



# Ishmael Beah's Long Way Back

Ishmael Beah's best-selling memoir, *A Long Way Gone*, tells the terrible story of his life as a child soldier in war-torn Sierra Leone. Now SUSAN McCLELLAND tells the next chapter—of the role Buddhism played in this remarkable young man's recovery and the healing power of storytelling.

“THERE WERE ALL KINDS OF STORIES told about the war that made it sound as if it was happening in a faraway and different land,” Ishmael Beah writes at the beginning of *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Child Soldier*.

Some stories are like those that Beah heard about the war before it reached his village—they make us think that the people involved have nothing to do with us. Other stories, however, place us in the heart of the narrative and, in so doing, they enable us to identify with people who are very different from ourselves and who have had very different life experiences. *A Long Way Gone*, Beah's *New York Times* bestseller, is this second kind of story. It describes something too awful for most people in North America to conceive of, yet it takes us into that experience and makes us understand it.

Beah was leading the life of a typical child in rural Sierra Leone. He attended school when he could. He helped cultivate his family's crops and he spent the nights sitting under the moon listening to stories told by his elders. One night when Beah was five years old, his grandfather's friend, a man named Pa Sesay, told a story that Beah never forgot. It was about a hunter who set out to find a monkey. When the hunter finally came across one and was poised to kill it, the monkey spoke: “If you shoot me, your mother will die, and if you don't, your father will die.”

“What would you do if you were the hunter?” Pa Sesay asked.

When Beah was seven, he came up with his answer to the riddle. He'd shoot the monkey, so that it wouldn't have the chance to make any other humans choose. "I never discussed it with anyone," Ishmael writes in his memoir, "for fear of how my mother would feel."

Five years later, in 1993, Beah was twelve and civil war was raging in his country. Refugees passed through his village and talked about how rebel soldiers from the Revolutionary United Front had killed their families. People felt sorry for the refugees and offered them a place to stay, but the refugees didn't accept the invitation. They said the war would soon come to Beah's area. And they were right.

One morning, Beah, his older brother, Junior, and some friends stuffed their pockets with rap-music cassettes and loaded their backpacks with notebooks full of lyrics. Junior, who had learned about North American dance and music at secondary school, had taught the others how to rap, and now the boys were scheduled to participate in a talent show in Matru Jong, a neighboring village. To save money, they opted to walk the sixteen miles there, arriving without incident. But they were not in Matru Jong for very long before they received news from home: the rebels had attacked their village.

The boys, not knowing if their families were dead or alive, set out to look for them. On the way, they saw lost children wailing for their parents. They saw a woman carrying a dead baby on her back, the baby's blood dripping down her dress, and they saw a man vomiting blood and crying. He and his family had tried to escape the rebels by car, but the rebels had shot and killed his wife and children.

The boys realized their parents could not still be in their village and that the only thing they could do was to go back to Matru Jong. Of course, everyone knew that sooner or later the war would find them there, too.

Beah was cooking when he first heard the rebels fire their guns. "In the beginning of the war, people were afraid of the gunshots," Beah tells me in an interview, "but soon the sound became all too common. We got used to it and didn't run."

On this day, though, Beah did run, and he didn't stop for many months. Journeying from one village to another in an attempt to outrun the rebels, Beah ate fruit growing on trees he'd never seen before and slept in trees or on the porches of strangers' huts. And in his running to no particular place, he lost people along the way. Some, like Junior, he lost in the confusion of rebel attacks. Others, like his friend Gasemu, were murdered by rebels right before his eyes.

