

Resting Solely on Hope and Each Other:
Exploring the Effects of Trauma and
Hardship on Refugees

April 24, 2010
Lake Avenue Baptist Church
Rochester, NY

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.

On October 24, 2009, the first gathering took place to begin to explore some of these collective practices. On April 24, 2010 a similar gathering occurred to further this work.

Welcome

Our day began with a welcome and introduction to the work ahead of us for that day. We introduced ourselves and where we were from originally. We had people from Liberia, Sudan, the United States, Burma, Nepal and one person who had lived in many countries. When we said, "Hello," in a variety of languages we were able to say it in about 11 languages.

One of the attendees had prepared a poem for the gathering called, "A Refugee's Song" which set a wonderful context for the day.

A Refugee's Song

Life has given me breath, but it wasn't just life, it was something higher
Then fate stepped in, there were twists and turns and now I am safe and sound.
Brave, alive and well, but who cares about me, really who does?
One whose heart is consumed with love and compassion
Who carries my burden so I don't drown, don't fall, and just simply survive?
Here I am still....., my new life will fully explain it

I've survived from wars that almost stole my soul, from the hatred that surrounded me
Angels guide me, over the threshold, through pains, sorrows; my soul's depth defines it
Yes, I've survived from hardships and trauma, a survivor I am and always will be
I know the strength that I carry, from yonder, from far away, resilient is truly built in!!!!

Life has given me a chance in a strange land
To live the life I never dreamed off, so finding resilience, I stand tall
Wondering a little, praying a lot, faith has led me thus far
Though, I am grateful, new opportunities are rising up
The joy I feel is indescribable, my gratitude is immeasurable
I survive like every other; amazed that healing is indeed possible.

Life has given me new blessings, which I will treasure and I can only value
In fact, peace has sat on my breast and love has come through
The love I have for me has been renewed, the love that others have for me, is so secure
I am resting solely on hope and that is all I need for now, all I will ever need.
Life has given me a fresh start and I am surely holding on, to the rest of my life.

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Collective Timeline

We then did a collective timeline exploring what drew us to this work. Specifically, we asked the following questions:

1. What drew you to working with refugees and the traumas/hardships they face?
2. When would you say you first started the work? (It could be in your lifetime or it could be something that happened from before your birth). Where were you?
3. Tell a short story of how you became involved?
4. Were there other people who helped to get you involved?

Since we were a small enough group, we were able to do this all together and hear stories of how we became involved. We heard stories like:

I always thought 'trauma' meant trauma like at the hospital. I became involved in translating for some Liberian refugee children in 2008 with the Rochester City School District and started hearing stories and seeing the things that really affected people. What I saw is that kids who have been through a lot were treated like they had special needs. Many had just never been taught what they needed to know in the refugee camps. I am not a professional helper/social worker, but when I saw what some of these children and families were going through, I decided to keep working with them.

Since I grew up, people called me "Doctor Amie" because I had gifts and skills. In Liberia, people came to me for advice with their problems and I talked with them according to God's leading. In January of 2000, the rebels came and took over. They killed my husband. My Muslim neighbor and I hid together to survive. God has a special ingredient in me. In Sierra Leone in the refugee camps, I heard the stories of people and decided I needed to help people heal from the trauma they had been through.

In 2005 in Rochester, I learned what trauma is through a workshop with Fr. Boyle. He helped me to see what I had been through, and I experienced a lot of changes going through that workshop. The workshop was for the Lost Boys and the Sudanese Community living in Rochester, Buffalo and Syracuse. After that I felt a sense of responsibility to myself and others to help in a new way.

My work started in Liberia working with people with disabilities. I saw how traumatic that can be – not being able to do the things that others can do and what happens to you. Then the Liberian coup happened and I realized that there are bigger traumas. My father got arrested. I had been going to school for business, but after the coup I decided I wanted to work with trauma instead.

Two years ago I started working with refugee families. I get a perspective on what they have been through here and before. I always thought trauma was one thing, but now see that it can be big or small. I felt a sense of responsibility to help people overcome these traumas – especially the day-to-day traumas that prevent people from starting a new life.

