

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

Letters from Lesbos: A Recounting of Emergency Pedagogy in Action

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It is a wet afternoon and there is a clatter of chairs as the group settle in a circle around me. Syrian boys and young men 11-18 years old, housed in makeshift “porta cabins,” on the island of Lesbos, waiting to be escorted to Athens. They are the unaccompanied minors: the young people sent alone or with siblings to make the journey overland to Europe to gain asylum for their family. And I am at this moment the Storyteller. I speak slowly as my story is being translated into Arabic.

(A yellow cloth is on the floor, a handmade felt bird perches on the cloth).

This is a story about a bird.

The weather was getting cooler and the bird knew it would soon be time to head south to warmer climes. So it said goodbye to its friends and family and had something to eat. Then it set off on its journey flying up high above the golden plains, soon leaving them far behind and flying over the open sea.

(I pull back the yellow cloth to reveal blue cloth underneath).

It wasn't long until a storm picked up which blew the bird sideways.

(I make blowing noises and the bird visibly moves sideways).

The bird flew out of the wind and then the rains came.

(I waft a blue silk over the bird puppet at this point).

The bird flies out of the rainstorm and is now tired and hungry and a long way from home. Despondently the bird flies on. At the same time a little bird is flying along and sees the bird and says,

“Hello Bird! Where are you going? Why are you looking so sad?”

The bird replies, “I am tired and hungry and looking for somewhere warm to live...”

“Follow me,” said the little bird. And they did. Up and over. Round and down.

(I pull away the blue cloth to reveal a green cloth below).

Until green land was in view with bushes and flowers and buzzing bees. The birds landed. Looked around and lived happily ever after.

Therapeutic storytelling using animals or fantasy to delve into much deeper and challenging topics aims to help heal or

guide the inner being of a young person. My work of this kind has been inspired by Susan Perrow (2008, 2012) and it was through emails with her, a workshop that I ran in Athens prior to Lesbos, and my colleagues on the island that the bird story was created. I tell it as a puppet show with handmade felted birds and coloured cloths, simple, symbolic and giving a beautiful, visual experience for those who do not understand English. It is meant to be about a migratory bird but no one I spoke to in my two weeks on Lesbos in October 2015 said they planned to return home to Syria. They are on journey (an exodus?) for a new life with a future for their children. To these unaccompanied minors I wanted to give some beauty, hope, a glimmer of what it is to be a child. They have experienced so much. They are living as men.

What is emergency pedagogy?

I was working on a two week intervention with *Die Freunde*—a German Steiner Waldorf Anthroposophical Charity—which has existed since 2006, using Emergency Pedagogy to work with traumatised children. They normally go to existing refugee camps such as in Kurdistan-Iraq or after a natural disaster such as Nepal in 2015. Lesbos was different, funded by Aktion-Hilfe Deutschland. Our group of teachers, art therapists, social workers and a doctor were sent with no clear objective other than to help with the children. Emergency Pedagogy is the name for a set way of working with children in disaster areas that utilises research about treating trauma through rhythmical and artistic approaches very similar to those used in Steiner Waldorf education. Methods used include art therapy (e.g., wet on wet painting, felting, wax modelling, form

drawing), eurythmy and games (e.g., movement, dance, circus skills, skipping, finger string games) and beauty in song, verse, musical instruments or therapeutic storytelling.

Research into Emergency Pedagogy highlights the importance of working with human beings as soon as possible after trauma occurs (Ruf, 2013; 2015, Landolt, 2004). Kuhn (2009, pp. 23-35) argued the pedagogy itself has an effect on the child's ability to cope with traumatic experiences. So the sooner that an intervention happens, the greater the possibility that each person has to realign themselves and prevent the trauma from taking a pathological course (Ruf, 2013).

Emergency pedagogy on Lesbos, October 2015

Kara Tepe

Our mornings varied. Sometimes we helped people out of the boats and other times assisted in the Syrian refugee camp Kara Tepe with the chaos of sorting people into lines to register, distributing any aid, entertaining children with puppets, skipping, music, finger games and chatting to adults in broken Arabic and English.

