

**African Lessons**  
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### **Introduction and First Lesson**

Liberia, a West African country of 3 million people, was founded in 1847 by freed American slaves who first settled there in 1822. Their descendants formed an elite that dominated the indigenous people for more than a century. Rising tensions erupted into a civil war in 1989. By 2002 over 200,000 people had died and one-third of the population had been driven from their homes.<sup>2</sup>

My first visit to Liberia was in 1998, less than a year after the dominance of Charles Taylor's forces put a temporary end to the ceaseless conflict that had ravaged Liberia for more than a decade. I was in seminary, studying to become a Unitarian minister, and using my legal background to work part-time in international development. I was sent to Liberia to help "modernize" Liberia's legal system.

In retrospect, it's ironic. The group of civil servants I worked asked for a freedom of information act. Under Charles Taylor, who now is on trial in the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity. The law was never enacted.

I visited Liberia several times between 1998 and 2001. Each time there were gunshots in the night, interruptions in telephone service, electric power cut-offs, and utterly unreliable, undrinkable water. I stayed in a hotel that looked like something out of Casablanca, but had high walls and security guards. On my last trip there before war broke out again, the protocol officer who accompanied me everywhere nodded his head toward the University of Liberia as we passed in our car. "The President is speaking there now," he said.

I looked over and saw a large gathering of people on the lawn, and a lectern at the top of the steps. A man was at the lectern. "Is that the President?" I asked, pointing. The protocol officer knocked my hand down. "Don't point!" he said sharply. "Don't point with your finger. The security guards may think you have a gun, and they will kill you."

Lesson learned. Don't point at dictators.

### **History and Second Lesson**

I didn't go back to Liberia for a long time. Rebel forces began to gather in the countryside. Both the rebels and Taylor's forces pulled young boys off the streets, out of their homes, and armed them with guns. The commanders of these forces bound the boys to them with fear, power, and

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<sup>2</sup> This short introduction to Liberia is paraphrased from the the opening words of the award-winning documentary film by Abigail E. Disney and Gini Reticker, *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* (2009). See it.

reward. Sometimes they forced the boys to kill their own parents. The boys were set loose to loot homes and villages. They could take whatever they wanted.

For two and a half years Liberia was a war zone once more. Then there were peace talks, and a transitional government, UN peacekeepers, and free elections. In 2006 Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was sworn in as Liberia's President; Africa's first woman president. But during 2002 and 2003, the fighting was in the countryside, outside the capital city of Monrovia. Monrovia: named after James Monroe who was President of the United States in 1822 when the city was founded. Monrovia and Washington, DC are the only two cities in the world that are named after US Presidents.

More irony: a city founded by former slaves is named after the President of a country that enslaved them.

American influence is evident in Liberia, and the names and places resonate with the history of slavery and the struggle for abolition of slavery. There is a Maryland county, and the name Talbot, one of the great American colonial names in the United States, is a common surname. So is Tubman. Most of the British-sounding names, like Stewart and Anderson, are the names of American slave-owners. The freed slaves who settled Monrovia brought their history with them.

When I returned to Liberia in 2006, I met Boima, a descendent of the indigenous people who has reliable employment as a driver thanks to the United Nations Mission in Liberia.

Boima talked with me about Liberia's history. He listed what he called "settler" names, the slaveowner heritage, and talked openly about Liberia's colonization by America's former slaves, Liberia's "settlers." The settlers bought the land that is now Monrovia with beads and trinkets, the same coin the Dutch used to buy Manhattan Island.

I wondered if it was unfair. "Oh, no," Boima said. "It was a good bargain, maybe not to us today, but at the time it was the the price the indigenous people thought was fair. It was fair to them. And the settlers have been good for Liberia." He spoke respectfully of the education, literacy, modernization, the connection with the global community that resulted from Liberia's colonization. I listened, knowing that prior to the military coup that launched Liberia's civil war in 1989 there were only limited opportunities for descendants of the indigenous people, while descendants of the settlers had education, wealth, and power.

It was the old story of colonization, the native people displaced and often exploited to benefit the colonists who came in with greater firepower and the ability to sell local goods in the global marketplace. To some extent, the civil war that gave Charles Taylor the opportunity to lead his militia into power was the result of discontent with the disparities in wealth and opportunity. But the violence did not bring an end to those disparities. It simply placed power in different hands, and taught a generation of young men that power is determined at the point of a gun.

As respectful as he is of the settlers who founded Liberia, Boima is critical of war and the abuse of power. "War is not good for anyone," he says. He's proud that his country has a freely elected

President. He worries about what will happen if the UN Peacekeepers leave. He condemns Charles Taylor, but says that if Taylor came back to Liberia there are many who would support him.

Why?

“Because of money. Because of power.” Boima is a realist. He has a good job, a college education, and he reads world news on the Internet. “Because,” Boima said, “of the Swiss bank accounts.”

Another lesson: wealth is power.

