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THROUGH A
NEVER-ENDING
WAR

KIDS OF KABUL

DEBORAH ELLIS

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GROUNDWOOD BOOKS / HOUSE OF ANANSI PRESS
TORONTO BERKELEY

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Published in Canada and the USA in 2012 by Groundwood Books

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This edition published in 2012 by
Groundwood Books / House of Anansi Press Inc.
110 Spadina Avenue, Suite 801
Toronto, ON, M5V 2K4
Tel. 416-363-4343
Fax 416-363-1017
or c/o Publishers Group West
1700 Fourth Street, Berkeley, CA 94710
www.houseofanansi.com

LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION

Ellis, Deborah

Kids of Kabul : living bravely through a never-ending war / Deborah Ellis.

eISBN 978-1-55498-203-5

1. Children—Afghanistan—Juvenile literature. 2. Children and war—
Afghanistan—Juvenile literature. 3. Afghan War, 2001- —Children—Juvenile literature. I. Title.

HQ792.A3E55 2012 j305.235092'2581 C2011-906638-6

Front cover photo: Gilles Bassignac / Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images

Back cover photo: Paula Bronstein / Getty Images

All other photos are courtesy of the author.

Design by Michael Solomon



We acknowledge for their financial support of our publishing program the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund (CBF).

Introduction

I am a feminist, which means I believe that women are of equal value to men. I am from Canada, a country not without its struggles but where women and girls are not limited — in theory — by the fact that they are female. When I heard about the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 1996, and the crimes they perpetrated against women and girls, I decided to get involved.

This started me on a journey that has taken me from Afghan refugee communities in Canada to the muddy tent camps in Pakistan and the decrepit Soviet workers' holiday hotels outside Moscow that, ten years ago, served as encampments for Afghan and other refugees. It is a journey that has spawned four books: an adult book (*Women of the Afghan War*) and three novels about children under the Taliban, the last one published in 2003.

And now I've gone back.

Afghanistan has been at war for decades. It has been used by the world's great powers in their struggles against each other. One such struggle produced the Taliban government, which, at an earlier stage of the war, had been supported by the United States. Among other things, the Taliban regime was brutally repressive toward women. The Taliban also harbored al-Qaeda, the terrorists who were responsible for the September 11th attacks on the United States in 2001. The war that followed initially overthrew the Taliban government but has continued for the past eleven years.

The real losers are the Afghan people, especially the women and children. Their daily lives are still threatened by suicide bombings, armed conflict and other forms of violence, and even Kabul, the capital city, is not secure. Tens of thousands of Afghans have died since 9/11 — many, many more than died in the twin towers. People have been injured, maimed, displaced and terrorized. People are hungry, people are fleeing, and families are separated from their homes and from each other. Refugees who left their homes as long as twenty years ago live in informal camps where they have no services other than those offered by one or two NGOs. This means there are still millions of internally and externally displaced Afghans living in miserable conditions without water, plumbing or electricity. The billions and billions of dollars spent on the war, which might have been spent on education, health care, housing and rebuilding a civil society, have been spent on weapons.

So has anything been gained?

For some young people life has improved, and they are grabbing hold of every opportunity with both hands. Though more than half the children in Afghanistan still have no access to schooling, those who do study hard. When they are allowed to play sports, they play hard. The lucky ones who have money and who live in Kabul and a few other cities are reaching out to each other and to the world, using social media and new technologies. Some institutions are bringing them into contact with music and art. And they are finding ways to take their considerable energies and talents into public life to move their country forward.

The interviews in this book were conducted over the weeks I was in Kabul early in 2011. Many of the young people spoke only Afghan languages, so their words were translated into English for me by an interpreter — the same interpreter for many of the interviews.



Children's playground in a park just north of Kabul.

Although I usually travel alone, this time I traveled with Janice Eisenhauer and Lauryn Oates from Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan. Many of the places I visited were involved with projects funded by Women for Women. Due to the security situation, I did not travel beyond Kabul.

It is possible to read the interviews in this book and come away feeling hopeful about the future of these kids and the future of their country. It is good to be hopeful, and if the future could be in the hands of this generation of young people, with their eagerness, openness and determination, then Afghanistan could indeed be a garden again.

Sadly, the old way of doing things — the way of corruption and killing and suspicion and venal international interests — seems to be gaining the upper hand. But there is no question that we must reach out and support these young people and the Afghan organizations that work with them. Only through work at the grassroots level can the patient day-to-day of rebuilding take place.

