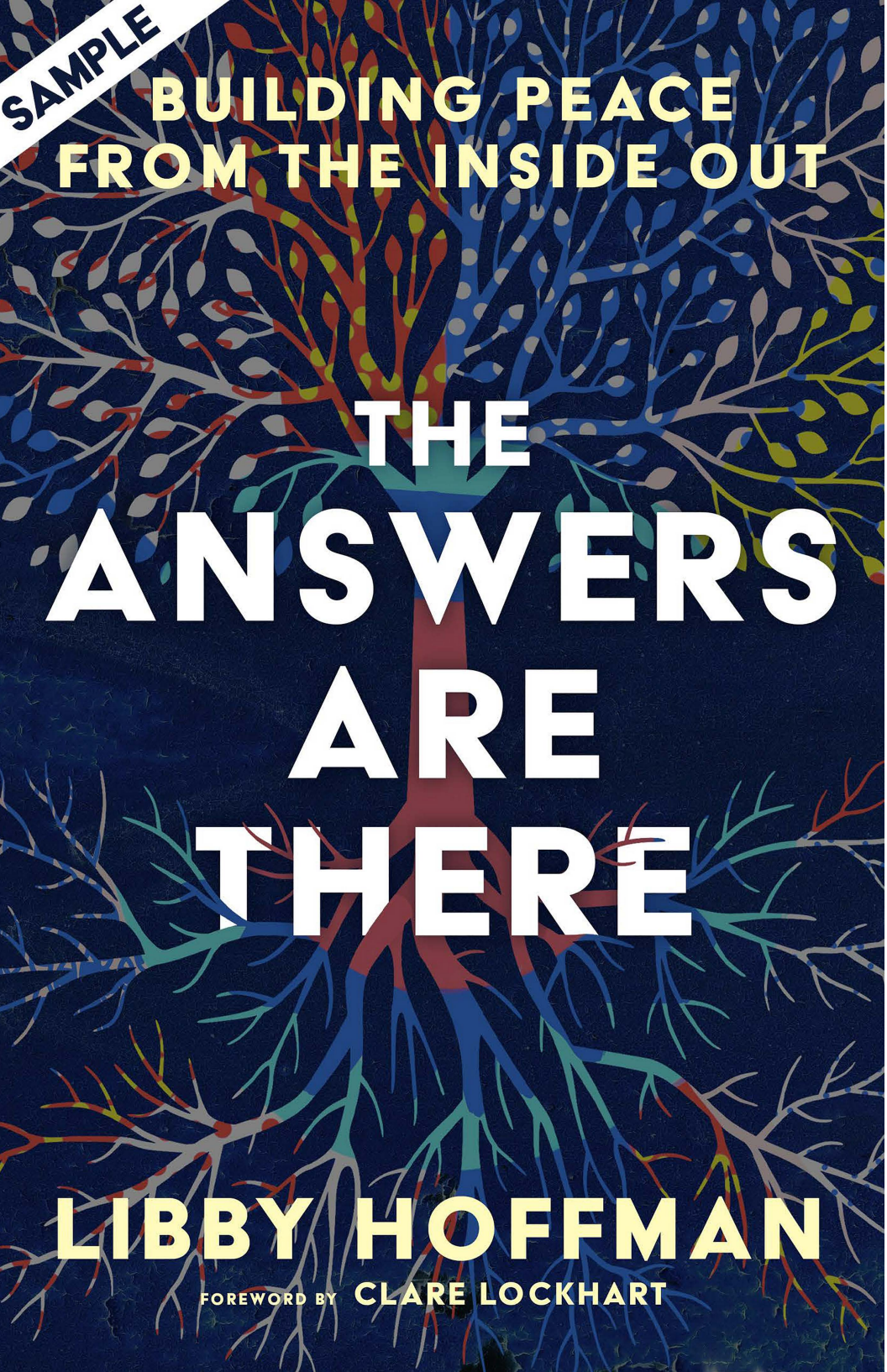
SAMPLE
BUILDING PEACE FROM THE INSIDE OUT
THE ANSWERS ARE THERE
LIBBY HOFFMAN
FOREWORD BY CLARE LOCKHART

PRAISE FOR *THE ANSWERS ARE THERE*

"*The Answers Are There: Building Peace from the Inside Out* shares a lived example of what's possible when you honor the resources of people working together in community. In powerful, vivid stories, Libby Hoffman shows us the transformation that can be unleashed when ordinary people are supported to fulfill their vision for themselves and their communities."

—**Leymah Gbowee**, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate (2011) and founder, Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace

"Libby Hoffman has poured out her huge and beautiful heart into the stunning and riveting pages of this book. The work she has done and the way she describes it in this truly remarkable account will break your heart open and also your capacity to see the profound dignity of people who go through unimaginable suffering. The teaching stories in this book are astonishing and vital to us all. Read this and learn how to have the world we want."

