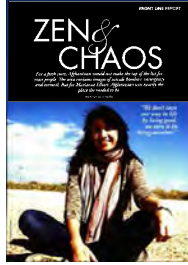


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FRONT LINE REPORT

ZEN & CHAOS

For a fresh start, Afghanistan would not make the top of the list for most people. The area conjures images of suicide bombers, insurgency and turmoil. But for Marianne Elliott, Afghanistan was exactly the place she needed to be.

Words by Frances Gordon

"We don't earn our way in life by being good, we earn it by being ourselves."

Image by Susannah Conway





A Human Rights lawyer, Elliott left her family and friends in New Zealand to follow her passion for human rights advocacy in Gaza and Afghanistan, resulting in a book relating her experience as she pursued her passion. Elliott's book, *Zen Under Fire*, discusses not only her life working in one of the most dangerous and misunderstood places in the world but also the way she found self-acceptance and serenity in an extremely chaotic world.

Like many who advocate for others, her first memories are of change. When Elliott was three, her family moved to the island nation of Papua New Guinea for one year, where her parents worked as missionaries. It was largely this experience that helped direct Elliott into a career in human rights. The journey taught her about the injustices many people face, and ignited a passion for helping people.

"My family moved to Papua New Guinea and those are my earliest memories. I think from a very early age, I was exposed to a lot of diversity. Diversity in the world, diversity in people's experiences and needs. Things that were often taken for granted in New Zealand were luxuries over there, and that really ignited an appetite to help others."

From Papua New Guinea.



Women and children in the city of Shindand.



IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) girl outside tent.

the family returned to Tokoroa, a small South Waikato town miles away from where she would end up. This rural community, known for its timber industry, was where Elliott grew up.

After finishing high school in Tokoroa, Elliott studied Law at Waikato University before moving to Auckland where she worked in corporate litigation at a big law firm, a job that helped Elliott pay off her student loans. She enjoyed the challenges of a corporate career but her heart was still set on human rights advocacy.

"I worked in Auckland for two years, which was great in the sense that it gave me my basic training and some grounding but I always knew I wanted to be a human rights lawyer."

From there, Elliott worked to fulfil her dream by starting her Masters degree in Human Rights Law – a dream fate would not be content to leave alone. Before she finished her degree, a job opened up for an Aid Worker in the Gaza Strip. Elliott applied for and was awarded the position, leaving her two weeks to pack her bags and head to Palestine for her first job in human rights.

For two years, Elliott worked in the Gaza Strip as an aid worker for the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights. The non-governmental organisation afforded her the first chance to immerse herself in aid work in the Middle East. Though the position and its responsibilities were fulfilling, she struggled with the horrific scenarios she was forced to deal with in her work-life. Elliott admits she had always been sensitive to other people's struggles, a trait that had many people wondering whether she was cut out for this type of work.

"My family would have described me as a sensitive child, not in tears all the time but sensitive to what was going on around me and sensitive to what was happening to other people. I would really notice if something unfair was happening, especially to other children.

"I think in Gaza, they were worried it would be a problem for me. I think they thought, "Oh, if you're sensitive, you'll suffer" but – and this was something that took me a long time to learn – it is possible to feel and not be destroyed. Being there, you see a lot of things that aren't nice, it is sad to see dying children or displaced families. But I learnt to feel and react in a way that didn't overwhelm me." It wouldn't be until Afghanistan, though, that she found her resolve truly tested.

After moving back to New Zealand for a period after her time in Gaza, Elliott applied for a job at her dream organisation, the United Nations, to work as a human rights officer in Afghanistan. The move proved to be more challenging and more intense than anything she had ever experienced.

Her first major challenge came one month after she started working in Herat. Elliott was left in charge for one week while other senior officers took much-needed recuperation breaks. Three hours into her week in charge, influential tribe leader, Amanullah Khan was killed. Khan led a branch of the Noorzai tribe in the Zir Koh Valley, and his death resulted in clashes through the entire province. Thirty-two people were killed, and many more were left wounded throughout the region. Dealing with the fallout of the clashes led Elliott into a spiralling depression. She admits to feeling completely out of her depth and questioning what good she could really do in a nation where its political problems run deep.

"I had never felt guilt to that extent, the experience in Afghanistan really pushed me to that next level, which meant I had to learn a whole lot of new skills, because a lot of the time, I was really unprepared mentally."



“The mainstream media paints a very definite portrait of Afghanistan, and it’s one that isn’t always entirely true. I think one of the biggest differences I saw were the Afghan women, who are so strong and powerful.”

Still, every day, Elliott was constantly surprised by the people and depth of generosity in the fractured country she was living in.

