



*Supporting genocide survivors  
and honouring Rwandan healing ways:  
Our own names, our own prescriptions*

*An interview with Chaste Uwihoreye*



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*Abstract*

The 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda took place over 100 days. Each year, there is therefore a 100-day commemoration period during which Chaste Uwihoreye is involved in supporting survivors. In this interview, Chaste spoke with David Denborough.

**Key words:** *Rwandan genocide, commemoration, solidarity camps, externalising*

DD: Chaste, I know you have many responsibilities to support survivors during the 100-day commemoration period here in Rwanda, and that you've been doing this for many years. Could you describe some of the experiences you've been responding to?

Chaste: Thank you, David. It's been 25 years since the genocide, and I think this is my sixteenth year of supporting survivors during these 100 days. In order to convey what the last 25 years have been like for survivors, I think it's helpful to think about three different periods. The first period was between 1995 and 2003. During those years, the commemorations often involved many emotional crises. So often, loved one's bodies had not been found or identified, so people were often asking themselves if the genocide really happened, if people really died, and if they will come back again. It was a hard period for survivors to be grieving and to be waiting. Maybe their brothers and sisters, their family members, might come back. Maybe their friends survived somehow. There was so much emotion around these questions: Maybe my family member will come back? Maybe he's in exile? Maybe I will find my children in an orphanage? It was a hard time where you could see survivors of the genocide going everywhere that commemoration events were happening, hoping to hear something about their loved ones, to learn if their family members had been found somewhere, if their bodies had been found so they could be buried. That period involved supporting survivors to go through that process. It was a period of mourning and searching, hoping and despairing.

Then, between 2003/4 and 2006/7, it was a period where survivors were asking, 'why did I survive?' This was a hard situation because the suffering seemed to make no sense. Survivors thought that they should also have died. It was a period of difficult pain and emotional crises. Sometimes people were crying and re-experiencing seeing the killers and crying, 'He's coming to kill me'. I remember visiting a house where a daughter was hiding under the bed. When I called to her she said, 'Keep quiet, keep quiet! The killer is around, the killer is around!' There

were many situations in which the moment of genocide was being revived, re-lived. I also remember some people re-experiencing physical injuries, even when they no longer had these physical injuries. They would say, 'You see they cut my leg', and while the physical injury had healed, they would be experiencing the injury again.

The third period, from 2006/7 til now, is involving people asking questions like, 'What is happening to me? What am I suffering?' It's a period of fear in some ways. I remember during last year's commemoration, at night time, I received five or six women who were crying and telling me, 'Can you help me? There is something that is beating on my head and I have fear. I don't know what's happening'. This experience of crying and not knowing what is happening to me, inside me, that's how I categorise this current period.

DD: Can you say little bit about what your role is during the 100 days?

Chaste: During the commemoration events when people are together, giving testimonies, listening to speeches, listening to poems, what I have been doing is trying to bring a person back to where we are. For example, most of the people when they are having an emotional or trauma crisis during a commemoration event, they close their eyes, they cry, they have fear, they are calling for help. In these moments, I ask them, 'Can you open your eyes? Can you look at me? Can you see me? Can you see where we are now?' These simple questions try to help people to come back into the present time and into my presence so that I can try to offer a sense of company. I want to make sure that people are not alone with their memories. We are together in the present, rather than them remaining alone in the past.

This is my main emphasis during the commemoration events. Then there is a period of follow-up. Over the years, I have organised many 'solidarity camps'. In these camps we bring together young adolescent children survivors of the genocide. We would bring a group of perhaps 100 or 200 young people together in schools where they could continue their ceremony of commemoration

but in a way that is meaningful to them. We would spend a period of one week or two weeks together and they would pass the whole days and evenings together. I would sleep in the same quarters with them, I would eat with them. We would be in this period of commemoration together.

If I can compare this to narrative practice, the young people would give their testimonies and, after the testimonies, their colleagues would help to acknowledge and name what they had experienced. In the Rwandan context, they would cry, of course, and after crying, they would dance. Their experiences and stories would be translated through dance and translated into poems. They would also translate their testimonies into games. All of this would contribute to a transformation of emotions in some way. Importantly, space was also facilitated to create the second story because they would share the strategies they were using to face their experiences.

