

My Life Was Given Back to Me Again.

By Adrien Niyongabo

My name is Adrien Niyongabo, born in 1972. I am married to Odette Nahayo. Together God has blessed us with three children: Ketsia Mugisha, Jonathan Nganji and Joshua Nziza.

In our family, I am a second child and have one main brother and two young sisters. My parents chose to call me NIYONGABO at my birthday for to emphasize God's mercy and power during that dark period of the history of my country. In fact, the year 1972 symbolizes the darkness that occurred when happened what some would call genocide.

I was born in Musaga, one of the southern suburbs of Bujumbura, the capital of Burundi. Our neighborhood was not very crowded. Each family had a house (without fence) with a back plot for vegetables. My family had enough to feed us three times a day. Before we reached school age, our parents used to leave us alone at home when they had to go to cultivate the fields. The oldest had the responsibility to take care of the young kids. A child would never mind his/her parents leaving him/her at home because there were many of us and all day we were playing different games. Those who got tired would lay down and rest. The parents who were the first ones to come from the fields would feed and their children and the neighbor's children. We were all treated as brothers and sisters.

My memory goes back to those days when it rained. The first thing to do was to take the young kids into one of the homes. As we knew whose mother was too strict with cleanness, we would not take the young kids in that home for fear that at the return of the mother our friend(s) would be seriously beaten. So, we had to be so cautious in choosing which house to put them in. After, we took off all our clothes and, naked, we ran into the rain, up and down, back and forth until the rain was over or we got tired. This was our rainy bath and as far as I know, only boys did this exercise. I have never asked myself why. My favorite time was summer vacation when the school kids and younger ones had to play together. One of the school children would play the teacher and all the others would be students. It was so wonderful to learn writing and reading from our brothers and sisters. These games activated our thirst of going to school and learning more.

At the age of 7, the separation between my father and my Mum came to shorten my familial joy. In that matter, my Mama stood up and accepted to take care of us on her own. I can still hear her soft voice telling us, when it was time for bed, that God sends every night and day the guardian angel to protect us and that nobody would come and break the door. I could then understand that the God that the priest had told us about numerous times did exist. As a woman single- parent, Mama could not pretend to afford the cost of school for four kids when she had to live on cultivating our little property and on no other remunerating business. She used to tell us, "I will do all that is possible so that you go to school to learn reading and writing. It is shameful to see a person going to ask someone else to read him/her a letter sent by a friend. I do not want such thing happening to you". That is why we could be brought to school with the precarious

economic situation at home. God's protecting hand stayed up on us. We all finished our primary school, and some of us did the secondary level and others went on to the university too. What a courageous and loving Mama who accepted to suffer from her marriage for the safety of her kids!

After my primary school in Bujumbura and Rutana (one of the eastern provinces of Burundi), I attended Buta Catholic secondary seminary school (located in the southern part of the country) from which I graduated in June 1993. Although many of the priests at the Seminary School were expecting me to go on with priests' studies, I chose to go to the Public University where I hoped that to do the undergraduate program in the Psychology Department. Unfortunately, against my will, I was offered the Applied Pedagogy Department by the government. Due to the massacres of students that occurred in the university campus in 1995, I was forced to stop my formal education until now.

In 2000, I co-founded the Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Services (THARS). This initiative was a partnership between Burundi Yearly Meeting of Friends and African Great Lakes Initiative (AGLI) of the Friends Peace Teams (FPT). In 2001, our team attended a four-month Trauma Healing, Conflicts Resolution and Peace Building training organized by the Quaker Peace Center in Cape Town, South Africa. We came back to Burundi where we started sensitization trauma healing workshops, counseling and training lay people, pastors and pastors' wives, teachers, and NGOs' staff in issues of trauma healing.

In 2003, at the request of Rwanda Yearly Meeting of Friends, I went there to help start a trauma healing program. The aim of this program was to help genocide survivors and suspected genocide perpetrators, who needed to find ways to face the remembrance of the past and live together in their communities. We set up a community trauma healing focused workshop module that helps people deal with the psychosocial problems caused by the warfare and devastation that had occurred. Proud of the excellent results from the trauma healing work in Rwanda, I went back to Burundi in October 2003 where we tried the same workshops with the Burundian population. The results were so encouraging. In 2004, we began our Healing and Rebuilding Our Community (HROC) program. Until now, I am coordinating the HROC activities.

I grew up Catholic as my parents both were. I came across Friends in November 1993. At that time I had fled my home because of lack of security and had gone to find refuge in Kamenge. There, a family friend of ours, housed me. Coincidentally, I met there other young people. One of them, Odette Nahayo was a Quaker, a member of Kamenge Monthly Meeting in Bujumbura, whom I married four years later. Now that I know what it is to be a Quaker I can affirm that she was really a Quaker. I am a member of Kamenge Monthly Meeting. In my church, I am one of the twelve elders and have served on the Rescue and Christian Education Committee.

In my life, there are many valuable people and facts that have greatly contributed to my choice of the work that I am doing now. I feel eager to talk about two of them. First, my

Mama is the more significant person. The way she accepted the suffering from her marriage just for our benefit taught a lot to me. It is from her I drew my compassion.

Second is that darkest night which turned to be a wonderful morning. In October 1993, the death of the first hutu elected president gave rise to a new round of massacres between hutu and tutsi. The night of the 23rd, the governmental military, attacked my suburb. The hutu were forced to leave the area or to hide themselves. As many others did, I followed the queue toward the hills surrounding Bujumbura. Unfortunately, after just one mile, I was stopped by two men with guns; stopped and forbidden to follow the others. Before I could even ask why, they added that I was a Tusti who followed the Hutu who fled Musaga so that I could investigate how things were settled and maybe go back to tell the governmental [Tutsi] army. 'So, we are going to kill you,' they said. I kept quiet waiting expecting to see God in few seconds.

In a short time, a man came up to where we were and asked them what that I was doing there. They answered him the same way they had told me before. And the man said, "Please, I know who is his Father, who is his Mum. He is a Hutu as we are. Let him join the others." One of the two men asked him: "Do you know him really?" The man responded by saying, "Yes, yes!!!" Turning to me, the two men with guns said, " You are saved, guy. You can keep on following others!" Could I believe it? Like a new morning, the dark night looked to me. My life was given back to me again. Praise the Lord! This entire incident came from the stereotypes, which we use in Burundi to say that this person is a Hutu or Tutsi. In some cases, one can be totally wrong mostly with our patriarchal system, where one relies on his father's ethnic group independently from the mother's ethnic group. This event encouraged me to have an inwards look. Many other innocent Burundians, men, women, girls, boys, like me I thought, would have been murdered in similar circumstances. I felt great bitterness and wished that I would get an opportunity to participate in reconciling the two groups.

I thank the Almighty God for what I am doing now. It is my calling. I am very excited and very pleased doing the Healing and Rebuilding our Communities work because that is my goal, my purpose. I am still optimistic that little by little, we will make our communities a home to live in again. Thanks to Burundi Yearly Meeting and African Great Lakes Initiatives/Friends Peace Teams for their willingness to help me nurture my devotion to peace work through Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities.