Study Guide for *Left to Tell*

By Immacule’e Ilibagiza

PART ONE: The Gathering Storm

1. How would you describe Immacule’e’s family of origin? How similar or different is it from your own? What role does the Catholic faith play in their every day lives?
2. How would you respond if a child you loved told you she or he wanted to be a sister or priest? How would you support that desire in the child?
3. It is clear that being Tutsi or Hutu was critical in Rwanda’s history. Can you think of any time in our history when being a certain nationality meant something as significant? What was the general response to such national identity?
4. Education is highly valued in Immacule’e’s family. How does education and faith contribute to Immacule’e’s growth as a person? Which do you think is most important for her? Which is most important to you? Why?
5. The political scene in Rwanda is quite tense as Immacule’e continues in secondary school and on into college. How would you approach life if you were confronted with the situations she faced each day? Please be as specific as possible.
6. Have you ever experienced discrimination because of who you are—because of color, gender, nationality, faith, etc.? How did you respond to those who held you down? How do you remain firm? What sustains you? If you have not experienced discrimination, how might you respond to those who seek to prevent you from doing something or being a certain way? From what would you draw strength?
7. Immacule’e’s brother, Damascene is the one who brings the reality of the scene in Rwanda out into the open in the family home at Easter. That very evening the president is killed. How do you find yourself reacting as you
read chapters 5, 6 and 7? What feelings are emerging in you? How do you want to respond?

8. Immacule’e’s family home became a haven for their Tutsi and moderate Hutu neighbors in the wake of the president’s death and the mounting violence. What does it mean to offer sanctuary to others? What was the cost to the family? What is the cost to us as we offer sanctuary to others today? Why is it the right thing to do?

9. When Immacule’e and her friend, Augustine leave her family home for Pastor Murinzi’s house her father presses his rosary into her hand. What religious symbols or faith artifacts do you possess that have been handed down to you by your parents or other significant people in your life? What will you have on to your children or others whom you care about?

10. As the violence and killing began, Immacule’e and Augustine, and later her brother Vianney were initially “welcomed” into Pastor Murinzi’s house. The next morning Augustine and Vianney were told to leave; it was too dangerous for the pastor to try to hide two young men in his household. Have you ever experienced a “conditional welcome?” How did you respond to it? Have you ever extended a “conditional welcome” to another? How did you feel about that? What did your “conditional welcome” say to the other?
PART TWO: In Hiding

1. In hiding in Pastor Murinzi’s small, cramped bathroom Immacule’e mentions hearing the “devil whisper in her ear.” For her, that is an experience of doubt and fear and a question of faith. Have you ever had a similar experience? What does doubt or a question of faith look like to you?

2. Throughout her terrible ordeal Immacule’e clings to the rosary her father gave her when they were first separated. To what do you cling when faced with adversity, faith struggles, sadness and grief? What from our Catholic tradition gives you strength and hope?

3. Immacule’e experiences times of profound contemplative prayer while hiding away in the small four foot by three foot bathroom. The prayers of the rosary and passages from Sacred Scripture which she had memorized are gateways for her prayer. Have you had experiences of prayer similar to Immacule’e’s? What has lead you to those moments of unity with God? What can you do to strengthen contemplative prayer in your life?

4. In chapter 11, titled “Struggling to Forgive,” Immacule’e writes, “But try as I might, I couldn’t bring myself to pray for the killers. That was a problem for me because I knew that God expected us to pray for everyone, and more than anything, I wanted God on my side.”

Think about the social tragedies of our day—September 11, 2001, war, injustice in all its forms, what does it take for you to find peace? What helps you pray for those responsible for the tragedies or events that confront us? What does praying for the resolution of these situations and those responsible for them ask of you personally?

5. On page 95 at the very beginning of chapter 12 Immacule’e comments on how her soul is nourished “while horror swirled around me.” She goes on to note that, “even as my body shriveled, my soul was nourished through my deepening relationship with God.”

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Why do you think this was Immacule’e’s experience? What was her disposition throughout this ordeal? How is your soul nourished in times of extreme difficulty? What do you do to feed yourself at those times?

6. The genocide left many people alone. Young people throughout the country were orphaned. Yet, Immacule’e felt that, “...even if my parents had perished in the bloodshed...I would never be an orphan.” Her relationship with God was so strong and transcending that she knew she was not alone.
   Have you ever experienced the closeness of God like that? What is your image of God? How does your image of God shape your relationship with God?

