

My Turn

I Have Had to Learn To Live With Peace

How do you make a new life for yourself when you're consumed with the pain of your past?

BY ALEPHONSION DENG

IN 1989, WHEN GOVERNMENT TROOPS attacked my village in southern Sudan, my peaceful world fell apart. As a boy of 7 I ran barefoot and naked into the night and joined up with streams of other boys trying to escape death or slavery. We crossed a thousand miles of war-ravaged country without hope of sanctuary. Bullets replaced food, medicine, shelter and my loving parents. I lived on wild vegetables, ate mud from Mother Earth and drank urine from my own body.

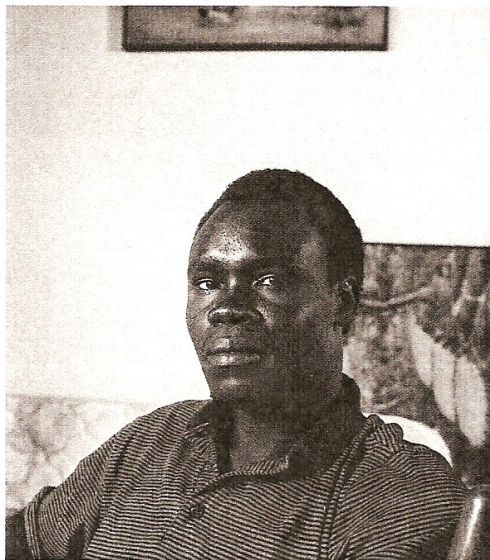
We walked for five years, occasionally finding shelter at a refugee camp, only to have to leave again when it was attacked by Sudanese soldiers. Finally we made it to a camp in Kenya, where I lived for nearly a decade on a half cup of cornmeal a day and went to school. After several interviews with workers from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, I was chosen, along with a few thousand other "lost boys," to go to the United States.

When I arrived here four years ago, I found that the skills I'd learned in order to survive in Sudan were useless. I knew how to catch a rabbit, challenge a hyena or climb a coconut palm, but I had never turned on a light, used a telephone or driven a car.

Luckily, the International Rescue Committee provided us with classes and mentors to teach us basics about computers, job interviews and Western social customs. Within a month I understood how to work most modern conveniences and started my first job as a courtesy clerk and stocker at a Ralph's grocery store in San Diego. Things like mangoes, chard and yams were familiar, but when customers asked about Cheerios, mayonnaise or Ajax, it was as though my years of learning English in the refugee camp were worthless.

Eventually I became acquainted with

most things in a modern grocery store, but I still faced a much greater challenge. I'd lived with war, but I still needed to learn to live with peace. At work people joked around and although they made attempts to be friendly, I couldn't understand or



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connect with much of what they said. It often felt as if their jokes were about me. When one woman said, "Al, you are hot!" I didn't know what it meant and assumed it wasn't good. I began to dread going to work, school or anywhere. Always the outsider who was ready to fight, I existed in a cloud of anger and depression.

It would take two more years for me to understand that these difficulties had little to do with language and cultural differences, and more with being caught up in conflict as a young boy. I could not forget the sound of guns or the cries of women and children dropping next to me like

leaves shaken off a tree in a storm. For so many years, the smell and taste of death had spread within me like poison.

I felt like I was dead when people around me laughed, and their smiles only made me feel more isolated and unhappy. I carried a weight as heavy as the earth. Anger boiled inside me and made me wonder if I was losing my mind. Sanity could not exist as long as I held onto the desire for vengeance against those who had taken my childhood. Trapped by my mental confusion, I blamed myself for what I was feeling, and lashed out at everyone around me.

Now I realize that the gigantic void created within me when I was young wasn't my fault. There was nothing I could have done. The emotions I held onto for so long only kept me from interacting with my new countrymen. I could not reach out in a friendly way or through humor because I lived in a fog of rage.

I'm finally making friends and adapting to my new country. When my friend Adam took me to a football game, the sound and smell of the halftime fireworks brought back bad memories and made me dizzy, but he understood and I managed to stay for the whole game. I drive a car, work as a medical-records clerk at Kaiser Hospital, attend college and even have a cell phone—a convenience I deeply appreciate. There was no way to call 911 years ago on that terrible walk.

I can't identify an exact turning point in my emotions, and I'm still struggling. However, I've found that speaking about my experiences at schools and community organizations and writing my memoir have helped. Sharing my feelings has lessened the burning inside me.

I do worry that when the American soldiers return from Iraq, even without cultural differences to deal with, they, too, will find that happiness in others can feel insensitive. At a time when they need it most, they may find it difficult to reconnect emotionally with their families and friends. Writer José Narosky said, "In war, there are no unwounded soldiers." I would add that there are no women, children or animals who escape unscathed.

Still, I know it is possible to move on. For all those years I lived with revenge on my mind. Now I'm a man with the seeds of love, dignity and hope in his heart.

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