—**Lynne Twist**, author, *The Soul of Money* and *Living a Committed Life* (forthcoming, Oct 18); founder, The Soul of Money Institute

"Libby's rejection of traditional 'black and white' thinking is a clarion call for the peace and security sector. As her book demonstrates in clear, concrete, and human ways, the only way to achieve lasting peace is by embracing complex thinking and trusting and supporting local people. Libby shows us that even acts as seemingly simple as holding space or listening to people can ignite powerful change. The people in our field need to read this book and take up its invitation to transform ourselves."

—**Alexandra Toma**, executive director, Peace and Security Funders Group

"*The Answers Are There* is a much-needed book in today's world, where we seek a greater dignity of purpose and practice, the deepening of more respectful relationships, and creativity in the pursuit of peace and development. This book offers a rare gift: Libby Hoffman's journey of both personal growth and systemic transformation, as experienced in the world of philanthropy and social change. She opens a window into the integrity required to face and follow the questions that unfold from our deepest commitments — and the stories of her life work offer better pathways of integrity for us all."

—**John Paul Lederach**, professor emeritus, University of Notre Dame

"In this luminous and powerful, gorgeously written book, Libby Hoffman challenges us to create a peacebuilding system based on wholeness and dignity, rather than fragmentation and loss. With clarity and wisdom, Hoffman shows us how local communities made peace in Sierra Leone, woven from their own cloth, alive with their own traditions, driven by women, and accepting that even the most violent perpetrators could become 'good somebodies.' *The Answers Are There* brings us nothing short of a new architecture for peace, delivered in the most colorful, musical tones, steeped in the wisdom of an actual process that healed a nation unraveled by war."

—**Melanie Greenberg**, Managing Director, Peacebuilding, Humanity United

"Sierra Leone's transition from war to peace has much to teach the world about accountability for and resilience after violence. The indigenous restorative justice and reconciliation process that Libby Hoffman and John Caulker pioneered not only helped a nation confront its painful past; it also reconstructed communal relationships that successfully stemmed the tide of the Ebola virus and paved the way for the national government's adoption of an innovative, participatory model of local development programs. Libby Hoffman's book offers a powerful story of a people's self-determination to recover, repair, and reconcile after war — in ways nothing short of transformative."

—**Carl Stauffer, PhD.**, Senior Expert for Reconciliation, United States Institute of Peace

"This book, and the story of Fambul Tok it explores, challenges the global tendency to see peacebuilding as a technocratic, outsider-driven activity. Libby offers an antidote to the world of metrics, consultants, and top-down funders, inviting the reader instead to connect with themselves and the humanness of others and transform violence through listening, nurturing, co-creating, and sharing. Truly inspiring."

—**Professor Brandon Hamber**, John Hume & Tip O'Neill Chair in Peace, Ulster University

BUILDING PEACE
FROM THE INSIDE OUT

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LIBBY HOFFMAN

FOREWORD BY CLARE LOCKHART

BLUE CHAIR
PRESS

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OPENING

The first time I visited Kpoundu, on the far-eastern edge of Sierra Leone, just steps from the Guinean border, the dusty village appeared largely deserted. Most of its thatched-roof mud huts stood silent, grim reminders of the deaths within their walls. Just a year before, Ebola had ravaged first this village, then the whole country. "Everyone in that house died," a resident told me. "And in that one next to it. And the one next to that . . ." It was the summer of 2015, eight years into my work supporting postwar reconciliation in Sierra Leone, and I had seen countless times that people were more than the tragedies they experienced. But that day in Kpoundu, it was difficult not to feel overwhelmed. Ebola had killed 22 people in this tiny village—half of its population—and 80 more in nearby villages. Over the course of 14 months, more than 14,000 people across the country had become sick, and close to 4,000 had died, a depth of loss people could explain only by reaching for comparisons to their civil war, two decades before.

And yet, on that hot July day, I also saw something else. At the edge of town, several dozen women gathered under the shade of large mango trees, many with infants on their backs or at their breasts, or small children playing near their feet. These women had walked to Kpoundu from 16 neighboring villages, an all-day trek for some, to discuss how they wanted to rebuild their communities after Ebola. Their conversation was as lively as their clothing, a glorious array of vivid colors and patterns. They bubbled over with generous words of affirmation and support for each other and for the ideas they shared, and their keen, attentive listening equally spoke volumes.

Delicious smells wafted as giant pots of rice and stew were prepared nearby for everyone, giving the event a festive, family feel. The noise grew louder and livelier as the women discussed and decided what projects they could take on together, and how they wanted to help their communities with the money they would make.

The Peace Mothers, as they came to call themselves, were bucking decades-long patterns in international aid. They refused to let labels like "poor," "war-ravaged," and "Ebola-devastated" define them, and they rejected the status quo of humanitarian aid, which consigned them to wait for outsiders to come help them, if help ever came. Instead, the women organized to work together with what they already had for the good of their whole region, and judging from the animated participation, that invitation was awakening a powerful resource for their communal welfare.

