

# Women of Purpose



Women practicing breathing and relaxation techniques. Photo by Alisha Sett

There is an email that sits at the bottom of my inbox. It is flagged, starred, and marked in every way to remind me never to delete it. The subject line reads: "Always remember this."

This needs some context.

I have a long history with post-traumatic stress: studying it, treating it, and living alongside it. I am scarred by living through ten years of the fighting in Kashmir during the 1990s. Yet, however much I may have flailed around with post-traumatic stress, or PTSD, across the years, I have so often been inspired to continue to fight it by the women around me. These are the women of Kashmir. Unlike me, they have never had the possibility of leaving. For them, there has been no choice but to remain.

The behavior of so many of these women became the bedrock of

how I found my way in the darkest moment, and it has become the foundation of how our organization, Healing Kashmir, works with people in Kashmir now as we treat the psychological fallout of decades of conflict and violence.

Some of those women have been attacked and raped in the maelstrom of the violence. Some of them have been thrown out by their own relatives, accused of having brought shame upon their families because they have been raped. And some of those women have been impregnated by their attackers. They have been staggeringly resourceful in the ways they have tried to raise these children of violence, often living at the most extreme levels of deprivation on the streets, at the edges of the villages and communities where they once had homes. Many of them have driven themselves on, year after year, barely clinging to shreds of sanity because they simply had no other choice.

Over the years, I tried hard to adopt the fatalism of these women, looking to them for inspiration as they carried on in the midst of their exploding world. Their dogged continuance of the day-to-day became my talisman and prayer: "Help me please to get through this day."

The contents of that carefully kept email read simply: "When you have found a powerful reason for being, the rest will fall into place."

I sent it to myself nearly ten years ago when I was heading home to England from Kashmir, clinging to a pale imitation of sanity. The framework that had kept me in this just-functioning state had been to copy those talismanic women.

Just moving from A to B, staying safe, and getting basic things done consumed every ounce of my energy each day. In a place with a fundamentally broken infrastructure, there seemed very little spare mind-space to think of anything beyond how to get through the daily round of security checks, random

bouts of violence, and survival aspects of living within the limping psyche of a place smashed by—at that time—fifteen years of conflict and brutality.

Beyond the example of those determined women, the psychological idyll that lifted me above the struggle of each day was that of an imagined freedom beyond the valley. It hovered on the horizon, burnished and perfect, a limpid sense of solace that I believed would come to me in the moment when I could lift my face to the sun, without my head covered, and without having to have a male chaperone five paces ahead of me wherever I went.

I know now, both from those we treat and from my own experience, that the two hardest times of day are first thing in the morning and at night when trying to go to sleep.

The moment just after the innocence of waking is stormed by the dread of the day ahead. And that supposedly quiet lull at the end of each day is filled with explicit replays of violence experienced, witnessed, or heard. Sometimes it is from that day, and sometimes it comes as flashbacks, waking nightmares from other days.

The waking torture is an over-imagining of the day ahead, and of the worst possible outcomes. It is a black spiral that spins around the constant terror of becoming just another statistic of the conflict, a meaningless number that would void everything that makes us all that we are: our families, achievements and failures, tumbling experiences of love and of loss. This fear transcends creed, color, and political difference, and yet beyond this Kashmir is divided into two castes: those with guns and those without.

Beyond this is the greater division of gender—men fighting, women trying to keep their families together.

On that occasion of return, there I was, back in London, out on the streets, surrounded by light, color, and the longed-for

freedom. For a moment, it was as exquisite as it had been in my fantasy. Yet, even as I felt the joy of the light through the leaves, the impact faded to be replaced by a creeping gray feeling.

The sense of escape was punctured so quickly by the dull drag of survivor's guilt. I had been able to leave. Those who inspired me were still there. It was a drowning feeling that crushed the most pursued aspect of the human condition: freedom.

I sat down on a bench at the edge of a park, just beyond the street, a green, soft place where I could sit by myself, as a woman, without being challenged or harassed.

How could this not shift my perception, the living out of this dream I had yearned for in Kashmir?

Around me the park was in full late-spring explosion: cherry blossoms, magnolia blooms, the soft scent of wisteria. But the loss of joy was a physical thing, a bank of fog rolling in across a bright blue day. It was as though I could feel its damp creeping across my sorry, un-blooming flesh. Images of dead men, women, and children rolled in with this fog, pale limbs, as waxy as the magnolia flowers around me. Even these images added freight to the guilt, this indulgence of memory, to be able even to experience it as memory rather than in the present tense, directly around me.

