

Wednesday July 4th

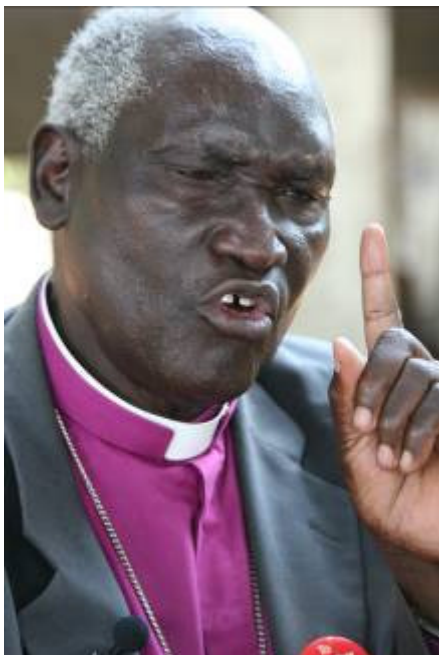
At 1 a.m., I awoke to the sound of a subdued, uniform hum and it took me a couple of minutes to figure out it was rain. No wind, no thunder, just a quiet, even drone that soon lulled me back to sleep.

It rained all night and continued through the morning, which only encouraged us to sleep a little later than usual. After breakfast, which never seems to vary, we drove to the Internet cafe to send another report and some personal mail. Apart from a few phone calls from our partners, it's the only thing that helps bridge the 10,000 miles from home.

While we were in the core area, Oketta took us on a tour of a nearby market which was crammed with every commodity grown in the region, ranging from cabbage and cassava to ocre and eggplant. Inside the door of a butcher shop, a man was using a machette to hack a beef carcass into various cuts. Two severed cow's legs, the hair and hooves still on them, stood upright, right in front of the shop. At a shop run by Oketta's wife, Betty, I bought a small, kerosene hurricane lamp. We also paid a short visit to a shop run by Benson Oyot, Gladys' brother and our Guest House host, where I got us some red plum jam.



We began our work day at the home of Bishop Macleord Baker Ochola, the Anglican clergyman who has worked unwaveringly for peace since the start of the war. Andrew and I interviewed him while Tim and Dave went to see a house and a specially-designed latrine built by the Mennonite Central Committee a few years ago when Dave was part of MCC.



During our discussion with the Bishop, our focus was on his personal loss and how it affected his life and work. In 1987, he and his wife, Winnifred, took two of their children to Canada where he was studying theology. Their other children stayed behind with their grandmother in Gulu where they were going to school, including the eldest daughter, Joy Adong — a name that was to take on a bitter irony

During a raid by Lord's Resistance Army the teenager was taken by force and brutally gang-raped then left for dead. She survived but, distraught and without the comfort and support of her parents, Joy killed herself, four days before her nineteenth birthday. As it happened, the Bishop and Winnifred flew home just after

and knew nothing of the tragedy until met at the airport by their remaining children. The news came as a crushing blow to the Bishop who had routinely counselled others devastated by the rebels. Worst of all, he was haunted by the possibility Joy may've lived if only he'd been home to help.



Still, he carried on and time slowly began to blunt the pain that stabbed at his heart. One night, a decade after Joy's suicide, the Bishop had a dream. In it, his uncle had died but, as the clergyman peered into the coffin, he saw the face of his wife, Winnifred. The next day, Friday, she was driving home after visiting people in the village when her car struck a landmine planted by the L.R.A. The explosion ripped open the entire left side of the vehicle, killing Winnifred and two

other passengers and leaving the driver badly injured.

"I felt like a tree split in two by lightning," the Bishop told us. The shock and loss seemed unbearable but the grieving husband resolved to dedicate the rest of his life to building peace, a commitment he's kept faithfully, at great personal risk. Whether meeting the rebels in the bush or pressing the government to pursue a negotiated settlement, the Bishop has been a powerful symbol of love and forgiveness for more than 20 years.

With a deep sense of acceptance and serenity, the Bishop showed us the torn, cannibalized car in which Winnifred died so senselessly, then we went with him as he visited her grave with its plain, concrete cross. It's easy to see why his people place so much confidence and credibility in the Bishop.



Lunch was at the Small World restaurant where owner William Okwero served us another fine Acholi meal as we sat on a closed in porch covered with a tin roof. Midway through the meal, the heavens opened and a torrential, tropical downpour soaked the entire area while most people took refuge in shops and covered market stalls. According to Oketta, Acholi tradition says rain comes when you have visitors who are on a mission, and that you grow tall if you dance in the rain.

