

The Trumpet of Hope and Change

Boniface Odong

Abstract: In this narrative, I look back at how my life's circumstances impressed upon me the desire to work with and to plant seeds of hope and change in the lives of vulnerable children, youth and families. Despite being born and raised in a war-zone area that lasted over two decades, within me still lay an amplified, resilient sound of sharing and giving hope, belonging and love.

Keywords: war-zone, Uganda

Throughout my life and from my working experiences within different communities, I have come to believe that social work is my career destination. I am currently navigating my way toward becoming an accredited social worker from Radford University (RU).

I am Boniface Odong, age 27, and I was born in a family of ten children (six boys and four girls). I was fifth in that line. I was born a few days before the longest heated civil war began in the Gulu District, led by Joseph Kony's Lord Resistance Army in Northern Uganda. My father died while I was very young. Early on, my caring mother adopted eight more needy, little children and our number rose to eighteen official siblings. Additionally, she took in several others from struggling relatives. A few people thought that my mum owned a private kindergarten of sorts because of the number of children residing with us. She was a strong, loving, hard-working Christian woman, a wonderful mother and terrific role model at my young age.

For a brief period of my youth, life was rich with love and joy, even growing up in such a large family with only one parent. That joy was to be short-lived. My nurturing mum died suddenly, at which point my childhood changed forever. Some of my own greedy relatives confiscated my mum's properties – both the land and the house we were living in. The legal system failed us when we children tried to fight them. We lost everything we owned except the clothes on our backs. Life for us became brutally hard without a father or mother to support us. Our number had grown too big for my oldest brother to handle; our outlook for survival became dim.

I do not have enough words to describe our miserable existence being born just before and raised during a civil war, with all its atrocities. I will do my best, though, to describe our grim existence. We

lived in a rural area without electricity or running water. Because of the war, most schools were closed, hospitals abandoned, and the entire national infrastructure was totally collapsed. Knowing what the rebels would do to us if we were caught, we still walked miles and miles daily to fetch water, which we quickly used up. Every day that we struggled to survive mirrored Charles Darwin's "survival of the fittest."

Most nights, we slept on empty stomachs because we could not risk planting a garden due to fear of the rebels. We had no way to make money to buy local produce from the market. So many, many nights, we longed for any kind of food. Sometimes, during the right seasons, nature looked at our family with fond eyes and provided us with mangoes, jackfruits, sugarcane, and maize. Those were the cherished times of the year. There were days though that we would strip the mango trees even before the fruit was ripe. Although they tasted green, we consumed them, reminding me of the words of Solomon:

"To a hungry person what tastes bitter is sweet."

We wore the same shirts on our backs as long as we could fit into them. If they weren't reduced to rags, we handed them down to the next child with hopes that another would hand something to each of us. Sometimes we took a great risk and went to the well to wash what we wore and waited for it to dry. Usually our bare feet felt the heat of the burning sand or rocky terrain. Only if one was very lucky, could one manage to get cheap flip-flops. In our community, one commanded respect when he or she owned a pair of black shoes. It was the dream for each of us to one day own a pair of black shoes. Shoes would earn us status in the community. How strange to desire status when we were barely surviving!

Needless to say, the war greatly affected us children in

our year growing up. One morning when my twin brothers were playing with a grenade thrown by the rebels, it went off, blowing both of them up before my eyes. I lived in constant fear that I would be the next in line of death's tortuous grip. Despite the misery, I wanted to survive. A year later, my siblings began to move away from home because the conditions were so tough. Many sought refuge in alcoholism, prostitution, early marriage, and drug abuse. We barely had any basic necessities for life. We had been abandoned like a flagstaff on a mountaintop and were left to fend for ourselves. We lived at the mercy of friends and compassionate people in the village.

