

Ode to the unwavering people of Afghanistan

Hjalmar Jorge Joffre-Eichhorn

The harder the experience of oppression, the more difficult it is to share; in other words, the solidarity and cooperation called for tend to be most scarce precisely when they are most needed in order to strengthen the struggles against oppression.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos

I imagine being in the midst of a political mass rally, the first in many years, right in the centre of your home country's capital. Imagine people from all walks of life with their banners, slogans and demands, asking for a little bit more life and dignity not only for themselves but for the whole of society. Imagine people expressing, or rather embodying, a whole ecology of deep affects (rage, pain, love, solidarity), cross-fertilising each other and producing an atmosphere never tasted before, never even deemed possible before, a taste that is beyond words, but palpable with the soul: a taste of poetry. Poetry in its literal sense of giving life to something that did not exist before. New bodies. New souls. And in a much more secular but not less important sense: new possibilities of being in the world, of surviving and lasting. Living and lasting. To live-last. We want to live-last!

This is what thousands of poetic bodies and souls echoed on that Friday of blazing sun and boundless hopes in Kabul, Afghanistan. We want to live lasting and last living! Enough of premature deaths and shortened lives!

Now imagine two young people among this beautiful multitude, yelling the same slogans, with the same fervour, and suddenly, Boom!

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I ask you again to imagine this: two young people among this beautiful multitude, yelling the same slogans, with the same fervour, and suddenly, Boom! The two young people, each one of them carrying several kilos of explosives, have blown themselves up, thereby creating a cemetery of shattered bodies, souls and dreams.

The end of poetry. The beginning of everyone for himself. The people run for their lives, without mercy for anyone else. The weakest of them are trampled to death.

Oh, I am sorry. I apologise. I was wrong. In fact, this is not what happened.

Imagine what really happened. The two young men blow themselves up, tearing to pieces dozens of people. There is blood everywhere. The chants are converted into a sea of screams and cries. Many people run for their lives (of course they do) ... but there are also those, quite a few of them, who immediately organise themselves in order to look after the numerous injured and identify the dead so that they can be buried with a minimum of dignity.

You may very well ask yourself how it is possible to identify those who have just been blown to bits. I will tell you right away.

Imagine a group of approximately 25 people, who have just become survivors of yet another suicide attack, the fifth in the last two weeks, all of them in the same neighbourhood of Kabul. These 25 people - who themselves have barely survived what will retrospectively be remembered as one of the most barbarous atrocities committed in forty years of uninterrupted war in the country - in spite of their state of shock, their profound feelings of pain and rage, and their deep desire to be among the dead in order to finally stop dying in life, these 25 people now dedicate themselves to gathering and putting back together the dismembered bodies of their comrades. Imagine a young woman in her twenties with the leg of a young child in one hand and the severed head of her best friend in the other. Imagine an elderly man, who had recently lost two of his sons in another attack, now crying inconsolably while picking up a loose torso wearing a Barcelona jersey of Lionel Messi. Some of the bodies are put back together. The majority are not.

Imagine the moment when family members arrive and the only thing they receive from our 25 friends are a few fingers, arms or ears of their loved ones. Imagine how many of those who gave their lives struggling for a more liveable

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Afghanistan for everyone will never be received by anyone, because their family members live far away in the countryside and will only learn about their murder days or even weeks later.

But this absurd nightmare does not end here. The bodies must still be buried before the government can make them disappear, as part of its efforts to massage the official number of victims in order to cover up its absolute incapacity to guarantee the country's 35 million inhabitants' basic human needs, including the right to life and the right to physical and mental integrity. We have 24 hours.

Imagine how within a few minutes, in the middle of the night, in spite of heart-rending individual and collective distress, a kind of emergency neighbourhood committee is set up, dividing and carrying out the most important tasks. Communicating with the families of the identified victims to find out whether they agree to a 'political' burial (a collective, community burial as opposed to an individual one) and deciding where to bury the dead (whether in one of the city's countless neighbourhood cemeteries, or by occupying a site with symbolic value to make sure that the innocent victims of this endless war are not forgotten).

