



Video Story Transcript

That Place Within Untarnished

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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBlbsLtoSrA>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hi, I'm Laura Simms. In 1996, I was a facilitator at a UNICEF conference at the United Nations called Young Voices. There were 57 young people from 23 third world countries. They were there, actually, to create what later became a Children's Bill of Rights. My very first day, I met two young boys; thin, wearing cotton shorts and T-shirts, who came from Sierra Leone, West Africa. I literally went home because it was mid-November, was snowing, they had never been in cold weather, and gave them my winter coats. The interesting thing is, of course, that years passed and I got these two boys out of the war in Africa. One of them became my son and reminded me often that first year that he would never wear a women's winter coat again.

It was an amazing 10 days. And a lot of what happened during those 10 days was, these kids listening to each other's stories. And these boys were so gentle, so sweet that I had met outside of UNICEF that day, who wore my coats, wrapped up, they told horrendous stories of having been child soldiers. Learning to be murderers. Believing that these murderers would take revenge on the death of their parents, who they had both seen killed, including family members and friends. A terrible civil war occurred in Sierra Leone.

So many things about Ishmael. One is that Ishmael wrote an amazing memoir. The publishers thought, well, a few people will like this but actually it became a bestseller [A Long Way Gone](#). Twenty million copies sold. Everybody wanted to read this book. About a child's experience in war. And Ishmael and I were invited to give a talk together (which in those years we did a lot) at a journalism school and university. And then, we were on a panel and one of the other panelists was a woman from Rwanda. Let me back up a minute, because people were always asking me how could you do this? How could you have a child who has murdered be your child, live in your house? But I'm a storyteller and I've been meditating for over 25 years. And I really understood,

something I believed, that inside each of us there is a place that is untarnished by violence, untarnished by circumstances. And if we come back to that place, that's the place at which we can transform. And that, basically, everybody is good. And I knew from Ishmael, at least, that he'd had enough violence to last ten lifetimes. The last thing he wanted to do was to be engaged with any conflict at all. And he was peaceful. He grew up in a traditional storytelling culture.

The woman from Rwanda. After Ishmael and I spoke, she spoke and, of course, she spoke about stories. It was her job in Rwanda, after the terrible genocide, to listen to young people's stories. And she told a tale, true tale, that was harrowing but haunting. It was a story about a Tutsi boy who was caught in a horrible massacre. And his body along with the bodies of his family and all his neighbors were thrown into a ravine, assumed dead. And that night, he awoke under the bodies. Shocked. And made his way up out this sea...of misery and blood. He was a kid, so, what did he do? He wandered back to his house. He washed himself and he got under the sheets on his parents' bed and went to sleep. In the middle of the night, a man came in, set his machete down next to the bed. He washed. Also seeking comfort, he climbed into the bed. He hadn't seen the boy. But they both slept deeply and in the middle of the night seeking comfort, they rolled into each other's arms and slept in the safety of embrace.

She described how early in the morning, the boy told her, he woke up and he was face to face with the man who had killed his family. And at first he thought, "I should kill him." But he had enough violence and he had slept in that man's arms as if that man was his parent. So, he got up out of the bed and wandered out into the bush, where he was eventually found and saved.

Ishmael and I listened to the story. And seated in the lobby of our hotel that night, we talked about. How it had moved us both. And Ishmael said, "That's the place isn't it? That, that's that place. That untarnished place."

And I said, "Yes, it was really remarkable to hear the story. Most people would probably say that boy should have killed that man."

And Ishmael said, "No. If he had killed the man. He would have been a murderer as well."

Those years, every so often, Ishmael and I would talk about that story. And then one morning, he got up, and knocked on my bedroom door. And he said, "It's still there. It's still there."

And I said, "What? What is still there?"

And he said, "I know we heard that story. I know we were talking about this but I thought that place inside of me was gone. That the war had taken it away. So, but I woke up, I felt it. I felt the joy. It's still there. That place is still there."

I understood. He would more than survive. Which he did, going on to write the book To Marry As A Child. And for me it changed everything. I understood the goal of my story telling. That place where, regardless of race, of violence, of learned habits, of bias. That place exists in all of us. And sometimes, I weep for the world. But knowing that I can do something about it completely cheers me up.

The untarnished place. That's true.