7. When the French soldiers arrived they announced their intention to set up, “safe havens for Tutsi survivors.” The women who had been in hiding at Pastor Murinzi’s decided to take their chances and go to the French camp. Why were the women so willing to take such a chance? Would you have done so? Why or why not/

8. Pastor Murinzi told his children to take a good look at the Tutsi women who had been hiding in the bathroom. He told them, “If you have a chance to help unfortunates like these ladies in times of trouble, make sure you do it—even if it means putting your own life at risk. This is how God wants us to live.”
   What scripture passages does this message to his children bring to mind for you? Please share and explain why?
   What does his message to his children instruct us to do?

9. What is the message of hope Immacule’e’s story leaves with you at the conclusion of this second section of the book?

10. How is it that hope and forgiveness go hand in hand along Immacule’e’s journey? Along your own journey?
SECTION THREE: A New Path

1. As Immacule’e and the others take leave of the pastor’s house they are faced with sixty or so of the Interahamwe who were heavily armed. How would you have responded to the sight of them? Put yourself in the position of the women, what would you do?

2. Once Immacule’e and the others reached the French field camp all the emotions that had been pent up for the three months of their confinement in the bathroom welled up and spilled out. If you had been among the French at the camp, what would you have done to reach out to them? How would you have responded to their uncontrollable emotional display? How would you respond to the experience of freedom after being a captive?

3. In the field camp Immacule’e is reunited with Jean Paul, an old friend. While conversing with him about all the killing that has occurred Immacule’e comments, “...the genocide is happening in people’s hearts...the killers are good people, but now evil has a hold on their hearts.” What are the issues of our day and time that are occurring in people’s hearts? What is the evil that has a grip on many hearts preventing them from doing what God would have them do?

4. How does Immacule’e respond to the news of the death of her parents? Of the deaths of her brothers? Does her response surprise you? Why and why not? How would you respond to the death of your family members or close friends in a similar situation?

5. After a conversation with the captain of the camp Immacule’e notes, “The captain’s anger made me think that the cycle of hatred and mistrust in Rwanda would not be easily broken.” What has been your experience with the cycle of hatred and mistrust? How can we begin to break the cycle in our own relationships? In our society?

6. Aloise was a strong woman who attributed her strength to Immacule’e’s mother. What qualities do you see in Aloise? Do you recognize those

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qualities in yourself? Has there been an Aloise in your life? Tell us about her.

7. Immacule’e went in search of the Tutsi soldiers and left Aloise and the others on the road. She knew there was great risk to her as well as to those she left behind. What do you think was the greatest fear she felt as she walked the road? What is your greatest fear as you journey along the road of life?

8. Fari, the husband of Aloise spoke about home and about what life would have been like without Aloise and their children, “If Aloise hadn’t returned to me with the children, I would never have come back here. A home is a prison without love.”

What do you think that last sentence means to Fari? What does it mean to you? How do you define home? How do you define a home without love?

9. Immacule’e, reflecting on her whole experience comments, “I was living proof of the power of prayer and positive thinking, which really are almost the same thing. God is the source of all positive energy, and prayer is the best way to tap into his power.”

How has reading Immacule’e’s story impacted your life of prayer? Do you share her understanding of prayer and positive energy? How do you tap into God’s power in your life?

10. The gruesome details of the genocide in Rwanda remind us of the power of evil alive in our world today. What are you willing to do to help stop evil and social sin? How will you advocate for peace in all corners of our world? How will you respond to refugees who come to us from similar situations?

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Immaculée Ilibagiza

Contemporary Black Biography, July 1, 2008

Born: c. 1972 in Mataba, Rwanda
Nationality: American
Occupation: Humanitarian aid worker

Worked at the United Nations, New York, NY, as part of the United Nations Development Program.


Immaculée Ilibagiza chronicled several horrific months of her life in the 2006 memoir Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust. Her book recounted the three months she spent hiding in a neighbor’s tiny bathroom, along with several other women, during the 1994 Rwandan genocide. While there, she learned some details of the grisly slayings of her parents and two brothers, who along with lifelong neighbors of Ilibagiza’s were among the estimated one million Rwandans who perished. Despite her experiences, the first-time author hoped a message of forgiveness would inspire readers of her book, which became a New York Times bestseller. “Even for those countries who did not try to protect us, it gives them a chance to feel sorry, to regret,” she explained in an interview with Bookseller’s Benedicte Page. “I don’t want to blame anyone—it is the past, anyway—but it is a way of learning lessons from what has happened.”

