

## LETTER TO THE REFUGEES

### **My story of fleeing and surviving, healing and homecoming.**

I address this to those of you who are about to embark on a journey that you never wanted or asked for. To those in the midst and the turbulence of that journey. And to those who have made a home at the end of it all.

Wherever you find yourself on this path, you have already been labelled and categorized. If you are on the move within your own country, you are an Internally Displaced Person (IDP). If you have crossed the border then you have been transfigured, in that instant, into a full refugee. I know the feeling.

If you have settled somewhere, you are classified according to the nature of the conflict that forced you from home, the geographical context, and the attention of the international community. Some of you are squatting in plastic tents in precarious conditions. Those of you who have found refuge in the shelter of bricks and a robust roof, and in the arms of local friends and foreign philanthropic organizations, are a fortunate minority in our collective category of traumatized migrants.

It's impossible to imagine the reality of this existence – unless you have lived it. I believe I can honestly say that I know the path you're walking, each step of the way on this forced migration, although each of our personal journeys is unique. Allow me to share my experience with you, and to offer some words of wisdom, practical advice, and heartfelt encouragement from one who has walked through exile, and found a way home.

#### **I: LEAVING HOME**

***“You don't get taught this stuff in school.”***

Rwanda. In the early 1990s, my homeland was in a state of civil war. When the bombs struck in my town, we already had IDPs from other parts of the country strewn about in any available space: classrooms, host homes, churches, and playgrounds. We regarded them with compassion, and sometimes irritation, as their waste and garbage made movement nearly impossible. They came in droves to ask for food, clothing, medicine, utensils, or anything else.

The thing is, you never know when that's going to be you. You can't imagine yourself in their shoes. We couldn't fathom being on the “need” side of the hand. We looked around and asked ourselves, how much terror must it take to abandon everything and find yourself in such a state of misery and desperation? We deluded ourselves that it would never happen to us. Even in a country at war, it was impossible to predict when we might be confronted with that same decision: is it time to go?

Today, I wish we had done more and given more to those IDPs in our town because – when it was our turn to run – we left so much behind. Even then, it was an excruciating decision. We tried to convince ourselves that the fighting and unrest wasn't as bad as it seemed. When that became too much of a delusion, we realised we had to get out, but we still

wondered whether we should leave someone behind to safeguard our house and belongings from looters – we thought we'd be back in two or three days. We didn't know what to take and what to leave. You don't get taught this stuff in school.

As Christians, we assembled ourselves as a family, took everything we deemed essential, devoted ourselves to God, and departed in sorrow. It was 3am. Hundreds had already set out, so we joined the long snake of soon-to-be refugees and crossed into Congo. Of course, these bare bones don't do justice to the details: the agonizing feelings of emotional trauma and fatigue, the hurling of "useless" stuff along the roadside, and the harshness of marauders towards us dazed and weary migrants. We walked the entire day and into the evening. We were so exhausted that we eventually picked an empty area outside a church, where many had already gathered, and tossed our small blankets on the floor to lie down. Some were in tears, while others were in too much shock to even cry.

It would be two years and four months before we would see our home again, and not all of us were afforded that privilege: my son, father and sister died in exile, never to return to the home we had been forced to leave behind.

### ***Dear potential refugee...***

Perhaps you are, right now, at the point of making this decision. Is now the time to go? No-one can answer that question for you. Among the many who leave and who stay, the decision to depart is an individual one, although you may be joined by very close family members. It's important to make sure that no-one feels compelled. External factors may be forcing your hand, but everyone must make their own decision in their own time.

In practical terms, we discovered that a cover for the cold, a small pan, a five litre water container, medication, very few clothes, any canned food, and food that can be consumed in two or three days are sufficient. Take your phones and place a bracelet with your name and address on any child under the age of five. There is much that you will not need and more that you might pick up along the way (is it stealing to take a bottle of juice from the home of a departing neighbour? The line between right and wrong quickly becomes hazy).

Stick with a group and adhere to the queue. In a lawless environment, numbers serve as your defence. Stay close to women and the elderly; cruel people have a tendency to show them mercy. Accept no invitations to go anywhere alone.

At the border, there will be a few organizations represented. Try to register as quickly as possible. It's also wise to keep an eye on what others are doing. If you are given the choice between a settlement with many or a private residence, it is best to choose the settlement with many. While organized services will look after you on certain sites, you will still rely on the solidarity of your own people. You can later relocate to a host home, once your new network is created.