In a discussion about names and their significance, we learned that Andrew wasn't the only one with an Acholi equivalent (Andrea... An-DREY-uh.) Tim's is Temceo (Tem-SAY-oh) and mine is Okal (Oh-CAL), which — like my real name, Eric, means "noble."

Dave received a name from Acholi friends years ago, Owot (Oh-WAUT) – a man who travels from place to place.



After lunch, we had an appointment with the support group for former child soldiers that's run by Oketta's church. A good size crowd was waiting for us as we walked into the same room in which worship had been held on Sunday. The assembly sang two welcome songs for us, introductions were made, then we heard from eight people the group had selected to speak to us.

After the guarded, sanitized presentation we got from two similar groups yesterday, I wasn't expecting much in terms of candid detail. I couldn't have been more wrong. As it turned out, this session was not for the faint of heart. In fact, as I heard each story, I thought to myself, "It can't get any worse than that!" only to find that every successive tale of horror and brutality went beyond the one before.

Leading off was the support group Chairman, Isaac Ominy (Oh-MOIN). His name means "laughter" but there was nothing the least bit happy in his story. Abducted in 1998 at age 21, he spent seven years in the bush, eventually working his way up to the rank of Sgt. Major. At the start of his testimony, he calmly admitted he was initiated into the L.R.A. with the killing of a 17-year-old boy who had escaped and been recaptured. Shortly after, he was forced to kill a 14-year-old boy that rebel commanders accused of being a witch.

There were many other killings, but nothing could've prepared him for a raid in 2000 during which the rebels surrounded a village of more than 500 people and slaughtered them all. He told us there were so many men, women and children to kill that he had to sit and rest between waves of carnage. Even now, he has nightmares and flashbacks in which he can't escape the faces of his victims.



There were more killings to come. But one day, for reasons he wasn't sure about, he refused to murder a captive his commanders wanted killed, despite threats of a severe

beating. In subsequent battles, he was wounded twice, in the arm and the leg. The second was so severe his rebel comrades left him behind. But the determined young man dragged himself to a roadside where he was found by some villagers. What he didn't know was that, soon after he was discovered, the people decided to poison him because rebels had attacked them shortly before. Incredibly, the man Ominy had spared in the bush was among those villagers and tipped him off, foiling the plan long enough for the Army to arrive and rescue him.

Next to speak was Charles Olara (Oh-LAR-ah) who spent more than three years with the L.R.A. after being kidnapped at age 15 in 2001. To harden him up, the rebels cut the heads and legs off some hens, dipped the birds briefly in hot water, then made Charles and his fellow recruits eat the fowl — feathers, blood and all — with the instruction that anyone who vomited would be killed. He survived.

When a boy tried to escape, Charles and some others were forced to beat him to death, but that was just the beginning. He was also a witness when three women and a man were bludgeoned to death by other rebels who then insisted he scoop up some of the brain matter from each victim and eat it, and lick the blood flowing from their crushed heads.

Once he was considered a full soldier, Charles was placed in charge of a woman with a four-day-old baby and three other children who were being forcibly marched through the cold and rain. Unprotected from the elements, the baby cried all the time and Charles' commander warned that, if he didn't silence the child, he and all the captives would be killed. "I took the child and threw it away, to safeguard my life," he told us. Having proven his loyalty to the rebels, he was also told to murder 17 school children captured in a raid. He tied each of them to a tree, upside down, and shot them one-by-one. But even that was not the worst.



As the tall, thin man with expressive hands related the next horrific story, our translator, William Oketta, choked up and broke down completely when he tried to relay what he had heard. The emotion was so strong and sustained that one of the former child soldiers said we needed to pray. When nobody could, or wanted to, I tried my best, asking that we would all receive God's peace, comfort, forgiveness and transformation. After the prayer, another man went to translate but Oketta

interrupted him and insisted on finishing.

In July 2002, Charles and a huge contingent of rebels surrounded a village of 600. L.R.A. leader Joseph Kony ordered that every living thing be destroyed, including plants and animals. The troops systematically moved through the settlement, herding families and animals into grass-covered huts which were set on fire. Hundreds were burned alive and those who tried to escape were shot or clubbed to death at the entrance of each death-trap. Though there was no emotion as the young man told his story, he confided later that he still sees the faces of his victims in the night.



