



*When you've lived through a war,
why be scared of a virus?*

Emerging tentatively from months of COVID-19 prompted lockdowns and restrictions, I sit with a small group of mainly Syrian and Iraqi ladies, who live as refugees in this city. We are masked and sanitised, gathered at a table around a pile of pictures, printed words, glue, and scissors. I myself am reeling somewhat, from the disappointments and uncertainties of the past confined months, where we traded in our 'normal' for this new online, home bound, health obsessed version of life in the large Turkish city where we live. The challenge in our woman's group today is to represent some of the emotions—the challenges and joys of the past months— in collage form, then to share with each other. Some women represent and tell of financial worries, medical concerns, feelings of frustration, or impatience with situations beyond their control. There are veiled references to violence and fractured relationships in the home, longing and anxiety for family left far away in even worse conditions, and heavy, sighing silences which say almost as much. One woman speaks up, 'Corona? When you've lived through a war like we have, a virus is nothing. Why would we be scared of that?' Her statement holds the weight of undeniable truth— these women have experienced such trauma and suffering that even a global pandemic pales in significance.

Engaging with and listening to these women and others in similar situations for the past few years, I have had my eyes opened to some of the unique ways in which they have, and still do, experience suffering. While many of these have been exacerbated by the pandemic, they existed before, and will continue to exist once the world's diagnosis has been downgraded.

For many of the younger women, war or civil unrest is all they can remember. Death has been a daily reality for many, and almost everyone we meet has lost a significant person, often multiple people, to bombings, violent attacks, or situations related to political unrest. The weight of their grief is immense and compounded in each subsequent loss. The trauma of witnessing violence and death up close from a young age has huge effects on neural development and has significant flow on effects into relationships, parenting, coping methods, and mental health. A six-year-old boy who comes along with his mother to our art club witnessed his own father's murder. Another woman told us that her uncle was killed in the street near their home, but no one was able to leave the building to retrieve his body, for fear of their own safety. A bomb killed my friend's father and brother in a single moment, when it landed on their family home. This is suffering on a level I struggle even to conceptualise, having never lived in a war zone.

Suffering that results from forced displacement is ongoing and does not end when the individual or family reaches the 'safe country.' One woman shared the story of how bombing in her town prompted her to go into premature labour with her third child. Three days postpartum, the family could no longer stay in that place, so carrying their children and what essential belongings they could (including a USB stick containing important documents and photos), they fled, paying a people smuggler to guide them and hundreds of others over the dangerous mountain ranges that separate their country from ours. This is a treacherously risky journey, especially in winter, with natural dangers, exposure, hunger, and military snipers all very real threats. When they reached the 'safety' of our country, border guards found their precious USB stick in a search and deliberately destroyed it. This kind of story is echoed again and again as we talk with refugee women. Even though this woman is now no longer in immediate

danger as she had been, she says she experiences headaches every day, as a result of her body's remembrance and holding onto the stress and trauma she had experienced. We notice often as we talk to our refugee friends how the body's ongoing response to trauma manifests in insomnia, headaches, other health problems, and PTSD symptoms.

Displacement also comes with the weight of guilt and anxiety that women feel for those left behind, or even the guilt of surviving crisis events when others did not. Often the elderly or those with pre-existing health problems are not physically able to make the journey over the mountains, for example, so the decision has to be made to escape for the sake of the younger family members, leaving the others in the dangerous situation. At a group picnic, sitting around with women on a clear autumn morning, one lady began to sing a beautiful song, and the women I was sharing a rug with began to cry. I asked her what the words meant, and she told me the song was about mothers. I know it has been seven years since the singer has seen her mum, likewise many of the other women have also been separated from or have lost their mothers. The emotional toll of this sits very close to the surface for many of the women we meet. In the moment-by-moment urgent pressing need to survive that these friends have come to experience as normal, I am sure that many have also, by choice or sheer necessity, done things which they would not otherwise have done and made moral or ethical compromises they wished they hadn't needed to make. It is my guess that this adds additional layers to feelings of guilt, and further weighs down their hearts.

The refugee experience brings with it suffering as a result from loss at many levels. Not only have displaced women lost homeland, loved ones and community, but also many of the things which previously helped define their identity, such as language, being able to engage in specific cultural traditions, and employment. Coming into a

country with a different culture and language, they can feel overwhelmed by the challenge of so much new learning, and often cannot access classes or resources, because of financial limitations, family responsibilities or restrictions placed on them by their husbands. Many have neighbours who will not even talk to them. Some come with low literacy levels which makes this process even harder, but others face the challenge of being highly educated and qualified yet unable to find employment because of the language barrier, employment laws, non-compatibility of university qualifications, or a reluctance of the part of local employers to hire someone who is a refugee.