Purchase or obtain a local SIM card so that you can keep up with the news, and begin communicating with those who stayed behind.

Above all, be assured that the agony will pass quickly. Save your energy. You will need all of your internal resources during the next phase of adjustment and integration.

## **II: FINDING A RHYTHM**

***“You won’t be going home tomorrow.”***

You’re traumatized, exhausted and in a completely foreign environment, and now you’ve got to get practical: Where do you go for medical treatment? Who do you contact in an emergency? How do the transportation, banking, and communication networks operate? You will be asked to fill out forms and make decisions – on behalf of yourself and your dependents – without any preparation. There is no orientation for new arrivals. We refugees have to acquire knowledge swiftly and chaotically.

To this day, I have no idea how myself and my family managed to enter a “numbing mode” as we struggled to integrate into life in the refugee camps in Congo. Just days ago, we had been in our own home, considering the IDPs with a certain detached sympathy. Now, we found ourselves having to skip over dead bodies, carry heavily laden bags on our heads, and go days without a bath or food. Some people with health problems went weeks without medication, while others with wounds had to tend to themselves. Others perished from exhaustion, the outbreak of cholera, and dehydration. Children were left stranded, some still nursing on the breasts of their deceased mothers. All of the vacant corners were converted into toilets. The stench was revolting.

Recalling it now, all I can say is that God gifted us a second skin, a thick skin, so that we could survive. We discovered that we had untapped resources within us that would, in these impossible, unthinkable circumstances, enable us to embrace our new normal.

And – despite it all – there were some elements of normality. I was surprised to see pastors and priests being instructed to organize church services in vacant spaces, and teachers registering pupils for class. Social professionals were asked to donate their services to society's most vulnerable people. It turns out that when people lose their sense of time, social contact, and the elements that make life meaningful, what they most need is rhythm. We immediately knew it was Sunday when we heard the sound of the small bell summoning people to prayer. Having kids in class gave them a reassuring sense of order, purpose and security.

These modest opportunities to serve and to receive a small income motivated people to get up and go out. It gave them a sense of dignity and purpose, as well as the chance to make new friends, gain information about the new environment, and acquire new skills. How adaptable we humans are, even in the grip of trauma.

***Dear refugee...***

Let me say it again because it's so important – be sure to register with organizations at the border. They may give you a paper that serves as a golden ticket to food, housing, and other services, as well as providing you with support and information. If you have a relative in the new country, it can be tempting to run straight for the safety of their door, but this is not a wise move in the long run. If you're not in the system, you will fall through the cracks. Register with an agency, keep in touch, and make sure you can always be found. When you arrive somewhere that meets your basic needs, stop moving. Settle in one place long enough to establish routines and your own support system.

As soon as you have a place to sleep and someone to look after your children, get out and do something. Don't simply wallow in self-pity and resentment. Learn a new skill, further your education, join a club or sports team. Leisure time and laughter are still allowed, and they might just be your salvation. Send your children to "school", in whatever format that takes. Allow them to mix and play with local children if possible – for the social interaction and to pick up the language. Proactively learn the language yourself, and find out about your host nation. Get out there and experience more of the community, culture, systems, and local cuisine. Seek out a local church community. You may still hold faith gatherings during the week with your own people but joining a local church on Sundays can help you to more quickly feel settled and supported.

Naturally, you will also want to hear how things are going back home. The biggest challenge is getting hold of accurate and reliable information. Thanks to the modern digital age, all you need is a local SIM and adequate internet and you can use WhatsApp, Zoom, or other affordable platforms to connect directly with friends and family. Get up to speed with these technologies if you're not already as they will be a lifeline for you (if you have a teen, they can probably help you out!).

By this point, you've accepted that you won't be going home tomorrow. You might be here for a week, a month, a year, or five years. For now, this is your home. This is your life.

### **III: FACING HUMAN LIMITS**

**“The survival instinct is strong.”**

Refugees lead extremely fragile and precarious lives, fraught with uncertainty. One of the biggest challenges is how to hold on to our humanness, our identity, our sense of purpose and meaning in such a context. Fleeing the immediate danger of home is one thing, but fear and adrenaline will only get you so far. It's not enough just to make it over the border, to survive. How do you reclaim and reframe your life within these new parameters?

