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Transcript of an Audio-Recorded Conversation in Post-Conflict Rwanda

Participants:

- Bisangwa Simon
- Kubwimana Jean d'Amour

Relation: Father

Relation: Son

Facilitator: Mukangiruwonsanga Agnes

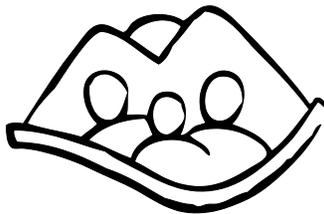
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Story Number: SFH0098

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Bisangwa Simon & Kubwimana Jean d'Amour

Story Number: SFH0098

Jean d'Amour: Let us not dwell so far in the past and start from when you were about my age. What were your thoughts and future plans at my age?

Simon: Thank you. By the time I was eighteen I had dropped out of school. At that time I studied at St. Andre College. I was careless and did not follow through with my afternoon classes very well and I was unable to pass my final high school exam. I tried to re-enroll but I was unable to at this point so I started looking for work but remained unemployed for a year. Eventually I got a job with the Ministry of Education and was transferred overnight to my new place of work Rubundi.

Jean d'Amour: Where was Rubundi?

Simon: Rubundi is close to Cyungu and near the swamp. I was also going there for the first time. I worked there for about 6 months and then joined the high court. I was still a very young man and I lived in a foreign place among people I was not familiar with. I needed to be disciplined and act with caution in order to live well and fulfill my duties. However I succumbed to temptations due to bad company and got involved in drugs and alcohol after work. You know what happens when one becomes deeply involved with alcohol, they cannot think of their future. The few times when I regained my sanity and thought of my parents, I would go and visit them on Saturdays. Often, when I left, I would get robbed.

Despite all my challenges, I remained focused on my work and loving people. I tried to show those around me that I am raised properly. I also hoped to send a message to all who doubted me and give them a chance to judge me by my hard work.

Facilitator: Could you please tell us where you drew your inspiration to work hard to disappoint those who doubted you.

Simon: I was inspired by my community. I loved everyone young and old and I tried to

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get close to many of those I encountered. After about ten years, I was transferred to a different and independent court in Kinyami. Once again, I had to move and start a new life in a place I was not familiar with. This time things did not go very well. Even before I could shift all my belongings to the new location, I was bewitched. I was only saved by God's grace. It was hard to know who had done this to me because even my colleagues whom I suspected showed me a lot of support during the time I was ill. Fortunately, one of the colleagues at work whom I suspected of bewitching me was demoted shortly after I returned (from my sick leave). At this point I looked at my life and reflected on the reality that I was about to die and I could have died a bachelor. At this point I started looking for a life partner. I got help from various people in the community to organize my wedding. One of the people who helped me was a colleague that I worked with at the court.

Jean d'Amour: During those times you faced very many challenges like witchcraft. As a person, what lessons did you take from your first ten years (in Rubundi) that helped you to reevaluate your life and create new priorities as you made this new start? What achievements did you make during those ten years in terms of property or land?

Simon: I drew many lessons from everywhere I lived. I faced many challenges but I also managed to overcome all of them. I never gave up on life despite the challenges. It was not easy being a young man, living away from home in a community with several detractors and no one to advise or support me. Back home my parents advised me to get a wife and raise a family. This encouraged me.

Facilitator: What caused the jealousy among your colleagues at work? Were you more hard working than all of them?

Simon: Yes, my hard work was a factor but the other important issue was the fact that I came from a different province. They saw me as an outsider and they asked themselves why (the government) could not recruit a local resident for my position.

Facilitator: Out of all this, what lessons do you wish to share with your son?

Simon: Well, I deeply regret not completing my education. I once even showed him some of my books. As you can imagine, I am someone who has spent over 30 years without stepping in a classroom! Despite this I share with him my science notes and books and asked him to compare with what they are doing today.

I advise you my son, if you concentrate on your studies, you will be successful and you won't have any problems in life. The message is, love your education and encourage your brothers to love it as well. Education is power.

Jean d'Amour: You shared with me that it is your parents who helped you get a wife and that you had lived for a while without one. Did you initially think that you would

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achieve more without a wife? What can we learn about the advantages and disadvantages of being married or remaining single from your experience?

Simon: There are many (advantages and disadvantages for both). But before I get into that I want to advise you to avoid bad influences. Friends who invite you for drinks are not good friends. During the ten years that I lived as a bachelor, I valued such friends and because of that I put alcohol first and ignored people who advised me wisely. It is not very good to be a bachelor for very long.