Loss of agency and sense of purpose also take a deep emotional toll. For women who are refugees in this country, many of their choices have been taken away, such as where they can live, how they can travel, how they can be employed, what kind of schooling their children can receive, if, when and to whom they marry, and many other choices that those of us not in their situation take for granted. This, combined with religious and cultural views about the nature of 'fate' or 'the will of Allah' in determining the events of their lives, often leads to a sense of resigned fatalism and helplessness. The women desire a better future but struggle to see a way that this could become reality, and sometimes seem to give up on being able to effect change in their own lives. The uncertainties and changes that COVID-19 has brought serve to add to the sense of life being beyond their control, and exacerbate the economic hardship, scarcity, and unemployment challenges that they and their families face.

According to the UNHCR, Turkey currently hosts the highest number of refugees of any single country (estimated to be around four million). However, this does not imply that they are welcomed here—quite the opposite is the case. The majority of Turks believe their Arab 'guests' bring with them crime, poor morality,

disease, backward and fundamental religious thinking, and are taking employment opportunities that should go to Turkish citizens. Arab refugees, therefore, are often excluded and ostracised by their Turkish neighbours, spoken to rudely, and treated as scapegoats for the problems of the moment. They desperately need and desire community and connection. Some women who are living here alone with their children without husbands or older male family members report that they regularly have local men come to their door, propositioning them, offering food or financial assistance in exchange for sex, or even approaching them on the street. They are fearful to go out, and fearful to be home. This is an incredibly traumatising state in which to live. Many women find themselves similarly fearful of the dangers that exist within their homes from violent male family members. It seems that when war-traumatised adults and children live in crowded situations with other similarly traumatised people, each acting, parenting, and relating out of their own trauma, the potential for volatile and harmful relational patterns is very high. Sadly, this is a huge factor in the suffering that refugee women here and around the world continue to face, even once they have left their ‘dangerous’ places.

In the light of this massive weight of suffering then, our team constantly finds ourselves asking the question—as followers of Jesus, how can we lovingly help people living as refugees move towards healing, connectedness, and integration? How can we be the eyes, hands, and mouth of the healer who sees and cares? When the needs, both physical and emotional are overwhelming, ‘what will actually help?’ is a question our team has been working through over the past few years, as we’ve listened to our refugee friends, read research, observed our context, and considered our position within it. Bruce Perry, a psychiatrist specialising in child trauma, asserts that at the

heart of effective intervention for trauma is safe relationship.¹⁵ While we have neither the physical or personnel resources to effectively meet every need of every person we meet, as the church we do have a powerful and effective gift— Jesus-shaped, loving community to offer our weary friends. This was the starting point we chose.

We established a community centre in an accessible location, renovated it to be a warm, beautiful, and welcoming place, as unlike a government office as we could manage, and opened the doors of our shared ‘home’ to refugees no matter where they came from. Our goal is ‘safety and life-giving welcome’—that those who experience the love and acceptance of safe community and relationships through the centre and team will begin to experience the kind of healing and a renewal of life, that can only be fully realised by encountering Jesus. We take a holistic approach, looking for how we can speak into the physical, emotional, social, and spiritual needs of refugee friends. We try to give people authentic and meaningful reasons to gather together, such as language practice groups, group counselling-style sessions, weekly therapeutic-focussed art making groups for women, table tennis, a small library, and on-tap tea. And we show up. The principles of consistency, predictability, and reliability—foundational elements of trauma informed practice—form a foundation for what and how we do things at the centre and helps to create a framework for safe relationship and community. Those who are genuinely seeking truth have the opportunity to engage in small group study of the Bible in Arabic. We visit with people in their homes, listen, cry, drink tea, hold their babies, and translate doctor’s prescriptions. Tiny acts of love,

¹⁵ Bruce Perry and Christine R. Ludy-Dobson, “The Role of Healthy Relational Interactions in Buffering the Effect of Childhood Trauma,” in *Working with Children to Heal Interpersonal Trauma: The Power of Play*, ed. Eliana Gill (New York: The Guildford Press, 2010), 26-43.

which seem almost inconsequential, can have surprisingly deep relational and emotional impacts.

