



People
Winter 2005

NATE BERKUS

Surviving The Tsunami

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Southeast Asia's epic disaster claimed the life of his partner, photographer Fernando Bengoechea, while the two were vacationing in Sri Lanka. Now, decorator Nate Berkus, with help from Oprah Winfrey and others, has begun to heal.

2005 began with me lying in my bed, unable to eat, unable to string sentences together, my house filled daily with people I love, who all walked around with expressions on their faces that scared me even more than I already was. It was a time of conquering what have been lifelong battles for me, all of which surfaced in a matter of minutes, all because I came home without Fernando.

I barely remember eating. I do remember the letters and e-mails that came to my door by the thousands. Many were awkward, many from strangers, who all seemed to be shocked as I was that I had lived through the tsunami and hopeful for me that I would somehow return to life as "normal."

I remember asking if that would ever be possible. I remember Oprah telling me that it would be a "new normal." That scared me as well.

I have always had a horror of nature, of standing water, of whether or not I would have the strength to survive a physical ordeal. I was never the one who could climb to the top of the rope in elementary school gym class. I have always had a horror of having a reason to grieve, always avoided talking about death, didn't "make it" to most funerals. I was never good at being sad.

I met with a grief counselor when I returned home. It was really helpful to me, but I know for sure that I would not be here without the love of other people and the support they gave me. I remember being shocked at their ability to

care. I know that each letter I received made me a tiny bit stronger. I also remember being shocked at the pain people live with, and their fierce determination to rebuild their lives. You wrote me and told me about car accidents, knocks on the door, losing a child, people drowning before your eyes. I understood your pain. I heard you. Sharing your stories made me able to sleep again. I never had nightmares. My base level state of being was a nightmare. Bad dreams were unnecessary.

Something changed on my birthday in September, a shift that happened inside me when I was not prepared. Nine and a half months after I had returned, I was laughing at a table outside with my friends. My best friend had organized the evening, my best friend who had flown to London to save me. Fernando's ex-boyfriend of seven years was at the table too. They were laughing and smiling. I was laughing and smiling too. He was a stranger to me before the tsunami. Now he is my brother.

New normal.

That night it occurred to me that I could again be "happy," that I was not defined only by loss and fear and grief, but also by love and joy and light.

That night a friend gave me a basket filled with beautiful candles. It was symbolic of something she had told me in February. You can light a candle or curse the darkness. We lit the candles.

I know now what it means to hurt, in every part of your being. I also know what it means to have deep, soulful connections to others. I know what it is to exist off of the energy of others, to really need help and to take it. I know now, because I am capable, that I will be okay. After you survive something like this, you learn that at a very basic level you have the will to survive and to start to heal.



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I started working again three months after I came back. I designed a line of home products (sold at Linen's 'n Things) and I published a book (*Home Rules: Transform the Place You Live into a Place You'll Love*, Hyperion, \$27.95) that taught me a lot about myself. There was a lot to do. I understand, even more deeply, the importance of doing what you love. Time is not by any means a guarantee. You have to use it wisely.

These are my gifts, the gifts that I have paid a price for. While I would never have chosen to pay that price, these now are the gifts I could not live without.

I have no capacity for insincerity. It is a waste of time.

I do what I do because I love the process. It would otherwise be a waste of time.

I allow myself to be loved and to love others. That is worth my time.

New normal.