

Solitary

John & Fiona Earle

Alan Johnston, the BBC commentator, thought he knew the Gaza Strip. After all, he had worked there for some three years. Nevertheless he was kidnapped and held in solitary confinement for 116 days.

About 120 people came to the Khalil Lecture Theatre in the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) to hear Alan speak. Lyse Doucet, another commentator, eased Alan from one point to the next and he told us about the strategies he had used to stay sane while in solitary confinement.

The BBC had given Alan some training in how to handle solitary confinement, which is a huge step away from normal life, particularly for someone who spends his working hours in talking, listening, assessing and then trying to broadcast truth.

Alan started by thinking "It could be worse. I'm not in Auschwitz. I'm not being tortured. I'm not being deprived of sleep."

Then Alan remembered how his father has told him about the explorer, Shackleton, who had had to leave some companions on the Antarctic ice while he sailed off to seek help – which he found. Alan came to believe that he was sailing across a sea of time and got immense help from a radio set he was given. He learnt that people from Buenos Aires to Beijing were sending messages and requesting his release. At least people knew where he was, unlike some captives who simply disappear.

Then Alan realised that, when he got out, he would remember how he had behaved in captivity – and intended not to get too low. Easier said than done! He made some sort of contact with the people next door, but could scarcely converse with them as his Arabic wasn't good enough.

Alan had an "on-off" relationship with his gaoler. Sometimes the man got angry and would shout at Alan, claiming he had

slammed a door too loudly. Yet when Alan was chained up for a day, it was the gaoler who got the chains removed. When someone sent in some food from a wedding, the gaoler shared it with his captive.

Alan had no religious faith and said that it seemed wrong to start praying to God (assuming there was one) just because he was in captivity.

Alan was released about a year ago, and his period of confinement doesn't seem to have had long-term effects. He is now enjoying life and has a temporary desk-job at the BBC. He was asked if he could go back to the Gaza Strip. He smiled and said "No. They've pulled me out of a hole once, and I don't know if they'd do it a second time."



Whilst in captivity Alan lost about 10 kilos (22lbs). Survivors of disasters report that people's approach to problems changes as they lose weight – the most trivial upset becomes a major barrier. So it is all the more remarkable that Alan survived in relatively good shape.

John asked "What took you into journalism?" Alan smiled and said "Well I thought people ought to know what's going on. I never really thought of anything else."

This seemed the answer of a humble man – but a determined one who wanted to tell what was happening and not to have the wool pulled over his eyes.

* * * * *

The evening was promoted in aid of Aschiana and kindly supported by the Centre of Contemporary Central Asia at SOAS.

The evening raised over £2000 from sales of tickets and Afghan Shawls and cards.

It is now about seven years since the Friends of Aschiana was turned from an idea into a charity. Now, in addition to fund-raising, we are able to do a bit of networking.

In the course of the evening an Afghan girl, probably in her early twenties, came up to John looking for, and getting, a contact so that she could work voluntarily in Afghanistan.

It helps enormously to know, and to be able to say, that any money we raise is used wisely. A French accountant, Jessica Patera (who we have met), trained in Paris and is now putting in place financial administration procedures for Aschiana that will meet European standards of transparency and reporting.

God's Gifts to Humankind

Norah Anderson

Every day, no every hour, a loving God bestows his gifts upon us. How thoughtlessly, how carelessly we often accept them.

To enumerate them all would call for more space than in the Bodleian Library; I intend to think of just a few.

There are the gifts of the Arts: painting, music, poetry, sculpture, architecture. Great music has resounded through the cathedrals of our land, and the sound of well-loved hymns has echoed round village churches. Who has not thrilled at the sound

of the glorious voice of a Pavarotti or the piping voices of young choristers?

The gift of poetry has been given to many. Some that come to mind are the war poets Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen., and more recently Seamus Heaney, John Betjeman and Dylan Thomas.

Sculptors such as Michelangelo are impossible to forget. Chipping away at rock hard marble they reveal images that delight the eye and the hand.

The blessing of great achievement is not given to us all. But we all have at least some of the five senses that allow us to enjoy or appreciate these wonderful creations, albeit at second hand.

There are also the physical gifts – most recently seen at the Beijing Olympics, but also to be found at sports fields up and down the country.

But the greatest gift is that of life itself. God in his wisdom has given us this all-embracing blessing.

There is but one way to finish: In the words of that great harvest hymn *"All good things around us are sent from Heaven above. Then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord, for all his Love."*

???? QUIZ EVENING ????

St Johns Hall, Churchfields, Hertford

Saturday, 4th October 7.30pm

Fish and Chip Supper - Bring your own drinks

Tickets in advance (by 26th Sept please) £8.00 from:

Denise Dille 01992 587113 or Renee Booker 01992 303314

Proceeds to All Saints Church, Hertford.