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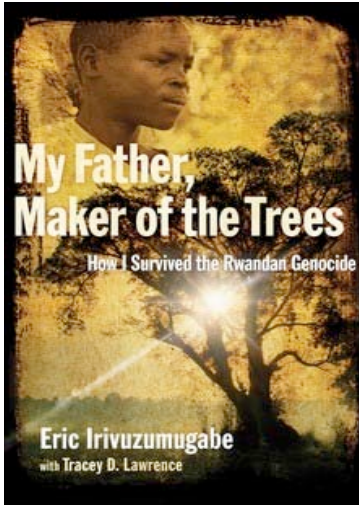
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RWANDAN GENOCIDE SURVIVOR TELLS HOW 15 DAYS HIDDEN IN CYPRESS TREES SAVED HIS LIFE

How one survivor is using his life to offer hope to other orphaned children

“Every tree is sovereignly planted by God for a reason bigger than we know” – Uncle Innocent

“In my country, the cypress tree is known as ‘the tree of life,’” says Eric Irvizumugabe in *My Father, Maker of the Trees: How I Survived the Rwandan Genocide* (ISBN: 978-0-8010-1320-1, \$17.99, September 2009). “But I never imagined that a cypress tree would someday become the tree of survival for me.”



When Eric was a young boy, a band of cypress trees bordered his village and provided shade for hot and weary villagers. They would eventually protect him and four of his family members from militia bullets and machetes as a generations old conflict between two warring tribes would envelope Eric’s village and the entire country.

Despite the fact that Hutus and Tutsis have no genetic difference and often were best of friends, Hutus would occasionally discriminate against Tutsis. Eric’s family was Tutsi and by the time the genocide of 1994 began when he was sixteen, Eric was no stranger to tensions between Hutus and Tutsis at his school.

As the genocide began, a band of Hutu rebels attacked Eric’s village, forcing Eric and his family into hiding. After five days of running, Eric took a chance and left the shelter of the forest to rest on a rock warming in the sun. He was discovered by three of his uncles who were hiding in nearby trees. He joined them in their attempt to conceal themselves from roving bands of villagers who were killing at whim. By hiding in the day and scavenging for food at night, Eric and his uncles were able to elude the massacre going on around the very trees in which they hid. Their game of hide and seek would last for 15 days.

Two important things occurred during this time. On the eighth day of hiding, Eric began a plan for pursuing justice for those who survived the genocide. But he also began to believe in a God he had so recently cursed. “Though I was not a Christian before the genocide, praying to God with my uncles before we left the safety of the trees convinced me there was an all-powerful God watching us. How else could I explain our survival? If God gave such trees a purpose on earth, then maybe my life matters to him as well.”

Eric began rebuilding his life by joining a trade school for auto mechanics and using the money he earned to support the few survivors of his family. As he was heading to school one day, he happened upon a gathering of believers praying. He stayed but initially resisted doing

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anything more than listening. He continued to attend the meetings, however, and eventually Eric gave his life to the Lord. Eric's desire to pursue justice for the victims of genocide, coupled with his newfound belief in Christ, led to the founding of an orphanage called Humura Ministries, which means "take heart" or "restoration."

Eric recognizes that pain and suffering happen to everyone. Good and evil people alike suffered in the Bible. Rwandans suffered. Americans suffer. "I am here to say, *all things are possible with God*. Though the darkness can feel like it will overtake you, remember the work God does in the right season of life. I respect God's wisdom in where he has chosen to grow a bush, fill a river, or plant the roots of a tree. And now I can even trust him to determine when he offers life and when he takes it away. The heinous blood thirst that invaded my homeland in April 1994 is something I will always carry with me this side of heaven. But now God is also helping me to carry hope in my heart. The evil of genocide is hard for me to grasp. Yet I know this: I serve a God who is not wasteful, and he is using my history to bring hope to others."

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Eric Irivuzumugabe is the founder of Humura Ministries, an organization that supports orphans of genocide, through which he ministers to hundreds of fatherless children in need of hope. He is a member of Evangelical Restoration Church, one of the largest churches in Rwanda, where he currently resides.

Tracey D. Lawrence is a freelance writer and collaborator who has written for Chuck Colson's *BreakPoint*, the Wilberforce Forum, Promise Keepers, FutureLead, Gary Smalley, and others. She is also the author of *A Savvy Christian's Guide to Life* as well as a contributing author for *Sister Freaks* and *Loved: Stories of Forgiveness* with Rebecca St. James. Tracey's dissertation also received the *Silver Quill* award for her qualitative research on genocide.



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SUGGESTED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. The concept of forgiveness plays a large role in your story. How did you manage to forgive the atrocities that occurred?

After being born again, I used to ask myself “Are Hutus different than Tutsis or are we the same? Can Hutus feel the pain like the Tutsi people feel?” I finally decided that all people, because they are human beings, do feel pain. They should, therefore, try to avoid the mistreatment of others and in case one is hurt by bad acts, forgiveness must occur. As a Christian, I learned that sin cannot be avenged by another sin so I had to forgive those who committed the atrocities of genocide.

2. What does reconciliation look like in Rwanda now? Tell us about some of your friends who are Hutu.

Reconciliation is being practiced in Rwanda by both the survivors of genocide and the perpetrators. The perpetrators who confess their guilt to the survivors of families they killed are being forgiven by those survivors. This is an important aspect in rebuilding our society. It cements unity among Rwandese.

I have many friends who are Hutus. After I was born again, I considered them as brothers and sisters because we are created in the image of God.



3. Do you think genocide will happen again?

I don't think so, because our government is fighting the ideologies that made genocide possible in the first place. By making the population aware of the social, political and economic impact of the 1994 genocide, an impact all Rwandese felt in every aspect of life, citizens are beginning to recognize they have a collective responsibility to fight it. They are saying “Never again” to genocide in Rwanda.

4. What is God teaching you now?

God is teaching me his love for all people. His love is unconditional to all people, both the good and the bad, the just and unjust, but his desire is to have these people know the truth and be saved by believing in Jesus, his only son.

5. How did you go from such disillusionment of there even being a God to starting an orphanage in honor of his name?

God tells us that He seeks us. The night I found myself wandering toward the gathering at Restoration Church, He was seeking me. I wasn't interested in church at all. I was just lonely. But He brought me to faith that night. I sat there hiding in the crowd, not interested in what any god had to say, but miraculously the Lord spoke to my heart and brought hope back into my life. I've been able to share that hope with fellow orphans. I see God replace disillusionment in the hearts of orphans with hope all the time in my ministry. God is so faithful to meet us right where we are.



6. What is the mission of Humura Ministries, your Charitable Fund?

To proclaim hope for the hopeless, especially orphans

7. Does Humura Ministries require recipients to be of a particular religious denomination or persuasion?

No. The only requirement is your need of help