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Miracles of Forgiveness

by John Braun

*Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive every indebtedness to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial. (Luke 11:4 NRSV)*

THARS was born out of the screams of massacres and rape and human disfigurement. There, where the soul is being shredded, where terror chokes out life, where violent hatred insinuates itself into smashed lives, THARS offers the miracle of new life. The pathway of healing involves entering the story with traumatized victims and listening compassionately. It also involves skilled help in recovery of a life, help that brings self-esteem and the possibilities of reconciliation. The very heart of healing is forgiveness. And when it happens, forgiveness always seems like a miracle powered by God.

THARS stands for Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Services. The organization is registered with the government of Burundi on the African continent. Its outreach extends not just to Burundi, but also to the people of Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The THARS logo is pointedly appropriate: *Healing in the Heart of Africa*.

In more than a spiritual sense, the mission of THARS evolved from the personal experience of its gifted director, David Niyonzima. In 1994, in the midst of the Tutsi vs. Hutu cultural violence, David and some of the pastoral students whom he was teaching became the targets of a massacre by a military contingent. In total shock, David and the students bolted for whatever safety they could find as the soldiers turned and began firing their semi-automatic weapons at them. Eight of the students were murdered. David was miraculously protected. Soldiers broke into the place where he was hiding but did not see him.

In the following days, a clear voice spoke to David on two occasions. The first time, it told him that he need not hide in fear. He had been protected from the flying bullets. The second time, during a deep depression following the burial of his students, the voice said that he had to forgive the persons who conducted the massacre, especially two persons who led the soldiers and whom David recognized before the killing began. Not long after that experience, David met one of the men, confronted him and



Gathering at the THARS amphitheatre. Photo courtesy of THARS.

surprised himself by saying that he forgave the man by God's grace. God's power was at work. The depression washed off of David and he understood thoroughly that God had spared him to bring healing to people and society through forgiveness and reconciliation. He was to lead a process of creating a new future for people caught in cycles of violence and bloodletting.

THARS was created. Grants supported the training of trauma counselors, the establishment of counseling locations in many communities, reconciliation and healing workshops, and remarkable work among poor village women. 61 women's groups now support one another with micro-finance needs and shared efforts at raising income. One such group operates a loan fund to support members' cottage industry efforts. Help has also come from *Peace Through Pieces*, a North Seattle Friends Church ministry, led by Patty Federighi, to empower the women through teaching quilting and sewing skills. Incomprehensible stories of miracles, healing and forgiveness flow from these women who had been so deeply scarred and traumatized.

Through support from generous individuals and groups in the USA (and one couple in particular) THARS is in the midst of building a training center with housing for 100 persons. Serenely set on a hillside with a view across the valley to mountains beyond, the center lures people to come for growth and renewal. Only half completed, the training center campus already hosts a variety of events. When fully operational, it will produce sufficient revenue to provide a steady income stream for continued counseling and trauma healing work.

My personal involvement with THARS started with an episode of deep grieving for the senseless loss of life due to poverty. In Africa, a person dies every three seconds from some cause that is poverty related. I began to count the seconds. I began to grieve the deaths, so many in just a few minutes! My heart broke open and I wept. "God, I don't know what I can do but I will do what I can." Then I met David and he asked me to lead a work camp to help get construction started on a government land grant to THARS. That first work camp took place in April 2007. A second work camp, scheduled for this coming summer, is now being rescheduled for spring 2012.

In the fall of 2009, the THARS Board of Directors in Burundi sent a message to ask for the creation of a U.S. charitable organization that might partner with THARS and help with construction costs, administrative maintenance funding between major grants, and coordination of work camps to visit and help with the Training Campus construction.

THARS International is now organized and awaiting recognition by the IRS as a charitable organization. I serve as Executive Director. The contact address is 2217 Honeysett Rd., Wenatchee, WA 98801. We can be reached by phone or text message at 206-920-5671 or by e-mail at vjbraun@nwi.net. Please spread the word to help create a network of partners. Miraculous changes take place as people merge their interest and energies for common good. THARS in Burundi is praying for yet more miracles. So are we.



The training center under construction. Photo courtesy of THARS.



John Braun, a GNA Board member, is a retired pastor from Wenatchee, WA. He is a theologian, counselor and businessman. His heart is prophetic, his vision is global and his actions are entrepreneurial. He can be reached at vjbraun@nwi.net.

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