Facilitator: Do you advise him (your son) to get married?

Simon: No, he has responsibilities he must accomplish first.

Jean d'Amour: The lessons I am drawing from what you are telling me are that you were distracted by bad influences and did not think of your own avenues to progress. Ten years is a long time that you lost because you were working to support your drinking habit.

Simon: I cannot advise a child to follow this path of carelessness and lack of focus. In these times we have to be focused on progress and put everything aside.

Jean d'Amour: You mentioned that you regret not completing your education when you were a young man. Did you ever think of going back to school after you started working, or had you given up hope by then?

Simon: At the time, I requested to be re-enrolled and had to wait a whole year before I got a response. I was fortunate to get a job in those times, only a few highly privileged people got jobs. There were no private ways to get an education and the only schools available were run by the government school system. Once I started working, I forgot my education.

Jean d'Amour: How did you manage to hold up a family and live in harmony with your wife despite your previous lifestyle that involved alcohol?

Simon: My marriage was my turning point. Everything changed after this. I stopped drinking and put my family first. We still met many problems from time to time - at work and at home. As a family we were destabilized many times by some people. We persevered and took advice from our families and that is how we managed to have you.

Jean d'Amour: I understand that you faced many challenges and that you never gave up despite everything. If the community treated you so badly why didn't you ever leave or give up?

Simon: Not giving up comes from patience. While we had people who hated us, we

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also had people who loved us and encouraged us. It was also not good to separate ourselves from our community. We chose to ignore the negative efforts of our enemies and this eventually paid off.

Jean d'Amour: Where are those people who hated you now? What happened after you gave them love in return for their hate?

Simon: Honestly, up to this day, I have never confronted any of these people. I did not see it necessary to flame the fires of hatred. One of the very people who orchestrated my suffering resigned his position at work. His desk was right next to mine so my return to work surprised him (because he hoped that I would die from the witchdoctor's spell). After he resigned, we became very good friends. He often visits and so does his wife. In fact his wife is related to mine and we often meet at church in Buyaga. We live in harmony now.

Jean d'Amour: Did you two ever look back and discuss what caused the rift between the two of you? Or did you simply move forward and bury the hatchet without ever looking back?

Simon: Well he still lives back there while I moved out here. We simply left it all in the past because what had come between us was no more. Our conflict was about the job he did not want me to have and I left the job and moved from the area of Kinyami. He also eventually quit so there was no longer a basis for conflict.

Jean d'Amour: I think it is a good thing that you two reconciled and are now on talking terms.

Facilitator: Did you learn anything from this, Simon?

Simon: Yes, I have gained some positive lessons because I also believe that love defeats all hate. Usually, I only witness this in the romantic novels I read but now I have a live example from my parent.

Facilitator: Do you have any other interesting questions, perhaps about Rwanda's history?

Jean d'Amour: I am very curious about what happened during the war because I was very young. I only remember hearing one bullet. Please tell me about the war. What happened and how did you survive?

Simon: Thank you, in the moment you have opened my mind and I am happy with your question. During the war things got really tough but as usual love emerged the victor. (It all started) One day while we were living in Kabuga, at the time, I did not know where you had wandered off to. Suddenly, the sounds of bullets took over the

A conversation between Bisangwa Simon and Kubwimana Jean d'Amour

area and we all hid under our beds in fear. We thought you were dead, and your young brother was crying. Fortunately, you came back the next day.

The day I will never forget is Labor Day first of May (1994) and the morning that followed. At this point we had seen it necessary to we flee to safety from Kagamba to the Temporary Zone in Mukono. You were still very young and your aunt Musema was the one who was taking care of your every need. Your mother was taking care of Iraguha. While in the protected area, war broke out again and you and your aunt Musema fled. After two days you returned but I recall that it was a very difficult day for me. You, your mother and aunt had all left and there had been shooting going on all day. I thought you were all dead. We were very relieved when you returned.

Jean d'Amour: Did you ever ask Musema where we had fled to?

Simon: Well, that is very sensitive (I would rather not talk about it). Maybe you should find Aunt Musema and take some time to speak to her. It would be a blessing if we all came together to share the experience and lessen the burden we have of it.

Jean d'Amour: I think this conversation has been really good. As a parent you went through so much and witnessed a lot. I am curious why it had to take this long and this organization for you and other elders to share these experiences with us? What prevents parents from sharing these stories?