The images that I saw in Kara Tepe were nothing that the media had not shown me before I left the UK—the crowds, the queues, the boat landings... But it was realising that the people that I looked in the eye and to whom I said “Salaam” were just like me...a mirror of a humanity...often woman to woman. just wanting the best for our loved ones... Yet now it wasn't remote or someone else's story, it was real. I was there, among them.

A university lecturer holding her sick baby who had ingested too

much sea water chatting to me for ages about where in Europe they should go with good schools and jobs and that she won't be going back to Syria. Her parting words were, "you are so good with children when you go home tomorrow you must get married."

Or another mother with three teenage girls all in perfect eye makeup and designer headscarves and I had begun chatting with me exclaiming about how fabulous they were looking after a night spent here. They smiled saying that although they had lost their bags on the crossing the refugee camp was so horrible they had been to a hotel. Later that morning their registration complete I was called over again as their mother wanted a selfie of me and her girls. My uniform cap was removed, my fringe straightened and a pink selfie stick appears from a pocket and there we are in the middle of the chaos with the aid of that pink selfie stick having a photo. "Memento" said the mother...

...I realising this was a very "modern" refugee crisis. The people arriving on the boats who had lost everything except their mobile phones kept safe in a water proof pouch around their neck. After a shriek of joy to land in Europe the phone is pulled out and family back in Syria spoken to. In the queues I was shown videos of loved ones, weddings, the boat crossing and asked constantly where can they charge their phone? This is 2015 and these are professional educated

people, just like me. I have my phone in my pocket—why wouldn't they?

Moria

Then each afternoon we went to Moria, the camp for people from Afghanistan—a mess with rubbish, people, queues, men with sticks, Greek police with shields and tear gas, haunting desperate eyes and not much hope. We scurried inside into the secure area where the unaccompanied minors were held, in order to use Emergency Pedagogy with the teenagers—to hopefully help them begin to heal themselves.

The daily work with the unaccompanied minors at the Moria camp has been for me what has kept this two week intervention together. A daily rhythm for us and the boys. Happy shouts of welcome when we arrive and friendships and understanding growing, even with no real common language. It has been interesting to work with the Die Freunde Emergency Pedagogy model beginning and ending with a circle. One of my colleagues is an Eurythmist (Steiner movement). She has led some fun but challenging exercises involving counting and different patterns for our feet, adding balls to pass and throw. The group delighted in my difficulties to learn it alongside them! Then often we have moved into something creative which I have been leading: for example, wet on wet painting where the colours flow into each other and drawing, model making with beeswax. One day I did felting and we made mobile phone covers which went down really well so they

could protect their phones for the onward journey.

We are enjoying the boys company: they are funny, cheeky but there are also some serious moments when in free drawing they don't copy my picture of a mountain, lake and trees but draw tanks and fighting. One boy just drew a face with tears.

It was our lesson on English, German and Arabic that attracted the largest crowd. We played games with counting and throwing balls and beanbags and then did some writing and speaking. Most are going to Germany so know their future relies on them being to speak the language.

However, there was a darker side to this work as a couple of boys did try to commit suicide whilst we were there. They had become so desperate in the unknown of their existence: would they be stuck in this containment camp forever? It was with one of these boys a couple of days later when he was released from hospital that I had to fight back tears as I observed his care, determination and creativity as he mixed colours to design and felt a beautiful case. He now knew he could leave in a few days.

How is Waldorf Emergency Pedagogy different from other approaches?

Ever since I began my training to be a Steiner Waldorf teacher in 2006 I have questioned many of its idiosyncrasies; describing myself as a “renegade” Steiner teacher. Yet here I was on Lesbos so impressed by experiencing the methods succeeding. I was intrigued by how important using the precise Waldorf emergency pedagogy methods were (as Ruf, 2013, clearly defines) and how that visibly differed from what I observed being

offered by the charity *Save the Children*. They had a child friendly space with some volunteers offering colouring-in sheets and Lego, both of which activities I know as an educator absorb and entertain a child, but do not necessarily engage and transform as Ruf (2013) argues emergency pedagogy can. *Save the Children* follow an approach where they offer informal education in refugee camps.

