

By Victoria Trabosh

Lessons from Rwanda

Renewing our faith in accomplishing the extraordinary

Miracles show up in the most ordinary of circumstances. In the smallest of ways we can see the greatness in others and ourselves. I believe that to declare the desire to coach, to make a difference in the world, first requires us to make a difference in our own lives. We must know without a doubt that the coaching we give or receive creates something both extraordinary and unique.

It is that belief that took me to Rwanda. I learned there that the small miracles of coaching can happen in the most unlikely of places, and that we can all renew our faith in the extraordinary things we can accomplish in our coaching practices by choosing to step into who we are.

“From the greatest of loss comes the greatest chance to make a difference.”

In 2005, I was working very successfully as an executive coach in the United States with people who looked a lot like me – middle-aged, successful, striving for more, white – with no thought that I was missing any opportunity.

That all changed when a past boss of mine asked me to go to Rwanda – where I could make a difference working with the poorest of women in the area of micro-finance.

I was interested. I was intrigued. I was ignorant. I read about the horrors of genocide in 1994 that killed over a million people in 100 days. About a world that turned its back on this country – calling it an “African problem” versus a human rights violation. And I knew I would learn more about the world and human nature in this short 12-day visit than I had learned in any previous trip abroad.

What I found changed my life forever. Nothing I had ever accomplished had ever had a greater impact on me than discovering the human spirit in Rwanda’s people, from the materially poorest of its survivors to the leaders of the coun-

try. To know them is to truly understand the meaning of hope.

If you’ve lost someone you deeply love through death, you know sadness. Can you imagine losing your entire family? Watching hundreds of people you knew die as they were executed in front of you: the machetes, clubs, rapes; the most senseless of deaths in the slowest and most painful of ways? I have seen the memorials, the mass graves, the grief,



and I still cannot imagine what it would be like personally. And then can you imagine going on? Knowing your life has not ended, although it will never be the same.

From the greatest of loss comes the greatest chance to make a difference. From my perspective, coaching in Rwanda created extraordinary results, even in the smallest of ways, both for me and for those I had the privilege to coach.

Being a coach means we go to the place where the client needs our skills. There are times when we are woefully unprepared, or so we think. But to know that you are called to a moment in time – to step into it, to get out of your own way – will change the person you coach, will change you, and will forever change the world.

In Rwanda, I faced the feeling that I was unprepared to handle the coaching issues of people who had witnessed horror and experienced the greatest of losses. What I discovered was this: while continually processing their loss separately from their daily existence, the Rwandans desired the same things as you and me: to stay motivated, to see ourselves as who we truly are, to succeed in business, live with integri-



Victoria Trabosh with some of the friends she made in Rwanda.

ty, remove self-imposed barriers to success, focus on what is possible, learn from mistakes, dream bigger, find joy, find love, raise successful children, forgive (to name a few). To address those desires is to coach.

There are many people who are suffering post-traumatic stress in Rwanda, 14 years after the genocide. In spite of their challenges, they want success, both personally and professionally. Whether from a woman who seeks a micro loan of \$50, or from a country leader who believes in the greater future, the coaching requests were the same: how can I be my personal best? How can I remove the barriers to my success? How can I take the best and leave the rest?

The man with no dreams

I coached a number of people in an NGO (non governmental organization) in Rwanda. I had 20 people who wanted to meet with me – more than I could ever handle in a day. I held 30-minute laser coaching meetings with each one. The meetings were enlightening for the client and inspiring for me. At the end of the day I had only 10 minutes left for the last young man who wished to speak with me. He arrived with no translator and spoke in quiet English. I asked him

what his dreams were. He said, “I have none.” “Why?” I asked. “When I was 10 years old I watched them cut off my mother’s head with a machete. I think of her every day and I miss her so much.”

Who was I to coach this young man? And then, in this small moment, the extraordinary occurred. Who I was became enough. I told him I too had lost both of my parents. And I too missed them every day. And he could honor his mother more by his action than his grief. I said that if he chose to live his life to honor his mother he would be giving her a great gift, and while I didn’t know how heaven worked (he was a Christian), if his mother could see him through the windows of heaven and saw that he lived his life to honor her, no mother in heaven would be prouder of a son.

That’s all I had. And then I left.

When I returned to Rwanda a few months later, I met the young man who watched over this orphan. He said, “Vicky, I meant to write to you about some of your coaching! You know that young boy you coached who had no dreams? I don’t know what you said to him, but he changed the next day after you coached him! He decided to go and finish his col-

lege degree and make plans. He kept repeating something you said!”

And I knew. I said, “Is it that he will honor his mother more by his action than his grief?” And he said, “That’s it!” (Footnote: I just heard that this young man did complete his education and received his college degree.)

A small miracle. Extraordinary by my standards. Not grief counseling, not psychoanalysis. Just what I know is true as a coach.

And that is what we can bring to the world. Ourselves. Working passionately in places and with people we love. Not underestimating them, or ourselves. Not believing they’re not ready or that we’re not equipped.

Human nature is not different outside of our country. Love is as passionate, grief as numbing and

“Human nature is not different outside our country.”

paralyzing, victory as sweet, self-awareness as life changing – and dreams as extraordinary.

Believe that coaching truly will allow you to create greatness in the world. Believe it for yourself and believe it for others – whether they look just like you, or whether they don’t. The world will be greater because you cared enough to try. •

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