

EPILOGUE: FROM SOLITUDE TO SOLIDARITY

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On a scorching, steamy day in June of 1998, a small group of women and men from Africa, Asia, North America, and Europe met for the very first time in Washington, DC. Little did we know that this encounter would give birth to an organization, the Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition International (TASSC), and would forever link us as a global community of torture survivors.

During our initial gathering, we realized that we shared much in common. The brutality that we had experienced, and mystifyingly survived, had changed our lives forever. Belief in ourselves, in the human family, and in the God we worshipped appeared to be gone. In a sense, we were like seeds of a dandelion, each carried by the wind and scattered to a foreign land.

We recognized that many, if not all of us, had been walking a silent journey. The realization that we were not alone gave us reason to believe that we were not powerless and that it was possible to restore a semblance of order in our shattered lives. Being able to share our vulnerabilities and the hardships of living a life of solitude was like an invitation to “to wash in the Pool of Siloam” (John 9:7) and to see the world around us with new eyes.

We recognized that, like ourselves, other torture survivors were fleeing brutal wars and trudging through foreign lands in search of a safe haven. They were living among us—in our neighborhoods, in our places of worship, and in our streets—searching for a welcoming and supportive community.

How, we asked, was it possible to have others understand our lives after torture, if we, ourselves, were constantly struggling to grasp the psychology of torture: its purpose; its immediate and long-term effects; and the political and social institutions that create, practice, and endorse this crime against humanity?

In the fall of 1998, TASSC opened its doors to anyone who had fallen victim to torture. Its mission was to create a global community of survivors and to offer unconditional support to those whose lives had been shattered by torture as they healed their physical wounds, reclaimed their self-dignity, rebuilt trust in humanity, renewed their lives' purposes, and re-established a sense of community.

In a blink of an eye, trust emerged among strangers. We caught glimpses into each other's souls and shared how torture had impacted our lives, the lives of our loved ones, and the lives of our communities. We dared to share the sudden visits of our torturers who came to us in our dreams; the haunting screams of those tortured beside us; and the indescribable fear that engulfed us when we saw a person in uniform, when a cloud of cigarette smoke drifted (wafted) in our direction, or when harmless questions asked by others took us back to our interrogations.

As wanderers in a strange land, we began to share how people of goodwill expected us to let go of the past and to move on with our lives. Many survivors expressed how they struggled to convey to spouses and partners, to family members, to friends, and to colleagues that we were, indeed, *living* life, considering the appalling violence that we each had sustained. Avoidance of dank basements, phobias of another person's touch, fear of coming face to face with one's torturers, consumption of cup after cup of coffee to stay awake as a way to escape the nightmares, frequent showering to wash away the traces of the perpetrator's odor, and social withdrawal and loss of interest in life were, all too often, perceived as abnormal, destructive, and unhealthy behavior. For survivors, these reactions were as normal as breathing air: a natural human response to an extremely abnormal experience of torture. They were not symptoms of weakness or psychological instability; in reality, these responses were survival skills that kept many of us alive.

Oddly enough, many of us were tormented by two burning questions: Why were we "chosen" as designated survivors while others—who endured similar, and perhaps even worse, cruelty—died in the hands of their torturers? Why was there a deafening silence surrounding the crime of torture in today's world? In response to the lack of outrage over the widespread use

of torture, TASSC provided a platform for survivors to speak their truth, to speak on behalf of those who had been silenced, and to advocate for the abolition of torture by raising awareness of its impact on the tortured, their families, their communities, and society as a whole. From the outset, TASSC promulgated that the strongest and most effective voices in the campaign to abolish torture were survivors. Who better than the tortured to speak of this atrocity and its complicated aftermath?

In the early days, a definitive goal of TASSC was to close the door on torture; in so doing, the global community of survivors would have accomplished its main objective: the worldwide abolition of torture. How naïve we were to assume such a quixotic responsibility.

Nearly twenty years have passed, and still the doors of TASSC remain open. Every day, women, men, and children of all ages, ethnicities, nationalities, faith traditions, and political ideologies make their way to the place they call “home.” Social service, government, and medical and mental health-care agencies continue to offer legal, medical, housing, food, and employment assistance to survivors. Many of TASSC’s allies have joined survivors to work to end torture through education, advocacy, and public speaking. This volume represents one more space where survivors and advocates have come together for the same goal: to work to end torture by witnessing it, analyzing it, and demanding its worldwide abolition.

One may ask, “Did TASSC succeed in its mission to rid our world of torture?” My answer is a definitive no! Despite a series of international conventions and prevention instruments, the use of torture persists. It is widespread and systematic; it is practiced not only by oppressive regimes during armed conflicts, but also by countries with purportedly democratic and stable political systems. In the fight to end terrorism, many governments have opted to legitimize torture as a method of investigating potential terrorists and protecting national security. Torture does not discriminate and knows no boundaries. No national emergency or threat, however dire, ever justifies its use. From the moment of its inception to the present, TASSC has committed to shining a light on the silence and indifference surrounding torture and its long-lasting effects on asylum seekers, refugees, and the broader community. The work of TASSC members and allies in this book represents one more expression of that commitment.

As one member of TASSC’s global community of survivors, I recognize that the memories of my torture will forever remain with me. I am of the opinion that one never heals from torture—torture’s ghost will constantly dwell within each of us. We will never forget the brutality that was

done to us and to others, nor will we forget those who were silenced by their torturers. Many of us will learn to live with the memories, the flashbacks, and the aftermath. We look past the tragedy of our torture and refuse to allow those dark moments to define who we are or what path we will walk. Survivors of the early days and of the present will continue to struggle, to question, and to fall into pools of despair, but together we will *rise*. Broken bones will mend, pulled teeth will be replaced, scars will fade, and many of us will return to a comparatively normal life. Like tall dandelions, we will grow in the sun and dance to the harsh beat of the wind of injustice, all the while scattering seeds of new life and a promising hope of a day when the world will be free of torture.

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