Though the war officially ended in August 2006, its effects still rage. Many people in this community are traumatized by starvation, homelessness, the unnatural death and murder of their family members, a narrow escape of death themselves, sexual abuse, family breakups, torture and a lack of medical care. Most do not function normally; they have been robbed of their purpose to live. This situation has given them a hopeless view on the way they see themselves, the situations they encounter and the expectations of the future. My community ranks among the worst in poverty, alcohol consumption, illiteracy, unemployment, depression, and early marriages. I did witness the masses living in camps and being helped by the various international agencies. This help brought hope to my people in Northern Uganda. However, during the economic recession, the community suffered a double castigation. Besides the effects of war, the economic recession led to more death because the relief organizations that were helping the people finally withdrew their help, when most donors stopped funding their services. This meant that the local people who were dependent on emergency services like food, water, and medical care, ultimately died of famine and disease.

During this period of war in Northern Uganda, no one ever said to me or my family about anything in the world called "counseling." It is strange, but the first time I used the word was years later in college in the United States. The closest thing to counseling that I had done was speaking to my siblings and the other children to "keep fighting, don't give up now. It's just another season that will one day come to an end; believe!" Yet I recall asking myself 'why.' I

had lived more than 20 years watching bullets fly over my head; hearing the screams of women and children as bombs exploded; existing in a community that buried its dead daily; watching the agony of people nursing freshly mutilated limbs and lips by machetes. After spending two years in America, I remained in awe by the tremendous difference between my people's existence and the rich living conditions of my adopted country – they were two worlds apart. I am still amazed by how the community in this country (US) responded to the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012. For over a month, the media covered the incident and talked about how traumatized the community was. It talked of the need of counseling and other interventions to help people deal with the horror of what had happened.

Despite the financial challenge I endured in Uganda during and after the war, a need within to help the children and the youths in my community began to brew. This excruciating story drew me closer to my Christian faith and shaped in me a love for others and an awareness of human suffering. Ever since those years, I have felt a deep obligation and responsibility to reach out and transform the lives and futures of young people. Sometimes when I had any possessions (like money), I would share it with those around me or even go with the young boys and girls to the shop to buy things to eat. This often made me feel satisfied and peaceful. Though we were in the same boiling pot, I dreamed of becoming an agent of change. However, I couldn't fathom how this was possible. I had been forced to drop out of high school and certainly didn't have the financial necessities to consider further education. The question of how I could help my own flesh and blood burned inside of me for a long time. My opportunity came when my older brother and sister sacrificed their education for me because they saw potential in me. Some family friends also saw something special and chose to help me. So how could I turn my burning desire to help others into a lucrative way to help support my surviving family? I now had the opportunity to continue my studies in Uganda, which had only been a dream before.

As I was struggling to figure out what to do, I recalled that as I was growing up, my family thought I had the call to become a priest. I knew that this would help me meet their spiritual needs. I dropped that aspiration and considered studying to become a medical doctor because in addition to helping the sick, I could earn

the money to help out my siblings. But I had been inconsistent with my education because of our circumstances. I also considered going into law to earn a good salary, but there just wasn't enough money for all the education I would need.

Once in was college, I questioned which discipline I would pursue if I wanted to be an agent of change in helping my family and my new community. I perused my numerous opportunities, but my heart was ultimately drawn to social work as the best option. Though I had lived with my mother for only a short period, she had instilled in me an empathetic, helping spirit. I had later been helped by many others with my tuition to study. I wanted to give back what I had been given. The problem came when I learned that social work was a field that does not pay well. I was trying to earn good money in my chosen profession to help my family back home. That was why I had considered becoming a doctor, lawyer or engineer. I was in internal turmoil. One evening, I recall being rebuked, challenged, and at the same time inspired by a thought in my mind.

It's not about the money, but the condition of the heart, that will make the difference in this world. You can have the money, but become just another statistic.

Those words hit me to my core, a chord in my spirit. Yet it seemed like my thought was not yet complete for it continued.

Consider men and women like Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and what about your own mother? How much did they have in their bank accounts? But they each left a footprint among the people with whom they lived...

