



THE HEROIC IMPULSE

BY WIB MIDDLETON

It is a bone-chilling, dark December night in 2015. The beaches of Lesbos, Greece, are strewn with tens of thousands of worthless, bright orange “life” jackets—just another scam foisted upon refugees fleeing Syria and other war-torn countries. It is not unusual to see as many as 2,000 refugees a day attempt the watery journey from Turkey to the shores of Greece. Embarking on boats and dinghies that are overcrowded and often break down, it’s a real gamble as to whether the refugees will make it the seven miles to their destination. The unimaginable death toll by drowning hits 3,000 in 2015.

Zoë Wild, a young American woman, stands on the beach looking out to sea with another woman from Sweden. Tonight they’re it, just the two of them, hopeful that they can guide refugees, often 80 plus in a rub-

ber boat, to a safe landing. The fate of the refugees is literally in their hands. Abandoned on the Turkish shore by smugglers, it is anyone’s guess who is navigating the boats, or if they even know how. Zoë scans the horizon looking for the faintest light from cellphones held high by refugees. The onshore signal to the refugees is the quick on-off flash of headlights. It’s illegal to signal the boats. They have to be stealthy. It’s crude, but effective.

You might be wondering at this point what forces are at play that would cause someone to be moved into selfless action by a terrible tragedy thousands of miles away and actually take the next step to do something. Where does that heroic impulse come from that propels one from empathy to compassionate action? Often we feel the pain of another in our gut, and tears testify that we care. But then the phone rings, or we get a text,

and the news report that so moved us is over, and that tender moment fades as we move on to the next thing. Taking the next step,—*showing up* with an authentic, heartfelt commitment to help is a whole other story.

Zoë Wild, a successful thirty-something entrepreneur, grief counselor, workshop facilitator in conflict resolution and trauma, with a lifelong bent for volunteering and saying “yes,” had planned to spend time around Christmas in front of a fire reading books in her cozy Sedona home. She needed to chill. Her mother was battling cancer, she had spent Thanksgiving with family, and this was to be her alone time.

In mid-November she began seeing posts from some of her 5000 Facebook friends about the Syrian refugee crisis. Heart-wrenching images and videos of traumatized families and bodies washing up on the shore of a

small Greek resort island were shocking the world. Most of the videos were of terrified women and children with fathers crying and stunned by their state of helplessness. After seeing so much pain and anguish flash across her screen, one particular video shook her to her core. Enough was enough! *These people are the same as me, they are my family*, she thought. Zoë, in her meditation got the answer: "Go!"

Using her frequent flyer miles set aside for a getaway vacation, Zoë created an Indiegogo crowd funding page hoping to raise \$5,000. She hit her goal quickly, mostly from friends in Sedona. While in Lesvos, funds keep coming. In just a few weeks she had raised over \$43,000 as her story got out. With all private donations and event fundraisers added in, the grand total raised by one fearless woman who made this horrific refugee crisis real for hundreds of donors, came close to \$70,000.

Zoë believes she has always been a very empathic person. "My mom used to tell a story about when I was two and she was turning over vegetables in the garden. Every time an earthworm would come up, I would pick it up and kiss it and tell it that it was going to a new home and that it would be okay," she laughs.

Recent behavior studies point to the innate qualities of empathy among toddlers and young children. Conversations about empathy seem to be popping up everywhere, the topic causing deep reflection about personal values and essential facets of being human. "I think empathy is something that has to be trained out of us," remarks Zoë, "and I think it's a really important issue globally." Clearly,



Zoe Wild surrounded by a Syrian refugee family on the banks of Lesvos, Greece.

empathy and taking action for others in need is part of Zoë's DNA.

After some troubling years seeing and experiencing her own suffering, Zoë landed in Burma, determined to learn meditation and to work with her mind. Remarkably, she became a Buddhist nun and spent almost two years in a Burmese monastery. It was during one of the country's most tumultuous times politically. She was 23 and "took to meditation like a fish to water." Buddhism would prove to be an essential moral compass for her and a path to develop her attention to suffering, compassion and non-attachment.

"Empathy is also about the *capacity* to meet another's suffering. For some, maybe they can only hear what is happening. For others, they can be with a friend who is dealing with a crisis. And for others, they will actually take a leap, get involved and act. You never really know who will do what. I like the word capacity because it is not judgmental," says Zoë.