Ilibagiza was born in the early 1970s into a family of Tutsi ethnicity. The Tutsi were one of the two main tribal groups in the Central African nation of Rwanda, and though their actual ethnic history is disputed, the Tutsi were tall, lean warriors and cattle-herders, and considered themselves superior to the shorter, stockier Hutu, who were farmers. This division was exacerbated during the period of Belgian control, when colonial authorities favored the Tutsi with positions of power. Conflicts between the two groups had periodically escalated into bloodshed over many generations and flared up again after independence in 1962, although by then Hutus enjoyed positions of political authority.

Returned Home for Easter

At the village level, many Hutu and Tutsi lived peacefully together as neighbors, as was the case in Ilibagiza’s birthplace, Mataba, situated in an area of western Rwanda known as Kibuye. Thanks to its Belgian colonial past, many Rwandans were devout Roman Catholics, as the Ilibagizas were. Both of her parents were teachers, and she was the only daughter among their four children. As a young woman, she won a scholarship to the National University of Rwanda, located in Butare, and was an engineering student there in the spring of 1994. She had planned to stay on campus over the Easter holiday to study, but her father urged her to return home during the break to spend time with the family.
Ethnic tensions had flared once again that April, with broadcasts over the government-controlled radio stations warning Hutus that the Tutsi were planning to seize power and enslave Hutus—but like most educated Rwandans, Ilibagiza considered such polemic ridiculous and barely gave it any thought. Three days after Easter, however, Rwanda’s president, Juvenal Habyarimana, died in a mysterious plane crash. Habyarimana was a Hutu, but he was moderate in his political outlook and had sought to end the long-running strife between the two ethnic groups. Extremist Hutus had been outraged by his peace efforts and seized the opportunity to blame the crash on Tutsi-fired missiles and urged Hutus to retaliate. Hutu soldiers and machete-wielding civilians alike began hunting down their Tutsi neighbors, and Hutus who did not support the massacre were targeted as well by the roving civilian gangs, who were called Interhamwe, or “those who stand together”.

Ilibagiza’s father learned that Tutsi women were being sexually assaulted before they were killed and asked a neighbor to hide her. The neighbor was an Episcopal priest named Simeon Nzabahimana—and a Hutu—and he agreed to take her in. For the next three months, Ilibagiza shared a bathroom with as many as seven other women, the door to which was concealed by a wardrobe unit. "It was a room measuring three feet by four feet," she told Jerome Taylor of the Independent. "It didn't even have a sink, just a toilet sunk into the ground. There was a door on to the next room and at night we could sometimes go there to lie down. But only at night." For safety reasons, the eight women did not speak but communicated with one another using rudimentary sign language. They could only flush the toilet when the neighboring house did so, to avoid detection, and after one week their clothes and hair were infested with lice.

Overheard Tale of Brother's Murder

Interhamwe gangs searched the reverend’s house, and Ilibagiza even heard her name read off a list of missing Tutsis. In a more horrific moment, she also overheard one young man she had known for years recounting his killing of her brother Damascene. Her parents also died tragic, senseless deaths, as did another brother, Vianney; her third brother was away at school in Senegal and fortunately escaped the massacre. Ilibagiza recalled that she was so frightened for much of her hiding period—a time in which the women had very little to eat—that she actually experienced religious visions. "I was totally immersed in God," she told Laurie Nadel in a New York Times interview. "I saw Jesus, I saw him on the cross. I grab his legs in my imagination." She also prayed the rosary, using the set of beads her father had given her when he left her with Nzabahimana, and began to teach herself English from an English-French dictionary the reverend loaned her.

Ilibagiza and the other women emerged from the bathroom after ninety-one days and began to make their way to a military camp administered by French troops, who had finally arrived to help. Once her health was restored, she embarked on a search for the Interhamwe member whom she knew was responsible for the deaths of her mother and brothers. She found him in pitiably condition in a village jail and told him that she was there to forgive him. "He couldn't look at me, he looked down and was so ashamed," she recalled in the Independent interview with Taylor. "Something changed in his heart. I hope it's made him realise the gravity of what he's done. Like me he had a beautiful family and home but one day he decided to go out and kill."

