

An Ordinary Man: An Autobiography

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Tonight we are going to sit together and answer a few questions that many people ask me, but before this I'll tell you briefly who we are and where our problems started. In Rwanda we are 84 percent Hutus and ten percent Tutsi. All of these people speak a similar language, all of these people have the same culture; there is no Hutu culture and no Tutsi culture, nothing like a Tutsi language or a Hutu language. We are mixed throughout the country, there's nothing like a Hutuland or Tutsiland. Then you ask me, why do these people hate each other? I tell you that it is rooted in our history. Starting from before colonization, Rwandans were divided. The relationships between the Hutus and the Tutsis were relationships between a master and a slave because Hutus were slaves to Tutsis.

Then came the colonization. Colonizers widened the gap, separating both offending groups. Colonizers went as far as even measuring noses, saying that a Hutu nose was supposedly shorter than a Tutsi nose. They went as far as bringing measuring equipment. Separating in order to conquer became their solution. What was the result? The 1959 Hutu Revolution. The majority Hutu said no to colonization, said no to that kind of slavery, and then took over. When they took over, colonizers went back to Europe and our countrymen, men and women, had no other solution than fleeing the country, going to neighboring countries such as Uganda, Burundi, and Tanzania and even the Congo. Hutus ruled the country until 1990. In 1990 those people who had fled Rwanda and were living in neighboring countries, having military training formed Southern African liberation movements. In 1979, they were the ones who overthrew one of the most known dictators in Africa, Idi Amin Dada. They are the ones who helped to bring in Yoweri Museveni; they fought for him in Uganda and helped him to take power. So they became very powerful.

And then in 1990 they attacked their own country and a war broke out from northeastern Rwanda. Unfortunately, when they came in, they came in killing Hutu civilians. So the surviving victims started killing innocent civilians on the hills—inviting them for meetings and killing them. That brought the whole region to a very heavy tension between Hutus and Tutsis. The whole of the Great Lakes region by 1993 was under very heavy tension.

In June 1993, a Hutu president was elected in Burundi, democratically elected, and then killed by the Tutsi army because Burundi was ruled by Tutsis and Rwanda was ruled by Hutus. So, the Hutus who were fleeing Burundi into Rwanda and all the Tutsis who were persecuted in Rwanda were fleeing to Burundi. The Hutu president, who was elected democratically, was killed on October 22, 1993. Now, in 1994, the killing of both the new president of Burundi and the Rwandan president was just like pouring tons of oil on a burning fire.

Then the story of the middle-class hotel manager who was living a normal life. When both presidents were killed, immediately the genocide started. Then came my experiences. Many times people, especially young people, ask when they see what I went through during that

genocide, they always look at me and say “Paul, have you ever been in your life threatened, scared?” I have been threatened very much, and I have been scared, too much. On day three of the genocide many of my neighbors had come to my house. On the 9th of April, at noon, I was standing in the living room with one of my guests, a young man called Michel. I had 26 of my neighbors who had gathered in my house and we saw soldiers climbing the gate. When we saw the soldiers, a neighbor of mine who knew that he had three sons who were fighting for the rebels, who knew that they might be looking for him, looked at me, shaking, and told me, “Paul, those guys are looking for me. Please, before they come in your house and kill all of these people, let me go deliver myself so that can kill me before they kill everyone else.” I looked at him and told him that those people are not looking for him, those people were looking for me. Let me go and meet them. And for sure, they were looking for me. I opened my gate and went to meet them.

As I describe in my autobiography, I believe in the power of words. With words you can kill and with words you can save lives, depending on what you want to achieve, evil or the right thing. When I opened my door going to meet them I had to open a discussion, a kind of dialogue. Their captain looked at me and said, “Sir are you the manager of the Diplomates Hotel?” I said, “Yes I’m the manager.” “If you’re the manager, then the government has sent us to pick you up and bring you to the hotel because we need you.” I said “Okay, you guys are on an excellent mission, but I cannot leave behind my family.” We were six people, four children my wife and myself, but that day we were 32 people. Children from a local L.A. high school were asking me a few minutes ago why did you take that risk? I told them I never took that risk. People trusted me to take that risk because they gathered in my house. I had no other choice than take them.