A few days after Gasemu's death, Beah was walking

## Some Hard Facts on Child Soldiers

- An estimated 300,000 children—boys and girls under the age of 18—are involved in more than 30 conflicts worldwide.
- A UNICEF study of six countries reported the average age of child soldiers as 13 years old. Human Rights Watch reports that there are soldiers as young as eight years old.
- Children are used as combatants, messengers, spies, porters, cooks, human land-mine detectors, suicide bombers, and for forced sexual services. New light-weight weaponry has made it possible for children to serve in frontline combat. In some cases, they are drugged to increase their fearlessness in battle.
- Some children are abducted or forcibly recruited; others join because of poverty, abuse, and discrimination, or to seek revenge for violence enacted against them or their families. Children are more likely to become soldiers if they are separated from their families, displaced from their homes, living in combat zones, or have limited access to education. They may join armed groups because doing so guarantees daily food and survival.
- Child soldiers have served in armed political groups or in government forces in the following countries/territories: Afghanistan, Angola, Burma, Burundi, Sri Lanka, Chad, Colombia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, East Timor, Eritrea, Guinea, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Israel/Occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip/Palestinian Authority Territories, Laos, Lebanon, Liberia, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Russian Federation, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda. (UNICEF includes the U.S. and Canada in its list because they allow conscription under 18.)
- Burma is believed to have more child soldiers than any other country in the world. The majority of their child soldiers are in the national army, which forcibly recruits those as young as 11. Children make up an estimated 20 percent of Burma's 350,000-strong force.

*Compiled from recent UN, UNICEF, and Human Rights Watch releases.*

along a dirt path when two government soldiers motioned with their guns for him to follow them. He was drafted into their army and for the next three years, he was—as he puts it—a long way gone. As a child soldier, Beah committed all sorts of atrocities, including murder. “I lost my humanity,” he says.

parables rather than first-person narratives. One such parable recounts the friendship between the Buddha and a man named Angulimala.

Angulimala was a student of Brahmanic learning, but after being betrayed by his teacher and his teacher’s wife, he spiraled down into a life of evil, fueled



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*A fourteen-year-old soldier in the Sierra Leone Army is helped with his rifle by another soldier (2000).*

ALL HUMANS SUFFER. It’s the basic human story. Yet true stories of horrific suffering were not widely circulated historically. Victors wrote the history books, and their victims’ stories were rarely recounted. “What has kept these stories back in the past is the tremendous amount of shame and the lack of receptivity to hearing them,” explains psychologist Dr. Beth Hedva. “Historically, there has been a strong blaming of the victim.” But things are changing now. According to Dr. Hedva, there is a trend in storytelling that points to a shift in consciousness. More than ever before, she says, people are developing the capacity to listen to the stories of others and to truly empathize with them. And since people are now ready to hear the victims’ perspective, the victims are ready to tell it.

Beah, however, was not just a victim. He was also a perpetrator of violence. It is a difficult truth that humans can be both victims and victimizers, and stories revealing this truth test the compassion of the listener. For that reason, says Dr. Hedva, when storytellers in the past wanted to make this point, they usually used

by bitterness and resentment. He became a murderer and took to wearing a necklace made of the severed fingers of his victims. Yet the Buddha was undaunted by this grisly decoration and sought Angulimala out, determined to save him. At first Angulimala tried to attack the Buddha, but eventually, through the Buddha’s guidance, Angulimala returned to a peaceful and happy life.

This story illustrates that even someone who commits the most appalling acts of violence can be saved through true compassion. Beah’s story is much the same. Both Angulimala and Beah descend into the worst kind of evil, yet in the end they are transformed and their life experiences serve as a light for others. There is one big difference between the two stories, however. Angulimala’s is likely fictitious, while Beah’s is hauntingly real.

UNICEF WORKERS RESCUED Beah from his three-year ordeal in the Sierra Leone army and put him into a rehabilitation program for child soldiers in Freetown, the

capital of Sierra Leone. “None of what happened to you is your fault,” one nurse told Beah. Still, he was plagued by demons. His sleep, when it came, was filled with nightmares, and during his waking hours he struggled with a drug addiction. One way superiors in both the rebel and state armies forced children to fight for them was by keeping them heavily doped up on drugs: marijuana, amphetamines, and “brown-brown,” a mix of cocaine and gunpowder. “I don’t think I would have killed without the



*Ishmael Beah speaks at a conference sponsored by UNICEF in Paris, February 5, 2007. Representatives from more than 50 countries gathered to search for ways to demobilize and rehabilitate the world’s estimated 300,000 child soldiers.*

drugs,” Beah says. But with them, and with the hatred he harbored toward the rebels, murder had come easily.

