

## **"Relevance of Understanding Rescue Behavior for Peacebuilding Programs,"**

**Talk delivered at a conference on [Genocide, Rescue, and Prevention: Understanding and Fostering Rescue Behavior in the Face of Mass Killing](#) at Yale University on May 8, 2009.**

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As a practitioner, my interest in rescue during mass violence has grown very naturally out of my peacebuilding work –because stories of rescue keep surfacing. I hear many first hand accounts of atrocities, but have been struck by how many stories I also hear of rescue, rescue by neighbors, colleagues, and strangers. These stories seem seldom collected and seldom part of the post-conflict national discourse, with a couple notable exceptions- the work of Tito's granddaughter, Svetlana Bros to collect stories of rescue from Bosnia and recent efforts in Rwanda.

The potential value of these stories for peacebuilding became apparent to me during an inter-group dialogue we facilitated in Sri Lanka in 2001. We had a group of 40 NGO leaders from Sinhalese, Tamil, and Muslim communities together for 5 days of intensive exchange. During the dialogue, each group told similar stories of losing loved ones, of displacement, and of fear. Tamil residents of Jaffna described the constant bombardment of government shelling, Sinhalese spoke of the terror of suicide bombings in the capital and of sons lost in the army, and a Tamil speaking Muslim participant described surviving a massacre carried out inside a mosque where he was praying, led by Hindu Tamils. Interestingly, as these stories emerged in a layered fashion, the sense of mutual blame between the groups diminished, replaced by shared grief over the tragedy that had befallen their beautiful island. A Tamil from Jaffna summed it up saying, "I think we are all in one big pot of suffering." As often happens in our dialogues, common ground was discovered through sharing experiences of loss.

But side by side with the stories of tragedy, came several quite dramatic stories of rescue. Among the 40 there were at least two Tamils who together with their families had been rescued by Sinhalese neighbors during the communal riots in 1983 in Colombo. These stories had a galvanizing effect on the group. Their interest moved from victimization- and competition over which group had suffered more- to stories of rescue, and many began thinking of others they knew who had also been rescued. They noted that leaders and the media focus only on the grievances of each group and that these rescue stories were not known. They instinctively felt that these stories could have a powerful effect if publicized, and they became quite enthused about collecting them. The earlier process of collective mourning seemed important, but these rescue stories offered hope, some reassurance that it would be possible to reconcile and to build a shared future.

Over the years, we have continued to hear rescue stories from conflicts around the world and sensing their potential, have posed ourselves the following questions:

- What can these stories teach us about the internal capacities and external conditions that prompted rescuers to act, and can our peacebuilding programs be designed to more consciously foster those capacities and conditions?
- How can we use the stories themselves to encourage others to become active bystanders? Not to risk their lives but to act before conditions descend to violence.

We ask these questions not so much as researchers or academics, but as practitioners wanting to make our peacebuilding programs more effective.

Before sharing my beginning thoughts on how our peacebuilding work could be strengthened by a deeper understanding of rescue behavior, let me tell you briefly what our programs aim to achieve.

We define our work as social peacebuilding. Post-conflict there is a clear need for political peacebuilding, which includes constitutional reform, transitional justice, the development of new democratic institutions, all of which hopefully address root causes of a conflict. There is also a need for economic peacebuilding. Tensions tend to simmer down as the economy develops and ex-combatants are gainfully employed. But as today's wars are largely internal wars in which civilians are caught in the crossfire between a mix of army, militia, and warlords, the entire social fabric is deeply affected, if not shredded. Once the violence ceases, this fabric needs repair. Civilian deaths in war have increased from 5% 1900 to 65% in WWII and 75% in the wars of the 90's, and of course the numbers of IDPs and refugees have become astronomical. Around the world we have witnessed power hungry political leaders manipulate ethnic or religious tensions to the point where neighbors turn on neighbors, and in some cases communal violence escalates to genocide. A young Bosnian Muslim friend described his horror when he learned that the man who led the militia that attacked his small village and massacred over 300, ranging in age from infants to the elderly, was the long-time principal of his local school, a man he remembered revering as a child. And in Rwanda we have the stories of Hutu men being incited to kill their Tutsi wives or children of mixed heritage. Our puzzle has been how can one rebuild trusting relationships; reweave this social fabric in the aftermath of what has been experienced as such unthinkable betrayal? When after war, groups must live side by side or in mixed villages, as they do in Rwanda, this social repair seems necessary to sustainable peace and security.

