

## **Kathryn Grody**

Last spring a friend invited me to a benefit for a group she thought I might be interested in. I did not expect a major life changing event, but that is just what happened to me that May evening...

As an actress, author and mother, I have always deeply believed in the transformative power of art, particularly the spoken theatrical narrative kind...though in America it is sometimes hard to believe that art can really impact the huge and noisy culture we inhabit. So when Shamil Idriss, Senior Advisor to Search for Common Ground, began to talk about the radio dramas that were produced by Talking Drum Studios five times a week, in six different languages, addressing all aspects of Sierra Leonean life which 92% of the population tuned in to, my jaw literally dropped, my heart raced and my brain was beyond excited by the possibility that art and policy were working together to effect the greater good somewhere on this planet. As I listened to all other aspects of how this group worked to truly search for common ground, between ex-combatants and civilians, between men and women, religious groups and health workers, soldiers and police I felt myself become more hopeful and optimistic about the possibilities of healing the planet, slowly, but surely than I had been in a very long time.

I introduced myself to Jane Shaw and Shannon Greenspan, co-directors of Individual Giving at SFCG, and let them know how excited I was and that I didn't know how I could participate but that I was excited about the possibilities. I want to add that often in "benefit" situations, you really don't feel folks want your enthusiasm or your actual participation unless it is accompanied by major dough, and not that Search doesn't need serious funding, but there was a sense of true desire for all kinds of support and connections, and I felt they genuinely welcomed whatever thoughts and support I could give. Initially I thought about the friends I wanted to share this work with, and perhaps have a gathering which indeed I did. I certainly had no thoughts of traveling to Africa...

Then Jane invited me to participate on the first investor trip to Sierra Leone. Initially I felt my work this fall had to be about the election here at home, and I also honestly did not know how to answer my oldest son when he asked what good my going there would do for Sierra Leoneans. But when I asked that question of a very wise board member, Gordon McCormick, he answered that I had no idea how powerful the notion of witness was for the people working so hard so far away often with few resources. To take the time to come from a place of such privilege to visit a place of astounding hardship, to support and learn about all the cultural work they are doing, would be a true gift in itself and have its own huge rippling effect. And he said, "you have no idea how the trip will affect you, what ripples you will want to send out when you return." Those responses pointed me in the direction of saying a somewhat timid but excited yes.

Timid because I was profoundly ignorant about this continent. I learned that people can destroy each other and their landscape and their infrastructure and live eleven years in a power frenzy, and after unspeakable pain and suffering engage in a profound civil discourse. I learned that in this brave new and odd world of technology, that a look in

each others eyes, human interaction, humor and deep, deep listening is still the most powerful tool we've got. I learned that to share this process of listening through the 18 new radio stations throughout the country creates an ongoing dialogue that continues long after the battery operated radios are turned off and people are gathered together around candlelight in front of tin-roofed, plastic sheeted dwellings. I learned that small community task forces that include soldiers, civilians, teenagers, police, mayors and disabled folk actually accomplish enormous benefits for their communities when the emphasis is on the commonalities they share, not the differences of opinion political or otherwise. I learned that in a country very far from New York City, where the literacy rate is 36% and the life expectancy 35 and unemployment is staggering, that they cared deeply about this past election because they knew it would eventually affect them so I learned just what global really means. I learned just how inaccurate stereotypes about "the dark continent " are, how familiar the unfamiliar could become and how important breaking bread together really is. And I learned what mindfulness means. For ten days in a very foreign country with seven strangers, we were so extremely present in this new place, with each other, with the people from Talking Drums, with the strangers we met on the beautiful beach, and for myself, it was one of the most truly alive experiences of my life.

When I asked Frances Fortune, a beyond rare and extraordinary woman who runs the West Africa program of SFCG, what would be the cost effective return for the incredible labor intensive trip she and her staff planned for us, I fully expected her first answer to be financial. But what she said surprised me and has stayed with me. She asked that we take back stories of humanity shared, that we take back all the experiences that were so the opposite of all the unspeakable stereotypes about Africa and Africans, that we take back the knowledge that we all can do something, that we find ways to advocate change and transformation and that we return with a knowledge that conflict can indeed be transformed into, if not blissful commonalities, certainly creative and peaceful and productive ones.

I returned home and entered a tornado of somewhat more frenzied and less "mindful" activities. However, I have made a renewed commitment to my home country. If people can come out of armed conflict in which limbs and lives were lost, with a deep and profound commitment to transformation thru civil discourse, then a blue person should be able to exchange ideas and dreams with a red person long before we resort to actual armed conflict...so from Sierra Leoneans I am inspired to make a commitment to peace and deep listening at home.