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## To Empathize With An Enemy

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# To Empathize With An Enemy

## **Abstract**

I do not like to talk about my time in Sierra Leone, but I think I'm ready to start.

Growing up in Sierra Leone was probably the best thing that ever happened to me. I carry with me fond memories of my childhood, growing up on 22 Thompson Street in the one-storey house with red doors and windows and zebra themed paint. Evenings were spent riding bikes with my best friend Fatmata. Weekend afternoons spent playing scrabble and watching our favorite Disney movies with my siblings and neighbors in our living room. Those memories I have kept, happily. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, Sierra Leone, ethnicity, refugee, Ishmael Beah, child soldiers, war, enemies

## **Disciplines**

African American Studies | African Studies | International and Area Studies | International Relations | Military and Veterans Studies | Military History | Peace and Conflict Studies | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies

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# SURGE

**[ VERB ] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward**

## TO EMPATHIZE WITH AN ENEMY

November 6, 2013

I do not like to talk about my time in Sierra Leone, but I think I'm ready to start.

Growing up in Sierra Leone was probably the best thing that ever happened to me. I carry with me fond memories of my childhood, growing up on 22 Thompson Street in the one-storey house with red doors and windows and zebra themed paint. Evenings were spent riding bikes with my best friend Fatmata. Weekend afternoons spent playing scrabble and watching our favorite Disney movies with my siblings and neighbors in our living room. Those memories I have kept, happily.

However, there are also parts of my childhood that I have tried unsuccessfully to forget. I vividly remember the rebels storming my town and wreaking havoc, looking on as homes were reduced to ashes, standing by helplessly as loved ones died. For the last 14 years, I have been reminded everyday of the rebels' impact in my life by simply looking in the mirror; a flower-shaped scar on my leg, the result of a gunshot wound, serves as a visual reminder of the tremendous losses for my neighbors, my family, and my country.

I first read Ishmael Beah's [\*A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier\*](#) as a teenager. Reading depictions of how child soldiers were brainwashed and exposed to extreme violence, I felt sorry for what the author and many others went through. Yet at the same time, I felt horrible that I empathized with him, almost as if I was betraying myself and all the other victims of the war in Sierra Leone.

Prior to reading Ishmael's book, the rebels and other perpetrators of the war were nothing more than evil human beings that had inflicted pain and violence on me, my family and countless others hurt and killed during the war. I failed to see them as humans. How could they be? They went around hacking people's limbs off. They were the greedy men looting people's houses. I could not see them as anything but monsters.



I had always assumed that I was a victim; that my deceased sister was a victim; that the thousands of Sierra Leoneans who lost their lives during the war were victims. But I had never considered that the rebels, child soldiers, and others coerced into fighting were victims of the war as well.

Yet, I found myself connecting with young Ishmael. He grew up listening to stories told by his grandparents, like I had. He enjoyed reading books, just like I had. His loss was as immeasurable as mine. His scars as real.

This sympathy felt shameful. Blaming the perpetrators gave me a clear enemy, people at whom to direct my anger. When Ishmael's book was released, some Sierra Leoneans, including my father, expressed their outrage that the "rebel" gets to share their story. Their anger stemmed from the knowledge that the majority of the tales of the 50,000 victims would go unheard.

I attended a lecture given by Ishmael a few weeks ago. With ambivalence, I sat in the fourth row and listened to him share his story, the pain, the recovery and his journey to slowly regain his humanity. And it was beautiful. There I was, in complete awe and inspired by a person I feared and was taught to always look upon with contempt.

Ironically, this man gave me exactly what I needed. I now have the ability to understand things I could not as a child and I have the permission to heal. I never thought that meeting my enemy would inspire forgiveness. But it did.

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<http://surgegettysburg.wordpress.com/2013/11/06/to-empathize-with-an-enemy/>