For instance, 'I have often been the head of my household, but I am managing to find food by ...' or, 'I am managing to help my siblings like this, and this'. Through the sharing of these stories the young children are learning from and with each other. This process also helped those children to create networks, because most of the time during the solidarity camp they would create an association with others from a similar district, for instance 'An association of children survivors of genocide head of households'. They would then set up a mechanism to meet once a week, or once a month, long after the camp was over. These associations would be a place to continue sharing experiences and strategies.

DD: Finding ways to share experiences so that people are not left alone with memories seems so important.

Chaste: I remember driving into the countryside one day to identify a child survivor of genocide. When I got to the village, I sent someone to call the child and let her know that I was here to visit her. When she came out, she saw the car I was in, and immediately she went back. She thought there must have been a mistake – that no one in a car could possibly be visiting her. She was thinking,

'I am somebody who lost everybody, who lost everything. Nobody would come to see me, especially no one in a car.' I remember getting out of the car and going to her house and saying, 'It's you, I'm coming to see you, it's not anybody else'. Immediately she cried, she cried. But they were good tears. Just having somebody come to see her was something very important because she had lost, if I can say this, her trust in everybody. Connecting her then to a bigger group of child survivors, it was really good. She then had an audience to tell people what happened to her, how her parents had died, and other people could understand her. This was a very important part of the solidarity camps. She is a grown lady now, but I remember so clearly meeting her when she was a child.

DD: That's a very moving story, Chaste. What if young people or adults have some particular sufferings that need further assistance in order to be addressed?

Chaste: If young people were suffering with say, persistent pains, I would organise a workshop or training event. Perhaps 20 to 30 children or young people would attend. Some of them would have participated in a solidarity camp or others may also have consulted psychiatric services or came to see me for individual counselling sessions. They may have sought different sorts of help but the pain, the suffering, was remaining.

These gatherings or workshops would take place over four days and they would have two main objectives. This first objective was to find a name of the problem, their own name. Most of the time, they would come with a name for the problem, which they have been given by a professional, but the objective here was to give your own name to the problem. And the second objective was to develop your own prescription for the problem. They were all aware of professionals, particularly doctors, offering their prescription of medication, but this workshop was about acknowledging that it was now time for us to prescribe for ourselves, to make our own prescriptions.

After a collective introduction, we divided into groups of four or five people and together

they would help each other to find their own name and their own prescription. One by one they would share their personal pains and personal stories and the rest of the small group would come up with possible names for the problem, from which the person would choose or make up their own. This name had to be a Rwandan concept. It should be a phrase or paragraph or proverb that would name and acknowledge the particular suffering. This was a fantastic process because it really helped people to summarise and organise their stories, and then reorganise their pains and relationships in a way that was clearer for them to explain to others. Most importantly, this process enabled people to understand themselves and define their experiences in their own words.

I remember I used to introduce this process with a Rwandan proverb: '*Ibuye ryagaragaye ntiriba rikishe isuka*'. This is a farming metaphor as more than 80% of Rwandans are farmers. The proverb states that when you are farming, once you can identify where a stone is, then that stone can never destroy your hoe. Meaning that if you know a problem, if you can name it, if you can locate it, then that problem can never destroy you.

DD: That's fantastic.

Chaste: Yes, it's a very good proverb in relation to externalising problems! We have to correctly name and locate the problem. There is something else that is also very helpful about this process. When people initially give testimonies about what they have been through, sometimes the way the stories are told can be a bit vague or unstructured. Naming the particular problem that people are facing, in a culturally resonant way, also gives a structure to how someone can tell their stories. It changes the arc or form of the story of the problem.

Of course, more importantly, when they are invited to prescribe for themselves, this is really an interesting moment. I like this moment so much. It's a moment that really helps people to start developing their second story telling and to show how strong they are. There is another Rwandan proverb about

this: '*Akagabo gahimba akandi kataraza / wirukankana umugabo kera ukamumara ubwoba*'. It means something like, 'I remember when I was in the village, when there was a fight between two people, you had to show how strong you are before you fought.' In accordance with this proverb, most of the prescriptions that people make involve them showing the problem how they are strong. They would describe their strength, their skills. And these were not only individual skills, but their prescription would consist of a composite of power including the strengths and stories of their environment, friends, family.

