***from: “An Ordinary Man”***

***Paul Rusesabagina***

…The entire world had gone mad around me.

What had caused this to happen? Very simple: words.

The parents of these people had been told over and over again that they were uglier and stupider than the Tutsis. They were told they would never be as physically attractive or as capable of running the affairs of the country. It was a poisonous stream of rhetoric designed to reinforce the power of the elite. When the Hutus came to power they spoke evil words of their own, fanning the old resentments, exciting the hysterical dark places in the heart.

The words put out by radio station announcers were a major cause of the violence. There were explicit exhortations for ordinary citizens to break into the homes of their neighbors and kill them where they stood. Those commands that werenít direct were phrased in code language that everybody understood: ìCut the tall trees. Clean your neighborhood. Do your duty.î The names and addresses of targets were read over the air. If a person was able to run away his position and direction of travel were broadcast and the crowd followed the chase over the radio like a sports event.

The avalanche of words celebrating racial supremacy and encouraging people to do their duty created an alternate reality in Rwanda for those three months. It was an atmosphere where the insane was made to seem normal and disagreement with the mob was fatal.

Rwanda was a failure on so many levels. It started as a failure of the European colonists who exploited trivial differences for the sake of a divide-and-rule strategy. It was the failure of Africa to get beyond its ethnic divisions and form true coalition governments. It was a failure of Western democracies to step in and avert the catastrophe when abundant evidence was available. It was a failure of the United States for not calling a genocide by its right name. It was the failure of the United Nations to live up to its commitments as a peacemaking body.

All of these come down to a failure of words. And this is what I want to tell you: Words are the most effective weapons of death in manís arsenal. But they can also be powerful tools of life. They may be the only ones.

Today I am convinced that the only thing that saved those 1,268 people in my hotel was words. Not the liquor, not money, not the UN. Just ordinary words directed against the darkness. They are so important. I used words in many ways during the genocideóto plead, intimidate, coax, cajole, and negotiate. I was slippery and evasive when I needed to be. I acted friendly toward despicable people. I put cartons of champagne into their car trunks. I flattered them shamelessly. I said whatever I thought it would take to keep the people in my hotel from being killed. I had no cause to advance, no ideology to promote beyond that one simple goal. Those words were my connection to a saner world, to life as it ought to be lived.