

SECTION A | LESSON 8 | WORKSHEET 1

'A pity beyond all telling ...'

The following is an extract from a book by journalist Fergal Keane. The book recalls his experiences of working in various war-torn areas of the world. It is written as a letter to his son, Daniel. The extract here tells of his utter revulsion at the horrors he witnessed in Rwanda, when he set out with a crew to cover the story for British television. It is evidence of one man's recognition of and reaction to evil.

Up ahead is the façade of a Church built from red sandstone ... As we drive closer, the front porch of the Church comes into view. There is a white marble statue of Christ above the door with hands outstretched. Below it is a banner proclaiming the celebration of Easter, and below that there is the body of a man lying across the steps, his knees buckled underneath his body and his arms cast behind his head. Moses stops the car, but he stays hunched over the wheel and I notice that he is looking down at his feet.

I get out and start to follow Frank across the open ground in front of the Church ... As I walk towards the gate, I must make a detour to avoid the bodies of several people. There is a child who has been decapitated and there are three other corpses splayed on the ground.

Closer to the gate Frank lifts a handkerchief to his nose because there is a smell unlike anything I have ever experienced. I stop for a moment and pull out my own piece of cloth, pressing it to my face. Inside the gate the trail continues. The dead lie on either side of the pathway ... I begin to pray myself. 'Our Father, who art in heaven ...' These are prayers I have not said since my childhood, but I need them now ...

Each of us had experienced war and killing before, but in Rwanda we had stepped into a place which all previous experience of death and conflict paled into insignificance. Here the journalism of objective assessment and rational comparisons meant nothing ... Set against the vastness of the evil of genocide, journalism was, at best, a limited vehicle of expression, at worst a crude and inadequate tool. For how, really, do you convey that sense of evil felt as a physical presence? To walk at night across an overgrown courtyard strewn with the rotting dead, to have to watch every step because in the long grass there are the decapitated heads of the murdered ...

The experience still leaves me struggling for adequate words. To borrow Yeats' phrase, I have started to wonder if the unhinged world I travelled through represented 'a pity beyond all telling'.

(From Letter to Daniel: Despatches from the Heart by Fergal Keane, BBC Books, Penguin Books, 1996)

Reflect on the following questions:

What is your reaction to this passage? How do you think you would have felt had you seen what Fergal Keane saw in Rwanda?

Why do you think Fergal Keane needed to pray in the face of the evil he witnessed?

The author has used Yeats' phrase 'a pity beyond all telling' to describe his experience. What do you think this means?

Can you think of an alternative title for this piece?

What has helped you cope during the difficult times in your life?
