**What It’s like when you’re not in the thick of things: A Marathon Experience from the Countway Library of Medicine & Newtonville 4-23-2013 (amended and updated 2-23-2014)**

While there are many who were affected more profoundly than I by the tragedies of this past week, even those of us on the sidelines have been impacted.

Last Monday I was in a meeting at work when the explosions occurred, about a dozen or so city blocks north of me.   We were too far away to hear them, but their effect became apparent rather quickly nonetheless. Our admin stopped by to let us know.  An hour or so before the explosions, many from my group were among the crowds at the marathon, cheering the runners on.  Thankfully, the moment I heard what happened I knew they were at their desks working.  But one of them was still there (a runner of prior marathons), and shortly thereafter we knew he was safe.  Others weren’t, though, and they were headed our way.  For the rest of the afternoon, ambulance after ambulance passed right under my window on Huntington Avenue, on their way most likely to Brigham and Women’s Hospital.  I was confident that the workers at the hospitals would do their jobs well, but also cognizant that a long, difficult recovery lay ahead—not just for the unfortunate spectators and runners who were harmed, and their families, but also for the emergency responders who cared for them, the media who reported this, and the bystanders.  The horrors they’ve experienced will be with them for the rest of their lives.

During that confused afternoon, we heard reports that the JFK Library was experiencing a fire.  This fire occurred nearly simultaneously with the blasts at the marathon.  While it looks like the two events were not connected, at the time it was difficult to know what was happening.   We tried to access several of the local news websites and many of them were inaccessible. Was there a cyber attack happening too? It was probably just excess network traffic, but in the aftermath of 9/11 and when the city was under attack, this certainly contributed to the angst of the afternoon.

After ensuring that everyone on my team could get home when the transit was partially closed, I drove a long ride home, winding through congested streets, following the one-way instructions of the police officers at intersections until I was far enough west of the city to be dumped onto Commonwealth Avenue, where I traveled the marathon route in the opposite direction that the runners had, mostly on the carriage road since the main thoroughfare was closed, past the litter of drinking cups, medical tents still occupied, folks cleaning up.   It was eerie, and difficult.

For the rest of the week at work I endured the sirens of the “ordinary” ambulances that routinely travel under my window each and every day. It will probably be a long time before that sound returns to being “ordinary” again.  On Thursday afternoon, I heard motorcycles.  I looked out my window to see the largest police presence I've ever seen, traveling noisily down the street--probably 50 or so.  Later I learned that Michelle Obama was next door at Boston Children's Hospital--a comfort in the midst of trying times.

By Thursday evening, I was exhausted—it had been a busy week at work, I’d spent evenings keeping up with the situation, and I’d had only fitful sleep.  I went out to dinner that night in Harvard Square, just to get a bit of a break from it all. My waitress scrounged up a copy of the Boston Globe for me. The last thing I read just before I left the restaurant was a full page ad from the NY Fire and Police Departments to the people of Boston, expressing understanding and hope in a way only they could. It moved me deeply, and gave me a profound sense of peace.

I drove home, along Mt Auburn Street and through Watertown Square and on into Newtonville, where I live. At the time I didn’t know that an hour later, the bombing suspects would force their kidnapee to withdraw money from a bank in Watertown Square, then travel to a quiet neighborhood I had just driven by, and engage in a shootout.

When I was getting ready for bed, I knew that an MIT police officer was dead, but I was aiming for sleep, hoping it was an isolated incident and not the beginning of more terror.  Just then I saw reports of gunfire and explosions in Watertown, less than three miles from my house.   With a sinking feeling, I connected the dots, knowing the bombers were there.  Alone and concerned, it was simply too close for comfort.  It was late—around 1:00 am I think, and while I wanted to tell someone about it, I didn't want to wake anybody up and make them worry.  I also knew there would be no sleeping that night. So I sat on the couch and watched the whole thing unfold on TV.

