

I Dreamt of War and in Hell I Found a Rebirth

BY ASH GALLAGHER

The sound of bombs and bullets move like slow motion in my memory. And from one front line conflict to the next unrest to the next refugee camp; on I went. The life of „war correspondent“, was a badge, and one I had pursued since I was 19-years old. But in seven years covering the Middle East, it was also exhausting. And there came a point, at the end of the Battle for Mosul, I actually touted, I felt ‚skinless,‘ exposed and needed a space to collapse.

The rush to the front pumped through my body and I absorbed it like the energy source it is, experiencing the destruction and death all around. But I also experienced connection, community and purpose.

You see, the adventure began when I was 19-years old. I sat curled up in a chair two weeks before Christmas in the home of a mentor and friend dissecting where I was going in life. I was bright-eyed and I dreamt of the future. It was romantic and thrilling. I was a writer and I wanted a fashion a life of meaning. The injustice of war seemed like the place to go and my friends told me I should go. In fact they were the first to say ‚yes,‘ to my crazy idea. Over the next decade, I navigated my way through news networks and newspapers until I finally left for the Middle East: Turkey, Lebanon, Palestine, Israel, Qatar and eventually Iraq, a few short months before the battle for Mosul began in 2016.

What I found, well: war is anything but romantic. In fact to say „War is hell,“ an old cliché, is an understatement. War is the desecration of the soul. War is a



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death, war is an addiction and war is a place where the truth is muddled. The lines blur together - every image slides into the next. Driving to the same place multiple times a week, exposed to the same sounds over and again, the smells; it all bleeds into a melting pot of senses and certain details are forfeited in my memory while others are magnified.

Near the end of the battle for Mosul against ISIS, the Grand al-Nouri Mosque exploded one overnight in June (2017). The next morning, I rushed with my colleagues to get there. Two-hundred and fifty meters away, we could still see plumes of smoke in the air. I called a friend to get me on air at the network where she worked. For over two minutes, I recounted soldiers' stories of the explosion and described a scene from a store front with a broken window, just barely out of range for a mortar to hit. Later, I rushed back home to file an article for another publication and what photos I managed to get, I turned over as well. Rumors suggested ISIS lined the Mosque with explosives, and ISIS wanted people to believe it was all from an airstrike. Evidence seemed to

suggest both, but it was war and who started it didn't matter. People died and were left under the rubble.

Such day to day can be draining on the mind and soul. Fireworks never sound the same. Pops in the back alley can make a person jump and insomnia is a common foe. War journalists often continue to return to the field with a hopelessness fearing they are unable to pursue another route or career. I felt „skinless,“ remember? I was exhausted but I struggled to know my next steps, so I stayed working in Iraq for nearly another year, covering the aftermath, the politics and elections. Then I pulled away, for my own sanity and I discovered something else.

I came to find, in the days since Mosul, there is another way. I learned something: war is the base camp for human conscious behavior. And if I could identify how we as human beings function when our world was threatened, I could heal my own stories. And it is in a place of war and strife, I saw my stories wide awake and telling them, stepping into a vulnerable open space, I no longer felt like a war journalist in the political sense, but a war journalist among the sacred human experience.

Our lives are defined by human connection: love and war, mercy and battle. And in the worst of circumstances we cling to those connections like we have everything to lose. When we finally take a breath, we find ourselves compassionate and offering solidarity to those still suffering. It took a political war to see the basic human emotions we experience

every single day. It took a war of ideology and guns to discover the language I needed to know the truth about how we can create a better space with each other.

And in a time of great division in the west, it seems like unity is impossible. But maybe, just perhaps if we can begin to tell the stories of our wars, we can heal our minds, our communities and create a better space with each ot-

her. As I write of war's aftermath; I am unpacking the events to better understand the human condition. And storytelling is bringing healing and clearing my mind of all the shrapnel and debris. What a lesson to learn and one I learned from war.

I will never forget the Yazidi woman I met in my first 24 hours in Iraq. She told me her story - one of slavery and torture. When

she finished, I asked her, "Why do you tell me your story?"

She replied quietly, "It helps my mind."

Wise beyond her years, I felt her words and I know them now. To tell my story is to heal my mind.

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