Spiritual Damage
Fergal Keane

From
‘Letter to Daniel’
Nairobi, October 1995

Providing coverage of the massacre in Rwanda left its mark on the news teams involved; it also forced them to ask themselves questions which were often difficult to answer.

We had been looking forward to this moment for weeks. We were sitting in an air-conditioned room in Nairobi, sipping cold drinks and waiting for our first hot food in what seemed like an age. There were four of us: myself, cameraman Glenn Middleton, sound recordist Tony Wende and producer Rizu Hamid. All the way down to the Burundi border by road, and on the flight to Kenya, we had speculated about the joys of hot baths and soft beds. The last stage of our journey out of Rwanda had been nerve-racking. Through roadblock after roadblock manned by drunken Hutu militiamen, Rizu had pleaded our case. No, we were not Belgians she told them. We were not supporters of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). We were not 'enemies of the people'. A few of the machete-wielding thugs didn’t believe us. Some dangled their grenades through the open windows of our vehicles. Others were simply nervous, wondering if the rebels had entered the area yet. Most of these people had been involved in the murder of their Tutsi neighbours. Tutsi men, women and children had died at roadblocks like this. Now and again the smell of the dead would drift out across the warm air of the afternoon. Somewhere in the bushes were rags and bones and withering flesh. I thanked God for Rizu’s calm, deliberate explanations. Only when we reached the other side of the border and stopped to check the vehicles did I notice that my hands were shaking.

Now, as we sat waiting for lunch in Nairobi, far from the darkness of those roads, we found ourselves wordless. There was none of the banter which had kept us going in the previous weeks. We stared at the menu, although we had already ordered. We gazed out of the window, looked around at the other guests, stared at the cutlery and tapped our fingers on the tabletop. It was Glenn who tried to break the silence. 'Some bloody place - I mean, can you believe the place? Unreal. Bloody Rwanda.' And then, for the first time in the three years had known him, Glenn's eyes filled up with tears. He looked away from us, back out over the buildings and the traffic. And then he got up and left the table and went to his room. I tried to talk to the others about how we...
might structure our film but, in spite of myself, I found my voice thickening, my eyes starting to swim. Looking around me I noticed that Tony and Rizu had also started to weep. Then one by one we left the table, leaving our food uneaten as the waiters looked bemused at our sudden departure.

Looking back on that moment, I have come to believe that, in its own painful way, it represented the truest expression of the Rwandan experience. Ours was an inarticulacy born of sorrow, fear and incomprehension. Each of us had experienced war and killing before, but in Rwanda we had stepped into a place in which all previous experience of death and conflict paled into insignificance. Here the journalism of objective assessment and rational comparisons meant nothing. To this day I am at a loss to describe what it was really like. That smell. On your clothes, on your skin. For weeks afterwards, lifting a glass to your lips or sitting down to eat, it could come flashing back. This was not something I could convey with words or photographs or film. Set against the vastness of the evil of genocide, journalism was at best a limited vehicle of expression, at worst a crude and inadequate tool. For how, really, do you convey that sense of evil felt as a physical presence? To walk at night across an overgrown courtyard strewn with the rotting dead, to have to watch every step because in the long grass there are the decapitated heads of the murdered. Or to listen to a fourteen year-old boy describe how he took a club and beat his elderly neighbour's head to a pulp and then, cheered on by soldiers, moved through a field meting out the same death to other neighbours lying tied up on the ground.

The experience still leaves me struggling for adequate words. To borrow Yeats' phrase, I have started to wonder if the unhinged world I travelled through represented a 'pity beyond all telling'. I have tried to tell the story in film and print but I have begun to accept that the ordinary language of journalism has failed me. Even though, thanks to the director, David Harrison, we produced a powerful film for Panorama it could only intimate part of the reality. I had a similar feeling when I opened Gilles Peress' book of photographs, The Silence. It offers us a striking series of images in black and white; the landscape of the genocide. We can see the dead and their terrible twisted features. We can see the killers and the refugees and the towns and villages where the slaughter took place. But, for me, Rwanda is a country
whose spiritual landscape is framed in images and memories that even the most brilliant photography cannot capture. Perhaps the only definitive testament can come from a survivor, a Rwandan Primo Levi who will give voice to that for which I can still find no words.

Although I felt a deep sense of journalistic inadequacy, the Rwandan genocide brought me more kudos than any other story I have ever covered. This has left me with lingering feelings of guilt. Perhaps it is an inescapable part of the territory. If you operate in the zones of misery, the sense of being somehow an exploiter is never far away. I have had people call me a vulture and there are times when my own reactions have made me feel ashamed. I can remember attending a mass funeral where the families of the dead were almost knocked over by jostling cameramen and photographers. One part of me was sickened by the spectacle, the other busy ensuring that my own cameraman was able to keep standing and focus on the grieving relatives. At the final stage of the process we compress the horror into minutes of television film or assemble it between the covers of a book. There are people who believe that by packaging the horror in such a way we increase the distance between the subject and the audience. This thought flickered through my mind when I first picked up Peress' book but, on a second viewing, I believe he has illuminated, not softened the horror.

