

A Lesson from Rwanda

**By
Thomas C. Hall**

Abstract

On a recent trip to New York City I had the honor and privilege of meeting a most remarkable person, Paul Rusesabagina, a hotel manager. Paul is the man who courageously risked his life to house over a thousand refugees during their struggle against the genocidal militia in Rwanda. The movie Hotel Rwanda was based on his actions during a very risky and dangerous time in his country.

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Paul's actions were not those of the film's hero. Paul's heroism came from embracing a messy situation and taking small, informed risks. Earlier this month while visiting a school in Falls Church, Virginia, Paul stated, "I didn't have time to be scared, I didn't know what I was doing was different." Rusesabagina's statement speaks volumes about the kind of life and the kind of support he nurtured on a daily basis. For his success, Paul would credit a variety of fortunate circumstances that he was able to exploit. Yet, Paul Rusesabagina himself is a hero. Instinctively he saw his own survival intertwined with those around him, including many people the homicidal militia called "cockroaches." Paul saved over 1,000 refugees. Without hesitation he risked everything, bargaining with the roving bands of militia intent on genocide. Paul risked his life with nothing but the power of his words to point out the truths in a situation to help "family". He was not able to save every member of his "family," but he was able to keep going and now uses his experiences in Rwanda to focus his energies and to bring this story to the world. Paul's story holds elements of risk, belief, and, ultimately, the joy of successfully surviving such an experience. Survivors in Rwanda were indeed fortunate to have someone such as Paul Rusesabagina who was willing to take informed and measured risks. In Rwanda or in our lives we know the difference between those who intellectually know this concept and those who step up and take such huge risks. In our daily lives, as a general rule, we have heard how to take care of ourselves, how to take risks. Only by being ourselves around others do we develop and nurture a supporting group of associates, friends, and family. How is it then that an enthusiastic and intellectually astute Law School graduate can, over the course of years, find himself miserable and defeated in the throes of addiction, depression, or any number of treatable psychological dysfunctions?

Paul Rusesabagina first had to admit there was a problem and admit that he had a responsibility to others by addressing this problem as much as he was able. He took many risks to help others when his own personal survival was even at a higher risk. He also reached out and asked for help from others. He exposed his own vulnerability to others, especially those in positions of power whom he thought he might be persuaded to help.

Many shy away from taking personal risks for survival because of false pride or fear of the judgments of others. This can emotionally and psychologically isolate a person: withdrawal, followed by self-loathing for not taking a risk, and further withdrawal continues and becomes fertile ground for depression, alcoholism, or drug abuse. At this intersection of choice, action, and risk, it is easy to lose our way in the pressures, distractions, stresses, and inner turmoil of day-to-day concerns.

Hopefully, very few of us will be confronted with the situation Paul Rusesabagina faced. There will be days, weeks, and even months when we feel like we are constantly battling the barbarians at the door. Life is an assault. Daily we are all assaulted by stress and anxiety on a daily basis over a period of years. Perhaps the questions become how are we going to maintain our resilience during these times, how will we learn to take emotional and psychological risks so that living our lives openly and hopefully becomes second nature and "we don't know what we are doing is different." Of course loss of resilience happens incrementally. The old saying; "borrowing from Peter to pay Paul" leaves Peter shaving the very infrastructure that allows us to perform at high levels out of our schedule. I am suggesting we take a minute

to focus on our condition long enough to check and maybe even catch the slow eroding of ourselves. Here, time is important. Consider taking time to nurture and to reinforce your best skills, the emotional and psychological skills necessary to support our ability to effectively take a risk, as we navigate career, family, and friends.

How could any of us have trouble taking the every day risks associated with high functioning? Imagine a time when you no longer have the resiliency to weather the shocks, the jarring, anxiety-producing twists and turns of career, friends and family. As so many others have said so eloquently, alcohol and other drugs do what they do so well – at first. Alcohol relaxes and gags the internal critic. Drugs like cocaine and amphetamine seem to give a shy person the gift of eloquent competence, each word uttered seems to ring of a shrewdness and clarity. Oh, what a feeling! At first drugs will make almost anyone feel capable of taking many risks. In fact, we eat risk for lunch. Or so we think. Soon all that the drug gave is taken away, the gift of eloquent competence is gone, and the glow is extinguished.

Changes in the brain, brought on by extended use of alcohol and/or other drugs, drains our supply if resiliency can trigger or exaggerate, stress, anger or depression. We know that no one ever took a drink or other drug with the intention of becoming an addict, just as no one ever intends to become depressed or addicted when life overwhelms and risk-taking is oppressive --- how often have you seen others take for granted the ability of our own built-in shock absorbers to see us through the worst of times without any thought of maintenance. We are surprised and embarrassed if our shock absorbers stop working. We minimize the implications and our fear of being exposed or seen as weak will often stop us from reaching out and taking the necessary risk to get back on track. Rebuilding the infrastructure of resilient thinking patterns is known to assist in the long-term recovery from many types of depression, but many of us are unable to reach out. When athletes hit a plateau and their performance begins to deteriorate, a coach is called in, trainers are mobilized, and the team psychologist is consulted . . . neither guilt, shame, nor fear of embarrassment is allowed to stand in the way.

Paul Rusesabagina not only survived, he demonstrated courage by taking risks in a situation he knew was life or death. Paul succeeded in saving many people in this life and death situation. At this point it bears repeating that Mr. Rusesabagina's story illuminates the strengths available to us all. Upon reflection it seems that once we get out of our own way and just deal with what is right in front of us we handle situations with courage, compassion and authority. Ultimately, the joy of successfully surviving such an experience informs further, future risk-taking. It has been said that to ensure resiliency of our own shock absorbers we must practice taking informed risks, lending help, maximizing opportunities and showing the willingness to accept help. Paul truly demonstrated the credibility of these concepts.

After meeting with Paul, I could not help reflecting on any measurable risk I could take to affirm and advance my own resiliency. Which ones do I need to be taking? Rusesabagina's message is one of hope and gratitude. I find myself searching for the last time I demonstrated compassion for someone else. Small risks even with those we trust certainly can seem scary. One starting point could be to try and remember the last time you took a risk, reached out and helped a colleague, friend or family member. When was the last time you helped others and risked rejection or censure.

One large lesson I learned from Paul Rusesabagina is to take a risk when life's exigencies cry out for justice. Apathy towards risk-taking is indirectly plunging ourselves into greater, future danger. There is no doubt that risky situations sometimes present the probability of pain, suffering and at times death. But, Paul Rusesabagina did not have any guarantees that he would feel no pain before he acted. Now is the time to take a stand.

Thomas Hall, Ph.D., is a certified alcohol and drug counselor, licensed Marriage and Family therapist and Psychology Professor. Professor Hall coordinates the Addiction Counseling Program at Kansas City Kansas Community College. Dr. Hall is a clinical consultant for secondary and post secondary educational institutions, drug courts, and provides program development, training and therapy for these institutions. To contact Dr. Hall go to the [Addiction Counselor Program](#).