



# A Soap Opera for Peace in Rwanda

By Maggie Ziegler

Five villagers sit together in an administrative building in the Rwandan district of Musambira, an hour's drive from the capital, Kigali. All had experienced the 1994 Rwandan genocide, in which approximately 800,000 people died in a hundred days. Two had participated in massacres, two had survived those massacres and the fifth was a boy of fourteen from the perpetrator group who had not participated in the killings. The five describe themselves as friends. How is this possible?

Throughout Rwanda's populated hills, survivors and released prisoners are expected to find ways of living side by side. They are told to join in creating a new, unified Rwanda.

But though they are grateful for the security and economic development provided by President Paul Kagame's government, they find living together complex. Some describe a "pretend peace" that papers over unresolved wounds. Heart-felt reconciliation is difficult.

For the five villagers it is a radio show that has led to change.

"We use entertainment to educate," says Aimable Twahirwa, the Rwandan project head of the Dutch NGO La Benevolencija. "Rwandans need more than speeches and conferences."

Since 2004, La Benevolencija has been broadcasting the radio soap opera, *Musekeweya* (New Dawn) twice weekly. Most Rwandans listen to radio and, of those, 90 percent follow *Musekeweya*. No ordinary radio drama, it contains carefully embedded psychological and communication messages intended to support healing in a population still traumatized by the 1994 genocide.

*Musekeweya* is a fictional story of two villages on two hills, with a legacy of historical animosity. Their problems escalated to a repeated cycle of violence. Slowly the villagers develop empathy for each other and confront their past and their current problems without violence. As the characters learn how to work together and resolve their past, they inspire the listeners to do the same.

Does this happen? Yes. Twahirwa gives an example. There is a rebellious student character in *Musekeweya* who challenged his teachers' "divisionist" attitudes and created a school reconciliation club that led to a new harmonious atmosphere in his school. This fictional narrative inspired a secondary school youth to adopt the radio character's name and eventually achieve a similar transformation in his own troubled school.

If *Musekeweya* works, perhaps it is because of the care that went into its development. Trauma psychologist Laurie Pearlman and Ervin Staub, psychology professor at the University of Massachusetts, were instrumental in creating the radio drama. They were invited to Rwanda in 1999 by Charles Murigande, then rector of the National University of Rwanda (and now Minister of Education), to assist Rwandans in reflecting on what had happened and to exploring what might help Rwanda unfreeze from its trauma.

In his upcoming book (*Overcoming Evil*, 2010) Staub describes their work as promoting an "understanding of the roots of violence between groups." He and Pearlman formed a partnership with Amsterdam film producer, George Weiss, who brought together a team to develop the educational radio drama. (See sidebar for their twelve original messages.)

La Benevolencija has become an international partnership that now broadcasts radio dramas and educational programs in Rwanda, Burundi and Congo. Ninety of the approximately 100 staff are nationals of those countries.

"We received a call," Twahirwa added, "from an administrator in Musambira who said we had to talk to the people from two hills who hadn't really spoken since 1994. The villagers said they had been listening to *Musekeweya* for four years and then decided to change."

Conflict had engulfed these two hills. The Hutu people of Giheta had committed atrocities against their neighbors, the Tutsis of Ruseke. For many years there was a strained silence. The road between

the hills was not used anymore: The survivors who were still too afraid and the perpetrators feared retribution from the families of their victims. Everyone carried the burden of memory.

Twahirwa smiled. "When we went there, they had their arms around each other."

He invited me to join a trip to Musambira. King Ngoma, La Benevolencija's grassroots coordinator was accompanying Julia Hoffmann, a lecturer at the University of Amsterdam who was writing a methodology manual about La Benevolencija's approach and wanted to hear the villagers' story firsthand.

And so, on a hot August day, I am jolting down a dirt road and then sitting on a wooden chair across from the five villagers.

Jean Claude Mutarindwa, the bystander from the perpetrator village, softly recounts his story. He had realized that the conflict between two hills in the soap opera resembled his own experience. This led him to bring the people in his village together "to expose the issue." He found that "in their hearts the people wanted forgiveness."

He convinced survivor Protogene Hategekimana to sensitize other survivors to the possibility of reconciliation. Initially, Protogene said, when the residents of Giheta came with hoes and shovels to help cultivate the fields of Ruseke, the survivors saw only their enemies carrying weapons and they were afraid.

A group that attacked was now asking for pardon. It was not easy. Day after day, people came from Giheta to work the ground of Ruseke and to plant sorghum and beans. Daphrose Mukambayiza, whose husband and son had been murdered, fell sick during the planting season. Those who had formerly come to kill her family came to cultivate her land.

"It was difficult to understand," Daphrose says, but she came to view the relationship between Jean Claude and Protogene as similar to that between Shema and Batamuliza (a young couple in *Musekeweya* who overcame challenging backgrounds on different hills to make a loving marriage). Daphrose, who carries herself with strength and dignity, gives her full attention to Reverier Gendaneza and Innocent Musigazi when they talk about "doing things unimaginable."