The tools we have for conflict analysis and all the good work that has been done in genocide studies gives us a detailed historical picture of how progressive stages of dehumanization have set the stage for communal violence and even genocide, but not enough is understood about what supports re-humanization and the prevention of future cycles of violence. A recent World Bank study states that countries that have experienced war have a 44% chance of returning to war within 5 years- so further efforts in this direction do seem crucial. No doubt more effective political, economic, and social peacebuilding are needed to bring those numbers down, but social peacebuilding is our particular focus. We foster social healing and attempt to build some "immunity" to future violence- by engaging civil society leaders (or government officials and elected

representatives) across divides to work together in peacebuilding programs that operate on several levels:

- On a conceptual level our training seminars develop shared frameworks to understand the root causes and history of their conflict and develop joint solutions
- On a relational/emotional level our structured dialogues develop understanding of each others lived experience and feelings, and rebuild trust
- On an action level, we help participants develop joint projects to put these tentative new partnerships into motion and activity.

We work to integrate these levels so that each reinforces the other, and this leads to a shift in identity from membership of victim or perpetrator group to a shared identity as peacebuilders.

I think there is much we can learn from a deeper understanding of rescue behavior to strengthen our work at each of these levels, and the current rescue literature already offers some ideas. On the more conceptual level, in the content of our seminars, in the models and exercises we use, we encourage perceptual shifts, to loosen the lenses that have led to distorted beliefs, stereotypes, and biases towards the other side. I think of it as a kind of cognitive restructuring, brought about through deeper understanding of the other's experience and new, shared ways of understanding how inter-group violence and genocide develop and escalate. Cognitive shifts also come through meeting the other as a full blooded human being, and one can often feel the cognitive dissonance in the room, as old prejudices just do not hold up.

Eva Fogelman in her interviews of Holocaust rescuers found they were not necessarily people of high moral character, but all held the common conviction that Jews are full human beings. In spite of propaganda, political and social pressure, this core belief held firm. How do we reinforce this core understanding or experience of our common humanity in our peacebuilding programs- makes it somehow unshakably strong? From Fogelman and Oliner, we learn not surprisingly that family upbringing influenced this belief- something we have also found in interviews with Hutus who rescued Tutsis. We may not be able to directly influence parenting on a broad scale, but we can influence education, and there is increasing interest in what gets called "peace education" around the world. How do we help children and adults develop this experience of the essential humanness of the other- along with the ability to recognize, to take notice, and to think critically when acts of dehumanization are committed- other cognitive capacities noted by rescue researchers? The group norms to help someone in danger- so prevalent in many cultures- break down during genocide. What would it take to develop helping norms that hold up as violence begins?

On a more emotional, relational level, our programs promote opportunities for empathy with the other side. Empathic caring, not surprisingly, is a strong characteristic noted by both Oliner and Fogelman in the Holocaust rescuers. We watch this quality develop in many of our sustained dialogues, as participants move from reactive blame to gradually developing the capacity to walk in the other's shoes. I think of an Albanian man, who began our dialogues in Macedonia full of anger. Some months in, he described his

experience listening to a young Macedonian woman speak of her fear as she was held at gunpoint during the violence of 2001. He said, “I felt as if it was happening to me.” Or of a young Rwandan genocide survivor who wondered out loud, “what it is in human nature that allows us to descend to the point of genocide?” He was not asking what is it in the hearts of Hutus, but in the hearts of us all. Such moments are quite frequent in our dialogues, but if we are better able to understand how rescuers developed such high degrees of empathy that they were able to sustain it in extreme circumstances, we may be able to more effectively cultivate it. Of course there maybe many aspects of what makes a rescuer that are idiosyncratic and have more to do with genetics or temperament then conditioning- still we would be served well to better understand what does develop through conditioning.

As mentioned, in addition to work on attitudinal change and the development of empathic relations across divides, we also encourage joint projects, believing that action that brings positive results will reinforce these shifts. The Oliners found that Holocaust rescuers believed they could influence events, and Ervin Staub has noted that Holocaust rescuers changed as the result of their actions. Many were motivated at first by connections to specific victims, but then developed a broader commitment to helping. Practice, witnessing the impact of one’s actions reinforces internal changes. The importance of varied social ties is noted in both the literature on rescue and genocide prevention, and may be one of the most important external factors. Casiro in his study of rescue during military rule in Argentina found that rescuers had stronger and more diverse social ties than non-rescuers. Ashutosh Varshney found in a comparative study of Indian cities that the level of Hindu/Muslim formal and informal civic and business ties is a strong predictor of peaceful relations. Where they are lacking, communal violence is considerably more common. All of this would suggest that building cross cutting ties through joint action and joint projects can help build the “social immunity” to future violence we seek.

