

this

(Rwandan)

life

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WE are woken before dawn each day by the inmates of the prison across the road chanting. Massed masculine voices, in determined unison, join forces with the neighbours' rooster to raise the sun over our little patch of Rwanda. This is a jail for corrupt police officers. The main prison is at the other side of the town in which we have settled for a year. We often see those inmates, in their orange or pink pyjama suits, crammed into the backs of trucks or walking to work duties. Many of these men committed atrocious crimes at the time of the 1994 genocide, when up to a million Rwandans, mainly Tutsis, were slaughtered within 100 days.

On a Sunday morning the congregation of the Evangelical Restoration Church behind our house starts up. It's low key at first, perhaps some microphone-enhanced muttering. Then the electric organ starts up in the background and the singing begins. The music gradually picks up speed and, with amplified exhortations, builds to a crescendo, members of the congregation periodically breaking out above the other voices with whoops, yelps and ecstatic hallelujahs. As the morning wears on, the phrases become increasingly repetitive, a frantic mantra, with euphoric worshippers jiggling from leg to leg or jogging in circles around the sparse hall. Following a lunch break it starts again, sometimes continuing until after 9pm.

Does it help with the pain? Recently I asked a Rwandan couple how many children they had. Four was the answer, plus six orphans, four of whom had been inherited from her brother, killed in the genocide. Next day I asked our landlord if his family had previously lived in our house. "No," he answered, rather matter-of-factly, "my parents, and brothers and sisters all perished in 1994."

The same week our Kinyarwanda language teacher told us that when his father had refused to kill a Tutsi neighbour, he was beaten and buried alive, though, happily, he was rescued and the grateful Tutsi man later gave him two cows, a valued gift. Another friend knows a young man who, at age 10, fled to a church after seeing his mother and sisters being raped and butchered.

Rwandan people carry a heavy burden. During those 100 days almost everyone suffered, saw or perpetrated atrocities we could not dream up in our worst nightmares. Only the little children, with the light, bright, cheeky exuberance of youthful innocence, seem free of the burden, but one must wonder if there will come a day when they ask the question: "What did you do in the genocide, Daddy?" and, as they discover the answer, whether the weight of their history will attach itself to their minds and to their hearts.

Who am I, then, to grumble if a bit of chanting or a Sunday singsong goes some way to numbing the pain?