

No. 6

THE MALE MIND



RANSOM NOTES
*Peter Moore
in New York
City, 2011—a
world and
several years
away “from his
Iraqi captors.*



HOSTAGE

*What
happens
to a man's
mind after
947 days
of torture?*

BY
HAMPTON
SIDES

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
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THROUGHOUT HIS CAPTIVITY, Peter Moore vowed to himself that if the end ever came, it would come on his own terms. He wouldn't grovel or beg. He would stay calm in the face of death. He would fixate on a happy memory—of when he was a boy in England, walking the family dog. When the bullets came, he would smile and feel the playful tug of the leash. • One day in the summer of 2007, somewhere in the sun-bleached warrens of the Iraqi city of Basra, the end seemed finally to have arrived. A guard blindfolded Peter, cuffed his hands behind his back, took him outside, and shoved him to the ground.

He felt the cool metal of a pistol pressed to his head, heard tense conversation in Arabic. He broke out in a sweat and began to shake.

As he knelt in that nameless alley, Peter was sure he was going to die. The gun barrel dug into his scalp. He heard a click, and felt a pop against his skull.

So this is what it's like to be dead, he thought. *It's not so bad. It doesn't hurt much.* For a few moments, he remained kneeling in the dirt, waiting for his body to rise into the spirit world. But then he heard laughter, more voices speaking in Arabic. Finally he realized that this was just a grim hoax designed to shatter his psyche: a mock execution.

He fell to the ground, shivering, anguished, and spent. He was less frightened than he was annoyed at himself. He'd forgotten his vow not to show fear. *I was supposed to think about walking the dog.*

But as Peter returned to his darkened room in the upstairs of some unknown house in Basra, he was more adamant than ever that he would make it out of Iraq alive.

I **IN 2008, MORE THAN** 27,000 people were kidnapped around the world, whether for ransom or for political, religious, or ideological reasons. Because of the demographic realities of the U.S. military and international business, more than 95 percent of foreigners kidnapped in Iraq have been men.

The constant danger of kidnapping has produced a sad train of ancillary enterprises, such as ransom insurance, international bodyguard companies, and hostage negotiation firms. It's also given rise to an increased interest in what goes on inside the mind of a man held captive—and how he copes with one of the most terrifying experiences imaginable.

Ordinarily when you're confronted with an intensely traumatic or threatening situation, a part of your brain called the hypothalamus instantly triggers a fight-or-flight reflex, which in turn activates your pituitary and adrenal glands. This results in, among other things, a state of hyperalertness and a surge of blood that primes your muscles for exertion.

But a hostage can neither fight nor flee; he is simply stuck in an anxiety-producing limbo that could last hours or days, months or years, during which he has scarcely any control over his circumstances or his fate. In effect, the experience requires him to cut against the grain of human instinct and to override the most ancient of human response mechanisms. He must summon other, more passive qualities that are perhaps not as commonly associated with survival ordeals—qualities such as patience, optimism, and discipline.

The psychology of captivity is a relatively new and under-documented field. With few hard clinical studies to point to, knowledge about the topic is mostly anecdotal, highly personal, and intensely subjective, recounted by survivors like Peter Moore—or, more recently, the two young American hikers, Josh Fattal and Shane Bauer, who returned from Iran in September after more than 2 harrowing years in prison. Why one person fares relatively well in captivity and another unravels mentally is only dimly understood. Similarly, why one person emerges from a hostage situation seemingly unscathed while another suffers severe and lasting psychological damage is the subject of vigorous debate in professional circles.

That said, there is one factor researchers agree plays a pivotal role in how someone will fare in captivity: resilience. It's a trait that's all but impossible to measure or predict in a person. It's not altogether clear whether resilience is inherited or learned, or even exactly what it is. Is it an instinct? An aptitude? Or simply a state of being? Whatever it is, resilience seems to be lodged deeply within some of us and can emerge in powerful and unexpected ways during traumatic situations.

"Some people are remarkably adaptive," says psychologist James Campbell, Ph.D., the author of *Hostage: Terror and Triumph*. "I still hear stories that leave me stunned. Sometimes, for certain people, I think these trauma experiences are crucibles that strip away the nonessentials."

