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We're all part of the refugee story.

To Risk It All

Far from his homeland, his wife having finally succumbed to illness and all but one child grown and out in the world, the refugee from Czechoslovakia had reached the end of the road. With no relatives, no loved ones nearby, he struggled to support his son and himself.

He'd come to this small town in Iowa in the mid-1800s on the run from persecution, as the story goes—probably religious or political. Being a refugee had taken its toll. Overwhelmed now with grief and responsibility, unable to speak the language, he rarely left home, and he relied more and more on the boy, fourteen, who translated the paper for him every day and handled the practical details of their life. One day, the boy came home from school to find him dead, gun next to the body. He'd taken his life.

It turns out that the father had asked the town doctor, should anything ever happen to him, if he would look after the boy, and that's what happened. The doctor took him in. The boy did well, thrived in school. He went on to university and then to a top law school, becoming a prominent supporter of the new Czech Republic this side of the ocean. The willingness of that doctor to harbor an orphaned boy changed the course of the boy's life. I imagine it changed both their lives.

The boy was my husband John's grandfather. His story has a compelling aliveness—on the one hand, it's a tragedy: the father risked everything by leaving the old country yet ended up broken. It's hopeful, too: the boy's life becomes a tribute to the human spirit and to the power of community.

Some of us here may know what it feels like to be a refugee, to feel there's no option but to flee. Others of us know by heart family stories of relatives who fled their homes, or tried to flee, to escape persecution or worse. Many of us have met refugees in social and work settings, in taxis and service jobs. And most everyone, I imagine, is all too familiar with photos on the news everyday of real refugees in real time—overloaded rafts at sea, crowds pressing toward a border, families with hungry young ones in line for food, parents holding babies and the very old sitting by the side of the road, weary and still. Their faces tug at our hearts. And at our reason.

Why does this happen? How can we just watch? How can we live in comfort, with the luxury of shelter? With food on the table? With heat and cars? How can we look ourselves in the eye while the horror of other people's truth unfolds before our eyes? Distressed, helpless, philosophical, outraged, we too are part of the refugee story. How could we not be?

People have always fled. Fled from families. From churches. From persecution. From racism. Misogyny. Homophobia. From the suffocation of being marginalized, much less terrorized. People flee from bombed out neighborhoods, their homes gone. From starvation. From death camps. From certain death. Many don't make it. The raft falls apart and they drown. Running, they're shot in the back.

Our own religious ancestors were on the run from authorities for what they believed. One free thinker in the 1500s, Michael Servetus, was burned at the stake on a pyre of his own books which critiqued the doctrine of the Trinity. Servetus, like many refugees, fled with a belief that his hard-won opinions and the ideas that stirred his imagination were not only worth living for—but worth risking his life.

Another part of the refugee story are the people who make escape possible. While some are thieves and opportunists, many good-hearted souls do this work, often at great personal risk—like those who harbored refugees on the Underground Railroad or in the French resistance. Others work in official capacities and assist refugees with documents and paperwork, helping arrange for shelter, protection and transportation.

It was this work that called Rev. Waitsill Sharp, a young Unitarian minister, and his wife Martha, to leave their home in Wellesley Hills, Massachusetts, in 1939, and travel to Prague to help endangered refugees escape the Nazis. And—think of it—this work also called them to leave their two young children in the care of two church families—separated not only from their parents but from each other.

The Ken Burns TV documentary this Tuesday tells the Waitsills' story from the couple's diaries and also from the point of view of their grown children and grandchildren all these years later—another gripping family tale in which people risk everything to act on their principles. The Waitsills' work in Prague proved exciting and fulfilling. They saved lives. Helped hundreds of people get out of Europe. They also lived in constant danger—the film shows a terrifying sequence when they ran through the city at night, separated from each other and pursued by the police.

Rev. Sharp and his wife were among the first Americans to be honored as Righteous Among the Nations, a title that honors non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. And while the couple also founded the Unitarian Service Committee, now the UUSC, their accomplishments came at a high price. The children had a rough time. Family relationships suffered greatly, and to this day, emotions run high about the impact on the children of their parents' leaving home to answer the call to justice. Living our faith is rarely a linear process.

The fire of commitment burned in Martha Waitsill well into her later years. A grown grandchild remembers her often asking “a wonderful, provocative question.... ‘What are you going to do in your life that’s important?’ ”

Who doesn't struggle with that question? Who doesn't long to do something important, something that matters? Feelings of inadequacy hound us. Lack of imagination stalls us. Fear holds us back, but make no mistake! We can do plenty in our life that's important. We, who in fact are players in the refugee story, can make a difference. Especially this election year, as once again Americans are asked to vote on our values. Especially this year when rhetoric and hatred toward that person who is “the other” has never been louder. People of conscience, who try to embody the spirit of genuine invitation every day, can do more than vote.

