

NINE LIVES

MAKING THE
IMPOSSIBLE POSSIBLE

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Peter Braaksma



Nine Lives: Making the Impossible Possible

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Dedication

Life may not be fair, but it is crucial we try to make it so.

This book is dedicated to those who did not get a fair deal – and to those that may still get exactly that, perhaps aided by the efforts of the contributors to this book.

About the author

Peter Braaksma (born in 1960) has worked as an editor, communication adviser and corporate journalist in the Netherlands and Britain. From Asian countries he contributed to various public and corporate magazines. This caused him to focus on human rights, the environment and (corporate) social responsibility, and to create *Nine Lives*. These stories reflect the endeavors of people who embody Gandhi's notion 'you must be the change you wish to see in the world'.

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Photo credits

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'It always seems impossible, until it's done.'

Nelson Mandela

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Introduction

What if?

ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE! But who would think so in times of recession and depression? Half a century ago, writer JK Galbraith passed a bookshop on his way to New York's La Guardia airport. Not revealing who he was, he asked the bookseller about a book with a bright red jacket, his own 'disaster study' *The Great Crash*. 'That's certainly not a title you could sell in an airport,' the woman replied.

Even though the last few years are reminiscent of previous crashes and crises, let's hope that *Nine Lives* fares better. And not just in airports. This book presents the life stories of people who were confronted with insurmountable obstacles, opposition and oppression. Yet they make the impossible possible. Reading this book, you might think more lightly about the barriers in your path. As contributor Rami Elhanan says: 'If we can, *anyone* can.'

'Sorry, your call cannot be connected'

Snapshot 1.

'Can I speak to any of the human rights activists we talked about?'

Silence. But the woman at the other end of the phone hasn't hung up.

'No,' she says after a sigh. 'That won't be possible.'

'Why not?'

'They're all in jail.'

Compiling these personal narratives led me into some very unexpected encounters – and to anticipated meetings that never took place. ‘Don’t come,’ someone said. ‘If they find the two of us in one room, it will be too tempting to destroy us.’ But arranging these meetings with remarkable men and women was not always so hard or risky. Most of them were able and willing to share their stories. However different, they each represent a cause that rises above them and the region they represent.

If there was only one *raison d’être* for this book, it would be that these stories deserve to be heard. Amidst today’s information anxiety, the sheer speed and volume of news that snowballs from every corner of the globe, it is difficult to get any depth. Our mental and emotional disk space runs out, leaving us little time to uncover the underlying stories that gave birth to the news, the *why* and *how* of it – let alone take up a well-informed stance on each of them. Does it matter? Well, entire wars are being waged based on ‘misrepresentations’, to use a friendly term, so I think it does.

It helps us to understand more deeply if we learn about people’s intimate personal experience. If you don’t *feel* it, both the talking and the listening become meaningless. This is why these stories are told in the first person. It gives them a sense of intimacy, as if you were sitting across the kitchen table – which in fact is the way some of them came into being. They have not been summarized to meet the needs of fast-track information, as shortcuts often misinform. You get, as much as possible, an unadulterated experience. Consequently, paraphrasing a famous beer commercial, these stories refresh the parts that other stories cannot reach.

The phrases you will remember from the book will not be headlines – ‘War in Gaza’; ‘Arms Trade Treaty Postponed’. Instead, they might be memorable lines in which important messages are embedded: ‘There is no future without making peace with the past’; ‘Opportunity is there all the time, but often we don’t see it’; ‘Our global military expenditure is simply

immoral'; 'You can cut the flower, but you cannot stop the coming of spring.' But now we're returning to soundbites again, when actually these statements gain in power when read in context.

So, why these nine individuals? Well, I was searching for people that matched three criteria. Are they *authentic*, is their cause *constructive*, and is their work of (global) *significance*? I was seeking out lives that embody Gandhi's famous phrase 'you must *be* the change you wish to see in the world'. Of course, it must be possible to have thousands of such encounters, and I have had the privilege of meeting many more than the nine lives reflected here. There were some that did not warrant inclusion, while other stories were set aside for a future book. While I gained access to some people quickly, in other cases it took seven months to fix a date – or multiple dates. It changed my agenda into a stand-by button. Impressed as I was by the odysseys of the contributors, their stories became my odyssey in turn, and may become yours.

