

THE CHIEF ID:OLOGIST MUSES...

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Circles of Family

“I need to tell you my story, and I need you to be strong.”

The words of a nameless woman in the Congo, passed on by Christine Schuler Deschryver at the Women and Peace Conference last weekend.

Born to a Congolese mother and a Belgian father, Christine's an outspoken defender of human rights, especially for women and children. Since witnessing the rape and murder of her best friend in 2000, she's devoted her life (with the help of her husband) to alerting the world to the femicide and massive rape against women and children in the Congo.

The women who's words I'll never forget came into Christine's office carrying nothing but a plastic bag. Having stated the terms of engagement, she told her story. That she was kidnapped with her husband and their four children. Her husband was killed in front of them, the others abused. After a time two of her children disappeared. When she went to the man in charge of the camp and asked him where are my children? She was told “You know the meat you've been eating...”

You know the beat that your heart skips when it goes cold. Before it recalibrates itself and directs the pain to be held elsewhere in your body. In the seconds that it took for Christine to relay that story, every single person in the room was plunged into the life she lives every single day.

She's tall, beautiful, and her horror stricken face has arranged itself into a passive neutrality, so that she disappears to make way for the story she has to tell.

100,000 women and children a year are raped in the DCR, and in her words ‘they don't mind regular rape, they'd be grateful for it.’ But what they have to endure has befuddled many of the surgeons who sew up the women as fast as the militia can rip

them apart. Some will never be put back together, their insides blown up by rifle blasts. This situation is worse than some of the most infamous rape camps in the world. It's not an exaggeration to call it femicide, the sexual torture and destruction of the female species. But it's destroying everyone. The men who witness their wives being brutalised are never the same again. It affects the children even more, and of course the women who suffer this kind of violence are never able to bear children again. This is the kind of brutality that destroys the soul, and breaks whole families and communities.

Christine experienced a different kind of horror when she got into a cab on arriving in New York, to find that the cabbie didn't know where the Congo was (something that will surprise New Yorkers not at all). She told him it's in the heart of Africa, and Africa is in the heart of the world, and if you heal the heart you heal the whole body.

In the heart of the Hudson Valley, before the first day of Fall, women gather together every year, to walk our talk about waging peace, to support each other and find ways of staying true to who we are in the process.

This year we were joined by three of the five living women Nobel Peace Prize Winners (Betty Williams, Jody Williams, Rigoberta Menchu Tum), actresses like Jane Fonda, Kerry Washington, Lynn Cohen, academics like Carol Gilligan and Riane Eisler and we were once again hosted by two of my favourite activists, Eve Ensler and Elizabeth Lesser.

Let's get the gender angle on the page. The F word is not one I'm shy of ascribing to myself but I prefer the W word. I'm a womanist, in the Alice Walker tradition, and every feminist/womanist in the gathering talked about the importance of men in our lives. We're all fathers' daughters, sons' mothers, brothers' sisters, husbands' wives. We simply represent one half of the world to men, as they represent the other half to us.

None of the women we met was tragically woman. Not one of them bemoaned their lot or whined about being victims (to quote Maya "whining lets a brute know that a victim is in the neighbourhood").

Every woman who spoke to us had a cause, and every one was a wordsmith, had

found a way of using words to soften, crush, open, bludgeon their way to being heard. That was pretty much all they had in common.

The Nobel Laureates who couldn't join us were Aung San Suu Kyi, who's been under house arrest in Burma for the past 11 years, and Shirin Ebadi, the first Muslim woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. She was refused an entry visa by the US Government, an irony that was not lost on any of us. Two of the countries the world most needs to connect, the USA and Iran, and a peace prize winner, who wants to attend a conference on peace, is denied a visa

The Nobel Laureates came from a place of unadulterated originality, and they left me feeling that spiritual activism is clearly fueled by anger or by peace.

Jody Williams, awarded the prize for her work to eradicate landmines, is one angry dame. In a room filled with peace lovers, she was uncompromising. "You know what? Fuck inner peace. I'll get inner peace when I'm dead. Right now I'm angry."

Rigoberta Menchu Tum, winner of the Peace Prize for her work to end oppression in Guatemala, has the kind of peaceful energy the Dalai Lama brings to a room. She came to us fresh from fighting an election campaign, one she was doomed to lose, and one that had already caused the death by assassination of eleven people from her party.

An election adviser told her she'd need to engage a team of image consultants (cost \$1 million) and advisors (cost \$25 million). She was told that to win you have to promise things that don't exist. Depending on the area of the country you're campaigning in, votes can be bought for anything from two dollars to fifty. Her response was that she's not a product, that she wouldn't buy airtime or radio time in a country where her people were so impoverished, and importantly, that she would not buy a single vote. Life was given to her by a mother who was raped, tortured and killed, and a father who suffered the same fate. She also lost her brother to the struggle.