During her three-month ordeal, Ilibagiza had decided that if she survived she would seek out a job with the United Nations (UN) as a way to work toward ending such bloodshed forever. When she met her
future husband, Bryan Black, a UN official who had come to Rwanda to establish a war-crimes tribunal, she considered it a sign from above. She and Black married and moved to the United States in 1998, settling first in the New York City borough of Queens. She worked as a program assistant with the UN Development Program but openly criticized the UN's failure to help Rwandans when the massacre began.

"The Poison Was Gone"

Ilibagiza and Black eventually moved to Long Island and had two children, and she began writing her memoir. *Left to Tell* was published by Hay House in 2006 to critical acclaim. A contributor to *Publishers Weekly* conceded its chronicle of the genocide was "soul-numbingly devastating, yet the story of her unquenchable faith and connection to God throughout the ordeal uplifts and inspires." Her book brought her into contact with filmmaker Steven Kalafer, who made a documentary about her titled *Diary of Immaculée* in 2006. Her story was also adapted for the one-woman play *Miracle in Rwanda*, which premiered at the renowned Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2007. Even the president of Hay House was so moved by her tale that he established a foundation to educate Rwanda’s orphans, the Left to Tell Charitable Fund.

Ilibagiza’s brother who had been out of the country is the only surviving member of her immediate family. He returned to Rwanda and established a veterinary practice. Ilibagiza hoped her book would inspire others, reminding them that compassion and forgiveness were possible even after the most horrific injustices. Yet even before its publication her own personal example had seemed to move others—she was surprised one day to receive a letter from the village jailer who had allowed her to meet with the killer of her brother. At the time, he found her act of forgiveness incomprehensible, but he wrote to say that it had inspired him to forgive, too. "He openly despised them," Ilibagiza recounted in an interview with Trish Beaver for the *Star*, a South African newspaper. "He would mistreat them and hit them, and inside him he would feel his hatred like a poisonous snake. When he was able to change his attitude, the poison was gone."

Selected writings


Further Readings

Sources

Periodicals

• Newsday (Melville, NY), April 16, 2006.


• Star (South Africa), September 3, 2007.

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Immaculee Ilibagiza

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Born: c. 1972 in Mataba, Rwanda
Nationality: American
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WRITINGS:
- (With Steve Erwin) Left to Tell: Discovering God amidst the Rwandan Holocaust, Hay House (Carlsbad, CA), 2006.

Worked at the United Nations, New York, NY, as part of the United Nations Development Program.


"Sidelights"

Immaculée Ilibagiza was born in Rwanda, where she was caught up in the 1994 genocide. Most of her family were killed during the devastating tragedy, but Ilibagiza managed to survive by huddling with seven other women in a bathroom at a pastor's house for a period of three months. The experience changed her life forever, giving her a strong faith and a sustaining relationship with God. Four years after the genocide, Ilibagiza immigrated to the United States, where she began working at the United Nations and became a member of the United Nations Development Program. She met her future husband, Bryan Black, who had also come from Rwanda, while working there. Black was part of the team organizing the court to try those accused of participating in the slaughter, and Ilibagiza took his presence as a sign. On the Left to Tell Web site, she says of her husband that he was "sent by God, courtesy of the UN, all the way from America!" Ilibagiza wrote about her ordeal and the faith she took from her experiences in the book Left to Tell: Discovering God amidst the Rwandan Holocaust. She discusses her thoughts and emotions while she was in hiding and how she handled the aftermath of the genocide. Anita Jackson-Hall, in a review for the U.S. Catholic, called the book "an inspiring story of how tragic circumstances can transform the human spirit." A contributor for Publishers Weekly wrote that Ilibagiza's effort is "a precious addition to the literature that tries to make sense of humankind's seemingly bottomless depravity."

Further Readings

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:
BOOKS

PERIODICALS
- *U.S. Catholic*, September, 2006, Anita Jackson-Hall, review of *Left to Tell*, p. 44.

ONLINE
- *Independent*, http://enjoyment.independent.co.uk/ (April 9, 2006), Immaculée Ilibagiza, "This Is Not My Time to Die."
- *Telegraph*, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/ (April 7, 2006), "Rwanda's Anne Frank."