They decided first to make and sell soap, and with that began a cooperative venture that is still growing. They have since built community centers with the money they made, given their children access to education, and prevented election violence. Their leaders

now advise the district on peace and development and teach other districts how to strengthen community leadership.

But when outsiders look at Kpoundu, what do we see? Do we see the village primarily in terms of what has happened *to* it—the challenges its people have faced and the problems they have? Or do we see their resources and potential, the capacity that is present within the community, even if not yet visible to us, ready to be invited into action and expression?

The "we" I refer to here are predominantly Western, or Western-trained, international peace and development workers. Whatever our personal backgrounds, we are professionalized and acculturated into a system that divides those with needs from those with resources, assigning narrow, mutually exclusive definitions of both. The system labels communities dealing with violence, poverty, or weak governance as those having "needs," while outsiders are those with the resources and expertise who come to help. This deficit-based lens has a totalizing effect, making it more difficult to see, much less build on, the resources and potential *already present* within communities "in need." This way of seeing supports a hierarchy built into the status quo: international experts are at the "top" of a system of knowledge, capacity, and resources, and local communities are at the bottom. The system we were trained to work in envisions aid as a one-directional flow from those with expertise and resources to those with needs, further entrenching the dichotomy.

The system also dichotomizes *us as people*. No matter where you are in the system, its logic insists that change happens "over there"—externally, often in faraway places, and always outside of oneself. Analytical skill and abstract thinking are privileged over the wisdom of lived experience and the power of the local—of

care, of community, and of home. The system says that people can't be trusted to solve their own problems; it reduces power to the capacity to control an outcome rather than the ability to liberate potential for good and to nourish mutual flourishing.

This is a book about how to unmake that system.

In my 35 years of experience, including 20 running my own granting and operating foundation, I have learned a lot about how to undo the entanglements of the system-as-it-has-always-been, and about how to build and inhabit something better. As a white American woman trained in the mindsets that underpin the status quo, I've had to learn how to unmake the thought patterns I've inherited so that I can live out my commitment to working differently. This critical self-reflection was exponentially fast-tracked when I came into $20 million in my late thirties (much more on that throughout the book). Suddenly, I was able to both create and fund programming to embody my highest values. And immediately, I ran into another dichotomy embedded within the status quo: the division between funders and practitioners. I rebelled against that false choice. I wanted to be both.

I wanted to create and work in ongoing, genuine, co-creative partnership with people coded by the status quo as "local beneficiaries." I wanted the mutuality of offering and learning in partnership, in a two-directional flow, built on relationships of mutual trust and thriving. I wanted to look for, magnify, and help grow local communities' knowledge and resources in organic and iterative ways. I wanted programming that valued analytical reasoning but also carved channels for things like imagination and vision and creativity. I wanted to see and serve not only outwardly visible accomplishments but also an ongoing, inward deepening of

purpose and clarity of calling—for myself and for others. And I wanted a space in which I could learn as much as I might teach, receive as much as I might give.

In this book, I'm going to show you how I've built that kind of system, in practice, over time.

Peace from the inside out

The story of Kpoundu's Peace Mothers is not an isolated one; it happened as part of a systematic effort to build peace and development from the inside out, led by the Sierra Leonean nongovernmental organization Fambul Tok. Fifteen years ago, I began a partnership with John Caulker, a Sierra Leonean human rights advocate, and we started Fambul Tok (Krio for "family talk") to create space for community healing, using indigenous restorative justice traditions, after the country's 11-year civil war. Our animating purpose wasn't to solve problems, to "save" communities, or even to meet needs, per se. Rather, we grounded our work in the intention of *fulfilling potential*. We sought to create space for people and communities—and, ultimately, the country—to identify, claim, and fulfill the potential we believed was always there, even after the devastation of war.

From that taproot, the tree of community healing burst forth and flourished. Over its first seven years, the Fambul Tok staff facilitated close to 250 tradition-based community bonfire ceremonies of truth-telling, apology, and forgiveness across six districts in Sierra Leone. The ceremonies involved more than 2,500 villages, and more than 4,500 people testified to more than 150,000 of their neighbors. We saw communities come together to face difficult truths and find their way forward. In the process, we saw individual

and communal hearts made whole, and we saw this wholeness animate local agency and capacity. Communities came alive again as tens of thousands of people re-membered their cultural and communal riches—riches still there after war—and drew upon those resources to reconcile and then lead their own recovery.

After every village reconciliation bonfire, the communities would designate a Peace Tree where they could gather to address new issues that arose. They formed Peace Mothers groups for women to continue to heal while working together for their communities. They rekindled the practice of community farming and used the proceeds to support local development. Individual healing and reanimated community went hand in hand.

We also saw how truth-telling and forgiveness in these communities, shared through a feature-length documentary I produced, opened imagination and conversation around the world—about the power of community and about what is possible when we look for, claim, and live into our wholeness, even in the middle of brokenness. These stories are still reaching and inspiring people today, sparking new ideas around restorative justice, forgiveness, and healing after atrocity.

