

Refugee Lessons: Let Us be Free Like the Birds!

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My life has been turned upside down and inside out. My brain has never had to work so hard to make sense, to survive and to live. For some of my hardest years, the system saw me and treated me as illegal.

That is a big experience. I learnt much. But above all I thought about being human and being free.

Syria

Now 24 years old I was born in Aleppo in northern Syria. As one of the oldest human cities in the world it is rich with history. But I didn't think of the city as a unique place. I thought that our cultures were everywhere in the world. As a young Syrian I couldn't leave the country for many reasons, including money and international laws, which did not allow me to roam freely across the earth. I had no direct knowledge of the world other than Syria.

After the winds of war tore up my country, I was forced to leave Syria without any options other than escaping into Turkey, illegally. For the first time in my life I came to understand the incredible importance that humans give to 'papers' – passports, ID, visas and so on. If I had been a bird in Aleppo I would have been free to go where I wished with no thought about papers or borders. For birds and all other living creatures on this earth borders have no meaning. But we seem to be alone amongst living things in restricting this universal right.

Turkey

When I arrived in Turkey I discovered that there are people who speak a strange language (my first feeling), which is Turkish and they do not know Arabic. I thought that I must learn their language so that I can communicate with them, but the Turkish language was not the only obstacle; the Turkish way of life I found hard to accept.

In the short time I spent in Turkey I experienced a society where men and women worked so hard for little money. Life for many seemed little better than prison.

On one sunny morning I went to a public garden to sit under the sun. There were a lot of young and old people in the garden and I approached one of them and said "Hi" to him, but he refused to respond and then he said, "What do you want, do you know me?"

I returned to my house where I heard the voices of the women in our neighbourhood, which I did not understand, but they were very loud. It was strange for me that their women sit in the street and talk and prepare food and wear bright clothes whilst on their heads they put a coloured cap that does not cover half of their hair, while their daughters wear short skirts

and go from morning until evening to work. Their life looked very difficult and complex and I did not understand it well.

On Fridays I saw men streaming to the mosque to hear the Imam's speech which is filled with screaming, crying, warnings and intimidations from God. And the people there were all crying and praying. But once they left the mosque they go back to their hard work, and later, tired after long hours of work they drink beer (which is not allowed in Islam) and eat dough mixed with chili. (I don't like chili!) There was a simplicity to this life but it was so hard and I felt that I was never accepted as a refugee from Syria. I felt that I had to become like them in order to live with them.

After some days I decided that I couldn't make a new life in Turkey so I left for Greece, again 'illegally'. There was no other choice for me. I am no longer afraid of illegal travel. I have been a homeless and guilty refugee as some people in the world seem to see me and as international laws want me, but in fact I am a bird traveling wherever he wants.

Greece

When I arrived in Greece (Samos Island) I could not roam the streets or travel between the islands because I was forced to live in a cage (camp for refugees).

The Samos camp was full of refugees of different colours, shapes and languages. For the first time I met many different people, who I hadn't been able to meet before, such as Ethiopians and Afghanis, Pakistanis, Indians, Egyptian Arabs, Algerians and many others. I did not know that all human beings were so alike and that we eat similar food with a slightly different taste and that Afghans and Pakistanis have a lot of cooking skills. And others were into sports and learning languages, and the prettiest of all of this was the chance I had to touch the body of one of the black refugees from Africa without fear, and I knew they were human beings like us. And it was in Greece where I had the opportunity to meet and know people from Europe and the north America.

How beautiful it is to be a free bird.

Despite all these great and new experiences there were many difficulties in getting close to people from so many different societies. There seemed many issues which held us back from accepting one another.

Even gays from Arab and Asian countries including Greece seemed closed to themselves and do not seem to like any person except gays. But I think that is a reaction because many people don't accept them. How hard it is to be different and to be a friend to all people, they see you as different and you see them as different and both of you are afraid of the other.

The Greek government allowed me to fly to its capital after much trouble and time and to start another tale.

Athens is not similar to Aleppo or Izmir and was so different from them, with people from many countries and cultures. But this did not change the nature of its people who love to dance and party, drinking beer and raki which is the best alcoholic beverage they have. This may be nice for them, but I was very surprised that most of the workers I saw in Athens were immigrants and refugees from Asia and Africa.