We have to stand together to move forward. Anything we can do to connect with Afghan people, to appreciate what they have been through and what they are capable of, and to assist them in getting the education they need to rebuild their own country will be a step away from madness and pain, and a step toward the sunshine.

Deborah Ellis

2012





Faranoz, 14

During the Taliban regime, schools for girls were closed, and women were forbidden from attending university. Extreme poverty coupled with decades of war and chaos have left the country with high rates of illiteracy. According to the United Nations Human Development Report of 2008, only 28 percent of Afghan adults can read and write. That number drops to 13 percent for women.

Since the fall of the Taliban, the international community has partnered with the people of Afghanistan to raise literacy levels and encourage education for all. It is an uphill struggle — one undertaken at times with enthusiasm and times with suspicion. In addition to regular schools, literacy classes have been introduced into non-traditional spaces to make them as accessible and acceptable as possible.

A small house in a rundown area of Kabul is a gathering point for widows and their daughters. The women have all experienced trauma brought on by the war and related violence. After receiving counseling for a few months, they take part in literacy classes. Each step forward gives them more power over their own lives.

The women crowd into a low-ceilinged room with walls decorated with the handicrafts they have made. They sit on toshaks along the walls, and when those are filled, they move into any available space on the floor. A small woodstove takes the chill out of the winter air.

Faranoz comes here with her mother. She has seven sisters and three brothers.

Everyone says I have too much intelligence. They laugh when they say it, so it is a joke, but they are right. I am very smart.

A year ago, I could not read anything at all, but now I can read all sorts of things — books, poems, everything. I can write, too. This proves I am smart.

I live in a poor area of Kabul. My father died thirteen years ago. No one in this room has a father or a husband. The men died in the war or from sickness or they were murdered. Husbands and fathers die for all sorts of reasons. Some get shot. Sometimes there are road accidents. Some fathers go to Iran or to Pakistan to look for work and don't come back.

My mother has no job, so we are very poor. My oldest brother is in charge of us. He is the one who said I should not go to school, so that is why I spent so many years not knowing how to read. I don't know why he said no school for me. Does he have to give a reason? Maybe he doesn't think I am smart enough for school. Maybe he is afraid I would end up smarter than him, and then how would he be able to tell me what to do? The women in this class have all been through bad times in the war. I was very small when the war ended but I hear everyone talk about it.

Our lessons are supposed to last one and a half hours, but they often go longer because the women want to talk about their problems. But that was more in the beginning. As they become better at reading they want to talk more about reading and less about the things that make them sad.

This meeting room is really just a room in a woman's house. The woman used to be married to a man who belonged to the Taliban. He was a very bad man. He beat her and made her be with other men, a very disrespectful thing. But she was very brave. She went to the Supreme Court and got a divorce. I don't know when this was. Sometime after the war. This is her brother's house. She lives here and he lets her have this room for us to meet.

Our teacher is a lawyer as well as a teacher. She has told us about how she defended women who were being beaten or treated badly. She says important people have offered her important jobs, but she prefers to be here in this room with us, because we are important, too.

The first day of classes, many women were crying because their lives are so hard and no one ever asks them about that. They don't get to just come and sit and talk with other women. They are

expected to just live their lives and be quiet. But the teacher here started to ask them and that's when they started to cry. Some would not talk at all at first. Even I was too afraid to shake the teacher's hand or even to look at her. I was afraid that she would see that I was not smart. But now I know I am smart, so I am not afraid anymore.

After a year of learning to read, we are all different people. We can stand up straight and read out the words we have written in loud clear voices. We laugh more than we cry.

Even though I am young, I know many things. Sometimes the older women forget I'm in the room, and they talk as if I'm not here. I hear all about their lives, about their children who died or their husbands who hit them.

I know that some women did not tell their families they were coming here. They said they were going to the market or to a clinic, or they only came to class when no one was at home to stop them. Only after many months had passed did they tell them, and by then they could read some things, so their families said, "You are using your time well, you are learning something, you are happier, okay you can continue to go."



The courtyard of a home where literacy classes are held.

The books we most like to read are about law, the constitution and about religion. Through these books we learn that we have rights. And if our families disagree, we can point to the book and say, "Here! It is written down! The law must be respected!" Religion does not give men the right to beat

us, and now we can prove it.