What is left, psychologists suggest, is some core element of identity, an inner reserve of character that the person was probably unaware of and had never previ-



BRAIN TRAINER | 07 Quick: What's your bank account number? How about your credit card number? Memorizing long series of numbers can increase your attention span and fortify your long-term memory, says Zaldy S. Tan, M.D., M.P.H., an assistant professor of medicine at Harvard medical school. To make memorizing longer sequences more manageable, Dr. Tan suggests dividing them into two to six chunks that hold meaning—birthdays, historically significant years, or athletes' jersey numbers, for example. When you're ready for a bigger challenge, try an alphanumeric sequence, such as your car's VIN.



ously tapped. Says Campbell, "Some people can rise to manage amazing things. They find something to anchor themselves and come out holding onto their humanity. I'm frequently in awe of them."

P **PETER MOORE IS A** shambling bear of a man with a booming laugh and a ready smile of crowded teeth. A 38-year-old bachelor, he hails from Lincoln, an ancient cathedral city in the East Midlands region of England. His background is normal enough: Boy Scouts, college, a master's in computer science. If you met Peter on the street, you'd think he was a regular middle-class gent—balding, with thick glasses set on a slightly pudgy face, a mild-mannered type who fidgets with his iPhone like anyone else. But make no mistake: Here is a man with resilience.

Peter's job as an international IT consultant brought him to Baghdad in the spring of 2007, installing accounting systems that would produce financial reports on Iraq's government spending. On May 29, 2007, he was kidnapped

by a group of some 40 Iranian-financed Shiite militiamen who called themselves Asaib Ahl al-Haq—the League of Righteousness. Four British bodyguards employed by GardaWorld, a Canadian security company, were assigned to protect Peter, but they were quickly overpowered, abducted along with him, and eventually killed. (The bodies of Jason Swindlehurst, 38, Jason Creswell, 39, and Alec MacLachlan, 30, were returned to the U.K. The fourth bodyguard, Alan McMenemy, is believed dead; his body has not been recovered.)

BearingPoint, the business consulting firm Peter worked for, had ample ransom insurance and was prepared to negotiate, but as it turned out, the kidnappers weren't interested in money. Some theories were that they wanted the removal of all foreign forces from Iraq and the release of their own militia comrades—many of them high-ranking leaders—from U.S. military prisons. Videos on YouTube showed a resolute, raccoon-eyed Peter Moore pleading with British and U.S. authorities to answer his captors' demands.

All told, Peter Moore was held for 947 days. On the morning of December 30, 2009, Peter's guards stuffed him in the rear of a car, drove him blindfolded across Baghdad, and released him to the British Embassy. Disheveled, sallow, and disoriented, Peter was so overcome with emotion that he couldn't face the ecstatic embassy staffers who greeted him. He went straight to the bathroom and stood for a long time looking at himself in a wall of mirrors, incredulous at his own good fortune. "I just put my hands on the wall and told myself, 'You've done it. You beat the odds! You made it out!'"

More than 2 years later, Peter still doesn't precisely understand how he beat those odds. Figuratively speaking, he's still studying his face in the mirror, trying to find meaning in a harrowing and surreal experience. He immersed himself in the literature of captivity, met with psychiatrists, and was debriefed by terrorism specialists. He has since returned to international IT work at a post in Guyana, but Iraq is never far from his mind.

"It still feels strange," he says. "I feel like I've lost years that I have to catch up on. I've tried to get on with my life. But I have to say, it was an incomparable feeling to wake up in the morning and think, 'Is this going to be the last day that I live?' And to think that every single morning for 2½ years."

Perhaps out of modesty, Peter scoffs at the praise he has received since his return from Iraq. After his release he was taken to the summer retreat of the British chancellor of the exchequer and briefly became the darling of the British media, lauded by Prime Minister Gordon Brown. David Miliband, the then British foreign secretary, told the press that Peter had endured an "unspeakable 2½ years of misery, fear, and uncertainty" and noted his "remarkable frame of mind."

Peter, however, is more inclined to point to the element of luck than to anything he did correctly or courageously during his captivity. As far as he's concerned, the four now-deceased British bodyguards who were kidnapped were the true heroes. "Really and truthfully," he says, "I feel that whether you live or die in these hostage situations has more to do with the toss of a coin than any sort of practical things that you do."

Still, in his own unassuming, cerebral way, Peter escaped the negative behaviors that psychologists point to as the common pitfalls of the hostage experience. Luck was on his side, to be sure. But going purely on instinct and common sense, he seems to have done nearly everything "right"—both during his captivity and in its aftermath. In many respects, Peter Moore's story is a classic case study in survival.

