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Refugee Narratives: Testimony to the Importance of Admitting Ignorance

When I left Seattle University for Denmark in fall of 2015, I knew next to nothing about refugees. The only issue of citizenship and residence of concern to American political discourse – so I thought – was immigration. Yet, as crises in North Africa and the Middle East intensified, rapidly increasing numbers of displaced and suffering people began to push into Europe and my curriculum. In attempting to discern and address matters of displaced people, which I soon discovered were also intimate to my Seattle community, I was driven by my liberal arts experience to be an open and autonomous learner, striving to develop as honest and complete an understanding of relevant issues as possible.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, or UNHCR, “A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence.” When one comes into direct contact with refugees, asylees, and other displaced people, however, it becomes obvious that these are not titles adequately summarized by mere ensemble of words. The complexity of displaced people’s experiences demands that each one be read through its own multidimensional and interdisciplinary – indeed, transdisciplinary – lens.

Consequentially, my return to Seattle was quickly followed by a number of volunteer and internship stints at a sequence of local refugee assistance and community engagement programs.

On Mondays and Thursdays, I worked 9am-5pm processing and filling out immigration paperwork for those still grappling with the English language. Monday-Thursday afternoons, I tutored children from East African refugee families at a neighborhood-run organization aimed at community support. In between classes, I helped organize extracurricular learning programs for low income students – mostly refugee and immigrant children.

With every person I met throughout this process, I was challenged to question dominant narratives of immigration and asylum that had been standardized as norms within my cultural sphere. In July of last year, I recall helping a middle-aged Ethiopian man file his N-400, or naturalization, paperwork and flipping through prior addresses to discover that he had lived in the same Kenyan refugee camp for around 19 straight years. Not wishing to reinvigorate pains of the past, I said nothing, but glanced up to see him sitting across from me as he had the entire session, grinning ear to ear.

I could no longer allow myself to think of these people as somehow illegal, dangerous, or unimportant. Each person had their own story of extraordinary pain, hardship, aimlessness, and, in more optimistic cases, hope. At school, my interdisciplinary liberal studies major and international studies minor facilitated this personal paradigm shift by providing a variety of globally aware courses that confronted presuppositions and beckoned me to continuously augment my understanding with additional perspectives. Although I cannot possibly hope to fully comprehend the experiences of refugees, I am compelled to fill gaps in my perception by continuing to ask questions. Perhaps this best encapsulates the most resounding takeaway of my liberal arts experience: there is always more to learn.