

Finding resiliency, standing tall:

Exploring trauma, hardship, and healing with refugees

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This document records some of the traumas and hardships faced by refugees living in Rochester, New York. Along with the effects of these hardships, the document also records the accomplishments that refugees have made, and how refugee communities resist the effects of trauma and hardship, as well as what sustains them. Finally, the document records some things the refugees wanted people working in social services, as well as members of the broader community, to know about refugee experience. This document was prepared using methodologies and ideas from collective narrative practice, including collective narrative timelines, collective narrative documents, 'double-listening', and recruiting audiences.

Keywords: refugees, trauma, collective narrative practice, narrative therapy, collective narrative timelines, double-listening

INTRODUCTION

Especially since the Second World War, people who have been displaced by war and violence have sought refuge in other countries. Rochester, New York, has become the home to many members of refugee communities from around the world. Many of the refugees who come to this country face continued hardship and struggle due to their past as well as their current situation. Leaders from the refugee communities and members of the wider community (in partnership with refugees and refugee leaders) continue to try to assist refugees in responding to the varied problems they face so that they might live the lives they desire.

ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

The Rochester Committee on Refugee Resettlement (RCORR) is one of many groups working in Rochester to address the situation that refugee communities face. RCORR members – who represent refugee groups, schools, service providers, and other agencies working with refugees – have sought to develop ways of responding to refugees that are respectful, effective, and culturally resonant. For the past few years, conversations about refugees and their responses to trauma have been ongoing. In June of 2009, a small group of people from Rochester attended a workshop presented by David Denborough and Cheryl White (from the Dulwich Centre in Australia) in Toronto, Canada, to learn more about collective ways of addressing hardship and trauma. The Hope of Sudan Foundation generously provided funding to enable the group to attend with the hopes that they would bring back what they learned to the Rochester community. The Hope of Sudan Foundation also underwrote the expenses of this gathering so that attendees – especially the refugees – could attend at no cost.

On 24 October 2009, 22 people gathered at Lake Avenue Baptist Church in Rochester, NY, to talk more about trauma and healing in refugee communities. The group was comprised of refugees from Bhutan, Somalia, Iraq, Sudan, Vietnam, and Burma. Another participant originally came from Liberia but did not come as a refugee. Some of the

refugees in the group had been in the United States for more than ten years. Some had been here less than three months. There were a handful of other people present who work intimately with members of the refugee community.

BEGINNINGS

The day began with a welcome. In addition to English, members were invited to share a welcome message from the many languages they spoke. All told, almost twenty different welcomes were offered to begin the day. We then heard a poem by one of the attendees written especially for this gathering. The text is included below, and its words created a wonderful context for the rest of the day.

We are one

*It is from our ancestors' sweat
that we have opportunities*

*It is indeed from their brow
that we are given another chance,
perhaps one*

*It is from those who came before us
that we can stand today
and hopefully embrace each other*

*A refugee, a foreigner,
whatever we may be called*

*An alien, an immigrant,
however we are seen, in others' eyes*

*We are not just those names, if we are,
at all; some of us are natives of this land*

*For we are like each and everyone else,
... a human being*

*A human being with needs
and a common thread*

*A thread that wants and yearns
for something better*

*Perhaps a better life
and even the best future*

Perhaps peace and even a unified family

*Perhaps a safe environment
and even an organised government*

*Perhaps a place where our rights
are and can be exercised*

*Even a place where our presence
are dignified*

*Okay, so it is in fact
what our forefathers fought for
It is in fact an irony
that we too fight the same war*

*In our minds, in our hearts and in our souls
Yet we have less complexity
or more audacity?*

*Do we have less faith
and/or more courage?*

*Yes, it is from their sweat
we have what we have and more
being offered to us*

*It is from their zeal that we carry on,
we may be denied a lot but we still move on*

*It is indeed from their hopes
that we gravitate, as we climb
and do the impossible*

*It is from their battles that we find
resiliency and we stand tall*

*It is within us these struggles exists,
so no matter what name we are classified as*

*We are one, from the same source;
we are all people, fighting, oh so cautiously,
diligently for the same results ...*

Freedom, life and liberty with dignity!!!!!!!!!!

