

LETTER TO THE REFUGEES

My story of fleeing and surviving, healing and homecoming.

I address this to those of you who are about to embark on the journey into exile, to those in the midst of that journey, and to those who have made a home at the end of it all.

Allow me to share my experience with you, and to offer some words of wisdom, practical advice, and heartfelt encouragement from one who has walked the path of the refugee, and found a way home.

I: LEAVING HOME

“You don’t get taught this stuff in school.”

You never know when it’s going to be you. We couldn’t fathom being on the “need” side of the hand. We looked around at the many displaced persons in our community and asked ourselves, how much terror must it take to abandon everything and find yourself in such a state of misery and desperation? We deluded ourselves that it would never happen to us.

You don’t get taught this stuff in school – when to go and what to take with you. It was 3am when we eventually joined the long snake of soon-to-be refugees and crossed from Rwanda into Congo. It would be two years and four months before we would see our home again, and not all of us were afforded that privilege: my son, father and sister were among those who died in exile.

Dear potential refugee...

Is now the time to go? No-one else can answer that question for you. External factors may be forcing your hand, but everyone must make their own decision in their own time.

In practical terms, we discovered that a cover for the cold, a small pan, a five litre water container, medication, very few clothes, any canned food, and food that can be consumed in two or three days are sufficient. Take your phones and place a bracelet with your name and address on any child under the age of five.

Stick with a group and adhere to the queue. In a lawless environment, numbers serve as your defence. Stay close to women and the elderly; cruel people have a tendency to show them mercy. Accept no invitations to go anywhere alone.

At the border, there will be a few organizations represented. Try to register as quickly as possible. If you are given the choice between a settlement with many or a private residence, it is best to choose the settlement with many.

Purchase or obtain a local SIM card so that you can keep up with the news, and begin communicating with those who stayed behind.

Above all, be assured that the agony will pass quickly. Save your energy. You will need all of your internal resources during the next phase of integration.

II: FINDING A RHYTHM

“You won’t be going home tomorrow.”

You’re traumatized, exhausted and in a completely foreign environment, and now you’ve got to get practical. There is no orientation for new arrivals. We refugees have to acquire knowledge swiftly and chaotically.

To this day, I have no idea how myself and my family managed to enter a “numbing mode” as we struggled to integrate into life in the refugee camps in Congo. We found ourselves having to skip over dead bodies, carry heavily laden bags on our heads, and go days without a bath or food. Some people with health problems went weeks without medication, while others with wounds had to tend to themselves. Others perished from exhaustion, the outbreak of cholera, and dehydration. Children were left stranded, some still nursing on the breasts of their deceased mothers. All of the vacant corners were converted into toilets. The stench was revolting.

Recalling it now, all I can say is that God gifted us a second skin, a thick skin, so that we could survive. We discovered that we had untapped resources within us that would, in these unthinkable circumstances, enable us to embrace our new normal.

And – despite it all – there were some elements of normality. I was surprised to see pastors and priests being instructed to organize church services in vacant spaces, and teachers registering pupils for class. Social professionals were asked to donate their services to society's most vulnerable people. It turns out that when people lose their sense of time, social contact, and the elements that make life meaningful, what they most need is rhythm.

Dear refugee...

When you arrive somewhere that meets your basic needs, stop moving. Settle in one place long enough to establish routines and your own support system.

Don't simply wallow in self-pity and resentment. Learn a new skill, further your education, join a club or sports team. Leisure time and laughter are still allowed, and they might just be your salvation. Send your children to "school", in whatever format that takes. Proactively learn the language, find out about your host nation, and seek out a local church community.

Naturally, you will also want to hear how things are going back home but the biggest challenge is getting hold of accurate and reliable information. With a local SIM and adequate internet you can connect directly with friends and family. Get up to speed with these technologies if you’re not already as they will be a lifeline for you.

By this point, you've accepted that you won't be going home tomorrow. For now, this is your home. This is your life.

III: FACING HUMAN LIMITS

“The survival instinct is strong.”

Refugees lead extremely fragile and precarious lives, fraught with uncertainty. One of the biggest challenges is how to hold on to our humanness, our identity, our sense of purpose and meaning in such a context.

