**Courage Out of the Sky**

**In conversation with Tim Knatchbull**



Interviewed by Genevieve Muinzer.

The most powerful book I have read this year has been [*From a Clear Blue Sky*](http://www.fromaclearbluesky.com), by Timothy Knatchbull. Published by Hutchinson in 2009, the work won the Ewart Biggs award for promoting peace and understanding in Ireland. Tim has been an active supporter of The Prince’s Foundation, using the organisation’s design skills to plan an innovative use for land he inherited in Romsey, Hampshire for community farming. He has also been one of a number of financial supporters of the latest Prince’s Foundation book by Andres Duany.

From a Clear Blue Sky is a commanding polemic that urges people to embrace the truth no matter how brutal it might seem at first, because the thing that causes the most damage to the psyche is often fear itself. By failing to acknowledge underlying traumas and learning how to deal with them, Knatchbull found that he was unable to lay to rest the emotional agony that he suffered in 1979, following the murder of several members of his family, including his identical twin, Nicholas.

A confidant, exuberant young man in his forties bounds into the coffee shop where we are to talk. The Chairman of London media business Knatchbull Associates, and the happily married father of five, Tim Knatchbull gives no clue to the tragedy he has lived through. ‘By coming through everything, writing the book was another layer of the healing process. The writing helped me to find peace, forgive and move on. My feeling was to write a book and try to reach out to others. It seemed to make the most sense of the situation.’

On the morning of August 27, 1979 Earl Mountbatten of Burma, the great- grandchild of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, took several members of his family including Tim out on a fishing expedition in Mullaghmore,Co. Sligo. Within minutes of setting out, a 5lb gelignite bomb ripped through the bottom of the boat and the Earl was killed, along with his grandson, 14-year-old Nicholas Knatchbull, a 15-year-old friend and crew member, and the family pet dog. The next day Tim’s grandmother died from her injuries. He and his parents were lucky to be alive, but had been very seriously injured.

Tim Knatchbull was fortunate to have been rescued from the water as quickly as he was, and was taken in considerable pain to the intensive care unit in Sligo Hospital, where he slowly recovered from his extensive wounds. But it was three days before he was able to be told that his twin Nicholas had died and had already been taken to England for burial. He was treated with exceptional sensitivity and kindness by his parents and family, and undoubtedly this love bolstered him over the following years as he went on to attain admirable academic success at Cambridge and Harvard. A career in journalism led him to the BBC as a Director and then on to the Discovery Channel in the US.

And yet his work ethic and drive masked the searing trauma of his youth. Only a short while before the explosion, the twins had asked each other how they would fare if the other died. ‘I looked into his eyes and was lost for words,’ Knatchbull writes. ‘So was he.’

Having doggedly tried to paper over the emotional cracks, the looming 25th anniversary of the tragedy meant that he had to confront the fact that he was carrying considerable emotional baggage. ‘I found that the bomb had left me with a legacy of mental and emotional wounds which refused to go away. I had kept these to myself.’

His marriage in 1998 meant that he had additional support to finally face facts. The bomb had left him blind in one eye and with audio problems. But it was the sustained periodic banging in his ears and the painful throb of a scar on his stomach accompanied by periods of depression that alerted him that he was unwell. Even the smell of diesel fuel triggered flashbacks to the stench of the bomb’s aftermath and left him feeling stricken. He decided to receive therapy, but discovered that he had to do more:

‘I felt I absolutely needed to confront and deal with the great unresolved issue of my life, my dead twin, Nicky. I needed to go back and do something but I didn’t know what, so I decided that I would just start by going back to Ireland, very quietly and privately, and spending a week there on my own and seeing what happened.’

Well supported by family and friends, some of whom occasionally accompanied him, Knatchbull went back to the scene of the deaths.

The return to Ireland continued regularly over a period of a year and enabled him to revisit places he had known and loved and to meet many of the people who had found themselves participants in that day’s tragedy. ‘They wanted to talk about the events just as much as I did and I felt we helped each other.’

These people included the couple who rescued him from the water, the doctor who performed his brother’s autopsy and the people in the town he had always enjoyed meeting: they all talked and listened. Incredibly Classiebawn Castle, which the family had once owned, had largely been kept unchanged by its new owner. Poignantly Tim found that far from evoking only the terrible images of that day in 1979, the house also resonated with the memories of happy family holidays and childhood fun. It was ultimately a cathartic experience and over time ‘my symptoms started to fade and I found a sense of inner peace that I had lost the day my twin was killed. It was not simply his death which so devastated me. It was the violence of it; the suddenness of it; and my own inability subsequently to discover what had happened to him, or to make any sense of it, or to grieve for him, or feel a final acceptance of his death … I said goodbye.’

He had believed that the spirit of his twin lived on there but, having had the courage to return, he discovered that it did not and he could stop looking.

I am not surprised that Tim Knatchbull received a hefty public response to his work. This meticulously researched and written account is an excellent piece of investigative journalism but it is also a powerful psychological exposition of renewal. By appraising the specific details of this awful event, he shows how he learned to handle the trauma and began to rebuild his life in a spirit of objectivity and peace rather than in a spirit of blame and bigotry – after all, his murdered grandmother, Doreen, Lady Brabourne, had been Irish. He writes with honesty and in a spirit of impartiality that can only be influential to the reader. Even for those who have never experienced violent death, the book will seem personally relevant and evocative. The underlying message is very clear: everyone has confronted some troubles in life and the book sets out a powerful precedent as to how one might handle them. From a Clear Blue Sky certainly jolted me and several of my friends who read it for not only does the reader feel moved but also empowered.

Knatchbull is full of love for his parents and family, laughs and jokes and is an interested listener himself. I feel much better a person for having talked with him. And yet, I say to him, he’s had a great deal to overcome:

‘Yes,’ he replied surveying the coffee shop full of people and gesturing. ‘But everyone here carries baggage and we should always be on the look out to see the ways we can help.’

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