

## **Volunteering with Refugees\***

by Molly Moylan Brown

Begin by imagining yourself in relationship with a stranger – in this case a refugee. Dwell there for a moment and imagine how our refugees' perception of themselves as part of a WHOLE has been and continues to be undermined through war, death, exile, and families divided. It is human behavior to want first to wait to feel safe, to stand apart, before creating the conditions for empathy and compassion. We must instead use our intelligence to overcome this fear of the “stranger”, bravely reach across to them, and embrace “difference”. The more diversity in our life, the more empathetic we become.

There is a saying: “The blessing is outside your comfort zone”. We do not want the refugees' feelings of disconnect to re-seed a cycle of violence. This must be at the root of our volunteer work. We must listen to them with open hearts, work to understand them, and make room for the gifts they have brought with them. While we continue to address the problems of their basic and material needs, we must also continue to enlarge our moral imagination to include the possibility of transformation – theirs and ours – through *relationship*. We must imagine and grow into the idea that we can be enlarged, made better by this stranger. This happens one person at a time, one relationship at a time. Though it is nothing comparable to the experience of refugees, as Americans, as

foreigners, we bring a particular sensitivity to our volunteer work derived from our living in different cultures and countries. We have experienced being the stranger, struggling as the outsider, trying to adapt, searching to find supportive relationships that will form our community and ultimately help us feel validated and vital in our new environments.

Being a neighbor is a moral concept, we share a collective responsibility for what happens. We have an opportunity as volunteers to help our refugees return to their fullest sense of aliveness, help them feel a sense of possibility, and help them find agency in their lives moving forward. The real potential of pluralism in our communities can be realized when we bring our best selves to our civic participation and develop *relationships*. What good can we do for others? What network of strong and supportive relationships can we help them build? How can we contribute to the sense their life is worthwhile? What narrative do we want to be part of developing? The cornerstone of the healthy integration of refugees is *relationship*, allowing for mutual exchange that can educate and enrich all parties.

This crisis is also an opportunity. When we roll up our sleeves to do this work, we are working in service to *whole* community. In doing so, we also fire up that moral molecule, oxytocin. Our hearts get ignited and progressively educated by the “other”. Allow the positive good from your volunteer efforts pass back through the

pipeline to your friends and acquaintances, let your energy and generosity become contagious.

\*(adapted from my opening to FAWCO Regional 5's *Panel on Refugees: Integration through Education*)