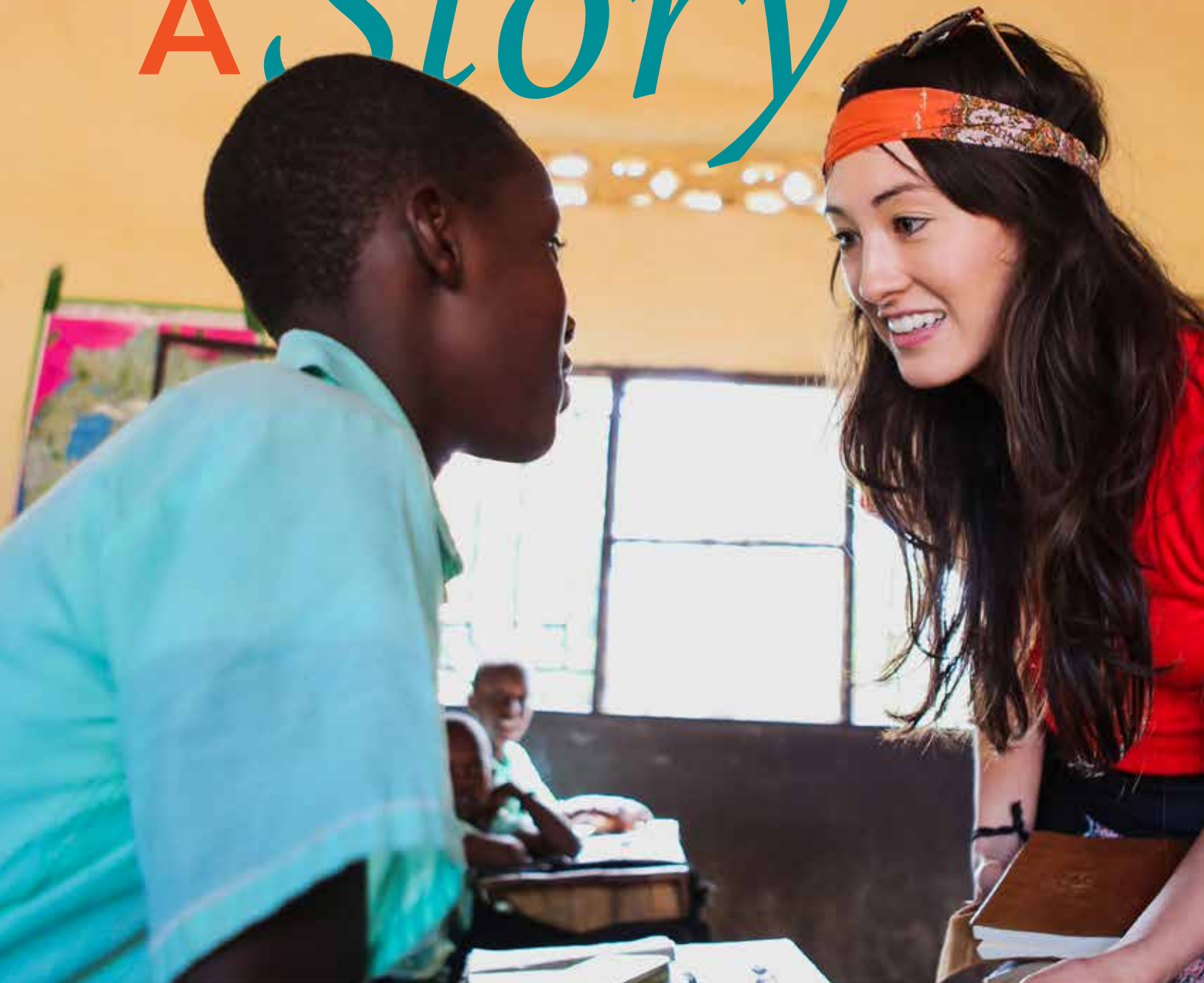
A WAR, A TEACHER, A LESSON, and A *Story*