“When you look at Afghanistan on paper, it doesn’t look good. It looks really hopeless. But then you meet these people, these local Afghan activists who are working to change their communities against incredible odds. They’re changing lives and making a difference, and it’s really inspiring. It just proved to me that there’s always something we can do.”

Even so, making a difference can come at a cost. Like many aid workers, Elliott was frustrated with the progress she was making in her work life and the slow-paced bureaucracy of the United Nations. After the stress of dealing with Amanullah Khan’s death, Elliott began self-medicating to help cope with the monstrosities she was facing in her waking hours. While many aid workers turn to alcohol to deal with stress, Elliott used anxiety medication to keep life running as smoothly as it could. While the medication helped her sleep, it didn’t help her reconcile with her underlying emotions.

“When you arrive, you get a





handbook warning you about the dangers of too much alcohol or too many drugs but if you're in a rural area, you may not have access to the same resources as someone working in a more populated area like Kabul. They're trying to be more supportive but unless you have alternatives, healthier alternatives, something's got to give.

"There is an extreme element to it but I think it's something that's normalised everywhere. Even in New Zealand, people will go to the bar after work to help with stress."

Elliott finally found balance and solace in yoga and meditation. The two practices have had a continuing positive presence in her life -- they are lifestyle choices she says has helped to give her more focus and stability in a world and a time that is incredibly uncertain.

"When I first started yoga, it was really challenging. I'm a driven person, so what yoga was asking me to do was to actually slow down, which was really uncomfortable at first.

"The thing about Afghanistan is that there was a lot I needed to be doing but the way of life over there is a lot slower. Afghan people were always telling me to slow down."

While yoga was helping Elliott deal with her emotions, it was impossible to juggle every struggle in her life, and eventually, something gave in - her relationship with her boyfriend. Joel was also an aid worker who worked for a children's organisation in Herat. The more emotional Elliott became about her work life, the more Joel withdrew. To lose someone in an environment where it is often hard to find people who can truly empathise with your life was a tough blow but one that was needed for Elliott to come into her own.

"I ultimately learnt from that relationship that we really truly are responsible for our own happiness. If we're looking for someone to give us support or if we think them being there makes it easier for us, then ultimately, we're setting ourselves up to be heartbroken."

The end of her relationship was the perfect opportunity to make a move toward bigger and better things in Afghanistan. In July 2007, 18 months after first arriving in the country, Elliott received a promotion of sorts. She was awarded a position at a new UN office in the rural town of Ghor. Elliott's role in Ghor was to oversee the UN mission in the town and help other UN agencies in the province in addition to her human rights officer commitments.

For Elliott, life in Afghanistan was an experience unlike from anything she had lived through elsewhere in the world, and dangers reached beyond the emotional realm into the physical world. While she had lived in high-risk areas like Gaza before, nothing compared to the complete loss of freedom that came with living in Afghanistan and working for the United Nations.

"Wherever I went, I had to have a security officer or I had to order a car and be driven from one place to the other and that was something that always bothered me, I expected more normalcy in my day-to-day life.

"I have to say, since I've got back, even after four years, I've never got tired of being able to go for a walk by myself around Wellington. It's that security that comes from being safe that is the biggest difference in life."

While Elliott's life was safe for the most part, there were many terror-inducing moments



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that reminded her just where in the world she was. Only three months after Elliott moved to her new workplace in Ghor, the surrounding area was bombed, her compound only narrowly missed by the lethal weapons of war. Elliott later discovered that the local drug lord had been behind the bombing, though he had been targeting the military base nearby rather than the UN compound. However, it was these types of frightening, unpredictable moments that constantly kept Elliott on edge.

“Because of the type of insurgency in Afghanistan, you never know when a bomb will hit or a missile will be dropped, and for me, that was terrifying because you just never know. In Gaza, there were very definite boundaries and areas where fighting would break out but in Afghanistan, it could be anywhere.”

Still, every day in Afghanistan was a day for Elliott to learn about herself and learn about those around her.

“The mainstream media paints a very definite portrait of Afghanistan, and it’s one that isn’t always entirely true. I think one of the biggest differences I saw were the Afghan women, who are so strong and powerful.”

Four years on from her experience in Afghanistan, Elliott’s life has been transformed. She now works as a freelance writer and a yoga instructor, though she still has a passion for advocacy. That drive has led her to plan a trip back to Afghanistan to reunite with all the people she left there, and follow up with those people she met and helped during her time as a human rights officer. Admittedly, her experience in the Middle East was more emotional and sometimes more traumatic than anything she could have imagined but she finds the changes wrought in her life by the journey to be all the more worthwhile for the pain.

“I’ve learnt whatever you do is enough, because there will always be something more. The biggest thing it taught me was self-acceptance. We don’t earn our way in life by being good, we earn it by being ourselves.” 

For more info on Mariamne Elliott head to mariamne-elliott.com