

## War and Peacemaking in Liberia

Former soldier Christian Bethelson's only job skill was killing—until a chance meeting on a muddy road transformed his life, and many others through it.

by Seth Biderman | posted Dec 30, 2011



Christian Bethelson visiting a refugee camp after violence erupted in Ivory Coast. Photo by Cynthia Jurs.

"I tell my children, 'Watch who you marry,'" says 53-year-old Christian Bethelson. "I married an AK-47, and it stole 27 years of my life. Bad marriage."

He flashes a smile. One of his front teeth is missing, knocked out during a torture session in military prison. He's also got a scar from a bullet in his right leg, and a host of terrifying stories from the front lines of Liberia's civil war, one of West Africa's most brutal conflicts in recent history.

Like the nation itself, Bethelson is trying to leave behind decades of military rule and no-holds-barred warfare. It hasn't been easy. Even in a quiet living room in sleepy Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he has come to develop his peacebuilding work and further his personal studies in meditation, Bethelson does not seem entirely at ease. He sits on the edge of his chair and gesticulates broadly, his heavily accented voice rising as he describes how he stumbled into the life of a soldier—a life he might still be living today, if not for the chance encounter on a muddy road that set him on a path to transformation.

Today, Liberia's Grand Cape Mount County is a roll of forested hills, cleared in no obvious pattern to make room for rice fields, rutted dirt roads, and clusters of palm-roofed homes. Somewhere, a bird is always singing.

In many ways, the region has changed little since Christian Bethelson was born there on January 1, 1958. Then, as now, its residents were mostly poor families, descended from any number of the 16 tribes that were living in the area when freed black slaves from the United States arrived in the early 1800's and—despite sharing a skin color—established a two-class, colonial society that left families like Bethelson's with scant political power or opportunity for economic advancement.

As was common at the time, Bethelson's father had multiple wives—nine of them—and Bethelson's earliest memories are not of playing, but of working the fields with his many brothers and sisters, scrambling sun up to sundown to scratch out enough food for everyone. From an early age, Bethelson intuited that education would be the surest path out of such a hardscrabble life. With dogged persistence, he trudged long morning hours to get to the nearest school—when his father would permit it—and then hustled home in the afternoons, lugging firewood he would pick up along the way.

Studying mostly on an empty stomach, he managed to graduate from the high school in the county seat. He knew he needed more.

"I had to go to college," he says. "Education is the oxygen of the world. I was choking without it."

When he learned the government was offering university scholarships for young men who enlisted in the army, he immediately signed up—only to find out the scholarships had run out. He was obliged to serve anyways.

That was 1978. Two years later, tensions generated by a century of injustice came to a head when a young sergeant named Samuel Doe murdered the Americo-Liberian president and installed himself as the nation's first indigenous leader. Liberians flooded the streets of capital city Monrovia in jubilation, celebrating what seemed a step towards a more inclusive, democratic society.

But Doe soon proved ill-equipped to lead the nation into a more enlightened era: He conducted a macabre firing squad execution of several prominent Americo-Liberians, allowed his soldiers unchecked power, and grew increasingly corrupt. He played off Cold War tensions to stay in favor with the Americans, and cracked down on political dissidence at home by sending Bethelson and other elite soldiers to places like Israel and Libya for the latest training in anti-terrorism tactics.

The oppressive measures backfired. Powerful rebel forces rose up, stormed the countryside and destroyed Monrovia, sending some 500,000 Liberians—20 percent of the entire nation—into foreign refugee camps. By mid-1990, Doe and 500 of his remaining soldiers had retreated into the Executive

**Bethelson was taken to a military hospital in the neighboring country of Sierra Leone. Slowly, his physical wound healed. The emotional damage did not.**

Mansion, where they held out for months under unimaginable conditions.

Bethelson was among them, and even today, his voice breaks as he tries to describe those final months of Doe's regime.

"People were drinking blood. People were eating people. Chickens were more valuable than humans. I kept a round in my AK-47—I knew that if the rebels caught me, it would be better to be dead."