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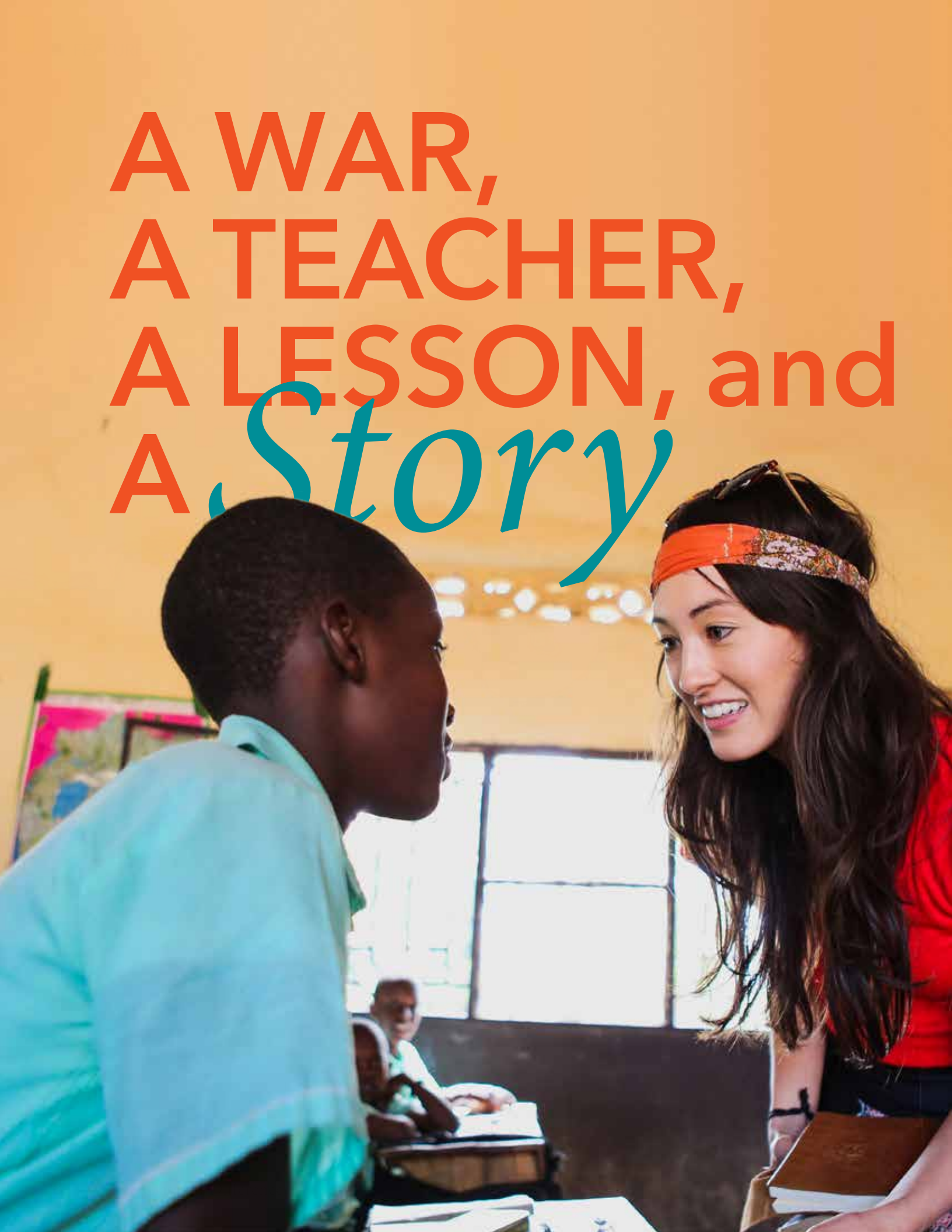


Teacher Jenny Rallens wishes her American students could see what Rwandans already know.

