

# When Hateful Words Groom People To Commit Violence

We learned it as children: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.”

I assume it is to be a comfort to children when someone speaks unkind words to them.

It occurs to me that it also could be a taunt that dares actual physical violence. In either case, it is not true. Words do harm us. To speak is to act; it is to do something.

The writer of James knew this when he wrote “the tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell” (James 3:6).

If we think we can say whatever we wish and then the world around us can remain unchanged, we are mistaken.

We can never unsay what we have said, retract what we have written. Once it is out there, it remains despite all our denials, apologies and disclaimers. The world is then a different place.

I recently was in Rwanda and had the chance to talk with both a victim and perpetrator of the 1994 genocide.

The perpetrator had killed the mother-in-law of the victim. Through a reconciliation ministry in Kigali, they were reconciled to one another and now live in peace as neighbors.

I asked each of them how their experiences shaped the way they raise their children.

They both answered that they talk with their children about what they are hearing and then seek to correct anything they have heard that might give birth to prejudice.

They both realize that words are dangerous, in some cases deadly.

The Rwanda genocide did not just happen overnight. It was the result of decades of ethnic tension and animosity created, crafted and disseminated by the government, by both former colonial powers and the Hutu government in power preceding the genocide.

The government began by fomenting animosity and divisions, and in this way brought the nation to the point where one group saw another group as “cockroaches.”

This all did not begin with the word “cockroaches.” It began by fostering a sense of victimhood and resentment on the part of the perpetrators.

They were told they were being denied something they deserved by their inferiors, the Tutsis. On the foundation of this rhetoric, the perpetrators were being groomed for violence.

Sometimes we say, “Look at what someone does and not what they say.” This is a mistake.

To say something is to do something that has consequences. As James says, words can be a spark that ignites destruction and violence.

Jesus said, “But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles” (Matthew 15:18).

Our words can defile us and everyone and everything around us. Words can desecrate God’s creation and humans who are made in the image of God.

Paul suggests that we use language only in a positive way, to enhance and


nurture.

“Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear” (Ephesians 4:29).

Paul knew that to speak is to act. With our words, we build up or we tear down God’s creation.

When we say, “Look at what someone does not what they say,” we make a mistake, and we can be laying the groundwork for powerful events that will hurt others.

Just ask the men I met in Rwanda.

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