

Boston Marathon bombings through one family's eyes

Claire Schaeffer-Duffy | May. 25, 2013

Essay Boston

This year's Boston Marathon was to be my husband's comeback race. A relatively new runner, Scott, 54, had run his inaugural marathon at Boston last year. The event had been bitterly disappointing despite his extensive training. Unseasonably warm weather and muscle-cramping dehydration flattened him halfway through the race, which he doggedly completed well above his desired time. Among the throng who passed him was a runner dressed as a cheeseburger.

Scott hoped for better this year. He began training last December, confessed pride to a priest days before the race, and then prayed he could run strong for the sake of everyone rooting for him.

"Don't let the cheeseburger pass you," a friend joked on the morning of the marathon.

The 117-year-old race is a big deal for Boston, an occasion to collectively celebrate the essential New England virtues of hardiness and endurance. All the city's colleges and universities, except Harvard, close for the day. The week before, local newspapers start profiling the runners and it is not just the elite athletes who are featured. This year, for the first time ever, two dwarfs planned to run. Spectators line the entire 26.2-mile course, which begins in the town of Hopkinton and ends on Boylston Street in downtown Boston.

Our two youngest children, sons Aiden, 18, and Patrick, 21, and I were Scott's cheering squad. By 1 p.m., we were strategically positioned on Beacon Street, one-and-a-half miles back from the finish line. Among the spectators, clusters of scantily clad female college students strutted along the race route. A few entwined themselves around laughing young men. Rap blared from a boom box. On our side of the police barricade, convivial drunkenness prevailed, but on the other, runners were digging in for the final haul. A man in a pink tutu, a fellow wearing a beanie with a small rotary blade whirring above his head, and alas, a hamburger as well as a hot dog jogged by before we saw Scott trotting up the hill. In pain from a pulled thigh muscle, he was smiling nonetheless, slapping the outreached hands of wildly cheering onlookers.

"Go! Go! Go!" they yelled. Aiden hopped the barricade to run bandit beside his dad, pacing him to the finish line. They crossed it, I later learned, at 2:32 p.m., 18 minutes before the bombings. They were a block and a half away, getting the traditional photo-at-the-finish taken, when they heard the first explosion. They turned around in time to see the second.

After saying goodbye to Patrick, who had to return to school, I had set out to walk the remainder of the race route. But pedestrian congestion along Hereford Street and the need for a restroom persuaded me to keep heading south instead of turning east on Boylston Street to cheer runners on to the finish line.

When the bombs exploded, I was less than two blocks away in the Cheesecake Factory restaurant. I heard nothing. The cinematic version of an urban bombing in which everyone erupts into instant, collective hysteria proved inaccurate here. In those minutes following the detonations, life inside the restaurant percolated on

ordinarily. Customers chatted, waitresses bustled and the newly waxed floor gleamed.

But outside, a bewildering and subdued panic unfolded sporadically, slowly. In my peripheral vision, I saw a horde of spectators running in silence. Emergency vehicles swooped northward, sirens blaring. Nearby pedestrians meandered down the sidewalk, obviously clueless about events a block away. A young mother, pushing a toddler in a stroller, ran by, crying quietly.

"What happened?" I asked.

"A bomb went off," the woman said at the same volume someone might say, "It's raining." Her report seemed unbelievable. Around me, young women, their faces crumpling into tears, were texting and talking on cell phones. More people running. More questions. After a man told me that "lots of people" had been hurt, a mind-stopping anxiety set in. Aiden and Scott were in the area of the bombs. Because I had the family cell phones, I could not call to verify they were all right.

"Lord, please, please, please don't let them die," I blubbered out loud as I aimlessly wandered toward the hotel where we planned to meet, too distraught to consult the Boston map in my backpack. Beneath the archway of a building, a young family was assembling. Father, mother, two kids. All there.

It was a long 15 minutes (was it really only 10?) before my cell phone chimed the opening bars of Vivaldi's "Spring," a ringtone one of the kids selected years ago. "Mom. Mom. Dad and I are OK." Now my face crumpled into tears.

Within an hour of the bombing, cell phone service in Boston's Back Bay shut down, complicating the efforts of thousands of families frantically trying to reach their loved ones. Our daughter, Grace, 24, reached us before the shutdown. A quick Facebook posting reassured our oldest son, Justin, in Cairo, of our well-being. But it was hours before Patrick and I spoke. Usually garrulous, he was eerily quiet when he finally heard my voice.

I am learning shock is not one discrete occurrence. It ripples through you hours, days after the distressing event. You feel solid, then go watery, then feel solid again. My husband is a stouthearted man whose work as a peace activist has plunged him into Sarajevo under siege and Bethlehem during curfew and sniper fire, yet even he collapsed into bed at 7 p.m., the evening after the bombing, only to be gripped with nightmares. Grace did not sleep at all. Seeing us back home in Worcester, Mass., she realized she could have lost half her family to a pressure cooker packed with nails and explosives.

And these are the small tremors of a family who were not victims of the day's explosion, who were not eyewitnesses to the carnage -- the severed limbs and graying faces. It was the *possibility* of drastic loss that rattled us so.

In Worcester, one friend tends to the 8-year-old granddaughter who stood near the blast and "saw everything"; another tells of the 24-year-old who aided victims and still can't sleep. I want to remember these reverberations whenever anyone tries to reduce war's effects to mere measurables: numbers dead, numbers wounded. Any bombing, whether by drone strike or crude IED, is never just that. After the blast comes the noiseless assault on trust, the battering of belief that human beings really are made in the image of God. Such attacks are most profoundly felt by the young.

Like bombings everywhere, the attack in Boston has forced us to reckon with the disproportionate power of violence, its ability to wreck, in an instant, that which takes years to grow, centuries to create. Such a swift undoing has to be seen to be believed, and even then we question. How can the house, the church, the mosque,

the human body, that intricate organism, be blasted apart in less than a minute? It's ferociously unjust.

"A violation," my sister-in-law says. This violation has been imposed on many communities around the world, including cities in Europe and Israel, villages in the mountains of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the deserts of Yemen. All week I have been thinking of my 22-year-old friend Fouad, a native of Baghdad. First bombed by U.S. forces, the city later became an IED blast zone. After a car bomb narrowly missed him on his morning walk to school, his father said, "That's it. No more school." The family later fled Baghdad, which, by Fouad's telling, also saw an exodus of childhood innocence. Steeped in violence, its children "became more aggressive."

Is that happening here? Boston bombing suspect Dzhokhar Tsarnaev is 19, old enough to have a moral code, too young for so much despair. Seeing his youthful face in the news, I can't help but wonder if he, and the other young men among us who became train wrecks of destruction, are a legacy of the wars we so mindlessly began these past two decades. Steeped in the violences of the day, they are clueless about life's immeasurable value.

To realize your utter fragility in the face of a bombing can make you rigid with fear or tribalism. It can also stretch your heart and courage. I have seen plenty of the latter among the runners and peacemakers I know. Both communities are digging in these days. The talk in Boston is that next year's marathon will be bigger than ever. A fence sitter for the past two years, I hope to enter with Scott. If the cheeseburger passes us, we won't care. This will be a comeback of a different kind.

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