F **FROM THE OUTSET,** it's common for hostages to blame themselves for their predicament. *If only I hadn't gone down that alley,* they'll think; *if only I hadn't been so stupid.* In a man, this type of self-reproach often manifests itself in a kind of macho frustration with his failure to physically stand up to his captors and fight his way out.

"Men will sometimes show a certain shame and guilt," says Melanie Hetzel-Riggin, Ph.D., an associate professor of psychology at Western Illinois University. "They'll say, 'I should have been more of a man and acted accordingly.'" James Campbell puts it another way: "Men will try to hold on to an identity of 'I am strong, I am tough, I can brave my way through this.'" When they realize they can't live up to this identity, Campbell says, many men are seized with feelings of self-blame and inadequacy. "They'll think, *If I were stronger, I wouldn't be in this situation.* It can become a kind of self-torture."

Except for that moment after the mock execution, Peter seems to have avoided this line of thinking. "At first I thought I would do a MacGyver and break my way out," he says. "You know, *I'll use a paper clip and a bottle of water to escape! I'll grab him by the throat, I'll bite his ear off, I'll kung-fu kick the guy!* But it doesn't work like that. Only in Hollywood does Indiana Jones win. The reality is, we never had a chance of escape. If I'd tried to do anything like that, I would have been dead in an instant."

Instead Peter endured. For months he was beaten, subjected to psychological torture, interrogated, and humiliated. He had a broken rib and suffered from dysentery, among other ailments. The cruelty seemed to come in random gusts: One guard would beat him for

SURVIVAL SOUVENIR

Peter holding the prayer beads given to him by his captors.

standing, and then another would come along 10 minutes later and beat him for sitting. Once a guard cuffed his hands behind his back and then ordered him to stand on a chair and hang his arms over the top of an open door. Another guard pulled his arms down while a third guard kicked the chair out from under him, leaving Peter to dangle awkwardly over the door until he finally fell to the floor in agony. They repeated this three times.

Despite the torment he endured, Peter concentrated on small ways he could connect with his captors. He listened sympathetically when they explained their hatred of the American occupation of Iraq. (“I didn’t necessarily agree with them,” he says, “but I wanted to understand them a little bit, and in the interest of survival, I went along with it.”) With one guard, he regularly played Ping-Pong, and this seemed to lead to improvements in his treatment. To appeal to his captors’ professed respect for family, he invented a spouse. “I’ve never been married,” Peter says, “but I felt I had to come up with a wife—that’s what they wanted to hear.” Because his

guards seemed to value religion—any religion—over atheism, he claimed he was a devout Roman Catholic and started to pray. “I actually found it quite relaxing,” Peter says. “If nothing else, it felt like I was complaining to someone about the day.” His guards found his religious zeal so convincing that they brought him prayer beads and seemed pleased to see that he used them every day for the rest of his captivity.

Trauma researcher Susan Klein, Ph.D., finds much to commend in Peter’s actions. “Rather than just being passive and subservient to his captors, he tried to find areas of common interest and to identify himself and them as real people,” says Klein, director of the Aberdeen Centre for Trauma Research, in Scotland. “This is an intelligent and helpful way to avoid being dehumanized as a hostage, or being confrontational and challenging.”

In some hostage scenarios, this strategy of a person trying to bond with his captors morphs into something decidedly less healthy—the so-called Stockholm syndrome. Frank Ochberg, M.D.,

a professor of psychiatry at Michigan State University, is widely credited with having clinically defined the phenomenon. He notes that some hostages come to feel an irrational attachment—an affection, even—toward their kidnapers, misconstruing a lack of abuse as kindness. According to a 2007 FBI report, roughly 27 percent of all hostages ultimately manifest symptoms of Stockholm syndrome. “For a while they will hold on to that attachment,” says Dr. Ochberg. “Then, years later, they’ll look back and think, *Oh my God, I actually thought I loved that guy. What’s wrong with me?*”

Peter never was in danger of succumbing to Stockholm syndrome—not even close. When asked how he views his captors now, he says, “I’d like to cut off their hands and feet and blind them so they can’t do militia activities anymore and they’re a burden to their families for the rest of their lives.” At the same time, Peter recognizes that vengeance can consume a person. “That’s just a part of me,” he says. “The other part says I’m a civilized person and I’m better than that.”

