

THE ROAD TO GIKONGORO
SITTING IN AN AVP WORKSHOP

By Laura Chico

Rwanda has been called the “land of a thousand hills” and winding through the countryside toward the southern-most province of Gikongoro, the expression seems like an understatement. Peering out the window of a crammed mini-bus (a 14 person van carrying 20 people), and bracing myself against the potholes as the bus jerked from side to side without the advantage of shock absorbers, I occasionally would try to count the hills that stretched off into the horizon in every direction. I never was able to count them all before we would round a bend and a whole new set of hills would come into view. Rwanda is such a small piece of land (the size of Maryland, I’ve been told) with nearly 8 million people living here, that I shouldn’t have been surprised that almost every piece of land is cultivated. The hills are terraced and quilted with small farms, and even the narrow strip of land along the side of the road has been claimed to grow small amounts of corn or beans or other crops I don’t yet know.

It is quite picturesque, Rwanda is, and the tranquil pastoral scene seems remote from the country’s bloody history. But I turned to my companion, Marie Paule – a poised and warm AVP facilitator who is working with me to write a report on AVP here in Rwanda – and said several times, “It is so beautiful here!” She would respond with a neutral nod, as if only to acknowledge my comment but not to agree. At first I thought this was modesty, but when I questioned her she said, “In French there is an expression that Rwanda has a thousand hills, and a thousand problems.” And I felt the sadness seep in. Even that which is so beautiful here is inextricably intertwined with pain, and the ground itself is soaked with blood.

When we arrived at the AVP workshop the next morning, the participants were already there, sitting quietly in a semi-circle of chairs waiting for the facilitators to begin. This early arrival is unusual here in Rwanda, where time is “elastic” and the unpredictability of transportation and the lack of reliable or affordable communication often leaves people waiting patiently for an hour for everyone to arrive for a meeting. We learned later that eighteen more people had come to the workshop though they hadn’t received an invitation, and had to be turned away! The others had claimed their seats, and weren’t moving.

In the workshop were 11 men, 10 women (3 of whom had no shoes) and two babies who played quietly at the edges of the circle and only demanded their mothers’ attention when they were hungry. These men and women are all judges for *Gacaca* – a traditional arbitration process (literally meaning “on the grass”) that has been revived to handle the overwhelming numbers of genocide-related cases. *Gacaca* has the enormous task of seeking the truth of what happened during the genocide, documenting all information gathered, and processing lower level cases (those who looted, destroyed property, or were coerced into killing), and finally seeking that sticky balance between justice and reconciliation. It is no small task, and the judges have received trainings from various organizations to better prepare them for the challenges they face. AVP is among the trainings offered.

The workshop began the way AVP begins – with an introduction from the facilitators, introductions from participants, establishing ground rules, an ice breaker that got people moving and laughing, and so on. I watched as the facilitators began to create a new culture within the room, with Adjective Names (I was Lucky Laura and Marie Paule was Peace Paule), and insisting that after someone speaks the next person says, for example, “*Murakose*, Lucky Laura. *Nitkwa* Peace Paule” (Thank you, Lucky Laura, I’m Peace Paule). There were some ripples of resistance to these new ways of interacting. In Rwanda, one’s name is very important, and to some the giving of Adjective Names has echoes of baptism with Christian names. To make matters more challenging, Adjective Names don’t work in Kinyarwanda, because of the complicated language structure, so usually the names are in English or French. In many workshops, at least one or two participants are wary of being called something new, but again and again the Rwandan facilitators would insist. I imagine that most Western facilitators would have given in quickly, figuring that the Adjective Name is simply not culturally appropriate. But the Rwandan facilitators here saw a deeper value in pushing people outside of their comfort zones, encouraging them to relate to one another across ethnic groups in a completely new way. And sure enough, I watched the magic of AVP unfold as the group began to gel and create its own safe space away from the pulls of everyday Rwandan life.

On that first morning, after participants discussed Active Listening they turned to a partner and told that person about a time when they had done something good. This seemed to me the perfect way to begin self-disclosure, since so much of life in Rwanda is wondering what bad things the person next to you has done or will do. So the partners talked and listened, and then a few shared their stories with the large group. There were stories of saving people’s lives, releasing prisoners of war from jail, taking in orphans, and so on. Stories that make the few things I could think of for myself seem small and modest. After the sharing had completed, several participants raised their hands. (Actually, they pointed their index fingers in the air, keeping their elbows close into their stomachs – but it is the US equivalent of raising one’s hand).

“How can we know that what these people say is true?” they wanted to know.

“I mean,” added one woman, “saving someone from a crocodile with just a stick! It’s hard to believe.”

The facilitators fielded the questions, but moved on quickly. I suppose they weren’t surprised by how almost impossible it is to trust one another in a country where your neighbor suddenly turned on you or your husband killed your children and tried to kill you. But for me, the question landed in my stomach like lead. Perhaps I shouldn’t have been surprised either, but that question was never one that I encountered in my many workshops in the US, even with the toughest, most traumatized youth. Maybe it was because they were judges? I hopefully wondered this out loud to David Bucura, AVP coordinator in Rwanda and one of the facilitators. Maybe it’s because now they are immersed in looking for the truth? David said, “You see, here in Rwanda, because of what happened, people do not trust each other.” So much for my hopeful theory.

Later on, the facilitators introduced an activity called “Serial News.” They asked five participants to volunteer to leave the room, and they chose one more to stay to listen to a short, detailed story. Then one by one, the volunteers came in, listened to the story from the person who came before, and then retold it to the person who followed. Even though I didn’t understand a word, I was laughing just as hard as everyone else, tears pricked into my eyes as the story changed and changed some more, to the point of becoming unrecognizable. This activity, I later learned, is one of the most valuable that AVP offers *Gacaca* judges. Many said that after seeing how stories can change in the retelling, they will no longer believe hearsay or rumors but they will be sure to go to the source.

“Before AVP, do many judges just believe what someone tells them, even if that person didn’t witness it?” I asked incredulously.

“Oh yes,” came the answer, from judges and *Gacaca* coordinators alike.

It was humbling to witness how essential AVP is to the process of reconciliation here, how deeply it touches the core.

In Rwanda it has struck me that people believe, deeply, in transformation – the capacity of the human soul to repent and be renewed. Perhaps they have to believe in this possibility in order to live next door to neighbors who might turn sour without warning, but whatever the source, the openness to transformation is profound. Throughout the workshop the facilitators connected the lessons not only to *Gacaca* and Rwanda’s violent history, but also to violence at home, against women and children. It was warming to see the two male facilitators speak out as strongly against rape and domestic violence as the women, and to promote the power of partnerships and joint decision-making. On the third day, the facilitators asked the participants how they would use the lessons they had learned so far. As we moved around the circle, we came to an elderly man who gave this testimony:

“Before, I was a bad man. Even at home I was having conflict. Now I am talking softly and they at home are wondering what happened to me”

The man went on to say that he had been changed by AVP and that he would be kind to his wife and children now. The room erupted in applause for this transformation, and then testimonies continued. Not everyone, but at least several more inspired more spontaneous applause and warm congratulations on the inner change that had been affected. Later, I asked Bucura: “Why do people believe the transformation testimonies but not the earlier stories of when people had done good things?”

“Because they just volunteered this,” was the answer, “no one asked them to share this.”

That made sense to me – that people need the space to be real. But I also wondered, watching the previously stone-faced group laugh and smile and listen deeply, if maybe AVP had started to do the impossible: to plant a small seed of trust that might, with generations to nurture it, one day flower.