There was something else that was significant. Something about naming and then developing their own prescription led to a different sort of determination to struggle, to take action, to fight. It was if they developed a dialogue with the problem and started to tell the problem, 'You know, I'm not sleeping, I'm starting to resist. I have to support my family'. It's hard to describe, but something about this process seemed to lead to a different impetus to take action. This seemed very important and, of course, is linked to narrative therapy.

The other strategy I use is to locate the problem in time and history. For instance, a person may be 40 years old and I can invite them to look at when this problem first came into their life. They locate it. If they say, 'In my twenties', then we can explore how it came into their life at that time, what was happening just before. Locating a problem in time can really help people to separate themselves from the problem. It becomes clearer that they were not born as a problem.

DD: Can you say a little more about the significance of proverbs and culturally resonant names for problems?

Chaste: Certainly! It's my favourite topic. I always use proverbs in my work. I remember a woman who came to see me after she had spent 10 years within psychiatric services. Her problem had been conceptualised as 'trauma'. I acknowledged that, yes, she had experienced trauma, but I said I couldn't understand enough about her life through that word. There is a proverb: '*Agahinda*

*k'inkoko kamenywa n'inkike yatoreyemo'* which says, 'It is only the person who lives the situation who can understand the story of that situation, and who can tell that story'.

And there is another proverb: *'Ijoro ribara uwariraye'* which says, 'Nobody can know the pain of another person; it's the person themselves who knows their pain, its characteristics, and how to name it'. These are Rwandan proverbs that I use in my work.

When I mentioned these proverbs to the women who came to see me, rather than describing her problem as 'trauma', she said, 'I have a permanent mourning from 1994 up to now'.

This was a very different naming and it meant we could take different action. She ended up writing a letter to Permanent Mourning. And the experience of writing this letter was extremely significant for her. It was chance to say, 'I'm tired of you. You have been living with me for so long and I'm tired of you. You are like a high mountain that I have climbed for so long'. This was the beginning of a change for her.

DD: Can you tell me more about the commemoration events? I imagine that during these events there are times you are having to respond to collective anguish.

Chaste: Yes, at times it's not easy. I have been part of national coordination team since 2004, and at times I have been at the national stadium receiving 200 people in distress at the same time, all crying. It's not easy. In that sort of setting, even for professionals, there is fear. I don't know if there is a school or university that can teach how to receive 200 people, all survivors of genocide, at the same time. Here in Rwanda, as professionals and as survivors, sometimes we have to find words and create tools that have never been published or written elsewhere. In these sorts of collective contexts we try to find ways that people can help each other. I remember one day during a commemoration event, that when somebody got in a crisis, after they had been supported, we found ways they could assist others.

I remember one person crying and visually re-experiencing the horrors of 1994, saying, 'See those are the killers ...'. And then a second person would say, 'Me too, I see them'. And then another, 'Me too, I saw them, but I know how to fight them [the visions]. Can you follow me ... I'll show you how ...'. It was a powerful moment for me. I saw how one survivor was able to support others in a crisis. He was not a professional but when he said, 'Me too, I saw them, and I can help you how to deal with it ...' it was fantastic to see how a person could help another person.

DD: It is fantastic. As you said, here in Rwanda, you have needed to invent ways of responding to extraordinary situations. Over time, I hope all these different practices can be documented and shared. Perhaps this interview can be a small step in that direction.

Chaste: Yes. We need to invent but these inventions are based on the evidence of our Rwandan traditions, context and language. I'm dreaming that one day soon we will have our own centre where pain and suffering will be named in Rwandan language and concepts, in ways that honour Rwandan culture.

DD: We're dreaming that with you, Chaste. Around us here in your office I can see all these folders and paintings of problems named in Kinyarwanda words and vividly drawn.

Chaste: Yes, these are externalised namings and images of local suffering. Time and again I notice that when people have a chance to name their problems in their own ways, and also when they get to depict this as an image, as a painting, it becomes easier to take action. No longer do people think they have a disorder that they have to live with for the rest of their life. Instead, they have a protagonist, a problem they have to struggle against, and this is something we can do together.

DD: Thank you so much, Chaste.



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