Beah was one of the more fortunate children at the rehabilitation center. After many months had passed and he was sufficiently healed, workers there managed to locate an uncle—his only surviving relative—and he invited Beah to come live with him in Freetown. Even more fortunately, Beah had impressed his caregivers at the rehabilitation center with his storytelling and, because of that, he was invited to New York City to speak at the United Nations’ First International Children’s Parliament. It was in New York that Beah met Laura Simms, a New York author and Buddhist, who would eventually adopt him.

Beah remembers when the facilitators of the program in New York were introducing themselves. One person was a UNICEF psychologist; another was a doctor. Then Simms said she was a storyteller. “I was wondering how this woman in New York became such a person,” says Beah, “and I was instantly drawn to her.”

For Beah, storytelling and myth-making had always been important. His culture had a strong oral tradition, and many times while he was on the run from the rebels, he found hope and solace in the stories he could remember from his childhood. One of these stories that did not appear in his book was about a man who traveled to faraway lands to meet new people, but he’d forgotten his heart at home and so he never made any friends. When he returned home, he found his heart in a jar by the sink. He cleaned it off and then put it back in his chest. From that day on, he didn’t have any more problems meeting friends.

WAR HIT FREETOWN shortly after Beah returned from his trip to New York City. His uncle died from an illness during the rebel invasion, and Beah was on the run again—this time to escape being re-recruited into one of the armies.

Beah and Simms had remained in contact with each other after meeting in New York, so when Beah managed to reach Guinea, a neighboring country, he called her for help. “I told him I would do whatever I could to get him to New York, where he could stay with me for a while,” says Simms. “And the phone went silent. ‘You mean you’re not going to adopt me?’ he eventually asked. I hesitated for a few moments, thinking of my life and the commitment I was about to take on. Then I said yes.”

Looking at his CV now, one might be tempted to believe that Beah’s transition into North American living was effortless. He attended the United Nations International School in Manhattan, after which he obtained a degree in political science from Oberlin College in Ohio. He began speaking publicly about his experiences as a child soldier to various national and international groups, including the Council on Foreign Relations and the Marine Corps War-fighting Laboratory. But despite these achievements, it took a long time for Beah to become settled inside himself. One thing that finally allowed him to do so was his deep spirituality.

“Having lived through the war, I have come to believe certain things about the strength of human nature and the strength of the human mind,” says Beah. “I know how the mind can play some strange games on you...traumatize you. When I came to live with Laura, she invited me to the Buddhist center, and I went and learned. Some of the teachings made so much sense to me. Many of the teachings reminded me of my own background.”

Writing *A Long Way Gone* also played a role in Beah’s healing. “Writing was very therapeutic for me,” he says. “In order to write, I had to go places that I wouldn’t normally voluntarily go in my mind—back to the army days, to going into villages and towns and killing people. One

thing I knew I had to do was to write about what I felt when I was in that world, not what I feel now. That was the only way people could come along on this journey with me.”

Storytelling is an ancient art for healing, along with silence, prayer, chanting, singing, and dancing. Storytelling is healing because it encourages the tellers to look at their narratives very closely, often from new perspectives that allow for some emotional distance. “While there is a part of us that is deeply involved in the emotion of the story, through telling a story we also have the capacity to witness what we have been through,” says psychologist Beth Hedva. “The way we view our stories reveals a lot about ourselves. If we are suffering, hold remorse, regret, self-righteousness, or self-pity, we can begin to see this through the telling of our stories and we can begin to release it.”

Yet it is not just storytellers who are liberated from suffering. Readers, when they begin to see themselves reflected in the words, also benefit. “When we read a book like Ishmael’s,” says Simms, “we experience a taste of something that is different but that we can relate to as well. Because of the extent of the suffering that Ishmael has experienced, it breaks down boundaries, such as cultural boundaries. Because such suffering and the truth of death cut across all lines, our inherent humanity is penetrated by a story like his. Sometimes when you have a story that is more abstract or more political, then readers can say to themselves that it has nothing to do with them.”