Through it all, John and I (and our organizations) lived out a system of peace and development the way we felt that system should be. We eschewed the neocolonial grooves of the dominant humanitarian system and instead forged a path and process rooted in wholeness and mutuality, engaged over time with and through committed relationships and networks of care, from the most local to the national and international levels.

By the time Ebola struck, six years after our first reconciliation ceremony, we had seeded a network of strengthened communities

across Sierra Leone. We confronted Ebola with the same approach that we had brought to confronting the past. When we encountered national and international responses that ignored or worked against community leadership, even while using language to the contrary, we responded by building and advocating for a connected national network of support instead—one that built bridges from local communities to national policy and carried community voices into the national response to Ebola in meaningful ways.

Based on our success at community-led reconciliation, we challenged prevailing global norms of crisis response and recovery that ignore local capacity and perpetuate colonial, outside-in dynamics. Step by step, we built a process for people and communities to lead their own recovery from Ebola and take charge of their ongoing development. We built connections from local communities to local government and then to policymakers at the national level, ensuring that Sierra Leonean citizens themselves led the process. As a result, people and communities could ask for what they needed and wanted, work together with their local leaders to achieve their vision, and build government connections to help that work be effective.

Seeing such vivid examples of success, the government of Sierra Leone decided to build a crucial national policy around this people- and community-centered approach, birthing the Wan Fambul National Framework for Inclusive Governance and Local Development. The government is now working to implement the Framework nationwide while building the inclusive national infrastructure to support and sustain it. And Sierra Leone's example is in turn inspiring a global network of policymakers and practitioners who are committed to creating space for people and communities

to lead. Learning from Fambul Tok and the Framework's success in Sierra Leone, they are now applying its lessons in Kenya, Guatemala, Afghanistan, Zimbabwe, Northern Ireland, the United States, and beyond.

When John and I first met in 2007, we couldn't have imagined most of what was to come. We only knew how we would start: by asking the communities in Sierra Leone what *they* wanted. By grounding in and continuing to true to our larger common vision and deeper purpose, we grew the program in practice, over time. That common vision and purpose called forth and enabled the kind of collaborative, creative, generative weaving work we did in Sierra Leone.

Ultimately, it's the vision of the larger whole—a healthy, regenerative, integral global community, held together by mutually liberatory relationships—that prompts, inspires, and undergirds my life's work. The vision of the whole I hold in my imagination is both *already* and *not yet*: It is true and present as something to turn to, to learn from, and to lean into, even while we work to bring it into clearer, visible expression around us. This whole is not imposed from the outside. It is not fragmented or fragmenting, not mechanical or mechanistic. It is alive and organic, unfolding and growing from within—if we let it.

Braiding peace

As someone trained in the system-as-it-has-been, I knew my ongoing learning and unlearning were critical. As Fambul Tok grew, I lived with the question: How do I need to transform myself in order to support the work we are doing?

That is not often a question that gets asked in the policy or

training circles of peace and security, and certainly not among funders. But over and over, I saw that if I wanted to do and support work that could transform the world, I had to be willing to transform myself. And so, in this book as in my life, I weave together the story of our work in Sierra Leone and the story of the learning journey that enabled that work. Like a braid. Whenever I have been faced with things that seemed to be fragmented or in tension, I've seen an invitation to braid—to make a cord that is stronger for weaving together things that may appear different or even oppositional.

Which is exactly what I did when I encountered the firewall of separation between the world of the peacebuilding funder and that of the peacebuilding practitioner. I turned the tension I felt into an invitation to create a new kind of space, one where funding and practice work together in healthy relationship and as parts of the larger, healthy whole. I put the funds I received in an endowment and started my own granting and operating foundation, Catalyst for Peace (more on this in chapter 8). And I set about working to braid my sense of the world's need, my soul's deepest longings, and my commitment to transformative programming.

I firmly believe that the generation that makes the money should also experience the social good it can support, and so I knew I didn't want to create a perpetual endowment. I planned to spend down the funds and sunset the endowment over a generation—20 years, give or take. That time frame provided a spacious boundedness that has supported action and learning over time, step by step—strand by strand. It has supported a vision of my social change leadership as a creative practice, a kind of social poetry, allowing for an extraordinary interplay of artistry and productivity, imagination and activity.

Braiding the story

Braiding puts things in relationship to each other in a way that is both beautiful and functional, and in a way that makes the whole stronger than any part would be alone. We have done that in our work in Sierra Leone, I have done that with the different parts of my identity, and I do that now in this book.

In the coming chapters, I weave three strands together. The first is the story of Fambul Tok, both what it accomplished and how it worked. The second is the journey I had to make, as a person and as a leader, in order to work the way I wanted to. And the third is the framework supporting it all—the foundational convictions, the creative and spiritual practices, and the programmatic insights and approaches that supported transformation in Sierra Leone, and in me.

But this book is not any one of those strands exclusively or exhaustively. Rather, I aim to share enough of each for you to sense and savor the whole.