Aken V. Wariebi

Introductions continued with a collective narrative timeline exercise (Denborough, 2008) during which participants responded to the question, 'What drew you to this work?' and told a little of the history of how they had become involved in the work of attending to the effects of trauma in refugee communities. A few of the members from the group shared their stories after they had placed their names on the timeline. People entered this work for many reasons:

- One man 'saw a lot of lack of understanding' when he worked as a translator in a hospital and became more involved.

- Another was a 'refugee turned pastor' who himself encountered a trauma healer (Fr Paul Boyle) and saw what was possible in his life and in others.
- One saw the 'wonder, hope, and love of new people and new cultures' in her work as a doctor.
- One experienced and witnessed loss, confusion, displacement and death as a refugee.
- Still another saw a 'need to help people move forward in their lives'.

EXPLORING TRAUMA

The next portion of our day explored what traumas and hardships the refugee communities had been through. There was not a need to distinguish between past and present because they were closely related in the minds and experience of the people gathered. While some hardships or threats had ceased, others had emerged – sometimes unexpectedly. These lists were not meant to be exhaustive either. They represent what was on people's hearts and minds and could be added to or changed over time.

In response to the question of what trauma and hardship refugees faced, the responses fell into broad categories:

Physical harm

In our countries, we have experienced torture, imprisonment, beatings by military guards, domestic violence, rape, murder of our loved ones, kidnapping of family members, and war.

Deprivation

We have experienced hunger, physical deprivation, extreme cold, poverty, and long-term illness. We have lived in refugee camps without proper housing, food, and safety.

Losses

Through the course of our experiences, we have lost the people we love. We have seen our children and parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends die, or we were forced to leave them behind. We have lost our homes, our property, our pets and

animals, our professions, and our jobs. We have also lost our mountains, our foods, our rivers, and our land. Less tangible losses include our loss of status, our loss of opportunities, and our loss of hope. Some of us were forced to change our religion or were forbidden to speak our language. Some of us were forbidden to practise our cultural beliefs.

Barriers

We face financial problems, a lack of knowledge of systems or laws, a lack of appropriate skill to make a new life for ourselves, cultural differences, or an inability to speak a new language. We face race or class discrimination, communication barriers, and family breakdown. We do not have translators.

Alienation

We feel alone, hopeless about the future, and isolated as we try to assimilate or adjust. We are like a 'dead body talking'.

EFFECTS OF TRAUMA AND HARDSHIP

We know that the experiences we have gone through, affect us in many ways. We thought together about some of the ways experiences of trauma and/or hardship have had an effect:

On our bodies

We experience migraine headaches, agitation, flashbacks, physical weakness, depression, heart attacks, diabetes, substance misuse, increased blood pressure, violence, ulcers, loss of concentration, paralysis, trouble breathing, anxiety or panic attacks, numbness, moodiness, anger, stomachaches, mental disturbances, loss of appetite, shock, suicidal thoughts, intestinal problems, and trouble sleeping. Some of the most troubling for us are the depression, the substance use, and the violence.

On our relationships

We experience separation and divorce, violence and abuse, lack of communication, family divisions, distrust, blame, torture, arguments, lack of intimacy (physical and social), running away to escape, or losing our children. It is most difficult for us to feel

like we are losing our children, or to experience the separations, or violence/abuse.

On ourselves

We experience poor decision-making, a loss of respect, more sickness, suicidal feelings, feelings of helplessness, poor judgement, isolation/introversion, sadness, disappointment, loss of self-esteem, a lack of confidence, loneliness, lack of self-care, a loss of identity, sleeping too much or too little, eating too much or too little, not responding, apathy, fear, powerlessness, aggression, stress, and a change in our thought processes. Sometimes we even feel brainwashed.

On our families/communities

We feel a sense of disconnection and guilt – especially for the people back home or in the refugee camps. Some of them think we have forgotten them or abandoned them. There are many judgements on us and misconceptions about what life is like for us in the United States. We feel a sadness and a pressure to help or support people back home or in the camps. We feel anger and often face a stereotyping of our culture, our religion, or identity.