"It was the messages on the radio show that led me to ask for forgiveness," says Innocent. His gaze is sometimes haunted but when he speaks about the massacres and how he confessed at *gacaca* (community justice courts), his voice is strong and clear. Reverier also speaks clearly as he describes the difficulties of the reconciliation journey. The others nod supportively as the men talk.

In 2009 the two hills came together in a forgiveness ceremony attended by sector leaders, district mayors, and other local officials. Daphrose represented the widows' association.

"I came to see," she says, "that the genocide was over."

The villagers' story embodies the messages of *Musekeweya*, which encourages them to humanize each other through building empathy. They learn the importance of attending to basic psychological needs, and that everyone can contribute to healing. They learn that open communication builds trust and decreases violence, and that it is action—not passivity—that inhibits wrong-doing.

Everyone carries a story that has left a deep psychological impact. Listening to each other's stories about their wounds opens villagers to new perspectives and moves them toward a common, shared history.

Pearlman, in Rwanda this past April to collaborate with Rwandan scriptwriters in identifying and embedding messages in the coming year's scripts, sees the project's psychological approach as unusual. "Most people who have analyzed violence," she said, "don't really think psychologically. They think primarily of history and economics."

After listening to the villagers, I was not surprised later to read Staub's research on the impact of the radio show. She showed that listeners were more willing than others to express their views (including naming disagreements with others) and more likely to express empathy for the experience of others. They were more likely to consider it helpful to talk about traumas.

King, Julia, and I head south to another rural community. As we climb and descend the hills, they tell me about La Benevolencija's community programs for social change and social cohesion.

Thirty-seven community associations have been formed, each in an area where genocide-related conflicts linger and social cohesion is low. The community associations emerged from a program to train community change agents.

The carefully-chosen members include local leaders and members of both survivor and perpetrator families. They are initially brought together for a five-day training that incorporates the messages developed for *Musekeweya*. It is an experiential training that involves role-playing. It enhances the radio program messages by supporting grassroots interventions for the active repair of community.

We are driving through dry, dusty hills as Julia and King tell how, in one community, *gacaca* had given a survivor widow the home of a perpetrator family. Later, when a sister of the perpetrator returned to the village she had nowhere to live, as the survivor was living in her former family home. The community association was able to provide successful mediation. The two women agreed to live in the same house and now they work the land together.

In sector Mukora, the villagers greet us enthusiastically and embrace King joyously. They explain that we are standing in front of a house built together by members of survivor and perpetrator families. A boy from a perpetrator family, abandoned after the genocide when his family fled, grew to be a young man who needed a home. The villagers decided to make him welcome by building him a home. Also, an older woman from a perpetrator family had been ordered to pay reparations through *gacaca*. This was not possible for her, so the entire village worked together to raise the required money, and now, as one survivor said, "The problem of reparations is finished here."

The infectious energy of the community accompanied me as we began the drive back to Kigali. There, Aimable Twahirwa flung open the door with delight to a small room in which a single microphone was dangling. "This is our recording studio," he said happily. "All this drama comes out of this little room." In the deepening dusk, my mind returns to the villagers of Giheta and Ruseke. As perpetrators seeking redemption, as survivors recognizing the necessity of reconciliation, they speak the truth of their hearts to each other. As they experience empathy they no longer avoid the road between the hills. Now they share a fierce pride in the story they have made public in the hope that others across Rwanda will find ways to live together with honesty, restored trust, and justice.

I think about myself. Today I open-heartedly shook hands with confessed murderers and took a step into Rwanda's call for unity. I glimpsed what is being asked here, something not abstract or academic, but something deep in the heart. This exploration can, just possibly, result in liberation.

## 12 Original Key Messages

1. Life problems in a society frustrate basic needs and can lead to scapegoating and destructive ideologies.
2. Genocide evolves as individuals and groups change as a result of their actions.
3. Devaluation increases the likelihood of violence, whereas humanization decreases it.
4. The healing of psychological wounds helps people live more satisfying lives and makes unnecessary defensive violence less likely.
5. Passivity facilitates the evolution of harm doing, whereas actions by people inhibit it.
6. Varied perspectives, open communication, and moderate respect for authority in society make the evolution of violence less likely.
7. Justice is important for healing and reconciliation.
8. Significant connections and deep engagement between people belonging to different groups help people overcome devaluation and hostility and promote positive relations.
9. Trauma can be understood.
10. It is important to tell one's trauma story, and there is a way to tell it that is emotionally safe and constructive.
11. People can help their neighbours heal and help them tell their stories as part of the healing process; everyone can participate in and can contribute to healing.
12. Healing is a slow process.

(with permission, Staub, *Overcoming Evil*, 2010)

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