

“What is There to Fear?”

“Canada has no history of terrorism. We are a peaceful nation and would like to remain as such. Therefore we have to guard against refugees who might be terrorists coming to our country.” So said a female participant at a refugee workshop, explaining why she thinks there should be stringent refugee laws.

As a refugee myself, I was somewhat surprised that this woman, who claims to sympathize with and support refugees, should make such a statement. But I guess she was being sincere in expressing a fear that she, as well as many other Canadians, harbours about refugees. Her fear is that many refugees, once in Canada, might not appreciate a peaceful democratic system, since she believes refugees often have a “violent background.” Given the chance, according to her, these refugees would probably resort to violent methods to bring about any political, social or economic change. True, the woman in question did not say that all refugees are terrorists, but she did think there are enough potential terrorists among refugees to make her apprehensive about an influx of refugees.

By law, refugees are required to prove that they are fleeing from genuine persecution. By law, we must also prove that we are not a risk to our host countries, that we are not violent. Those who arrive at Canada’s borders and ask for refugee status also undergo strict security checks. Even without these security checks, which should help allay people’s fear, I do not think there is any cause whatsoever for a “blanket fear” of refugees.

After all, we are not the instigators of violence, but the *victims* of violence. We are the ones fleeing from, not instigating, oppression and injustice. We took the ultimate step in trying to escape violence — we left our countries, homes, families and our roots, and became stateless. People should fear not *us*, but the unjust governments and political and economic systems that force citizens to flee. The refugees who arrive here, or in any other country, looking for asylum are the ones who have been made powerless and homeless by the perpetrators of violence, whose power is unchecked and who have no need to flee.

Listening to the woman at the workshop talk about her fear, I

wondered what sorts of images of refugees were going through her head. I don’t know all of her thoughts, but for me, the images that flashed to mind were of the many female refugees, Ethiopians and Eritreans — in particular those in Djibouti — who, having escaped death at home, suffer what they consider an even worse fate, that of rape by border guards and soldiers in the refugee camps.

I thought of the many women and children in remote camps who are ignorant of the procedures involved applying for resettlement to a third country of asylum. Even if they knew that such opportunities for a way out of the misery of camp life existed, they do not have the money to pay for transportation to the big cities, where the embassies of countries that provide such opportunity for resettlement are situated. I thought of the children, the orphans and those born in exile, who have little hope, if any, of ever seeing the home that should have been theirs.

I also thought of the many determined and courageous people who, having lost so much, do not give up, people who work even harder to contribute to their new society.

I thought, too, of Makda, our eleven-year-old daughter, and her six-year-old sister Emet, who, perhaps because of their experiences, are more accepting of the newcomer at school and more willing than are many others of their age to lend a helping hand.

When I think of refugees, myself included, it is not fear that I feel: it is pain at all the suffering refugees go through; it is anger that not enough is being done to give such people, especially the women and children, hope for a better future.

I’m not trying to deny that there are any bad apples among refugees — there are, just as there are good and bad people in any society. I’m talking about the majority of refugees.

I hope that those expressing fear of refugees would first ask themselves what is there to fear from people fleeing in search of peace and justice? What is there to fear from people who do not want their children and grandchildren to go through what they themselves have endured? What is there to fear from people who, because of having experienced first-hand the absence of justice, are now deeply committed to working for a just society?

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