The stories, though, are worth it. They are captivating,

'This way, please'

Snapshot 2.

At Phnom Chisor, in southern Cambodia, a young girl guides me to an ancient Angkorian temple. Her friends join us on the climb to the hill top that offers a panoramic view of the surroundings. But does she know where she is going? Why does she keep stumbling over rocks and bumping into branches? She knows the site well, as she grew up here, and she can almost find her way by memory and by touch. And that's exactly what she is doing. She speaks about the site from memory, as she is being blinded by a tick that has infected her eye. In developed countries, this condition is easy to cure at little cost. But, despite the changes that are taking place in her country, in Cambodia she will simply become blind.

confronting and uplifting. They demonstrate self-effacing honesty, resilience, courage, ingenuity. They show some people staying true to their beliefs, and others leaving cherished views behind forever to embrace entirely new ones. When it comes down to it, people from every corner of the globe have a similar decency and dignity. In their darkest hour, every person hopes to survive, to return to normal life, or to rise again like a phoenix. Ordinary people can accomplish extraordinary things. There is hope for the unrecognized, the suppressed, the underprivileged. Sometimes, that hope or last straw turns out to be... *yourself*.

The book functions as a platform for views that would otherwise go unreported. As Nelson Mandela says, 'it always seems impossible, until it's done'. It *can* be done and it *is* possible. Each of these nine voices was confronted with an urgent and inescapable need to dig deep, either to rescue themselves or to forge a fresh way forward for others. Cats are said to have nine lives; perhaps some of these contributors do too. In several cases, the only way out was by teaming up with former adversaries. Despite their trials and tribulations, they built bridges across their predicaments to a different future. Not only that, they made their cause public, as is evident from their activities and websites.

You may be familiar with a few of these names, some of whom I could only meet abroad or in exile. I spoke with Malalai Joya, Harry Wu and Monireh Baradaran in Madrid, Washington and Frankfurt respectively instead of Kabul, Beijing and Tehran. The other six chapters were created in the places where the interviewees live. Some simply call for recognition of their cause, others speak truth to power. As such, they reflect the challenge of *homo sapiens* to live up to its noble name, or claim the rights as enshrined in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. *Their* rights are *everybody's* rights; *our* rights.

What they did and still do presents us with a mirror and makes you wonder: what if I had been in their shoes? How

would I deal with questions without answers, problems without solutions? Where to begin, for example, when confronted with the question: What should be done with the former Khmer Rouge leaders? Youk Chhang of the Documentation Center for Cambodia feels it is impossible truly to punish them. 'How would they pay back two million lives? Should they die two million times? Live in hell for two million years? The crimes they committed are so grave that I don't know what punishment would be fair.'

Efforts to improve one's lot and that of others reflect a universal, innate and irrepressible urge towards human fulfillment that exists before laws, text books or permits. Together, these *Nine Lives* represent a microcosm of such efforts, and the resistance they encounter. It shows what the human race is capable of – its best and its worst.

Questions remain. *What if* poverty was an epidemic and could grab you this afternoon, drain your bank account and force you to live in a cardboard box tomorrow? *What if* trafficking and rape suddenly became contagious and you found yourself systematically abused, and crying out for help from a windowless cellar? *What if* freedom of speech was suddenly abolished and

Have-nots and will-nots?

Snapshot 3.

Landing in Kathmandu, Nepal, in 2004 as a volunteer teacher of English to a Buddhist monastery in Bodhinath and Little Angels Primary School, I notice something awkward. It is possible to run my shower for an entire day at no additional cost. But it represents a stark contrast to my immediate environment. Leaning against the outer wall of the guesthouse is a man that cannot even afford one bottle of clean drinking water – he is exhausted and ailing. Why is this life-saver in short supply in a country that has it in superabundance?

for an innocent remark the ‘thought police’ dragged you out of your home? Plausible? Possible? A person’s greatest fear may be a knock on the door by a man in a three-piece suit; their greatest joy making friends with the enemy.

The snapshots above and the chapters that follow demonstrate that human rights are not abstract – and neither are missions impossible that are made possible. They’re hands-on affairs. Born under a different constellation, I might well have been the subject of any of these stories. But on which side? It caused me to look into the mirror and ask: What if I had been in their shoes?

Any shortcomings of the book are my own.

Peter Braaksma