

## **And Still Peace Did Not Come: A Memoir of Reconciliation**

*And Still Peace Did Not Come: A Memoir of Reconciliation*

Agnes Fallah Kamara-Umunna and Emily Holland

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What can you do for a child whose youth has been destroyed by war? This stark question is a very real and critical daily challenge for those who have lived through conflict. Children who were victims of war or who fought as child soldiers belong to families and also, collectively, can hold the peace in their hands. When the war ends, young people who have been shaped and misshaped by violence and fear not only need food and shelter, they need a practical means to repair some of the damage done.

We know that the future health of a nation rests with its youth; however, in war-torn countries there is a tragic recognition that war produces “lost” or “forgotten” generations of the young. The question, therefore, becomes what can be done for those who are already lost? And whose hands may make the difference between war and peace? This is a journey and dilemma so brilliantly described in Agnes Fallah Kamara-Umunna and Emily Holland’s *And Still Peace Did Not Come: A Memoir of Reconciliation*. It is, in part, the autobiography of Agnes as she grows up in peacetime, the daughter of a physician and away from the war, and how her world is transformed by what she sees on her return to Liberia in the midst of civil war. She is shaped by what happens, or nearly happens, to her one night in Monrovia, and by her post war job as a radio talk show host that forces her to connect with the lives of the children left behind by the war, living in and from the city’s rubble.

Agnes’ own story, however, serves largely as a means to revisit the horrors of the Liberian civil war and the lives of so many children who were on the front lines of the national nightmare. Her narrative is interspersed with stories of what happened to a handful of those children—mostly child soldiers told in their own unvarnished, harrowing words. Compared to the children profiled in the book, Agnes’ war has been an easy one, despite the changes made to her world. Throughout her narrative, she never loses sight of this central truth.

As a fledgling UN radio host, Agnes finds herself at the very front edge of Liberia’s efforts

to come to terms with what has happened during the war as she learns her trade and finds her voice on a talk show about reconciliation. On the show, she hears every day from the victims of violence but rarely from the perpetrators. She is struck by the rage that her callers direct against the former young fighters who were part of the war, particularly as she comes to know some of these children personally. She concludes that their stories, too, have a place in the effort toward national healing.

Agnes learns the stories for herself of these young people and how they were often forced into the war against their will and brainwashed by adult commanders into committing atrocities. Gradually, she begins to form the conviction that these children are victims themselves and require help if the nation is going to heal. Gradually, she gives more and more of her time, her money, and her life to a small group of former combatants. Agnes does as much as she can to help them with food, shelter, and a measure of tough love. She creates the “Straight from the Heart” community center that provides a focus for some small number of young lives, while struggling for funding. For every success, there are more failures and, in many ways, her efforts are just a pebble in the ocean.

While the book is compelling, the story is not unique to Agnes. Throughout Liberia, women and men are daily trying to help youth and keep them on the right path. As lawyers and politicians argue who if anyone should be prosecuted for crimes during the war, communities throughout the country have been largely left to their own ways to live with one another, trying to fill the ocean one pebble at a time.

There is a tendency among some to try to move past the memories contained in such books of this genre. While they are seen as true and honest, they are also viewed as backward looking rather than focusing on what is more positive and what can be done for the future. Liberia’s economic recovery has certainly been rapid if judged by the debt reduction, construction, and the number of foreign concessions granted. However, Liberia’s recent elections have shown vividly, unhealed wounds remain close to the surface just nine short years after the fighting ended. The country has made it through the elections, but the anger of unemployed youth remains for politicians to represent and sometimes misuse, so much so that the two post-election priorities are national reconciliation and youth employment.

The book also discusses the efforts of Liberia’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Agnes’ efforts when she moved to New York to work with the equally divided Liberian

community. She discovers and chronicles in New York another story of conflict, which is that the further one moves from a country; the harder it is to bring diaspora communities together.

Perhaps the biggest challenge she points to, however, is the failure of the Truth and Reconciliation process. Despite the passage of nine years, reconciliation is still seen as a needed national priority, yet the country does not seem that much closer to agreeing what this means. No Liberian has been prosecuted in the country and only Charles Taylor and his son have been prosecuted abroad. Approximately 250,000 people are thought to have died in the Liberian Civil War out of a population no larger than 3,000,000. If the same proportion died in the United States, we would be discussing ways to manage the aftermath of 25 million deaths. Agnes' book is strongest when she is describing the impact of the war on survivors, particularly child soldiers and girls, and the impact of the war on individuals. Without understanding the world through the eyes of those most affected, any large-scale efforts at reconciliation and reintegration will likely fail.

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