

Listening to Refugees' Stories

Heather Lash

What attitude can we – teachers and tutors – take in front of learners' autobiographical accounts of trauma? How can we be open to hearing without being vampiric or voyeuristic? How can stories be truthful about a self without reducing that self to a few summary incidents?

In the adult literacy classroom, we are familiar with the impacts of violence; we work mainly with people to whom bad things have happened. Economic, racial, sexual, and a host of other violences undeniably set the stage for most scenarios that bring people to literacy work. This is certainly the case with newcomers in our communities who have fled war: refugees bring inevitably heady raw material to the task of self-expression that is learning to write.

Refugees and asylum seekers are not immigrants who voluntarily leave their countries to pursue a better life, or greater opportunity. They are fleeing war, genocide, and persecution, and cannot be protected by the authorities in their country. What forces them to move is always beyond their control. What could be so grave, so frightening, as to make you leave everything you know – your community, your language, your possessions, your *home*? No one chooses this, nor such risky routes and methods of travel as are usually necessary.

When refugees receive permission to remain, it is often conditional or temporary, leaving many of them living anxiously in limbo. Their adjustment is fraught with tensions over resources: waiting on more permanent status, work permits, and family reunification, helping children settle in school, coping with endless bureaucracy and paperwork (usually not in their first language), finding palatable food – all the while dealing with culture shock and the sadness of exile. This is exactly when educators encounter refugees in literacy programs; it is in the aftermath of violence and amid all this stress that they are trying to learn. And the stories of how they came to join these programs will be elicited over and over again at this stage of learners' lives.

In fact, the first thing required of refugees is a narrative explanation of what brought them to the host country. They must drag themselves through a detailed biographic form and interview (the cornerstone of the application process), and they must tell their story to lawyers, psychologists, and doc-

tors. If the story's unconvincing, there is no chance of staying. Then there are the optional tellings, for example to the volunteer with whom they've been matched in a befriending program, or to the literacy class, teacher or tutor. Personal story plays a central role in curriculum – it may arise during



Collages on pp. 46-48 by Lenore Balliro

writing exercises or in-class discussions, or be triggered by learning materials used in class.

As literacy teachers and tutors, we may not know what to say or do as we witness these accounts. I would suggest that's okay – better, in fact, than being too sure of ourselves. In my experience, it's best to wait, and pay a particular kind of humble attention before we respond.

Too often, we, as teachers or tutors, think we've got learners figured out. Our impressions mix with whatever bits of information we have about them to form – too quickly, too simply – into a story. This is not just about stereotyping them; it's deeper than that. When we encounter learners, we risk filling in too much narrative – making the story coherent and linear when in fact it is complicated and full of contradiction.

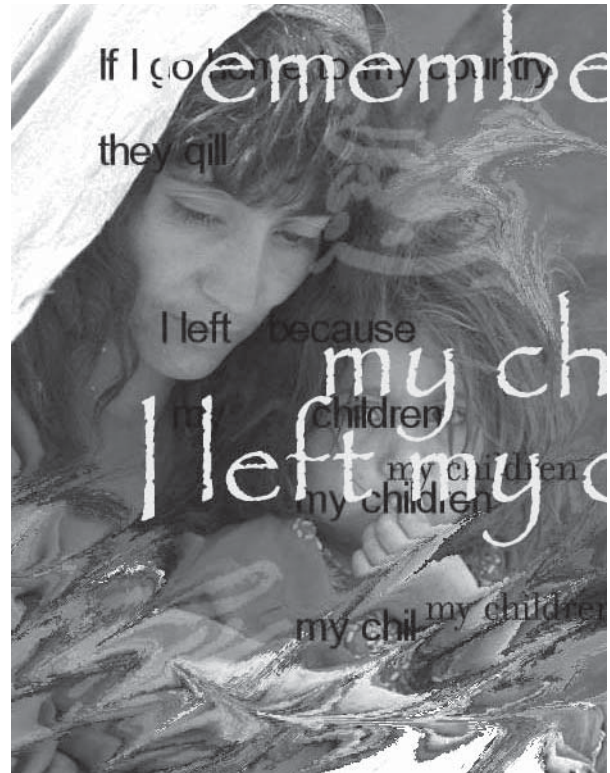
Assuming too much narrative about someone is degrading to that person, and so is prying for details. Yet, telling autobiographical stories is central to the literacy environment. It is how we listen to it that will foster dignified, equitable, and authentic relationships, which in turn introduce the possibility of honesty. But this honesty is not a

matter of *how much* is revealed, nor *in how great detail* it is revealed, but is rather a matter of someone speaking in a voice that is truly theirs and no one else's, speaking for their own reasons and on their own terms. This