On my first afternoon visiting Bright Future School in Nyagatare, Rwanda, the 6th grade teacher waves me into his room. "Teacher from America," he says, "they have asked that you will lead them." He pushes his white stub of chalk into my hand and disappears into the back row.

The sudden request takes me by surprise. I am scheduled to teach English classes later this week, but today I am the learner, studying this Rwandan school which hopes to import classical methods into its country of terraced green hills, silvery eucalyptus forests, and recent genocide scars.

I step from red dust sunlight into the concrete cool of this classroom, halfway across the world from my own. Forty Rwandan students press forward on their benches. Automatic reflex takes over and I find myself doing what I almost always do when I'm not prepared, or when I want my students to taste goodness beyond any explanation I could prepare. I read them a story.

The Hobbit happens to be one of the books on my iPhone Kindle. I open to chapter 1 and begin, with all the vocal drama I can muster.

> *In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort.*

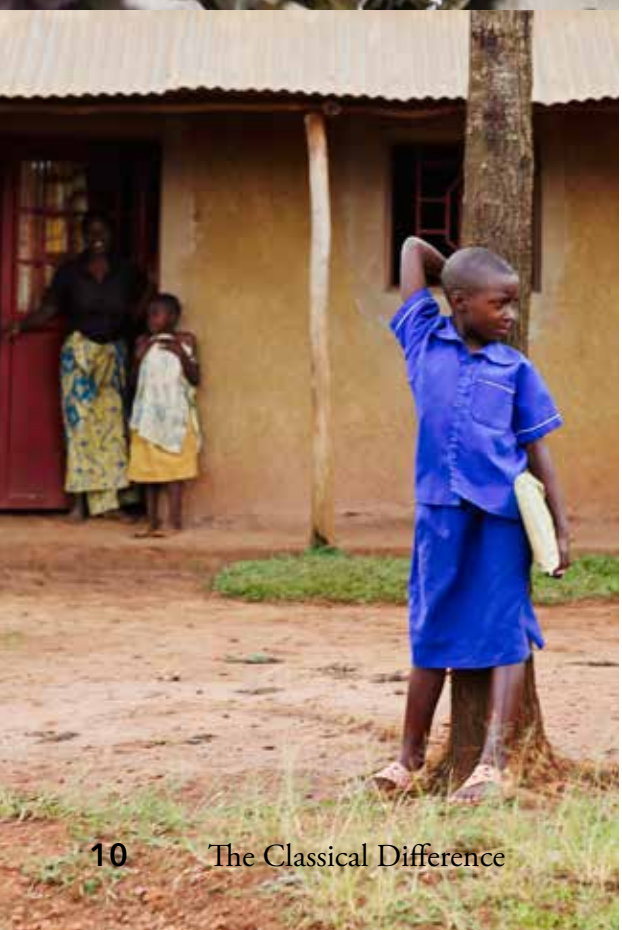
Instantly the dear familiar words evaporate the distance between this sweaty, red-dusted concrete classroom and the air-conditioned, carpeted fifth grade room at Ambrose where I read *The Hobbit* aloud every single year. No matter that my American students have self-flush toilets, smartphones, and organic peanut butter sandwiches while my new Rwandan students have squatty potties, cracked blackboards, and no lunch at all. 8805 miles away from Idaho, Tolkien's words are home. Part of my soul dances with the joy of sharing one of my favorite stories with these new friends, my little brothers and sisters, who seem to be devouring it eagerly.

But another part of me wrestles doubt. What am I doing reading a challenging Western book to African students who struggle to track with my American accent in simple conversation? What was I thinking, plunging students straight into dwarves, dragons, wizards, and a fat, pipe-smoking reluctant hero—with no previous introduction to the mechanics of literature? What could classical Christian education from Idaho have to offer these children who are already much richer in faith and community than my American companions and me?

When the class period ends, more than a dozen students linger hopefully in the classroom. "Do you want me to keep reading?"