~~Some of the stories are funny now, because we know better, but they weren't funny when they~~ happened. One woman says she got a prescription from the doctor and she got it mixed up with other papers, and what she took to the pharmacy was not the prescription, it was the electric bill! Women talk about how they used to be like blind, but reading has made them able to see.

I used to think, if only I could read, then I would be happy. But now I just want more! I want to read about poets and Afghan history and science and about places outside Afghanistan. Many of us write our own stories, and we decorate the borders of the pages with drawings of flowers and designs, because that is the Afghan tradition.

My brother lets me come here because it's not really a school. More just a place where women get together to learn. My mother was the first to come, and when he saw that she felt better and seemed happier, he said, okay, it would not be bad if I came with her. There are only women here, so he thinks I won't get into trouble and make him look bad.

I hope he lets me go to a proper school one day because I like to be around books and I would like to be a doctor one day. I think I would be a good doctor. What else can I do with so much intelligence!



A tradition of Islamic art — or art created in the Islamic world, regardless of the religion of the creator — involves creating a sense of balance and harmony. One part of the tradition is to focus on patterns rather than representations of living creatures. The magnificent tile work on mosques and public spaces throughout the Middle East is a testament to the grandeur of this style of work.

Other traditions, such as the one led by the great Afghan miniaturist of the sixteenth century, Kamal al-Din Bihzad, created spectacular illuminated books of illustrated poetry and legends, with people and even the Prophet Muhammad represented in full-face drawings.

The first national Afghan school of fine arts was established in 1921, with other schools coming along as the decades passed and leaders changed. When the Taliban took power, art was one of the many forms of self-expression they crushed. They even destroyed many of Afghanistan's artistic and cultural treasures, such as the giant Buddhas of Bamiyan (magnificent giant statues carved into the side of a cliff and deliberately dynamited by the Taliban in 2001). Most forms of art were against the law.

In one of the many attempts to rescue and rebuild the cultural life of Afghanistan, a women's art center was established by the Centre for Contemporary Arts Afghanistan (CCAA). Since 2006 it has trained hundreds of young Afghan women in painting, photography and filmmaking. After living in a time when their voices were silenced, having an ability in the arts allows women and girls like Liza to express themselves in new and daring ways.

I live with my mother and one sister. My father died from an untreated illness some time ago. When he got ill, there was no doctor and no medicine. We could see he was sick and suffering, and we did what we could to try to keep him warm and comfortable, but the pain was bad and we watched him die. We were all helpless.

To lose a father in Afghanistan is a dangerous thing because it is very hard for a woman to earn enough money on her own to support herself and her children. She has to rely on someone to help her — an uncle, a brother — and that makes her like a beggar.

For my family it has been very hard. I was seven when my father died. He used to work in a shop selling carpets. I remember visiting him there to take him some lunch. It was the time of the Taliban, so my mother could not go outside with any safety. The Taliban would beat her if they saw her. It was a little safer for me because I was a little child, and they usually ignored very little children. The shop was near to where we lived and I would run there and back. I ran because I was afraid of them. But I was glad to get out.

Except for taking the lunch, we just sat inside. No school, no playing. Nothing. The days were long and we would argue just for something to do. When you are locked up with someone, everything they do can quickly become annoying, because you can't get away from it. Every day is the same.

Before the Taliban fell there was a lot of fighting and shooting. It was terrible. But then it stopped and things are better now. I am about to start grade ten. I study very hard in school. We are on school break now for the winter. Instead of going to regular school classes I come here every day to work on learning art.

After the Taliban, my family was really hopeful. People would come to visit and I'd hear them talk "The dark period is over," they'd say. "We can all breathe again." But it's not really like that. We can do some things, but we never know who is watching and who will try to stop us with violence or by saying bad things. I try not to think about it. I prefer to think about art.



A sculpture in the courtyard of the women's art center.

I am just beginning to learn about it. I've been learning about colors and shapes and how to use light and shadow. When I look around at some of the work done by women who have studied for a while, I think, "How can they do that?" Then I think that one day a new student will ask the same thing about my work, because I will be so good at it.

Many girls paint their memories or their thoughts about their memories. How do they feel when they remember this thing? That's what they paint. So when you see their painting, you get their feeling.

