

Refugee Fatigue

by Jordan Hattar



While exploring the Eastern European country of Montenegro earlier this year, I met Hamzah* (on the left in the picture). Hamzah is a 26-year-old man whom I met while walking out of a convenient store in Podgorica.

“Where are you from, mate,” he asks. “California,” I reply excitedly, as I glance at his Los Angeles Kings hat. “Are you from California too?,” I ask, hoping he is a sports fan.

Hamzah is from Iraq—an area of Iraq that has seen much violence. He has witnessed community members being killed and been near to death himself, but I won’t go into the details of the atrocities that he shared with me, but I will share his story.

Hamzah reminded me of myself. Not only do we share the same age and stature, but we have similar mannerisms and dispositions about the world. Hamzah and I share the same optimistic outlook on life and also crave spontaneous adventures. Despite making a new friend, after walking around the town with Hamzah for several hours, I was almost left in tears.

That night I began to reflect on our different predicaments despite having so much in common.

Hamzah found himself in transit in Podgorica on his way to Germany, in hopes of reuniting with his sister and mom. I found myself in transit in Podgorica before embarking on a speaking tour across Europe.

Hamzah did not have more than 5 Euros to his name and was sleeping on a concrete slab in the town square— his temporary home before finding enough money to board a bus across Serbia. Whereas I was sleeping down the street from him at a luxurious hotel.

It was during this train of thought that I recalled this quote from the Gulag Archipelago by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn:

“Confronted by the pit into which we are about to toss those who have done us harm, we halt, stricken dumb: it is after all only because of the way things worked out that they were the executioners and we weren't.”

Hamzah could be from California too. Hamzah’s refugee story is typical and familiar and thus it is easy to lose sight of his humanity when we see people like Hamzah on the news. It is easy to abstract away the individual’s humanity. It is easy to classify Hamzah with the millions of other refugees forced to flee their homes -- this is when refugee fatigue sets in.

Mother Teresa once said, *“If I look at the mass, I will never act. I look at the one, I will.”*

Looking at the individual helps us remember that we could have been born into predicaments aside from our own, which can serve two helpful purposes:

- 1- As a reminder that part of our life will always be based on chance and therefore it is important to look for opportunities to serve others, especially people that come from cultures, religions, and backgrounds other than our own.
- 2- Looking beyond our constructed differences and towards our innate similarities is necessary to avoid refugee fatigue and allows us to find ways to take part in *tikkun olam*,” the act of repairing the world.**

*Hamzah's name has been altered to protect his identity.

** *Tikkun olam* is a concept in Hebrew used to describe efforts to “repair the world.” This phrase is often used by good friend Reed Taylor, a Board Member with the Holocaust Resource Center.