

As Ramadan approaches

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After the Peshawar Army Public School massacre in December last year, which cost the lives of 132 beautiful young girls and boys and 13 teachers, and injured as many, we all felt the pain, those who lost their loved ones, those who helped and those who were at a distance. A young TV producer who had covered the story and seen more than she wanted to and could bear, said to me that she had become sad and worried, and wondered if she should seek psychological counseling. A psychiatrist who was there gave her good advice, but it was also in his professional approach to suggest that she should probably seek professional help. The woman thought that something was wrong with her. I say not; I say that she should be proud of herself for not going on as if everything was normal. I am glad she reacted the way she did after having been so close to the tragedy and seen and heard so much close-up.

True, professional helpers and the media should keep a distance, but they should also not be above compassion and hide own feelings. I think the media woman she should seek counseling, but not because something was wrong with her, but because she would learn from it and be become a better person and do a better job in future.

Tragedies and grief, difficulties and sorrow, are part of our lives, albeit few would experience and be involved in massive tragedies such as the one in Peshawar. Yet, many also go through difficulties in life with very little help and sympathy, and they may suffer and eventually heal, hopefully, without much professional counseling and medical help – except for what family members and friends can give, yes, women in particular.

When I worked in the field of Afghan refugee education in Pakistan some years ago, I met so many everyday heroes and heroines who had had to cope with war and violence of the most gruesome form – and they had picked up what was left without professional help, even often without their dearest, too.

Collecting data for one of my books about refugees entitled ‘Learning Away from Home’ (Alhama, Islamabad, 2007), one of the refugee teachers, Abdul Samad, said: “I have seen better days. I had a medical clinic that was burnt down during the civil war in the early 1990’s. During the Taliban time, I worked as a school teacher and was also running a pharmacy shop, but I had to leave my teaching job and only ran the pharmacy. During the Taliban time, you almost had to hide that you had a university education, otherwise they might come after you”, Abdul said.

“Wars are devastating”, he said. “I have seen many people I loved taken from me in the blink of an eye. I have seen places I cherished turn into dust in front of my eyes. My children are displaced and we live at the mercy of others, and I and so many other Afghans have had to bear this due to no fault of our own.”

And then Abdul Samad added that in spite of all of it, he still found meaning in life and the importance of teaching children, talking with and counseling parents, and just being in the refugee camp. “To try to do what I can has also become a comfort for me”, he said, stressing that he looked to the future with optimism.

We can only bow our heads and be impressed when we meet such people, with such 'world outlooks'. How Abdul had found strength, courage and energy to start over again, several times, we don't really know. Was it his faith, maybe his wife, maybe his children or other family members? Or maybe it was a sense of duty to those who needed him, who would be more helpless without him?

And then, what lessons can you and I draw from the two stories above, now as we approach Ramadan, a month of prayer and reflection?

They are two stories, but with a myriad of veiled stories and fates inbuilt under the top layer. We need to sit still and be quiet, then we can begin to grasp a bit of the reality of the people, some brave and others not so brave. To be brave isn't always necessary; to do one's best under given circumstances is all we can do.

The two examples are only two out of many stories after terrorist attacks and other sudden and unexpected tragedies, disasters and accidents, including traffic and work accidents, and the helicopter accident in Gilgit on 8 May when several foreign diplomats and locals died.

In Pakistan, we have this year, and thus far, been spared for floods and major natural disasters. Nepal has had more than its fare share of earthquakes – as Pakistan had on 8 October 2005.

In many cases we prepare well for disasters and accidents; security precautions are everywhere, especially in the cities, and sometimes to an extent that goes beyond what is required. Measures to avoid effects of earthquakes and floods are less, but improving, and that also goes for response once disasters have struck.

How we cope after disasters, and life's many ups and downs of less massive character, has to do with how we have learnt to cope, how our mind is set and what kind of mechanisms we have for responding, including knowing how much we can take and when we need to seek help from others, within nucleolus family units, from friends and colleagues, and when we need to seek professional help. The latter is not available to the majority of people in Pakistan, not to mention in Afghanistan. Hence, most of the social and psychological help is provided by wise women, and also men, sometimes the clergy, mostly with skills obtained in informal ways. But then, perhaps we shouldn't always think that such skills are inferior to 'school medicine' and formal training.

As we approach Ramadan, a month of reflection, prayer, sacrifice, community and more, we come to realize that the holy month will also be of importance to our general well-being, not only as regards religious aspects but also social and psychological ones. I believe these aspects of Ramadan, of Islam throughout the year, are a particular strength to the believers and others in the community.

But if we cannot cope with disasters and grief – or overwhelming success for that matter – we should let that, too, be laid in God's hands. We should not blame ourselves. None of us are always able to manage our lives as well as we should. Disasters strikes unevenly, and they happen to no fault of our own. Let all of us, Muslims, Christians and others, begin to prepare for the healing month of Ramadan.

The writer is a senior Norwegian social scientist with experience from university, diplomacy and development aid