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Memory

Dealing with the Unspeakable

Shaken by an attack of fiendish terror, the Balinese respond with forgiveness

By Janet De Neefe

Not long after 9/11 in the US, Bali was also shaken by terrorism. In the tourist district of Kuta, a suicide bomber detonated a bomb inside a nightclub. Patrons fled into the street, where many were killed by a second and much more powerful explosion when a car bomb, hidden inside a white van, was detonated 20 seconds after the first. Damage to the densely populated residential and commercial district was immense. The car bomb left a crater one meter deep. Over 200 people died. In a state of shock, the Balinese reacted in the only way they knew.

On Sunday, October 13, 2002, the gentle touch of my daughter Dewi shook me out of my early morning dreams. She whispered about "a bomb in Kuta." I can still hear her words clearly in my head and recall the expression of nervous concern on her face. Together we watched the television with disbelief.

Many Balinese friends gathered at our house that morning. My Balinese husband's eyes were moist as he discussed plans to help the victims. "Your daddy's very upset," I told Dewi. "Yes, I know, Mummy," she said. "I think he's going to cry." For my husband, Ketut, one of the greatest sadnesses was that tourists had died on Balinese soil, that the Balinese people had not been able to protect them. He reminded his friends that they have a great responsibility to keep visitors and guests safe from harm.

We gathered with a large group of expatriate friends, set up an extra phone line and began contacting nearby hotels and restaurants for donations of food. In the

kitchen, we began to make hundreds of sandwiches and rice meals and collected drinks and other necessities for victims and helpers. The first team of volunteers headed off to Sanglah Hospital in Denpasar. Ketut and his friends helped organize a blood donors' unit at a nearby clinic and translated for the terrified tourists when necessary.

Volunteers from all walks of life spent day after day at Sanglah Hospital, counseling parents who had lost their children, answering desperate phone calls inquiring after missing persons, attending to the injured and organizing bodies in the morgue. Their only skills for dealing with the crisis were a compassionate heart and a determination to help as many sufferers as possible. One volunteer sat with a badly burnt Indonesian woman who did not speak English, and the volunteer could not speak Indonesian. She held the woman's hand and sang simple, gentle songs that lulled her to sleep. When the Indonesian woman woke, she asked the staff to find the tourist who had sat by her bed and sung so sweetly.

After the bombing, the Balinese made offerings to apologize to God. Assuming they must have erred somehow, they were now asking for forgiveness. They searched for possible reasons why the bombing had happened, and repented for their perceived misdeeds. The tragedy spoke to them also regarding the balance between man and his environment. Was this a message that there has been too much development on this picturesque island? Perhaps it was karma from past deeds, or a sentence from a previous life. Some said it was the backlash for slaying an ancient turtle at a ritual a few months before, when the priest, in a trance, predicted doom to Bali. "Do you think we are being punished?" a driver asked a Western friend of mine. She was astonished that the Balinese people could internalize such a tragedy as part of their karma.

Mystical stories began to spread soon after the tragedy. On the Friday after the bombing, sprays of fragrant raindrops fell to the ground, like tears, from the leaves of a huge shady tree within the inner courtyard of the Ubud Palace. Word spread throughout the town, and by 10pm the small area was crowded with Balinese throwing their arms up to receive blessings. The atmosphere within this royal sanctuary was charged with happiness and hope. "Could this be a miracle?" I heard a Westerner ask. The following day the shower persisted. By midday the priests had arrived and began chanting sacred mantras to the anxious crowd. More Balinese arrived to gather water and take it home to their shrines. People lined up for blessings. The holy men who channel spirits were called upon to ask for an explanation; the message was that Balinese ancestors of the palace were responsible for the water. The collective team of deified spirits were showering the

people of Ubud with holy water to protect them from further troubles and to purify the village. The impact of this single event gave all of us great hope that peace would prevail. The prince gave a speech at the temple, his heartfelt emotions obvious in the tears on his cheeks and his delicate words. He asked for God's forgiveness. There was no talk of blame.

Ubud quickly became an empty town, tourists nowhere to be seen. Unemployment soared throughout the country. I remember lying in bed, tears falling on my pillow, as I thought of all the plans I had made for the coming months, plans I now had to abandon. And I was only one amongst thousands.

My children asked endless questions about why the bombing had happened and who had created such evil. At night their dreams were filled with ghosts and disturbed souls flying through the villages, for a soul that is not properly cremated can wreak havoc. People said the security guards at ground zero in Kuta heard screaming voices in the dark silent hours after midnight. Weeks later, when I intended to drive past the bombing site with the children, Dewi was almost hysterical in her refusal. "We can't drive past today. It's a dark moon and we haven't brought any offerings," she cried.

We were present at the cleansing ceremony on November 15, 33 days after the attack. Driving through cinematographically beautiful areas, which reminded me how special that part of the island is, we eventually entered a covered area over which white cloth was suspended: "the road to God." We knew the site was near. From here, we could see shrines and temple paraphernalia sparkling in the sun, surrounded by Balinese umbrellas and crowds of people. Then the devastation of the bombsite unfolded before us. Many of the buildings surrounding the explosions had been destroyed. Under a pavilion sat twelve high priests, chanting and ringing small brass bells. The gamelan played soft music outside and special performances were held. Young girls attired in yellow and white danced the rejeng, a traditional temple dance; a mask dance followed. Some sensitive tourists wore a full Balinese ceremonial outfit. Journalists were baffled--some even angry--that they were not granted special privileges at the event, but this was not for them.

Cleansing rites are common in Bali. Known as Pacaruan or Mecaru, their purpose is to balance all aspects of the universe to maintain peace and harmony on the planet. The October tragedy was of such magnitude that the sacred texts were consulted. The basic principles of life had been violated and only ritual and prayer could

restore them. When the priests had finished chanting, certain areas were blessed, and then we were called to pray. There must have been at least three thousand people there, an ocean of people as far as the eye could see. The prayers started with the Gayatri Mantra. I held my hands to my heart and lowered my head in preparation. The whole area was charged with an extraordinary power as thousands of people joined in this mystical chant. My hands began to shake with the intensity of the prayer. The smell of sandalwood and jasmine incense sat on the moist air. Following the priest's instructions, we prayed to bless the departed souls on their journey to eternity, for forgiveness of our careless deeds that created such tragedy, for the recovery of the wounded victims, for the tormented survivors of the disaster, and for the blinded criminals so that they might repent and see the evil of their ways. We also prayed for restored balance between the macrocosm and microcosm, man and the universe. Finally, we prayed for Bali, the island of the Gods, this tiny land that has touched the heart of so many: "May this gentle paradise recover from sadness and return once more to a life of peace and harmony."

My companions and I slowly walked back to the hotel in the scorching midday sun. Later that afternoon, as we sat at a roadside cafe near Kuta Square, a beautiful procession passed by. It included Balinese girls in shimmering gold and white, a Muslim dance ensemble, a Chinese dragon, a Balinese Barong figurine, gamelan players, baris dancers, Christians and many more. It was a message of peace and unity. Would it be any other way? Here in Bali, we continue to live harmoniously together, and that cannot be changed.

Many tragedies have been experienced here, but Bali has risen from the ashes every time. This terrible event created a positive time of deep introspection and spirituality, a time to examine the seen and unseen elements of mystical life. It has reminded the Balinese who they are. And at the end of the day, the allegiance to family and friends is the light that illuminates their lives. Takwa Masi is the Hindu belief of brotherhood, which states that all people of the universe belong to each other and together share the triumphs and tragedies of the world. The Balinese are optimistic: their prayers may take many full moons to be answered, but we all know that good things come to those who wait, and pray.