



The Incredible, Indomitable Super-Survivors of Ukraine

by Chitra Ragavan · 19 Mar 2022 · 5 min read

The world is witnessing a terrible humanitarian crisis unfolding in Ukraine as Russian President Vladimir Putin unleashes his military might against millions of innocent civilians, killing thousands, including women, children and the elderly, while demolishing entire cities on a whim.

We've been brought to tears by the extraordinary courage of Ukraine's soldiers and average citizens who are putting their lives on the line to fight for their country and for democracy.

Watching the distressing scenes of long lines of refugees fleeing their country, I've wondered, how can one possibly recover from this scale of the tragedy — financially, familially, logistically and emotionally?

More than just a rhetorical question

This question takes on growing urgency given the scale of this tragedy. The UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, [reports](#) that since the start of the Russian invasion, nearly 4 million of Ukraine's 44 million people, including 1.5 million children, have fled the country, and an equal number have become internally displaced. It's the greatest exodus in Europe since World War II and is likely to get worse. Families leaving everything behind with little time to grieve the killings of aging parents, husbands, wives, sons and daughters. Families displaced from their once-peaceful homes that have crumbled like toothpicks under the lethal weight of Putin's bombs and missiles.

I was grateful to get some soulful answers to my question last week from a timely conversation on my leadership Podcast, [When It Mattered](#), with Nobel Peace laureate [Jerry White](#), who suffered a tragedy that would have felled most people to the ground and kept them there. But not White. After losing his right leg in a landmine accident during a hiking trip in Israel in 1984, when he was just 20, White turned his pain, loss and suffering into a weapon of global activism over the next two decades as he fought to rid the world of landmines.



Jerry White

White cofounded [Landmine Survivors Network](#) and worked closely with Princess Diana, Queen Noor, Paul McCartney and other celebrities and activists on high-impact campaigns that resulted in three major international treaties: The [Landmine Ban Treaty](#), the [U.N. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) and the [Convention on Cluster Munitions](#). In 1997, White shared the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to the [International Campaign to Ban Landmines](#).

As he launched these campaigns and traveled to the world's hot spots, from Ethiopia to Jordan to Bosnia to Cambodia to Angola to El Salvador, White began questioning why some people are crushed under the emotional rubble of devastating incidents like military invasions, tsunamis or genocide, while other "super-survivors," as he calls them, are able to make the transition from "victim, to survivor, to thriver."

"They're missing their arms and legs. Their house was burnt down. Their sister and mother are dead. How on earth could they be smiling? How? Like they didn't get the memo that they're victimized, life sucks, is awful. You can't fathom the level of polytrauma that has been inflicted, like at the level of the Book of Job in the Hebrew Bible." — Jerry White

White's research resulted in the 2008 book "I Will Not Be Broken," later re-released as: [Getting Up When Life Knocks You Down: Five Steps to Overcoming a Life Crisis](#). As the title indicates, White's research showed that the transition from victimhood to survivorship involves five key steps, beginning with confronting facts, denial and emotions. In his case, it was acknowledging that he had lost his right leg and would never get it back.

"Choose life is step number two, which means that despite this horrible situation, that you choose hope or that your life won't be defined by this awful dark ring in the trunk of your tree ... that you have many other rings to grow." — Jerry White

The third step, says White, is to reach out for help and support. "My two best friends carried me out of a minefield. And I had nurses," he says. "I mean, I joke, if you're going to step on a landmine, do it in Israel because there's the best trauma care in the world. You cannot survive alone, just like you can't succeed alone."

If Putin can be stopped from completely destroying Ukraine, it's clear that the world's governments will have to come together to rebuild the country and make its citizens whole again. Mateusz Morawiecki, the prime minister of Poland, has even called for the richest European countries to create a new Marshall Plan for Ukraine, comparable to the initiative to rebuild Western Europe immediately after World War II.

Step four: Get moving. White recalls sitting in a wheelchair for the first time after his accident. He was thin, weak and hungry for the first time and wanted to get some food at the cafeteria. He looked up at his jovial but steely nurse for help and vividly recalls her response.

"So she looked down at me and laughed and said, 'Well, Jerry, if you want to move, then push,'" says White. " And it was sort of like Israeli tough love, but I realized that movement is important, no one will do your rehab for you. It's yours to do your sit ups and push ups in real life or metaphorically."

And last, but not least, says White, the fifth step is to give back. The survivors who were smiling were givers who had learned to pay it forward.

"Let's say we offered a greenhouse to get back into micro-enterprise or farming. Then they would give or pay forward their round of, you know, tomatoes for the local orphanage, for example," says White. "So it was a way to trick the system not to stay in a victim space of entitlement or taking. And the givers shine."

In the end, says White, for the survivors and thrivers of polytrauma, it just comes down to one thing. "You realize that you can't be defined by a thing and that you're a whole person," he says, "no matter how many limbs you're missing or what disease you have or what hard luck you've experienced."

These days, White is teaching a popular class on religion, violence and strategy at the [University of Virginia](#) titled, "How to Stop Killing in the Name of God." And he has a new book, with Georgette F. Bennett, out this November (now available for pre-order) called, "[Religicide: Confronting the Roots of Anti-Religious Violence.](#)"

I found my conversation with White reassuring in these troubling times and I think you will too. You can find the full episode [here](#).