In part I, I share stories from the remote communities in Sierra Leone where Fambul Tok began its work and offer background about the history of Sierra Leone's civil war and of the international efforts to support peace. I also share John Caulker's story—his community roots, his harrowing wartime exploits as a human rights activist, and how he came to lead the call for reconciliation, believing in the power of his country's people, communities, and culture. I bring you to Fambul Tok's tradition-based reconciliation bonfires and cleansing ceremonies, and I share stories of the forgiveness and healing that came from them, including the transformation of a notorious wartime commander who became a leader for peace. I also walk you through the processes we used to make this work possible.

In part II, I share the story of how and why I came to this work, focusing on the resources that helped me challenge the norms of an international peace and security field dominated by secular, rational analysis. As I discover and learn to integrate previously untapped spiritual resources for peace, the separate threads of my spiritual life and my work in the world become increasingly interwoven. I show you how my peacebuilding work evolved and how I decided to use $20 million through Catalyst for Peace to help bring a new system to life. And I tell you about my encounter with northern Uganda's Acholi religious leaders, working to end the violence of the Lord's Resistance Army in their homeland. I share the insight from them that became foundational to my life's journey: What if existing international justice mechanisms were actually an obstacle to justice and peace? How can we instead live out a different system of accountability and community healing?

My journey and Fambul Tok's weave together in part III, "Building a Home for the Work," where I illuminate the key elements of our approach of "building peace from the inside out," showing what that has meant in practice. You'll learn how we structured our programming to support the nonlinear nature of real-world social change, including using action-reflection cycles and practicing "emergent design." You'll witness how we practiced storytelling *as* peacebuilding, not merely *about* peacebuilding, and how the relational, conversational skills of "hearing to speech" and "appreciative mirroring" illuminate important roles that outsiders can play.

My individual journey mirrored and supported the organizational journey. I share about how, at a critical moment in my own leadership, I had to humbly learn how to receive others' support, not just for the *work* but for *myself*, and how this led me to form

my own Wisdom Circle. And I describe the metaphoric journey of "leaving my father's house," and how moving into a "home of my own" meant disentangling from a patriarchal, "outside-in" system.

In part IV, I describe how we had to adapt our programming and step into new levels of resilience and growth when Ebola struck Sierra Leone in 2014. You'll see the inadequacies of much of the international response up close, as well as the strength of the Fambul Tok model and the resilience it offered communities facing this new threat. You'll learn how we not only challenged the "business as usual" approach but also built, together with local leaders, a powerful alternative that opened the way for working differently.

In this part, I also drill down on two key metaphors at the heart of the theory behind our work. The first is the image of the community as a cup: a vessel that, when whole, can contain and support everything within it but, when cracked, can hold neither its own resources nor retain anything poured into it from the outside. This metaphor makes the community container visible and illuminates the necessary work of repairing the cracks, instead of simply pouring in aid and expecting that to "fix" problems. The second metaphor I introduce is the image of the international system as nested bowls—our vivid and powerful alternative to the linear, hierarchical assumptions of the status quo. This metaphor represents a whole-scale reconceptualization of the field and can inspire fundamental, necessary changes to the international system. These images, and the transformation they ask of leaders at every level, were crucial to bringing Fambul Tok's innovation to a national scale and, eventually, to it being adopted as government policy.

Part V unfolds the next step in Fambul Tok's evolution: the People's Planning Process, our community-based model for

development, and its adoption as national policy through the Wan Fambul National Framework for Inclusive Governance and Local Development. I show how rural women's leadership in Sierra Leone was key to making that possible. I share how the Wan Fambul Framework was more than just a milestone accomplishment; it was inspirited by the vision of wholeness in community that grounded and resourced everything built to that point. And I complete the braid of the book: the individual journey that underpins my transformation and that of so many people on our journey; the journey of Fambul Tok's work, from the most remote villages of Sierra Leone to the national and international policy arenas; and the expression and invocation of wholeness, of the new, life-giving system, that can spring up when we work together from the inside out.

My story, this story, exists at the intersection of all the things you were told not to talk about in polite company: politics, money, and religion. I can't tell this story without bringing in each of those threads. It's not politics I write about, per se, but rather the systemic processes of social change, the transformation of the very way we think about organizing as a global community. It's not money I write about, per se, but rather aligning funding, relationships, programming, and values so that our financial resources enable us to call forward and live into our deepest shared values—together. And it's not religion I write about, per se, but rather the deeper spiritual ideas that inspire and support me and inform my work, and consequently the approach I have lived out more generally. The work of transformation is fundamentally spiritual, whatever that word may mean to you, and it is resourced by both the visible and invisible, the tangible and intangible.

As you journey through this book, there may be moments in which the balance of these threads feels surprising or uncomfortable to you. Where program detail seems too dense, feel free to skim, leaving us program nerds to exult in the complexity. As my personal learning journey unfolds, I invite you to look for yourself in the stories, too, whatever your life circumstances. If my candid discussions of spirituality touch an uncomfortable edge for you—welcome to the journey. I hope you will let it expand you.

