

ROMEO DALLAIRE – by Wendi Stewart

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On Remembrance Day, perhaps more than any other day of the year, we focus on the effects of war, the loss, the victory of freedom, a freedom that feels threatened at every turn these days by terrorism, a war that is waged without rules. Each of us has a story that Remembrance Day evokes. We wince and we wonder what we learned at such a cost.

Canada has a deep history of peacekeeping, a history that many of us know little of and even less understanding of. We leave the peacekeeping to our forces and trust that our support is enough. We can look away when the loss is great and severe, like we did with the UN mission in Rwanda in 1994. We squirm when we hear the details, shudder at the abhorrence, and thank God we climb safely into our beds at night knowing no horror is at our doorstep.

That is not the case for Canadian Lieutenant General Romeo Dallaire, who led the UN peacekeeping mission in Rwanda. He documented suffering, the total absence of humanity, in his book *Shake Hands With The Devil*, an experience that took his notion of hope and integrity and ground it firmly to dust.

Dallaire spoke at Wesley Knox United Church in London the evening of November 7th and I slid silently into a pew with six hundred others to pay heed to an experience that forever wounded this man and nearly robbed him of his will to live. He raises his hand and takes responsibility for the failure in Rwanda. We all share that burden, but we let men like Dallaire carry it for us.

I am reading his first book, not because I have an appetite for the horror of that mission but because I am compelled to listen, to somehow honour his suffering. I went to hear him speak to offer the respect that he has earned a thousand times over. What I witnessed was a man who has been to hell and back and found a way to restore his optimism, to continue to fight for freedom, for humanity. He was a man abandoned in Rwanda, left to fight with bureaucracy, his voice unheard, silenced in many respects, abused in others.

He gently told the crowd gathered, many of them young adults who came to sing in the program for annual *Canadian Aid For Southern Sudan (CASS)*, that 80% of humanity lives in inhuman conditions. We take pride in the *Canadarm* and sit at the edge of our seats awaiting the possibility of travelling to Mars, yet so many suffer without hope, suffer in the midst of constant conflict, endure horrendous abuses of human rights. Canada is a world power and that comes with a responsibility. Dallaire is outraged that we no longer sit at the table of the UN's Security Council. There are countries that suffer and are saddened that Canada cannot be their voice in decision making of the UN's agenda. "We have let them down."

Sixteen years ago his life was forever changed when he was deployed to Africa on a mission he felt honoured to lead, certain of its success. Dallaire finds it difficult to speak in a church, having witnessed the slaughter of thousands, the enemy using the churches to corral those individuals they decided to annihilate. 700,000 died in Rwanda for no other reason than they were different, wanting to live within the same piece of geography.

Dallaire spoke of the 250,000 child soldiers involved in thirty wars across the planet. Children that are used and abused for adults to gain power while the rest of us sit by and watch. "Imagine their suffering," Dallaire said, the notion incomprehensible. "What can you do?" he asked, raising his open hands, his voice breaking. "Take an activist role. Get involved. Be a voice that demands change."

Hope: it was in the room and spread out on to the sidewalk at the end of the evening and I carried it home with me. Let it continue. Let this man's voice engage us all in the name of humanity.