War Shows You Who You Are

By Esther Groves and Hylke Faber

"When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves." – Viktor Frankl

Imagine for a moment that your country is invaded by a foreign aggressor. What would you do first? What next? For Ukrainians Yaryna Klyuchkovska, a senior communications expert in Kyiv and Olena Sergeeva, a seasoned facilitator and coach, currently living in Seattle, this is not a theoretical question. This was their reality.

Although the women ended up on different paths after the attack on their homeland, their core intuition about what to do was very similar: first ensure your own safety, then make sure your family is safe, then discover how you can contribute to the cause.

Olena remembers, "I was watching the news … and made a decision to leave [Ukraine] and come to the U.S. to stay with friends. And then the war started." She sensed what was coming having lived through one era of Soviet rule. She didn't want to experience that a second time. Her daughter called to say she woke up to explosions. Two of her relatives volunteered to join the army. Her family became fragmented. She stayed in the U.S..

She reflects, "Because this sense of guilt, when you are in a more comfortable or safe or healthy situation than someone you care about, or someone you barely know, it's a real thing .... And I think that empathy for yourself starts first. And then you learn to be more empathetic towards others also, and find the right way of supporting them, the right way of contributing."

Olena has become part of a nonprofit in the US that supports Ukraine's freedom and also joined Growth Leaders Network in the U.S . as a leadership facilitator.

Yaryna, on the other hand, was still in Ukraine when the war started – and had COVID and was immobilized for a while. Once she knew she would survive, her priorities became clear – to take care of her loved ones and then find a way to serve the country. She points out, "A lot of women I know went to volunteer and fight as medics or actually enrolled in the regular army. I'm not brave enough for that. My strength is communication. So I started with my family. And I started with my team. And then I helped spread the story to people outside Ukraine, because we understood that the information war was as real and as impactful as the actual physical war… it was very important to get the story out."

"We helped however we could to help find and purchase equipment for the army or food or medicine, there was a lot of things to do. It wasn't a conscious decision to be brave or to stay active. It was the only way to survive."

Yaryna, says, "You learn to mobilize your internal energy without thinking and you do the right thing. What war and any crisis does is it shows you who you really are. It shows you your weakest spots and it

also shows you the strongest sides of your character and that's what you rely on without much reflection."

"Today is a good day – the lights are on and no missiles have fallen." - Yaryna Klyuchkovska