It was not difficult to talk to the young Greek people because they speak English and I have enough to make conversation. But their pronunciation of the English language can seem strange as they speak a new language with a strange voice, but the bigger problem was with the old people who speak only the language of their country.

If I hadn't met my English friends, life would have been harder for me in Greece. It was also great that my English friends are sociologists which helped them and me better understand the Greek people and others. I began to realise that I too had been influenced by the place where I grew up where the air I breathed was not so open and fresh.

In Greece, which is one of the gateways into Europe, you find a lot of refugees fleeing from their walled countries; many of them also seek to escape from Greece. And the reason is that they are looking for a country that does not have racism, fences and prisons, and is full of safety and love and coexistence. And where you have a chance to make a new life. Greece is a beautiful country but it is so poor that like many refugees I couldn't see how I could make my new life there.

It seemed to me that most of us still carry in our minds many feelings of distrust and lack of acceptance of those different from ourselves just as we are looking for people different from us and to become like them. I experienced a lot of persecution from refugees which made me think that the freedom we are looking is still infected by the poisonous air from the societies where we once called home. Even now I am still trying to understand all of this!

Netherlands

My illegal journey finished in Greece. I was so lucky when the Dutch government allowed me to go to Holland by family re-unification. They recognized me as a free, legal bird . A few weeks after my acceptance I took the travel documents and went to Athens airport to stand there as all other people and could now say I am here ! A legitimate bird so you have to let me get into the plane.

I arrived in the Netherlands with my beautiful loyal dog Max after I got financial help from my British friends to buy travel tickets for me and my dog and some money to buy food, clothes and bags.

The journey was very beautiful, but the fear of another shock was in my mind all the time. I arrived in that beautiful green country, which is trying to escape from the water which is threatening it from all sides. Should it win then will I be safe with Dutch people or should I learn how to swim to start again my journey again but this time as fish not bird ? That was the first question in my mind. Crazy!

In the airport in Amsterdam my friend was waiting me to take me to his house in Enschede where he is living. It was not a house but just one room he shared with another three Syrian refugees.

These were not the easiest days for me in the Netherlands because I was living with my friend and Max my dog in a small room. I couldn't relax because these Syrian birds didn't accept me and my dog with them in the same house and because they see me as a 'fucking feminine' boy so they want to fuck me or for me to leave the house. They didn't accept Max either because they said it is not allowed in Islam to have a dog in your house. Although I tried to talk with one of them to explain to him that we are both human and that I am a

good person and not as he thinks and his answer was “why you are talking with me ? What do you want ? “

My question is, is he right that I shouldn't have talked to him and every person must make his life in a small shell ? or is he a psychiatric patient who needs treatment in order to learn to live with others?

Smiles

Before going to my friend's house I had to spend a few days in a camp sorting out my papers. I arrived at the refugee camp after a journey of more than three and a half hours, but the beauty of the nature and the houses there made me forget everything. I had not seen in my life more beautiful buildings and more beautiful grounds for a refugee camp. Wherever you look, you find trees, flowers and small houses with red roofs, white doors and policemen wandering around the camp on bicycles with a beautiful smile on their faces.

I can not forget those smiles that explained the meaning of life and assured me of my humanity, which I feel has been 'imprisoned' since I was a child growing up in Aleppo. And it was not only the smiles on the faces of the police, but wherever you go, you find people smiling at you and greeting you as if they knew you for years or as if you were one of their family.

Even the refugees living here were painting their faces with the same smile. Perhaps the secret is that when you see this smile everywhere and all the time it will draw on your face without thinking. This experience made me so happy because I never imagined that there are people smiling for all people even if they have different colours, religions, shapes, education levels, races and passports.

The story does not end here, but the smiles still accompany me everywhere here in the city where I decided to live in the east of the Netherlands. Every morning and evening I go out with my dog for a walk. I see people around me smile and greet each other and me . That is really the key to life and this is a beautiful society which seems to accept all cultures, and with smiles welcomes all people and all creatures.

Perhaps the Netherlands is not the only country with these wonderful qualities, but this is what I have discovered so far. Life is going on and my wings are stronger and longer now that I have I got legitimate wings. But I will never forget that legal or not we will never stop trying to fly, free like the birds in the sky.

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