Throughout our time in Congo, my family relocated numerous times. We had two small children and our priorities were to be near to extended family and friends, food and medical assistance, and job opportunities. We left a packed church court, where cholera was rife,

and followed some acquaintances who had a distant relative outside the city. There were fewer people and a decent refugee camp, equipped with the necessary facilities. It was also near a commercial port with prospects for small businesses. After a few months, refugees were instructed to relocate to a remote camp outside the city for security reasons. We spent over a year in the stable camp – with the white and blue plastic sheeting of UNHCR as our backdrop. When the fighting started again, we were forced to periodically relocate our tents to a few different sites. When the shelling became more intense, we chose to return to Rwanda. Many others became disoriented in the bushes and endured terrible misery. All I can say is that prayer has always been critical in sustaining us and bolstering our resilience in the face of the impossible.

Numerous people lost their minds to the anguish and agony of this existence. Many tried to bury their pain, anger, desperation and despair in alcohol, drug abuse, and all kinds of immoral behaviour. People of great prestige could not bear the thought of living as worthless beggars.

This comes as no surprise. When humans are pushed to our limits, we look for ways to numb. That also explains why it can be such a challenge to keep a grasp on our sense of right and wrong when our very existence feels so fraught and fragile. The survival instinct is strong and can act as a powerful numbing agent for the conscience so that the lines become blurred. People do what they have to do to survive.

Many people lied to us about the number of children they had in order to obtain extra food. Several pretended to have health problems. Parents sent their small children to enrol at centres for unaccompanied minors, claiming their parents had died. Some people who could speak enough of the native language got papers and passed themselves off as locals to avoid being harassed.

We may think there are certain lines we would never cross, but in times of extreme vulnerability – in desperation for sustenance, help, or consolation – it's impossible to say what we might be capable of.

In my case, we were operating on a shoestring budget. My wife urged us to drink only a tiny bit of water each, and to keep a small amount of porridge on hand for our two small children. We were carrying our belongings between us, and my wife also had our youngest child on her back. The trip into the unknown seemed endless. We walked and ran for nearly two days. In my weakest moments, I cracked open the small container and sipped once or twice, in the crowd, away from my wife's sight. The few drops of porridge gave me the stamina to continue walking until we came to a spot where we could rest. Maybe this sounds trivial, but that was a heinous theft, a breach of protocol, and behaviour unbecoming of a decent spouse and father.

I waited years, until we were back in our homeland, before I felt able to speak about what I'd done on that long, long walk. I needed to share it, to confess it, and in doing so I discovered healing in the depths of my spirit.

A further ethical dilemma I encountered was that, in my heart, I was opposed to war. But many of those around me in the camp felt that it was our duty to contribute to the "war effort" back home. When you flee a war-torn country, there is an expectation that you will be ready to either pick up a weapon or support the cause through your skills and your finances.

As a devout Bible believer, I was well aware that we are commanded to love our adversaries, not to throw grenades at them. Many Christians have created the idea of a "just war," to try and silence their consciences, but I can't reconcile this. I have no idea how to restore order and justice to a society filled with insane warmongers but I don't believe that the answer is more bloodshed. In any case, I didn't have to donate. The money was taken right out of our salaries.

And it wasn't just fellow Rwandan refugees who took offence at the idea that some of us might not support the war. The locals can be just as cruel. "You have no business being here, bunch of cowardly losers. If you weren't willing to fight for your country, we shouldn't be penalized. Go back to where you came from, you filthy parasites!" Such savage words have left an indelible imprint on many of us.

That's another brutal lesson we've had to learn on this long road. It's not just our own communities that can turn on us. And it's not just our fellow refugees, pushed beyond the limits, that can fail and fall short.

Entering another country, weary and with almost nothing, tends to attract empathy and helpers. You will surely encounter "angels" along the way, who will extend mercy and provide practical assistance. But the disheartening truth is that some people are like vultures, waiting for your final breath so that they can devour whatever's left.

When we arrived in our new nation, hordes of young people approached us and offered help and hospitality. Sadly, for many it became all too clear that their plan was to pick off a straggler from the herd, isolate them, search them, and confiscate whatever meagre possessions they might have. That was bad enough on its own, but some even went so far as to rape the women. The less scrupulous pretended to be security agents and stole purses, watches, and whatever else they deemed important. Those with a semblance of morality demanded that you exchange your vehicle for two goats!

Of course, as we know, not all refugees are saints. Some had already done terrible things – from looting and stealing to outright murder. But in the majority of cases, it was innocent, exhausted and traumatized individuals who were being stripped of whatever morsels they had left – food, dignity, security, faith in humanity...

