

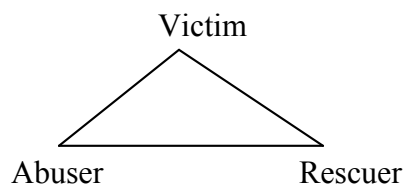
FROZEN IN TIME:
Escaping the Victim-Abuser-Rescuer Triangle

There is that of God in each of us. This is a fundamental tenet of Quaker faith. But perhaps there is that of the Devil in each of us too. And that of the Sacrificial Lamb.

As an outsider living in Rwanda, I often wonder – If I had been here during the genocide, what would I have done? Would I have stayed and played the hero, the rescuer? Would I have fled? If I were Rwandan, what would I have done? Would I have risked my life for a neighbor? Would I have killed or robbed or raped? If I had been the President of the United States, would I have looked the other way, convinced myself it was simply a civil war? Of course, I will never know the answer to these human questions until, unless, I am tested. And here I am, living and working and sleeping and breathing in a society where almost everyone has already faced that terrible, ultimate test.

I believe that each human being has the capacity for great good. And I believe we each have the capacity for great evil. Any person can become a victim – that is certain. At the same time, any person can play the hero. And given the right circumstances, every person has the capacity to abuse another. Inside of each of us there is a constant interplay of these forces, and in healthy contexts these forces balance each other out. But when there is extreme oppression, – domestic violence, rape, colonization, genocide – certain roles become frozen in a violent system and people or groups of people become sucked into playing these frozen roles – some are the “victim”, others the “abuser”, and others the “rescuer.”

After oppression – and in Rwanda’s case there have been multiple oppressions, from the brutality of colonization to the terror of the genocide – there is a period of recovery. One critical outcome of a healthy recovery is that the victims do not remain victims: there is a history of victimization that will never and should never be forgotten, but ultimately, for true recovery, victims can no longer rely on a “rescuer” but must ultimately discover their own sources of strength and support for healing. However, too often, in a recovery process the roles remain frozen in a static triangle. The triangle becomes an operating system as people can either be stuck in a role or, paradoxically, shift from role to role in order to maintain this unhealthy triangle’s equilibrium:



(source unknown)

This is most likely to happen if a helper – a therapist, a spouse, a donor, or development organization – becomes too invested in playing the role of rescuer. It is easy to do – we all want to feel as though we are good people, and when entering into this frozen triangle,

the role of rescuer is the most appealing to our egos. The international community shares a collective guilt about its inaction during the genocide of 1994, and thus the role of rescuer, however belated, is attractive and has drawn huge amounts of aid from Western governments. There is nothing wrong with giving aid: aid is important and should always be encouraged. That is about sharing what we have. The question becomes more complicated when we look at how that aid is used, and how we conceive of ourselves in the act of giving aid. Are we using that aid to promote an image of ourselves as “rescuer” or are we simply acting out of our obligations as responsible global citizens?

When my husband and I first arrived in Rwanda, neighbors would come and ask for money. Culturally, asking for help when you need it is acceptable, much more than it is in my home culture. We felt overwhelmed by the bottomless need around us, unsure of when to help and when to hold back.

The way Rwanda works is that people with more give and people with less ask. Usually what people give is short-term; it is not sustainable and cannot be counted on. But usually things come back around -- they are a part of a large patchwork of giving and receiving that last for years and generations. The generosity can be staggering -- our landlords routinely give half of what they make each month to people who need help. Our house worker, now that she has a job, has taken in a battered woman she barely knows and her sick infant. Our neighbors used to feed our house worker and her children when she was starving and out of work, and now that they don't have that burden they bring us milk each week from their cows and refuse to be paid. This is how people survive, and it is beautiful to see.

There is a difference, though, between giving out of genuine generosity, and giving because it props up an image of self as rescuer. So, the enormous question for me when I arrived was -- where do I fit in? For the first few months here, I was tormented. An easy way to feel good about myself was to give when I was asked, but I had a gnawing question about whether this was right. When I said no, I felt ashamed in the face of the generosity around me. I swung between wanting to rescue or save anyone who came across my path and then feeling like a victim -- as though I was being trapped into buying friends. It seemed that most foreigners around me took one road or another -- either they gave freely and embraced the role of rescuer, or they shut down to the suffering around them. I wanted to find a third way, to somehow melt this frozen system, but I didn't know how.