Source Citation

Gale Document Number: GALE|H1000170902
In 1994, Rwandan native Ilibagiza was 22 years old and home from college to spend Easter with her devout Catholic family, when the death of Rwanda's Hutu president sparked a three-month slaughter of nearly one million ethnic Tutsis in the country. She survived by hiding in a Hutu pastor's tiny bathroom with seven other starving women for 91 cramped, terrifying days. This searing firsthand account of Ilibagiza's experience cuts two ways: her description of the evil that was perpetrated, including the brutal murders of her family members, is soul-numbingly devastating, yet the story of her unquenchable faith and connection to God throughout the ordeal uplifts and inspires. Her account of the miracles that protected her is simple and vivid. Her Catholic faith shines through, but the book will speak on a deep level to any person of faith. Ilibagiza's remarkable path to forgiving the perpetrators and releasing her anger is a beacon to others who have suffered injustice. She brings the battlefield between good and evil out of the genocide around her and into her own heart, mind and soul. This book is a precious addition to the literature that tries to make sense of humankind's seemingly bottomless depravity and counterbalancing hope in an all-powerful, loving God. (Mar.)
Interview with Immaculee Ilibagiza

Interview with Immaculee Ilibagiza

Author of Left To Tell and Led By Faith

I have often wondered, “What would I do if someone killed someone I love?” In today’s world a lot of the violence is in the name of revenge. You need to go back decades or centuries, or in the case of the Middle East, millennia, to find the original insult or wrongdoing. In the case of the Middle East it’s, as Bill Moyers of PBS said, “The longest-running family quarrel in history.” It’s been so long that most Israelis, Christians, and Muslims have forgotten what it was even about, yet the conflict goes on, and on, and on. That’s why, when I watched Immaculée on Oprah and on 60 Minutes and I read her books, Left to Tell and Led by Faith, I knew I needed to talk with her to see how she came to that place of forgiveness of the people who slaughtered her family, friends, and neighbors. The time has come when we must learn to forgive the “others.” Unless we do, there will always be a reason and justification for revenge and the fighting will continue. Fortunately it can no longer continue on our planet the way it has for the last 3,000 or 4,000 years because living in a world with high technology that is ruled by “tribal warfare” is no longer an option. And when I use the term “tribal” I am not limiting it to the traditional meaning of the word. I have witnessed tribal warfare by those who drive tanks and Cadillac Escalades.

Another note worthy of mention is the mountain gorillas. Only 655 are left in the world and half are in the northern Rwanda patch of forest. Bringing peace through forgiveness to this area has also brought back the much-needed protection for the gorillas. All living things are part of the web of life and as our awareness evolves we realize our interdependence.

I hope you get out of this interview as much as I did.

Lotus Guide: Some of my questions may be on a deeper level than what you are used to because I happen to be working on forgiveness myself.

Immaculée Ilibagiza: I think we always are.

LG: After reading your book, Led by Faith, and trying to understand all you have been through I barely feel qualified to ask some of the questions I have because I have never experienced anything even close to what you have.

Il: Please ask anything you want.

LG: I think to help explain where you are today we need to have a brief background of your experience in Rwanda. I think it’s difficult for a lot of people to understand the depth of the hatred between people who were for all appearances the same. We are used to that when dealing with obvious differences like skin color and religion, but this seemed to come from an intentional design on the part of other groups of people with their own agendas from other countries.

Il: Yes. What happened in Rwanda started with colonization. The first group were Germans who colonized the country then they gave the country to Belgium. When
Interivew with Immaculee Ilibagiza

always hear great things
about her and her work.
We've watched her...
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Gayle Kimball, Ph.D.
LG Editor 3 years ago

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It was a surprise for them to see a country in Africa that was so organized, with a king and every area had a chief. And the king was a Tutsi. Anyone who had more cows, which was a sign of wealth, would become Tutsi. If a Tutsi loses a cow, he would be poorer; he would become a Hutu. Like any other country, there are the rich, and the middle class, and the class that does not have much money is always the largest. There wasn’t much of a noticeable difference between the Hutus and the Tutsis. Sometimes even between two brothers, one of them would become a Hutu and the other become a Tutsi. We’re now looking at the consequences it can have on a country when it divides itself, no matter what the division is based on.

So then in a very short time the Hutus overthrew the king. Many people believe that he was poisoned. And then they trained the Hutus to take over. The people who took the power in the first government were people who didn’t even know how to read sometimes. They just wanted to have the power so they could overthrow the Tutsis.

What was once a class division had become a political division. So there was a big conflict between the tribes. So the Hutus had one agenda, and it was to kill Tutsis or send them away. This was the first civil war in 1959.