Other effects

Sometimes we feel extreme anger or hatred that can blind us – especially toward those who hurt us or our families. We rebel or feel invisible or overlooked. We experience a loss of creativity and feel a sense of separation from our cultural history. We experience a lack of support, a lack of focus, or a lack of happiness. We feel a sense of victimisation by leaders, systems, or authority.

On our children

We see our children lack a sense of belonging or watch our children become isolated. They can become disrespectful, rebellious, or act out. Some of our children join gangs, drop out of school, grow angry, manipulate, or feel different from others. They might struggle with a loyalty to their culture and a desire to assimilate or fit in. We also see that they are often skilful at dealing with the many pressures they face within the education system as they try so hard to succeed. We rely on them to help

us. While some may feel shame from their culture, others feel a great sense of pride in it. It is hard because some of our children lack the support they need because there is no other family here. We see some of our children lacking what they need.

Somewhere around this point in the workshop, the mood changed. It was during the creation of one of these lists of effects that we had a good laugh. Imagine, while creating a list of all the traumas and hardships, and exploring all of their effects on us, we laughed! This highlighted that we are more than the traumas and hardships we face, and that we are always responding to those hardships – with something like laughter being a very powerful response. This led to a brief exploration of some of the assumptions of the work we were doing on this day:

1. No matter the degree of trauma, hardship, or desolation, individuals, groups and communities will be responding to the situations they are in. Correspondingly, there will be initiatives they are taking to try to reduce or redress the harm and/or care for and protect others.

2. People's response to hardship and trauma are forms of local social action. By creating an ever-increasing sense of personal/collective agency, this makes it possible for people's initiatives to become linked and for further actions to be taken.

3. If rich descriptions of people's skills and knowledges in dealing with hardship can be transformed into local cultural mediums (written word, spoken word, song, film, dance, poetry, etc.), this makes many things possible.

4. Our task becomes the generation of possibilities for those affected by social issues, to make meaningful contributions to others also affected by these social issues in ways that provide relief from the negative effects of trauma and that build both personal and collective agency.

5. It can be particularly significant when opportunities are created for two-way inter-generational contributions and inter-generational honouring. When it can be acknowledged that the skills and values of younger generations are carrying forth (in unique ways) the legacies from older generations, this can provide an antidote to the inter-generational desolation that collective trauma often causes within communities.

(Adapted from 'Reflections: Ten themes and dreams' in Denborough, 2008, pp.198–200.)

We then broke for lunch together. For some in the group, it was their first experience of 'sandwiches.' Some of the more experienced sandwich-makers in the group were able to explain to some of those unfamiliar with the practice of 'sandwich-making' the ins and outs of the process. After lunch, one of our refugee participants, Padam Ghimire, shared a poem he had written after arriving in the United States. It speaks of the joy he felt arriving here only a few months earlier and suggests many of the topics we took up later in the day.

My dream came true

*I used to imagine America to be
Enormous, as in map I see
Virtually found her to be art
so tiny, easily filled in my heart.*

*She dwells in it; lives there
Love to me, she doth share
As a minute minor, awfully small
Imagined someone would give me a call.*

*Little grown up I had a clue
Ever since, 'I really love you'
Damned young boy, I often said
'Instead of rice they take bread!'*

*Freaky and frenzy, I still love
Despite all odds, sky and above
Enthusiastic young lad truly fine
Wished to be here before sunshine!*

*Oh dear! wishes are at the destination
Wishes and triumph are at connection
Kind people at sublime nation
Thanks to luck for true imagination.*

*Glory ought to furnish as well,
Thanks again to shun that hell
Mighty God is as is He
Good days have come absolutely free.*

*Hymns and prayers, all to whom
I know my heart has no room
Enough space to carry the glee
And can't write poor me!*

*Sure enough clouds have silver lining
For this is the end of whining
Sure enough clouds have silver lining
For this is the end of whining.*

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

During the afternoon, we built upon the idea of responding to hardship and trauma. We started with the question, 'Despite the hardships, what have we already accomplished as a community?'. Given that participants came from many refugee communities and had been here varying amounts of time, the answers were quite varied and included responses such as:

- We formed a cultural dance troupe.
- We established a burial fund.
- We formed a youth club and a Teen Tutoring Kids program.
- We formed ethnic associations or our own faith communities.
- We formed a women's weaving co-operative or women's groups.
- We formed our own temple/healing centre.
- We developed a workshop teaching men how to cry and how to help women to speak for themselves.

