Over that month of the Pan-African conference, I asked people to share with me stories of healing and forgiveness. The people who most deeply inspired me were the ones who had taken their experience of victimhood as an inspiration to transcend, and create a new possibility for their own lives that contributed to the transformation of others. An example of this is Jean-Baptiste, who watched his entire family killed in the Rwandan genocide. As we spoke, he told me "This year I know that I will go to the man who killed my mother and tell him that I forgive him. I will ask him to take my hand so that we can work together, because we must move on. But I also must wait for him to be ready. I will give him time." As we parted he asked me to come to Rwanda with this work and told me "Please keep your heart so very open, in spite of what you see in the world around you."

In another moment I had dinner with a woman, Ginn Lourie, a white South African who started a foundation to work with ex-combatants with one of the former commanders of the Resistance army. This organization is named after her daughter, who was killed in an attack that the Resistance army made on the civilian population. The commander with whom Ginn has co-founded the organization, is the very same man who ordered the attack that killed her daughter. "You just don't ever know the capacity that you are able to forgive. You just don't know what you are capable of, until you are put into the situation and you just ARE."

Elias, upon release from prison has dedicated his life's work to holding healing workshops with prisoners on death row, and trying to abolish the death penalty throughout Africa. When I asked him to share his experience with me he told me,

"Daughter, I am very happy.... You know, God is funny. He will do things that we human beings will not ever understand. We will think that he is unfair. When my children were 4 and 2 I went to jail and waited to die. When I was released they were 22 and 20 and no longer knew me as a father. I lost all of

my money, I lost my friends, I lost my children's childhood...But now I am free. And those who framed me to send me to jail, they were overthrown. And my friends, many were killed for their money. And because I went through all of this today, I was invited here to South Africa to speak, and now I have met you....So God is funny. He knows the lessons for us. If we are lucky, we will get them. Then we can help others. And so I say God is good."

In this journey, through the stories that I collected, I have been reminded how to love. To love like Madukele who holds workshops with people infected with HIV/AIDS in Kwa Zulu Natal. "We must restore their sense of their own humanity," he says, "and our own. We must create a sacred space, where they understand that I love them with AIDS, and that they do not have to change anything about themselves to be worthy of loving".

What inspired me so much about these individuals is that in the face of all of the death, the injustice, the inhumanity that they have lived, these people remember how to Love. I mean the kind of love that really matters, Divine Love. This Love is big enough to face genocide and apartheid, death row and AIDS epidemics, to look in the face of the man who killed your mother and to still reach out and say "you are worthy of loving."

If I am to understand that there is any reason for which I came to this earth, this is the closest that I can find. This is a Love worthy of dedicating my life to. And, as Elias reminded me, I know it is my path to share it with as many people as I can.