Of course, I don't really expect Rwandan sixth graders to understand *The Hobbit*. The most I can reasonably hope is that they will be entertained by my animated facial expressions and the distinct voices I've developed for each of the 13 dwarves.

But, somehow, they are getting more. I pause now and then to ask comprehension questions, and their answers come at first in hesitant whispers, but reveal an understanding that astonishes me. When the class period ends, more than a dozen students linger hopefully in the classroom. *Do you want to keep reading?* I ask, sitting down on one of their benches and inviting them closer. There is an instant scramble, and then fuzzy shaved heads are pressing so close I can hardly breathe. One circle of students squishes around me, some of them trying to read the screen upside down. A second circle leans over their heads. One student, Dian, begins to read aloud along with me, then another, and another, their beautiful accents harmonizing with mine.



I've spent the past eight years teaching some of the most delightful, faithful people in the world, and yet I've never encountered children so hungry to learn.

As they sang the hobbit felt the love of beautiful things made by hands and by cunning and by magic moving through him, a fierce and jealous love, the desire of the hearts of the dwarves. Then something Tookish woke up inside him, and he wished to go and see the great mountains, and hear the pine-trees and the waterfalls, and explore the caves . . .

Why do they stay? I still wonder. Is it their unending fascination with my white skin and straight hair? My theatrical reading? Does their culture's generous tradition of hospitality insist they maintain polite interest? Or is it possible that they have been captivated by this fat, frightened hobbit and want to follow his adventure? We read until the headmaster comes to tell me school was dismissed a half hour ago, and I must leave the classroom or the students will never go home.

They squeeze me goodbye and scatter down footpaths through cornfields and the red dirt road that winds through the village. Several of these children will walk two hours or more on tattered shoes, through glowing fields of banana trees and lush rice paddies, and up and down some of Rwanda's "thousand hills" before they reach their homes. There they might collect jerry cans and walk another mile or two to bring water back to their family, eat supper, do more chores, sleep on a mat over a dirt floor, and get up well before dawn to walk the two hours back to school.

And those are the lucky ones. How will I ever forget the little huddle of yearning faces outside every classroom window, where the village's uneducated children stood straining to catch fragments of the stories we read in classroom after classroom? Though public schooling is nearly free for Rwandans, many families must choose between food and paying the miniscule monthly fee for education supplies. And then there are the mothers who buy schooling for their children by selling their own bodies.

I get on the bus and cry all the way back to our hotel. I've spent the past eight years teaching some of the most delightful, faithful people in the world, and yet I've never encountered children so hungry to learn.

Starving African children with toothpick limbs and bloated bellies so regularly haunt my Facebook news feed that I subconsciously expected to find them around every corner in Rwanda. In reality we met very few underfed children on this trip. Instead, we were welcomed by the most joyful, hospitable Christians I have ever met, whole communities who seem astonishingly free from the particularly Western temptation to control life rather than offer it as a holy sacrifice. What I would consider heroic faith—a fatherless young woman taking a year off to serve a church instead of pursuing her career "just to say thank you to the Lord;" a large family opening their small home to a half-dozen orphaned children; a poor village pastor providing a lavish meal for me, a stranger before that moment, when I appeared on his porch; a high school student sharing his own two shirts and one bar of soap with a struggling classmate—these are mundane habits among the Rwandans I met.

But still, the word that kept coming to mind was *hunger*. This love is the natural embodiment of their hunger to follow a God, I realized, they somehow believe is more real, more present, and more good than I do. And *hunger* was again the desire I sensed at Bright Future School: a hunger for Christ and for education in His truth, a hunger fueled in part by their recent history, a hunger I wish I and my Idahoan students tasted more often.

The reason our group of students, teachers, and parents from The Ambrose School traveled to Rwanda for two weeks

was to better understand this hunger. We had also been asked to share a few classical methods with teachers and students at Africa Bright Future School in Nyagatare and to try to understand the vision for classical Christian education in this small country healing from centuries of colonialism and ethnic violence.