When cholera struck, several individuals sold the rare IV serum at exorbitant prices. Those who were unfamiliar with foreign exchange were systematically disposed of when they learned the impossible rate. I witnessed some locals and migrants who had been assigned to distribute food stealing and selling it. Several of those working for NGOs acted as "lords." Certain individuals treated us as like animals. Some were escorted by armed guards and equipped with walkie-talkies while they carried out their supposedly charitable activities.

Only a few of them were familiar with any of the refugees' names. Of course, I also met some extraordinary people who disregarded the UN's directives and stayed on beyond the 4pm curfew, treating the refugees with humanity.

***Dear refugee...***

I am at a loss as to what constitutes right and wrong when it comes to political activity, but the best you can do is to stay true to your own conscience. Your devotion to your people and your country should not compel you to betray your sense of right and wrong. If you succumb to pressure you will have to live with the profound scars of that decision. Many of those who mobilize others against those they deem "the enemy" become the most ardent recruiters for the new ruling group of oppressors. Please evaluate your conscience before becoming involved in refugee politics.

My own refugee experience also taught me that the "god" that we look to in the form of the international community is a sham. That thing is air. We realized that powerful countries can pick and choose what narrative to tell, based on their own interests. They can feed or starve you.

As a Christian, I urge you to pray to God for resilience. Pray that you will be able to make the right choices, and not succumb to despair and desperation, and pray for forgiveness when you fall short. Remember that we all have the capacity to lie, to steal, to cross the line, to do the unspeakable. Don't let this make you bitter and cynical, but rather let it empower you to be more compassionate towards yourself and others, while talking responsibility and living your life with your eyes open.

**IV: HEALING & FORGIVING**

***"Healing is a deliberate act."***

Some people are more robust than others. This is a fact of life. Some can carry a great deal of pain for a long period of time, while others will easily snap. I have talked about how we somehow switched off our emotional reactions to the horrors around us when we first arrived in the camp in Congo. It was healthy and necessary for us to do this in order to keep moving forward. If we were going to practically take care of ourselves and each other, we had to delay our grief journey.

I had witnessed individuals murdering and being murdered in my own village, followed by the death of thousands of people from cholera, including those dearest to me. But I was compelled to continue moving with my family. I needed to be tough. As refugees, we couldn't afford to stop and allow our memories to replay the horrific images, and our emotional systems to feel the sorrow.

We were on the run for two years, living in constant fear and peril. 28 years later, as I attempted to write about my experiences, I was constantly surprised by certain vivid memories flooding back for the first time.

However strong and resilient we might be, we can't hide from our trauma forever. But I believe that we can overcome it through healing, forgiveness and reconciliation.

### ***Dear refugee...***

It is my belief that the proper period for healing is while you are still in exile. Allowing children to play, praying together, and sharing our experiences as refugees are all beneficial forms of therapy. This should begin with refugees. Though the majority of people in the host country will have no idea what you've been through, some will ask questions. When you experience such curiosity and compassion, you may find some relief. When we meet those on the other side of the conflict, we can experience some even deeper healing.

Healing is a deliberate act. You must desire it. Bitterness consumes and destroys you as a refugee. It impairs your ability to overcome. You won't necessarily have the opportunity to speak directly with people on the opposing side of the conflict, but you still have the power to release them from your own anger and resentment. In my experience, forgiving those you do not see opens your heart to the possibility of meeting them one day, without fear or rage.

Whom do you still need to forgive? Perhaps you want to forgive your people or leaders for inflicting this suffering on you, or do you need to forgive your host country for letting you down when you most needed hospitality and humanity from others? Perhaps your husband remarried in your absence, or your wife sought solace with another partner? Perhaps, above all, you need to forgive yourself for the mess, the falling, the failures.

Don't wait for a cue to begin your healing process. Now is the time for forgiveness. Reconciliation, however, is possible when you return home or extend a hand of friendship to those you have labeled as foes. This is why the most profound healing and reconciliation happens when you find your way home.

## **V: FINDING HOME**

### ***"No, I have no regrets."***

Not everyone will choose to return. Some will settle and establish themselves in the host country, working hard and piecing together a life of beauty from the ashes. Some will marry or remarry into the local communities and form new, wonderfully blended families that would never have existed without the unwanted journey.

Some of those among us returned to Rwanda prematurely, either out of nostalgia, a desire to return to their families, or because living in exile had simply become intolerable. Others followed the momentum of the masses, afraid that their property or belongings would be taken by someone else if they didn't go with the crowd.



