

Journal #1: Nyamata Memorial

This is our first genocide memorial, and I pause a moment before entering the church. I look around at the garden before the church, and it is clearly loved, attended meticulously. There are clear, paved walking paths, touching rock memorials - one in the shape of a heart. Sparse plants line the walking paths... When I enter the church, our docent points out the metal gates that protected the people for a moment, until grenades tore up the cement floors and broke down their last hope. Inside, there are piles and piles of clothes, the clothes of the people killed during the genocide. Piles upon piles...I can see cuts in the clothes where the machetes rained down on the bodies, the heads, of the victims. At the altar, there is a heap of items taken off the victims' bodies: rosaries, coins, ID cards, walking devices to help the handicapped walk. But it's the clothes, now covered in dust 23 years later, that make the victims real. Shirts, pants, sweaters - it's so real. The bullet holes in the red brick walls aren't even as real as the victims' clothes. I don't know guns, bullets, or grenades. I do, however, know shirts, pants, sweaters... Outside, there are many mass graves covered in large bouquets of flowers. But my mind returns to the clothes...

On the other side of the memorial fence, I hear children reciting things in the classroom. It is these sounds that I am drawn to, sounds of hope, of happiness, of life continuing. The peach colored buildings show no signs of life outside, but I can hear vibrant, innocent sounds floating out of the windows.

Slowly, one by one, children emerge from the door of the classroom. They are wearing bright red school uniforms; they are so alive against the background of the dust covered clothes inside the church, against the dark brown of the coffins. They run and play and smile and wave at me. I am a foreigner, a visitor, something different. I wonder if they know what happened on the other side of their school yard fence 23 years ago? I wonder when they learn about the genocide that destroyed so many of their parents' families...

And I wonder if it matters in this moment when they are playing with their friends, smiling, running... safe in their school, with their teacher and their friends...

And I understand it is so easy to forget, sitting here, watching the school children, playing, laughing. But we must never forget - the church, the bullet holes, the rosaries, the clothes...

I realize, at the Nyamata Church Memorial, I have taken the easier path - I sit with my back to the mass graves, the church, the clothes - and I face the school yard with the brightly clothed children playing, running, laughing. I choose to look towards the future - the children - instead of the past. However, I will never forget the dust covered shirts and pants and sweaters...