

Scattered Leaves: Piecing Life Back Together

Sitting on the picnic blanket with my family, looking up at the constellations, I didn't know what to expect. I could feel everyone's energy around me: something magical was about to take place. To my horror, what I felt was sheer fear. Fear for my life. Fear for my family's life. While the crowds "oohed" and "aahed" at the bursts of spectacular, colorful fireworks, I started seeing blasts and hearing gunshots. I saw people running for shelter, screaming until they could find cover. It was my first 4th of July in the U.S., but I was back in Syria with terror surrounding me.

This visceral reaction illustrates the deep scars left by the trauma of conflict. The injustice of civilians suffering amidst civil war violence beyond their control is a profound ethical issue. My experience highlights the terror that ordinary families face when disruption of normal life becomes the status quo. The sights and sounds of a celebratory fireworks display triggering associations with bomb blasts and gunshots reveals the long shadow cast over psyches and futures. It raises difficult questions around preventing such trauma, protecting innocents in conflict, and upholding humanitarian rights. What could have prevented my once-idyllic childhood from metastasizing into a war-zone? How can global bystanders stand idle while children's lives shatter?

I was born in 2005 in Damascus, Syria to a comfortable middle-class family. My father was a successful dentist, my mother a respected radiologist. Throughout my early childhood, we enjoyed a peaceful life full of rich cultural traditions. I have fond memories of my grandfather ritualistically grinding aromatic cardamom coffee beans every morning, as the rest of the household awoke to delicious smells wafting through our home. My grandmother dazzled us

with elaborate Levantine lunches- plates overflowing with olive oil drizzled entrees, roasted vegetables, nuts and sweet pastries.

After school I'd proudly display my latest crayon drawings on the refrigerator door, anticipating praise. In the evenings our home filled with the nostalgic sounds of my grandparents slowly dancing together to scratchy records- dulcet tones of classics like Fairuz, Umm Kulthum, and Farid Al Atrache reverberating. The lyrics spoke of loss, redemption, belonging. Looking back now with the clarity of hindsight, perhaps these cherished family vignettes foreshadowed the deep longing and rupture on the horizon.

However, in the pivotal year of 2012, the Syrian civil war aggressively escalated. Aerial bombings of civilian areas, extrajudicial killings by the authoritarian state, terrorist attacks by militias, and restricted electricity and water access soon made normal daily life untenable. Waking up one morning to see bullet holes piercing the walls and spiderweb cracks in the windows proved to my child's mind that something was irreparably broken. The frightening noises, security restrictions, and scarcity bore down heavier with each passing week.

My parents did their utmost to preserve my innocence amidst the chaos, not yet burdening me with the full extent of horrors transpiring outside. But when violence breached the perimeter of our once-secure familial cocoon, the stark new reality could not be ignored. One sorrowful October night, calamity struck in a way that shattered the last vestiges of normalcy holding back encroaching anarchy.

As my father finished work, there was a loud banging at the bolted front door. Masked gunmen forced their way in, knocking my father to the floor. They were operatives from a notorious local militia group that had veered towards extremism, funded by criminal rackets exploiting the power vacuum. Brandishing automatic rifles, they abducted my dazed father into

the darkness. One day blurred into the next without sleep or solace, my distraught mother fruitlessly pleading with corrupt authorities indifferent to our plight. My mother was given an unthinkable ultimatum- pay an exorbitant ransom within 30 days or my father and each family member would be executed.

This presented an excruciating ethical dilemma- comply with extortionists funding further violence, or risk brutal retaliation. It illustrates the horrific lose-lose choices civil war can impose on ordinary citizens for no fault of their own. My parents had to weigh bankrupting ourselves to enrich immoral actors responsible for untold suffering, against jeopardizing their loved ones' lives. It raised complex questions around moral courage, refusal to capitulate with naked aggression, and protecting innocents amidst cycles of vengeance. How does one make such god-like choices under the gun?