For us, there was no choice to make. The camps had been demolished, the situation in Congo was becoming more volatile, and we had to run back home to escape the shelling. How strange that it had come full circle and we were now seeking refuge in our own homeland. We had to spend months in transit camps within our own country before being allowed to work and do business.

It was disconcerting to feel as though we were strangers in our own nation. There were newcomers who had spent years as exiles and had already been resettled in our community. They spoke several different languages, and that made us feel like second-class citizens. The majority of us were very thin, whereas these others had some flesh on their bones. Our bodies singled us out as refugees, even back in our home communities.

We were made to feel guilty for fleeing the nation. They said that it was a sign that we were resisting the new regime. Friends shied away from being seen with us. The country even had certain programs in place to "rehabilitate" us before we were allowed into the system. I recall one acquaintance asking me if I regretted taking the road to exile and spending two years among the atrocities of the camps. I considered it briefly but ultimately replied, in all sincerity, "No, I have no regrets."

I tallied up all the rewards of our anguish. As a Christian, my faith developed enormously and the Bible became real to me. I was given the opportunity to serve the impoverished and destitute in their hour of greatest need. During moments of severe pressure, I learned a great deal about myself and others. I grasped the essence of life; what is truly significant and profound.

### ***Dear refugee...***

Returning home is a personal decision and will depend on a variety of factors. You may hear via the media that your region is now safe and stable. Family members may encourage you to come home. This is a pivotal decision for your life. It is yours to make and no-one else's.

Make sure you express gratitude to everyone who helped you, gather all your available contacts, and – where possible – give away or sell everything you can because you will need funds to restart your life. While the UNHCR and other groups may help with the reintegration process, you won't get as much help as you did when you were a refugee.

As you cross the border, you will feel odd, as if you are in a foreign country. Soon, you will discover that you're not returning to what you left behind. Bear in mind that you, too, have been changed beyond recognition. There is no "going back".

Expect a cold reception from neighbours and relatives. People will struggle to understand how to relate to you. Those that remained will have formed bonds, a circle that will never be broken. They faced danger side by side. They share affinities and a collective fate, bound by death. You will become an outsider. Within a few

days, you will find that you do not think like those who remained. Inevitably, you will have picked up some foreign cultural attitudes and behaviours.

For the majority of returnees, you will pass through a transit centre before settling down. Do not be afraid to relocate the entire family to a different town or city. It can be preferable to make new friends and acquaintances rather than enduring the pain of being an outcast among your own relatives. You may be able to set up a new community of returnees from the same or different host nations.

After you've settled in, begin volunteering. This provides an opportunity for you to become acquainted with your "new" nation. And then attempt to obtain employment through recruiting agencies. Again, it's a case of finding a rhythm.

Carry a large tank of mercy and be prepared to hear horrific tales of betrayal, slander, and retribution. I recall an old friend who had to forgive his grandfather after realizing he had been an informant for the occupation army years before. You will hear many stories that go something like this: "When they arrived, we were astounded to learn that 'M' had been leading them the entire time."

Perhaps you will never find out what became of M after the war ended. Forgive M. Forgive them all. If there is one thing that you have learned above all from your experiences in exile, it's that you have no idea what you would have done if you were in their shoes. Perhaps they lived and died with secrets you will never hear.

## **RECLAIMING THE NARRATIVE**

Your story is your own. I don't know what you have seen and experienced, what you are still to endure, nor how it will change you. But my experience has taught me a few undeniable truths: none of us is immune to becoming a refugee at some point in our lives and being subject to the whims of the international community, and none of us can know what we are capable of – for better or for worse – until we are pushed to the very limits of our humanity. Have compassion for yourself. Have mercy for others.

The reverberations of your time in exile will continue to surprise you throughout your life, with new lessons and revelations about the things that you carry. I can speak of my own healthy detachment from material things, my realistic expectations of life and community, my motivation to continuously learn new skills, my wide and deep network of friends, family, colleagues and connections that spans nations and cultures – I wouldn't have any of these things without my experience as a refugee.

Regardless of where you are in your journey, I pray that the God of all compassion will sustain you, that kind and trustworthy people will open their hearts and homes to you, and that someday you will find your way home – whatever that means for you. There is so much that is out of our control as refugees. In time, it is my hope that you will be able to reclaim your narrative, your labels, your identity as one who has walked in exile and overcome.

From a former refugee, in love and solidarity.