As I said earlier, when our work at conceptual, relational, and action levels is well integrated, we notice a shift to a “peacebuilder” identity. Participants frequently comment on this and seem to experience it as a source of strength. Fogelman speaks of the ways Holocaust rescuers developed a “rescuers identity” that sustained them. Judith Herman in her work with trauma survivors speaks of the “survivor’s mission,” the desire to use one’s own experience of suffering to help others, as something that can become an important source of meaning during the final stages of recovery. Shifts to a positive identity, such as rescuer, active bystander, and peacebuilder can strengthen pro-social behavior- especially when shared across divides. And we may want to give more thought to the best terms to use-, as language no doubt helps shape the identity.

These are some of the ways a deeper understanding of rescue behavior could inform the practice of peacebuilding. Some of the lessons to be learned may have universal application and some may be quite context specific. Understanding what led Hutus to rescue in Rwanda, for example, may have some lessons that are quite particular for preventing further outbreaks of violence in that region, and these more contextualized lessons could also be very valuable.

As peacebuilders, however, we also think that rescue stories themselves can be powerful tools to support reconciliation. I mentioned the shift they brought about in that early dialogue in Sri Lanka, and we are now engaged in a project with Leora Kahn to collect these stories from several recent genocides and to disseminate them through traveling exhibits and a documentary film, all of which Leora will describe more fully. Our hope is that these stories of moral courage will provide a much-needed counterweight to the stories of atrocities that are so prevalent and often have the effect of sustaining old narratives or creating the justification for revenge.

Our first effort has been in Rwanda where Leora has put together a traveling exhibit on Hutu rescuers for Gisozi genocide museum in Kigali. The director of the museum is a genocide survivor- who survived thanks to the help of a Hutu neighbor. He has been well aware that few Hutu visit the museum, that most of the public discourse about the genocide focuses on the atrocities, and that collective blame of Hutu dangerously undermines efforts at reconciliation. Ethnic taunting is on the rise in Rwandan schools, and many are concerned. The Rwandan government discourages the terms Tutsi and Hutu, emphasizing instead a national Rwandan identity, making it difficult to address this problem directly. Stories of rescue cut through the prevailing stereotypes that almost all Hutu were either involved in the killing or stood by without entering this political minefield. In February a colleague and I did training for the museum's education staff on using the exhibit to encourage school discussions on building more tolerance within schools. The education staff is now working with the government Commission on the Prevention of Genocide to take the exhibit- and possibly some of the rescuers themselves- to high schools around the country. Structured dialogues will guide students to analyze what enabled the rescuers to go against the tide and what it would mean today in their schools to counter prejudice. There are of course challenges. How do we make these extreme cases of altruism accessible and applicable to everyday circumstances, and not just set the rescuers up as larger than life heroes? And, as we thought about using the exhibit not only in schools, but to stimulate community discussions, some of the museum staff wondered if the stories could increase the shame of Hutus who did not help, or the resentment of Tutsis who were not rescued, who asked their neighbors for help and were rejected.

While work with rescue stories needs to be treated with all the sensitivity that each post-conflict situation requires, we believe that these stories should be part of the post-conflict national dialogue. One-sided focus on abuses suffered by victim groups can leave perpetrator groups under a cloud of collective shame that inhibits authentic reconciliation. Rescue stories can effectively disrupt stereotypes or thin narratives while providing powerful models of critical thinking and moral courage. Of course not all rescue is done for purely altruistic motives- there is often in fact a complex mix of self serving and altruistic motives. In Rwanda there are many stories of Hutus who rescued some and killed others, and many women were kept alive for rape. But these grey situations, these thicker descriptions also complexify in useful ways. They break down notions that groups are all good or all bad, and reveal the complex web of forces that operate during mass violence.

Members of both victim and perpetrator groups need to recognize that we are all capable of both de-humanizing and altruistic/compassionate behavior. Neither can be the province of any one group. Imagining one's way into the shoes of victims and perpetrators alike seems invaluable to post-conflict healing. By walking in the shoes of the rescuer, members of both groups expand their sense of possible responses and hopefully can develop a shared interest in co-developing pro-social ones. Groups can then be encouraged to develop strategies for supporting each other in becoming active bystanders. Acknowledgment and collective mourning are important stages of post-conflict social healing, but full recovery also requires this shared hope for a better future. Sometimes a leader of exceptional moral courage, such as Nelson Mandela, engenders this type of optimism almost single handedly. But in the absence of such leaders, rescue stories may have a helpful role to play. Understanding how best to use them will be strengthened by practitioner/researcher collaboration.