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Forgiveness Is All I Have To Offer

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Forgiveness Is All I Have To Offer

Edward Culhane

When one overcomes hard times, the triumph can often be attributed to one of three “dispositions”: a personal disposition, “I made it through those hard times because I am unbelievably talented”; a situational disposition, “I am just very lucky”; or what I would call a spiritual disposition, you attribute your survival or success to a higher power. I personally did not believe in the validity of spiritual disposition until I came across the story of Immaculée Ilibigiza. This essay will examine her story, as told in *Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust*, in light of the works of Eben Alexander, M.D., and Carl Sagan.

Rwanda is predominantly made up of two tribes: a Hutu majority and a Tutsi minority. In 1918, under the Treaty of Versailles, Belgium became the protectorate of the former German colony Rwanda. The Belgians introduced a race-based class system and made the minority Tutsi aristocracy the ruling class. They also introduced ethnic identification cards in order to more easily differentiate between members of the two tribes. In 1959, the Tutsis claimed greater independence and, in response, the Belgians encouraged a Hutu rebellion that resulted in the death of an estimated one hundred thousand Tutsis. When the Belgians left Rwanda in 1962, a Hutu government had firm control and the Tutsis became second-class citizens. The ethnic identification cards from the Belgians allowed discrimination to become much easier. Over the next couple of decades, Tutsis faced persecution, violence, and massacres at the hands of Hutu extremists.

Hutu and Tutsi villages were not segregated by tribe affiliation; and intertribal marriages frequently took place, except in the cases of extremists. Immaculée, a Tutsi, had both Hutu and Tutsi neighbors alike in her village Mataba, located in the western Rwandan province Kibuye. The physical differences between the tribes were that Tutsis were supposed to be taller, lighter-skinned, and have narrow noses, whereas Hutus were shorter, darker, and had broad noses. Immaculée describes the actual “differences” between the tribes: “Hutus and Tutsis spoke the same language-Kinyarwanda-and shared the same history. We had virtually the same culture: we sang the same songs, farmed the same land, attended the same churches, and worshipped the same God” (17).¹ But on October 1st, 1990, the Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF), which was made up of Tutsi exiles, crossed the border into Rwanda and began fighting with government soldiers in the hopes of a coup d’état. In response, Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana created a youth movement called the *Interahamwe*, meaning “those who attack together,” which quickly turned into a Hutu-extremist militia. After peace talks between the President and the RPF went awry, a powerful Hutu military officer, Theoneste Bagosora, who was also one of the chief leaders of the *Interahamwe*, vowed to never make peace and promised “to prepare an apocalypse.”²

During the night of April 6th, 1994, President Habyarimana’s plane was shot down. Who fired the shots is unclear; there is speculation that it was RPF’s leader Paul Kagame and yet others conclude it was militant Hutus looking to spark anti-Tutsi outrage. Nonetheless, on the morning of April 7th, 1994, Immaculée’s world drastically changed. The President’s death

¹ *Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust* by Immaculée Ilibigiza.

² Ibid.

sparked the genocide that resulted in the murder of more than one million people in roughly 100 days. In order to protect his only daughter, Immaculée's father sent her to hide at the house of a family friend, a Hutu, Pastor Murinzi. As the genocide began, the Pastor took seven Tutsi women into his home to hide; he told his family, however, that he kicked all the women out in order to maintain complete secrecy. He hid seven women in the three by four foot wide bathroom in his bedroom for 91 days. The Pastor concealed the door with his wardrobe. Not only did the women not know each other but they also could not move or make a sound. When they had to flush the toilet, they had to wait until another person on the other side of the wall in the other bathroom flushed the toilet. Immaculée went from her weight of roughly 115 pounds to 65 pounds, during the 91 days. During this trial, Immaculée states that she experienced two "miracles" that saved her from death.

Soldiers would constantly search the pastor's home for any hiding Tutsis. Immaculée describes the scene vividly: "They were in the pastor's bedroom, right on the other side of the wall. Less than an inch of plaster and wood separated us...in the chaos, I recognized the voice of a family friend. 'I have killed 399 cockroaches...Immaculée will make 400. It's a good number to kill'" (129).³ As Immaculée began to pray, she felt her consciousness slip away and describes floating above the other women. She recounts looking up and seeing Jesus Christ hovering above her; he was painted in a golden light and he was reaching out to hold her. Jesus said to her: "Mountains are moved with faith, Immaculée, but if faith were easy, all the mountains would be gone. Trust in me, and know that I will never leave you. Trust in me, and you shall live" (131).⁴ Immaculée recalls regaining consciousness at this point and witnessing a white light radiating from wall to wall in the form of a cross. She manifests her feelings at the time: "I knew instinctively that a kind of Divine force was emanating from the cross, which would repel the killers" (131).⁵ The soldiers visited again the next week, leaving no stone unturned in Pastor Murinzi's bedroom, yet they still did not find the door. The wardrobe did not even fully conceal the door (as shown in Appendix A). Whether divine intervention occurred or not, it is certainly incredible that she and her fellow Tutsis were not found.

