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Trauma in Foreign Correspondents

Pearl Macek

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Pearl Macek

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Foreign Correspondents and Trauma

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I remember the exact moment when it occurred to me that journalists were human too. I was interning at a citizen journalism startup this summer while the latest Israeli-Palestinian conflict was taking place in the Gaza Strip. It came up in a conversation with another intern that Sky News in the UK was offering its photo editors counseling because of the horrific photos they were receiving of the conflict. I could see how this was necessary, given the pictures of severely burned Palestinian children that we were also receiving from our contributors.

After that I began to think about journalists as people —not just hardened reporting machines but as human beings with emotions that they have to deal with while reporting as well as afterwards. And then I started to think about myself as a journalist. Would I be able to report in war zones and come out psychologically unscathed? After all, reporting from the center of a conflict is something that I and many other aspiring foreign correspondents feel that we must do in order to make a name for ourselves.

Before, I had naively thought of the glory that came with the title, “War Correspondent”. It certainly sounded great but then I started to think about the reality of it. In a conflict, there would be pain, tragedy and death —would I be able to handle it? I decided to speak with journalists who had been at the epicenter of some of the most important and horrific wars in the past twenty years. I wasn’t sure that these seasoned correspondents would want to talk to me, much less divulge any psychological trauma they went through but I was happily surprised. These journalists not only spoke to me about the trauma they suffered, but they also believed that this was an important topic — something that they felt was not spoken about enough.

Nicole Tung, 28, just a year after graduating from New York University, booked a ticket to Egypt in 2011 with the hopes of covering the Arab Spring as a freelance photojournalist. As the tide of revolution swept over the Middle East, Tung followed it. She reported from Libya and Syria and took photos that have appeared in magazines and newspapers all over the world. In Libya, she became close to a fellow freelance reporter, James Foley, and they became both travel and work buddies.

In Syria, Foley began to freelance for Agence France Presse and GlobalPost. He was abducted on November 22, 2012 in Northwestern Syria. Tung was supposed to meet him on the Turkish-Syrian border that day but he never showed up. She was the one to call the CEO and President of GlobalPost, Philip Balboni, to tell him what had happened. Despite the efforts of Foley's family and Balboni, Foley was beheaded by members of the Islamic State on August 19, 2014. The beheading was captured on video and viewed by millions of people around the world.

Tung is a petite woman who doesn't look like she has seen the horrors of war, except for the serious and intense gaze she has when speaking about reporting from conflict zones. When I saw her for the first time I was instantly in awe of her courage and devotion to the profession. It was at a panel at Columbia's School of Journalism called "After James Foley- Covering Conflict When Journalists are Targets". Journalism students, reporters and professors packed into the main conference room, as well as into smaller rooms where video-screens had been setup. We all listened to Tung, Balboni and several other journalists talk about just how dangerous journalism has become—especially for freelancers. I met Tung a week or two later near to her home in Astoria. She was dressed casually and looked completely at ease being back in New York City from the Middle East.

Tung says that the way to get into the business has not changed but the very nature of conflict reporting has—especially since the Arab Spring began. "Even the most veteran journalists who started reporting in conflict zones did the same thing—they went unprepared." She told me. "I think the reason why it is a big issue now is because how dangerous wars have become—where journalists are directly targeted."

Despite what happened to Foley in Syria, Tung is prepared to head back into conflict zones. She seems to be a naturally stoic person, who can and will react calm when under pressure. But there are aspects of conflict reporting that do affect her.

Tung told me that the hardest thing to witness were civilians , especially children being affected by war, “Seeing them blown to pieces. Losing their parents, losing their siblings, it makes you feel very helpless and in a way you feel responsible because you’re there witnessing it and you’re there documenting it and you try to get the image out.” But sometimes Tung feels like the gravity of what she is seeing in conflict zones is not understood by the rest of the world. She told me this while we sat together at Hunter’s Point Park in Long Island City. It was a beautiful, sunny day. Families walked up and down the promenade that looks out onto the East River and Manhattan. Nicole Tung is just one among many journalists who feel often times helpless and guilty for documenting tragedy—especially when they think no one is listening.

Sebastian Junger is a well-known war correspondent and author of *The Perfect Storm*. When I met him in Bryant Park to speak about his experiences, he looked ready for a war zone. With khaki pants, rugged boots and a backpack that looked like it had seen a couple conflicts, he looked like the ideal man to have out there in the trenches reporting on the horrors of war.

But Junger has decided not to return to conflict zones. He has had his fill. Tim Hetherington, a photojournalist and close friend of Junger died in Libya in 2011 after being hit by shrapnel. Journalists who were with Hetherington managed to get him and Chris Hondros, another photojournalist who was injured, to the nearest hospital but both men died. Junger, wanting to do something in memory of Hetherington, founded Reporters Instructed in Saving Colleagues (RISC), a course which teaches freelance journalists basic first aid and other survival techniques needed in emergency situations in the field.