WHEN BEAH FIRST MOVED to New York City in 1999, writing a memoir was the furthest thing from his mind. He didn’t think that people would want to hear his story. In fact, even when *A Long Way Gone* was published, Beah was surprised by readers’ reactions. “I thought only humanitarian workers would be interested,” he says.

He was wrong. Across North America, auditoriums fill when he is scheduled to speak. His story has struck a chord in his readers, awakening in many of them the ability to listen and love unconditionally. “In some ways, our goodness is awakened along with Ishmael’s,” says Simms. “There is a recognition, which is hard to swallow, that any of us could be on any side of this story. We could be the nurse who saves Ishmael or the colonel who puts a gun in his hand. We could be the child recovering or the child on a killing spree. When we read his book, we taste that possibility inside each of us and we are awakened to the possibility that we can envision change and choices.”

Stories such as Beah’s, adds Dr. Hedva, “help those who dare read them to go beyond the emotions that initially come up when they stand face to face with someone who is different. When people who are different stand side by side, they often con- tort their projections of the other in an attempt to make the other appear the same as them. It is only when we begin to accept the differences between us



PHOTO COURTESY OF LAURA SIMMS

*Beah and Laura Simms  
in New York.*

that we discover we are all the same. We find solidarity in our wounds and pain. We recognize the human condition and our vulnerability, which then draws forth our compassion, the universal healer, and we awaken.”

MARIATU KAMARA is awakening. Even though child soldiers in Sierra Leone had raped her and cut off her hands, when she met Ishmael Beah she found a friend, not a foe. She was only twelve in April 1999, when teenage rebels from the Revolutionary United Front sacked the village where she was living with an aunt. They held the young girl and two of her cousins hostage for more than ten hours. Then she and her cousins were rounded up and told they could live, if they chose some form of additional punishment in return. “We started crying like babies,” Kamara told me. “They said because we could not decide our punishment, they had decided to chop off our hands.” Kamara is one of the estimated 20,000 Sierra Leonean children who had their limbs amputated by RUF soldiers. As Beah explains in his memoir, the rebels maimed people in this way because they did not want anyone to vote. Without hands, it is impossible to cast a ballot.

A few days before Kamara and Beah met, I had written separate profiles of each of them for the Toronto *Globe and Mail*. Afterwards, Kamara called me and, though she is now twenty-one, she asked in a timid and child-like voice: “Will Ishmael want to talk to me?” Showing typical African courtesy, Beah agreed, never once expressing his apprehension. It was only through his publicist that I learned Beah had fretted for days leading up to the meeting.

“Does she want to unload some burden?” the publicist asked me outside the room. “Does she want some apology from Beah on behalf of the child soldiers who did this to her?”

I shook my head. Kamara wanted to meet Beah because she found him inspiring. “He’s a storyteller,” she had said to me. “He makes me want to tell my story one day.”

Near the end of their meeting, she shared her dream with Beah. “I want to write a book, too. What should I call my book?”

“That’s up to you,” he said with a smile, touching her softly on the shoulder.

“Hmm...*Never Give Up*,” she said, looking out the window. “*Never Give Up...on Your Dreams*.”

It seems that Beah has opened the door for others, like Kamara, to come forward with their stories. “What I have learned in writing *A Long Way Gone* and reflecting on my experiences is that humans have the capacity to be both completely good and violent at the same time,” says Beah. “Nobody during that war believed that they could be violent until they became violent. Everyone was victimized to become perpetrators—you had no choice. It was kill or be killed. But human nature is inherently good. Remembering this helps me to find peace.” ♦

## Bloody Business

*ISHMAEL BEAH recalls a brutal yet all too ordinary scene from his days as a child soldier*

THE RAINY SEASON in Sierra Leone falls between May and October, with the heaviest rainfalls in July, August, and September. My squad had lost the base where I had trained, and during that gunfight Moriba was killed. We left him sitting against the wall, blood coming out of his mouth, and didn’t think much about him after that. Mourning the dead wasn’t part of the business of killing and trying to stay alive. After that, we wandered in the forest searching for a new base before the wet season started. But we couldn’t find one early enough. Most of the villages we came upon weren’t suitable, since we had burned them or another group of fighters had destroyed them at some point. The lieutenant was very upset that we hadn’t found a base, so he announced that we would keep walking until we found one.

