



**Finding Resiliency,
Standing Tall
Exploring Trauma, Hardship
and Healing
With Refugees**

**October 24, 2009
Lake Avenue Baptist Church
Rochester, New York**

I needed to speak of the spoken, of the said and not said, of the heard, of the listened to. To speak of the said is not only to resay the said, but to relive the living experience that has generated the saying that now, at the time of the resaying, is said once more. Thus to resay, to speak of the said, implies hearing once again what has been said by someone else about or because of the saying that we ourselves have done.

Paolo Freire, Pedagogy of Hope

Background

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 refugee needs 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, CA, to learn more about collective ways of addressing hardship and trauma. The Hope of Sudan Foundation (www.hopeofsudan.org) 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 October 24, 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 10 years. Some had been here less than 3 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 20 different words of welcome 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 organized 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!!!!!!!!!!

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Introductions continued with a collective timeline exercise 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 loss, confusion, displacement and death as a refugee
- Still another saw a “need to help people move forward in their lives.”

Amongst the refugee participants, there was a profound similarity to the stories shared by people from Somalia, Bhutan, Burma and elsewhere. Many did not specifically date a “time” when they came into this work. They just found themselves in the midst of hardship in their community and needed to respond.

People spoke of the difficulties they endured in their countries or in refugee camps. They spoke of current systems of care that create traumas for families and children that people never encountered before. They spoke of how systems of counseling are very different here in the United States and where they came from. For example, here they ask you, “Do you want to kill yourself?” That was not one of the questions people are asked in other places. Participants shared of how skills that people possessed in their countries are erased upon arrival because one doesn’t have the proper papers. Or other skills, like farming, are not able to be used by people living in highly urban environments.

One man commented that he never thought he had “traumas” nor did he know there could be medicine for that. But upon reflection he now sees that “trauma is a drama” and is something that “follows me all the time.” His life is getting better, however, and he said that speaking to the group today about his story made his spirit “lighter.”

There seemed to be great value in creating a space whereby people from all around the world were able to hear each other’s story of struggle.

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 practice 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 and go 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, stomach aches, 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 our selves

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 and 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 victimization 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 effective with the system and face many pressures to succeed or gain education. 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 (below).

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 peoples 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 honoring. 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 *Ten Themes and Dreams* in David Denborough's Collective Narrative Practice, Dulwich Centre Publications, Adelaide, South Australia, 2008)

We 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 cooperative or women's groups
We formed our own temple/healing center
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 everyday
- 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 their 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*

- (Sudan) 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 ennoble 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

Given that our time together was quite limited, we were not able to fully engage all that we hoped to in this gathering. One of the activities that we had hoped to do was the “Skill and Knowledge Exercise.” This would have enabled us at this point to more richly explore the roots of what sustains us and connect it back to our histories. It was described that this exercise could easily be done in any community to provide a richer description of what sustains people as they work to resist and address trauma and hardship. This exercise was brought back from the gathering in Toronto and was developed by David Denborough and Cheryl White. The questions are listed below.

Skills and Knowledge Exercise

1. Name a special skill, knowledge or value that sustains you or your family through difficult times.
2. What is a story about this skill, knowledge or value or a story about a time when this made a difference for you, your family or others?
3. What is the history of this skill, knowledge or value? How did you learn it? Who did you learn it from?
4. Is this skill or value linked in some way to collective traditions and/or cultural traditions? Are there proverbs, sayings, stories, songs, images from your family, community and/or culture with which these skills and knowledges are linked?

Members of refugee communities could gather to discuss questions such as these and further tell and/or record the histories of what sustains them in hard times.

We also explored another exercise that could be used in refugee communities to create conversations about trauma and healing. This exercise, called the *Tree of Life*, was developed by Ncazelo Ncube in southern Africa. To read more about the *Tree of Life Project* (and other related projects, please visit <http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au/tree-of-life.html>)

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.
- On a general basis, people generalize 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 organizing 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 said:

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 culture get together and share what hardship each community has and could find a healing or solving method. I hope you could be the doctor to heal our trauma. It means that you could organize 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 areas 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 also hoped that readers of this document might suggest some of what occurs to them after reading this in hopes that we might further the work we started

together. If you wish to respond, please do so to the contact below. Any responses to this document will be forwarded to all those who participated.

This document was prepared by Michael Boucher who helped to coordinate this day's workshop. Michael can be reached at St. Joseph's Neighborhood Center, 417 South Avenue, Rochester, NY 14620 or by email at mboucher@sjncenter.org. Everyone whose names, words or pictures appear here gave their consent that these might be shared.