For 18-year-old Stella Achan (Ah-CHAWN), the nightmares have finally stopped, but her ordeal is far from over. She was just 14 when snatched from her home. Like other rebel recruits, she was forced to kill some prisoners who tried to escape, but what sets her apart is the ease with which she was able to slaughter the innocent. At one point she was given eight captives to murder. She hacked them all to death, saving one victim for special treatment. On orders from her commander, she heated the machette

red-hot then used it to carve a cross in the back of the last victim, not as a symbol of Jesus or the church, but as a symbol of her loyalty to the L.R.A.

During another murder, she decapitated a man and was made to eat near the corpse then lick blood from his body. This prompted an entire killing spree during which she felt no remorse, but she hated life with the rebels and finally found a chance to escape. When Stella found her way home, she was welcomed joyfully by her family.

Not long after her return, she and her brother were cutting cassava in the family garden. Her brother grew tired. "Do you want to rest?" she asked. When he said yes, she attacked him with her machette, killed him and cut his body into pieces before fleeing from the family. When I asked why she had murdered her own brother, she told me it was reflex: L.R.A. abductees made to carry impossibly heavy loads who begin to complain are routinely offered a choice. They're asked, "Will you continue, or do you want to rest?" Those who choose the latter go to their eternal rest. And so it was with her brother.



With nowhere else to go, the young woman fled back to the bush and found the rebels she had deserted, telling them she'd only been away for a visit. They took her back, but things were not the same. When commnded to kill a captive, she took him into the bush, cut him just enough to draw blood and had him make a loud cry. Stella then dipped her machette in his relatively minor wound, let him go, and went back to her commanders who assumed her smeared weapon told only one story. She escaped soon after. Amazingly, he family was able to forgive her when she accepted responsibility for her brother's murder and nderwent counselling.

Today, Stella says she no longer has violent urges, because of prayer and counselling. She's back in school and dreams of being a nurse, anxious to help others after bringing many so much harm.



The five other testimonies were somewhat less horrific but no less disturbing.

*** A teenage boy named Justine Okot (Oh-COT) was part of a pack of recruits made to bite a man to death (the rebel commanders kept checking their teeth for blood, to ensure no one was holding back);

*** Susan Lokot (Lo-COT), kidnapped at 14, told us of being given to a rebel commander as a sex slave, ending her youthful hopes and dreams (when describing her escape, she broke down and wept as the memories flooded back);



*** Anna Achiro (A-CHEER-oh) talked about being abducted by her own brother who'd been kidnapped before her, and how — after killing a man — she and her comrades were made to cut him open, ate his liver, and tie pieces of his intestines around their heads and necks as a reminder of what would happen to them if they tried to escape; and

*** Alex Obina (Oh-BEEN-ah) described how the L.R.A. killed his father then grabbed him the next day as he was fleeing to Gulu to escape the rebels. Just 18, he was severely beaten, his back scarred by machettes taken right from the fire.

What tied all these stories together was not just the senseless cruelty, the wasted years and the grim resignation that nothing could bring back lost time and opportunity, but also the almost unanimous conviction that the rebels should all be forgiven and welcomed home, right down to Joseph Kony himself. They agreed that killing the L.R.A. leaders would accomplish nothing except to threaten the burgeoning peace.

They also supported the concept of traditional justice, complete with an acceptance of responsibility and compensation for victims., and they endorsed the need for more resources to help them rebuild their lives. Having already experienced forgiveness themselves, they passionately believed it should be extended to others who sincerely embrace the Acholi way of justice with its emphasis on repentance instead of punishment. Tellingly, nobody we asked wanted to live near any rebel leaders who might accept the offer of reconciliation.

After giving out a soccer ball, basketball and frisbee — small gifts that got a very big response — we poured ourselves into the Padjero and drove off, drained and numbed by the chronicle of abject cruelty we'd just heard. Aside from marveling at the complete difference in response from yesterday, there wasn't much to say. We felt depleted as we drove to supper at the home of Bishop Ochola.

By the time everyone else arrived, there were about ten of us eating with his extended family. The other guests included Gladys and two of her teachers, and some women who work for UNICEF and other non-government agencies. Over another traditional Acholi meal — this one including matoke (ma-TOKE-ee), starch-laden cooking bananas — we shared some things about our emotionally draining day and got our minds off what we'd heard by talking to the other guests.

Well, we wanted honesty. Today we got it. I still don't have a clue how all of this will eventually tie together, but — however it does — it will be unflinchingly honest, even if it's not the message so many at home are expecting to hear. Something else I know is that tomorrow will offer little respite. We're going to visit John Ochola whose encounter with the rebels cost him his nose, lip, ears and hands.