



 Internally displaced people in Syria

Editorial: Confronting bigotry

These last few weeks I have been wondering what it feels like to be a Muslim, or to appear vaguely “Middle Eastern”, in Australia.

There is a scene in Mira Nair’s film adaptation of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Mohsin Hamid’s 2007 novel, where its protagonist, Changez Khan, returns with a colleague to New York from a business trip to Manila immediately after the attacks on the Twin Towers. At customs, Changez, a Pakistani national working in a Wall Street firm, is stopped by airport security and strip-searched, despite the protests of his white American colleague. This is the first in a series of humiliations and false arrests for Changez in the wake of 9/11,

and this believer in the American Dream is transformed from being a poster-boy for Ivy League education and capitalism into a scapegoat for American fears about Muslims and terrorism.

These last few weeks I have been wondering what it feels like to be a Muslim, or to appear vaguely “Middle Eastern”, in Australia. At the more risible end of the spectrum, calls for the banning of the burqa, either because some politicians claim to find it “confronting”, or because it is seen as a possible disguise for women (or men – for who would know?) intent on terrorist acts in Parliament House, dominated the headlines and editorial pages for several days. What has been more concerning to me has been the way that social media has given a platform to people wishing to air, and in doing so, spread, their paranoia

and fear about Muslims in the wake of the counter-terrorism raids in Sydney. A random selection of Twitter feeds, for example, yield tweets ranging from the acerbically cynical (“So the peaceful Muslims were planning to behead a few Australians on Australian streets”) to the violence-inciting (“Eradicate them! It’s only a matter of time before these radical Muslims will behead an Australian!”).

I found the following tweet particularly revealing: “Muslims in Sydney claim they are being picked on. If you don’t like it pack up your terrorist relatives and f— off out of #Australia then.” Behind this exhortation is the assumption that Muslims somehow aren’t quite Australian; that they are fundamentally aliens who have somewhere else they can move to, a place in the Middle East perhaps to which

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they owe their primary allegiance. This kind of bigotry is more often than not rooted in sheer ignorance: no-one who has an Australian Muslim friend or work colleague could possibly think of their being any less Australian than an Australian with a name like Christopher Tsiolkas, Marie Bashir, or Hieu Van Le.

The film actor and director Ben Affleck was recently on a talk show where another guest, a prominent neuroscientist, described Islam as “the motherlode of bad ideas”, and the host compared it to the Mafia. Affleck described this kind of talk as “gross,

racist, disgusting”, and went on to say, “How about the more than a billion people, who aren’t fanatical, who don’t punish women, who just want to go to school, have some sandwiches, pray five times a day, and don’t do any of the things that you’re saying all Muslims do? You’re stereotyping. You’re taking a few bad things and you’re painting the whole religion with that same brush.”

Pity the country whose national politicians do not have a fraction of the intellectual integrity and moral courage of a Hollywood actor. The demonising of asylum seekers by politicians and the

media in Australia isn’t very different from the demonising of Muslims that is happening right now. I never thought I would say these words, but take Ben Affleck as your role model: stand up for the truth, and confront bigotry and ignorance wherever you find them. (You might also like to follow JRS Australia on Twitter @JRS_Aus, where we will endeavour to inflame not bigotry, but compassion.)

Fr Aloysius Mowe SJ

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A crafty solution to loneliness

The incident reinforced for Sue the importance of patience and ingenuity in her volunteer role – and showed her that the lessons are often reciprocal.

JRS volunteer Sue Fogarty gathers around a table with a group of refugee women and children, instructing and encouraging them in their beading projects. Amanthi* has an inbuilt talent for this craft, and has hastened her learning by watching YouTube tutorials. Hnin loves anything with gold in it, and Ana has beaded in the past but is learning new, more complex techniques under Sue’s gentle guidance.

The idea of a beading group occurred to Sue while volunteering with male asylum seekers in JRS’ community detention project: some of them had wives, and these women had little with which to keep themselves busy as they awaited the outcome of their visa applications.

A craft group was the obvious solution. Sue had lived for a time in Dubai, where



the hot weather necessitated an indoor lifestyle.

“I knew the enjoyment that I got out of it,” she says.

The beading group is the latest in a string of projects in which Sue has been involved. The very first volunteer at JRS’ Epping centre (now relocated to West Ryde), she brought with her an awareness of the misfortune that often befalls others and the pain of dislocation.

“I’d been an expat many times in lots of countries and so I was aware of the difficulty of what it was like to start out in a foreign country – and I was starting out under very different circumstances to what these people are,” Sue explains.

Aware that the fear borne by asylum seekers is complex and deep, Sue has

striven to simply be a presence for the people she reaches out to – an invaluable contribution that volunteers like her make to JRS and the people it works with. Sue had one of her most challenging – and hilarious – encounters while teaching one of them how to make a curry.

“I showed him how to peel an onion, which he’d never done. I told him to get the oil. He went to get his jar of oil, and I didn’t look [at it] and I squeezed it into the pot. We put the garlic and the onions in and I thought, ‘Why don’t these onions brown?’ And I looked at the bottle and it was dishwashing liquid!” she recalls.

