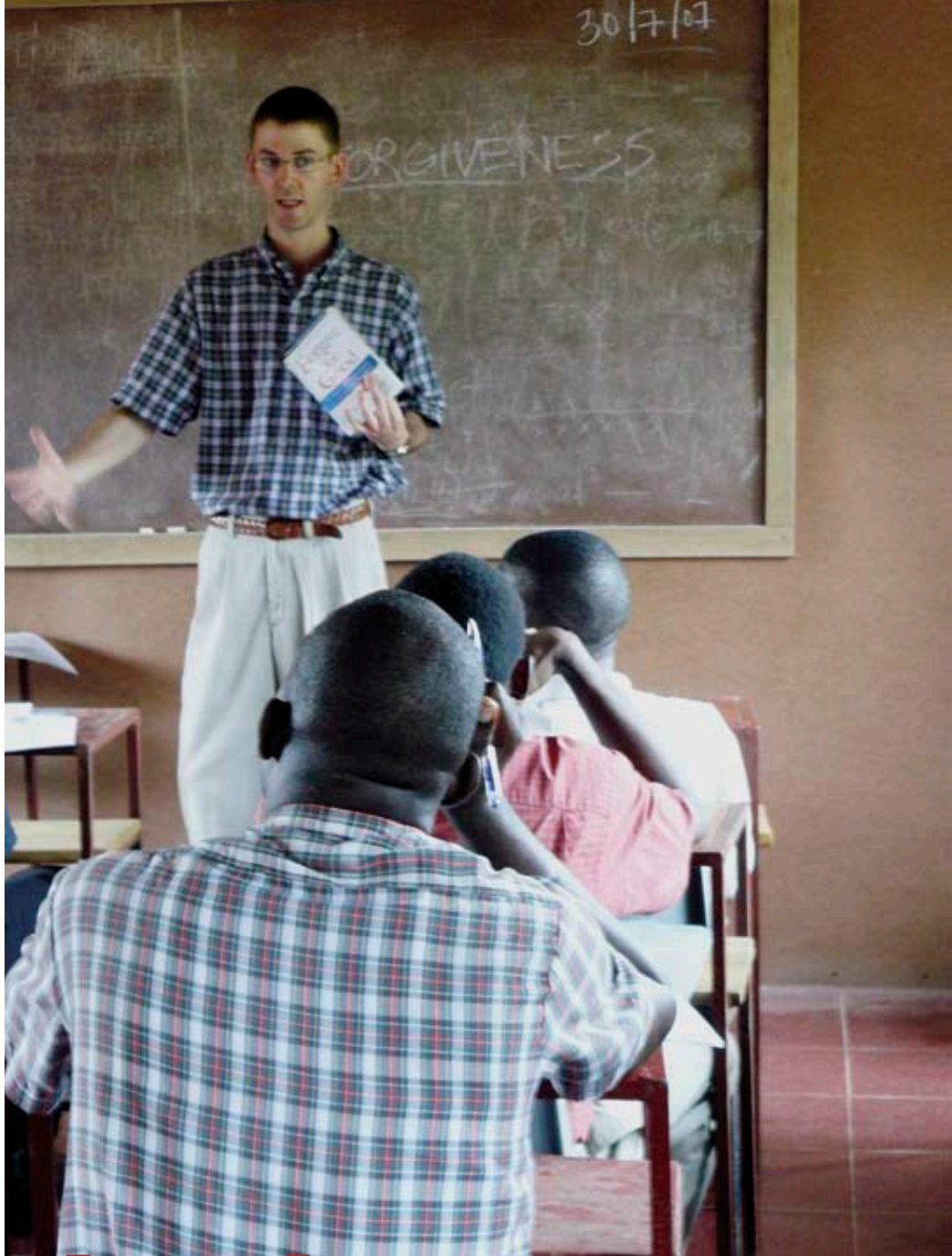


While leading forgiveness trainings in Sierra Leone, psychologist Loren Toussaint (standing) says he worked with “the most serious and engaged students I’ve ever taught.”



The Greatest Test

BY EMILIE RAGUSO

All Sierra Leone photos by Alyssa Cheadle

Forgiveness improves health and strengthens relationships. But can it help heal the scars of civil war?

LAST SUMMER, A PROFESSOR AND TWO students from a small Iowa college jammed 200 teddy bears into a duffle bag and flew to Sierra Leone. Armed only with books, laptops, cameras, and the bears—which were gifts for Sierra Leonean children—they were on an ambitious mission: to try to teach forgiveness skills in one of the most war-torn places on Earth.

It was an unlikely project for the group's leader, Loren Toussaint. He had never left North America before.

"I'm kind of your classic Iowa farm boy," says Toussaint, a psychology professor at Luther College, a liberal arts school in northeastern Iowa. "I am not what you would think of as an Indiana Jones academic."