Exploring the traumas refugees have faced

As in a previous gathering, we spoke about the traumas that refugees have gone through. Our conversation focused especially on a few areas. (An assumption of this day was that we would not be able to or even try to capture the 'entirety' of what refugees had been through or the effects of this journey on us. Instead we would just try to work with what occurred to us during this time together.)

Losses - *We or members of our families have lost our husbands or life partners during the wars or conflicts. Some were taken from us, shot or kidnapped. Some of us lost our parents during the conflicts (or other family members). We lost our status as people because we did not have work or language skills or merely because we were new and unfamiliar with things.*

Alienation – *Some of us were now single parents raising children in the United States. We feel a sense of isolation from other people. No one greets us as we go about our days (people here just go about their business)*

Adjustments – *We have had to go from one situation to another. We had to learn to live in a strange land where we did not know the systems. We experienced culture shock and had to face new types of weather (like snow!). We live in our own houses now but our neighbors don't bother getting to know us and people don't bother talking to us. We have had to start our lives over with very little support and there is an overall sense of loss.*

Some of the losses that we spoke about were tangible and could easily be categorized. Others, however, seemed like traumas that emerged out of what we have gone through. Some examples of this would include:

- *We notice greater levels of domestic violence in marriages here. We also notice increased rates of divorce. In Africa, for example, we do not see this like we do here. Back home elders and other people from our villages call everyone together and sit with couples to try to work things out. Here people just call 911.*
- *We notice that our children do not seem to respect us like they did back home. They face assimilation issues and peer pressures that are different here. We feel a sense of loss of respect and loyalty from our children.*
- *In Africa, we sit with our children and talk together. Here children are so busy with computers, games and television, they do not have time for each other or us. "We're busy," is what we hear. Because there is no time for each other, our children can end up on the streets, involved with gangs or things like that. Parents become stressed.*

- *We or our children sometimes become the targets of bullying at school because they are not from the United States. This hurts us very badly.*

Exploring the Effects of Trauma and Hardship

As we explored the effects of the various traumas on our lives, we focused in on certain categories. In general it was agreed upon that these effects damage our lives, cause our families to fall apart and prevent us from bonding for support.

On our bodies – *We noticed that we have sleep problems, headaches, nightmares. We also have eating problems (of eating too much or too little), we have less energy or pains we cannot explain. Sometimes we have a tight stomach or digestive problems.*

On our relationships – *We notice that we get disconnected from each other. This leads to problems in our relationships with our children or our wives and husbands.*

On our selves – *We experience increased levels of anxiety and depression and our mental health gets distorted. We experience increased levels of stress. We experience self-blame for what happened to us.*

On our families/communities – *We do not connect and bond as we used to. We do not trust others as we used to. We experience greater levels of conflict. Sometimes we exercise greater secrecy or caution in our lives.*

Other effects – *We experience confusion. A part of this confusion is that our children (especially those who adopt the ways of the United States quickly) seem to lose the traditions and get involved in things that are harmful to them. Outside forces are very strong here.*

The Greatest Challenges – While there is an inherent risk in “ranking” or creating a hierarchy of problems, we did explore which problems or challenges seemed most difficult or persistent. When asked what the most challenging problems facing our communities are we said:

In the Sudanese community, I think domestic violence is the most difficult problem. The men have become violent, and the women do not want the men in the house any longer. There is no one to help the women or to stop the man.

In the Liberian community, youth involvement with the legal system is the most challenging problem we face. Our young people assimilate with the “wrong crowd” and they become involved in drugs and theft. The environments we live in and the pressures our children face contribute to this. Many of our young people do not have fathers (because they died in the war). Our children also lack meaningful things to do and do not go to school. They do not know who to turn to and become frustrated.

(This led to a conversation about the freedoms our young people have here. *These freedoms are different than in the countries/cultures that we came from. These freedoms have some very good aspects but also contribute to other problems within our communities.*)

In the Bhutanese and the Burmese communities, a sense of hopelessness is the most challenging problem that is faced. (One of the people in the group who works intimately with these communities offered this observation). People who come here as refugees feel as if they were 'somebody' where they came from and had a sense of meaning and place. Here the barriers of language, education, social systems, a breakdown in community and family breakups all contribute to depression and mental health issues and general hopelessness.