When I told the soldiers that I had my family they said okay, bring everyone, it’s very good, take everyone. I said okay, we started piling in people and we drove a mile away, but not to the hotel compound. I saw ahead of us there were 20 soldiers in jeeps. I saw the jeeps ahead of us slowing down, stopping, and I stopped also and my neighbor who was following in the other jeep stopped. I saw all of the soldiers get off of their jeeps. The captain came to me, handed over a gun and told me “Listen, you traitor, you are lucky we are not killing you today, but have this gun and kill all of the cockroaches in these cars.” Dehumanizing people before killing them. I knew that this guy was not joking because all over the street were many dead bodies, some of them missing their heads, others bellies opened, mutilated. And yet we had been living in that neighborhood for seven years. We knew almost everyone and almost everyone knew us. Can you imagine those children who were there, what they were seeing?

For five minutes I was speechless. I stayed silent for five minutes watching him, his movements, his reactions. After five minutes of watching him I told him “My friend, I do not know how to use guns,” and I do not know even now how a gun works, “but even if I knew, I don’t see any good reason why I should kill this old man who is in my car.” There was a young woman holding a baby. I told him “My friend, are you sure that the enemy you are fighting today is this young baby?” Many times when you deal with such people I believe that one of the best solutions is to touch their sensitive side, the ego side. I then told him, “You guys are hungry, you guys are tired, you guys are stressed by this war, you are thirsty. I do understand you, but this is not the right thing to be done.”

We started finding other solutions. After two long hours of dealing, negotiating, we came up with an agreement. Whoever opens himself up to you, talks to you, you always come up with a solution—there is always another solution somewhere. We came up with an agreement. We drove up to the hotel, I went to the hotel safe and brought out cash and paid them. That day I was scared and very much more scared than ever in my life, but I had learned one of the best lessons

I've ever learned in my life—how to deal with evil. I have crossed eyes with evil, we had a deal that we negotiated, and we came up with an agreement.

I stayed at the Diplomates Hotel for another three days. I had transferred to the Diplomates Hotel one and a half years before in November 1992. But the Milles Collines manager called on the 11th of April. He told me, "Listen, Paul. I'm going to leave. Can you please have a look at my hotel?" We were two general managers, he was from the Netherlands and I was Rwandan, both working for a foreign company. I said, "But I don't promise anything, I'm here with the government." But by the following morning the government fled the Diplomates and I joined their convoy and went up to the Milles Collines. This was the place where we were going to stay for another seventy long, long hot days.

A day at that time was more or less like a month. Young people ask me, "What is the toughest decision you have ever taken in your life?" Well, the toughest decision I took was on May 2, 1994, during the genocide. We were starving. Our hotel was cut off and remained without water. I stopped the running water in the rooms because if you use running water in the rooms just a few minutes your pool would be empty. Not everybody would care for it. So I stopped the running water in the rooms and people started coming to fetch a few drops of water every morning at 8:00 a.m. I was standing there each and every morning just watching people taking a few drops, with the trash bins from their rooms because those were the desperate limited means we had. Electricity was cut off. No electricity. Food, our meals were limited to corn and dry beans, no very good chicken, no very good steak, nothing like that. I started smuggling firewood to cook dry beans and corn. Twice a day we were eating dry beans and corn. Life became so difficult, so complicated.

The United Nations had pulled out all their soldiers. They had 2,500, pulled out 2,200 and left us only 260 soldiers for the whole country. The few executives who had remained had with the army and the rebels, been sitting down negotiating finding ways and means to evacuate people from the killing fields, including the Milles Collines Hotel and the national city stadium. The Milles Collines Hotel being controlled by the army and the national stadium by the rebels, they came up with an agreement to exchange us.