While he may not be an expert traveler, Toussaint is an expert on the psychology of forgiveness, which was the reason for the trip. For years, he has studied the relationship between forgiveness and health, finding that forgiveness generally promotes psychological well-being. His work has added to a growing body of research linking forgiveness to improved mental and physical health and stronger social relationships.

With his trip to Sierra Leone, Toussaint wanted to apply forgiveness research in ways rarely attempted. Accompanied by two Luther students—one American and one Sierra Leonean—he planned to spend two weeks at a school in Freetown, the country's capital, teaching forgiveness skills to two dozen teachers and their students.

Sierra Leone's civil war ended in 2002, leaving tens of thousands dead and displacing two million more, one-third of its population. During the war, rebel raids destroyed families and towns. Civilians became victims of abduction, amputation, and slaughter. Homes were burned with their inhabitants inside.

Poverty, unemployment, and corruption continue to plague Sierra Leone. The United Nations ranks it the world's least developed nation.

Toussaint found the idea of working in Sierra Leone compelling, he says, because much of the country's population has struggled to overcome severe psychological trauma. Other African nations torn by violence, such as South Africa and Rwanda, have initiated nationwide efforts to reconcile their divided populations and facilitate some degree of forgiveness for past crimes. Though starting on a smaller scale, Toussaint's program also aimed to promote forgiveness as a way to improve psychological health and help people let go of some of the anger and resentment that had festered in their country for years.

Scientific programs like Toussaint's have proven effective in dozens of studies, helping

people forgive parents who neglected them, lovers who betrayed them, and even strangers who murdered their children. But it was unclear whether such a program could work in a country just a few years removed from civil war. Toussaint says he felt that if he could find positive results in Sierra Leone, he could find them anywhere.

"If you can take these ideas to the very extreme and show that they work with individuals in the worst state of hurt, you would expect them to be even more effective as you get back into the normal realm of hurt and transgression," he says. "This trip would put these forgiveness techniques to what I considered to be their greatest test."

Training the trainers

Toussaint's project got its start in 2006 when he heard, via a colleague, from Nancy Peddle, an American who runs the LemonAid Fund, a nonprofit organization in Freetown that sponsors schools and orphanages. Peddle had read an article Toussaint co-authored about the relationship between forgiveness, gratitude, and well-being. As they began exchanging emails, she suggested that Toussaint's work might play a role in Sierra Leone's healing.

"So many people are still struggling with the aftermath of the war and the effects of trauma," says Peddle. "I thought that this work was a way forward."

Peddle suggested that Toussaint try to teach forgiveness skills at a LemonAid-sponsored school in Freetown. By testing the program on a small scale, she thought Toussaint might create a model that could be applied throughout the country, contributing to efforts to make the next generation of Sierra Leoneans less likely to turn to violence.

Toussaint approached Fred Luskin, a psychologist who led several successful forgiveness studies as the director of the Stanford Forgiveness Projects at Stanford University. Luskin helped the team adapt his teaching model, a nine-step process of forgiveness that he has taught for many years. Luskin's wife, a second-grade teacher, helped develop a children's curriculum based on the program, which the team would share with students at the school.

Toussaint and the Luther students, Alyssa Cheadle and Anthony Sellu, read Luskin's book and took his online training course to prepare to teach forgiveness skills in Freetown.

Based on his research, Luskin was confident his training could benefit people in Sierra Leone. In two studies, Luskin had worked with Catholics and Protestants from Northern Ireland who lost family members to that region's political violence. After completing Luskin's program, participants

"After the forgiveness training, I have now developed a way to be at peace with myself whenever I think of my sister's death," wrote one teacher in Sierra Leone.



AP Photo



Reuters

Many African leaders have promoted forgiveness and reconciliation in post-conflict situations. These efforts include (from top) Rwanda's "Gacaca" community courts, established in the wake of the 1994 genocide that killed roughly 800,000 of the minority Tutsi group, and South Africa's post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission, chaired by Nobel laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

reported feeling healthier, more optimistic, less depressed, and less hurt by their loss.

Though these results were encouraging, Luskin was aware of the challenges Toussaint's group would face.

"Civil war is horrifying and people suffer for a very long time," he says. "It's hard to work with, because both sides have convinced themselves that the other side is their enemy. That makes it really difficult for people to change."

The politics of forgiveness

Many African leaders have promoted forgiveness and reconciliation in post-conflict situations. In

addition to the famed example of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which is widely credited with unearthing human rights abuses and helping the country heal after the end of apartheid, Rwanda struggled to embrace forgiveness after the 1994 genocide that killed roughly 800,000 of the minority Tutsi group. The Rwandan government emphasized justice and reconciliation through "Gacaca" community courts, where killers confessed and apologized to their victims' families.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize recipient and chairman of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, has argued that forgiveness is the path to "true enduring peace." "True reconciliation is based on forgiveness," he writes in his 2004 book, *God Has a Dream*. "Only forgiveness enables us to restore trust and compassion to our relationships. If peace is our goal, there can be no future without forgiveness."