Bethelson survived on chicken bouillon and hot water until international peacekeepers brokered a ceasefire, and he and others escorted Doe to the port for peace talks. But no sooner had they laid down their guns, than a rebel faction broke the accord and opened fire. Many were killed; Bethelson scrambled aboard the peacekeeper's ship, a bullet in his leg. (Doe was soon after tortured and executed in the Executive Mansion by a rebel named Prince Johnson, who caught international attention by releasing graphic video of the event.)

Bethelson was taken to a military hospital in the neighboring country of Sierra Leone. Slowly, his physical wound healed. The emotional damage did not.

"I would get drunk, smoke dope, listen to Bob Marley. I was never in a good stage, never experienced happiness. I had been driven from my family, from my country, from my dignity." He pauses, and then adds: "I had no conscience."

What he did have were years of military experience and training—assets that quickly led him back to Liberia, now plunged into full-out civil war. Under the *nom de guerre* General Leopard, Bethelson spent the next 13 years leading rebel forces in ruthless battle against warlord Charles Taylor. He was imprisoned for three of those years, but managed to escape and return to the front lines.

It was not until 2003, when an uncertain peace arrived, that he finally set down his AK-47. His first move was to find his wife and children, whom he'd not seen in four years. He found them living in an unfinished house, half-starved to death. But the country's infrastructure was destroyed, and there was no work to be found. The joy of being home soon faded before a crush of impotence, shame, and anger.

"My wife and kids would insult me, cuss at me, ask why I could not find food for them. I would leave early in the morning, go to the beach and get high, and return late at night, when they were asleep.

"At that point I hated myself for having no education, for having gone into the military, for having participated in the ways that I had, for having been a rebel general. I saw myself as a criminal."

After two frustrating years, Bethelson weighed his options. He had not worked the earth since childhood. His high school diploma was worth little, and his dream of going to college as distant as ever. He had only one marketable skill to which he could turn. Like so many other Liberian veterans, he set out to offer his soldiering services to the highest bidder in the newest regional conflict, in the neighboring Ivory Coast.

He'd not quite reached the border when the car in which he was traveling got stuck on a road turned to mud by the rains. Several other cars had gotten stuck along the same stretch, and drivers and passengers stood about in small groups, working at the tires with makeshift tools, or chatting as they waited.

Bethelson was drawn toward the conversation of a nearby group, which included some white Westerners. He overheard them talking about peace, and was struck not only by the words, but by the tone of their voices. He realized he was hearing something he had not heard in a very long time—a sense of hope.

He knew his eyes were bloodshot, and he looked haggard, even threatening, but he stepped up to the group and introduced himself as a former rebel general.

"I was afraid they'd reject me," he recalls, "but instead they gathered around me, told me they loved me, even hugged me. I didn't expect that. That someone could love me after all that I had done, could come up and hug me ... I could not have dreamed it being possible."

The group was called the *everyday gandhis*, a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping war-torn communities rebuild. They quickly recognized that Bethelson could be a key ally in their work, someone who was ready to embrace peace, and could help other veterans do the same. They asked if he would consider joining them. At first Bethelson declined, believing he would be unable to meet the challenge. But after a longer conversation with a charismatic group member who went by "Uncle Jake," Bethelson agreed to give it a try. The group gave him \$100 as a token payment. He accepted it gratefully, found a car heading back, and arrived home proudly bearing bags of food for his family. He's never looked back.

**"I was never in a good stage, never experienced happiness. I had been driven from my family, from my country, from my dignity." He pauses, and then adds: "I had no conscience."**

**"I was afraid they'd reject me," he recalls, "but instead they gathered around me, told me they loved me, even hugged me. I didn't expect that. That someone could love me after all that I had done..."**



This is the "house" where Bethelson discovered his family living "half starved to death." It is not far from his current home and Bethelson returns regularly to sit by this tree—still a favorite refuge and place to meditate.  
Photo by Cynthia Jurs.

**"It's significant that this happened from me being stuck in the mud. Being physically stuck like that created an awareness in me."**

"It's significant that this happened from me being stuck in the mud," he says. "Being physically stuck like that created an awareness in me. I can see now it was a sign that something was about to shift in my life."

