

## **Ishmael Beah Lecture**

Beah discusses the impact the war in Sierra Leone had on his life.

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### **Transcript**

[I. Beah] As you heard, I was born in Sierra Leone in 1980. When I was growing up as a young boy, there wasn't a war in Sierra Leone at that time. I grew up in a very remote part of the country where I didn't have the luxuries of electricity, tap water, or such things, but I had a remarkable life.

Through time imagine at twelve-years-old, everyone run away from you. They can no longer place you. If and when you hadn't seen your neighbors for a few months, you saw them you they no longer could to talk to you very openly because they weren't sure whether you were a spy for one group or the other. So this tremendous fear, sort of distrust, brought about fear that forced people to attack each other or run away each other to distrust each other and also began to eat at the fabric at the foundation of what this culture had been. Now, I was in this war, I lost everything where being part of the group also had brought about a replacement of this sort of community structure that we had. Even thought at the beginning we join these groups we feared deeply.

It was difficult to be there but as time went on these became our family – these groups. They replaced the communities we had lost. Commanders became the father figure. The kids were joined with formed a kinship. They became our brothers. In order to be a part of this new family, it required violence.

Violence became a way to show loyalty to these groups. The more violence you committed, the more it was celebrate. You were celebrated Now one of the ways [intelligible] you had no choice. I will give you an example. When we joined we were going on to attack a town or village, we had lots of guns but we had no food. We had no money. We had to fight for all these things.

So when we would go into a town to do these things, we encounter somebody on the road. There are several instances where the commander would say I don't like how this person looks - It could be a child. It could be an older person. It could be anyone - and ask one of the boys to shoot or girls to shoot this person. If you resisted, you were killed. So when you were asked to do so, you knew your life depended upon this.

In the beginning there were such things happening. We vomited. People were nauseated. But as time went on it became so much a daily part of our experience that it became normalized. That it no longer disturbed us. We lost the ability to even exercise human emotions.

When I came out of the war I had forgotten how to sleep. I even had forgotten how to cry. Various things I had to relearn again because in order for you to function within this environment, you have to actually stop exercising human tendencies. If you do, you would not live at all.

Anyway, when I came out of this war, went through rehabilitation, I still heard [unintelligible], which was difficult. I spent eight months there just to learn how to function. I had forgotten how to do a lot of things as a normal person. Thank God the people who worked at the center were [unintelligible] deeply interested in helping us. It's... it is... it makes a tremendous difference when people who are from your country help you to recover.

Somebody else from outside can easily forgive you who had not been there during the war, but when some of the peoples whose families you have actually destroyed, who say to you, who come to work to take care of you, it makes a tremendous difference. That's the difference that came in our lives. Now when I was at rehabilitation center in Sierra Leone, [unintelligible] the most people know how to deal with children who come in from this extreme violence situation. When the war was going on and when it ended, we only had one psychologist in the country, a fellow called Dr. [unintelligible], who passed away.

It wasn't a profession that people did because there wasn't a need for it, because there were sort of local ways of dealing with kinds of things. So all of a sudden there was this tremendous number of children coming from the war who needed help. So people didn't know what they were doing. But what worked is that people cared deeply about the children they were helping and that made the difference. When you come from any kind of suffering as a young person you develop an instinct to tell what if somebody generally cares about your or not. If they don't, whatever they were trying to do for you would not work. When I first went to the American Embassy in Cape Town, South Africa to get my Visa. I had all the right papers except I couldn't provide two particular documents they wanted from me. One was a bank statement to show that I had money in Sierra Leone and second, was to show I had properties in Sierra Leone which meant that I intended to return to Sierra Leone at some point. Now, I told the guy that I intend to return home, because its my home. "But I'm from Sierra Leone," I said to the guy thinking this would mean something to him. And he said, "Sir do you have those documents?" I remember thinking to myself that people don't really understand what war is.

Do you think that during a war people are going to say, "Oh, I need my bank statement" or "I need my property documents so that I can show them when I'm at the American Embassy." You don't even know you will live to see the next minute or the next day. There's chaos. When you hear the gunshots, if you're down the street or at a store, or wherever you are that's where that chapter of your life begins. Whatever you are carrying, whatever you are wearing that's all you have.

Families live behind things where they've worked for years and just run away because you need to stay alive. I've been on shows where people ask me questions. They think that this guy hasn't changed and it'll be a matter of time before he loses it. And I see that. I sense it before they even say it. And I laugh because I think, we're probably the people the don't want anything to do with any form of violence at all. Not even verbal violence because we know what violence does to people. We are no longer fascinated by it so we don't want to do anything with it.

But people called us the "Lost Generation" thinking that once your life has been dragged through this violence you will finish, and you will no longer be able to recover, nothing can be done for you, that was it. And here I was, living in New York, going to school I suddenly didn't feel like a "Lost Generation" or a "lost person" except when I wanted to order certain foods and things like that. I thought to myself, "this is not good." And also, the discussion was only about, tell us what the war was like. Tell us about the war only not about how people come out of the war. So I also wanted to write a book that not only talked about the war but also how people regained their humanity after they have lost it in the war.

One of the things I like to emphasize, you know, is that for me particularly, one of the things that has been quite remarkable in my life, besides coming out of the war which was something that changed my life and the family stability that I had, is being able to have an education.

It allowed me to rediscover myself. My plea to people, to young people here, is for you to not only think of education as only a way to get a career, to change your socioeconomic status, but rather think of in addition as a journey to discover yourself. To discover your own humanity. What your contribution is to your community, to the world and also use it to expose yourself to the world. You don't have to wait until there's a war to learn about a country.

Lastly, my advice to everyone, I've met a lot of remarkable people in my life, but there's a saying I've heard from Bob Marley. If you don't know Bob Marley, I'm not sure what I can do for you [crowd laughs]. Bob Marley, of all people, he said something in one of his interviews that has sort of become one of my mottos, the way I live my life. He said, "One's life has to be not only for you but for others. If your life is only for yourself, it is not worth having it." And for me, based on my experiences and where I've come from, I believe that tremendously because what changes in my life is because people stopped at one point in their life to stop thinking about their own lives. And thought about somebody as his life, which is me.

That's why I'm standing in front of you here, so that's where the miracle lies. That's where the chain lies when we stop to realize other people's humanity. Genuinely, it changes, it shifts things around and also in the people that we look at.

So, thank you again for your attention.