

To tell the truth: Nobel winner Leymah Gbowee

If Martin Luther King Jr. had written a book exposing his personal failings, it would have been seen as undermining his cause. But Leymah Gbowee does not want to be thought of as a hero.

November 16, 2011



PHOTO BY Michael Angelo for Wonderland

Read Frykholm's [*conversation with Gbowee*](#).

In the summer of 1990, two decades before she would win the Nobel Peace Prize, Leymah Gbowee was a frightened 18-year-old huddled in the courtyard of her church in Liberia, expecting the worst. In the midst of civil war between the government and rebel forces led by Charles Taylor, Gbowee's family had left their home and taken refuge in St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Monrovia. Within weeks, close to 1,000 refugees were living in St. Peter's compound.

On July 29, government forces attacked the church in search of food. After raping and killing the woman who held the keys to the church, they proceeded to kill more than 500 men, women and children inside the church using machetes, knives and machine guns. Gbowee and her family had managed to escape just the day before. One of her uncles had come to the church and told the soldiers holding the refugees hostage that he needed to collect his family. Asked which tribe he belonged to, he had lied and named the tribe to which the soldiers belonged, speaking a few words of their language. They released Gbowee, her mother and other relatives, warning them not to come back.

Gbowee was born on the outskirts of Monrovia, a place called Old Road. Her neighborhood was a patchwork of simple homes and kitchen gardens belonging to closely linked families. She thinks of it as a privileged background because her family always had enough to eat and had aspirations for their children's education and future. A member of the Kpelle tribe, she was one of Liberia's indigenous people, not one of the Americo-Liberians, the descendants of the freed American slaves who settled in Liberia in the 19th century and became the country's ruling elite.

The Kpelle people became Lutheran Christians during the latter part of the 19th century through the work of missionaries David and Emily Day. (Hospitals and schools in Liberia still carry the Day name.) Religious distinctions were not highly significant, however. Her grandmother's best friend was a Muslim, and people of many different Christian denominations lived together. Growing up on Old Road, she says, "We knew who went to the church and who went to the mosque, and that was it. We didn't ask people their denomination."

Gbowee's family was active at St. Peter's, the largest Lutheran church in Liberia, which also houses the offices for the Lutheran Church in Liberia, the national Lutheran women's organization and the Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Program (THRP), among other ministries. Her mother served as an usher and was on the

women's committee. Gbowee attended vacation Bible school and served as an acolyte from the age of ten. In her memoir *Mighty Be Our Powers*, Gbowee writes that she loved the church's "high, wood-covered ceiling, the arched windows of pale blue and red colored glass."

But the massacre at St. Peter's and the horrors of war turned Gbowee from an ambitious teenager with plans for medical school into a traumatized refugee. For almost ten years Gbowee moved back and forth between Sierra Leone, Ghana and Liberia. Her faith in God and in most everything else eroded. She entered into a relationship with an abusive man, gave birth to four children in quick succession and then, depressed and desperate, moved in with her parents in Monrovia. She found a job at St. Peter's as a social worker with THRP, dealing with women and with child soldiers who were psychologically and physically devastated by the civil war.

ALTHOUGH GBOWEE HAD MOVED back home and back into her church community, her feelings about St. Peter's were complicated. She was reluctant to let the people of the church see what a mess her life had become. In some ways, she thought of St. Peter's as her parents' place, not her own. She was also weighed down by the memory of the violence at the church and the church's helplessness in the face of it. And she had little respect for the church's leaders, whom she saw as degrading women and seeking power.

But she felt useful in her work at THRP. Her boss, a Lutheran pastor known as BB Colley, noticed her intelligence, sense of humor and passionate speech and not only gave her more and more responsibilities but also encouraged her to read works by Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., the Kenyan peace activist Hiskias Assefa and John Howard Yoder. He challenged her to think for herself. "If you are going into the field," he told her, "you need to be armed with ideas." She was struck especially by Gandhi's claim that violence and tyranny never finally succeed. "In the end, they always fail. Think of it: always," Gandhi wrote. In her memoir, Gbowee writes that she began, slowly, to see the truth of this.

Through her work with THRP she began learning about peace building and started developing her own techniques. One of these is "shedding the weight": women sit in circles and tell of the rapes, murders and horrors they have experienced and seen, and they talk about the suffering of their children. They speak about the costs of being a woman in Africa.

"I call us the sponges of our society," Gbowee explains. "Regardless of where you function as a woman . . . you take in everything from everyone. And then you are not allowed to let it out. You are supposed to be strong and not say anything. We realized that all of these women needed a place to let it out."

