

Talking Bones

by Rachel Soukup, Burke High School

11-12 Grade Category, Third Place

The moral ramifications of the Holocaust have been felt around the world. Such extreme human suffering evokes both compassionate sympathy and heroic actions in the face of peril. During the Holocaust, many people came to the aid of threatened Jews by hiding and smuggling them to safety at the risk of their own lives. Just as this occurred during the Holocaust, it occurred in Rwanda. But, the few with the moral courage to speak and act out weren't enough to prevent 800,000 people, including Tutsis, perceived political opponents, and anyone associated with them from being killed in only 100 days (BBC News). However, these brave rescuers weren't the only to show moral courage. My essay is a tribute to a different sort of rescuer; a rescuer of the dead that brings peace to their living families. Forensic anthropologist, Clea Koff, worked with the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) to identify victims of genocide. The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda's website states the purpose of the organization as, "the prosecution of persons responsible for genocide and other serious violations of international humanitarian law committed in the territory of Rwanda". Koff describes her experiences and the circumstances of the Rwandan genocide in her book, *The Bone Woman*.

Rwanda's genocide took place over 50 years after the Holocaust but was carried out with the same chilling, systematic efficiency. The Nazis marked Jews with yellow stars or armbands for easy separation and identification. The Rwandan perpetrators of genocide used mandatory identification cards with a space clearly marked "Ethnicity," next to which was listed Hutu, Tutsi, or Twa (Koff 85). Often, soldiers would pull over random cars and demand identification cards; if the card listed them as a Tutsi, they were married to a Tutsi or the

soldiers believed their politics were moderate, they were immediately shot or hacked to death with a machete (Koff 85).

The ICTR team identified the bodies of a mass grave behind a church in Kibuye, western Rwanda. This grave held the bodies of several thousand people who were rounded up and murdered in just one episode of this horrifying genocide. Those who weren't murdered in the church fled to the priest's chambers, crawl spaces, and outside if possible. Despite their efforts, most of these escapees were hunted down and killed. (Koff 34)

Koff's arrival was nearly two years after the massacre took place, but tiny handprints made in blood still dotted the walls as ghastly reminders, and blood spatter still clung to the high ceilings (Koff 34). Koff was 23 years old when she made the decision to travel to Rwanda; a place where the U.N., the "world's largest peacekeeping force," had been unable to quell the violence (BBC News). To travel to a country where less than two years earlier genocide had taken place and encounter many present-day government and military officials that participated in the organization of these massacres was a decision that took moral courage. But, as Koff describes it, "I aspired to give a voice to people silenced by their own governments or militaries, people suppressed in the most final way: murdered and put into clandestine graves" (Koff 17). Her sense of duty towards the dead, and her commitment to fighting genocide and social injustice for the benefit of the living shows a possession of courage all her own.

Koff's moral service in Rwanda is indeed commendable, but is it truly moral courage? The ADL defines moral courage as, "a choice and decision to confront a threatening situation due to one's moral convictions." Koff did make a choice to leave the safe confines of labs and graduate school to travel to turbulent Rwanda to perform a service to the families of genocide victims, and there are many instances in Koff's book where her life is in danger. One such event was during dinner at the Kibuye guesthouse. As Koff and her team ate, a

speedboat with armed men killed two men swimming in the lake directly in front of them. Bullets ricocheted off the water towards Koff and her team whistling past their faces (Koff 66). She witnessed two lives snuffed out by machine guns; two lives that ended right there in the dark water of Lake Kivu.

Despite this close brush with violence, Koff continued to identify bodies exhumed from the mass grave. The mission greatly affected her; she and her teammates brushed dirt from the bones of toddlers to find machete wounds etched deeply on their skulls and faces, and slash wounds on the backs of ankles intended to prevent escape (Koff 36).

Koff's perseverance and dedication to her internal sense of duty and justice in the shadow of constant emotional, mental, and physical stress and danger inspired and motivated me when I first read *The Bone Woman*. I have long been consumed with a curiosity and interest in the fields of anthropology and archaeology. In elementary school, I studied pictures and books on the mummies of ancient Egypt, the cultural history of Native Americans, and the wondrously preserved Incan mummies discovered high in the Andes Mountains. But until I read Koff's book, I didn't perceive that anthropology could have any application to the social injustices splashed over news, headlines and television.

Each person has an opportunity to demonstrate moral courage in the world even in a small act. Koff showed me a way that I can, as she eloquently puts it, "help end human rights abuses by proving to would-be killers that bones can talk" (Koff 7). I hope to apply her example of moral courage in the wake of the Rwandan genocide as I attend college next year as anthropology major and begin my future career. When I am called upon to be of service in some way, I believe I will find the strength to demonstrate my own moral courage from both Koff's actions in Rwanda and the heroic actions of rescuers during the Holocaust.

Works Cited

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