The older artists paint sadder, darker pictures than the younger artists like me. Of course, we are still learning technique and have a long way to go in our studies, but I think we are looking more to the future than to the past. I have heard many sad stories, and I know there are many more, too many more. I want to think about happier things and put my mind and my art to making work that will give people a good feeling instead of a dark feeling. We all have things inside us that need to come out. It can be dangerous to speak, or maybe you are too shy to speak. But you can draw your feelings, in private, and let them out.

We have all lost things because of the war. Losing things and people is normal for Afghans. We have had enough of that. It is time to plan for good days and before you can do that, you have to fill your head with thoughts that are hopeful.

That is why I like to paint the ocean. I have never seen the ocean for real. One day I will, when I travel the world as a famous artist. I paint it because when you look at the ocean, nothing gets in your way. There are no obstacles. You can see forever.

This is what we want for Afghanistan — no more obstacles!



Poverty and child labor go together. War creates poverty. War creates situations where families are so desperate for food and shelter that children must work to provide these necessities, especially if their parents have been killed or maimed by the conflict. War also destroys schools, and when schools are destroyed, opportunities for a way out of bone-grinding poverty are destroyed.

In Afghanistan, children are engaged in all sorts of work, from water-carrying to sheep-herding to carpet-weaving and working in shops. The money they earn goes to basic necessities like bread, and a hard day's work nets them barely enough to keep starvation at bay. And if they don't work, they don't eat.

Aman is one of the lucky ones. He landed at a school that educates child workers and others from very poor families. The school is down a chopped-up, muddy alley in a slum district of the city. It is surrounded by high walls. It looks shabby compared to schools in North America, but inside it is a safe haven, a powerhouse of young minds reaching for something better.

I lost fifteen members of my family to the Taliban, including my parents. We were living in Kabul. Not in a rich neighborhood. Lots of poor families. The Taliban came and said to my father, "What is your name?" He told them and then they killed him. Then they killed my mother. Then they kept on killing until fifteen members of my family were dead. I am alive and my little sister and my grandfather are alive. My grandfather is disabled and lives a very poor life. So I live here at this school with my sister.

I am now in grade nine and I am at the top of my class. I want to be a doctor, of course. This is the dream of many Afghans because we have seen so much death and suffering.

I did not begin school at the correct time in my life because I had to work. When I was young I was shepherd and looked after sheep that belonged to someone else. My job was to keep the sheep together in the street and take them from one garbage dump to another so they could rub their noses through

the plastic bags and things people threw away. That was how they would eat. They had to eat garbage because we have no grass in Kabul except in the parks and they were far away from where I lived and they don't allow sheep. Everything else is dust and rock.



A computer room at a school for impoverished and working children.

It isn't a hard job, looking after sheep, but I was very small at the time. It seemed hard to me then. The sheep were bigger than me! I was always afraid they would not go where I told them to go. If I lost one, it would have gone very bad. It doesn't matter whether I liked it or not. It was my job and I had to do it.

If I wasn't able to go to school that might still be my life, taking sheep from one garbage place to another. So I study hard and I work hard. I have no free time. Every hour is busy.

I help teach the younger boys here. Most of them also have jobs. This one is a mechanic, this one goes through garbage, this one helps out in a shop. They work in the morning. Then they come here for a free lunch and stay for classes. Many of the boys here earn money to support their whole families, so they have to work. If they don't work, no one eats. The free meal they get here at the school for lunch makes their family feel better about them spending the afternoon at classes instead of at more work.

When I miss my family, so much that my chest hurts and everything hurts, I try to calm myself by thinking of my future, because I think it could be a good future if no one comes in and starts killing again. Look at what I've learned in just a few years! When I first came here I was afraid all the time.

had too many dark, sad things in my head. I thought there would never be room there for anything else. Then I learned how to read and write and even to use a computer. So now I have many good things to think about.

I don't know why the Taliban killed my family. My family were innocent. They were not important fancy people. They were nobody's enemies. The Taliban killed my family just to show their power. They did a lot of that, killing whole families. You can see it when you go into a graveyard. Big groups of family members all buried on the same day. Like they are on a picnic. Only they are dead.

Karima, 14



Women need economic power. Economic power means having ownership over enough money to create their own lives to live without being dependent on men for food, shelter and the other necessities of life. This is true for women everywhere.

