

## One Befriender's Journey- The Full Version

*English: Forge    Swahili: kufua    French: pousser de l'avant*

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I can recall the biggest challenges I faced as a young man: not having a pair of Adidas basketball shoes...not having a Peter Maxx psychedelic folder to hold the few school assignments I actually completed...not having the proper haircut...and having too much acne. Traumatic inadequacies for someone existing behind a cozy middle class existence. At no point did my list include not having a safe place for my children to sleep...not having enough food...or having constant fear in my heart that the next day could bring with it intense horror. (Certainly, there were times when I did not have enough acne medicine); these mysterious concepts were of little consequence. They didn't concern me, and I preferred it that way wrapped safely with uncultivated youthful perceptions.

But soon came the realization that self sacrifice was a crucial component to growth. Life progressed and so did my understanding of it. I had it all figured out.

Or so I thought...

My volunteer assignment for SURVIVORS began with the best intentions: *do something nice for someone less fortunate. Applaud yourself for being such a wonderful and humble contributor to society. Kiss your wife at day's end. Become a befriender. Simple. I can do this.* Things fell beautifully into place. I was to be paired up with a man from Rwanda. We were introduced. We spoke, determining how we would function within the other's world. We came to an agreement.

Forge: To advance gradually but steadily  
*As in I forged ahead through throngs of concert goers.*

Thomas appeared small of stature and slight of voice. He was pleasant and respectful. An intense stare behind dark eyes betrayed a stifled angst—an angst made all the more difficult with the language divide. He struggled to find the right words, and I could see it in his body language, like one life form buried within another and desperately trying to free itself. As I listened to him describe his background and situation, I quickly discarded perceptions. I did not find him needy

or desperate. (It seemed as if pride was the only thing keeping him together.) Conversely, I think...I hope...he did not find me pretentious.

“English,” I said. “I teach English. And some computer skills. Resumes. We can even go see a movie...or we can....”

“English?”

“That’s right.”

“That’s good. I need more English. And you don’t talk too fast. Everyone talks fast. At work...fast, fast, fast.” I laughed as he raised both hands and made quick hand gestures.

“You’re from...”

“Rwanda. Land of a thousand hills—*Pays des Mille Collines* in French.”

“Why is it called that?”

“Because it has many hills.”

“I see.”

We agreed to begin our friendship the following Friday.

That night I poured a glass of chardonnay and logged onto Wikipedia.com. *Rwanda: a small landlocked country in the Great Lakes region of central Africa. It is bordered by Uganda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Tanzania. Its fertile and hilly terrain, which gives it the title "Land of a Thousand Hills" supports the densest populations in continental Africa. It is best known to the outside world for the 1994 Rwandan genocide that resulted in the deaths of up to one million people. Before this, it was known mostly as the habitat of mountain gorillas.*

*Mountain gorillas. I didn’t know that. A genocide that had claimed the lives of so many. I do recall that but not many of the details.* Then again I knew little about what was actually occurring on another continent aside from those doses of information delivered courtesy of mainstream media or researched on my own when I had a bit of down time. Yes, I had rented *Hotel Rwanda*, but I suspect most of us are in a similar position—supplement information gathering can be so...so...messy and unprofitable. Understandably, I had never considered myself an expert on the turmoil of an individual from another land; there was plenty to do here on my home turf. I had coached Special Olympics. I was a lector at church. A Boy Scout before I grew bored and discovered girls. And I was my own biggest charity case during graduate school.

But there was simply more here. Something more than my previous obligations presented. Something more to comprehend behind an inconceivable distance, an inconceivable struggle, an inconceivable level of caring. The rationalization that I *may* be doing the right thing took a back seat to the realization that maybe I really *was* doing the right thing: aiding in the eradication of another's very real suffering. I neared a new threshold.

Forge: a furnace or hearth where metals are heated or wrought  
As in *I forged a great weapon with which to defeat my enemies.*

Our first meeting was held at the downtown library. Words plucked from a weekly entertainment newspaper resulted in a macabre but oddly satisfying language link. My idea. *Thomas, grab a newspaper, circle the words that you don't recognize, and we'll review them. We'll experiment with some sentences on the library computer.* Simple. Was I careful what I asked for?

“What means...jackass?”

“Well, Thomas, that's...that's a word of great insult. It means stubborn...but worse. You don't want to be using that one in public if you can help it.”

He seemed satisfied. I backed away from having him compose a sentence using the word.

“And this word?”

He had carefully circled all the words whose meaning had escaped him; there were many. The snippets of dialogue he was exposed to while working with other non-native speakers clearly frustrated him. The paper he brought me that first day was scarred with red ink, like a battle field upon which many lives had been lost. I immediately detected a pattern.

“This word?”

“Yes.”

“Shit.” I lowered my head and spoke directly into the paper.

“Sheet? Again please.”

“Shit.” A bit louder this time.

“Shet.”

“No...shit.” I said it with conviction remembering that I was sitting on the second floor of the downtown library. My initiation to the world of volunteering for SURVIVORS: teaching curse words to a Rwandan man. I chose to turn it into a learning situation: “Thomas, there are

certain words that characterize certain publications and the message they are attempting to deliver to the reader. Although it's important to know these words you've picked out and how they function...their use in a formal context...from a priority standpoint.... Why don't we move on to some words over here." I did my best to convey to him that words often betray the tone and level of one's communication skills. Sometimes language can be manipulated to mask intent or agenda.

Forge...to make a forgery or counterfeit.  
As in *I forged a false alliance in order to accomplish a secret agenda.*

He seemed satisfied. I started to wonder if he thought I was crazy.

As we experienced the other's temperament, personalities, thresholds, quirks, we learned more about one another. In his native Rwanda, he had been a teacher like me—math, science, geography. He played soccer. He has five children and was deeply worried one day when they had all come down with a bad cough. I saw the pain in those dark eyes—despite his best effort to be typically male and typically stubborn. I saw the helplessness at his being thousands of miles away and not being able to administer care. Not being able to function as a father to his children. Not being able to tell them that everything was fine. Perhaps he saw the pain in my eyes despite my best effort to mask it as well. He also must have detected that we are not so different, and maybe this is the key that we are all aware of but do not always take to heart—a realization that despite geographical separation, despite socio-political separation, despite vast cultural separation...basic needs and wants are consistent. The hug I will administer to my sick child is no different than the hug administered by a Rwandan man to his.

Forge: to make something, usually for a specific function

As in *I forged an understanding with another.*

*Forge...kufua...pousser de l'avant.* My friend speaks three different languages. He may even speak one or two more. But the language he has taught me that I am most impressed with is the language of perseverance during trying times.

*Forge: to give form or shape to, especially by means of careful effort, as in friendship.*

This is the language that allows us to break free from complacency. This is the language that reminds me that I do not function as a self-serving man with self-serving goals. But as a link in this bizarre chain that cannot function without another.

“And this word?”

“This one?” He circled it again.

“Forge.”

“Forge?”

“That’s right.”

“And its meaning?” *Its meaning*, I thought. *Its meaning....*

“To bond with another in search of a common goal,” I said. “It is everything.” He nodded.

“One word can mean so much.”

“Yes it can,” I said. “Yes it can. Come on. That’s enough for today. Let’s have lunch. You can tell me more about the land of a thousand hills.”