**TED Talk: Melissa Fleming—“ Let’s Help Refugees Thrive, Not Just Survive”**

*Today's refugee crisis is the biggest since World War II, and it's growing. When this talk was given, 50 million people had been forcefully displaced from their homes by conflict and war; now the number is 65.3 million. There were 3 million Syrian refugees in 2014; now (2016) there are 4.9 million. Inside this overwhelming crisis are the individual human stories -- of care, growth and family, in the face of lost education, lost home, lost future. Melissa Fleming of the UN's refugee agency tells the refugees' stories -- and asks us to help them rebuild their world.*

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So I started working with refugees because I wanted to make a difference, and making a difference starts with telling their stories. So when I meet refugees, I always ask them questions. Who bombed your house? Who killed your son? Did the rest of your family make it out alive? How are you coping in your life in exile? But there's one question that always seems to me to be most revealing, and that is: What did you take? What was that most important thing that you had to take with you when the bombs were exploding in your town, and the armed gangs were approaching your house?

A Syrian refugee boy I know told me that he didn't hesitate when his life was in imminent danger. He took his high school diploma, and later he told me why. He said, "I took my high school diploma because my life depended on it." And he would risk his life to get that diploma. On his way to school, he would dodge snipers. His classroom sometimes shook with the sound of bombs and shelling, and his mother told me, "Every day, I would say to him every morning, 'Honey, please don't go to school.'" And when he insisted, she said, "I would hug him as if it were for the last time." But he said to his mother, "We're all afraid, but our determination to graduate is stronger than our fear."

But one day, the family got terrible news. Hany's aunt, his uncle and his cousin were murdered in their homes for refusing to leave their house. Their throats were slit. It was time to flee.

They left that day, right away, in their car, Hany hidden in the back because they were facing checkpoints of menacing soldiers. And they would cross the border into Lebanon, where they would find peace. But they would begin a life of grueling hardship and monotony. They had no choice but to build a shack on the side of a muddy field, and this is Hany's brother Ashraf, who plays outside.

And that day, they joined the biggest population of refugees in the world, in a country, Lebanon, that is tiny. It only has four million citizens, and there are one million Syrian refugees living there. There's not a town, a city or a village that is not host to Syrian refugees. This is generosity and humanity that is remarkable. Think about it this way, proportionately. It would be as if the entire population of Germany, 80 million people, would flee to the United States in just three years. Half of the entire population of Syria is now uprooted, most of them inside the country. Six and a half million people have fled for their lives. Over and well over three million people have crossed the borders and have found sanctuary in the neighboring countries, and only a small proportion, as you see, have moved on to Europe. What I find most worrying is that half of all Syrian refugees are children. I took this picture of this little girl. It was just two hours after she had arrived after a long trek from Syria into Jordan.

And most troubling of all is that only 20 percent of Syrian refugee children are in school in Lebanon. And yet, Syrian refugee children, all refugee children tell us education is the most important thing in their lives. Why? Because it allows them to think of their future rather than the nightmare of their past. It allows them to think of hope rather than hatred.

I'm reminded of a recent visit I took to a Syrian refugee camp in northern Iraq, and I met this girl, and I thought, "She's beautiful," and I went up to her and asked her, "Can I take your picture?" And she said yes, but she refused to smile. I think she couldn't, because I think she must realize that she represents a lost generation of Syrian refugee children, a generation isolated and frustrated. And yet, look at what they fled: utter destruction, buildings, industries, schools, roads, homes. Hany's home was also destroyed. This will need to be rebuilt by architects, by engineers, by electricians. Communities will need teachers and lawyers and politicians interested in reconciliation and not revenge. Shouldn't this be rebuilt by the people with the largest stake, the societies in exile, the refugees?

Refugees have a lot of time to prepare for their return. You might imagine that being a refugee is just a temporary state. Well far from it. With wars going on and on, the average time a refugee will spend in exile is 17 years. Hany was into his second year in limbo when I went to visit him recently, and we conducted our entire conversation in English, which he confessed to me he learned from reading all of Dan Brown's novels and from listening to American rap. We also spent some nice moments of laughter and fun with his beloved brother Ashraf. But I'll never forget what he told me when we ended our conversation that day. He said to me, "If I am not a student, I am nothing."