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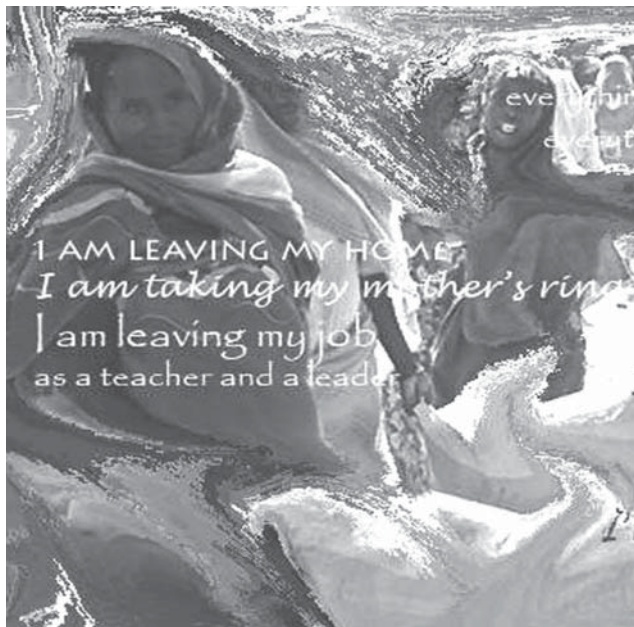
voice can only arise out of a body that is grounded and certain that it is in a safe environment.

It is a privilege to hear truth, anyone's truth. It asks that we learn from it, allowing it to challenge our own safety, and how we understand ourselves. When we listen without assuming, we can remember that as with any biography, there's a bunch missing, a bunch that's none of our business, and that the person speaking is choosing precisely



what and how to tell us. We all share a desire for listeners to recognize – to “get” – us, but it comes with great personal risk. Most tellers bring a profound ambivalence to sharing their stories; no one wants to be “gotten” like a reporter gets a story.

Pity, too, justifiably makes people squirm. When a teacher coos, “Oh, you poor dear,” he or she is also expressing how very different the teller's story is from the listener's. When difference is overemphasized it becomes a fetish. For instance, a tutor meets a learner who is a refugee, and right away sees her through a romantic Hollywood lens of how strong, how tragic, how resilient she is. Though the admiration may be heartfelt, it can make the admired one feel like an object on display, trapped as in a hologram, unspeaking. Here the learner is reduced to her refugee-ness; it's what essentially defines her in the tutor's mind. The impression of trauma has eclipsed all the other truths about the learner's life, and has stuck out as the most important facet of her identity.



This unwitting objectification goes on with all interhuman dealings: we are forever making assumptions about those with whom we relate. It's just, the risks are more severe where there's a power imbalance. It is hard to pin down what

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is wrong when a well-meaning literacy volunteer waxes on with, "I need refugees more than they need me." On the one hand, the volunteer is acknowledging something important – that the relationship between the tutor and the student is two-way. But on the other hand, such comments seem patronizing and even betray a rush of moral superiority. This will not go unnoticed. People who have survived violence are often uncannily adept at reading the room, at figuring out what's underneath. You don't have to know the words "essentialize" or "fetishize" to get a load of when they're going on.

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essential that I not perceive someone as only a refugee, but as a person as complex as myself. It is *the* cure for romanticization and objectification. It involves consciously honoring each individual's adulthood and agency, as well as their knowledges and capacities. Just as with any adult, learners' stories are private; a respect for the distance that separates us leaves room for the unknown.

It also leaves us open to being surprised by one another. Years ago, I participated in a performance art collective made up of people using the services of the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture. Perhaps the project started off guided by the notion that trauma would be processed through the piece of theatre we were to create. But during the writing phase, people fairly refused to name torture directly. It turned out that they wanted to produce

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a comedy. A rip roaring comedy. Trauma and exile were in there, but they were funny.

By claiming sole ownership of story, and representing it on their own terms, the collective rather flew in the face of anyone's unexamined fantasies about what's Good For People (including the ethnocentric notion that "catharsis" is always "healing"). And a story shared thus is a gift – one with integrity, one that cannot be hijacked, and one that, when we pay attention, can instruct and, yes, heal everyone it touches.

Heather Lash is involved in adult education in Toronto, Canada. She has served on the Board of Directors of Parkdale Project Read (a community literacy centre) for over 10 years, has tutored individuals and groups, and is currently an English instructor at a community college. She is a researcher and writer on issues in adult literacy with Spiral Community Resource Group. See <www.learningand-violence.net>, where you can also find many more resources for acknowledging the impacts of violence on learning.