WHEN PETER concocted his tale about being married, he had no idea it would be a story he would have to live with, and embellish, for 2½ years. His guards persisted in asking questions about his wife, so he had to have answers. It turned out to be an oddly therapeutic exercise that both sustained and distracted him. “Her name was Emma DeSousa,” he says of his fictional wife. “She was a malaria doctor from Brazil. Short, tan, Amerindian features. I proposed to her on a beautiful day at this world-famous waterfall in Guyana. I memorized every little detail—except I never could recall the exact date. You know how men are. We never remember those anniversary dates.”

Experts say that conjuring these sorts of “fantasy-scapes” can be a vitally necessary diversion for hostages. “I once knew a captive who built a house in his mind,” recalls Dr. Ochberg. “He also mapped out every restaurant that he was going to visit once he got out. Oh my goodness, he was imaginative! And it helped him. It helped pass the time. It gave him a daily activity and a mental occupation. Sometimes when you’re in a traumatic situation, you have to leave your body to preserve your soul. You have to go somewhere else.”

Campbell notes that many hostages suffer from long-term sensory deprivation; for months or even years they may not know where they are, or even whether it’s day or night. Their circadian rhythms fall out of sync. They’re starved for stimulus and information—any reminder of the wider world. “The only thing they have left,” Campbell says, “is their mind. So they use fantasy and imagery to cope. They may recall every note of a favorite piece of music, or every moment of a vacation. Often it’s *anticipatory* fantasy: What am I going to do when I get released? Where am I going to go?”

Peter had several recurring fantasies that kept him sane, especially during the first 12 months when he lived shackled to a wall grate, blindfolded, handcuffed, and forced to lie down. For example, he would often find himself at an imaginary motorcycle shop, negotiating with an imaginary dealer, trying to decide among a brand-new Harley-Davidson, a



UNDER DURESS Peter in a 2008 video shot by his captors and broadcast by Arab satellite TV.

“What people can imagine is sometimes worse than what can be done. It’s as if the torturers let your mind do the work for them.”

Ducati, or a BMW. In his mind he would linger over the bikes, running his hand over every contour, lavishing his attention on every tailpipe, saddlebag, and pinstriping detail. Or he would see tiny beads of paint on the wall of his prison and go into a kind of reverie, pretending they were train stations that he would then try to link together using the least amount of “track.” Motorcycles, trains: They were metaphors for escape but also focal points in mental rituals that kept him actively tilted toward the future and engaged in the world outside.

“I could just switch off and think about things,” Peter says. “All my other senses started to kick in.”

But fantasy is not to be confused with denial. Denial is one of the least healthy yet most common hostage responses. All the experts interviewed for this story emphasized how important it is for hostages to take daily stock of their environment and constantly reassess their possible avenues of survival. Says Klein, “If denial carries on for a long period of time and you’re not actually taking on board the reality of the situation, then that can cause problems.”

For Peter, one of those reality-check moments came near the end of his first year of captivity. His guards kept insisting that he was a military operative and not a civilian contractor. One day, following their line of reasoning, Peter decided to push back just a little. “If you want to keep me as a prisoner of war, fine,” he told them. “But I want to be kept as a prisoner of war, not an animal. Look at the way you’re treating me. You’ve kept me in chains for over a year. I am a human being.” Something he said resonated with his guards: Immediately, the chains came off for an hour a day. Over the next year, his treatment steadily improved.

BY THAT POINT, however, the months of uncertainty and terror had already done their damage. The trauma of the beatings—and particularly the mock execution—seared itself into Peter’s psyche. He’s had trouble getting it out of his system.

“Torture, whether it’s physical or psychological, is designed to really confuse you and destroy your sense of self,” says George Bonanno, Ph.D., a professor of clinical psychology at Columbia University. “It’s meant to make you malleable so you’ll do what you’re asked to do.” In this regard, psychological torture often can be even more powerful than physical torture. “What humans can imagine is sometimes worse than what can actually be done to them,” notes Hetzel-Riggin. “It’s almost like the torturers are letting your mind do the work for them.”

Peter has suffered from nightmares, loss of appetite, and vivid

flashbacks. Sometimes he’ll be at work and suddenly the adrenaline will start flowing: He is actively reliving something one of his guards did to him.

“It’s a bit embarrassing,” he says, “because someone will come over and say, ‘You okay?’ And I’ll say, ‘Yeah.’ But I can just feel my heart going *doof-doof-doof!*” Other times, in his bedroom in Guyana, Peter will be drifting off to sleep to the screech of the tropical bugs when he’ll suddenly jerk himself awake, thinking he’s still shackled to that wall grate in Iraq. He’ll look down and realize it’s just the mosquito net, wrapped around his foot.