### **Peace and Third Lesson**

Back in 2002, with Charles Taylor in place (lesson one, don't point) and the trade in diamonds smuggled from Sierra Leone building up Swiss bank accounts for him and his supporters (lesson two, wealth is power), we might well ask, “What happened?” How did we get from Taylor to Sirleaf, from dictator to freely elected President?

The first step was the renewal of violence by Taylor's opponents. People in Liberia refer to Taylor and his opposition as “warlords.” They used warfare and boy soldiers to seize power. In 2002 a coalition of warlords escalated the fighting in the countryside, which Taylor's forces had never fully controlled. The militias plundered villages, sending more and more refugees fleeing into Taylor-controlled Monrovia. The tent cities stretched over acres of land. The UN has a phrase for people who are refugees within their own country: internally displaced persons, or IDPs. The term IDPs entered the Liberian vocabulary.

One morning in 2002 a woman named Leymah Gbowee woke suddenly. “I had a dream,” she told people later. “A crazy dream. But the memory of it wouldn't leave me alone. I had to do something about it.”

She was given the opportunity to talk about her dream at the Lutheran church she attended. Leymah proposed a Christian Peace Initiative—a women's protest for peace. Sitting in church that day was a Muslim woman who was an officer in the Liberian National Police. She had seen too much violence. And she thought to herself, “Why should it just be Christian women?” She went back to her mosque and talked to the women there. And the Liberian's Women's Peacebuilding Network emerged.

At first it was just 30 or so women who sat on the ground at the fish market in Monrovia, wearing white T-shirts, holding signs that said “The women of Liberia want peace.” They sang songs. Sometimes they sang and danced. Old songs, traditional songs, made-up songs, songs that they turned into songs about peace.

“Liberia is my home, Liberia is my home  
Peace is what we want, peace and no more war.”

They were photographed. A Liberian woman reporter courageously interviewed them and broadcast the interview on a local radio station. Their message was simple. “War is not good for the children of Liberia. We are mothers. We want peace, now.” They stayed away from politics. They didn’t blame one faction or the other (Lesson one, don’t point.) They said, simply, “Make peace. You who are fighting, make peace now for the sake of the children of Liberia.”

At first Charles Taylor ignored them. Then he condemned anyone who would “sit on the ground and criticize the government.” It was a threat, and the women understood it as a threat. When one woman’s mother said, “Don’t go. It is not safe. You risk your life. He will have you killed,” her daughter answered, “Well, if I should get killed, just remember me, that I was fighting for *peace*.”

The women began meeting with their religious leaders, Christian and Muslim, all men, and calling on them in the name of God as they understood God to speak for peace to the men in power in the Taylor government. They talked to their husbands, saying they expected their men to use whatever influence they had to bring an end to war. To make their point, they announced that until the war was over they would not have marital relations with their husbands. (Boima told me that this part of their protest was “very effective.”)

And every day the women went to the fish market in their white T-shirts. They held their signs and they sang. And every day there were more. Every day there were passers-by, ordinary people (men as well as women), who smiled and said “yes” to peace. The word spread. The international community began to pay attention.

The attention put pressure on Charles Taylor and led to a formal occasion. In front of the capital building, with many people watching and cameras rolling, Lehmah Gbowee presented Charles Taylor with a statement from the Women’s Peacebuilding Network. It said, pretty much, “Make peace.” Taylor announced that he was willing to meet for peace talks.

Unstated, but evident, was the third lesson: Using violence to silence the peaceful protest of these women would invite international intervention. This is a lesson Gandhi understood.

### **Democracy and Fourth Lesson**

Less than two weeks ago I returned from a one-week trip to Liberia. I had been back several times since President Sirleaf took office in 2006, helping under UN auspices with the work of creating a sound legal structure for the financial aspects of government. My visit this time clarified for me the ways in which democracy is both fragile and robust.

Most of us are used to the processes of government that help legislation move from one stage to the next. Sometimes our own laws are not what we would wish them to be. But when democracy and representative government are only a short distance from the use of force to obtain power, the fragility of democracy becomes evident. In Liberia that fragility is evident. Yet democracy is robust, too, because it arises from the desire of people to solve their disagreements by means

other than violence. It arises from the desire of people to live in peace. It arises from the understanding that the world is watching—that the women’s peace movement is watching.

I can’t say much about what happened during my most recent visit, because most of my conversations with government officials were confidential. But as I listened, I heard words that delighted me: “If they don’t agree to do what we ask, I swear I will take this matter to court!”

The fourth lesson is the power of the democratic process to subvert the power of wealth and the power of violence.

### **Conclusion**

Democracy does not occur without risk. It does not spring into being fully evolved. It starts with people who, one by one, two by two, begin to say what they think. It requires determination and persistence and courage. It needs creativity and imagination and solidarity. It can’t happen without commitment; it can’t happen without voices that will not be silenced.

### **Maya Angelou, “I Rise”**

...

Out of the huts of history's shame

I rise

Up from a past that's rooted in pain

I rise

I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,

Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear

I rise

Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear

I rise

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,

I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

I rise

I rise

I rise.