- We engaged the wider community in various ways.
- We invited trauma healers to come and give workshops and trainings.

Given these rich accomplishments, we wondered about how refugee communities resist the effects of trauma and hardship on their lives. The responses were that we:

- have memorial services and gatherings for those who die in Africa to keep us connected
- maintain our faith as a gift to the community
- keep our sense of responsibility and commitment
- engage in activities of all kinds
- have family nights like we used to where we talk and have conversations
- celebrate festivities like the new moon, the new year, or national independence days
- keep cultural traditions and celebrations – like weddings
- pray every day
- connect with and visit relatives in different states
- make financial donations to people/our families back home
- attend workshops as a way to heal
- talk about what has happened to us
- remain silent about what has happened to us
- exercise and take care of our bodies
- dance or move
- create a 'double consciousness' that allows us to think about it but not think about it
- laugh
- visit the elders, keep them as advisors, and go to them in a crisis so they can direct and consult us
- call or write back home
- write our stories for others to read or learn about
- journal
- network in the community with groups/people who can help us
- sing, drum, or draw

- develop coping skills
- remember sayings about moving on. [These were expressed in the refugees' native languages but are represented here in their English translations so that everyone might understand them: 'everything has an end to it', or 'everything late will be good for you', or 'this too will pass', or 'if you look you will find', or *kace* (Sudanese) which means 'what is in front of you is a lie/illusion; it will pass', or 'Tuesday will come'.]
- tell ourselves things like 'don't give up', 'fight back', 'you're in America', 'you're the man or you're the woman', 'everything's available', 'it's not so bad', 'you have gone through a lot, don't give up', 'it gets better with time'
- sing to ourselves
- work in a garden
- plant our own foods – especially those from our countries
- cook and eat
- try to forgive or come out of hatred
- remember our histories and name what has happened to us
- try to remember that suffering does not enoble us and that we can do something more than suffer or that we are more than our trauma
- be positive – 'good mind, good find'
- change our attitude
- make sure the people around us have what they need to live
- listen to other people's stories
- do acts of love and care
- cry
- encourage people, give information, or advocate for them
- let our grief out
- speak out
- teach others about our culture
- develop trust in our lives
- communicate with others
- have good relationships
- go to the beach, ocean, or water
- recite verses from our scriptures

- inflict a 'pain on a pain' in order to heal
- engage in traditional rituals or practices.

In all of these ways, we resist the harmful effects of the trauma and hardship on our lives and begin to take back and reclaim what was once ours.

WHAT SUSTAINS US

Knowing that doing this work of healing can be difficult work, we make efforts to sustain ourselves as we move forward. How do we do this for ourselves or for each other? We:

- try to be patient with ourselves and others
- listen to others and share their pain
- help people resolve their own problems
- take care of ourselves by exercise, sleeping enough
- try to remember that 'too many goods are the enemy of the best'
- try to be responsible to our families
- play music, sing, write poetry
- accept complaining
- pray
- take intentional family time
- take time to celebrate what is going on
- watch our children make progress in school
- attend religious rituals
- accept the situation
- stand up for the children of others.

WHAT WE WANT OTHERS TO KNOW

A significant level of misunderstanding, judgement, stereotyping, and fear is experienced by refugees from the wider community in which they live. Knowing that others who interact with and assist refugees might be reading this document, those attending this workshop wanted to share these thoughts with the wider community in hopes of increasing understanding and communication but also to decrease the trauma/hardship their communities experience when misunderstanding, judgement, and stereotyping are present.