Trapped

The danger is that I could easily become addicted to being a “rescuer” -- that it could feed my ego and become an all-encompassing identity. The problem is that a rescuer needs a victim to rescue, and a victim can only be that when there is an abuser. Thus, it is impossible to have one of these roles played without the other two. When we try to “rescue” anyone during the recovery process, we inadvertently become invested in that person or group remaining victims. Thus, in the absence of an abuser, while simultaneously “helping” we might unconsciously do things to “hurt” so as to maintain that sense of our own inner goodness. In the meantime, those who are frozen in the role

of victim begin to see that they can benefit by remaining victims – they can gain material aid or emotional support while simultaneously avoiding responsibility for their own recovery – and they, too, in the absence of an actual abuser, may behave unconsciously to “hurt” themselves, manipulating the frozen triangle, staying forever the victim in order to exploit the ego needs of the rescuer. Of course, when this happens, true recovery is elusive, as victims never discover their own sources of positive power to heal.

It did not take me long to see that I was not the only one in Rwanda trapped in this frozen triangle. It is a dynamic that is prevalent throughout the society and perhaps magnified by the horror of abuse and victim-hood in Rwanda’s recent past. When we train community members as peer counselors in our Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities program (HROC), we always find ourselves discussing this triangle. It is because love and caring here is often expressed through the offering of material aid: money, clothes, food, medicine, etc. This makes sense in such an impoverished economy – these material comforts are rare and sharing is a sign of true generosity. It also makes sense in this fundamentally community-oriented culture – it is a way of showing that the hurting person or family is not alone. But in the context of peer counseling (or Healing Companions, as we call these trained community members), it can sometimes be problematic. Sometimes, problems are so fundamentally overwhelming that the only thing a new counselor knows to do is to give money or advice, trying to “rescue” the person who is hurt rather than supporting, loving and guiding that person to find his or her own solution. Although there are times when giving materially is called for (during severe illness or grave hunger), at other times, there can be a residual negative impact: it can make the hurting person feel even more helpless and empty, as though they have nothing left to give themselves or anyone else. And it can stop the conversation, making the hurting person feel even more isolated than before. And most harmfully, it can keep the hurting person in the victim role – the more convincingly she expresses her victimhood, the more material benefits she may reap. Thus she prostitutes her own tragedy to feed her children.

I see this dynamic play out again and again in Rwanda, not only on a personal level but on an organizational level as well. Within organizations, this frozen system is often more subtle and more difficult to pin down. Nevertheless it can define working relationships and ultimately corrode the self-sufficiency and core strength of many local organizations. Friends Peace House, for example, works closely with Western implementing partners, and in their effort to truly help, many of these Western partners (AGLI included) can get sucked into a rescuer role that is hard to avoid. There is no doubt that many donor or partner organizations have done a tremendous amount of good – from sponsoring important programs, to sharing expertise, and building cross-continental relationships. However, Western donors can unintentionally define key administrative realities for local Rwandan organizations that local agencies should be defining for themselves: they often define programming, by providing the initial vision. They often define salary scales, rather than that scale being determined locally based on local realities. Occasionally partner organizations are far too involved in hiring, without understanding the complex personnel dynamics on the ground. Working here, I personally encounter a constant challenge: I have the capacity to write a successful proposal, but when I write how much

of my own vision and my own ideas and my own understanding is what ultimately gets expressed rather than that of my local boss and colleagues? It is subtle, but it is there: the very spirit of local organizations is too easily defined by outsiders, thus keeping these local organizations in a victim role.

As the “victims”, local organizations have become masters at manipulating their “rescuers.” In an effort to equalize the power relationship, Friends Peace House and others snatch at short-lived power while relinquishing a long-term hold on their own development. For example, they know how to write budgets to fit what donors will accept. Thus, while they think they are getting more money from some donors, they still allow outsiders to define their salaries. They have other, new ideas for projects, but many leaders drop them quickly in favor of what their partner organizations seem to support. Here in Rwanda, I’ve seen leaders simply accept a donor’s hiring recommendation as a “directive” rather than explaining why a potential staff member or even a particular hiring process may not be appropriate. Rather than take an active role in proposal writing, or conceptualizing project ideas, many staff members will sit back, accustomed to being “rescued” by me and others like me, and thereby forfeit their influence in the shaping of crucial programs.

