

Charlottesville: Witnessing the ‘monstrous’ attack

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14th August 2017

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Charlottesville, VA, USA — Overwhelmed by the moment, I had to share that joy. “This is so beautiful!” I yelled to one of my friends, slinging an arm around their shoulders as we walked. They yelled back happily: “I know!” as we rounded the corner onto 4th Street.

I looked behind me to find another friend, and threw her a grin as I caught her eye.

A moment later, we were leaping out of the way of a charcoal grey Dodge Challenger as it sped at full throttle down the street and plowed directly into the march.

We were marching through the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia, a few hours after we had watched the army clear Emancipation Park of the white supremacist gathering — a gaggle of white nationalists, KKK members, armed far-right militia groups, Trump supporters, and Nazis (yes, literal, in-the-flesh Nazis replete with Third Reich insignia and sieg heil salutes).

Our anarchist group, MACC, had travelled down from New York City to lend our voices to the strident chorus gathering in Charlottesville to protest against the so-called “Unite the Right” neo-Nazi rally being held that weekend.

On Saturday morning, we had joined the vast crowd of counter-protesters who had gathered outside Emancipation Park to demonstrate against the Confederate flag-waving extremists. The Nazis were outnumbered, and, soon enough, were kicked out of their permitted safe space to cheers from locals and out-of-towners alike.

As the day’s events continued to unfold, we got word that armed far-right forces were heading to a nearby housing project, Friendship Court, to threaten its residents (the majority of whom are people of colour). We rallied, and a large contingent of us — anarchists, anti-fascists, communists, Industrial Workers of the World union members, socialists, and maybe even a few liberals — took to the streets and headed towards Friendship Court to lend our support to the community.

Flying bodies of my fellow protesters

Along the way, we merged with another leftist march, doubling our number and adding to the festive atmosphere. Our purpose there in Charlottesville could not have been more serious, but we still managed to have some fun. It was deeply inspiring to be surrounded by people and organisations from across the leftist spectrum who were all so passionate and so invested in the cause — defending Charlottesville, smashing white supremacy, preventing the cancerous spread of fascism and standing in solidarity with oppressed, marginalised communities.

As we went along, we raised our voices and sang out our demands: Black liberation. Brown liberation. Indigenous liberation. Queer liberation. Women’s liberation. Workers’ liberation. Liberation for all, not the privileged few.

He hit more people as he retreated, his windshield now half-shattered with spiderwebs of cracks from the impact of protesters’ bodies.

I’d scarcely registered what had happened as I leapt out of the way of the vehicle that rammed into the protesters ahead. But the car growled back to life and slammed into reverse, tyres screeching and hunks of twisted metal dangling off the now-battered hood.

He hit more people as he retreated, his windshield now half-shattered with spiderwebs of cracks from the impact of protesters’ bodies.

I can still smell the burning rubber that filled the air as he ran away.

In the silence of the moment immediately following the crash, time really did feel like it had stopped. Those flying bodies seemed suspended in the air like so many dandelion seeds, each one full of energy and promise — each one unimaginably precious.

I didn't see his face then. My eyes were on the street, frantically scanning the asphalt for familiar faces. What I did see was so much worse than the wan, pasty countenance of 20-year-old James Alex Fields Jr. I saw the bodies of my fellow protesters — the brave, smiling, resolute comrades with whom I'd marched and sung and shared candy — fly through the air like shrapnel.

I saw his car smash directly into a woman in a blue and green striped top, with blonde curls the same colour as my own; her body flew upwards against the windshield before sliding off.

Directly below her, between the murderer's car and the plum-coloured vehicle it rear-ended, another woman struggled to free herself, her small body contorted. The humid air that had only moments before crackled with energy and solidarity was now filled with screams.

As our street medics rushed to aid the wounded and a team of ambulances veered down Water Street, a dazed fog settled over those who had survived.

Huddled in small groups on the pavements, we searched for our people. Every few seconds a cry would pierce the air — “Michelle! Where's Michelle?” “Have you seen Tom?” “Where is Riley?” I felt my chest seize up as I realised that I had no idea where some of my closest buddies were. They'd been right behind me, and I knew well how close to the car I'd been. What if ...

I eventually found everyone I had been searching for, and we as a group were fortunate enough to have all made it out alive without any life-threatening injuries. A wave of grief and horror washed over us as we tried to catch our breath and figure out what to do next. All around us, scores of people did the same. Some wept, alone or clenched into tight embraces with their friends. Some sat quietly, their eyes blank. I crouched down with a friend who'd been hit by and nearly dragged under the car, stroking her hair, my face hardened and wet with tears.

Heather Heyer will not be forgotten

Once everyone in my immediate group was accounted for, we made the decision to head to a nearby sanctuary church for safety. In my dazed state, all I could think about was charging my dead phone so that I could call my partner and tell him that I was still alive.

As we picked our way towards the church, doing our best to avoid the roving gangs of heavily armed far-right militias that prowled the streets, we came upon a line of police blocking a road. They stared back at us impassively as we passed. Some of our number hollered at them in grief and frustration. Unable to muster the energy, I just looked back at them and said, quietly, sadly: “You let them kill us.” I wonder if they heard me.

I was extraordinarily lucky. Had I been walking a little faster, or if I hadn't looked back to check on my friend, it could have been my name on the news yesterday morning. My luck stretched further, too, in that I didn't lose a close friend in the Charlottesville Nazi terrorist attack — but I did lose a comrade.

Her name was Heather Heyer, and she was 32. While the two of us had never met, we shared the same ideals and the same struggle. She was one of us, and she was murdered by a Nazi while peacefully protesting against white supremacist hatred, in broad daylight, on the streets of an American city, in 2017.

Remember her name.

As I sat in the church later that day, face still wet, I realised why the attack had hit me so hard, harder than I could have anticipated. It was because, while I know full well that that kind of virulent, murderous hatred has always been a part of human nature and I have seen plenty of tragedies play out on the news and between the pages of history books, I'd never seen it manifest in such a monstrous way.

I'd never stared death in the face before. James Alex Fields Jr rammed his car into a crowd of people. He killed Heather Heyer, injured 19 other people, and headed for the highway, presumably back to his mother's house in Ohio. How do you process seeing that kind of mindless evil explode four feet from your face?

I don't know what it is like to feel that kind of hate, or why the police allowed violent far-right extremists to roam the city virtually unchecked, or what it will take for the United States to finally, genuinely, take some sort of stand against the twin poisons of white supremacy and fascism.

Heather Heyer's bravery and sacrifice will never be forgotten. This hateful far-right extremist movement stole an innocent life that day, but they will never steal our joy — or our determination to fight back.

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Retrieved on 2020-04-14 from www.aljazeera.com

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