The incident reinforced for Sue the importance of patience and ingenuity in her volunteer role – and showed her that the lessons are often reciprocal.

“I thought, ‘How can I do this? He’s got to be able to cook later, and I can’t give him a recipe.’ So we drew onions and cloves of garlic and I was teaching him the English word and he was teaching me the Dari word and we made a basic pumpkin curry [using pictures].”

**Names have been changed.*



Where to now?

It helped me to realise that as time passes so do the times of injustice and evil.

The Curtin Detention Centre in Western Australia recently closed down. Sr Jacqueline Ford – one of the generous Mercy Sisters who have undertaken pastoral work there on JRS' behalf – reflects on the experience.

I have been to Curtin each year since 2010, and have seen many changes. The greatest difference I have noticed is that in these last two years the hope that was present in the hearts of most of the asylum seekers, that they would one day become citizens of Australia, has now been exterminated.

The detention centre at Curtin consisted of two compounds for detainees when I first visited and increased to seven compounds when the maximum number of men reached 1400. Each compound was enclosed, with six-to-eight-metre-high double wire fences electrified at the top and securely bolted with gates controlled electronically. There was only one compound where the detainees resided, and for me to reach it meant getting access through the bolted gates of unused compounds.

At first I found this a little eerie as it was a like passing through a ghost town. But then I discovered an ideal place to have a reflection time. This was an area where lovely native trees and bushes of the Kimberley region had thrived, and as I sat

among them I began to recall so many former detainees who used to gather under the trees and share their hopes, dreams, fears and sufferings.

It helped me to realise that as time passes so do the times of injustice and evil. Many of the former asylum seekers are now with visas in the Australian Community.

Each one of the asylum seekers at Curtin had his own personal story as to why he chose to come on a very dangerous boat journey to Australia. This hope has now become almost extinguished by the harsh treatment that is the government's policy for those arriving by boat and without visas.

The second last day I visited the detention centre and was conversing with a special young man from Iran when suddenly the silence was rent with the most horrific screams I have ever heard. They were screams of rage, terror, anger, despair and extreme pain. I heard glass breaking as the man threw things at the window. This was to obtain glass to keep the security guards at a distance. Then suddenly it was quiet again. Someone told me the man had received a visa the day before, and it was cancelled the next day.

I feel that those despairing cries will remain with me for some time.

link online

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Fun at Featherdale

In late September, 26 people, including four families, went to Featherdale Wildlife Park in Doonside. Nothing remarkable about that, you might think. This, however, was a visit by very remarkable people. The families were clients of JRS' Residence Determination Project - asylum seekers from all over the world currently living in and around Sydney in community detention.

Since they may not work or study for a qualification, an important part of what JRS' team does is provide opportunities for engagement, a social life and capacity

building during the limbo of detention. When a kind donation from a Catholic school in Meadowbank gave us the opportunity to organise a trip to the zoo, we took it with both hands.

Here, they not only got the chance to socialise with each other and our indefatigable volunteers, but also to explore a little slice of outdoor Australia.

The families were particularly impressed with the array of Aussie wildlife (excluding the enthusiastic parties of school children) they saw roaming around. The critters on display ranged from bats to bilbies and pelicans to peacocks. Our youngest client was most disappointed that the kangaroo did not want to share its tail with him – but Joey seemed unfazed. After cavorting with koalas, discovering dingos, seeking out snakes, camping around a crocodile and even selecting souvenirs, the weary team retired for lunch (with contributions from JRS and clients alike) at a neighbouring park.

Someone even managed to unearth an abandoned football from beneath an equally ancient tree and a soccer game was soon in full swing before a tired but elated group returned home.

Justin Glyn SJ

JRS joins Twitter

JRS has joined the social revolution: you can now follow us on Twitter at @JRS_Aus where we will highlight developments around Australian asylum seeker and refugee policy, raise awareness of the plight of refugees seeking asylum in this country, and continue to advocate on behalf of these vulnerable people in the powerful social media sphere. This is your opportunity to follow us, dialogue with us and share the story of JRS and the people it serves among your own social media networks.



Jesuit Refugee Service Australia
PO Box 522, Kings Cross
NSW 1340

Ph: 02 9356 3888

Fax: 02 9356 3021

Email: info@jrs.org.au

Web: www.jrs.org.au

Director: Aloysious Mowe SJ

Associate Director: Maryanne Loughry RSM

Head of Policy and Advocacy:
Oliver White

Project Coordinators:
Suma Pillai, Maeve Brown

Housing Officer: Mamour Seck

Volunteers Coordinator:
Anne Porter

Caseworkers:
Angela Gallard
Kim Mignacca
Matthew Potts

Patricia Lay
Linda Baxter

Kathy Moran
Cecilia Silva

Office Manager: Kim Mandelik

If undeliverable return to:

Jesuit Refugee Service Australia
PO Box 522
Kings Cross NSW 1340

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