Integration is not linear but circular and iterative. It happens in fits and starts, ebbs and flows, rhythms of expansion and contraction. I've tried to write with a rhythm that offers a path for your own iterative reflection and integration as you read. I encourage you to give yourself that space.

How I work is as important to me as what I do, and yet this is not a how-to book. It is a *how-I* book—how I have done what I've done and what I've learned in doing it. There are a lot of how-to implications from my experience and in the writing, but for the most part, they are meant to be an invitation, not a prescription. We are all in different places, physically and metaphorically. I invite you to let my stories spark self-reflection on your own deeper values, vision, purpose, and potential. I invite you to let these stories spark new possibilities and new imaginings in your own contexts. I invite you to look for that which you most want to see more of, and to find ways to come together with others to make more space for it in the world.

I invite you to find and hold to your own core, like in a French braid, and to find the people and possibilities to weave together with so that you, too, can bring your whole self as one part of a larger whole, where your self and the whole feed and sustain each other. My experience tells me that it's possible.

Holding fire

In the mid-2000s, I had the privilege of working with the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI), an extraordinary interfaith group of northern Ugandan religious leaders who came together to try to end the brutal civil war there, to end the reign of terror of the rebel Lord's Resistance Army, or LRA, and to help people and communities heal from the devastation and destruction. One of the founders, Anglican Bishop McLeod Ochola, became a hero of mine. Bishop Ochola's wife and daughter were both killed by rebels in the fighting that plagued northern Uganda, and yet he was leading national calls for forgiveness and a restorative justice process, even for those responsible for his own losses. He shared a beautiful metaphor for what helped and guided him in this process:

> Once the truth is known, it is very bitter for you to swallow. Truth is very deadly; it can kill. But how can you handle, accept it? It is only through mercy. Mercy can let you hold it. If you want to carry live fire in your hands, you will throw it away because it will burn. But if you hold it in something good, that does not conduct heat, you can take the fire. So it is the same with this, truth revealed—you can receive it with mercy.

You can handle the heat of painful truth by holding it in something good—something Bishop Ochola named as mercy. In Sierra Leone, we held the heat of truth with community. Fambul Tok has focused its work on repairing the fireproof container of community to hold the people and the work they and their country most need. A healing and whole community is itself a living organism.

Working *for* it helped people work *from* it—to live out the values and practices of a healthy and whole community in the present, even while working to grow its lived expression. A living whole greater than the sum of its parts, a restored community connects us to something bigger than ourselves, opening us to new inspiration, energy, and capacity. It is our channel to the universal, ancestral wisdom, at once invisible and yet so tangibly present and powerful that it can help us confront some of the most difficult challenges we face.

This greater wisdom, the wisdom of wholeness, is the ultimate fireproof container for the work we are called to do. I fundamentally believe that this wisdom wants to be more fully expressed in the world today. It wants to be expressed in us and to us, as individuals and as communities, and in and through the work we do. This greater wisdom feeds our core. It is the wholeness that ultimately holds us all. And it is a strong and trustworthy container.

Chapter 1

CROSSING OVER

March 2008

There is no bridge across the Manowa River. To get to the cluster of villages in Manowa section, a small region in Kailahun, the eastern-most district of Sierra Leone, you have to drive your vehicle onto a floating wooden platform, optimistically called a "ferry." The ferry is attached to a wire cable that straddles the river. Powered by two ferry "operators" pushing long poles, it slowly moves across the river. There's no use being impatient. There is simply no way to go any faster.

Even getting *to* the ferry takes spacious, gracious unconcern with time. That much I'd learned already, even though this was my first trip to Sierra Leone. To get this far, we'd left Freetown, the capital city on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean, the day before, and driven the length of the country, more than 11 hours through a panorama of open, gently rolling terrain. Unpaved road cut a curving, soft-red line through lush green fields. Scattered palm trees punctuated the

blue sky like miniature green fireworks. As we got farther east, dark gray hills of volcanic soil framed the horizon. Red-caked leaves of roadside greenery boasted of the dry season's dusty gift to anything too close to the road. Even the air smelled dry.

In the best of times, Manowa would still be remote, but in post–civil war Sierra Leone, where roads destroyed in the war still hadn't been rebuilt or repaved, the journey felt like it moved in slow motion. Annual heavy rains deeply rutted the roads, some of which were more pothole than pathway, and navigating those by car could qualify as an Olympic sport. Fambul Tok's three-month-old Toyota Land Cruiser had already looked run-down and battered at the start of our journey, and now I understood why.

As the road wound through villages, I saw clusters of women with giant wooden mortars and pestles, rhythmically pounding rice to crack off its hard hulls. Bright-red palm kernels dried on tarps the size of family picnic blankets. Thatched-roof homes hugged the road. Once in a while, we'd see a zinc roof, often rusty, just like the NGO (nongovernmental organization) signs that littered the roadside, announcing who had helped whom do what in that place. The larger the town, the more signs clamoring for attention.