My mother faced an excruciating ethical dilemma when militiamen kidnapped my father for ransom, threatening to kill us all if an exorbitant sum wasn't paid. Complying would mean bankrupting ourselves and indirectly funding more violence. Refusing could be a death sentence. This impossible lose-lose predicament reveals how war tears moral fabric by imposing unconscionable options. My mother was forced to weigh enriching war criminals against protecting loved ones. Many families have had to make similarly gut-wrenching decisions pitting principles against primal survival instincts. It lays bare the sadistic choices cycles of retribution create, where individual integrity yields to collective penalty. Those leveraging innocents as bargaining chips carry grave moral responsibility.

After thirty agonizing days of my mother desperately selling off our household possessions and my father's entire dental practice to amass funds, the ransom was paid. My father was released, dazed but grateful. However the threats had already done their work - both

materially and psychologically. All that my parents had built now lay in ruins, with no ability to safely resuscitate careers and connections decades in the making. Like over 5 million other Syrians, we came to the painful decision that despite ancestral roots going back generations, we could no longer viably remain. The finality of it all flooded my young mind - saying goodbye forever to my bedroom, my school, my friends without closure. We needed to flee and start over.

My experience as an innocent child caught in a war zone spotlights the injustice of civilians bearing the brunt of armed conflicts beyond their control. The displacement of over 5 million Syrians like my family illustrates the failure of global bystanders to protect innocents or stem the violence. Standing by while children's lives shatter goes against fundamental human rights principles. The repeated trauma highlights policy gaps around enforcing humanitarian law, demilitarizing militias, and investing in conflict prevention. Those funding and perpetuating the conflict hold ethical responsibility for the resulting chaos forcing families like mine to abandon everything.

This forced migration away from the only community I had ever known created profound loss I still wrestle with today. The injustice and sadness of abandoning my home country has impacted me more than I initially comprehended. For years to come, I'd be left in a sense of permanent estrangement- geographically, emotionally, and socially. The familiar childhood cornerstones so vital in providing security and identity for young people like myself were all suddenly gone.

No more commingled smells of cardamom coffee and jasmine shrubbery welcoming each new day. No more lengthy homemade family lunches consumed while talking with neighbors and extended family. No more displays of my latest colorful doodles magneted proudly upon my grandparents refrigerator. No more swaying and twirling with my grandmother to scratchy

records as soulful crooners sang of days gone by. The only childhood I had known vanished overnight, with uncertainty taking its stead.

We eventually secured asylum in America and resettled as refugees into a modest apartment in Chicago. Compared with the turmoil back home, this new stability allowed wounds to gradually heal. However, acclimating to an unfamiliar culture created its own quieter trauma. Reconciling my two selves- the carefree Syrian child and the cautious newcomer perpetually relearning norms- sparked an inner crisis of rootedness. Back in Syria, teachers would praise my compositions as creative genius. Here I struggled to articulate basic thoughts, relegated by well-meaning instructors into “English as a second language” remediation classes separated from my peers.

My lack of English fluency erected barriers to cultural integration. I grappled with confusion over subtle social cues and idioms in my new environment. I was afforded special resources, but they reinforced feeling “othered”. Everywhere were signs I didn’t fully belong yet in America either. Celebrating unfamiliar holidays evoked discomfort - hearing “Happy Fourth of July!” but remembering the rocket’s red glare. Even seeing backpacks and lunchboxes similar to ones left behind caused momentary flashes of painful nostalgia.

At the same time, spending too much time recounting past trauma didn’t seem constructive. My parents had already relinquished their careers, social status, and family history for a chance at renewal. Honoring their resilience required cultivating my own moral courage. I realized early on that wallowing in survivor’s guilt or resentment would only undermine healing. The path forward lay not in what was taken, but what I could yet create.

I resolved not to accept being marginalized, instead asserting my full potential. Outside of school hours studying English vocabulary, I voraciously read novels like “The Giver”, “The

Outsiders” and “The Diary of Anne Frank”- tales of persecuted youth overcoming through passion and community. I discovered even imperfect new language could help me process complex emotions when harnessed for self-discovery. I wrote pages of verse wrestling with questions of identity, forgiveness, and hope.