Still, even with this handful of symptoms, Peter doesn’t really feel that he has a significant psychological problem stemming from his ordeal, at least not one that has manifested itself yet.

“I know that most people feel there must be something wrong with me—survivor’s guilt, PTSD, or whatever. So if I say I’m okay, then I must be in denial. I’ve read where in 7 years’ time a person like me is going to wake up one morning and do something psychotic. I am concerned that I’m going to do something like that, but I don’t think it’s going to happen.”

While PTSD is a very real possibility for all kidnapping victims, the research is also increasingly peppered with references to something called post-traumatic *benefits*.

“I’ve talked with hostages who have declared that the experience was in some ways beneficial,” Campbell says. “After this, they’ll say, ‘I got me rethinking things. Life is finite; let’s not waste it. Am I living it the way I should be?’” Dr. Ochberg notes that some individuals come out of their captivity experiences feeling wiser. “They say, ‘I’m going to shift my priorities. I’m going to spend more time with people I enjoy and love. And I’m not going to sweat the small stuff anymore.’”

This has certainly been true for Peter. Nowadays he works less, travels more, spends more time with friends. He’s stopped drinking, exercises more, eats healthier. He’s changed his media diet as well. “I don’t watch Schwarzenegger or any of those kinds of action movies anymore—I’m done with violence,” he says. “I’m more than happy to sit in front of some chick flick.” He calls his captivity “a test of faith and an interesting life experience, but not one I want to repeat.”

Peter is quite aware that he lives in an unstable country where kidnapping, though uncommon, is a possibility. He’s decided that he can’t let what happened in Iraq rob him of his career or rule his life. “I’m not going to do anything stupid,” he says. “I’m not going to any more war zones. But who knows? Iraq might be a perfectly nice place to go on holiday in 20 years’ time.”

For now, however, Peter is sticking with a safer vacation destination. Next year he’s planning to do something he’s dreamed of most of his life—take a motorcycle trip across America. He’s still mulling what to buy for the journey. Harley-Davidson? BMW? He’s looking forward to spending some quality time in a bike shop trying to decide. ♥

A Continuum of Pain

University of London researchers asked 279 torture survivors what took the biggest mental toll.



HOW TO ENDURE ANYTHING

Tap into your mental fortitude with these strategies

Your chance of being nabbed by terrorists is slim. But what is certain is that life will hit you with physical and mental pain, agonies that will test your ability to endure rather than run. Mark Garver, a security expert who trains businessmen to survive kidnapping and captivity, tells you how to tough it out.

THE SCENARIO You’re in excruciating pain, whether it’s from a bad burn or a broken bone.

YOUR STRATEGY If you need medical help, seek it. But at the same time, “open your mind to the pain—feel it, welcome it,” recommends Garver. “Accepting the pain gives you power over it.” Now just as quickly, replace it: Recall the sensations of a pleasant memory—maybe the smell of your first car, the feel of shifting the gears, the sound of the engine. Put your brain in a relaxed state, and your body will follow, says Garver.

THE SCENARIO She’s dumping you, in person—and from the looks of it, she has a lot to say.

YOUR STRATEGY Don’t allow her and the hurt she’s now causing to take over your mind. “Think about hanging with the guys—a time when she wasn’t around—and remember how relaxed it was,” says Garver. “Or imagine doing something on your bucket list.” At the same time, try repeatedly tightening and relaxing your jaw muscles; focusing on a source of physical tension can distract you from an emotional stressor, he says.

THE SCENARIO Your boss calls you into his office, and begins tearing you a new one.

YOUR STRATEGY Unless you truly did screw up royally this time, remember that you may be a random target. “Don’t personalize it—it’s not necessarily you,” says Garver. “Try to understand where the boss is coming from. What’s motivating him? Is he disorganized? In over his head? He may be passing his stress on to you.” Pinpoint the weak spot that’s probably driving him, and that knowledge will stop you from feeling powerless.

THE SCENARIO Your muscles are screaming, but you need to push through that last rep.

YOUR STRATEGY Shift your focus from the iron above you to memories of when you were a mere shadow of your current muscular self. “Think about how many reps you could do when you first joined the gym and how much weight you could lift,” says Garver. “It keeps your mind off the immediate fatigue, rewards you for ‘surviving’ as long as you have, and prepares you for the ‘survival’ yet to come.”

LAURA ROBERSON