"Songo is that way," John Caulker said, pointing over the steering wheel as we crossed an early junction. John was the director of Fambul Tok, and Songo is where he grew up. As we drove, he shared memories of village life before the war destroyed his town, and of how hard it had been to resettle and rebuild after. He told stories of other places we drove by, too. He talked about the West Side Boys, a notorious gang active especially at the end of the war, as we passed their base at Okra Hills. Approaching Mile 91 (many places are commonly known simply by their distance from

Freetown), he pointed and said, "See that pile of rusted cars? This was called Foday Sankoh's Garage." Then he described how the rebels, under Foday Sankoh's command, would hide just over a hill and ambush vehicles when they reached the top, capturing everything and everyone and burning the cars.

At Mile 91, John gestured to his left and said casually, "That's where I would go to infiltrate rebel camps." As a young human rights advocate, he disguised himself as a rebel so that he could sit around their bonfire, listening as young fighters bragged about the day's events. Then he snuck out and looked for a phone to pass the information to his colleagues at Article 19 and Amnesty International.

It was a huge relief to spill out of the car and uncrumple my body when we finally stopped for the night. Exhausted from the day of driving, I was also filled with deep appreciation and even awe at the much longer life journeys that had brought John and his team to this place and this moment. We spent the night in Kailahun Town, the capital of Kailahun District. The town had once been a thriving hub of regional commerce, strategically located at the intersection of the Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea borders. Then it became the place where the war began, and easily one of the country's most war-ravaged districts. The United Nations compound, which sometimes allowed internationals to rent rooms for the night, was the only secure place to stay in the district and, when the generators were running, the only place with regular electricity. But even the UN didn't have running water, and among the many things I learned on my way to Manowa was how to bucket flush.

The next morning, it was another two and a half hours, on the road and on the ferry, to reach Manowa. I was accompanying the Fambul Tok staff to Manowa's first gathering of community stakeholders,

where John would ask if they wanted to engage with the *fambul tok* community reconciliation process. John never presumed he knew how the community wanted to approach reconciliation, and he paid special attention to consulting an inclusive group of traditional leaders, women, youth, elders, Muslims, Christians, victims, and perpetrators, explaining the *fambul tok* process and exploring whether and how they wanted to engage with it. The initial meeting was structured around a series of open-ended questions: Do you want to reconcile? If so, how? What resources do you have to begin that process? How can we walk with you and support you in the process? We trusted these were the right questions. But none of us knew exactly how the people of Manowa would answer them.

We went first to the section chief's house, and after the official greetings, we all walked together to the *court barray*, a covered, open-air community gathering space common in rural Sierra Leone. A large circle of chairs stretched to the edges of the *barray*. Stakeholders from all of the neighboring villages were beginning to gather, and the crowd grew so large that many people had to stand outside in the sun, where they nevertheless leaned in eagerly to be part of the conversation. As we talked together, it was immediately clear that no one in Manowa felt that they had experienced anything close to reconciliation, even though there had been a formal Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in the country. The TRC had comprehensively documented wartime atrocities and produced a multivolume report, but it had not offered space for people to reconcile with each other. There had been an unquestioned collective resignation to its impossibility, and communities had tried to move forward without it.

Yet when John asked the people of Manowa if they *wanted* to

reconcile, there was a resounding, universal "Yes!" And when he asked them how they might like to do so, there was a visible awakening to the possibility. John explained that Fambul Tok valued Sierra Leone's cultural practices of communal truth-telling, apology, and forgiveness and recognized that communities had many other resources, already present within their villages, that they could use to lead their own reconciliation process. With that, the conversation grew loud and animated.

From the spillover crowd just outside the open sides of the *barray*, a tall gentleman came forward. Dressed all in white, with a white kufi cap that amplified his height and added to his air of distinction, he spoke deliberately, with an authority that immediately captured the crowd's attention. "No one's ever come here like this before," he said, expressing an almost stunned disbelief that we had traveled to Manowa at all, although clearly referring to more than the physical difficulties of actually getting there. "This is the first time we've ever been asked what *we* want."

He put our visit in the context of centuries of history, speaking like an excited schoolteacher lecturing on his favorite subject. "First the Christians came," he informed us, "and they said, 'Your culture is heathen. You need Christianity.' And then the Muslims came, and they said, 'No, no, your culture is bad, haram. You need Islam.' And then the colonizers came, and they said, 'No, no, your culture is backward. You need our civilization.'" His voice and his head dropped, and he added, "And then the war came and destroyed everything anyway."

With piercing directness he looked up at us. "You are the first people ever to come here and say, 'Your culture is valuable.' To believe that we have resources, ourselves, to address these challenges."

