

BELINDA BAUMAN

FOREWORD BY CHRISTINE CAINE

BRAVE

SOULS

**EXPERIENCING
THE
AUDACIOUS**

**POWER OF
EMPATHY**

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BEAUTIFUL COLLISION

*You who suffer because you love, love still
more. To die of love, is to live by it.*

VICTOR HUGO

I learned about love from a woman named Hope.

Esperance is the French word for “hope,” and her sisters risked journeying for days by bus, by motorcycle, and by foot to tell their stories in rebel-occupied Congo. There we sat next to them, women listening to women, to their stories of life in the midst of war. We sat for hours hearing the histories of those who had witnessed the deaths of their husbands or children, or both. Women who had survived brutal rape, torture, and other violence, their pain compounded by rejection from those they loved.

I use the term *survivor* rather than victim for this reason: yes, they were victims of corruption, of systematic violence, of a soul-stealing culture of rape that had grown up in the weeds of war, but they were not helpless, not voiceless. They were survivors. And with every story, I wondered if I could ever be half as strong as they were.

I remember thinking, *this is Esperance's reality—her world*. When I met her, my eyes took in only the obvious: Her orange shirt stained with work. Her pink and blue tie-dyed skirt wrapped around her thin waist. Her white head scarf with a gray bow. Her neon-green flip-flops with white daisies. Her high cheekbones framing her deep-set eyes. Her lips pulled tight as she planted her feet, calloused like the roots of a tree. She was the first of eleven women to speak that day. Eyes downcast, she dutifully told us her name, her age, and the number of children under her care.

She had beautiful hands, although I doubt she thought so. They were dry and rough from hard work, her long fingers elegant, intertwined obediently in front of her as she spoke.

She was fifty. I was forty-five.

She had four children. I had two.

She was a widow. I had no idea what that felt like.

She and I were alike. Yet she and I were so very different.

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I don't recall breathing as she unfolded her story like a new garment, turning back the corners of each sentence in the light that filtered through that old cinderblock church. She and her husband had set out to find cooking wood. “It must be done,” she said, “even though it's dangerous.” Husband and wife met militia soldiers in the bush. Each man carried a machete tucked inside his fatigues, next to their gun. She heard them before she saw them, the click of metal against metal. But there was nowhere to hide.

For a moment, I looked away as she spoke. I was uncomfortable and anxious. I felt cowardly and disrespectful. Taking a breath, I looked at her feet, her hands, and finally her face. She had tears in her eyes. And so did I.

Esperance continued. In a nearby clearing, the soldiers bound her hands. When her husband resisted, she instinctively threw them, still bound, over her head, the universal sign of surrender. She knew all too well what the soldiers would do to anyone who resisted.

First they shot her husband. Then they flung their fists at her. She was thrown to the ground, stripped of her clothes, and raped. Again and again. Hours later, they left her in the forest, where she remained for three days—torn, bleeding, unable to walk.

As she spoke, she looked at her hands. Her thumbs stroked her thin wrists nervously.

Eventually she had been found by her “sisters.” At the hospital, she struggled through a month-long treatment for pregnancy, HIV, and STDs. The rape she’d endured was so violent, so destructive, she said she was “not whole” and could never be fully repaired, even with surgery.

Esperance explained she would have despaired if it were not for pastors who sent Mama Odele, a trusted caregiver from the church, to her. Pointing to Odele, sitting in our listening circle, Esperance told us how she co-led a trauma recovery program with other volunteer counselors trained and supported by World Relief.

These gentle, heroic women had cleaned Esperance, clothed her, and taken her to the hospital for treatment. When she returned home, they visited her, brought her children food, and helped her find work. Nine months later, these were the women who stayed with her through a complex maze of tears and pain as she gave birth to a baby boy. She finished her story by saying their kindness had brought her back to life. The room was silent as she ended. A holy silence.

TURNING A BLIND EYE

Esperance lives in a country full of beauty, rich with natural resources and an ancient, regal people. The Democratic Republic of Congo, or DRC, should be a tourist paradise with its lakes, volcanoes, and mighty silverback gorillas in the vast Virunga National Park. But the tourists do not come, because Congo is full of conflict. At that time, a woman as young as three and as old as seventy-three could suffer violence as often as every sixty seconds.

When Lynne Hybels and I first started traveling together to the Democratic Republic of Congo to understand the reasons for the violence and conflict in region, we found that most of the Western world was turning a blind eye to the problem. Many in our circles had never heard of the war that Esperance lived through every day. These words about the DRC from a CNN report stole my breath when I first read them:

The wars in this country have claimed nearly the same number of lives as having a 9/11 every single day for 360 days, the genocide that struck Rwanda in 1994, the ethnic cleansing that overwhelmed Bosnia in the mid-1990s, the genocide that took place in Darfur, the number of people killed in the great tsunami that struck Asia in 2004, and the number of people who died in Hiroshima and Nagasaki—all combined and then doubled.