I recall being speechless for a while. As I reflected and meditated upon those words, I became inspired to pursue social work while at college. This made me more curious to learn more about the profession. So I began taking courses in the field. I discovered that social work is a helping profession where social change is promoted, problem solving in human relationships is enhanced, and people are liberated and empowered to function to their best of their ability (self-actualization). My college professors influenced me with their obsession with the field.

Their zeal was contagious. I studied the profession not with the mentality of I-shall-save or I-know-all the answers, but to become a part of the process of change among the youth and children.

During our semester breaks, I decided to volunteer with a couple of organizations in my community. I volunteered with several organizations in order to make a difference such as The AIDS Support Organization (TASO), Health Integrated Development Organization (HIDO), Gulu Women Economic Development and Globalization (GWED-G), and later in the US with Urban Promise Ministries (a non-profit in Camden, New Jersey working with inner city children). I was involved with the following activities: community dialogues, debates, sensitization, drama, school outreaches, and focus group discussions with the different stakeholders in the community. I was filled with the desire to challenge some of the social injustices on behalf of the vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people. I discovered that many people were devalued or denigrated, thereby deprived of a voice on matters affecting their lives. This enabled many people to regenerate and revive their innate potential and resilience to control their lives. I do believe in the intrinsic worth of an individual in their environment.

Despite all the financial challenges I faced, I pushed for my higher goal of academic excellence and this I achieved when I was pronounced the best male student during my college graduation. I had been involved in several research projects within Uganda Christian University. As a Teaching Assistant (TA) at my undergraduate school, I held several dialogues and discussions with students and those in my community about the rewards of education. I shared with them my testimonies, and this encouraged many who were on the verge of dropping out, to persevere until they graduated. I was able to talk some of my siblings into returning to school, and by God's grace, two of them are now in college.

A friend who once visited my university through an exchange program encouraged me to apply for an internship with a non-profit organization in Camden, NJ. Luckily enough, I was granted the opportunity to work with the inner-city kids of Camden. While working with these disadvantaged youth, I discovered that one should possess a heart of love, empathy, resilience and a belief that they can succeed and above

all, be compassionate. I realized that to further tailor my career to the specialty of working with children, youth and families, a master's degree in social work would be the next pursuit. Fortunately, an opportunity opened up at Radford University in Virginia. I currently work and intern with the Substance Abuse and Violence Education Support (SAVES) under the RU Aware department, whose focus is on counseling and an education intervention program, for students who violate the university's alcohol and other drug policies.

Social work is challenging, yet rewarding, and fully packed with priceless moments. I recall while volunteering at TASO, I talked to a couple that had twins—one was HIV (Human Immune Virus) positive and the other was negative. This helped to challenge me that there are people outside who are still in need of help. I am honestly enthused by the skills and values used by social workers in approaching clients such as acceptance, a non-judgmental attitude and the positive belief in them. This would not be possible in a society that is characterized by stigmatization and discrimination, but social workers say, "I am here for you." While working, I developed the ability to work within a team and the relevancy of working in partnership with other agencies.

Through applying these values, principles and skills

in my voluntary roles, I have not only gained a great sense of job satisfaction, but have learned that they are vital to gaining respect and trust from clients. My ability to demonstrate patience, empathy and humility in such situations has further encouraged me that I am in the right profession. I am excited to be a social worker and to continue to grow and mature in my ever-expanding dream. I believe in embracing diversity; applying reasoning and logic to unfamiliar ideas, opinions and situations; effective communication; skill and competency in administration; acting with integrity and the involvement of multi-disciplinary approaches to achieve results.

Pursuing social work will bring me closer to my career goal of becoming an agent of change and hope, that through being part of the process of liberation and empowerment, especially to vulnerable children, youth and families. I believe there are successful places in this world that need to be occupied by the children and youth that have experienced indescribable difficulties as they find meaning, belonging, love, peace and the resilience to survive and thrive despite horrific odds.

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