What is the long term consequence of this? Although good programs might be put in place, they run the risk of having roots that are not deep enough to hold a local organization steady as the whims of external donors and partners ebb and flow. Thus local organizations are constantly dependent on the active involvement of donor organizations. Of course, any non-profit organization is dependent on donors for funding, but they are not always so dependent on donors for program development, strategic planning, monitoring, and evaluation. But in the presence of this frozen triangle, local organizations rely on external partners for their vision as well as their funds. In formal presentations, I have even heard a local organization leader describe programs in terms of donors rather than programmatic departments and refer to a donor as his “boss”. Thus, when donor organizations inevitably move on, local organizations are left feeling abandoned and betrayed; the donor organizations are perceived to have shifted to the abuser role while local organizations ultimately stay victims, and the frozen system has not been altered.

And so we are trapped. The short-term benefits are great – the rescuers feel good about themselves and proud of the work and how much they have helped an organization or a person grow. The victims feel powerful – they have been able to get the most out of their donors or counselors. They succeed in getting some money – but weaken their core. And both, trapped in this system which needs all three roles to sustain itself, take turns as the abuser, ensuring that the victims stay staunchly in their place.

Finding Our Way

Solange is my friend and a highly accomplished facilitator in Friends Peace House’s Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities (HROC) program. She is 25. She was 13 when the interahamwe tore the roof off her family’s house, dropped down inside and murdered her parents in front of her eyes. She survived because one of the murderers

turned to her and told her to “GET OUT, GET OUT” before the rest of the group turned to kill her and her sisters. She survived because Hutu neighbors hid her for two days in their house. And because of a million other small things that added up to the saving of a life.

Three days ago, Solange told me a story. A man in Kibuye, the lakeside community where Solange lives and works, wrote her a letter. He had been a participant in one of her HROC workshops, and he wanted to approach her but was afraid. Although she knew he had recently been released from prison, she suggested that they meet and talk face to face. And so they did. And he began to talk: During the genocide he and his wife had done terrible things, he told her. They killed many people – so many they were not sure how many – and when they were killing they did so with zeal. Forty bodies were found buried around their house. They had done terrible, terrible things.

This man had heard Solange’s testimony during the workshop. He knew what she had been through, and he knew that she did trauma healing work. He wanted to tell her his story. He wanted to tell her what he was going through now. He wanted to start to heal from all that he had done.

“It is something,” Solange said, “to be trusted. That is something. Here in Rwanda, who can we trust?” Solange said she was afraid, but she sat and she listened. She listened deeply. She listened to all that this man had encountered since he was released from prison – his home had been destroyed, his land gone to weed.

“These people,” she said, “you know they have problems too. And so, even though I don’t have much money, I gave him 5000 Francs (~\$10).”

Here, the roles are becoming blurred – is Solange a victim, or is she a rescuer? Is the man an abuser or victim? Solange, with a grace as clear as cool water, recognized that this man was giving her a gift. He trusted her. And so, she wanted to give something back. She listened. And she gave him money to help restart his life. Our triangle is fading, blurring, mixing back into that tangled complexity that is human nature trying to heal.

When I asked Solange for permission to tell this story, awed by her capacity for compassion, her unwillingness to stay the victim, and her ability to see a man like that as a complex human being who abuses and suffers and saves like the rest of us, she said, “Yes. It’s no problem. Please tell everyone you know. Because, to me, this man – it is not that I think what he did is OK, but now, this man, to me, he is a hero.”

There is no clear path for untangling the corrosive and deeply ingrained roles of victims, rescuers and abusers, but Solange has given us one possible way. It strikes me that Solange did not try to save this man, and he did not try to save her. Instead, they have subtly reoriented themselves so that now they are side by side, looking at their broken lives, looking at their broken country, together. They are each on a journey, and for a

while they fell in step with each other – traveling companions, healing companions on a long long road.

And this is a lesson for me – this work is not about saving anyone. It's about being together. It's about being angry together, being overwhelmed together, being hopeful together. It's about grieving together, seeking answers to impossible questions together, and allowing ourselves to be inspired by each other's hope as we muddle on. It's about humility, and the willingness to set aside mutual exploitation in order to be fully capable of sharing what we have. It's about listening and learning and teaching. I ought not to be here to help Rwandans rebuild and heal their country. I am here, instead, to help heal and rebuild our wounded world, together with my friends and colleagues, side by side, on a long long road.