In the spring of 1994, I was 8 years old, chasing fireflies in Maryland woods, feeding earthworms to box turtles in my bathtub, and watching purple East Coast lightning with my newborn baby sister's fist curled around my thumb.

On the other side of the world in the spring of 1994, genocide was choking the streets of Rwanda, Africa, with dead bodies, babies' heads smashed systematically against a killing wall, a country crippled by the slaughter of a seventh of its people, many of whom were now orphans and HIV-infected widows. In 100 days between April and June in 1994, the Rwandan majority ethnic group, the Hutus, executed a secretly planned extermination of one million Tutsis, the minority ethnic group.

"Most people who participated in the genocide were young people who couldn't read or write," Pastor Patrick Twagirayesu explains. "Most were impoverished. Many were hungry." They had not been taught to think critically, to ask questions, to feel wisely, and they were led by a handful of immoral but highly educated masterminds who exploited them. "Lack of education made these young people vulnerable, believing what their leaders told them to do was right, led by the promise of a better life if they killed their neighbor." So when the genocide masterminds told them that God wanted the Tutsis dead, they obeyed unquestioningly.

Rwandans were slaughtered at nearly three times the daily rate of Jewish deaths in the Holocaust, despite a lack of sophisticated extermination machinery. The murders, designed to humiliate and torture as well as kill, were performed mostly by machete, and where machete was unavailable, by club.

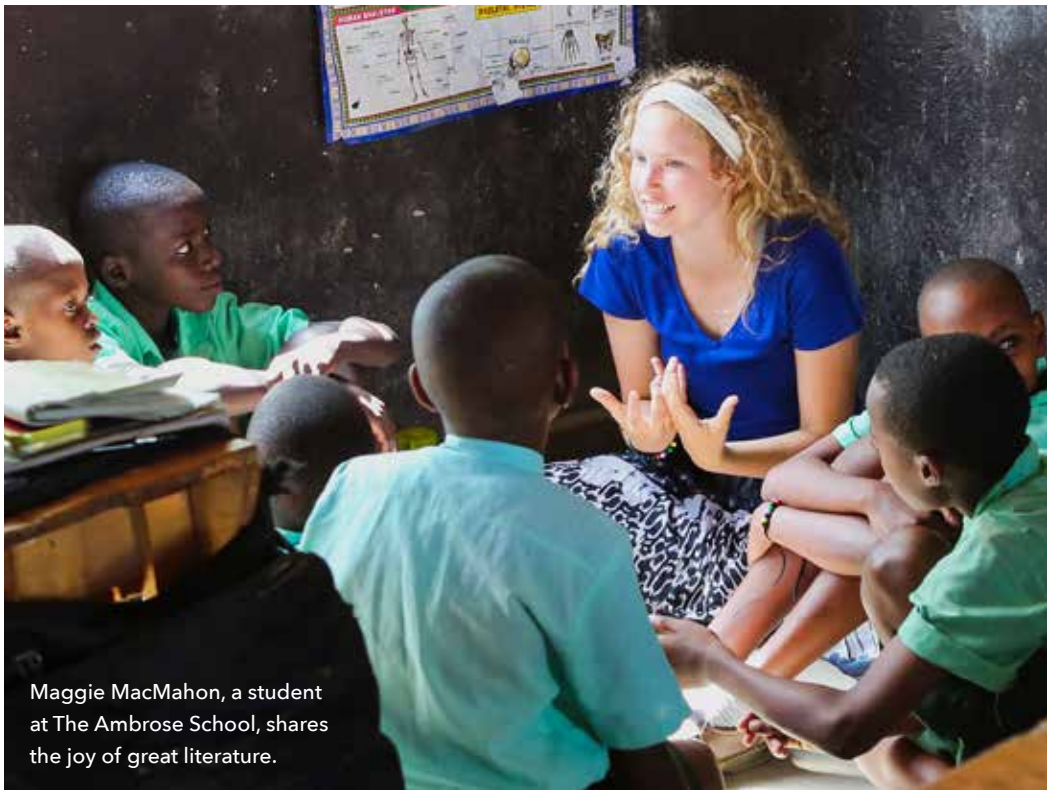
I stand in this slaughter house church only 21 years later. Of a family of 10, our guide Rachel whispers, she is the only one who survived. When someone from our team asks her to tell her story, she shakes her head, presses her lips together and lowers her eyes.