Yet we rarely heard anything about it. Could it be that pain like this was just too much?

Esperance's words pierced my soul and left me undone. The ground we tread together felt hallowed. Was her experience heart-crushing? Absolutely. Unjust? Completely. But it wasn't her pain that ambushed me. It was her response to her suffering. Her story—her life—wasn't characterized by the version of love I was trying

to live out in my life. Her love was far greater. It was audacious yet sacred, gentle yet fierce, and entirely brave.

I've been obsessed with it ever since.

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LOVE, ACTUALLY

In a café on Fifty-Second Street in New York City, in the fall of 1939, W. H. Auden penned a poem that included one of his most stunning lines in just seven words: “We must love one another or die.” There was plenty to fear that year. Germany had invaded Poland, marking the beginning of World War II with its six years of devastation costing more than sixty million lives. Critics say Auden both loved and hated his poem for a simple reason: his words proved to be true.

With so much pain in our world—personal, global, political, philosophical, and theological—I resonate with Auden. Violence against women had been too much for me to bear, but Esperance gave me a glimpse of hope in one of the most difficult places on the planet. If she could love in the face of so much pain, maybe there is hope for the rest of the world too.

Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13). This kind of love is holy and set apart, the kind that knows fully, that cares deeply, and that is willing to do something despite the cost. But this kind of love is hard to find. When was the last time you were caught off-guard by an unselfish act? Moved to tears by someone’s pain? Amazed by the bravery of someone willing to sacrifice for the greater good?

Is it too much to envision this kind of love in our world today? Love in a sea of refugees? Love that convinces people black lives really do matter? Love for a child who feels different inside than he is on the outside? Love for the person who offended you? Love that knows when to speak and when to act? Love thick and resilient enough to silence disagreement, argument, judgment? Love strong enough to hold back a war and soft enough to open a way for peace?

Even as we've become more connected virtually, we've grown more isolated and distant from each other. More than sixty million Americans—a full 20 percent of the United States—suffer from what sociologists call chronic loneliness. As Mother Teresa said, “The biggest disease today is not leprosy or cancer or tuberculosis, but rather the feeling of being unwanted, uncared for, and deserted by everybody.”

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MOTHER TERESA

Had I forgotten how to love—*really love*? It was too easy for me to imagine my enemy as “them” or “those,” or anyone against me or different from me, whether across the world, the political aisle, the street, the row of cubicles, or the hallway at church or home. As journalist Susan Faludi aptly wrote, “When the enemy has no face, society will invent one.”

For me, it's far too easy to cave in to the lesser angels of my nature, to draw lines, to define who I am by who I am not, unknowingly drinking in complacency as if it were medicine. For me, fear swells. And when I become afraid, everything inside seems

to stop. Maybe I justify my caving-in by saying I can't hear. Or maybe I'm too overwhelmed to understand. Or maybe I become too busy to care.

When I stop caring, I stop loving. And when I stop loving, I stop doing. I trade in the messy for the quaint, the gutsy for the tame, the authentic for the fallacious. I give in to pampering. I rationalize apathy. I settle for less. And sadly, I become less.

Something began to gnaw at my soul after I met Esperance. On that holy ground in dusty Rutchuru, she trusted others with her story. And her sisters trusted her with theirs. She knew their stories enough to retell them with their pain, as if they had happened to her. And her sisters could do the same. Those marginalized, vulnerable women regularly laid down their stories for the sake of their sisters.

I wondered, *Have I ever trusted someone like that? Have I ever been trusted to such a degree?*

For the first time in my life, I had serious questions about love and its relationship to faith. My beautiful collision with Esperance left me asking, *What is love, actually?*

THE GOLDEN ROADBLOCK

The law of reciprocity is found in almost every culture. It showed up in ancient oral history as early as 1800 BC. Buddhism teaches, "Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful." Confucianism teaches, "What I do not wish men to do to me, I also wish not to do to men." Hinduism teaches, "This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you." From Islam to the Incas, "do unto others" is a part of each culture's moral code. Even the teachings of Satanism directly state that "to willfully and unjustly encroach upon the freedoms of another is to forgo your own."

Our Christian version of the Golden Rule goes something like this: “Do unto others what you would have them do unto you.” It’s first mentioned in the book of Leviticus: “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself.” (Leviticus 19:18). In the New Testament, Jesus said, “In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12). The apostle Paul alluded to the Golden Rule in his letter to the Romans (see Romans 2:1-3).

