

Dear friends,

I just returned from Afghanistan yesterday and read the conversations. I deeply appreciate all the passionate and compassionate responses to this latest blow to the already struggling arts.

I can add details to the situation: I was at Istiqlal High School and experienced the tragic event. In my twelve years working in Afghanistan, I've been close to many explosions -- bomb blasts that were miles away and suicide bombings blocks away. But never this.

The production, *Heartbeat, the Silence after the Explosion*, was going to be a beautiful event. Before the show we all gathered in the lobby -- my students at Kabul University, Barmak the filmmaker of *Osama* fame, Professor Hussainzada the Chair of the Fine Arts Department and a man who has done more than anyone to revitalize theatre in Afghanistan, and so many good friends.

We settled ourselves down front, fourth row center, perfect seats. The performance, directed by the German psychologist, Inge Missmahl, was performed by the actors of Azdar Theatre (who also perform as Parwaz Puppet Theatre). The play was simple, direct, with few words: actors ran onto the stage and froze, staring in awe, horror, curiosity toward the back of the audience, then moved off. Others ran on, grabbed them and pulled them away. In the darkness, musicians entered, quietly sat on the floor, and began to play sweet sounds on traditional Afghan instruments, with French composer Yves Pignot in the center on keyboards. The play was elegant, stylized, precise, with just snippets of thoughts or poems spoken. The entire effect was graceful and profound.... but cut short.

An unbelievable thunderclap shook the building. Chards of ceiling fell on the audience; the air filled with smoke and plaster dust. The explosion occurred in the back of the theatre, injuring the cameramen, and those who like to stand in the back in case they want to leave. My advice from now on: sit in the front! The suicide bomber, I'm sure, had never been in a theatre. He arrived late and entered the theatre in the dark. Maybe he was surprised at the darkness and couldn't figure out what he was supposed to do. He took the first seat he could see -- at the end of the last row. There he sat next to a German fellow, a friend of the colleagues I huddled with later in the guard house. He was the only casualty.

The sound was so loud that, even in the front, it was like being punched hard in the side of the head, while at the same moment like sharp objects piercing your eardrums...it was painful. This is what they mean by earsplitting. It took a few minutes to hear again; others took much longer.

What was surprising was how quickly and orderly everyone moved en masse to exit. Yes, a few yells and cries but, really, all moved so directly without confusion or panic -- just movement -- the well-practiced actions of those who have learned. We in the front jumped onto the stage, ran off stage left and gathered in the hall. No one dared make a sound -- all of us thought that attackers had entered the theatre and aimed to slaughter us all. We were absolutely silent and waited. One large guy pulled us into a storeroom where we huddled with about 12 others behind the locked door. Someone opened the window and peered out.

People were hurrying to the front gate. The group deemed it safe to move and grabbed our arms and pulled us outside into the cold air. We were all still shaking and silent.

Reaching the front of the theatre, we saw Director Laurence Levasseur, the dauntless woman who has directed the Institut Francais d'Afghanistan for years. "This is the first time we have ever been attacked," she said more than once. She calmly but forcibly directed the flow of traffic out of the theatre and to the front gate. Except us foreigners. We were firmly directed to go to her office and stay there (hide I think is the operative word).

It was clear now there was only one suicide bomber, alone, a 16 year old kid, sent to his death by someone else who was now sitting safely and comfortably alive. How unfair are these wicked, warped people – sending someone else to do their dirty deed. Then feeling satisfied: "Aha, job well done!" Sick, just sick. Poor child, all that was left of him in the theatre was his head and his legs.

We spent another hour in the in Laurance's office – two Germans, one Swiss, one French, and two Americans (us). From her office we could peer down into the lobby: blood scattered everywhere, trails of it into rooms and out the front door. From the light booth we could see the grizzly scene in the theatre. We were then corralled into a tiny guard house by the front gate. They informed us that there was another bomber outside on the street and no foreigners could leave. It hardly felt safe in the guardhouse until we noted that the walls were two feet thick. There were two Afghans with us, one was crying inconsolably. It was his third suicide bombing that week and he was beside himself with grief.

Slowly we learned who was taken to the hospital in what condition. Professor Hussainzada was among the hurt. Thankfully, he and most of the others are recovering from wounds from flying or falling debris. We foreigners were the last to leave the premises, except Laurence and an array of Afghan police. Whatever one hears about Afghan police, these men were quick, organized, experienced (sadly), and professional. I was very impressed.

Somehow we have managed to stay out of trouble for more than a decade of traveling throughout Afghanistan. And I hope our luck continues. Kabul has always been relatively safe, but the attacks are just so random, you can never lower your guard. The Finast store that sells foreign foods – we hesitate to go there anymore; Wazir Akbar Khan, the fancy neighborhood where all the big NGOs and Embassies are – we rarely go there unless we must. The US Embassy is a fortress and the hundreds who work there are rarely allowed to leave the compound. They rely on us to let them know what life is like beyond the barbed wire and walls.

The Afghan people are unwavering, stubbornly continuing their lives and refusing to let the wicked amongst them rule their existence. But they all bear a pervasive sense of grief and resignation, a deep longing for peace. For all their trying, their country is infected with a disease and it is being meticulously spread to impressionable youth.

We have been privileged to work with many brave theatre groups in Afghanistan who take great risk in performing publicly. Now we are conducting a Youth Engagement project to counter this insidious blight by utilizing the arts: theatre, film, photography, mural painting, music, sculpture.. There's a tremendous need for community dialogue. Art is

communication. Our project, in collaboration with our theatre partners, will have 375 youth in 25 provinces design and implement their own arts projects that will involve their entire community. We saw communities come together during the elections. Our theatre programs, and other media efforts, were very effective at getting people to reach out beyond their families and into their communities.

To revitalize the arts is to restore the soul of the nation. The Afghan people have been through so many years of tragedy, they are utterly fed up. I believe that this spate of attacks is the last hurrah of a desperate group. I have high hopes for the leadership of Ashraf Ghani, a brilliant thinker and a specialist in fixing failed states. The youth of Afghanistan will create their country; we can only give them a nudge and some guidance. They call this generation the “transition generation.” Everyone says it will be the next generation after them – the children – who will restore the country. I do believe that the children will see a new Afghanistan.

Finally, I stand with Hjalmar in encouraging a manifesto of support from artists around the world, and sincerely looking into ways to bring Afghan troupes (including our all-female troupes) to the US, and US artists to Afghanistan. There's so much more to be said and done.

Warmest thanks and regards to all,
Joanna

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