The second war was in 1967. In 1973 they made another war against Tutsis who were going to school. In 1994, it was again really the leaders who arranged it. And to this day, I don't think there can ever be genocide if the leaders are not behind it. People don't hate each other enough to get up and start to kill each other. You must have strong people behind it.

LG: Yes, they've done a lot of research over the years; it's the "madness of crowds." There is a crowd psychology, like a lynch mob, for instance. Most people in a lynch mob would never lynch a person if they were by themselves, but in a mob, or a crowd, you can hide. And we do some of the same things in today’s world. Some of our belief systems, our nations, and more recently our corporations can turn into a mob mentality.

II: That is so right. The important thing I would like to say is that if it could happen in Rwanda it can happen anywhere there are strong leaders behind it. People that want power so badly end up having evil in their hearts. When you see firsthand something like this happen and understand the process behind it, you should realize it can happen in any country. You can't believe that it happened to this beautiful country. People say to each other, "How can this happen right here?" And those who took part in the war are now regretting it.

LG: There was a teacher who did an experiment a few years back, and she divided her class into blue eyes and brown eyes, just for an experiment, and by the third week, she had to stop the experiment because they started fighting on the playground; the blue eyes started making up stories about the brown eyes—they weren't as smart—not as strong. There have been a series of experiments and studies that point to the fact that we have a mental process that strives to divide. Some seem to think it's part of our evolution that helped us survive. And the only way we can get past this is doing what we're doing right now, which is dialogue, talking and putting light on it.

II: Yes, once you acknowledge the conflict and put a little light on those things that go on in the mind, you can feel it coming and make a conscious choice to take this action or that. One problem was the fact that we couldn't study the history of such things as the Jewish Holocaust; it was forbidden.

LG: Unfortuately we don't always learn from history but if you are not allowed to know what happened then you will never learn. That's why it's so important for people to hear, firsthand, stories like yours.

I have a question about faith. I'm somewhat confused, as many are, when I hear the word "faith." I have seen times when faith seemed to work miracles in people's lives but on closer examination there were many people in the same situation who had faith and things didn't work out for them at all. How do you reconcile this within yourself when you went through so much suffering?

II: Oh. What a question. There were these thoughts that were coming to me when I was begging God in my heart, "Please don't let them find us, don't let this happen to us," and this voice would come to me and say, "Oh, who do you think you are? What about people who are dying? Do you think they are praying? And you even dare to ask for you?" A part of me wanted to give up and I felt I had no hope. And then I remember another voice telling me, "You are a human being. Don't try to know the minds of other people and understand what they are doing, what is happening to
them. Who knows what they are asking?" For example, and this is in my book Left to Tell, there's a letter my brother wrote to me. He sent it home before they killed him. He was a person who was so scared of dying in his life. He was afraid of the dark and he was a fighter, an athlete, but he was so scared of dying. And when he wrote to me I realized that in every situation God has a way to speak to people, even in the face of death. For example, he said, "If I have to die and if I don't make it, don't worry, I will go to heaven. And if we have to die, for the salvation of this country, let it be." So for somebody who was so scared of death, all of a sudden he's ready to face it, I think it is the grace of God.

Wherever forgiveness is in my heart, there also is what I call God. A lot of people's prayers are like begging but if you just do the best you can and surrender to a greater will then it seems to work out.

LG: I think that with everything going on in the world today, and with the position that the United States is in with so many conflicts in the world, we're taking a deep honest look at ourselves here in the United States, finally, and to do that, I think we need to figure out this next question. According to some research, three out of five conflicts are motivated by revenge. The only thing that seems to heal this is forgiveness. Can you go into what you went through in the process of forgiveness? How did you "truly" forgive, Immaculée?

It: Oh, that's such a good question. I remember in the first week of hiding, forgiveness was not even in my reality; I was so angry and scared. In my life up to that point I had my parents, my brother, I had people loving me. I never knew anyone hating me in my life. I thought everyone was so honest in life, even the government. In that kind of world I didn't really see or understand all that was going on around me. And all of a sudden I am sitting in the bathroom and I'm thinking, "What will happen to me? What has caused this to be this way?" So that week I was more just realizing the reality in the world: "What is going on? I am not calling myself a Tutsi to be sitting in this bathroom." I was just lost. I was so overwhelmed with this anger and thinking, "If I get a chance to live, I will never speak to Hutus, I will hate them and their children. I would never be friends with them after what they did to me, my brother, my mother, my dad." All I could think of was "these evil people." I hated them, thinking they were not humans. This was all real. I was so angry. And then the pain has a way of teaching us, even though we hate it. I remember one time I asked the guy who was hiding us, a Hutu pastor, to put the radio outside to hear what was going on in the country. Then I could not believe what I had just heard on the radio.