Numerous people lost their minds to the anguish and agony of this existence. Many tried to bury their pain, anger, desperation and despair in alcohol, drug abuse, and all kinds of immoral behaviour. People of great prestige could not bear the thought of living as worthless beggars.

This comes as no surprise. When humans are pushed to our limits, we look for ways to numb. That also explains why it can be such a challenge to keep a grasp on our sense of right and wrong when our very existence feels so fragile. The survival instinct is strong and can numb the conscience. People do what they have to do to survive.

We may think there are certain lines we would never cross, but in times of extreme vulnerability – in desperation for sustenance, help, or consolation – it's impossible to say what we might be capable of.

In my case, we were operating on a shoestring budget. My wife urged us to drink only a tiny bit of water each, and to keep a small amount of porridge on hand for our two small children. We were carrying our belongings between us, and my wife also had our youngest child on her back. The trip into the unknown seemed endless. We walked and ran for nearly two days. In my weakest moments, I cracked open the small container and sipped once or twice, in the crowd, away from my wife's sight. The few drops of porridge gave me the stamina to continue walking until we came to a spot where we could rest. Maybe this sounds trivial, but that was a heinous theft, a breach of protocol, and behaviour unbecoming of a decent spouse and father.

I waited years, until we were back in our homeland, before I felt able to speak about what I'd done on that long walk. I needed to confess it, and in doing so I discovered healing in the depths of my spirit.

A further ethical dilemma I encountered was that, in my heart, I was opposed to war. But many of those around me in the camp felt that it was our duty to contribute to the “war effort” back home. And the locals could be just as cruel – “You have no business being here, bunch of cowardly losers. If you weren't willing to fight for your country, we shouldn't be penalized. Go back to where you came from, you filthy parasites!” Such savage words have left an indelible imprint on many of us.

That's another brutal lesson we've had to learn on this long road. It's not just our own communities that can turn on us. And it's not just our fellow refugees, pushed beyond the limits, that can fail and fall short.

When we arrived in our new nation, hoards of young people offered help and hospitality. Sadly, for many it became all too clear that their plan was to pick off a straggler from the herd, isolate them, search them, and confiscate whatever meagre possessions they might have. That was bad enough on its own, but some even went so far as to rape the women. The less scrupulous pretended to be security agents and stole purses, watches, and whatever else they deemed important.

When cholera struck, several individuals sold the rare IV serum at exorbitant prices. I witnessed some locals and migrants who had been assigned to distribute food stealing and selling it. Several of those working for NGOs acted as "lords" and treated us like animals.

Of course, as we know, not all refugees are saints. Some had already done terrible things – from looting and stealing to outright murder. But in the majority of cases, it was innocent, exhausted and traumatized individuals who were being stripped of whatever morsels they had left – food, dignity, security, faith in humanity...

Dear refugee...

I am at a loss as to what constitutes right and wrong when it comes to political activity, but the best you can do is to stay true to your own conscience. Your devotion to your people and your country should not compel you to betray your sense of right and wrong.

My own refugee experience also taught me that the "god" that we look to in the form of the international community is a sham. That thing is air. We realized that powerful countries can pick and choose what narrative to tell, based on their own interests. They can feed or starve you.

As a Christian, I urge you to pray to God for resilience. Pray that you will be able to make the right choices, and not succumb to despair and desperation, and pray for forgiveness when you fall short. Remember that we all have the capacity to lie, to steal, to cross the line, to do the unspeakable. Don't let this make you bitter and cynical, but rather let it empower you to be more compassionate towards yourself and others, while talking responsibility and living your life with your eyes open.

IV: HEALING & FORGIVING

"Healing is a deliberate act."

I have talked about how we somehow switched off our emotional reactions to the horrors around us when we first arrived in the camp in Congo. It was healthy and necessary for us to do this. If we were going to practically take care of ourselves and each other, we had to

delay our grief journey. As refugees, we couldn't afford to stop and allow our memories to replay the horrific images, and our emotional systems to feel the sorrow.

We were on the run for two years, living in constant fear and peril. 28 years later, as I attempted to write about my experiences, I was constantly surprised by certain vivid memories flooding back for the first time.

