

July 2005

A Question of Humanity

Ruani S. Freeman

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Recommended Citation

Freeman, Ruani S. (2005) "A Question of Humanity," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 94: Iss. 2, Article 9.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol94/iss2/9>

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A Question



By Ru Freeman
Photo By Fred Field

Lt. General Roméo Dallaire asks the West to consider its role in the Rwanda genocide

In his memoir *Shake Hands With the Devil—The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda*, Lieutenant-General Roméo Dallaire speaks of an encounter with a 3-year-old boy, whom he followed to a hut where, surrounded by bodies, the boy crouched beside the remains of his mother. “I looked into his eyes and saw that he was the same as my own son. I realized he was another human.”

In 1994, as commander of the United Nations peacekeeping force sent to Rwanda, Dallaire watched his mission disintegrate as his troops were withdrawn over the death of 10 Belgian peacekeepers under his command.

Ten years later, on April 2, when Dallaire delivered the keynote speech at the Shadows of Rwanda conference, in Cotter Union, it was clear that his mission had not ended. “I am here to light a fire in your soul and stomach,” he said. “I believe in student activism. I am a child of the sixties, looking for a rekindling of that flame.”

Dallaire first asked the question that dominated most of his talk: “From war to peace to civil war to genocide in less than one year—how did it happen?” He provided a preliminary answer: “The world was more preoccupied with O.J. Simpson and Tonya Harding than

the slaughter of eight hundred thousand human beings.”

Dallaire argued his case with blunt eloquence, repeatedly questioning his audience. “Why is sub-Saharan Africa always the lowest priority?” “Why is the International Human Rights Commission for Africa in a remote way station, not at the Hague?” “Why are we subcontracting the work of peacekeeping to poor nations without the skills or technology to do the job?” “Why when I needed help—not to fight but to protect—did they send me five hundred Ethiopians just getting their army together?” “Why was there not a single white soldier there?” “Why is it ‘tribalism’ in Africa but ‘ethnic-cleansing’ in Yugoslavia?” “Why did black Africans not count and white Yugoslavians count so much?”

His indictments left no one untouched. He blamed churches that never questioned the separation between Hutus and Tutsis, saying, “It is the great sadness of our time that our religions sustain the instruments of inhumanity.” He bemoaned the culture where individuals could accept the argument that “the death of ten Belgians was too much loss, but the potential death of eight hundred thousand Rwandans was not enough” to justify intervention.

of Humanity

Dallaire moved on to the scourge of small arms, describing the trail from individual ownership in American homes through re-sales into the hands of 9-year-olds on the front lines. He had once attempted to interrupt the delivery of a cargo of weapons in Rwanda: “I looked at their papers. The very governments that had pushed for a peace agreement were simultaneously selling weapons to child soldiers! Therein lies the dichotomy between government and industry.”

His explanation as to why we find ourselves in these ethical conundrums highlighted the complexity of our world. “Global terrorism is a problem for the rich nations, not the poor,” he said. “When eighty percent of the world lives with indignity, the other twenty percent will never be safe. Think about the fact that your country and mine enjoy a quality of life that is at ninety-five percent while theirs survives on five percent.” He pointed out that we live in a time of complex agendas and that “we help so long as it costs nothing.”

Dallaire’s talk also touched on insidious forms of control. He spoke about the use of radio in Rwanda not merely to signal the exact time of the genocide but to describe the enemy, where to find

them, and how to torture and kill them to inflict maximum suffering. “That is a radio society,” he said, “where certain programs had mass following.” He issued a warning: “You would do well to keep an eye on the odd TV stations here.”

Despite the quiet rage with which he spoke of the failures of Rwanda, Dallaire displayed an inherent optimism. He believes that humanity, through persistent work toward human rights, will divest itself of the differences that create conflict. He smiled at his young crowd, saying, “How do you eat a one-pound marshmallow? Bite by bite. Some days you will have a bad stomach, other days not. One day it will be gone.” Dallaire urged students to remember Rwanda and to act in Darfur. “To intervene is within your grasp. The media is starving, and social change depends upon the expression that our youth puts in front of those cameras.”

Before the standing ovation at the end, Dallaire leaned toward the microphone and repeated the words with which he had begun the evening. “May I recommend a backdrop to all your work? Remember this: all humans are human, and there isn’t one human more human than another.”

CONFERENCE CASTS A LONG SHADOW

It was last fall that Victoria Caicedo '07 and Huseyin Akturk '07 first saw the documentary film *Ghosts of Rwanda*, about the genocide there. Caicedo and Akturk were profoundly moved, but it struck them that when the mass killings occurred in 1994, they, like other current Colby students, were children. “I didn’t feel educated [about the issue],” Caicedo said.

So the pair began to brainstorm. Bring an activist to Colby, Caicedo suggested. Bring someone from an NGO working in Rwanda. “I said, ‘No,’” recalled Akturk. “Let’s bring Dallaire.”

That thought was the seed for what would become the Shadows of Rwanda conference at Colby, an event that not only brought Lt. General Roméo Dallaire,

Canadian commander of the United Nations peacekeeping force in Rwanda, to campus in April but also attracted students from Bowdoin, Bates, Middlebury, Wheaton, and the University of Maine. Hundreds of students and faculty—even a former soldier, Damas Rugaba, a Congolese Tutsi who fought with the Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF)—came to Colby to explore the forces and decisions that created the regional conflict that culminated horribly with the massacre of an estimated 800,000 Rwandans in 100 days.

That the conference was a resounding success by all accounts—including, reportedly, that of Dallaire himself—was testimony to the determination of the student organizers, who raised money from a variety of College resources for Dallaire’s

speaker’s fee and handled logistics as the event expanded. A faculty panel was augmented by a lecture by Rugaba, the former Tutsi soldier, now living in Portland. He was joined by activists from the Sudan, also living in Maine. “We didn’t contact anyone else,” Caicedo said. “People started to contact us.”

The event also was an empowering project for a new organization, Colby for Humanity, which organized the conference and is planning to move ahead with events aimed at creating awareness of humanitarian issues. Next year’s conference may center on the role of nongovernmental organizations in human rights issues.

“I have never seen a group of kids so committed,” Caicedo said. —Gerry Boyle '78