A Chicago woman approaches two Afghan refugees—Farah Ahmedi, a young teenager, who lost a leg as a girl when she stepped on a landmine on the way to school, and her mother—true story in the girl’s memoir written 10 years ago, entitled *An Afghan Girl on the Other Side of the Sky*.¹ Farah and her mother have survived an unbelievable sequence of horrors. And, not unlike that Czech refugee and his son, after several years of bureaucratic delays before finally leaving their homeland, they struggle terribly in America. They receive three short months of government assistance, then find themselves cut loose, entirely on their own in Chicago, and in no way able to sustain themselves, much less succeed in finding what Farah calls “the sweet anonymity of blending in.”²

They speak broken English at best. Like the son of the Czech refugee, Farah falls into a caretaking role for her mother, who’s virtually paralyzed by anxiety, having lost everything she once knew and homesick for “a world [they] never wanted to see again.”

And then a miracle. A woman and her husband knock on the door, offering friendship. It’s awkward—the Afghan refugees don’t believe the offer and turn it down. The couple returns and are dismissed. They return again. They keep offering help. The woman, whose name is Alyce, hangs in there. “What things do you need?” she keeps asking. Finally, Farah says they could use a second pot. (When they cook a meal, they can only cook one thing at a time, then wash out the pot and cook the next part of the meal.) A second pot arrives, then a third. Alyce keeps coming back, uninvited. Offering help. Trust forms. The refugees realize that they can ask for what they need.

One thing leads to another. Alyce helps Farah sign up for English as a Second Language lessons. She helps her find western clothes. She invites mother and daughter for Thanksgiving. Eventually she helps the girl obtain a new prosthesis...get a driver’s license. She helps with things you and I might not give a second thought about. And over time, their relationship evolves beyond one person helping another, to becoming central to each others’ lives, important to each other. Two lives, not one, are transformed.

Farah ends her book with a provocative invitation. Soon to graduate from high school, she writes that she has no friendships with her peers. She says it’s hard:

We [refugees] don’t want to take the first step because we assume we’ll be rejected.... It’s harder for us to reach out to you—we, with our clumsy English. I want to say, “Don’t be afraid of us—you have to understand: *We’re* afraid of *you*....you have to take the first step....It’s hard for us to...push our way in. It’s easier for us if we feel invited. That’s what you can do. Invite us in....We’re shy. You have to start first.”³

“It’s easier for us if we feel *invited*.”

“You have to start first.”

¹ Farah Ahmedi, *The Story of My Life: An Afghan Girl on the Other Side of the Sky*, NY: Simon Spotlight Entertainment, 2005.

² Ibid., 198.

³ Ibid., next to last page. My italics.

May these words remind us that we're all part of the refugee story.

A Czech widower finally gives up, but not before reaching out for help. The boy is invited into an English-speaking family. They welcome him, include him, harbor him. This makes all the difference to who he becomes and to who my husband becomes, too.

Despite the tough impact that committing to refugee work has on her family, Martha Waitsill wants her grandchildren to do something “in your life that’s important”—perhaps be an active participant in the refugee story.

Alyce in Chicago finds the courage and patience to offer friendship, a safe harbor. Turned down over and over, she keeps inviting Farah into her life until—in the fullness of time—fear softens into trust, and trust grows into friendship.

We close with a recording of the song “Would You Harbor Me?” by Sweet Honey and the Rock.⁴

Would you harbor me?
 Would I harbor you?...
 Would you harbor a Christian, a Muslim, a Jew
 a heretic, convict or spy?
 Would you harbor a run away woman, or child,
 a poet, a prophet, a king?
 Would you harbor an exile, or a refugee,
 a person living with AIDS?
 Would you harbor a Tubman, a Garrett, a Truth
 a fugitive or a slave?
 Would you harbor a Haitian Korean or Czech,
 a lesbian or a gay?....
 Would you harbor me?
 Would I harbor you?

“It’s easier for us,” says Farah, “if we feel invited.... You have to start first.”

So may it be.

⁴ <https://www.google.com/webhp?sourceid=chrome-instant&ion=1&espv=2&ie=UTF-8#q=would%20you%20harbor%20me%20sweet%20honey%20in%20the%20rock>