When I performed well enough on standardized tests, I was accelerated into grade-level classes, bridging the perceived knowledge gap. My memories of academic success in Syria sustained motivation to overcome setbacks. I had regained hard-won ground, but schools still felt like neutral territory where I transacted learning without deeper bonds.

Adapting as a child to American culture surfaced my disorientation and trauma. Relegated to English remediation classes despite prior academic excellence, I felt marginalized. Confusion over cultural cues complicated integrating my Syrian past with my tenuous present. Inner turmoil was magnified by external barriers. But grace and care from those helping me learn English alleviated some culture shock. My eventual achievements reflect how sensitive support aids assimilation for immigrants and refugees overcoming displacement’s scars. Understanding the psychological dimensions of starting over, not just logistics, helps smooth transitions. Policies enabling refugees’ full participation demand both material resources and compassion that affirms dignity and diverse experiences.

It was actually my extracurricular discovery of music that provided respite. I became engrossed in jazz legends like Miles Davis, Ella Fitzgerald and Duke Ellington. When I could save up the \$300 from my parents' hard earned money that we were so frugal with, I finally purchased a used student alto saxophone. I began practicing John Coltrane and Charlie Parker riffs for hours, channeling melancholic sounds from the horn into cathartic release.

The instrument became a conduit for finding my new voice. I auditioned successfully for the school marching band, joining a sunny cohort who made me feel worthy again. The disciplined harmony of our collaborative performances taught powerful unspoken lessons about solidarity, trust, reckless hope. During competitions around Texas, I was eventually named section leader - helping guide less experienced players.

For seven years after coming to the U.S., my parents worked tirelessly minimum-wage jobs to afford basic necessities, all while obsessively studying to re-obtain their American healthcare licenses lost in the turmoil back home. My father attended accelerated dental certification courses late into the night to become a licensed dentist here, while my mother similarly worked around the clock to pass certification exams in radiology. As the oldest child in a household now struggling, I had to assume caretaker duties for my younger siblings- getting them ready each school day, helping with homework in courses I had just mastered myself.

Even with these increased family responsibilities and nagging financial worries, for the first time since leaving Syria I felt renewed personal safety and forward career momentum. Our modest apartment became a warm sanctuary, with the refrigerator now proudly displaying my report cards with A's and gold-foil trophies from the marching band's accomplishments. The smells of my mother's baba ganoush again filled rooms which echoed with my father's off-tune love songs from his oud (a traditional Syrian instrument) rather than munitions blasts.

Having to no longer hyper-prioritize basic security and survival on a daily basis meant I could unwind perpetual vigilance and explore professional passions. With the benefit of my parents' unrelenting sacrifice and protection, I flourished into a promising student leader enthused about uplifting others. My success story affirms how moral courage and compassion shown both by refugees and those welcoming them can foster growth even on scorched earth.

In retrospect, seeing my parents relinquish hard-won careers, social standing and property back home- solely to shield family- proved to me that resilience is a quality I must carry forward to live fully. The war had incinerated the bridge between my childhood and me, taking with it many of my past joys and dreams. But persevering through this life-altering hardship taught me indispensable lessons. I gained an optimistic spirit appreciating renewal, an armor against adversity nurtured by necessity, and a diverse perspective attuned to the shared condition of humankind.

Starting from scratch as refugees in America required immense sacrifice and resilience from my family. The courage to persist despite trauma and loss of status reveals the human capacity to regenerate. My parents relinquished successful careers to take menial jobs and study for U.S. medical licensing into the night, all to offer us renewed stability. Their selflessness and vision affirms how moral purpose fuels recovery, as we leaned on our adopted community. Our incremental progress spotlights the potential of displaced people when given opportunity. Ethical reception of refugees demands recognizing their latent talents, not just material needs. Shared responsibility in uplifting those rebuilding with humility after turmoil carries moral weight.