Now it was my turn to be stunned. I'd been hearing about this dynamic from John all along, of course. As the elder spoke, I recalled those rusted signs all along our drive. His words gave me a new understanding of how unconventional the ideas behind Fambul Tok gatherings really were: our presence, questions, and invitation; our deep listening and genuine commitment to "walking with," reinforced by walking so very far *to,* these villages—all of it countered decades, even centuries, of relationships with outsiders who had ignored, devalued, or destroyed what was there, imposing their own sense of what was valuable onto this community and ignoring its connections to its own ancestral wisdom. It wasn't only religious and colonial powers that had done so. Decades of humanitarian support had replicated the same dynamics, bringing outside "solutions" to "problems" that outsiders defined, without recognizing, much less engaging or mobilizing, the resources already in the community. The value of the local culture, of the talents, desires, experience, ingenuity, courage, commitment, knowledge, and caring relationships within the community itself—all of that had been left unacknowledged and uninvited.

Many others jumped in to echo the spirit of the elder's response, and after animated conversation, the community agreed unanimously to engage the *fambul tok* reconciliation process. Mere hours before, the crowd had said they didn't think reconciliation could ever happen. But simply being asked what they wanted, and what resources they might already have to facilitate that, had opened up a clear and immediate interest in working together to make it happen. That stakeholder meeting in Manowa inaugurated a three-month process in which Fambul Tok staff guided the villages of Manowa through organizing and running their own community healing bonfire.

The centerpiece of Fambul Tok was the *fambul tok* reconciliation process. (I denote the process in lowercase italics and the program we named after it using capitals.) The *fambul tok* process was designed over months of consultations with a wide range of local leaders across the country, and it centered around a two-day ceremony held in the community. On the first day, around an evening bonfire, people would tell stories of what happened to them during the war, or of what they had done, offering apologies and granting forgiveness to each other in front of the whole community. The ceremony revived the tradition of communal conversation and collective problem-solving and adapted it to help communities heal from the war. The next day, there would be a cleansing ceremony that revitalized traditional practices and reconnected communities with their ancestors—connections that had been dormant since the war, and sometimes even earlier, suppressed by the many phases of colonial interference the elder had described. The cleansing ceremony would be followed by months and ultimately years of community activities to deepen reconciliation, build on the relationships being rewoven, and address critical community needs with collective economic development projects.

The conversation in Manowa was only the first step in their long-term community healing process, and what happened there would be repeated with more than 2,500 villages, involving more than 150,000 people. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Photo by Danielle Cohen

As the founder and president of Catalyst for Peace, Libby Hoffman creates space for those most impacted by violence and war to lead in building the peace and restoring social wholeness. For 15 years, she has focused her work in Sierra Leone, as co-founder, funder, and ongoing program partner of Fambul Tok (family talk), a postwar reconciliation program rooted in local culture and tradition. After the 2014 Ebola epidemic, she helped adapt the Fambul Tok approach into a national policy framework for people- and community-led planning and development; the framework has become a model for transformative partnerships between international donors, national governments, and civil society.

Libby produced the award-winning documentary film *Fambul Tok* and coauthored a companion book of the same name. A former political science professor at Principia College, she has degrees from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy and Williams College. The mother of three grown children, she divides her time between southern Maine and Washington, DC.

For more about Libby and her work,
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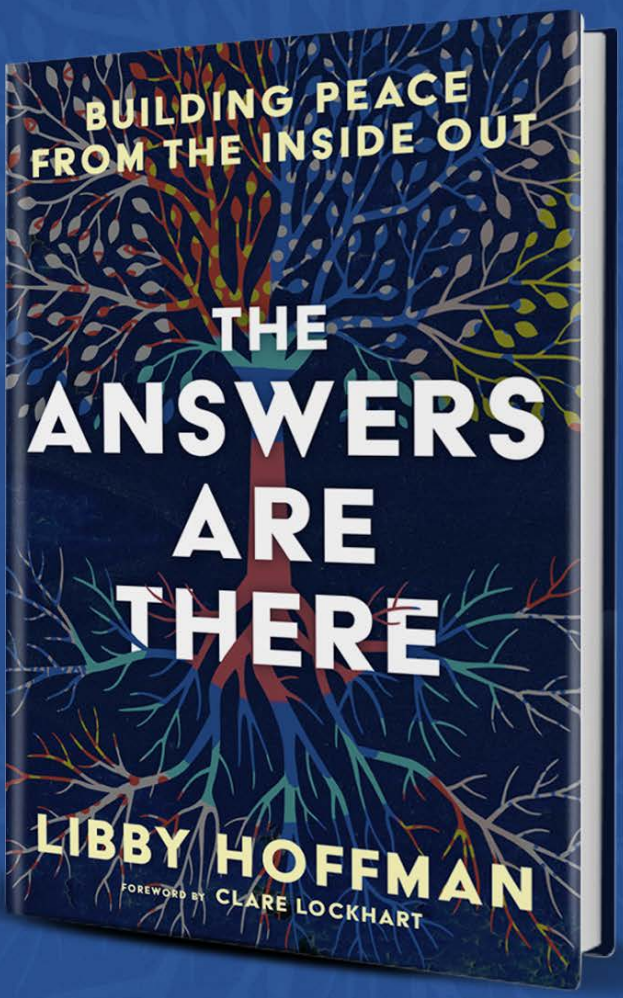

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