In North America there are laws to protect the rights of women and, just as important, there are strong social customs to back those laws up. When Canadian and American women are beaten by their male partners, there are shelters for them to go to with their children, and the police can arrest the men for assault. The system doesn't always work the way it is supposed to, and each year women are still murdered by their male partners. But the ideal we strive for is that no one has the right to make anyone else live in a state of fear. And since women in North America have the right to earn their own money — and decide how to spend it — they can learn to make the types of choices that will help them avoid or get away from abusive men.

In Afghanistan social customs make it very difficult for women to have independent economic power, and without that, they must depend on men for their survival. Very often this turns out fine, as the vast majority of Afghan men — like men anywhere — are kind and strive to do the right thing. But when a woman is forced to be dependent on an abusive man, her choices are often limited. She can suffer through it and hope things get better, she can commit suicide, she can escape the home and hope she is not found and killed for “dishonoring” her family, or she can kill the abuser and be executed or spend the rest of her life in prison.

Karima and her mother face this situation every day of their lives.

My father has been dead for ten years. He died of a brain attack. My mother washes clothes for people in the neighborhood, and they give her a little money. It is not enough to live on. We live in a poor area and the neighbors can't pay a lot.

I have three sisters and one brother. My brother is seven and the youngest. We live with my mother's brother, my uncle. He has just a small house — one room we share with his family. There are too many of us in that small space, but where else can we go?

There are not enough mats for us all to sleep on, so my family sleeps on the floor. There is a rug but it is thin, and the floor is a cold and hard place to sleep. The house has no electricity. None of the houses in the area do. When it becomes dark outside it becomes dark inside. I have no way to do my homework.

My uncle has oil lamps and candles, but when I try to use one to study he says, "Why are you sitting there with books? Why do you just sit while I have to work to feed you? You should not be going to school. Your job is to get a husband, not to sit around with books, using up the candles."

I am lucky, though, because my mother stands up to him on this matter. She tells me to go to school to study hard and make a good future for us.

My mother never had the chance to go to school. She cannot read or write. She has no experience of these things. But she knows how hard her life is, and she thinks that education might be the way to an easier life.

My great ambition is to one day work in a bank. It is a job that a woman can do where she will have good responsibility and where people will treat her with respect.

I cry sometimes because my uncle is very cruel to my mother and brother and me. He hits us. He says insulting things to us because he does not want to have us around, but we have nowhere else to go. When I get my job at the bank I will make a good salary and take us all to live in another place, far away from my uncle. But that is still many years from now.

We don't know what will make him angry. If we did, then we wouldn't do it. I think he is just angry when we breathe, and we can't do anything about that. My brother is a boy and can run outside, but my sisters and I can't just leave the house when we want to. It's not safe for us outside, either.

My uncle keeps threatening to find me a husband. I know that will be my fate, that one day he will marry me off to someone and I won't be able to disobey. But I hope I get to live part of my life for myself.

So I come to school a lot because school is a nicer place than home. After I finish regular classes I stay at school for special courses, like English, tailoring and computers. All classes are free at my school, as long as you do your work. You cannot just come and not work because someone else would make better use of your space.

When I do go home I spend most of my time taking care of my little brother and helping my mother wash clothes. My favorite food is spaghetti. Sometimes we have it here at school for lunch. I have one good friend, a girl in my class. She has a hard life, similar to mine, so we understand each other very well.

We both work hard in school. We hope one day to have a life.

Sharifa, 14



One of the legacies of decades-long war in Afghanistan has been the bombing, land-mining and burning of orchards and farmlands. Afghanistan used to grow enough food to feed itself. War changed that.

Farmers came back from war or exile to find that their land could not be used. But they still had families to feed. So they turned to a crop that can grow in rocky, dry soil — opium poppies.

Opium poppies produce a gummy substance that is the raw material for heroin, an illegal, addictive drug. The opium itself can be smoked. It is a painkiller, producing a heavy stoned feeling in those who smoke it.

Afghanistan now produces more than 90 percent of the world's heroin. It is used by addicts in Russia, Europe and North America. The trade is controlled by warlords and other criminals — and the Taliban — who have no interest in human rights or the well-being of children. The money they get from selling heroin buys them more guns and more power.

The poppy farmers are generally poor families growing poppies on small plots of land that will not support any other crops. They often have to borrow money to buy the seed. If their poppy crop is destroyed by foreign troops to prevent the heroin from being sold in their home countries, the farmers cannot repay the debt. So they may give in payment the only thing they have — a daughter. These girls who are forced into marriage — a form of rape and slavery — are called Opium Brides. Farmers who don't pay their debt have also been tortured and killed.