To see a woman in constant pain work against those in constant power, with a smile on her face, is nothing short of a miracle. When asked how she keeps going, she replied "I wake up every morning and I think what can I do to bother them today?"

Betty Williams is every Celtic woman you've ever met. She and Mairead Corrigan were jointly awarded the Peace Prize in 1976 for their work to bring peace to Northern Ireland. She was a receptionist who witnessed the horrific death of three innocent children, and from that moment has done nothing but work to relieve the suffering of the world's children. But funny? You have no idea. Unapologetically herself, and a masterful storyteller. She's a faithful Catholic with a devotion to Mary, a devotion that was triggered by an experience at the birth of her daughter. She lost so much blood she was unconscious and wired up, and her daughter was taken to the baby unit so she could sleep. Betty woke from the sleep to see a blue light in the corner of the room and heard the voice of Mary ("I didn't know Mary was Irish.") telling her that her baby needed her. She tore the wires from her body and went to find her baby, and when she arrived the baby was black and had stopped breathing. After the birth they had failed to clear the baby's airways of mucus and fluid, and she was slowly choking to death. From that moment her faith has been complete, and as I often say, where there's faith there's no fear. This is one fearless woman.

She told us for example the story of meeting the Popes (plural). Invited to meet John Paul II at the Vatican, he began their conversation by leaning in and telling her he was very concerned about world hunger. Her response? "Sure, don't be - just sell a couple of Michelangelos". She calls Desmond Tutu 'the Arch', and does a lot of work with the Dalai Lama, so much so that last time she was with him in Dharamsala she said "Sure your Holiness is it not time you and I got married?" He replied that he thought he should find someone younger. She's so fond of him she says that every morning she says her rosary, then does a little chant for His Holiness.

The final word from Nobel Laureates belongs to Aung San Soo Kyi, who says women get accused of talking too much. Maybe that's what we need.

There were so many amazing people listening and talking for three days, I won't attempt to capture all of them. Most potent though were women from conflict zones, like Christine from the Congo, like Carol Bebel from New Orleans, and of course, like Malalai Joya from Afghanistan.

Malalai is a controversial Afghan politician and advocate for women's rights. She's only 28 years old, and has already been denounced and banned from parliament for calling the male politicians warlords and druglords to their faces, in a three minute

speech that would alter her life. She told them they were worse than dogs.

After a stunned silence there was an uproar. Some of the male mujahideen, guns at their feet, rushed her, and she was ushered out of the building, put under the protection of the UN. Since then she has survived four assassination attempts, been branded an infidel and a communist, and travels in Afghanistan under a burqa and with armed guards. Despite the commands of Assembly Chairman, she still refuses to apologize for her words. When interviewed by the BBC a year ago, the notion of an apology was raised, and she said that an apology was indeed due.

To the dogs.

She wears the expression of one who knows her days are numbered. Words leave her mouth in a torrent, high pitched and strident and without pause. Like she only has a certain amount of time and needs to get her story and the story of her people out while she still has a voice.

She told us "They will kill me but they will not kill my voice, because it will be the voice of all Afghan women. You can cut the flower, but you cannot stop the coming of spring."

I gave a talk too, and seeing my name on the programme with these women was the most humbling experience. I joined them at the faculty dinner and shared a few brief but intimate conversations.

The stories we shared, and those I've passed on to you here, are in the modern oral tradition, the baton being passed. We laughed more than we cried, and the typically exclusive emotions of hope, despair and humour was the best ménage a trios I've ever experienced.

One of the funniest parts of the weekend was when Jane Fonda's assistant came to me and said she'd been looking for me everywhere. Jane had a massage booked at 1 o'clock and wouldn't be able to make it, so she'd like to gift it to me, would that be ok? I'd met her briefly the night before, exchanging no more than a word, a look and a handshake. Thanks to Jane, and her uncanny perception, I put myself in the hands of her healer with gratitude.

You know you're in the presence of greatness when the most commonplace thing in the room is intelligence. Each of the women we met is smart, funny, politicised, strong, soft, warm, uncompromising ... Not one of them was a thin slice of woman, but whole, and in some way being of service, and surely that's all any of us can hope for.

When I saw Michelle Shocked last month in London, she said that in her opinion there are five kinds of tears:

Tears of sorrow

Tears of joy

Tears of desperation/frustration

Tears of compassion

Tears of Travail

We cried tears for all of these reasons, but the important thing was we cried them with each other, for each other, and just knowing that your tears aren't alone is comfort. I know we brought comfort to each other, but I know we also brought comfort to Christine, to Malalai, to Rigoberta and all of the women who came to get our attention.

Mother Teresa used to say "We draw the circle of our families too small."

Hear. Hear.

POSTED BY CAROLINE AT 2:35 PM 0 COMMENTS

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