That afternoon they came up to me and told me their conclusion, and they had a list with names. All my family members' names were almost the first on the list, including myself. I remember that day many Milles Collines refugees coming to me and telling me, "listen Paul, we know that you are leaving tomorrow, please, if you are leaving tell us, so that we can go to the roof of the hotel and jump." Our main concern at that time was not to die, but how to die. The killers were torturing their victims, cutting tendons so that people couldn't run away, then going to torture other people, coming back again and cutting off hands, for instance, and going away again. People being killed slowly, this was our main concern at that time. I told my friends, "I'm not leaving tomorrow, I'm not leaving," but they couldn't believe me.

I had made the toughest decision of my life. I had decided to send my wife without any hope to see her anymore in life. Without any hope to see my children anymore in life, without any hope for them to survive or for me to survive. I had decided to send them and remain behind. That night as usual I went to bed at quite a late hour. My wife and children were all of them awake. Everyone was surprised to see me, I was changed, I was a completely changed human being. And yet, I was on the list. All the people on the list were supposed to be evacuated. So no one could understand what was going on with me. What is going on with you? Are you normal? I started pretending, yes, I'm normal and things like that. I couldn't hide this for so long. When my

children were playing or busy doing other things, I looked at my wife and told her “Tomorrow you are going to be evacuated.” When I said “you”, it turned everyone. In a joint voice, they looked at me and said “You are saying us. How about you? Aren’t you coming with us?” “No, I’m not coming with you. Today, I have made a decision. I am not leaving these people alone.” Up till then, for more than a month, I had been the only person sitting down with these guys, convincing them not to kill these refugees. If I left this place and these people are killed, I will never be a free man in my life. I will never eat and feel satisfied. I will never drink and feel satisfied. I will never go to my bed and sleep. Please, accept and leave. We discussed it over, and in the end my wife, my children, accepted to leave. The following day, on May 3, I escorted my wife and my children.

When research was being done for making *Hotel Rwanda*, we found footage of that evacuation and I saw again myself, original film, which was made by a soldier. I saw myself escorting my wife and children, seeing them off. There is nothing as heartbreaking as seeing your beloved ones, thinking that maybe, this is the last time I see them in my life. That day, my heart was broken.

So we just watched the first truck leaving, the second one leaving, the third, as the last one, crossing the hotel main gate. The radio, the power of words again, the radio was broadcasting all the names of all the people being evacuated from the Milles Collines Hotel, urging militiamen to put up roadblocks, stop all those cockroaches, and kill them. Saying that if you forgive them, they never forgive you. That all those names, including babies’ names, were going behind the enemy’s lines and that they would attack us tonight. With words, we can save lives, with words, we can kill, depending on what we want to achieve.

That day, I had made a decision, and a very tough one, but did I succeed? Those people could not make it for more than two miles. Roadblocks were put up, they were stopped, and militiamen started beating them. They were beaten, almost killed. Then they started shooting. The first bullet came from a militiaman, as many people have seen in *Hotel Rwanda*, and also as I have described in my autobiography. When they started shooting the first bullet from the first militiaman killed a soldier. Then the soldiers and the militiamen started fighting each other. When they started fighting each other, the UN soldiers, who had surrendered actually, relaxed a little bit, and started pulling the victims from the tumult and throwing them in the backs of trucks.

When my wife was brought back, she was not as strong as you’ve seen on the screen, shouting. She was lying flat in the back of a truck, other people’s blood mixed with hers. I went and picked her up, brought her up to the room, where she stayed for many weeks unable to even turn herself in bed.