Junger says that journalists are in a peculiar situation when reporting from conflict zones —they are in a sense voyeurs who witness tragedy, even wish it to happen and then document it. This can often lead to feelings of guilt. “If you’re out on the frontline and it’s quiet, as all journalists do, you’re actively hoping for something to start up, something that is going to kill and maim people, but you are hoping that it will happen” Junger told me when we met, “There is a real moral debt to think about. Soldiers don’t have to think about that.”

And it’s true, soldiers and first responders, at least generally, believe that they are doing something “good” when they are on the scene of a traumatic event. Journalists do not have that benefit. They must suffer the consequences of witnessing horrible things, without the relief of thinking that everything that they are doing is for the greater good. But like soldiers and other first responders, journalists can continue to be affected afterwards —by something which we all know of by now —Post-traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD.

Junger says that he suffered from PTSD after returning from a stint in Afghanistan in 2000. The panic attacks are what gave it away, although he didn’t know that until a couple of weeks later. The first attack happened on a New York subway platform. “I got on the platform —it was a little bit crowded and noisy and I had a full blown panic attack. The attacks kept happening in the strangest places,” he said. Junger described the attacks to a friend of a friend who was a psychologist and she told him “That is something called PTSD,” It was a psychological disorder that Junger knew very little about at the time.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders ,or the DSM is a bible for psychiatrists and psychologists. It is revised and re-published every couple of years, and provides mental health professionals with the information needed to diagnose psychological disorders. According to the DSM-V, the latest edition of the manual, symptoms attributed to PTSD include nightmares; guilt for putting others in harm’s way; self destructive behavior, like excessive drinking and smoking, as well as a sense of detachment from general society. There are many more symptoms associated with PTSD but these are some of the

symptoms most common in journalists, as Dr. Anthony Feinstein found out during his research on PTSD among war correspondents during the 1990's.

Dr. Anthony Feinstein, a neuropsychiatrist and researcher at the University of Toronto, decided to study the effects of PTSD among war reporters after a strange case was referred to him in the '90s. He was the first health professional to seriously undertake research on trauma in foreign correspondents who report on conflict and has continued to do so. He just finished research on journalists in Mexico who report on drug cartels and face constant threats to their lives and their families'.

For Feinstein, it all started when a woman suddenly became incoherent during a dinner date with her husband and friends. She was rushed in an ambulance to the nearest hospital, and by the time she arrived, it was feared that she had had a stroke. After a series of scans, doctors could find no abnormalities in her brain. The woman made a complete recovery by the next morning. But within a week, the symptoms returned and yet again, doctors couldn't find anything out of the norm in her brain or body, so she was referred to Dr. Feinstein. She was a conflict reporter. "I found the patient fascinating." Dr. Feinstein told me during a Skype interview, "I found her a lot more interesting than she found me, because she had a really interesting life— going off to far-flung places and reporting on revolutions and famines and conflict." Dr. Feinstein diagnosed the woman with PTSD and the her condition improved, but she decided not to return to the front-line.

Since this first encounter, Dr. Feinstein has interviewed hundreds of journalists in the past 14 years. He has written several books about his research, including, "*Journalists Under Fire: The Psychological Hazards of Covering War*" in which he interviews war correspondents about their experiences on the front-line and how they have (or haven't) been affected by them.

Feinstein says he was struck by the lack of awareness of mental illnesses within the profession when he started his research, “The level of, at times, callous disregard for ones health was quite striking and the level of naiveté was also quite striking — that you could go into a civil war, have your colleagues killed or get beaten up, or be exposed to a mock execution and somehow just come out OK.”

He also recognizes that this was, in part, because journalists knew that as soon as they showed any signs of cracking at the edges, younger and very eager journalists would be ready to take their place. I asked him how war correspondents whom he interviewed received his work, since it is such a sensitive issue. “Journalists being a very independent group of individuals, I think they are very concerned about being portrayed as a traumatized profession and I was very careful not to do that.”

Dr. Feinstein told me that he feels that the diagnosis of PTSD has been used far too loosely in recent years, allowing people who have suffered relatively minor traumatic events, like a car accident for example, to claim that they have PTSD. “I think that is a big problem because you can’t really equate that with a journalist working in Syria or Iraq who has seen unimaginable things or been exposed to terrible traumas.”

In the United States, between 7 and 8 percent of the general population will experience PTSD at some point in their lives. When this is divided by gender, approximately 10 percent of women will experience PTSD, while men have a 4 percent chance. As Dr. Feinstein found out, the numbers are higher among journalists at 12 percent.