The initial emergency response is the creation of “safe spaces” for children and adolescents to participate in educational and recreational activities. These safe areas are clear of harmful objects and create a peaceful and supportive environment for children to play and relax. (Triplehorn, 2001, p. 15)

So a safe space had been created with activities that pass the time when waiting in those queues but no philosophy for education or trauma pedagogy seemed visible in contrast to the *Die Freunde's* Emergency Pedagogy model, which was driven clearly —if sometimes dogmatically— by pedagogy. However I did notice that *Save the Children* did have clear child protection policies in place: for example, no photos of the children present which I think *Die Freunde* could learn from.

Since my return I have also learnt more about a splinter organisation called *stART International* that also uses Waldorf emergency pedagogical methods but in a less explicit manner.

Somehow the daily rhythm of the work as Steiner informed actually enriched me as we began each morning with a verse, singing and eurythmy outside on the

balcony. I know that the opportunity to use Waldorf methods with the unaccompanied minors gave me a sense of purpose and at many times joy.

Sharing and grieving

And it wasn't until I left Lesbos, processed my anger that the situation continues, and began to grieve—accepting Herman's (1994) words that “trauma can be contagious”—that I realised how the experience had changed me, transformed me (see Pearlman, 2002, pp. 77-86).

I have since shared my story at six Steiner Waldorf schools in the UK and in Australia, with friends and at my Dad's Rotary Club. It has been in sharing my story, particularly with teenagers, that the power and beauty in my experiences has hit home. Telling a teenager about someone their own age leaving their home to go on a dangerous journey to find a safe place for their whole family, about that rite of passage, to truly grow up, opens Pandora's box...

On a shallower level, sharing stories about having a selfie taken, or the role of the mobile phone, connects to their lives. It isn't anymore the “them and us”; it is more a “we”... What would they take if they had to leave their home and go on a journey to save their family?

I was nervous about how much to share in the assembly to not shock or unnecessarily traumatise these children but it seemed there is an empathy of age in the plight—the rite—of adolescence and coming of age. I didn't talk about the man whose finger was black with gangrene and who poked it at me from the back of long line of Afghani men, drenched in a tumultuous downpour, asking for a doctor. Or about the unaccompanied minors who

tried repeatedly to kill themselves as their desperation was so great. Maybe I should have? But I am still dealing with these images myself and these shadows are still too raw and horrific to share. Once I vocalise these images they happen again in my mind...again and again.

I think back to that gangrenous finger. It was pouring with rain and I was covered in a poncho and had rain running off my nose and I was walking fast to the car, to the dry, for I had had enough. I couldn't help and I didn't cry. I had become numb to this chaos. It was like I wasn't there looking in from the outside. As horrific as it sounds it was like a zoo. I felt sick in the pit of my stomach for staring and not being able to help. I cry now at that numbness, the horrific nature of the chaos and lack of humanity. I am not sure I like this transformed “I.”

I know that it is argued that personal transformation is a risk we take as educators: that we don't know what the transformative effect of education on ourselves or others will be (Pearlman, 2002). It was in going to Lesbos, in entering that risky, “edgy” space, that the genuine learning, the transformed I emerged for me and for my colleagues, for the unaccompanied minors and for those UK teenagers and adults with whom I have shared my story. I am left pondering on the power of story. As with the bird story at the beginning of this piece, I hope to continue sharing stories that can heal.

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS *Letters from Lesbos*

Children and adolescents are the future; supporting them in processing their traumata is therefore not only a humanitarian act, but also a long lasting assistance to the development of countries affected by crises and catastrophes. (Ruf, 2013, p. 99)

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More information on *Die Freunde* can be found at <https://www.freunde-waldorf.de/en/emergency-pedagogy.html>

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