It was a long and surreal night. I counted close to 100 gunshots as I witnessed vicariously a live shootout across the river. I followed instructions and stayed inside, riveted by what my neighbors were enduring.  It was no surprise when the doctor who came on the news to report the death of suspect one was someone I had helped at work. He carried the special burden of treating the accused with dignity and respect despite the heinousness of the acts. On TV, every image I saw contained a familiar place. while reporters talked of “undisclosed locations” I knew exactly where they were. It occurred to me that the distance between them and me was half the distance the suspects had traveled from where they killed the MIT police officer to where they were now.

My aunt (who lives in Watertown) was the first to contact me the following morning, and sent me the nicest message. Not long afterward, the rest of my family were chiming in.  When light came, things seemed more manageable.  I heard almost constant sirens and saw military helicopters travel overhead.   It was a long grueling day of shelter-in-place, but I was so glad they did that. Since the governor said stay where you are and work was closed, I didn’t have to make the call as to whether to encourage my own staff to go to work or not. It was quite remarkable that (in my neighborhood at least) everyone heeded the call. No one stepped outside. There was a solitary black pickup truck that traveled my street—once every hour, like clockwork. I’ve often wondered what local official that was. Maybe it was a coincidence, but regardless I was comforted that someone was watching.

When they announced the shelter in place was lifted without having captured suspect 2, I was concerned—not really sure it was a good idea to leave him at large, and frustrated that all that vigilance had not led to a successful conclusion.  In hindsight, it was exactly what they needed in order to catch him.  Moments after that press briefing, I heard many many sirens and saw more helicopters overhead, so I knew the authorities were on his trail again.   It’s been 4 days now, and I am still shaken.  It is a minor miracle that no residents in Watertown were hurt.  This was personal, even for those of us who were bystanders.  It is something we are not likely to forget.  I know the Boston marathon will come back strong next year, but it will be forever altered.

I am so proud of our leaders from all levels of the government, and the hospitals and emergency management folks, and the media.  I firmly believe that the competency that they demonstrated is the reason for today’s outcome. In an era when government is sometimes ridiculed and little valued by some of its citizenry, they've epitomized why government of the people, by the people, and for the people is both essential and honorable.  Their actions gave me hope—confidence—in very uncertain hours that the dangers would be resolved.  They also made it very clear to me what I was supposed to do.  Their intelligent, thoughtful, caring and deeply coordinated approach to decision-making and communications reassured me even in the darkest moments.  Their bravery and courage in the face of uncertainty and evil was exemplary.  I’m astounded that in only five days we are at this important juncture.  I know there is much more to do, but the immediate danger has receded.  I feel safe again. I keep the memory of those who died. My thoughts are with the injured, their families, and all those affected by this horrific event. Boston Strong. Boston stands as one.

*Update: 2-23-2014*

When I wrote the above testimonial (which has been slightly revised and augmented for inclusion in the Strong Medicine archive) I sent a thank you to our public officials for their tremendous, coordinated response to the multiple bombings and shootout. Several of them replied, including the governor, mayor, chief of MBTA police, and several hospital emergency room chiefs (I love this town).  They expressed appreciation for my thoughtfulness in reaching out to them, and confidence in our city.

The city observed a moment of silence on the one-week anniversary of the event.  We at Harvard Medical School stood out on the quad. Church bells rang all over the city, although I did not hear them. It was very windy and unseasonably cold, but nonetheless many people stepped out in solidarity to reflect.

For several months after this event I felt very raw. It had a profound effect on me. It took quite a long while before I could listen to an ambulance outside my window at work (an hourly occurance) without getting a horrible feeling in the pit of my stomach—a visceral reaction. I can only imagine what it’s like for those who truly were in the midst of the trauma, the lasting effects they must be suffering.

I haven’t decided yet what I will do on Marathon day, except I know I’ll be wearing my Boston Strong T-shirt. I want to be there and show my support. But I also want to forget. I don’t know whether there’s irony or was it intentional that these bombers attacked us on Patriot’s Day, the day we celebrate our hard-won freedoms? Many men died to give us our liberties and I don’t want anyone to take those away. Fear gets us nowhere: courage can overcome evil. I guess that means I must show up, no matter how difficult it may be!