For the next few years, Bethelson worked with Uncle Jake and the *everyday gandhis*, and in 2008 traveled with them to a conference in Northern California, where he was moved by a meditation ceremony led by Buddhist practitioner and teacher, Cynthia Jurs:

"I saw her sitting on the ground, very focused, and I thought, if I can be focused and quiet like her, I can recover."

When Jurs traveled to Liberia the following year, to conduct a healing ceremony through the Earth Treasure Vase Global Healing Project, Bethelson began to formally study a type of meditation called "engaged Buddhism" with her. The practice, he says, has completely "remolded" who he is:

"Meditation brings me back to my true self, to my real conscience and sense of humanity. With a deep breath, my heart feels a sense of relief, like you are thirsty, and you drink a very cold glass of water."

Today, Bethelson and Uncle Jake have embarked on an ambitious project with Jurs' nonprofit, Alliance for the Earth, to build "peace huts" throughout the nation. A callback to the traditional "palaver huts," where elders once gathered to resolve civil and tribal conflicts, the circular, open-walled structures offer a way for the wounded communities to unite, and like Bethelson, rediscover who they were before the conflict. The first peace hut has been built in hard-hit Lofa County; here in the United States, Bethelson and Uncle Jake are raising funds to start construction on the second.

"The government's doing what it can," he says, referring to the administration of recent Nobel Peace prize winner Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, re-elected this November. "But the tribes have been divided. We all fought for different factions, and in order to have one nation, one destiny, and one people, we need to create the peace huts, where we can leave our ethnicity behind us and come together."

As this article is being posted, Bethelson is back in Liberia, working on the peace huts, furthering his own mediation practice, and inviting former combatants to share their stories, to dance and sing, to play soccer, and to take a moment to breathe. He still dreams of attending university to pursue a degree in counseling, so that he can build his capacity as a peacemaker, and do even more to help Liberia recover.

But for now, he's taking it slowly, enjoying his new life as a peacemaker, a civilian, and a member of his family.

"I love washing the dishes," he says. "I love doing the laundry, playing with my kids. It sounds foolish, but I've got a lot of time to redeem.

"My great Buddhist teacher tells me, 'Slowly, slowly, step by step, we're going to arrive.' I believe that. We're all going to arrive."



Bethelson in front of the Peace Hut in Telowoyan Village outside of Voinjama in Lofa County, Liberia that Alliance for the Earth helped to build. He is standing with the daughter of the Paramount Chief Bessa Telowoyan, who gave the land to build a cultural center here. The community decided to build a Peace Hut in the village as a place to come to resolve conflict and continue to cultivate their prayers for peace. The peace hut is a traditional structure that has been used for centuries as a place to go to resolve conflict in the traditional way and the building of peace huts is now being advocated by the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a valuable peacebuilding mechanism to strengthen and stabilize peace in the region.

Photo by Cynthia Jurs.

---

Seth Biderman wrote this article in partnership with The Academy for the Love of Learning for YES! Magazine, a national, nonprofit media organization that fuses powerful ideas with practical actions. Seth is a writer and teacher researching transformational education. He has reported on sustainability, education, and personal transformation.

The Academy for the Love of Learning is an organization dedicated to transforming our culture and has developed a wide range of programs, including Profiles in Transformation, which collects and publishes stories of people who have reconnected to their humanity, and in doing so activated their lives and the lives of those around them. Among the most dramatic of these profiles comes from post-war Liberia, where Christian Bethelson's transformation from career soldier to spiritual peacemaker stands as a testament to the human potential for positive change.

Alliance for the Earth, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the healing, protection and renewal of the Earth, intends to build a peace hut and dig a well in each of the 15 states of Liberia. With each brick of every hut, we hope and pray that peace becomes stable in Liberia. To learn more about supporting Alliance for the Earth's Peacebuilding Project in Liberia, go to: <http://earthtreasurevase.org/2011/12/the-liberia-peacebuilding-project/>

The Earth Treasure Vase Global Healing Project (a project of Alliance for the Earth) ceremonially plants treasure vases that contain prayers and offerings for the peace and well-being of the land in collaboration with wise elders, young activists and regular folks to grow a global community dedicated to our sustainable future. For info about the Earth Treasure Vase Global Healing Project visit [www.earthtreasurevase.org](http://www.earthtreasurevase.org) or call 505.986.9232.