The Golden Rule is astounding because it’s found in every culture and throughout history. I find it miraculous. I find it encouraging. But only to a point. What happens when the logic in the Golden Rule breaks down? “Do unto others what you would have them do unto you” assumes a shared view of what is best. What if what *you* want is *not* what *I* want?

We often try to understand another person through our own experiences. Have you ever shared a vulnerable moment with someone who replied with something like “I know exactly how you feel. I went through something similar.” Did you feel heard? Chances are that reply didn’t quite hit the mark, leaving you feeling disconnected and less than understood.

When our listening begins from the point of self—our culture, our socioeconomic status, our privileges or hindrances—we’re forced to camp out there for the entire conversation. We aren’t really relating to someone else. As well intended as we may be, we are relating only to our own experiences. In Stephen Chbosky’s 1999 novel, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, a character says, “We accept the love we think we deserve.” Hearing others the way you want to be heard means hearing them as if they are you, which they most assuredly are not.

What if the Golden Rule was never meant to be the ultimate standard for social ethics? What if, instead, it was meant to be a common denominator, something everyone could strive for, no matter their background, geography, or faith? In other words, what if the Golden Rule is only a baseline ethic or, at best, a penultimate ethic. It might make more sense to see it through a reverse lens: Don't do anything to another person that you don't want done to you.

You may be thinking, *Still, better a world with the Golden Rule than a world without it, right?* It certainly has the potential to make the world more decent. It is a better way to live than with enmity or exclusion. But it is limited—actually, by *us*. How well is the Golden Rule really working for us?

I can't escape an important niggling question: Aren't we supposed to expect more than mutual backscratching, quid pro quo, and tit for tat? To be "done unto" is something every human should expect in their experience. It seems to be the low bar, the on ramp, the low-hanging fruit. Why then do we treat it as something we should *aspire* to when it is merely expected? If the Golden Rule is our aspiration, what the heck is the point of the gospel?

If the Golden Rule is our aspiration, what the heck is the point of the gospel?

MORE THAN GOLDEN

When Jesus said, "A new command I give you. . . . As I have loved you, so you must love one another," what did he mean (John 13:34)? Was he giving an entirely *new* command about love, one that would not just fulfill the law but go much further, something

qualitatively better than the Golden Rule? Was he asking us to trade in an interpretation of love limited by our experience, so we can have the transforming power to understand how wide, how long, how high, and how deep the love of God is (Ephesians 3:18)? Jesus described it this way:

But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful (Luke 6:27-36).

Paul echoed this idea of love at the end of his first letter to the Corinthians as a lead-in to his chapter on love, “I will show you the most excellent way” (1 Corinthians 12:31). This “most excellent way” is a version of love that sacrifices even when not thanked, forgives even when not asked to forgive, defers even when in need, assumes the best even when the worst is assumed by others, treats enemies as friends, and gives away the last penny. This love accepts what is

before asking what should be. This love is a far cry from “do unto me as you want done” or even “do unto me as I want done.”

No, this is a love that says, “Do unto me as my Creator would do. God knows what is best!” This kind of love is rare. Jesus, alive and in the flesh, lived it day to day. He stepped out of his comfort zone, set aside his glory, slipped on human skin, and took up our story to address our deepest need.

Not for the faint of heart, this kind of love.

Still we may think this version of love is reserved for the super-spiritual, the lofty, the better-natured, or the saint. But here’s the rub: Jesus gave his new command to anyone who claims to *follow him*—not just to his disciples but to anyone who would believe in him through their message (John 17:2). You probably know one or two people who live out this kind of love. Are they saints? Maybe, but maybe not the kind for the history books. In other words, they’re probably closer to you and me than we think.

We can’t escape Jesus’ command “Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11).

So where do we start?

WELCOME TO BRAVE

Meeting Esperance shook my soul awake, leaving me with the weight of one question: *What do I do now?* To my surprise, my answer arrived by email when I returned home from Congo. My friend Larissa was coordinating the hundreds of images, words, and hopes from our time there. Here’s what she wrote:

P.S. Just received the “release forms” with signatures (or thumbprints where they couldn’t write) of the eleven women who shared their stories with you and the team. Belinda—these hit me hard. Even more than any of the stories I read—or perhaps, they rounded out the words—but seeing the

signatures, the fingerprints, seemed to make it all so personal. Even more so . . . their names:

Rachel

Clementine

Fazila

Esperance

Nane

Goreti . . .

Sadly, I've felt slightly cold and hardened as I read the experiences of the women you all interviewed in Congo. But in the last week, I've read so many articles on war, so many statistics on violence, and the numbers feel overwhelming. Numbing.