Simon: Having this discussion has been just as rewarding been for me. I feel like we have found the key to living in harmony between parents and children.

Jean d'Amour: ...and families

Simon: Yes, and families. Now that we have had this opportunity, you are going to help us to build on this. You will bring us together so we can share experiences. There is no reason to hide our stories from you. This is a brilliant idea and we should take it from here to build on something better.

Facilitator: Is this the first time you two are having such a talk?

Jean d'Amour: Yes, this is the first time. Usually all we talk about is school.

Facilitator: Do you still have more questions?

Jean d'Amour: Yes, I have plenty. My next question is about the wars. There are many wars that have taken place in Rwanda, some that you know about and others that you don't. Since you born in 1954, I will ask you about what happened in 1959 and at independence. But you were present in 1973 when the issue of ethnic divisions (got even more serious) during Mbonyumutwa's regime when students were killed in Butare.

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I am sure you know about this.

Simon: Oh yes, I know about that. I was present. In fact, some of the survivors of that shooting are living. I can introduce you to some of them.

Jean d'Amour: What did you make of the situation at the time? Why didn't love prevail and ethnic hatred take over? What did you and your friends make of the situation?

Simon: Honestly, at this time I was still unemployed. I was among the disgruntled because the government had refused to re-enroll me. But I wondered how could this hatred have been sowed among the students and grown to that extent? It was difficult to understand.

Jean d'Amour: I know, but this continued. 1973 went by and you continued to witness what was happening. What puzzles me is why people who lived together would turn around and kill each other. When I read about it from history books it seems as though this had entrenched itself as a culture that manifested itself in everyone within the community. What were your feelings when you heard that a fellow student was killed? What did you think the future held?

Simon: At the time it was a puzzle even to us. News about deaths came in so fast.

Facilitator: Were you unable to do anything to stop the killings?

Simon: There was really no way (to stop the killings). All I hoped for was that I could live to see the next day.

Jean d'Amour: Despite all that, we still hear old people talk about Habyarimana as a president who spurred a lot of development. What developments are they talking about when people were being persecuted? Doesn't this disrespect those who struggled to liberate this country from that chaos or were there developments actually taking place in some areas?

Simon: Those people who say that live in the past and they don't realize the necessary changes that need to take place for a society to transform itself

Facilitator: This is usually old men and women who are stuck in the past and believe that everything that happened in the past was better than what is happening today.

Simon: I would not expect a young, forward looking man like you to think like that.

Facilitator: What lesson can you give your son to make sure all this does not happen again?

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Jean d'Amour: If I was caught in the same situation where I was witnessing killings, what am I supposed to do? What challenges did you face as youth that prevented you from taking action to prevent these killings? Why did you ignore it all? Was it because of alcohol perhaps?

Simon: I had the wrong attitude. I assumed that that what was happening was 'none of my business.'

Facilitator: Moving forward what can your son and other youth do today to prevent this from happening?

Simon: Plant seeds of love and do not be afraid to condemn whoever attempts to bring hatred him because he will be destructive and limit your positive achievements. We need to move forward.

Jean d'Amour: I am very happy. This has been a valuable experience for me. Some of the most important lessons I have gained include; never giving up, love and to avoid the line of thinking that assumes that national issues are 'none of my business'. I think that this 'none of my business' attitude is what caused many deaths. I have also learned patience and perseverance. I am thankful for this conversation and I hope we can have more discussions like these.

Facilitator: Do you feel like your questions have all been answered?

Jean d'Amour: Yes, I feel that I have been answered.

Facilitator: What about you (Simon)? How do you feel about the discussion we have had?

Simon: It has made me really happy. To think that I have lived eighteen years with my son and we have never had a conversation like this... I feel really blessed.

Facilitator: Do you wish to have a talk like this with your mother?

Jean d'Amour: Yes, I do. I think that a parent who does not have such discussions limits their child's potential. We live in uncertain times when we don't know our origins. Parents need to guide their children and this is how to do it. I would rather listen to history from my father than read it in a book written by a Frenchman.

Simon: Honestly, it seems as though our children don't belong to us because we never find the time or initiative to give them guidance. We need to speak to them so they cannot make the same mistakes we made. This would bring growth to our families.

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Facilitator: Thank you, I am glad that you all feel that you have benefitted from this discussion. Thank you.

Simon: Thank you.

