

Do the ends justify
the means?: pain and
time in 'left to tell' and
'columbine'



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Winston Churchill, former British Prime Minister, argues that instead of having a definitive end, every journey “ will stretch out before you an ever-lengthening, ever-ascending, ever-improving path.” When a journey qualifies as “ completed,” there is always something that needs to be maintained. Perceptual ideologies are constant reminders of the never ending work that needs to be accomplished to keep a journey from being undone. David Cullen’s *Columbine*, an in depth account of the 1999 school shooting, and Immaculee Ilibagiza’s *Left To Tell*, a first person narrative of the Rwandan Genocide, support Churchill’s assertion that the most difficult tasks are rarely ever overcome or accomplished because time cannot mend pain.

Although the means of healing through prayer are specific to one’s self, many turn to their faith as a means to forgive. In the beginning of *Left To Tell*, the protagonist begs, “ Please, God, move them to stop the slaughter. Forgive them” (Ilibagiza 105). The protagonist, Immaculee, has already started her healing process as a means to repair her loss. Although she has already started to forgive, she tries to use her faith in God as an excuse to speed up the process because she does not want to live with the pain. In *Columbine*, we see this dilemma through the survivors. One survivor states, “ ‘ I have no idea how we are going to heal’ “ (Cullen 132). Many characters in this novel also turn to God in their time of crisis. However, they are not looking for a haven, they are looking for answers. They believe God will help alleviate their suffering and allow them to move on with their lives. Towards the end of *Left To Tell*, Immaculee learns that loss is everlasting when she recalls, “ I heard many horrific tales, but made some lasting friendships.” (Ilibagiza 160) She has finally accepted the reality of her journey. Her faith

alone is not enough to repair her sorrow because her personal loss will always be with her.

Faith, however, cannot heal all wounds. Those who suffer from mental health conditions, such as severe anxiety and PTSD, understand that they must live with their issues. After the aftermath of the murders, Columbine delves into how “ many of the survivors had entered the early stages of post-traumatic stress disorder” (Cullen 152). For the survivors, their painful journeys have only just begun. Their minds cannot properly deal with their ordeals, and thus, create a false reality of constant danger. The author then goes onto explain, “ This [PTSD] was something that produced truly profound effects and lasted...a lifetime” (Cullen 153). The survivors individual journeys entail their endless troubles. Those living with PTSD understand how this process does not go away if ignored; it is something one must deal with head on. In *Left To Tell*, Immaculee faces a very similar type of trauma: “ Our anxiety about the killers’ return was constant mental and physical torture” (Ilibagiza 84). Especially in this case, the protagonist’s problems are ongoing. They cannot simply be solved with the wave of a wand and require delicate attention and care. This attention is time consuming, making one’s journey to reach their goal much longer.

For humans, memory acts as a constant in an ever-changing world. Some, however, would much rather be able to forget. In *Left To Tell*, we see this when Immaculee says, “ I ran my fingertips across the tear-stained works and knew that I’d never be able to read this letter without crying” (Ilibagiza 152). With her brother dead, this letter serves as a constant reminder of what she has lost. She would like to forget, but this memento triggers a

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visceral response. Immaculee, pondering life, then wonders, " How many years - how many generations - would it take...How long for our wounded hearts to heal, for our hardened hearts to soften?" (Ilibagiza 179). In this instance, memory is the obstacle that Immaculee faces because the memories of the genocide prohibit her from moving forward. Another haunting memory from Columbine is recalled by one of the faculty members that survived the shooting when he calls, " No one had ever covered them [massacre victims]. Years later, he shuddered at the memory." (Cullen 108) Because he cannot forget this memory, it acts as a deterrent from his own self growth; it actively blocks positive progress. Memories associated with traumatic events hinder a person's rehabilitation making the road to recovery much more daunting.

Both Cullen's Columbine and Ilibagiza's Left To Tell do well in asserting how the path one must complete to succeed is endless. Through faith, mental health, and faith, we are shown the obstacles one must endure on this path. Both novels are excellent examples of how many factors, such as memory, mind, and faith, play into how quickly humanity may move on from tragedy.