Truth-telling at any cost is a cornerstone of Gbowee's leadership style. That commitment is evident in her memoir and in her speeches. Her writing records her heavy drinking, her less-than-ideal relationships with men and her failures as a mother. "People say, 'Do you regret having your personal story out there?' I say no. No. This is just the first part of my story."

For comparison, imagine Martin Luther King Jr., in the midst of the civil rights struggle in the U.S., writing a book exposing his personal failings. It would likely have been seen as undermining his status and his cause. But Gbowee does not want anyone to think of her as a hero. Her writing intentionally and to great effect exposes her failures in leadership, her regrets at watching her children grow up without her, and the bickering that marred the movement she helped lead. She believes that this helps the movement because it allows others to speak the truth of their own lives and so become freer.

She is just as honest when speaking to representatives of the United Nations or the European Union, or with Lutheran bishops. Invited by French President Nicholas Sarkozy to address an EU/UNIFEM conference on peacekeeping missions in Africa, she reports telling participants, "Don't think when you are going to Africa that you have all the knowledge, because you don't know a thing. . . . Are you going to emphasize the issue of protecting of women? It is not enough to have 10,000 troops on the ground when the rapes of women are still increasing, the deaths of women are still increasing. Then please don't come." A Nigerian friend once said to her, "I don't understand how you come to these meetings, abuse these people, and they will still call you back the next year."

They call her back, Gbowee believes, because they want to hear the truth. She is relentlessly critical of institutions of power and relishes the role of outsider and iconoclast. She has even been sharply critical of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who became Liberia's president in 2005 and who shares the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize with Gbowee and Yemeni activist Tawakkul Karman.

In late 1999, the civil war in Liberia entered another phase. Onetime rebel Charles Taylor, now president, was under attack from rebel groups in the north of the country. Long-standing tensions between Americo-Liberians and indigenous Liberians, as well as tensions between Christians and Muslims and between rural and urban Liberians, created the context for violence and instability. Gbowee continued to work for THRP but also helped start the Women In Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET). Working with a broader coalition of African women, she crafted a curriculum aimed at helping women tell the stories of war so as to help heal themselves and their societies. As the fighting intensified, Gbowee arranged for her children to go to Ghana with her sister while she stayed in Liberia. Lonely, fearful, frustrated, she frequently found herself sleeping in the WIPNET offices.

In the spring of 2002, while spending the night there, she had a dream: in the dark a voice commanded her, "Gather the women to pray for peace." Gbowee was baffled by this instruction. She didn't see herself as a religious leader. She was a single mother, never married, who had a complicated relationship with her church. "It was like hearing the voice of God, yes, but . . . that wasn't possible," she writes in her memoir. "I drank too much. I fornicated! I was sleeping with a man who wasn't my husband, who in fact was still legally married to someone else. If God was going to speak to someone in Liberia, it wouldn't be me."

Later that day, she tentatively shared the dream with a co-worker at St. Peter's compound where the offices of THRP were located. A few women overheard the conversation, and one responded, "We need to pray."

Twenty women started to pray once a week. This was the beginning of what came to be called the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace. Eventually it comprised thousands of women, including Muslims and Christians, educated and non-educated, rural and urban.

Gbowee described the movement at a recent gathering of Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. "We started a peace outreach project, going to the churches on Sunday, the market stalls on Saturday, the mosques on Friday. The not so usual suspects of peace building were the ones that we were mobilizing and recruiting. In nine months, we grew from 20 to over 1,000. We had to set up teams to engage the different communities. We brought them together to talk about some of the issues that I see so prominent in this nation and in other nations—the issue of the divide within races, the issue of the divide based on religious affiliation. We have

to bring women together because we never really thought that our agency was in ourselves. We recognized that if we must continue on the right path, we must tear down the veils of Christian versus Muslim, Kpelle versus Loma, elite versus urban—all of those things we needed to tear down."

The Mass Action for Peace movement spread quickly throughout Liberia. Linda Post Bushkofsky, the executive director of Women of the ELCA, the first U.S. organization to note Gbowee's work, said that in remote areas of Liberia one can still see WIPNET signs that women used to signal a gathering place for their protests. The mass action was, in essence, a street protest. After a time of prayer, the women would stand on the side of the street, wearing white, holding signs demanding peace. They ignored threats from Taylor's government that any protesters would be beaten and instead increased their visibility and sent him invitations to meet their demands.

The women did little more than make their shared suffering visible. These "fish market women," as some called them, were acting so far outside cultural norms that they weren't recognized as a political force. A few years later, when Abigail Disney was searching for footage of those early protests to include in her film on Gbowee, she found almost nothing. Gbowee writes that the response from local photographers to the request was, "Why would we [have filmed them]? They just looked pathetic."