On their ninety-first day, the seven women left the pastor's house in an attempt to escape to a French encampment down the road. At this point in the genocide, the roads were still not safe for Tutsis; roaming bands of *Interahamwe* were still everywhere looking for people to kill. And unfortunately for Immaculée's group, on that morning the soldiers at the French encampment received new orders: to move all survivors currently at the French encampment to an RPF outpost further down the road, and then shortly after, to simply leave the survivors on the side of the road en route to the RPF camp. The RPF outpost was 500 yards away from where Immaculée and the other survivors were dropped off; her group totaled approximately thirty in number. *Interahamwe* almost immediately surrounded them. However, for whatever reason (possibly out of fear of their proximity to the RPF), the *Interahamwe* group quickly disbanded and left the survivors unharmed. After this encounter, Immaculée told the rest of the group to stay put while she ran ahead to the RPF outpost to get help. Three *Interahamwe* who disappeared shortly after giving chase initially followed her. At this point she was in an all-out sprint and at last she reached the outpost, where she was met with unexpected hostility. The guards there put a gun to her head and accused her of being a spy. After multiple questions and threats, an RPF

³ *Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust* by Immaculée Ilibagiza.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

soldier who happened to know her before the genocide, recognized her, called off the guards, and saved her life. Immaculée attributed this unbelievable good fortune to an act of God.

Carl Sagan, author of *A Demon Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*, would try to find a more prosaic explanation for what happened to Immaculée. In regards to the first “divine intervention” she experienced: since she was so malnourished, she could have just been hallucinating, or simply dreaming. As for the light on the door in the shape of a cross, I believe Sagan would simply say that since she had been diligently praying for hours a day, she would have had selective attention. She wanted to believe that God was protecting her; therefore, she interpreted the light in the shape of a cross when someone else would have interpreted it differently.

As for the encounter with the soldiers along the road and at gunpoint, I believe Sagan would reply, “post hoc ergo propter hoc” or in other words, “after, therefore, because of.” In other words, God did not necessarily cause the soldiers to leave Immaculée alone, just as He did not cause the man she knew to conveniently walk by when she was being held at gunpoint. According to Sagan’s logic we do not know what caused the soldiers to act that way. It could have been a number of different things; therefore, it very well could have just been a coincidence. I do not think Sagan would doubt that Immaculée’s experience was anything short of a miracle, but I do not think he would deem it a miracle by the hand of God.

On the other hand, I believe that Eben Alexander, author of *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon’s Journey into the Afterlife*, would agree with Immaculée, that her survival was partially engineered by a higher power. However, I believe Immaculée’s story is more reliable than Alexander’s supposed interaction with God. After reading *Proof Of Heaven*, I not only think Alexander’s story is untrue, but I also believe he had ulterior motives. One of the nurses who took care of Alexander pointed out that he could not have yelled out during his comatose state, “God help me!” because he was intubated. Furthermore, the weather reports show that no rain occurred during the day when he came out of coma, so there is a little chance that a rainbow coincidentally appeared as he reported in his novel.⁶ There is also the conjecture that his deceased sister, whom he had never seen, was the woman on the butterfly taking him around in the afterlife. Aside from his general arrogance, his story seems too far-fetched to have actually happened.

On the contrary, Immaculée’s novel is not focused solely around her interaction with God. The reason I believe Immaculée’s story even after reading Sagan is because at no point is she trying to convince the reader that her interaction with God really happened. Instead, she wrote the novel to show the world the power of forgiveness, not necessarily to prove the existence of God. When Immaculée returned to her village after the genocide was over, she visited the prison where the man who killed her beloved mother and brother was being held. The burgomaster of Kibuye, Semana, explained to Immaculée, “He looted your parents’ home and robbed your family’s plantation, Immaculée. We found your dad’s farm machinery at his house...after he killed [Immaculée’s mom and brother], he kept looking for you...he wanted you dead” (204).⁷ But all Immaculée said to Felician, the man who butchered her family, was “I forgive you” (204).⁸ She forgave the man who murdered her mother and her brother to his face.