45,000 of those who died in the genocide are buried here in three mass graves. Fresh flowers left on the white stone testify to living hearts that still ache for the dead.

In a shaft below the church neat piles of bones are sorted by kind and heaped on shelves. Rows of skulls are stacked on others, many of them pierced or dented from blunt weapon trauma. The shelves are a few stories high, row upon row, bone upon bone. The bones are too many to count. The shadow of an enormous cockroach, illuminated by my flashlight, raises a ghastly antenna over a shelf of skulls. The catacomb smells of dust and bones.

I Corinthians 15 flickers through my mind, and I try to imagine the resurrection, the explosion of life that will burst from these shelves and mass graves when Jesus comes to knit these bones back together and wipe away the tears from the thousands buried here. I want desperately to be comforted by this truth, but hope of a new earth shrivels next to the real horror of broken bones and bloody garments.

God, where were you when this happened to your people, in your church? Christians killing other Christians in your name. I sit down on the steps of one of the mass graves and sob. Our translator, John, takes my hand and pulls me to my feet. "Take heart," he says, pointing toward heaven. John remembers being six years old in 1994, when he and his family returned from forced exile in a Ugandan refugee camp—in which four of his ten siblings died from malaria—to a Rwanda whose villages, fields, and dirt roads were blocked with brutalized bodies rotting in piles.



Maggie MacMahon, a student at The Ambrose School, shares the joy of great literature.

How can your people bear it? I ask.

The genocide has taught us the precious worth of every single human

life, John replies, and in valuing persons so deeply there is great joy. We mourn this past, but we take heart because God brings beauty out of ashes. As Pastor Patrick explains later, the passion he and other Rwandan leaders invest in education—and the revelation that Christian education could make the difference, literally, between life and death—was forged in this holocaust.

As our bus bumps along the red Rwandan roads, I can't stop thinking about a conversation I had with a disgruntled Ambrose student shortly before I left for Africa. *All I want to be when I grow up, he said, is a good Christian dad and a park ranger. And all that takes is some science, the three R's, and God. So why Augustine, poetry, critical thinking, Beowulf, discussions, medieval history? I get that you want us to be virtuous, he added, preempting the usual answer, but why this classical stuff when all we need is Jesus?*

> Why this classical stuff when all we need is Jesus?

How I wish he could hear the Rwandan answer to his question. Because they had Jesus, and they also had a genocide.

"I treasure education," Pastor Patrick Twagirayesu explains one night over steaming mugs of nutmeggy African tea, "because illiteracy hinders your ability to truly comprehend Christ himself."

Why, we ask, does he—already a prolific evangelist and church planter—consider academics a crucial part of his mission? Why not stick to spreading the gospel? His answer, framed by the backdrop of blood-spattered killing walls and shelves of fractured skulls, takes my breath away. *Moral education would have prevented the genocide.* Education that is Christian and thoughtful, cut along the grain of God's own nature and the nature God gave to man, is an antidote to genocidal ideologies and "the key to a better future for Rwanda."

Consider an illiterate Christian Rwandan peasant, Pastor Patrick goes on to explain, one who might easily have been a killer in the genocide. This peasant believes the gospel and loves Jesus, but embodying the gospel requires the ability to understand how the gospel shapes all parts of life, the eyes to see how genocidal ideology contradicts Christianity—even when the leaders he has been educated to blindly follow tell him God wants him to kill Tutsis. The unschooled person has been prevented from growing the spiritual, intellectual, human capacity for asking moral questions, applying ideals to situations, or contemplating different narratives of action. An uneducated person, Pastor Patrick analogizes, is like a man who cuts down the pillar that is holding up his own house and burns it for warmth, thinking he has done a good deed.