What was going on in the country: They have killed thousands of people who were hiding in the stadiums, thousands of people who run to churches. And I remember one thing that pushed me to the edge was the order they gave to start searching the homes of Hutus. And that was my situation. I could only think of what I had been listening to on the radio about arms and legs, machetes, and grenades. I thought to myself, "They can't search." It was so painful to imagine what would happen to me if they found me.

And then somebody said a prayer when they were coming, but I wondered, "Where is God?" Because my vision of him stopped right there. If I suffer, it means God is not around. So that is how I saw things. If I don't suffer, then God is with me. I remember saying a prayer not knowing if God is there or not, and I remember almost having a vision of voice telling me, "Oh, God doesn't exist. If he existed, you can hear what he was saying here." I just gave up. Then I gave up asking him for anything. And then I remember the voice telling me, "Just ask God to give you a sign if he exists. Ask with all the might in your heart. If he is there, he will answer you." And somehow, I went, "Okay. Maybe I can just choose to listen to this little voice that says if I ask, it's possible." And so I asked, "If you are there, if you exist, don't let the killers find us. Then if you do that, I will try to know who you are; I will try to know what you want." So that's the first time I felt a huge commitment. The killers came inside the house, they searched in every place you can imagine, and they came right to the door of the bathroom, and they were searching everywhere you can think of. They finally said to the pastor, "You know what. We trust you." Then they left. The last part they would have searched was the bathroom we were hiding in. So when he told us what happened out there, I said, "Okay, God, I will hold on to you, now I believe in you, but we have to know each other. What do you want? But I hope you aren't asking me to forgive because you know I can't do that. I don't even know how to do it." And I remember sweating out of anger. Just trying to imagine what I will do when I get out. I will put the bomb under the country and everyone will blow up. I can just be like Rambo and I can shoot everybody. I wanted to be anything horrible, terrible, and kill these people.

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I found that there are three steps to forgiveness. The first step was to feel the anger. To really feel it as it is, in your body. You know when you are angry at somebody you can feel it as justice. You feel like you have taken over and are in control. And then the pain of holding them and carrying them everywhere you go is so painful, and for me the question was, "Who hated most, me or Hutus?" And then the second step, I remember when it was really painful, my body was aching, I couldn't even remember how to smile. I remember asking myself, and telling God in my heart, "I surrender. I don't know how to forgive, but I feel like it is the only thing that was asked of me. I wish I could be naive and innocent again. Smile to people, be happy to people. Believe in the goodness in them. But right now I only believe in their evil. I wish you could give me that joy I used to have as a child." And I didn't know how that would come, but I felt like God was saying, "Let it go. That is the only way you can feel better." I was thinking to myself that the anger I had toward the Hutus was so much, was so heavy, I didn't know what to do with it. And it was aching my body. I said in my heart, "I give it to you, if you know how to forgive, help me out." And to tell the truth, there was one time I thought I would never know how to forgive and a part of me that didn't want to forgive them. I have such a good reason to hate them. And then maybe God would find a way to make me feel better, but not forgive them. But I didn't want to be the person who was asking God, "Help me out to be peaceful, help me out for them not to find us," and yet I am holding this anger. I had to realize that we are all children of the same God.

LG: Yes, there's a part in the Bible where it says, "Why would my right hand cut off my left hand?" We are all one humanity. It looks like we're divided but energetically, we're like this thin film of consciousness, a planetary consciousness, in a planetary body, and I think the Bible speaks of it as being one in the body of Christ, Pierre de Chardin speaks of the noosphere surrounding the earth, and progressive spiritual thinkers have been speaking of "spiritual evolution" for centuries. But the reality is that you and I, speaking right here, right now, we are the same person, speaking to ourself, from this higher consciousness that is evolving and insisting on unity and oneness.