Hany is one of 50 million people uprooted in this world today. Never since World War II have so many people been forcibly displaced. So while we're making sweeping progress in human health, in technology, in education and design, we are doing dangerously little to help the victims and we are doing far too little to stop and prevent the wars that are driving them from their homes.

And there are more and more victims. Every day, on average, by the end of this day, 32,000 people will be forcibly displaced from their homes — 32,000 people. They flee across borders like this one. We captured this on the Syrian border to Jordan, and this is a typical day. Or they flee on unseaworthy and overcrowded boats, risking their lives in this case just to reach safety in Europe. This Syrian young man survived one of these boats that capsized — most of the people drowned — and he told us, "Syrians are just looking for a quiet place where nobody hurts you, where nobody humiliates you, and where nobody kills you." Well, I think that should be the minimum. How about a place of healing, of learning, and even opportunity? Americans and Europeans have the impression that proportionally huge numbers of refugees are coming to their country, but the reality is that 86 percent, the vast majority of refugees, are living in the developing world, in countries struggling with their own insecurity, with their own issues of helping their own populations and poverty. So wealthy countries in the world should recognize the humanity and the generosity of the countries that are hosting so many refugees. And all countries should make sure that no one fleeing war and persecution arrives at a closed border.

Thank you. But there is something more that we can do than just simply helping refugees survive. We can help them thrive. We should think of refugee camps and communities as more than just temporary population centers where people languish waiting for the war to end. Rather, as centers of excellence, where refugees can triumph over their trauma and train for the day that they can go home as agents of positive change and social transformation.

It makes so much sense, but I'm reminded of the terrible war in Somalia that has been raging on for 22 years. And imagine living in this camp. I visited this camp. It's in Djibouti, neighboring Somalia, and it was so remote that we had to take a helicopter to fly there. It was dusty and it was terribly hot. And we went to visit a school and started talking to the children, and then I saw this girl across the room who looked to me to be the same age as my own daughter, and I went up and talked to her. And I asked her the questions that grown-ups ask kids, like, "What is your favorite subject?" and, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" And this is when her face turned blank, and she said to me, "I have no future. My schooling days are over." And I thought, there must be some misunderstanding, so I turned to my colleague and she confirmed to me there is no funding for secondary education in this camp. And how I wished at that moment that I could say to her, "We will build you a school." And I also thought, what a waste. She should be and she is the future of Somalia.

A boy named Jacob Atem had a different chance, but not before he experienced terribly tragedy. He watched — this is in Sudan — as his village — he was only seven years old —burned to the ground, and he learned that his mother and his father and his entire family were killed that day. Only his cousin survived, and the two of them walked for seven months — this is boys like him — chased and pursued by wild animals and armed gangs, and they finally made it to refugee camps where they found safety, and he would spend the next seven years in Kenya in a refugee camp.

But his life changed when he got the chance to be resettled to the United States, and he found love in a foster family and he was able to go to school, and he wanted me to share with you this proud moment when he graduated from university.

I spoke to him on Skype the other day, and he was in his new university in Florida pursuing his Ph.D. in public health, and he proudly told me how he was able to raise enough funds from the American public to establish a health clinic back in his village back home.

So I want to take you back to Hany. When I told him I was going to have the chance to speak to you here on the TED stage, he allowed me to read you a poem that he sent in an email to me.

He wrote: "I miss myself, my friends, times of reading novels or writing poems, birds and tea in the morning. My room, my books, myself, and everything that was making me smile. Oh, oh, I had so many dreams that were about to be realized."

So here is my point: Not investing in refugees is a huge missed opportunity. Leave them abandoned, and they risk exploitation and abuse, and leave them unskilled and uneducated, and delay by years the return to peace and prosperity in their countries. I believe how we treat the uprooted will shape the future of our world. The victims of war can hold the keys to lasting peace, and it's the refugees who can stop the cycle of violence.

Hany is at a tipping point. We would love to help him go to university and to become an engineer, but our funds are prioritized for the basics in life: tents and blankets and mattresses and kitchen sets, food rations and a bit of medicine. University is a luxury. But leave him to languish in this muddy field, and he will become a member of a lost generation. Hany's story is a tragedy, but it doesn't have to end that way.

Thank you.