Advocates like Tutu have seen forgiveness as a spiritual and political necessity. But before Toussaint started his project, only a handful of studies, including Luskin's, had tried to scientifically measure the effects of forgiveness training in post-conflict situations.

In one instance, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, psychologist Ervin Staub evaluated a forgiveness training project he first helped bring to Rwanda in the late 1990s. According to a 2005 article Staub published in the *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, his program was associated with reduced trauma and more positive attitudes between Hutus and Tutsis.

Toussaint's project faced some special challenges. Sierra Leone is plagued not only by lingering resentments and hostilities but with severely underdeveloped infrastructure, making it hard to run any program, let alone one with such ambitious goals.

When the group landed at the Freetown airport, no one was there to meet them. Peddle had left the country due to concerns about violence in Sierra Leone's upcoming elections. Their local contact thought they were arriving the next day. The group eventually took a ferry into Freetown, sharing a semi-private area with several Texas oil men, the only other Westerners around.

"We were just thrown into it from the beginning," says Cheadle, 22, a recent Luther graduate who studied psychology and religion, and worked with Toussaint, Luskin, and Sellu on the grant that funded the bulk of the trip. The team arrived during the region's rainy season. Torrential rains and traffic often turned a mile-and-a-half bus trip into a two-hour journey. To complicate matters further, the team learned they'd have no Internet access, no plumbing, and intermittent electricity with which to power their laptops. Toussaint says the humidity, 90-degree weather, and construc-

tion to complete the school made it hard to focus on training.

Despite these obstacles, Cheadle remembers the participants' enthusiasm from the very beginning. "I kind of expected them to be skeptical," she says. "But what struck me was how willing they were to learn and how interested they were in what we had to say."

The trio planned to work with one group of teachers the first week; a second group wouldn't get trained until the next week. The researchers planned to measure the training's effectiveness by comparing the two groups. As they went through the training, the teachers would share what they learned with their students, most of whom were between seven and 13 years old. Sellu, who lived in Sierra Leone until he was 20, served as a translator.

Before starting the training, Toussaint explained to the teachers that forgiveness, according to Luskin's program, does not mean condoning or justifying horrific acts; it's not antithetical to justice. It involves coming to peace with wrongs one has suffered, moving on, and learning to enjoy life.

Each day of the training, teachers read sections of Luskin's book and worked through his methods. They filled out workbooks to practice the skills Luskin describes. They would imagine ways they'd been hurt and create statements about how their future response to that hurt could be different. Or they would imagine a time they had been offended, then work on deep breathing or other stress reduction techniques to let go of the frustration.

Many participants tried to confront traumatic memories.

"Let's say during the war I was a couple years younger, and my parents were killed in front of me, probably by a kid who lives next door or down the road," says Sellu, 22, a physics and math major at Luther. "That's the kind of thing some of the youth grew up with."

In their forgiveness exercises, some children wrote about wanting God to punish rebels who burned down their home. Others were angry about relatives killed in the war. One girl wrote about forgiving a boy who had thrown a stone at her.

Toussaint's team encouraged teachers and students to start by practicing forgiveness toward lesser offenses. Rather than trying to forgive a neighbor for turning in your father as a rebel collaborator, it might be easier, the researchers suggested, to try to forgive the cousin who stole and sold your camera.

"I think it was overwhelming for them to think about forgiving people who had wronged them during the civil war," says Cheadle. "We encouraged them to start small. To go in there and say, 'You need to forgive that a friend of yours

was killed or your house was burned'—that's too much."

Some teachers cited mistreating them, frustration at co-worker for accusing them of misbehavior, or pain of a former spouse who left them. One woman said she was angry at family member who distracted while baby sitting the woman's child let the boy tumble from window three stories high.

To work with the youngest students, Toussaint's group used activities translated from Luskin's program into language children understand. For instance, Luskin says one way to get rid of a grudge is to "change the channel" and focus on positive aspects of one's life. To explain this, the team had children take Polaroid photographs of things they liked, then practice imagining the picture in their head.

"Both the teachers and the students were the most serious and engaged students I've ever taught," says Toussaint. "There was an incredible connection between their needs and the topic we were bringing."

Getting results

Less than a week into the training, thieves used bolt cutters to break open the steel door of the school's office. They stole one laptop computer, school supplies, and gifts the researchers had brought. They also stole the teachers' salaries for two semesters.

"They took everything they had," says Sellu. "The teachers were supposed to be paid the next day."

In the next day's training, the researchers discussed the theft with the teachers.