This led to a conversation about the role of community in supporting people. Without even trying to, the group began to actually transition to speaking about how individuals and communities resist the effects of trauma and hardship on their lives.

Resisting the effects of trauma and hardship on our lives.

One person commented on how in Africa, “there is no such thing as a single parent.” The community takes much more responsibility for each other. People also reflected that, “we don’t say, ‘I can’t help you.’” This seemed to be one of the primary ways that people resist the effects of hardship – they look out for each other. For both the Liberian and the Sudanese refugees in the room, this was acknowledged, as was the breakdown in the ‘looking out for each other’ once they encountered some of the forces at work in this culture in the United States.

As we talked more about how people resist the effects of trauma and hardship, we talked about the following:

- We support each other – often informally
- We talk to people back home and they check in on us if we are having hard times
- We met together to iron things out
- We get people involved in the places where others are having trouble – like the schools, etc.
- We tell parables to teach and instruct (The group had a good laugh because some of these parables can be quite lengthy and people here in the U.S. want us to “get to the point” very quickly - but we are not always accustomed to coming out and saying what we’re thinking...).
- We recite sayings that reconnect us to our culture. For example they say in Sudan, “An older person sitting can see things that a younger person standing cannot see.” This helps us to respect our elders.
- We tell stories of “success” to give hope to younger generations.
- We have parties and celebrations.
- We talk to each other (to counter the isolation)
- We look at what motivates us and do that (like praying)

- Our youth get together to play dominoes or other games (But, unfortunately, neighbors grew fearful of the noise when our young people played together and called the police. Now they are afraid to gather).
- We seek ways to connect with each other.
- We garden and plant the foods we want to eat or sell (We especially liked the bok ‘Seedfolks’ by S. Fleishmann)
- We try to recreate what we knew – fully acknowledging that we are no longer back home.

Before lunch, we reviewed the **assumptions** that undergird the work of “collective practices” as a way of thinking about refugees and trauma/hardship.

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)

Skills and Knowledge Exercise

At our last gathering, we did not have adequate time to do the “Skills and Knowledge” exercise. Because we were a smaller group and due to the interest, we decided that it would be good to do this together.

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?

When we had finished, thinking about this on our own, we got into groups of 3 and shared our stories. It was very rich indeed! Here are the skills/knowledges/values we identified:

Prayer
Having Family Meetings
Helping Others through Advocacy
Keeping Perspective
Humor/Laughter
Conversation with Others – especially storytelling
Writing

Some of us had never thought of these as “skills” that were practiced and passed down. The group seemed to have a greater appreciation for the efforts we and our communities had taken to address hardship and wondered together how an activity like this might be done within our own communities to surface other skills and similar appreciations.

(One of the members of the group who works with refugee children was curious about where these questions came from because she has used very similar language with her students and has seen similar results.)

What We Want Others to Know

We spent a little time talking about what we want others to know about us or our experiences as refugees.

Psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers have preconceived ideas about us and who we are. We tell them stories that we think they want to hear. But our stories hide the ‘real’ stories of what is happening to us.

Most people are looking at us through an “American lens.” They say things to us like, “You need to think about yourself,” if we are facing a problem. We were brought up, however, to think of others before yourself.

Many people in this country do not understand what ‘family’ means to us. We will support our family even at personal cost. In fact, it is not even ‘personal cost.’ We are so integrated into our families that in them there is no ‘self’. Our integrity (which we highly value) is so tightly wound into family.

You often ‘hear’ our experiences based on your experiences in the world. Thus if you have not had our experiences or ask about our experiences and what they mean, you will likely ‘hear’ something different from us in them.

Next Steps

As some potential next steps we said that:

This type of workshop should be done with young people to see what they are thinking and to find out more about their struggles.

We should take this to individual organizations and schools.

Schools should invite some successful people (refugees who had gone on to make it in the U.S. and overcame hardship) to come and talk to students or communities to give hope.

Collective timeline exercise

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Tree of Life Exercise- see separate sheet