If the story is to be told, if we are to give witness, what can we do but focus, switch on the record button and let the tape or film run? This is especially true of Africa, where a journalism of passion and involvement is essential. We must not report countries like Rwanda as if they were demented theme parks, peopled by savages doomed to slaughter each other in perpetuity. Too much of the reporting of Africa has been conditioned by a view of its people as an eternally miserable smudge of blackness stretching across the decades, from the Congo in the sixties to Rwanda in the nineties. In the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide there was far too much reliance on tired clichés about ancient tribal hatreds. The fact that this was an act of systematically planned mass murder, a final solution of monstrous proportions, was too often lost in the rush to blame the catastrophe on the old bogey of tribalism. This was not just lazy journalism, it was an insult to the nearly one million dead.
Since returning from Rwanda, I have heard many smug voices decrying the savage Africans and their 'lost continent'. Such talk is easy but it ignores the truth of vast numbers of good, decent people working against odds that would drive the average Westerner over the edge in a matter of days. It also conveniently ignores the role of Europeans, men of civilization and learning, in fermenting division and resentment across the continent of Africa. It should never be forgotten that the identity card system 'which allowed the Hutu extremists to round up their opponents with such ease was introduced by the colonialists. Or that it was German troops who tutored Rwandan peasants in the arts massacre in the last century.

In writing this article, I find myself walking away from the task again and again. It is not a subject I wish to face. I make coffee. Go for a walk. Listen to the radio. I live in Asia now and Rwanda is a place I left behind me. Now that I sit down to write, however, the old questions have come. They are not questions that find their way into the average news report or documentary. Questions about good and evil and life and death. I remember, on my way into Rwanda, meeting a colleague who described it as a 'spiritually damaging' place. At the time, his remark puzzled me. Now I understand it only too well. Although I had covered acts of evil, I had managed to retain a belief in a world where the triumph of evil was prevented by an ultimate force for good. That belief has disappeared. It was whittled away in Kigali, Butare, Rusomo, Nyarabuye and all the other acres of suffering where the genocide was acted out.

With the help of counselling and friends I have managed to put my bad dreams behind me. What has not gone, what may never go, is a deep feeling of sorrow for all the poor ruined humanity I encountered in those months of spring last year.

After editing the film I took a long holiday in Canada, anxious to remove myself from Rwanda and anything to do with Africa. One afternoon, driving through the mountains outside Vancouver, I switched on the radio to hear a Canadian reporter describing the death by cholera of thousands of Hutu refugees. At one point the Canadian reporter broke down as she described how bodies were being 'piled on to trucks.

On this occasion the world did react. Unlike the genocide, when most
of the world was looking the other way, the cameras were on hand to record the crisis. There was a massive humanitarian aid effort and endless political speeches. Although I sympathized with the dead and dying, I felt angry with the world for caring so much now when it had cared so little about the genocide. The Americans, who had bickered over the funding of armoured vehicles which might have been used to protect the beleaguered Tutsi population, now rushed to organize air drops.

The second act of the great Rwandan tragedy was played out in full view of the media. The disaster was a much easier story to cover than the genocide. It was, on the face of it, very simple: refugees flee for their lives and end up starving and dying. For the US television networks in particular, this had powerful resonance: there were unmistakable echoes of Ethiopia and the ‘Feed the World’ campaigns of the eighties. For a few weeks, the story dominated the bulletins. And then, when the body count dropped, they all packed up and moved on. Most people I met in America that summer had no notion that the catastrophe in the camps was the direct consequence of one of the worst acts of genocide since the Holocaust. It was as if the memory of mass slaughter was being buried under a fresh mound of dead bodies.

I cannot pretend that my work made any tangible difference to the lives of those who survived the genocide, or that it influenced governments to change their policies and care about Rwanda. The Panorama film was well received by the critics but attracted a small audience. I received a few letters from people who said they’d been moved by our film, and one from a man who said he was sick and tired of watching blacks killing each other. There wasn’t a scintilla of political reaction. Our disclosure that the perpetrator of one of the worst massacres was now running food distribution in a UN camp was met with a deafening silence. To the best of my knowledge he is still enjoying the protection of the United Nations. As a diplomat friend of mine put it, 'It's all very upsetting but what possible sense would it make for us to get involved in a faraway dispute in which we have no part? It might make emotional sense but not politically.'

Six months before the genocide, I had an argument with a BBC colleague during the annual review of the year programme on Radio 4. I was warning of the possibility of a disaster somewhere in central Africa. I wrongly imagined
that the source of the problem might be Mobutu's Zair, where ethnic unrest had been bubbling in the Shaba region: 'Why,' my colleague asked, 'should we spend so much time reporting on tribal disputes in obscure African countries?' I was taken aback by the question, believing that it represented a narrow view of the world. I was unable to convince her otherwise at that time.

Now that I have sifted through my emotions and thoughts about Rwanda, the answer seems terribly simple. I will care about what happens in remote African countries because Rwanda has taught me to value life in a way that I never did before. The ragged peasants who died and those who did the killing belong to the same human as I do. This may be a troubling kinship but I cannot reject it.

To witness genocide is to feel not only the chill of your own mortality, but the degradation of all humanity. I am not worried if this sounds like a sermon. I do not care if there are those who dismiss it as emotional and simplistic. It is the fruit of witness. Our trade may be full of imperfections and ambiguities but if we ignore evil we become the authors of a guilty silence.