At first it began to rain on and off. Then it started to rain continuously. We walked into the thickest forest and tried to escape the downpour by standing under big trees, but it rained to the point where the leaves couldn’t hold off the water anymore. We walked through damp forests for weeks.

It was raining too hard one morning, and all of a sudden we were under fire. Our RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades] failed to explode when they were fired. As a result, we retreated. The attackers didn’t follow us far enough, so we regrouped and the lieutenant said we had to counterattack immediately so that we could follow the attackers. “They will lead us to their base,” he said, and we advanced toward them. We fought all day in the rain. The forest was wet and the rain washed the blood off the leaves as if cleansing the surface of the forest, but the dead bodies remained under the bushes and the blood that poured out of the bodies stayed on top of the soaked soil, as if the soil had refused to absorb any more blood for that day.

At about nightfall, the attackers began to retreat. As they were running back, they left one of their wounded men behind. We came upon him, and the lieutenant asked him where their base was. He didn’t answer, so someone dragged him, with a rope around his neck, as we chased the attackers. He didn’t survive the drag. At night the attackers stopped retreating. They had come to the outskirts of their base and were fighting fiercely, because they



Beah, center, at the UNICEF rehabilitation program for child soldiers in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone.

didn't want to give it up. "Hit-and-run *kalo kalo* tactics," the lieutenant ordered. We made two groups and launched the attack. The first group opened fire and pretended to retreat. The attackers chased after them, running past the ambush formed by the second group. We quietly got up and ran after the rebels, shooting them from behind. We repeated those tactics throughout the night and severely weakened the rebels. In the morning we entered the village and killed the remaining fighters, who didn't want to leave. We captured eight of their men, tied their hands and legs, and left them in the rain.

There were fireplaces in the village and lots of wood and food. The rebels had stocked up for the rainy season, but now we were the beneficiaries of the looted food and provisions. We changed into the dry clothes we could find and sat around the fire, warming ourselves and drying our shoes. I clutched my gun and smiled for a second, happy that we had found shelter.

I extended my toes toward the fire to warm them and saw that they were pale and had begun to rot.

We had been in the village for only a few minutes when the rebels attacked again. They didn't want to give up the village easily. We looked at each other sitting around the fire and angrily changed our magazines and went out to get rid of the attackers for good. We fought them throughout the night and the following day. None of us wanted to give up the village to the other, but in the end we killed most of the rebels and captured a few more. The others ran away into the cold and rainy forest. We were so angry with the prisoners that we didn't shoot them but, rather, decided to punish them severely. "It will be a waste of bullets to shoot them," the lieutenant said. So we gave them shovels and demanded, at gunpoint, that they dig their own graves. We sat under the huts smoking marijuana and watching them dig in the rain. Each time they slowed down, we would shoot around them and they would resume digging faster. When they were done digging, we tied them and stabbed their legs with bayonets. Some of them screamed, and we laughed and kicked them to shut up. We then rolled each man into his hole and covered him with the wet mud. All of them were frightened, and they tried to get up out of the hole as we pushed the dirt back on them, but when they saw the tips of our guns pointed into the hole, they lay back and watched us with their pale sad eyes. They fought under the soil with all their might. I heard them groan underneath as they fought for air. Gradually, they gave up, and we walked away. "At least they are buried," one of the soldiers said, and we laughed. I smiled a bit again as we walked back to the fire to warm ourselves.

By the fire, I realized that I had bruises on my arms, back, and foot. Alhaji helped me attend to them with some bandages and medical supplies that the rebels had left behind. It turned out that the bruises were from bullets that had merely torn my flesh as they missed killing me. I was too drugged and traumatized to realize the danger of what had just happened. I laughed as Alhaji pointed out the number of bruises on my body. ♦

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