

Faces

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February 7, 2016

I dropped in on our local English training center for newcomers to Canada today. It wasn't a planned visit, but I was having a conversation at a downtown coffee shop about how the Syrian families we sponsored are doing, and I said something to the effect of, "Well, they're across the street right now in English classes. Wanna wander over there and see?" Off we went.

We arrived around lunchtime and were graciously treated to an impromptu tour of the facility by the director. All around there was a buzz of activity and the delightful strains of a multiplicity of languages as the students finished their morning's work and began to prepare their lunches. The smells were incredible. I thought about the sandwich and yogurt awaiting me back at the office and scowled internally.

I saw a few familiar faces waving eagerly at me. It was so neat to see these dear people who stepped off a plane in this strange land only one short month ago, now with notebooks in hand, smiling, showing me what they were learning, talking about their kids, smiling some more. "Coffee?" they asked. It doesn't matter where or when or under what circumstances we get together; I am always offered coffee by my Syrian friends. And I've learned that the only answer to this questions is, "Yes, of course."

We made our way to a table with our paper cups and instant coffee where they introduced me to another Syrian couple who were with them. These two were a bit further along in their journey with the English language, so conversation was slightly easier. The questions were the usual ones: "Where are you from?" "How did you come to Canada?" "How long have you been here?" "Do you have any kids?" This is relatively familiar terrain and I was able to traverse it with little difficulty.

Then things took a turn. "Do you have family back in Syria or Lebanon?" I asked the young woman with a timid smile. The smile left her face. She told me the stories of losing a mother and two brothers ... of bombs falling from the sky ... of her one brother (Christ have mercy) having limbs blown off and dying slowly because there

was nowhere to get medical treatment. All around, the lively multilingual conversation, the smiles and laughter, the clanging of dishes and forks and spoons continued to buzz and swirl about. But our table was quiet. Me and six Syrians looking absently at our coffee cups, playing with our stir sticks, shaking our heads, nothing left to say about things that should never need to be spoken about.

I wondered how it was possible that people should have to make their way in the world with such stories lodged in their souls?

I rode the bus in my hometown for the first time yesterday. Growing up here, nobody took the bus. And by “nobody,” I mean “nobody like me.” Obviously. There was no need. The bus was for poor people. Or immigrants. Yesterday, I rode along with my Syrian friends to make sure they knew where to get on and off. The closer we got to the downtown area, the more colorful the faces getting on the bus got. Brown faces, black faces, faces-obviously-from-different-places faces. Many of them were going to the same English classes as my Syrian friends. There were shy smiles and awkward English hellos from all these faces from all these different places.

I thought about all these faces as I left today. I thought about how easy it can be to look at faces and attach labels to them. “Immigrant.” “Refugee.” “Foreigner.” “People who ride the bus.” But behind each of those faces is a story. This is a truism, yes, of course it is. But it’s also a deep and abiding truth that is all too easy to forget. Faces can be masks for horrors that many of us can scarcely contemplate. Faces can conceal far more than they reveal. Faces only tell the smallest parts of any story.

And there are, come to think of it, no such things as “immigrants” or “refugees” or “foreigners” or “people who ride the bus.” There are only human beings with human stories. And, as grace would have it, opportunities for these faces and stories to mix and mingle and laugh and cry together. Or stare absently at paper cups with instant coffee, struck dumb by stories that should never have to be told.

Originally posted at [Rumblings](#)