

Harvard University Memorial Church

Speech by [Dr. Mimi Goss](#), November 26, 2002

Last year, as a State Department consultant, I traveled to Rwanda, where I did negotiation and media training seminars with 40 African women leaders. Legislators, lawyers, heads of peace organizations, journalists, generals, the women were members of Women as Partners for Peace in Africa, all working toward the inclusion of more women at African peace tables. Participants from Sudan included women from both sides of the war. Participants from Rwanda and Burundi included Tutsis and Hutus, both sides of their countries' genocides.

To travel to Rwanda with its staggering levels of disease, I had shots for yellow fever, typhoid, diphtheria-tetanus, hepatitis A, and polio, and I took malaria pills. During the trip, one American colleague got dengue fever. Another was bitten by a fly that horribly disfigured her eye. In a card my 22-year-old son gave me before I left the States, he wrote, "Dear Mom -- I hope you have a wonderful time in Rwanda. Now you can really worry about the diseases you worried about when I was little."

What worried me more than the diseases was the place. In 1994, Hutus had slaughtered 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus. In my hotel's basement, residents had stacked bodies of dead people. When residents ran out of water, they drank water from the swimming pool. In the hotel, I felt what seemed to me palpable evil. Unable to sleep, I took the first sleeping pill in my life.

But the people I met were extraordinary. The Embassy employees, mostly Rwandans, all had lost close relatives. The librarian had lost his wife and children. With tremendous courage, they still smiled, their smiles helping them face each day. And the women leaders, who also included South Africans and Nigerians, had such energy to help their countries, and most, though not all, had such hope that their countries' futures would be better than their pasts.

Early in the workshops, one woman startled me by saying, "We need your knowledge." Then another agreed and another. I had no idea what they meant, but after we discussed it, I realized what they wanted were theoretical frameworks to help them better understand their own knowledge from their experiences, studies and intuition.

We began our workshops in earnest, all learning from each other, they more my trainers, I felt, than I theirs. And once we really began exchanging ideas, listening and talking, I realize I worried less. Subconsciously, I must have believed that if something terrible happened, I was with people who would help me be more courageous than if I had been alone.

I also learned what I teach my communications students and clients. If you are worried about public speaking – or in this case about being in an unsettling place – listen to other people. Listening is a form of giving that helps ease our anxiety.

At the end of the seminars, we had a party. Every delegation brought CDs from their countries and we danced and told jokes. The Burundians were petrified of returning to their country, fearing a new genocide. But even they, elegant and regal, joined the dancing. My new friends changed my life. On the plane back, I thought that, except for illness, especially the illness of children, we Americans have few problems. As a group of people, even in a recession, even considering the tragedies of 9/11, we are so lucky.

As we celebrate Thanksgiving and the beginning of the winter holiday season -- which for many people is a mixture of giving and worrying -- I will remember the friends I met in Rwanda and how much they taught me.

On the first Thanksgiving, the Pilgrims, who had a lot to worry about – It's so cold here. Why didn't we land in Florida? -- thanked God for his blessings. They also thanked their new neighbors, the Wampanoags, for teaching them skills to survive in the harsh New England winter.

The Wampanoags, who also had their worries -- Should we trust the pink-skinned strangers? Why didn't they land in Florida? -- may have been thankful that the Puritans taught them more than they already knew about the lands across the sea.

And despite H.L. Mencken's observation, "Puritanism: the haunting fear that someone, somewhere may be happy," the Puritans and the Wampanoags probably all partied pretty hard that first Thanksgiving. And by sharing with each other their bounty, their knowledge and their good will, they probably also forgot to worry.