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Book Review


Inspired by the movie with the same title, Catherine Larson decided to write a book about the reconciliation and healing process after the tragedy of genocide in Rwanda. The book follows the stories of the movie characters and analyzes them in depth.

Conflict is inevitable. But conflict leaves behind scars. To Larson, a scar can reveal the human capacity for evil but also the potential to heal. To her, a scar reflects the process of reconciliation. In this case the process is a painful one, since the criminals have been released and now have to face the surviving victims. “How can they live together,” she asks? The scar can be a separating border between past and future, between justice and mercy, or it can become a road map for reconciliation. Larson shows how Rwandans promote the later.

The main concept in the book is restorative justice as opposed to retributive justice. Restorative justice brings the criminals and the victims face to face in the process of reconciliation. This kind of justice is based on the biblical concept of forgiveness, especially the Old Testament seeking of *shalom*. The title of the book comes from the Lord’s Prayer. Forgiveness is not simply forgetting. In one of the victim’s words, “forgiveness is a gift one gives to change the heart of the offender” (87). It is a lifelong commitment, a decision taken in spite of feelings and rationalizations. The offender has to accept this forgiveness in order to be effective. The acceptance includes an admission of guilt and shame. This lifetime commitment...
is expressed in the REACH acrostic presented by Dr. Everett Worthington: Recall the Hurt, Empathize, Altruistic gift of forgiveness, Commit publicly to forgive, and Hold on to forgiveness.

In a practical way, the restorative justice has a particular face in Rwanda. The *umuvumu* fig tree shadows the popular tribunals, called *gacaca*, which require the telling of truth and confession on the perpetrators’ side and the desire for peace and reconciliation instead of revenge from the survivors. It is not simply justice looking for guilt and blame, but redemptive justice, a process of restoration and restitution. It is more than punishment for a broken law; it seeks to restore relationships and people. The community is part of the process by supporting both sides to help people get over the tragedy. The elders facilitate the dialogue and recognize the responsibilities, and also identify the solutions. It is a justice that involves all parties and requires that they go forward together. Out of tragedy comes beauty.

The approach of the book is very positive, although painful. The reader’s emotions are stirred, both against the perpetrators as well as the victims. The end of each story brings relief to such emotions and hope for the future. The book is also surprisingly practical, including an application of each story to the present life of the reader, by means of prelude, postlude, and interludes between the chapters. The book also includes a list of resources and organizations that practice restorative justice, as well as an appendix with steps necessary to be taken by both the offender and the victim. I highly recommend the book to every person who is interested in the peace and healing process, but particularly to those who have been hurt. The book is a must for pastors, missionaries, and spiritual leaders who are in charge of the reconciliation process in different parts of the world. The *gacaca* type tribunal teaches all of us a contextualized lesson about God’s justice and reconciliation.