However strong and resilient we might be, we can't hide from our trauma forever. But I believe that we can overcome it through healing, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Dear refugee...

Healing is a deliberate act. You must desire it. Bitterness consumes and destroys you as a refugee. You won't necessarily have the opportunity to speak directly with people on the opposing side of the conflict, but you still have the power to release them from your own anger and resentment, and to set yourself free.

Whom do you still need to forgive? Perhaps you want to forgive your people or leaders for inflicting this suffering on you, or do you need to forgive your host country for letting you down when you most needed hospitality and humanity from others? Perhaps your husband remarried in your absence, or your wife sought solace with another partner? Perhaps, above all, you need to forgive yourself for the mess, the falling, the failures.

Don't wait for a cue to begin your healing process. Now is the time for forgiveness. Reconciliation, however, is possible when you return home or extend a hand of friendship to those you have labeled as foes. This is why the most profound healing and reconciliation happens when you find your way home.

V: FINDING HOME

"No, I have no regrets."

Not everyone will choose to return. Some will settle and establish themselves in the host country, working hard and piecing together a life of beauty from the ashes.

For us, there was no choice to make. The camps had been demolished, the situation in Congo was becoming more volatile, and we had to run back home to escape the shelling. How strange that it had come full circle and we were now seeking refuge in our own homeland.

It was disconcerting to feel as though we were strangers in our own nation. We had to spend months in transit camps within our own country before being allowed to work and do business. We were made to feel guilty for fleeing. Friends shied away from being seen with us. The country even had certain programs in place to "rehabilitate" us before we were allowed into the system.

I recall one acquaintance asking me if I regretted taking the road to exile and spending two years among the atrocities of the camps. I considered it briefly but ultimately replied, in all sincerity, "No, I have no regrets."

I tallied up all the rewards of our anguish. As a Christian, my faith developed enormously and the Bible became real to me. I was given the opportunity to serve the impoverished and destitute in their hour of greatest need. During moments of severe pressure, I learned a great deal about myself and others. I grasped the essence of life; what is truly significant and profound.

Dear refugee...

Returning home is a personal decision and will depend on a variety of factors. You may hear via the media that your region is now safe and stable. Family members may encourage you to come home. But this decision is yours to make and no-one else's.

Where possible, give away or sell everything you can because you will need funds to restart your life. While the UNHCR and other groups may help with the reintegration process, you won't get as much help as you did when you were a refugee.

As you cross the border, you will feel odd, as if you are in a foreign country. Expect a cold reception from neighbours and relatives. People will struggle to understand how to relate to you. Those that remained will have formed a certain affinity, and you will become an outsider. Inevitably, you will also have picked up some foreign cultural attitudes and behaviours.

Do not be afraid to relocate the entire family to a different town or city. It can be preferable to make new friends and acquaintances rather than enduring the pain of being an outcast among your own relatives. After you've settled in, once again, find your rhythm.

Carry a large tank of mercy and be prepared to hear horrific tales of betrayal, slander, and retribution. You will hear many stories that go something like this: "When they arrived, we were astounded to learn that 'M' had been leading them the entire time."

Perhaps you will never find out what became of M after the war ended. Forgive M. Forgive them all. If there is one thing that you have learned above all from your experiences in exile, it's that you have no idea what you would have done if you were in their shoes. Perhaps they lived and died with secrets you will never hear.

RECLAIMING THE NARRATIVE

The reverberations of your time in exile will continue to surprise you throughout your life, with new lessons and revelations about the things that you carry. I can speak of my own healthy detachment from material things, my realistic expectations of life and community,

my motivation to continuously learn new skills, my wide and deep network of friends, family, colleagues and connections that spans nations and cultures – I wouldn't have any of these things without my experience as a refugee.

Regardless of where you are in your journey, I pray that the God of all compassion will sustain you, that kind and trustworthy people will open their hearts and homes to you, and that someday you will find your way home – whatever that means for you. There is so much that is out of our control as refugees. In time, it is my hope that you will be able to reclaim your narrative, your labels, your identity as one who has walked in exile and overcome.

From a former refugee, in love and solidarity.