Every day the women protested, and every night a small group gathered to make plans for the next day. The work was intense and rife with internal conflicts among the women. "Later, I learned that it is called 'strategic peace building,' but that's not what we called it," Gbowee told me. "Every night we sat down together and said, 'Let's ask: What did we do good? What did we do bad? How can we improve?' Those three questions guided our work."

Recalling her conflicted role as leader of this movement, Gbowee says: "I tell people that I resigned over 1,000 times before we even signed the peace agreement. I would go to a meeting and I would say, 'I resign today. I am no longer your leader. I resign tomorrow. I don't want to be a part of this group.' Sometimes I walked out of the meeting, and by the time I got to my house they would come knocking on my door. They would say, 'We will continue the meeting at your house. You can never give up on us.'"

The women kept their message simple: "We want peace. No more war." They sat through rain, wind and blistering heat. They sat while they argued, discussed and strategized, through disagreements both petty and substantial. When they gathered early in the morning, they began with Christian and Muslim prayers. They developed a repertoire of songs; they listened to one another's stories. Very rarely did they sense that their protest was making a difference. The civil war went on, displacing thousands of Liberians from their homes.

WHEN TAYLOR FINALLY AGREED to hear the women's demands, they chose Gbowee as their spokeswoman and asked her to read a statement that they had all agreed on. But Gbowee decided that the statement was too polite. Once she had a microphone in her hand, she used it. After reading the group's statement she continued on her own, to the chagrin of some of the network's other leaders. "We are tired of war," she said. "We are tired of running. We are tired of begging for bulgur wheat. We are tired of our children being raped."

As the women's movement gained coverage from BBC's *Focus on Africa* and eventually CNN and other international news media, pressure mounted on Taylor to enter into peace talks with the rebels. He agreed reluctantly to meet with rebel leaders in Accra, the capital of Ghana. Gbowee and others decided to camp outside the hotel where the talks were taking place.

Meanwhile, reports from Monrovia painted a dire picture. The rebels were gaining on the city, and the president's forces were fighting back. Every public hospital had been ransacked, every school looted and closed. Taylor had said, "We will fight street to street, house to house." A bloodbath was on the horizon. The women felt helpless and foolish, camped outside the hotel in Accra waiting for a peace agreement that would never come, while warlords lounged by the pool and communicated with their combatants in Monrovia about battle plans.

Gbowee said that the darkest times were when she would look for signs that their work was succeeding and find none. "When I took my eyes off my community and started to track successes in the eyes of the world—for example, I would look and see that they were still shooting—I was losing it. But when I came back to that group, to their faith in that higher power, even in the midst of chaos, they still believed in what they do, then my energy came back."

One day after the negotiators went into a conference room, the women moved into the hallway and blocked the door. They passed a note through the glass doors. No one could come out, the women said, until a ceasefire agreement was signed. This was perhaps the culminating moment of all that Gbowee had learned as a peace builder. There is a time for strategizing, alliance building and networking, and there is a time for people to tell their stories and to sing, march and pray together. But there is also time for spontaneous, dramatic action.

In a moment caught in the documentary film *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, hotel security officers moved to arrest Gbowee and others. Gbowee responded, "I will make it very easy for you to arrest me," and she began to take off her clothes. Other women rose to do the same. She was responding intuitively, without forethought, she says. Her thoughts were "a jumble." The point was to say: "OK, if you think you'll humiliate me with an arrest, watch me humiliate myself more than you could have dreamed."

Later she realized that her action had "summoned a traditional power." In Africa, a man is cursed if he sees a married woman naked. If Gbowee and the other women were to undress, they would in effect be bringing a curse on the men in the room—the guards and the leaders who had gathered for the peace talks. The president of Nigeria, General Abdulsalami Abubakar, intervened and urged the men back to the negotiating table.

FROM THIS CONFRONTATION, a fragile peace was born. The military conflict did not end immediately, but the ceasefire was signed, and within a month, Taylor had resigned and gone into exile in Nigeria. The peace has proven lasting, much to WIPNET's surprise. Gradually Liberia has started the long road back from war.

The country was "absolutely devastated by 13 years of war," says Bushkofsky. Whole villages were wiped out. Many buildings in the capital were uninhabitable but occupied by squatters nonetheless. Hospitals, schools and roads were obliterated. Many neighborhoods lacked electricity and running water. All of these problems continue to challenge the country.