Heroin is a bad business.

In the absence of proper medicine, opium is used to get rid of pain, including the pain of hunger. Parents give it to babies who have earaches and to children whose bellies are empty. For adults, smoking opium eases the pain of long hours of back-breaking work, and it blocks out the memories of trauma from the war.

The number of opium addicts in Afghanistan is estimated at 1.5 million. In a country of thirty million people, that works out to one of the highest rates of addiction of any country in the world. Treatment options are very few.

Anyone who has lived with or known an addict knows the kind of chaos and havoc they create around them.

Sharifa has an addicted father.

My brother is one year younger than me. We live with our mother. I hear from other girls how their

family members sometimes argue, but we don't have that problem. The three of us have to pull together if we are to manage, and even then it is very hard. So we have no energy to waste in arguments. What would be the point? Our lives would still be hard, no matter who won the argument.

My mother washes clothes for neighbors and also does cooking jobs when she can, not as a formal cook but as a helper. My brother does odd jobs to help out, whatever he can, carrying things or helping someone out in their shops. He gets paid very little. He works hard, but people think he is young so they don't need to pay him much.

I wish there was a job I could do to earn money, but for Afghan girls it is very difficult.

My father is still alive, I think, but he does not live with us. As far as I know, he is in Karachi staying with relatives, but I can't be sure.

He is addicted to opium. He has been addicted for ten years. He used to be a shopkeeper. He kept up this job even while he was addicted, but then his health became too bad. He took more and more opium and he stopped working.

It was hard to live with him. Our house always smelled of opium smoke. My clothes, too, would hold the smell. When I went to school other children would call me names because of the smell on my clothes. I tried to keep clean but there was no place to hang clothes away from the smoke.

My father had many moods when he lived with us, all bad except when he had smoked a lot of opium. Then he just lay on the floor and didn't bother us. He had a lot of bad memories from the war, my mother said, and was in pain a lot of the time from injuries that had no proper treatment. Opium took away his pain and his memories.

When he didn't have opium, he would smoke hashish. When he could not get these things, then he would be in a very bad mood. He would yell and say bad things for hours and hours, mean and insulting things. We all lived in one room and there was no way to get away from the insulting things he said. And there was no way to make him feel better.

Finally, it got so bad my mother asked his relatives in Pakistan to take him in. I don't know how she came up with the money or how she got him to go. But he went away and now it is just the three of us.

I try to remember that my house is not me. Where we live it is very, very bad. We have no clean sheets, no beds. We sleep on the floor. We try to keep it clean but there is mud when it rains and dust when there is no rain.

We have no electricity, just a little oil lamp that we light to do our homework, but we must work quickly and not waste the oil.

I like to have fun, and at school that can happen sometimes with my friends and classmates. We all work hard, but we can't be serious all the time! We are not old yet!

I have decided not to be married. I want to be a doctor, and I don't want a husband that I have to take care of. I want to do good work and make a better life for me and my family.



One of the great Islamic traditions is the discipline of memorizing the entire Qur'an, the Islamic holy book. This tradition may spring from the days when books and literacy were less widespread than they are now. Memorizing and reciting the Qur'an was a way to pass on the words from one person to another.

A person who has accomplished this phenomenal task is called a hafiz. It is a revered title, one worthy of respect. The Qur'an is more than 86,000 words long, and it takes, on average, three to four years to memorize the whole thing. Anyone who has tried to memorize a poem for school will understand the concentration and dedication such a task takes! The children who accomplish this are said to be an extra special blessing to their parents.

Becoming a hafiz is a goal of Sadaf's.

I live with my mother and three sisters. My father was killed in a rocket attack a few years ago.

We were in our village, which has the name of Kolach. It was an ordinary place, not a special place.

My father liked to pray outside. He liked being under the sky instead of under a roof. So he was outside of the house, kneeling on his prayer mat, saying his prayers. And a rocket came down and killed him.

The rocket blew my whole house apart. There was nothing left of it. Maybe scraps of things. Nothing we could use. Nothing of value.

I was in my grandfather's house at the time, with my mother and sisters. My grandfather's house was right beside my house, so when the rocket hit my house, we felt it at Grandfather's.