As these things happen we notice again and again that Jesus in community speaks to the suffering of the women we meet. Through shared prayers and seeing their answers, offering practical care and support when possible, and being available to listen, we notice as Robert Stolorow did that safe community means that suffering has a “relational home.”¹⁶ These women begin to feel not as alone, they can open up to tell their painful stories, and be heard kindly. Just as hurt and trauma have happened in relationship and community, healing can too. Indeed, Jesus himself experienced suffering in many of the ways refugee women do. He knew firsthand what it was to be displaced from his home, to be a refugee even.¹⁷ He suffered rejection, being unwanted in a place, separation, physical and verbal abuse, exhaustion, grief, loss of loved ones, and the weighty burden of carrying the consequences of the guilt and sin of others.¹⁸ At the same time, the gospel accounts of how Jesus cared so tenderly for suffering and marginalised women, speak powerfully into the situations where our friends find themselves. Sometimes we have opportunity to share stories of how, in gentleness, Jesus gave time and healing to women who were looked upon as second class citizens, who were sick, culturally unclean from bleeding, outcast, judged for adultery, and known prostitutes, and how he acknowledged the value of the lives of young girls.¹⁹ In the villages and Arab cultures where most of our friends from the centre come from,

¹⁶Robert D. Stolorow, *Trauma and Human Existence: Autobiographical, psychoanalytic, and philosophical reflections* (London: The Analytic Press, 2007), 10.

¹⁷ Matthew 2:13-15

¹⁸ Among other references, see for example Matthew 8:34, Matthew 27:20-46, Mark 15:15-20, Luke 4:1-2, John 11:33-36, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Mark 14:33-36.

¹⁹ Among other references, see for example Matthew 8:14-15, Luke 8:40-56, John 8:3-11, Luke 7:36-50, John 4:7-26, Mark 10:14

we are told that this kind of treatment is rare. Jesus' compassion for women did not stop in the gospel accounts though, and we can see his work and hand in the lives of some of our refugee sisters.

For those similarly looking for opportunities to establish relationships and build community with refugees, no matter where they are located, the following observations, practical considerations, and implications for practice, may be helpful to consider as we have done over the past years.

Firstly, an effort must be made to avoid totalising refugee women as suffering victims, in the way we think or speak about them, or in the way we seek to help them. Among the women I have met, I have seen great strength, amazing determination, creativity, resourcefulness, resilience, and even joy, all co-existing with their very real and present experience of suffering. We should be mindful of not feeding a potential cycle of learned helplessness by stepping in with 'aid' without considering ways which we can also help build and strengthen their own resilience and capacity to solve problems, and enable a sense of agency.

Secondly, while it may be widely agreed upon that our Christian response to people in situations of suffering must extend beyond 'Go in peace. Keep warm and well fed' (James 2:16), the way we go about helping alleviate suffering in the name of Jesus can be a source of debate, and it is a question we hold in tension daily as we run the community centre. For our gospel-centred philosophy to be authentic, we must consider the physical needs of the people we minister to, as Jesus did when he took time to heal the sick, give sight to the blind, mobility to the paralysed, and food to the hungry crowd. While miracles of healing may not be our calling, attending to the physical suffering of those around us still provides, as it did to Jesus, a powerful

context in which God can do his transformational work. It also serves to set us as Christians apart from a majority who would often prefer to look away and ignore, rather than touch and take time for those who reach out for help. We have found that this in itself is a powerful challenge to the preconceptions of our Muslim friends about what Christians are like,²⁰ and leads the way to deeper conversations. Even though at our community centre the primary aim is not to distribute physical aid but rather to address emotional needs, the need for community, and spiritual questions people may have, all these facets are bound together. This is the root of holistic ministry—considering physical, emotional, and spiritual needs as we work with the refugees God brings across our path.

Part of how we do this is by checking in regularly and intentionally to gauge what people in the refugee community themselves say they need, and not just assuming we already know. This takes humility, but also discernment, especially when their stated needs are either beyond our capacity to help, or it may be actually unhelpful or unwise to give them what they say they need. For example, handing out large amounts of financial assistance, or promises of help to obtain visas would be detrimental to our community building efforts as equity is impossible, our resources are limited, and it does not empower long-term change. Instead we respond to stated

²⁰ For example, people we have spoken to have said that previously they thought Christians were hateful and immoral people because of narratives they had been told by religious leaders, and their observations of the 'Christian West' in media and military presence in their country. When they learn that we are Christian people, some have said they are surprised to see that instead of hatred we work hard to show love and welcome them, and that the women on our team dress and behave in a modest and culturally sensitive fashion. One woman said "I really love how you treat the people. As a Syrian, this is the first time I have seen Syrians treated like this." Another said to my colleague from the US "Your country bombed and destroyed my home, but you are different. We like you." Another person said "Here there is love. Our (religious) leaders never treat us like you do." We have found that acting with genuine love and wholistic concern for people opens up opportunities to answer questions about our motivation, values, and faith.

physical needs in other ways such as running conversation clubs to help people improve their English and Turkish, providing access to second-hand clothing and blankets in the winter, and helping people out with a bag of groceries or a supermarket voucher when we visit them in their homes. We aim to seat physical assistance firmly in the context of relationship, when we can more accurately know what would help the families we meet.