Life became so difficult. All the hope we had vanished completely until June the 17th. On June the 17, early in the morning, I learned that militiamen were killing the refugees in a neighboring church. The Sainte Famille church is just about 500 meters away from the hotel. And from the hotel rooms, because the Milles Collines is not that building you saw in *Hotel Rwanda*, you could see what was going on in the church compound. When I learned that, I just started phoning all the people I knew. As I used to do it, I was disturbing every one, the White House, the United Nations, the Peace Corps, each and everyone I knew. So I started phoning again and while I was phoning, I saw the mayor of Kigali, just coming in from outside. I went to meet him and started telling him that, “Sir, you are the very person I’m looking for. You have the solution to my problems. I need to enforce security around this house and you have the solution. You have soldiers. Please, give me soldiers.” He looked at me and told me, “Listen, Paul, I don’t have

soldiers. Any soldiers I had are just fighting. Others are protecting official buildings.” I looked at him and said “Sir, people are dying and soldiers are protecting buildings. Do you know that all of what is happening today will one day come to an end, and that day you and I, the two of us, we will definitely face history. Is this the answer you will give to history?” He then looked at me for a few seconds and turned his back. I just watched him joining his bodyguards, getting into his jeep and just disappearing. I stayed standing there, looking at the dead flowers, another sign of June, 1994, just watching without any other hope to survive.

I used to stockpile favors so that one day I might cash them. I had an appointment with the General Chief of Staff, General Bizimungu, at the Diplomates Hotel, to give him a few supplies. When I went to meet him, while I was talking with him in the cellars of the Diplomates Hotel, I was informed that after killing 150 people, militiamen came running to the Milles Collines Hotel and they were breaking doors. I told him, “General, let us go down to the Milles Collines Hotel.” We went and when we arrived I remember General Bizimungu telling one of his bodyguards, “Go up there and tell all the militiamen who are in this hotel that whoever kills someone, I kill him, whoever beats someone, I kill him, whoever remains in this hotel for the next five minutes, I will kill him.” Militiamen had broken many doors. They had already taken many people downstairs, around the swimming pool, many innocent victims were kneeling down ready to be slaughtered. The deciders come up again with a decision to evacuate the Milles Collines Hotel and this time without any condition. They came to me at a late hour, at around 5, and told me their decision. I looked at them and told them, “Listen my friends, let us learn from history. Last time we tried to do this was a late hour, it was also 5, 5:30, something there. Those people were almost killed because of the darkness. But they escaped by luck. Tomorrow morning, as early as you can, we start evacuating these people.” Then, security was reinforced and the following day all the Milles Collines refugees were evacuated to different destinations of their own choices.

From the beginning to end, Milles Collines had 1, 268 people who had passed there. None of them had been killed, none of them had been beaten, none of them had been taken out. Thank God, a miracle had been performed. But why isn’t it the same thing in the whole country? I have in my mind, in my dreams, that all the people could not have gone as mad as that. But I was cheating myself. I was also evacuated to the rebels’ side, but many men were being invited to meetings and killed, including my employees. The hotel employees who had been staying in that hotel from the beginning to the end, many young men were being recruited to the army and killed. I was recruited to go to train for a new kind of militia, a new form of a militia, what they call today local defense, but I didn’t go to train. I told them that “my friends, myself, I’ve made a different decision. In my life I will never fight with a gun. I will fight with my words. I believe in dialogue.” I didn’t go to train but again, those who went disappeared. Ironically, we sometimes say in Rwanda, that those who went to meetings are still attending meetings and one day they might come back. Those who went to train as soldiers, they are still training, one day they may come back. But we say this, as I said, ironically because we know that they never come back. They are gone forever.

We stayed there for two weeks. As you have seen in *Hotel Rwanda* and also in *An Ordinary Man*, after two weeks, we searched for and found my brother’s two daughters, who were actually babies because the elder daughter was two years old and her sister was nine months. After finding those two babies we came back to town. I did not go to Tanzania as *Hotel Rwanda* suggests. I rather came back to town and started cleaning both hotels before opening on July the 15. Many times again when young people see me, smiling, they think that Paul has never been sad in his life. He might have been threatened but never sad. Before opening both hotels, this was on July the 12, early in the morning a friend, myself and my wife we decided to drive south, to go where

we come from, where we belong to, to see our families. When we went out of Kigali, the capital city of Rwanda, the whole country was smelling of death. In the whole country, throughout the roads, you could see dead bodies, there was no human being alive. There was no animal alive. We could only hear dogs barking, but from very far away, in the background.

