

Looking ahead in 2019 - a personal viewpoint

When I met Omaid Sharifi, the founder of Art Lords, I asked him "Why do we stay optimistic about Afghanistan's future?" His answer was, "Maybe it's because we have no choice!"

After that exchange, I asked myself why I stay in Afghanistan, since I have a choice that most Afghans don't have. Here's my answer: I remain positive and feel nurtured by 14 years of living and working as a professional in Afghanistan.

The constant stream of stories of heartbreak and disaster reported by national and international media create a sense of despair in many people. However, most non-government organizations interpret the stories as challenges to overcome as we support our beneficiaries who are near breaking point from incessant tragedy.

What I have learned over my long tenure in Afghanistan is that what I focus on grows. If I focus on fixing problems, those problems grow to a point that overwhelms me. So I have created my own narrative. I focus on stories that reflect the spirit of the Afghan people to help me solve the problems that I face.

Afghan communities have assets, courage and a cultural heritage that creates a resiliency that is formidable. When I focus on this narrative, I discover positive outcomes and solutions. Are there downsides? Of course, and I have probably experienced most of them. But stories from our field staff support my optimistic view of the country's future.

Last week a psychiatrist who is of our psychosocial staff members was meeting with members of one of our women's support groups. The women meet weekly in a government clinic in a community that is behind Taliban and besieged by conflict. The women told our staff member that if their families knew they were participating in a psychosocial group that they would probably be killed.

Our staff member worked with the local government doctor and a support group facilitator to diagnose and treat their own psychosocial problems such as severe anxiety and depression. They worked with our staff order to give the women access to badly needed psychosocial support. By collaborating with our government partners to find a solution, we developed a plan that would benefit everyone in the clinic. The new partnership was possible

because these Afghan women had the courage to come to the support group and our Afghan staff member had the compassion and will to treat them.

There are thousands of stories like this across the country for us to learn from. There are countless ordinary Afghans caring for each other under unimaginable circumstances.

When we wake up to no electricity, a long commute because of a bombing incident, and a myriad of challenges that we face in our daily work, do we say to ourselves, "It is getting worse! There is no hope." Or do we look for a thread of inspiration in a narrative about the fierce generosity, resilience and strength of the Afghan people that we are here to serve?

You may not have a choice over living in Afghanistan, but you do have a choice over the narrative you listen to. If we listen for this we will find our way. And that is why I am still living and working in this country.

Marnie Gustavson

Executive Director PARSA