Feinstein was surprised, however, to discover that there was very little difference in numbers between male and female journalists affected by PTSD, “which is very unusual because in the general population, women have a lot more anxiety, depression and PTSD than men.” Feinstein says that the numbers amongst journalists were very similar to those seen amongst soldiers of both sexes in the military, which he believes is because women who choose such a profession are “not your average women”.

A perfect example of the “not your average woman” would be Barbara Crossette. She is no longer a foreign correspondent, although she continues to write for *The Nation* as their United Nations correspondent. She worked for *The New York Times* in the 1980’s and 1990’s and was their Bureau Chief in South Asia for four years. She reported on the horrors committed by the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka and witnessed the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India in 1991.

Before moving to Asia, Crossette spent a couple of years covering many of the guerrilla wars in Central America. “That in itself was a very different time when you could go out with the guerrillas, for example in Salvador, in the morning, and then go to an Army press conference in the afternoon,” she said during a phone interview, “We were not the enemy.” Now, she says, journalists are viewed as “infidels” who are just another chess piece in the game.

Crossette says that, yes, she saw horrific things but she never felt the need to seek psychological help, even when it was offered to her by *The New York Times*. “I only went to pieces once and it was over the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi.” She realized that she had been affected by what she saw when she returned to her home in Delhi. “I came back from that trip and I had a [expletive deleted] of a landlord-and when I got home, and needed to forget the whole thing, he showed up and wanted to argue with me about the rent - I threw him out. I was really angry — I scared the cook!”.

Crossette said that one of the things that kept her from becoming too unravelled were the other foreign correspondents who she was friends with. Being able to go and have a drink with them and enjoy a little black humor would often help her get through the difficult and sometimes horrific events she was witnessing. Another source of support was her husband. According to Anthony Feinstein’s research foreign correspondents have a hard time balancing their work life and a marriage. Very few were and are able to maintain a solid and long-lasting relationship but there are exceptions.

Bobby Ghosh now works for Quartz, a business news website, but before that he worked for *TIME* for 16 years. He reported from Iraq during the American invasion and occupation, which began in 2003. Ghosh prides himself on having been able to write about what it was like to be an average Iraqi living in a war zone. He developed close relationships with his Iraqi colleagues.

When he would take his one month leave after a couple of months of reporting in Iraq, he would often feel guilty for leaving his fellow Iraqi colleagues behind. Often he would feel it most when he was out having a meal with his wife. “I just couldn’t eat anymore. When that happened my mind wasn’t flooded with nightmare images but just my Iraqi colleagues.” He told me over coffee near to his office in downtown New York. “That sense of “What is going on?” I am sitting here in Singapore, in this really beautiful restaurant, eating a hundred dollar meal and Ali or Riad or Sammy are driving from work to home through danger, to danger and from danger.”

For Bobby Ghosh, his wife, Natasha and the stability of their marriage was key. He says that he would call his wife throughout the day while he was in Iraq just to let her know he was OK, especially when a bomb went off and was headline news. Skype was a godsend for them. When he returned to Singapore or London, wherever his wife was based—she would keep an eye on him and comfort him when he was becoming upset about what he had experienced in Iraq.

Ghosh was in his '30s when he got into war reporting, something he says helped him in the long run. “I think I felt a little more grounded. I had a long, stable marriage already at that point. That helped.... I think if the marriage would have been weaker at that point—I don’t know how it would have taken that strain.”

Ghosh says that when he returned from Iraq, his mind and body would react to what he had experienced there. “I’d have these horrible nightmares, wake up in a sweat; sometimes I would wake up screaming.

loud enough to wake up the neighbors.” Sometimes he would pull his wife off the bed during these dreams, as if protecting her from gunfire.

Hear Bobby Ghosh speaking about one specific recurring nightmare he used to have:

<https://soundcloud.com/pearlmacek/bobby-ghosh-part-2-rough-cut>

Ghosh and his wife moved to New York City in 2007. He started to seek out counseling which helped him deal with all the emotions and stresses that covering war brought on, but he knows that the memories will always stay with him. By the end of his time reporting on the American occupation, he was the longest serving print journalist in Iraq.

When I started reporting this story, I was looking for an answer to the question: “What makes a great war correspondent?”. What I found instead is that there is no formula for being good at this job. None of the reporters that I interviewed were alike—they didn’t come from similar backgrounds, nor did they have similar family situations or the same ways of coping with trauma. But they all felt that what they were doing was important; that it made a difference; that it needed to be done. This allowed them to push through any adversity that was in their way. Every journalist who I spoke with has suffered from what they saw when reporting on conflict, but none of them regretted having the chance to witness history playing out before their eyes.

For more on conflict reporting and freelance journalists go to:

<http://youtu.be/I9LJPT3baio>

THE END