We went up to my homeland where I was born and grew up. Lucky enough, my elder brother was there. When he saw me, he was very much concerned. And he started asking me, “What brings you here? Why are you here?” Because he was very much concerned by me being there. I started asking him questions: “Where are our brothers and sisters?” Our elder sister had been killed by the rebels who are today in power. Our younger brother had also been killed by them. I started asking him about neighbors; many of them had been killed by militiamen, others by the army. Many cousins and their nieces and nephews were being burnt by the rebels in houses. We are seeing that, them burning. He told me that “Please, even these walls you see have eyes and ears, they listen to what you are saying. They see you. Please leave.”

We drove, went down south to see my mother-in-law. From far away we noticed that her two houses had been destroyed, and when we arrived she had been killed, with her daughter-in-law and six grandchildren. All of them had been thrown in a pit where we used to mature bananas to make banana juices and banana beers. That day was a very long day, the longest in my life, in our lives, for the three of us we sat down in the winds and just like babies, we cried. That day I was very, very sad.

We drove back to Kigali, where we stayed for another two years and more, hoping that things would improve, hoping that we would always make it and build a better Rwanda. I was almost assassinated myself and escaped by luck. Then I decided to take the fastest and nearest flight into exile. I went into Belgium where I have stayed since that time.

Up to today a solution has not yet been found. You all can tell me that “Paul, you have underlined problems. What do you suggest as a solution for people that have experienced this?” What I suggest is dialogue. Rwandan people, just like anywhere else in the world, need to sit around a table. We have seen that guns have failed to solve our problems. 1959 Hutus took over from Tutsis and colonizers. Tutsis went away. 250,000 of them fled the country. But those that fled the country came back and took power again, fighting in 1994 after three and a half decades. And when they come back fighting, two million Hutus fled the country and went into exile. Shall we keep on playing that kind of game? Or, shall we sit around the table and find a lasting solution? Which would be a result of words, of dialogue, of negotiations. The true reconciliation is a result of a dialogue between both Hutus and Tutsis today. As Rwandans, so far we haven’t learned a lesson.

Has the world learned a lesson? Two years ago I went to Darfur, to see with my own eyes what was going on over there. What did I see? What I had been seeing in Rwanda between 1990 and 1994. Until 1994, starting from 1990, when the rebels attacked, killed men and their sons, all the people were fleeing the zones occupied by the rebels and by 1994 Rwanda had 1.2 million people surrounding Kigali, coming to town going to sleep outside, in the open air, without food, without shelter, without water, without schools for their children. Can you imagine how many generations have been lost?

In Darfur, when we were there two million people had been displaced within Darfur. About 250,000 had crossed the border with Chad, in the neighboring country and those few people who had made it were sleeping in the Sahara sand without food, without shelter, without education for

their children. Their wives and their daughters were raped when trying to go out and find firewood. Have we learned our lesson? When all those people saw us, about two thousand kids gathered and demonstrated peacefully to teach us a lesson. They demonstrated peacefully holding big panels on which they had drawn government helicopters, bombing and destroying villages, and janjaweed militias on horses, armed by the government, killing every one trying to flee the burning villages. What has shamed me most was a big blackboard held by those kids on which they had written “Welcome to our guests, but we need education.” Is this not a shame to mankind? Is this not a shame to all your land?

That is why, ladies and gentlemen, I have become a humanitarian, to help and speak for those voiceless voices, to put myself on their own side, in their own skin.

On my way back I was flying from N’Djamena to Paris. In the airplane they were watching news, and all the superpower leaders were gathered in Auschwitz remembering, commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Holocaust in Poland. And all the speakers of the day repeated at least ten times the two words that we keep on abusing: “never” and “again.” And yet where I was coming from, it was happening again, and again, and again, and again. Ladies and gentlemen, tonight I urge each and every one of us to stand up. Are we being selfish bystanders? Watching and simply saying “This is not us, we are not concerned. This is not our problems.” Today is the day to stop being bystanders but rather to stand up. Thank you.

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