As I swayed neurotically on the bench, a small boy on tiny splaying roller-blades sped toward me. He hit me, not hard, but with enough of a clunk to scare him. His conditioned response was to look at me nervously, assuming that I would be irritated by the collision. He was holding his breath.

I did not react. I just kept rocking back and forth.

He began to sob, not because he was hurt, but because my lack of a reaction seemed to scare him.

He seemed so forlorn, and something in his crying was like a foghorn, calling me back from the dark, from the place where the mind mist was so thick that I could not see my hand in front of my face.

That little boy's crying allowed me to see myself through his eyes, as a woman who looked like a grown up but who was acting like a crazy person, crouching on a park bench, curled up against some enemy that he could not see.

If I had been in his place, on his rollerblades, I would have cried too.

A shift of self-perception came through the eyes of that small boy. Seeing myself as he might have been seeing me changed the view. It seemed suddenly to be such entirely irrational behavior, and yet understandable too.

Without the intense focus of surviving each day, my mind was flailing, seeking out enemies, wrongfully perceiving everything as a threat because that was what it was used to. Without a clear purpose, its default setting was to dive into catastrophic thinking. It was in evolutionary overdrive, still stuck in the "fight or flight" mode, unable to see things as they really were, the world still a threatening, dangerous place.

I just had to apply the lesson of those women in Kashmir to the situation I was now in. I had to adapt my sense of purpose.

Viktor Frankl, the Austrian psychiatrist, writer, and Nazi death camp survivor, devoted his life to sharing a tool for psychological endurance. He advocated the importance of finding an anchor point that allows us to survive what should be impossible to tolerate. His memoir of survival, and the psychological structure that this presents to the reader, has a simple title: "Man's Search for Meaning." Millions have read it, and the lives of millions have been changed by it because

it presents a roadmap to psychological survival.

Frankl wrote a short and very clear memoir of living through what was unimaginable, then he gave the equivalent of a psychological equation to explain what had enabled him to survive. The idea of a psychological anchor point cannot be underestimated because it enabled him to live through, and then rehabilitate himself from, one of the twentieth century's most repulsive, humanity-degrading periods.

Early in Part One of his memoir, written soon after the end of the Holocaust, Frankl wrote:

"We who have come back, by the aid of many lucky chances and miracles—whatever one may choose to call them—we know: the best of us did not return."

In writing this with such simple clarity, he paid homage to those who had died because they chose to stick to a code of human dignity and behavior, and by doing so they gave away their lives. Perhaps they gave up a place on a work cart that might have gotten them out of the camp to someone they believed should live, or handed a tiny corner of bread to someone they felt was hungrier than they were, or took the blame for something that someone else had done, knowing that the punishment would be a point-blank bullet to the back of head.

Those who did survive knew they carried a legacy on behalf of the men and women who had made a sacrifice in order to allow the younger, stronger, or better qualified to live, to carry the torch of having borne witness to acts of depraved human destruction. In bearing witness, the survivors were handed the moral duty of telling the world the story of Nazi genocide in order to stop it from ever happening again.

Those survivors knew that they had a responsibility to every man, woman, and child who had died in fear and agony to tell the story and to keep it alive through history, to keep

reminding us all about what can happen when the darkest side of the human condition is allowed to run amok, unfettered. This statement gave the parts of Frankl's simple equation for psychological survival: the purpose of legacy plus human tension equals mental resilience.

It is this same equation of purpose and human tension that the women of Kashmir have handed to me, and to those with whom I work. The women have been deeply scarred by what they have had to do in order to protect their families, and yet this same tension has been a driving force behind their sense of purpose.

Understanding the purpose of our lives is central to how we train our team in Kashmir, just as it is central to enabling people to remain psychologically resilient in the face of human struggle. And this does not just apply to the extreme of surviving in war zones. It applies to any situation that pushes any of us to the edge of what feels tolerable, whether it be violence, ill health, the death of a loved one, divorce, natural disaster, the loss of a sense of earlier purpose—this being something that can stall people entirely when they retire, or lose their job.

In the email that I keep, this understanding of purpose is purified to its simplest essence: "When you have found a powerful reason for being, the rest will fall into place." Simple does not always mean easy. And yet, it is simple to watch the survival mechanisms of others, to learn from them, and to apply them, every day, with absolute focus—the basis of survival.



Justine Hardy flying a kite. Photo by Jonathan Foreman