- When the crises in our lives finally settle, often our experience of the trauma rises.

- The systems do not understand us. They often show little forgiveness when we make mistakes and present many barriers to us to get the help we need. We find this particularly true of the social services that are supposed to be available to help us.
- We are human beings and often experience little to no empathy from people in helping professions and in other contexts.
- Because we do not understand the systems of help, our trauma continues.
- Just because we have an accent, it does not mean we are stupid. Just because we do not speak English or speak it well, it does not mean we do not have skills.
- Even the educated treat us poorly, even dismally.
- There are double standards that exist that judge us differently.
- We do not get sufficient translators or a sufficient orientation when we come to this country. This contributes to our hardship.
- Often, people generalise about us. This causes us trauma and damage.
- When I approach you as a refugee, you don't need to be afraid of me.
- Our children can be a resource for the future of this community. They can be great mathematicians or physicists. They need adequate education, however.

NEXT STEPS

We concluded our day by exploring what 'next steps' would look like to continue the work of today, but also to further the work of healing and connection in the Rochester area. We thought that we could:

- continue this format but invite different agencies, the City School District, mental health professionals or other refugee leaders
- expand the number of people at this type of meeting
- identify where these approaches and discussions are currently going on in Rochester (or elsewhere) for support and training

- provide more training to refugee leaders in identifying disorders related to trauma and or mental health assessment
- develop an assessment process to better help refugees
- talk more about concepts of trauma and healing – especially with recently-arrived refugee groups
- distribute information. One participant, Pastor Jordan, offered his library of trauma and healing materials as a resource to other leaders
- more social, community events
- more publicity, networking and organising between and among refugee groups and those assisting them.

FEEDBACK

Numerous people offered feedback on the gathering. One participant who works closely with the refugee community said this:

I really enjoyed the program and wish I could have stayed later ... It seems to me that most if not all [of the Bhutanese refugees] were confused by the term trauma. It has been my experience that the experiences they faced in the past became a 'way of life' and some of their frustrations stem from a predictable response in their countries ... [But] the people who I have come in contact with have a sense of hope. That hope loses ground when they struggle with a lack of knowledge and the ability to start over through complex 'systems'.

Others said things like:

The workshop I thought was very useful and can serve as a form of therapy in the refugees' journey to healing. The only thing I would suggest is everyone introducing

themselves and perhaps stating what they do now, where they are from, if they choose and how long they have been in Rochester, in the very beginning of the workshop ... I [also] discovered that there can be a sense of 'CONTENTMENT' in spite of the trauma while in the process of healing.

Thank you for arranging such a rich and thought-provoking workshop. I do hope we can continue working together on the many crucial issues that were discussed.

One of the refugee participants offered their reflections and hopes in this way:

Thanks for inviting me to attend today's program and for the opportunity to present our trauma and hardship that we face in Bhutan, Refugee Camps in Nepal, and here too. I felt very relieved and light in my heart after I expressed the feeling in front of other people – those who have more or less the same pain and cause. It could be a platform where the refugees from different countries of the world with different values and cultures get together and share what hardship each community has, and find a healing or solving method. I hope you could be the doctor to heal our trauma. It means that you could organise much more effective programs along with the professionals and experts in future. I am really interested in this kind of program and hope this will provide us the opportunity to be exposed to the Rochester community. Once again, I would like to thank you on behalf of my friends, those who were there, from the whole Nepali community, and on my own behalf. We really need your help and support in every area to be the able citizen of this sublime nation.

RESPONSES

It is our hope to circulate this document among the participants and in the wider Rochester community (and beyond). Translators within each of the communities present at the workshop will work to make relevant material available to members of their communities. It is hoped that readers of this document might let us know what it means to them. If you wish to respond, please do so to the contact details at the beginning of this document. Any responses to this document will be forwarded to all those who participated.

NOTE

Everyone whose names, words or pictures appear here gave their consent that these might be shared.

REFERENCES

- Denborough, D. (2008). *Collective narrative practice: Responding to individuals, groups, and communities who have experienced trauma*. Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.