While traumatic memories still sometimes surface when I least expect, like on that 4th of July picnic years ago, I now feel pride and possibility when gazing up at the open sky. My larger understanding of the forced migration crisis puts my struggles in perspective. I recognize the privilege of being able to rebuild lives in a country like America, when less fortunate refugees experience ongoing exploitation.

My acceptance into a top university to study biology to one day become a physician to heal those who are less fortunate underscores how education can help turn personal suffering into social conscience and service. On campus I connected with a vibrant collective of immigrant

activists and allies. We have organized policies upholding family reunification rights, just asylum practices, and economic empowerment programs for new Americans. I now assist refugee youth in coding and creative arts, hoping to lift hearts and hands marred by tyranny.

I feel enormous gratitude for those who helped ease my passage to better prospects- my family above all else, but also caring strangers who choose compassion over indifference. Their examples drive my dedication now to fostering hope and opportunity for other displaced young souls. By elevating exiled talent barred from blossoming, I hope to multiply the second chances my parents sacrificed so much for to secure.

When I glance up at the American flag snapping in the wind, or hear the national anthem sung aloud, there is still some small lingering doubt over whether I fully belong in this adopted homeland. Yet in community service efforts, campus activism, and welcoming the next new arrival to these shores, I reaffirm my commitment to help author the history yet to be.

I dedicate myself to advancing the American experiment's highest humanistic ideals of plurality, equity and emancipation which first stirred my imagination. If this nation's destiny is continually reinvented by spirited waves of hopeful humanity unfurling their potential, then I too stake claim to that unfinished story now. No longer displaced, but still traveling hopefully. No longer disabled, but determined for discord to be redeemed.

A student was talking with her professor after class about ethics. She asked her professor if someone were to really wrong you to destroy your home and threaten to harm your family, wouldn't revenge be justified even if it's technically unethical?

The professor replied: I know the desire for retaliation seems valid there. But imagine if the trees that were burned by forest fires were to get angry and lash out; would they spare the match that lit them, or graciously grow back branches of shade? The student looked puzzled. The

professor continued gently: Revenge usually just cycles more violence, however unfair the original act. The ethical ideal is forgiveness, though that can seem impossible after trauma. Still, we must try. That weekend they volunteered together raking a neighbor's leaves. As piles accumulated, the professor said: Notice how stoically trees stand through storms of life, vulnerable but resilient. We can emulate such wisdom amidst pain and chaos- building inner reserves to renew meaning like nature after forest fires.

He scattered some leaves demonstratively. The goodness is often in what we make of fragments, not what gets broken. In piecing things back little by little, we transform. However, stripped by life's winters, we still hold small seeds for possible springs. The student grabbed drifting leaves, considering his words. She felt sad yet oddly hopeful imagining new growth sprouting from devastation's ashes.

So far, my life story underscores ethical complexities in preventing unnecessary suffering, making impossible choices, and channeling resilience across communities. It compels seeking justice beyond retribution's cycle. If innocence demands protection and potential deserves nurturing, then both head and heart must guide the refugee's long road towards renewed wholeness.

My family's journey from civil war's grip to refuge in America has imprinted the complexity of such ethical tradeoffs on my heart. Similar to the student grasping fading leaves, I wrestle with sadness over lost childhood yet reach for optimism. My parents exhibited the resilience of noble trees in conflict's blaze- seeking renewal through moral courage built over time. Starting anew as strangers in a foreign land demanded immense sacrifice, but gradual cultural integration awakened the promise of belonging to something great.

Today when I hear newcomers recounting similar passages into unpredictable waters, I share the professor's lesson on life emerging from bareness. We transmute brokenness into wisdom when clouds of resentment dissipate. However impossible it seems, the ethical seed lies in forgiveness, not retribution's vicious cycle. If innocence demands protection and talent deserves elevation, then empathy must temper policies and open arms.

On evening walks now further from old unrest, I pause to admire tenacious branches sprouting along my path from decaying stumps. And I recall the professor's teaching on making goodness from fragmentation. By mending rifts in this emerging community I call home, I honor the resilience that sustained my family thus far- still finding light where shadows fall.