

"The unthinkable is quite possible"



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by Pedro Meyer

Bombs are falling on Afghanistan as I write. Most of you reading this probably have never been exposed to the horrors of having bombs explode around you, just as most of us outside the World Trade Center have a hard time fathoming what it meant to run down forty, sixty or eighty floors of stairs only to see everything collapse around in what was an unthinkable scenario of possibilities.

Those who are exposed to extreme experiences are changed for life we are told, and they seem to tell us that we don't really get it what ever it was that they went through. I suspect they are right about this, as otherwise experience could easily be transmitted from one to the other with out having to go through the normal pains associated with expanding our awareness by personal efforts.

But, then how do we deal with recounting and making reference to events that fall outside our immediate personal experience? It is after all impossible to experience first hand everything there is in everybody's life, for us to then formulate an opinion. So, faulty as it may be, limited as it must be, we improvise and we feel our way around to discover then for ourselves, the issues we want to contend with.

All of a sudden it seems that we have built a world quite unable, or even willing, to understand the otherness in each one of us. There is truly a clash of cultures or civilizations happening.

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During these days "The day of the Dead" is being celebrated here in Mexico, and within this long standing tradition of celebrating the dead, Mexicans have chosen among other things to create little skulls made out of sugar and decorated with small scraps of paper in all sorts of lively colors. They are placed lovingly on altars dedicated to the person who died, with flowers and all sorts of other items which sometimes include some of the preferred dishes that the deceased really liked. In the end, the sugar skulls are eaten by the people who prepared the altar, with the remaining dishes not consumed by the deceased, or if left around too long, by an army of ants munching away at the sugar.

We have placed on the cover of ZoneZero a picture of such little sugar skulls in memory of all those who died on September 11th in the US, as well as the innocent civilians in Afghanistan that continue to be killed today because of a war that has just started and of which we know that there is no foreseeable end in sight. For us there is no difference in humanity between a prosperous secretary, mother of two, who was killed at the WTC or a humble illiterate Afghani mother, also killed, this time by a bomb, that leaves two orphans behind. I am pretty sure the two Afghani children will have no one to look out after them, while the children of the American mother will surely be able to count on the outpouring of charitable donations to overcome their loss, but in their bereavement and humanity the survivors are one and the same.

During a recent trip, I made to Moscow I came upon a memorial to all those victims of the Stalin era who had died behind barbed wires in Siberian camps. I was taken aback by several similarities that were lodged in my mind when I saw that monument. On the one hand I was looking at faces made out of stone that evoked so many pre Hispanic figures I had grown up with here in Mexico, faces of yet other wars and other nations plundering and killing each other off, then there was that other close reference to the sugar skulls from the Day of the Dead, as I remembered that there were a million people killed during the Mexican Revolution, and lastly the images of all those millions of Jews exterminated in German concentration camps. As all these images of death passed through my mind, I was sure that I could not understand so much destruction, that this is an experience for which one is never quite capable of grappling with, yet we must.

So many millions of innocent civilians have been murdered, and all in the name of what, I might ask? Some who need to justify so much



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destruction and put a moralistic spin on all this death, attempt to choose what ever it is that their favorite political or religious credo seems to be. Some say we have gained Freedom, others argue we have Independence, some make reference to Economic gains, while yet some more contemplate Religious motives, and so on. Probably none of the justifications for causing death on to others in the name of those high minded principles turned out to be justified in the end.

Just think of all those churches for which people have fought and died for, the world over, and which today have become nothing more than an interesting tourist attraction. Empty shells which just give work to some tourism and cultural institutions in charge of their maintenance and upkeep and provide sustenance for tourist guides, bus drivers, sellers of souvenirs, post cards and trinkets. Hardly the stuff worth dying for one would believe.



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Now for those who espouse Freedom and Independence as the main achievements that justify all those people killed, I would ask what Freedom and what Independence and from whom. In an ever increasing global economy I have a hard time locating of whom we are supposed to be independent of. It turns out that the only super power and the most powerful economy in the world, has been brought to its knees by a small group of people determined to cause great harm, hardly the idea I have of being very Independent of everybody else.

Then there is the economic fall out from the events of September 11th, with the expansion waves from the explosions making their way through out the rest of the world. Again the question is, who is it that everyone is supposed to be so Independent of? Why can't we just accept that we are more Interdependent than ever before, look at what the Europeans are doing: acknowledging through their deeds, precisely their interdependence? Today, the USA is discovering belatedly that is was a bad idea to walk away from Afghanistan after the Soviets departed in defeat, there is truly an interdependence between what happens in one part of the world to that which happens elsewhere. We are interdependent no matter how you want to look at it. If all the Mexicans now living illegally in the US were expelled, most probably the economy would collapse even further, for lack of food on the american's table, either by the absence of anyone serving the food or the lack of produce altogether.

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So what has all this got to do with digital photography? Well, probably not much, but then it also could be quite a lot, it is all about the unthinkable actually happening,

Bill Biggart from New York, was the only photographer killed at the World Trade Center, who unfortunately proved through his professional dedication that the pictures from his digital camera, a Canon D30, could be delivered despite being destroyed, a micro cassette with all the digital files intact and which have now been published in Newsweek [October 15], while the film based cameras he also used that day, also just crumbled in to pieces but all their film was lost. However, some other shots on film that had already been exposed, and saved in a separate tin, although partly ruined, survived. A few frames from that lot were published along with all the digital images. I am sure this experience will not be lost on many professional photographers who are increasingly seeing the benefits of the digital medium over that of film.

In an ongoing survey we have conducted here at ZoneZero, over half of you think that film will never disappear from the market. I wonder how many ever considered the possibility that one day the World Trade Center would no longer stand there. Unthinkable, was it? Yes, we have to learn of the unthinkable scenarios as being, well, very possible. Huge corporations associated with great technological names such as Polaroid, Xerox and Kodak, have fallen off their pedestal. Polaroid has just gone bankrupt, Xerox has not been far from bankruptcy itself, and Kodak is but a shadow of its former glory. These are all stories associated with the unthinkable taking place, great titans of industry falling apart. We need to remember the words of that great poet and musician, Bob Dylan, "The Times They Are A-Changin".

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