Also, it is worth considering that if suffering related to displacement is not static but dynamic—i.e. people’s vulnerabilities will change depending on their situation and what is happening around them—then an agile response does not refuse to provide material aid simply because it could breed dependence, but also takes the other factors at play into consideration. For example, at a time like the COVID-19 pandemic which has compromised a lot of people’s financial margins and income security, it does make sense to adjust the way we respond to people’s needs in this season in order to help alleviate suffering and demonstrate loving care.

In seeking to address the social, emotional, and spiritual needs of people living with the long-term effects of trauma, it is my belief that creative practice in the context of community is one of the most accessible and effective tools that we have. I run a weekly therapeutic-focussed art club for women at our centre and have observed that when women sit in a group with their hands and minds creatively engaged, their mouths and hearts also seem to open more willingly. They can tell their stories with words and images; sometimes the pictures say what they struggle to articulate and give a visual voice to their painful unspoken suffering. Art making in community requires accepting a level of emotional vulnerability, but when their efforts and expression are met with kindness, listening, and encouragement, the healing effect can be powerful. We often see tears and laughter, grief, and gratitude intermingling at our

art table. I remember the woman that I mentioned earlier who suffers from constant headaches telling my friend with enthusiastic amazement that the first time she came to art club was the first day in as long as she could remember when she felt relief from her headaches. Art making is also a conduit for play in its broad sense—something that was stolen from many of their war-affected childhoods. It is a luxury many don't have time for amidst the demands of caring for others, but a practice that can be restorative and relaxing. Safe, accepting community and the openness that creative practice promotes is truly a gift from our Creator to the hurting hearts of our traumatised friends.

Developing an understanding of suffering from an Islamic theological and cultural perspective, while having a solid Christian theology of suffering, helps us who work with refugees wrestle with the big needs and big questions that arise from what we see, hear and experience. . It provides a framework that guides our own decision making and helps us understand the areas of difference and similarity in how suffering is perceived by the refugees we work with, so that we can engage sensitively with them. For example, in a recent art session with a group of women, we were identifying particular emotions which may be experienced within the broader scope of 'grief.' The list included 'hopelessness,' but several of the women reacted strongly against the suggestion that they may feel this way, asserting that as long as there is Allah there must be hope, and to feel hopeless was tantamount to rejecting faith. There is also the constant overtone of 'alhamdulillah' which runs through our conversations like a kind of catch-all to the joys and sufferings of the women's lives, verbally embalming their feelings with a fatalistic acknowledgement that all things are ordained by Allah and praise belongs to him. As we also share our own hard stories, griefs and vulnerabilities with our friends, and the ways in which God has led us through dark times, we can help

give language and permission to the expression of difficult emotions. Sometimes we can tell stories from the Bible about women and men of faith who cried out in lament to God and continued to trust him, despite feelings of hopelessness and desolation. Several Arab friends have told me that in their cultures an emotional vocabulary and how to talk about feelings is not something that is taught to children. It is understandable, therefore, that in adulthood exploring and verbally processing complex feelings can sometimes be challenging. Visual art, as mentioned before, can be helpful in this situation, as a non-verbal means of working through emotions that may not have an easy name.

Finally, I have noticed that the benefits and value of sharing our own personal stories of suffering and grief with our friends as we sit with them in homes, or at the centre, go far beyond linking vocabulary to emotion. It allows genuine relationship to form, builds mutual trust, and allows our refugee friends to minister in their own way to us in our moments of vulnerability. This gives opportunity for the ministry of safe relationship, presence and listening to flow both ways and values the women's capacity to speak out of their wisdom and experience to our situations. For example, when I lost my grandmother last year and was not able to physically be with her to say goodbye or attend her funeral, I shared my feelings of sadness with the women at art club and received their genuine caring, comforting words. They know what it feels like to lose loved ones and to be far from home, and as such were able to respond with true compassion. Indeed, there is much I find we can be learning from the friends we sit with—valuing family, perseverance through great difficulties, the ability to be content with very little, and a commitment to hospitality, among many other things. Being openly honest about our own pain and vulnerabilities guards us too against falling into the trap of thinking of ourselves as the 'saviours' who have it all together and are

bound to assist the 'helpless,' and helps us see ourselves and our refugee friends in a more accurate light. However, when these friends can see that the words we speak of comfort and faith in the goodness of God even in suffering have been tested on real, difficult paths, it lends authenticity to our words and opens channels to further discussion, honest questions, and deeper relationships.

It has been said that sorrow carves into our hearts a path that joy will one day fill. As I grow to know and love some of the women of the refugee community in this city, it is my prayer that the deep grooves of sorrow that suffering has carved into their hearts will one day be filled with the healing joy that comes from knowing Jesus and his love for them. I hope that through their involvement in Jesus-shaped community and the safe relationships they encounter at our centre, that trickle of his joy will begin and bring with it transformation, enduring peace, and new life.