For Gbowee, the next ten years would present their own great challenges. She had defined herself as an iconoclast, a powerful speaker and a leader of great intuition. The days of mass action were over, and yet there was so much work to be done. Hungry for more education and restless to find a way to assist African women, she

was torn between seizing the opportunities for study and shaping newly forming political groups. Compounding the uncertainty was the painful divide between family life and work that did not let up in the postprotest years.

In 2005, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, a U.S.-educated woman who had initially supported Taylor, was elected president of Liberia—the first woman president of an African nation. Gbowee was ambivalent about Sirleaf because of her connection to Taylor, but she came to be one of her most crucial supporters. Gbowee rallied women to Sirleaf's cause. When Sirleaf offered Gbowee a place in her administration, Gbowee said no. She was not ready to cede the role of outsider. She could see how easily government could become corrupt, and she learned how powerfully one can speak from outside.

Meanwhile, on the international stage, Gbowee's star was rising. In 2005, while in the U.S. studying for a degree at Eastern Mennonite University, she was approached by Abigail Disney, who wanted to make a documentary film about Women's Mass Action in Liberia. At first, Gbowee was skeptical. "I didn't see what I had to say to these white girls," she writes. "Disney? Were they planning to make a cartoon?" But she warmed to the idea, and *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* premiered in 2008, winning first place at the Tribeca film festival.

Suddenly many doors opened. She has advised the UN on disarmament and has addressed the UN's Security Council meeting on women and security. She received a Profile in Courage Award from the John F. Kennedy Library Foundation and a Blue Ribbon Peace Award from the Women's Leadership Board at the JFK School of Government. At every stop, her frank assessment of the West's engagement with Africa and her unwavering commitment to women's issues has made her voice stand out.

I MET GBOWEE at a luncheon for ELCA women a few days before it was announced that she was a winner of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize. She stared over my shoulder at a table loaded with desserts. "I'm trying to reduce," she said with a little longing in her voice before filling a plate with fruit. She looked tired, and she had admitted to being tired in her remarks to the gathering. She was on a monthlong book tour. During our interview, she checked e-mail from back home. She was distracted and restless, even while graciously submitting to photo requests and book signings. She needed to be at the Council on Global Affairs that evening, then on a plane to New York for a presentation at the Clinton Global Initiative the next day—and that was

before the West Coast tour even began. "God will give me the strength," she said wearily.

At age 39, Gbowee ponders her next steps. Should she get a Ph.D. in public policy? Or should she start planning a run for parliament? When I asked her about the Ph.D., she looked down and away. "That is my way of wanting to hide," she said softly. Then added, "I want to do a Ph.D. not for myself, but for girls, to show them and my daughters that regardless of where you find yourself in this life, you can still achieve your highest potential."

A political run is tugging on her too. When the subject of Liberian politics comes up, her face lights up and her voice grows more intense. If she were asked to join the government of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf again, would she say yes this time? "I might say yes." Sirleaf is currently seeking a second six-year term as president of Liberia. But Gbowee's long-range plan is to move back to Liberia and run for parliament in the next six years.

"To stay outside is a strong temptation for me, the temptation to continue my activism. But I know that if you stand on the outside, unless you have political connections, you can't make the changes that need to be made. So I can stand on the outside or I can go in and say, 'Let's work together to change this.' The inside represents power, control, resources. It is difficult to function as an outside organization. You can have ideas, but without resources, you can't do them."

If Gbowee decides to run, she will be joining a wave of women's formal political action in Africa. In Cameroon, entrepreneur Kah Walla is running a lively campaign for president, although corruption is expected to prevent a true popular vote. In Rwanda, quotas for women in government were set after the civil war, and women were supposed to hold one-third of all seats—but today they hold more than half. In the newly formed nation of Southern Sudan, women make up more than half the registered voters. Gbowee's organization, Women Peace and Security Network-Africa, based in Ghana, has been working in Sierra Leone and Nigeria building women's political power and training women to run for government.

But working through government has never been Gbowee's personal method. She seems less interested in the mechanisms of government than in personal transformation and awakening political activism in others.

Gbowee has seen her share of corrupt politicians and endured her share of empty political rhetoric. As a political outsider, she has criticized the European Union's peacekeepers for creating more problems for women in countries where they serve. She has taken the UN to task for poorly planned and executed aid to African nations. She has declared that until church bishops and ministers stop beating their wives in private, they have no right to speak of a Christian witness in public.

A spontaneous thinker and actor who is known for her restless nature and sharp rhetoric may not be well suited to a government position. But Gbowee says she is interested in seeing what she can do. "If you are in a government, you can help to shift things; you might be able to make changes." If it doesn't work, she said, "you have the option to go back outside."