⁶ *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon’s Journey into the Afterlife* by Eben Alexander.

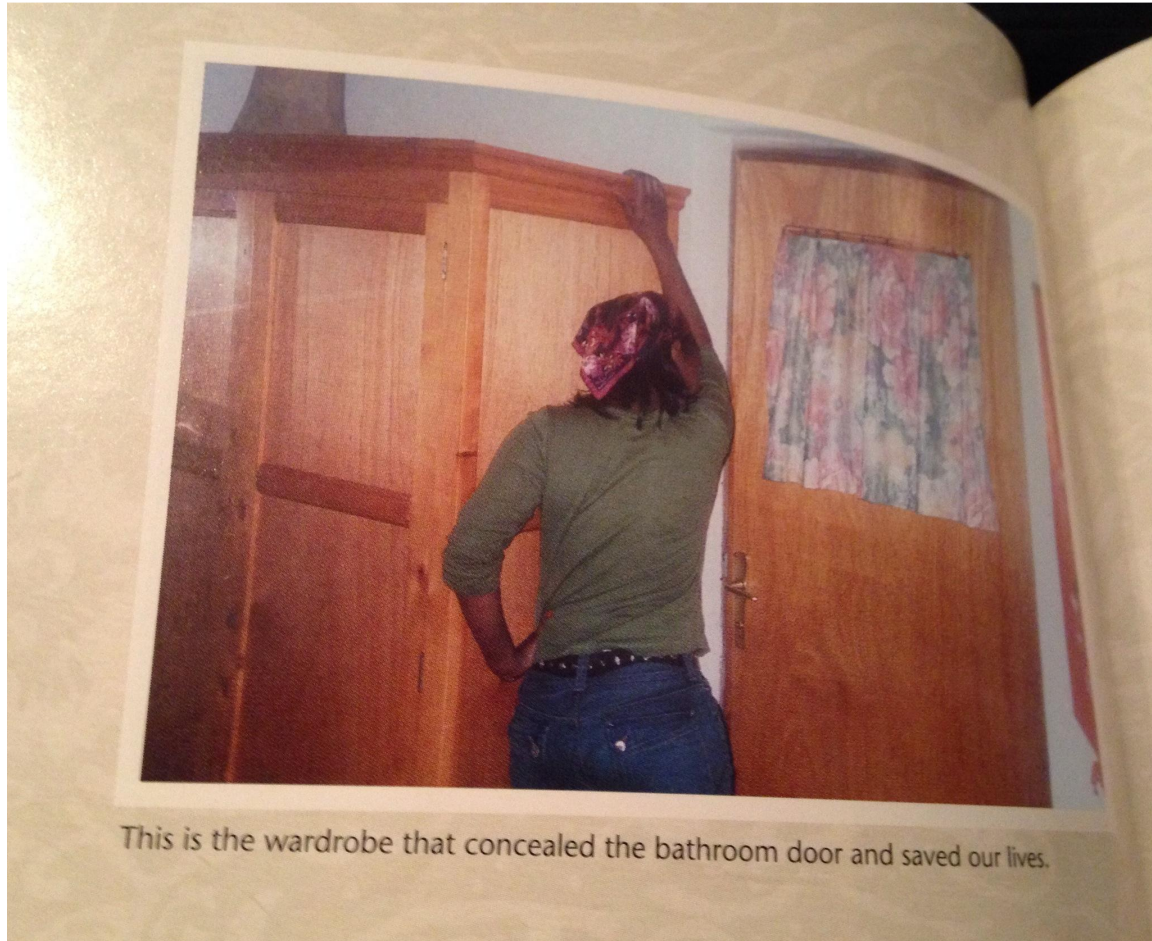
⁷ *Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust* by Immaculée Ilibagiza.

⁸ Ibid.

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I had the pleasure of hearing her speak at my sister's Catholic school, and later had the chance to meet her face to face. I have been Baptized and Confirmed in the Catholic Church, received Holy Communion, and attended a Catholic high school. I have encountered plenty of "official" Church figures throughout these experiences, people whose profession it is to know and understand God. However, Immaculée is the first person I have met in my life that I would say actually understands what it means to know God. She exudes what I would only call the Holy Spirit; she lacks hatred, bitterness, or anger of any kind. Her presence just seemed to fill the auditorium with joy. After reading Sagan and Alexander, my opinion of her story did not falter. I still have faith that she really experienced what she believes she did. Even if you do not believe that she truly experienced a miracle, she spreads a message of forgiveness that everyone can respect.

Appendix A



This is the wardrobe that concealed the bathroom door and saved our lives.



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