

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Leadership and the Indomitable Human Spirit

by Dr. Mike Armour

With so many things going wrong in our world, it's easy to let pessimism take over. I feel that temptation sometimes myself.

But as a historian by training, I'm struck by the indomitable spirit of humanity, a spirit that triumphs over the worst tragedies imaginable. It's a recurring pattern, unbroken over the centuries.

We forget too easily, I fear, just how resilient and resourceful the human spirit truly is.

I've been thinking about this the past few days during a visit to Rwanda. I was meeting with the Prime Minister, the Minister of Cabinet Affairs, and the Minister of Local Governments and conducting leadership training for the Prime Minister's staff.

My visit happened to coincide with their national commemoration of the genocide of 1994. That horror, unleashed by the government on its own people, took a million lives in a hundred days.

On Saturday I toured the genocide memorial in Kigali, where slabs of concrete, large enough to be the foundation of a house, mark a dozen mass burial sites.

Rwanda will never get over the memory of those days. But it is amazing how fast that the indomitable human spirit is proving itself once more.

Triumph Over a Dark Past

Today Rwanda is a constitutional democracy, with a constitution that forbids discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, religion, or gender.

The majority of the representatives in parliament are women. In fact, Rwanda has more women in its parliament than any other legislative body in the world.

And no nation has a more determined campaign to stamp out corruption than the one you will find in Rwanda. As we were approaching the complex housing the Prime Minister and his staff, a large sign in the grassy median warned, "Zero tolerance for corruption!" And the recent history of their courts demonstrates that this is no idle threat.

Rwanda still has a steep learning curve ahead of it. Its approach to democracy falls short of American and European ideals, especially with regards to freedom of the press. But exceptional progress has been made in rebuilding from the bloodbath.

At the height of the genocide, who could have imagined such a flowering of constitutional and human rights in little more than a decade?

Driving the well-paved, beautifully landscaped boulevards of Kigali, scanning the magnificent homes perched atop the many hillsides framing the city, I recalled a turnabout that was even more spectacular seven hundred years ago.

Rising from the Ashes

During my graduate studies I spent much of my time researching the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. I was drawn to this era because of its testimony to the indomitable human spirit.

In the middle of the fourteenth century – in 1349 to be exact – the Black Plague wiped out one-third of the population of Europe. Entire towns disappeared, never to rise again.

Had you walked among the piles of corpses and smelled the stench of death at every turn, you would have wondered if Western civilization could even survive, much less flourish again. Yet the Black Death came only two generations before the cultural and scientific explosion known as the Renaissance, the Rebirth.

The Renaissance is renowned for its great works of art, its architectural wonders, and the intellectual revolution that laid the foundation for modern science. But above all it's a monument to that indomitable human spirit.

A Reminder for Leaders

As leaders, it's important for us to keep this aspect of human nature in mind. In difficult and trying times, even leaders can be shaken in their confidence about the future. They can begin to doubt their people's ability to bounce back, especially in the aftermath of some staggering blow.

But to succumb to such doubts gives inadequate tribute to the potential that people have within them. As leaders we must believe in our people and what they can achieve. And then we must help them believe in themselves.

When they do, unthinkable challenges can be overcome. The consequences of devastation can be put behind. The darkest hours can turn into brilliant success. And the indomitable human spirit can once again prevail.

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