Later that week we return to Bright Future School to teach literature lessons. Pastor Patrick has asked that we model specific practices for his teachers in Nyagatare that he has seen at Ambrose: integration of biblical truth in every lesson rather than only in Bible class, critical and creative thinking instead of mindless "cram-work," how students can be discipled not just disciplined, pedagogy that forms what a student loves and not just what he knows.

Once again my Rwandan students eagerly eat up the story of Aslan's sacrifice from *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe.* They listen breathlessly, spellbound by the great Lion's death on the Stone Table under the glittering knife of the White Witch, Susan and Lucy's long bitter night, the nibbling mice, and the deeper magic of that bright dawn.

Divided into small groups led by students from Ambrose, the Bright Future students narrate the story back, timidly at first but then with increasing flair and relish. Eventually a few groups reenact the story while their classmates cheer. They grasp, with some struggle at first, the idea

of allegory: how Aslan's sacrifice is an image of the gospel, and they begin to articulate their own insights about the story.

This is better than Christmas, I write in my journal from an overflowing heart, after spending a few more days reading *Frog and Toad, The Hobbit,* and *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* all over the Bright Future School grounds with students, not only during class, but before, after, during every break. They can't seem to get enough of stories, appearing in pairs or dozens at my elbow, a book in hand, grinning up invitingly. We sit down on curbs, or in the dust, or grassy hillocks, open the book, and read a little bit more about four Pevensies, who somehow belong in Rwanda as much as they do in Britain or Narnia or Idaho.

To be sure, nothing about simply reading Tolkien, Lewis, or Arnold Lobel—whether in Boise or Nyagatare—*feels* like the antidote to genocide. But then I remember Irving Babbit's insistence, echoing moral educators through the centuries, that literature is "emancipating," because it presents us with universal ideas and questions and "leads him who studies it out and away from himself … and servitude to the present" illuminating the demands of the here and with the holiest, wisest of thens and theres.

When my future park ranger asked me back in Idaho why an Ambrose education was worth it, *to prevent a genocide* was not the answer I gave him. But now I wonder if perhaps Pastor Patrick's answer is the most honest one. We classical educators speak of instilling virtues, ordering loves, *imitatio Christi*, passing the (healthy) soul of society from generation to generation. But Augustine, Charlemagne, Alfred the Great, the medieval monastic tradition, and Pastor Patrick know all too well the dark antithesis to a culture without moral education: churches full of barbarized bodies, small children forced to slaughter their own parents, shelves of battered skulls and bones.

Later that week I hear Bright Future students dramatically retelling the story of Aslan's sacrifice to each other, to other members of my team, to younger students. I imagine them trekking home to share the story over pots of beans and roasted plantains that night with their siblings who yearn for stories, as much as they hunger for their evening meal. I imagine them finding and devouring the rest of the Narnian Chronicles and other great books, where we left them at Bright Future School. As Rwanda's thousand hills ripple away under my airplane window, I pray that the heart-stirring hunger—for worship, for a life poured out, for Jesus—we experienced in this community is both fed and deepened as they read these books, and I beg God that after tasting the keen longing for His presence here, I will learn from my Rwandan friends how to always be this hungry. ■

> How I wish my student could hear the Rwandan answer to his question. Because they had Jesus, and they also had a genocide.

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JENNY RALLENS is a former teacher at The Ambrose School in Meridian, ID. She attended New Saint Andrews College and Oxford University, and is currently pursuing her doctoral degree at Oxford University. She speaks at various events around the world, and is a guest speaker at the 2016 annual ACCS "Repairing the Ruins" Conference. Her practical application of classical methods and ideas with examples from her years in the 5th to 12th grade classroom make her a popular speaker at our conferences.