In reflecting on what prompted her to drop her life and fly to ground zero in Greece for the refugees crisis Zoë said, "I think that a key part of

empathy in action is that we don't need to know what to do. But we can show up, and by just showing up, we demonstrate that we care. 'I see you. You are not invisible. You matter, and I understand what you are going through.' It's really not anybody's job to know what to do emotionally for someone else. Every person and every situation is different. From my own spiritual practice as a Buddhist my job is honestly to meet every moment—especially when I don't know, or when I am afraid. Can I listen in to what the deepest part of my being is guiding me to do? Can I follow it and have the courage just to be present and show up especially when I don't know? That, to me, is faith. And then, to allow things to unfold and not be attached to results. It's up to me to show up do my best and let go," reflects Zoë.

Lessons from Lesvos

Zoë has a lot to say about the conditions on the ground in Lesvos and what she saw as the total failure of the EU and many of the larger NGOs that had no clue how to deal with the

crisis. “These were the organizations whose mission it was to respond to human tragedy, and to actually see them letting people drown, to see them letting babies freeze to death, to see them letting people starve, when it was so easy to fix, was absolutely shocking,” she says emphatically.

There were thousands needing help day and night. Most nights an hour of sleep for the volunteers was generous. One night heading to bed four people showed up to tell Zoë they had been robbed at the Turkish border and their baby had the flu. “So what are you going to do? Tell them you’re tired and have a cough?” says Zoë.

At one point Zoë had a profound revelation. Her own grandparents escaped from Nazi Germany. “I can’t tell you when that occurred to me what it felt like. What I was able to do for the refugees had been done for my family decades ago. I wouldn’t even exist if people hadn’t broken laws to help my grandparents. My grandfather was a Jewish doctor living in Austria. One afternoon a patient who was a Nazi officer came to his office and said ‘they are coming for you right now.’ He met his mother at the train station, and never saw her again. He hid in the train car bathroom, and when the ticket taker found him without a ticket, he decided to let him continue on to Switzerland and to safety.

“Another lesson I got for my time in Lesvos is that it really, really takes a village. Each person brings a gift. One woman turns discarded boats and life jackets into backpacks. Another who is a lifeguard pulls drowning babies out of the water and a doctor revives them. Another is distributing food and clothing, and still another is building infrastructure in the camps.

It takes *everybody*, and no gift is too small,” she asserts.

With the thousands of dollars Zoë raised she began spending it. She took people to hotels; she bought them food and clothing, tents, and airline tickets to other countries. If they needed something, she got it for them. She was a one-woman, guerilla humanitarian force backed by friends in Sedona and beyond who kept sending her funds. “I became known as someone who could help. And every time I did something for anyone, I said, ‘This is not from me; it’s from my friends in America.’ You could see their surprise and 90 percent of the time, they would cry and thank me over and over.” Zoë got a message from some refugees she helped to get to Germany: “It was just a small tent and just a little warmth, but it was your smile that gave us what we needed to continue.”

“I think one of the things that people don’t always know about empathy is that when you get over the fear and show up, even though you don’t know what to do, the payoff is ten-thousand fold. For me there is so much richness in my life when I show up,” reflects Zoë. Was she able to process her ordeal to recognize that she too was suffering from PTSD? Was her PTSD training and work as a caregiver working? Now back in Sedona that’s mostly a yes. However, some searing images and words will never fade. “In Lesvos I heard stories that took me three days to wrap my mind around. I literally couldn’t make my lips form the words to retell them. I have never experienced that before in my life.”

Mostly Zoë is left with questions. How did there come to be such a breakdown in humanity? Besides

the corruption, the greed, the rip-offs, where were the governments and global institutions geared for this level of suffering? And there are much deeper questions that all of us need to confront. “If we are born empathetic what is it that happens that causes some people to become the kind of person that would sell a fake life-jacket to a child? Or take a suffering family’s entire savings to put them in a ‘lifeboat’ that could easily end up killing them? If we don’t look at those things, we won’t get anywhere and nothing changes.”

Zoë got to spend time with her mother after more than five weeks in Lesvos. They went together to Trinidad for what would be her mom’s last compassionate adventure for Habitat for Humanity. It was deeply moving and a special time for both. Shortly after the trip, Zoë was boarding a plane to Boston, her mom in failing health. Within days, Zoë’s mother—her mentor, role model, co-adventurer, and lifelong friend...compassionate and concerned for others to the end—with a well-prepared and serene mind passed peacefully.

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As a result of her experience in Greece, Zoë is founding an NGO, One Light Global (www.onelightglobal.org) and devoting her life to humanitarian work around the globe. The organization will initially support refugee children, many of whom have lost both parents. Please kindly consider supporting her work by donating to her tax exempt organization. “I was one light on the beach in the dark, shining so they could find their way. One light, that’s sometimes all we can do.”