II: That is so true. And that is really the lesson you get there, let go of that voice that tells us that we are different. Not only are we praying for peace in the world, we also need to pray for peace within our own lives. And you don't have to take care of everybody. But send them love. Think of them as people who need to express themselves, who are trying to become. When you forgive, there are so many people who feel it, that know it, and you have let go of the anger toward other people. Instead of them now continuing to build up the anger of the revenge, or what they can do to you, and your loved ones, you give them a chance to think and to feel their hearts themselves. If you hold anger they have that passion of continuing to be angry with you, then they are trapped and live with their fear of what you can do to them. But once you can forgive them in the depth of your heart, something happens. And the great thing about it is they will tell someone, maybe their child, their wives, their friends. Maybe not what they have done, because it's not good. Then you give them a chance to grow. And you don't have to go to save them, because these feelings of love, we all know it and love does its own work.

LG: Yes, this has to be the most important lesson, and maybe our ultimate lesson on this planet, as we grow into a global society, because in today's technological world you can only imagine what would have happened in Rwanda if the Hutus had access to fighter jets with advanced technology or an atom bomb. So we really need to get this under control, this armed conflict; our barbaric past has to come to an end. Otherwise, there's going to be one person who will bring it all to an end because unlike even 200 years ago, it only takes one person to kill a million people now.

Okay, I know this is a politically incorrect question but being politically correct is one of the things that have brought our planet to the brink of destruction so...

I'd be really interested to hear what you have to say about this. According to Amnesty International, there's usually an average of 20 religious conflicts going on in the world at any one time. These are armed conflicts by people of "faith" who have a belief in a loving, although capricious, God. More often than not they are of the same skin color, the same genetics, and living in the same area; the only thing that divides them is their beliefs. What have you learned from your experience in Rwanda that you feel would benefit them? In other words, people of belief who have the belief that they have the ultimate belief that gives them the ordained right by their God to change other people or remove them from the planet.

II: Oh, my God. I wish I could have a quick answer to that, you know, one thing that would completely answer that question. But you know what I think, if you really
understand what love is and what it does to you, you really see yourself in other human beings, and try to act with love. I wish there could be a government of love. A ministry of love. Sometimes where people have the business of being compassionate. The business of knowing what is going on in the heart of another person. To just hear what you think and what you are feeling. I just want to tell you the journeys I went through, the struggle I went through in my heart by hiding, the tears I shed for my mother, for my father, what would happen if you went through that. And I really think that if there is one thing that gives me peace in life, and which allows me to act as who I am, I can come to this country and feel like I have peace in settling here, is that knowing that deep down, we are the same. Deep down we have the skin that gets hurt the same way, deep down we like people who talk to us with love, and we feel bad with those who talk to us harshly, and we can pretend it doesn’t touch us, but yet it does. That is how you can defend another person who is being treated unjustly. Because even if you don’t know them, you know those things hurt. When we believe in something, you can’t criticise somebody else for believing what they believe in, it’s a belief, which means you don’t know for sure. I used to have a boyfriend, he was from another region, all Christians, but they had different beliefs. And I had a different belief in one small thing but I accepted him as he was but he wanted me to change if we were going to get married. And I loved him with all my heart, and I wished I could change. But what does it serve you if I change something, just for you, and not because I’m really convinced? And is that really change?

LG: Yes, because usually what we’re asking another person to do is to pretend like they believe something that they really don’t believe. I think people forget that to believe something it needs to be believable. Bertrand Russell, a great Christian writer, once wrote that he would never die for his beliefs, because he could be wrong. And if we can all can grasp that, that all of our beliefs, almost traditionally and historically, almost every belief that we’ve ever had on this planet has ended up either being wrong or misleading and if we look at our beliefs now, so much of it is changing and in constant evolution; to get attached and identified to some fixed idea of what the reality of the world is, is really absurd and possibly a delusion of grand proportions. We need to hold on to that part of ourselves that we’re children and constantly learning.

II: That is why I love children. They are so innocent. They touch the fire, they let it burn them, and they learn from that, and what is most important is how we practice love. I have seen people in my religion, in Rwanda, killing those who are teaching us to love. So it’s really how you grasp with your heart; it’s not how much you know. It’s how much you can practice that love. I will write again and again, you can never go wrong by caring for somebody, you can never go wrong by giving, by caring, by loving, but you go wrong by hurting somebody, by lying to somebody. You can go wrong by hating somebody. But if in your heart you are doing what you think you wish to be done to you, to another person, you can never go wrong. And I think that is the secret. How can we get there?

LG: Well, like most truths, they’re usually simple. All beings are searching for one thing, to love and to be loved and to connect with other beings doing the same. And I think that’s about as simply as you can put it.

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