"They wanted to know, 'Do we forgive these robbers? What do we do?'" says Cheadle. "Loren told them, 'You have to forgive at the right time.' They couldn't be expected to forgive what had just happened the night before."

The Luther group believes their presence attracted thieves to the school. They left for the United States the next day, concerned for their safety and for the safety of those at the school. They left behind journals in which the teachers could record their reflections about the training, along with surveys to measure the teachers' mental health. The surveys were completed days



“If peace is our goal, there can be no future without forgiveness.”

after Toussaint's group left, about one week after the study began. Peddle carried the surveys back to the U.S. several months later to avoid losing the data in Sierra Leone's notoriously unreliable postal system. Toussaint compared the results against identical surveys the teachers had completed before the training.

Despite the training's challenging conditions and their early departure, the group discovered their work had indeed made a strong impression. Compared to teachers who didn't receive the training and to the initial survey results from before the training, those who learned forgiveness skills reported feeling less depressed, more grateful, more satisfied with life, and less stressed. (Because of language barriers and the fact that many of them were so young, the children in the study could not complete surveys as detailed as the adults'. Still, the team collected baseline information about the children's mental and physical health, and about their feelings toward forgiveness, with an eye toward future work.)

Thirteen teachers completed the training and eleven, the comparison group, did not, but Toussaint says the differences between the two groups were so great that the results were statistically significant. In other words, despite the small number of people, the results were strong enough for Toussaint to conclude that the training worked. And he learned an important lesson: that

it's possible to teach forgiveness with Luskin's curriculum even in such distressed conditions, and even if Luskin himself wasn't teaching it.

Questionnaires the Sierra Leonean teachers filled out after the training offer insight into what they may have gained from the experience. Before the training, many described events from years earlier that continued to haunt and disturb them, often expressing violent feelings. After the training, though some remained unable to forgive, others revealed that they were starting to think differently.

"It was seven years ago during the civil war where my older sister was killed," one teacher writes. "One good thing is that, after the forgive-

ness, healing, happiness, and health survey training, I have now developed a way to be at peace with myself whenever I think of her death."

Another teacher describes being angry because his younger brother stole his salary, then lied about it.

"That made me so hurt that I nearly break [sic] his head," he writes. "Presently I am no longer disturb [sic] over the issue because I have decided to forgive him for what he did to me."

First steps

Sellu says he initially had his doubts about the project's goals. While he was in Freetown, many teachers expressed frustration to him about the training. They wondered how Luskin's ideas could help them, especially with elections on the horizon.

"Some kept saying, 'We'll be doing this training, but we don't even know the future of the country,'" he says. "Other people said, 'How is this going to help at this point when we've just come out of war and people don't have jobs?'"

Over the course of the trip, he says he came to believe the curriculum could help Sierra Leoneans. But more time and money must be invested, he says.

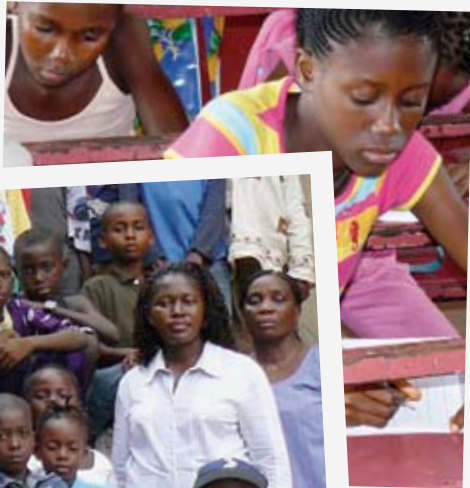
Luskin and Toussaint say that's their plan. They want to raise money to bring a group of Sierra Leonean teachers to Stanford to participate in forgiveness trainings in a more controlled environment. Those teachers would return to their country to share what they learned. (This is how Luskin ran his Northern Ireland studies.) Over time, Toussaint imagines the curriculum spreading across many countries that are struggling to overcome violent pasts.

Toussaint has no immediate plans to return to Sierra Leone. But Peddle has started to offer the forgiveness training to former war combatants in the country; she has also offered a one-year "refresher course" to teachers and others at the school in Freetown.

Toussaint says he's grateful to have met the teachers and students there, and has no regrets about going. Neither do Sellu or Cheadle.

"It's easier to do this kind of thing in the U.S. or in a country that is maybe safer, and there's obviously a need in those countries," says Cheadle. "But the needs in a place like Sierra Leone get met less often. Maybe it wasn't the best country to choose, strategically or practically. But it was a good country to visit to be reminded of the importance of forgiveness."

Emilie Raguso, M.J., is a crime reporter for the *Modesto Bee* newspaper. Her last article for *Greater Good* covered efforts to apply mindfulness meditation to childbirth and parenting.



Anthony Sellu (bottom right), a member of Toussaint's research team, lived in Sierra Leone until he was 20 years old.