We also must get in touch with the various *morda shoye* who have the cruel responsibility of preparing the corpses for the funeral the next day. Imagine someone handing over to you at 10.30 at night a blood-stained bundle containing body parts that only a few hours before made up the delicate body of a 21-year-old human being, possibly a philosophy student or a bird seller, a kite lover or a passionate supporter of the national cricket team. In any case, someone with ordinary dreams - such as to one day wake up without the fear that someone from your family, on the way to the bakery, will lose her life as a result of the most recent mortal toy developed by the US military-industrial complex, or through the involuntary actions of an unfortunate donkey-bomb. (Yes, my friend, donkey-bombs do exist. There are so many ways of losing one's life in Afghanistan.)

I apologise, too, for having begun calling you 'my friend', but after having told you such intimate and painful things, and recognising your capacity to listen and read with such care and solidarity, I feel that there is now a certain degree of complicity between us. Thank you so much for your presence. It gives me a lot of strength. You cannot imagine how alone one feels at times, engulfed by all this suffocating sadness. Thank you. You will always be welcome here.

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Above and right: in Afghanistan, a cemetery is often a site of resistance against the prevailing culture of death and impunity. Photos supplied by AHRDO.

Returning to the funeral. A decision was made to go ahead with a political burial, occupying a symbolic site in the city. Imagine, my friend, how the next day more than a hundred people, most of them men, meet in the vicinity of the National Parliament, on a hill that until yesterday served as a popular picnic place, but is now transformed into a site of resistance against the culture of death and impunity in Afghanistan. Imagine how these people, all of them heavily armed with shovels and pickaxes, charged with feelings of immense fury and infinite agony, begin to dig out with their own hands - with their own hands - a humble mass grave, big enough to receive in tears (for graves also cry) what remains of the bodies of Fatima, Abdullah and Tamana, but not big enough to ever be able to welcome with sufficient tenderness all of these massacred dreams and yearnings, all of these annihilated talents and brilliances, these exterminated smiles and joys. Graves should not be made to give shelter to the murdered laughter of an incinerated child.

The funeral ends with a prayer drowned in a tsunami of laments. There is no air

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left to breathe. Let us listen and feel ...

Next, the people return home. Imagine, my friend, how the women must feel, who, while the others were digging, were preparing their homes for the *fatiha*, the mourning ceremony, continuously reciting one of the Surahs of the holy Koran in order for their children to rest in peace. Imagine the sense of fatigue the human excavators and human Surahs must feel. Their tired bodies, empty eyes and crushed hearts. Their absolute helplessness. We are all on the verge of insanity. Nobody speaks. Grief without cure. Death by existential exhaustion. There are elegies that can only be expressed through silences and looks. Let us listen and feel ...

We serve ourselves some tea. And, as incredible as it sounds, gradually people's spirits come back to life. Their mouths resurrect and begin to whisper new desires. The return of poetry. A modest poetry, a poetry of courage, a poetry composed of generations of Afghans who were forced to live a life without future and who nonetheless never stopped dreaming and struggling for a future with life. Let us listen and feel ...

Soundings

The protests for a more just and beautiful Afghanistan continue day after day, everywhere, all the time, carried out by thousands of people, in a myriad of ways. Nobody is giving up just yet. Imagine, my friend, joining our struggle to stop the war and build peace, with justice and dignity. What do you say? Are you coming?

The author expresses his gratitude to Patrick Anderson and Tracy L. Hunter for their editorial support. The text is dedicated to the staff of AHRDO, who risk their lives every single day so that all people in Afghanistan can live a life in dignity.

Hjalmar Jorge Joffre-Eichhorn is a German-Bolivian Theatre of the Oppressed and Playback Theatre practitioner. He has worked in Afghanistan since 2007. Together with a group of Afghan activists, he founded the Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization (AHRDO: www.ahrdo.org), a political theatre and direct action platform based in Kabul. He has written and published about Afghanistan in Germany, Spain, Japan and the United States. He is currently working on his PhD, researching on the Epistemologies of the South, at the Centre for Social Studies (CES), University of Coimbra, Portugal. His invitation to join the struggle for peace and justice in Afghanistan was serious. Anyone interested, please get in touch at communitybasedtheatre@posteo.de.