Then I receive this email. Your women sat with their pastors and people they trust, discussing what it meant for them to sign the release form. Esperance's release form written by her Congolese pastor at her command says, "Go ahead, tell the world my story."

Her permission to tell her story of being raped in the woods.

Sitting alone in my cubicle—it's all too much of a paradox. It's hard not to make it about me—oh, I'm so overwhelmed, I'm so tempted to ignore all this—the pain I feel for them. My pain.

No.

Their pain. Their rape. Their story. Their thumbprints. Their names. I can't do a disservice to them by saying, "It's too hard for me to bear." Those words in themselves are laughable.

Larissa

Larissa was right. I had been home from Congo long enough to know how people sometimes react to the words *rape*, *sexual violence*, and *rebel soldiers*. Some cough and change the subject. Others shake their heads and click their tongue, saying, "Terrible,

terrible,” while they move on to the coffee bar. I understand; it was difficult for me as well. But I knew too much to turn away from my feelings of discomfort.

As I sat looking at Esperance’s thumbprint, embracing the truth of her story, I realized how often I had excused my own self from the tension of another person’s story. How easily I passed over their pain at the first twinge in my soul. How quickly cynicism and doubt became my default. When had numbness become a viable option for me? The truth of Flannery O’Connor’s words came rushing to mind: “The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it.”

“The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it.”

FLANNERY O’CONNOR

I’m ashamed to say that my first response to Esperance’s request to “tell the world” was cold and harsh. I thought, *The world won’t care*. But “tell the world” burrowed into my soul. I couldn’t let that phrase go. For months I carried the image of her thumbprint with me everywhere I went—her thumbprint stamped under those three words. She had chosen to give her story of pain and redemption away for the sake of her sisters. She had not been undone by her battles but was all the more convinced of the friendship of God through the love of others. She fought for the violence around her to stop. Her weapons of choice were not anger or hatred, or even a cry for justice. They were forgiveness and love.

I wanted the violence to stop, but justice was the only weapon for me. Esperance’s love was so extravagant, it seemed reckless. For me, stripping away the illusion of a nice, painless, unmarked life

meant that I needed to feel the weight of love as it is: pain, suffering, and overcoming. My soul would have to grow brave enough to see each person I meet as C. S. Lewis did: “the holiest object presented to my senses.” I would need to shed my ability to pay attention or not pay attention, care or not care, as a privileged person. If O’Connor and Lewis and Larissa and Esperance were all telling the truth, caring about others went way beyond being nice and way beyond pain alleviation. These were new rules. I didn’t want to just hear someone’s story, but to genuinely enter it. Real love looks a lot like having skin in the game.

Real love looks a lot like having skin in the game.

For the first time in a long time, I was willing to take a risk. But I needed to start somewhere. So often action—doing something, even small—is where understanding begins. For me, it meant committing to telling Esperance’s story. As I did, a path emerged.

THE ROAD TO EMPATHY

My soul began a slow and steady awakening. It was like wiping the sleep out of my eyes. The hope I found isn’t unique to me but is for anyone exhausted by pretense, fear, and saccharin versions of love—even “Christian” love. It’s for those brave enough to believe—and live—a better way. However, there was a breakthrough behind the breakthrough. For me, the idea of love had been so abstract, so hard to wrestle to the ground, so hard to *do*. Love felt tinny, hollow, slightly cheap. Jesus’ command to love as he loved seemed out of reach for me. Esperance was my example, but I struggled with what it meant for me. I needed a way to understand this skin-in-the-game kind of love.

My breakthrough emerged slowly, over months—and I'm still breaking through. For me the turning point involved re-understanding love as *empathy*—not the nice I'll-do-you-like-I do-me kind of empathy I had grown up with, was spoon-fed in school to keep the peace, and learned at work so I could manipulate my teammates into doing what I wanted. No, the kind of empathy I have discovered is entirely different. It has the potential to revolutionize love, to make it real, genuine—a kind of empathy that converts our talk into action. Empathy, I learned, is the key to Jesus' new commandment, a rule of love that holds greater potential than any rule of gold.

What I discovered wasn't what I'd expected. Empathy is not reserved for a few saints who walk above the earth. It's not a feeling or an epiphany. No, empathy is gritty, personal, concrete, and practical, available for anyone thirsty enough to pursue real love.

Empathy is gritty, personal, concrete, and practical, available for anyone thirsty enough to pursue real love.

Empathy has the power to save us; I am sure of it. It was Esperance's love that ambushed me; it was her empathy that pointed the way, from a simple thumbprint to the towering summit of Kili-manjaro. Two very different places. One destination. It required a roadmap for me to get there—and the journey between the two made all the difference.

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