It was very, very bad, so bad that you cannot even imagine it, like a nightmare. But worse than a nightmare. When you are next to a rocket exploding, you see it, you feel the ground shake, you hear the noise like a big animal roaring, and you smell it, too, the fire, the dust.

I did not want to believe that my father had been killed. I wanted to dig through the yard, through everything that was broken, to see if we could find him. But my grandfather took me away. It would

not have helped. Of course he was dead.

I don't know who fired the rocket. Maybe it was the Taliban. Maybe it was the foreign soldiers. You think they would tell me? You think the Taliban would come to me and say, "Oh, we killed your father but we didn't mean to. The rocket went the wrong way." No, they don't do that. Nobody explains anything.

My father was a good man, a kind man. He liked his daughters to be smart and to learn things. He was proud when we learned how to read.

After the explosion my uncle took us away to another village to live with him. He is my mother's brother. We lived with him for a few years. My grandfather was too poor for us to stay with him. Now we are here in Kabul, trying to make a new life.

My two older sisters are married now, and they share everything with my mother and me. When they get some food, we get some food. My mother is jobless. She gets a bit of money from her brother, but not a lot. He is a laborer and does not make a lot of money.

The thing I most like to do is study the Qur'an. My father was killed while he was praying, and I think that makes his death holy in some way. I like to think so, anyway. By studying the Qur'an I feel that he is not so far away from me.

It is my dream to one day memorize all of the Qur'an. It was the wish of my father that all his girls be able to do this. I want to become a hafiz, which is what people will call me when I have memorized the whole Book of Allah.

It will be a big job. The Qur'an has 114 surahs [chapters] and over six thousand verses. But others have done it and I will be able to do it. Then the message of the Prophet will be inside me, and I'll always have it, even if all the Qur'ans disappear. And when I have a problem, I can know what part of the Holy Qur'an will help me solve it.

I haven't started to memorize it yet. I am still learning to read it, and I make a lot of mistakes. When I stop making mistakes, then I will start to memorize.

There is a television show on Afghan TV called Qur'an Star, for those who memorize the Qur'an, a kind of competition. I want to go on this program and do well. That is one good way I can help my family. The last winner was a sixteen-year-old girl. She won 150,000 afghanis (\$3,000 US). My family will be helped a lot with that much money.

My mother says that when it is her turn to die, it will be my responsibility to recite the prayers over her body. She says that praying over her will be more important than crying over her, so I should practice the prayers and have them easy in my mind to get to when the time comes.

I hear that Kabul is a nice city, with parks and gardens and big shops and even a zoo, but I haven't seen any of that. All I have seen is this area, and it isn't very nice. It doesn't really matter, though, if you live in an ugly place. If you have beautiful thoughts in your head then it's like you are living in beauty.

In the future I want to be a teacher and teach both English and Islamic studies. People who know English are more respected, and if I am a scholar of Islamic studies, I can help spread the news of the Qur'an.

War comes when there is no unity, when people look out for themselves instead of each other. But through discussion we can solve all our problems, create unity and avoid war.



Life expectancy for people in Afghanistan is, on average, forty-four years. In Canada and the United States it is about eighty. Poor nutrition, lack of access to health care and clean water, exposure to the elements, poverty-related illnesses such as tuberculosis, plus war and related violence all take their toll. Twenty percent of all children born in Afghanistan die before they reach their fifth birthday.

Many people have fled Afghanistan because of the war. Others have left in search of jobs or a better life elsewhere. In Canada and the United States, we have an economic safety net. People over sixty-five receive a pension. People who are out of work are often eligible for unemployment insurance. For those who are too ill to work, there is another type of assistance. We have these things because the people who came before us worked really hard to make them happen. We have also never suffered the horrible destruction of prolonged war on our land.

War creates poverty. In countries like Afghanistan, where there has been prolonged war, there is no economic safety net. People go hungry. According to UNICEF, nearly 40 percent of children under the age of five are undernourished, and over half of all children under five are smaller than they would be if they had enough to eat.

Mustala's family has been split apart by war.

I live with my grandfather and grandmother. We are really poor. My grandparents don't work. We have no money for soap, so I am often dirty and wearing dirty clothes. I would like to be better dressed, so when people see me coming they will think, "Oh, this boy is important, look at his clothes. He must be somebody special." No one will think that of me if I don't have nice clothes.

My father left when I was quite small. He went to Iran to find work and also because some people here wanted to kill him. My mother got another husband and left us so she could be with him. I think she has other children now.

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