

“Anne Frank and the Humanization of the Refugee Crisis”

by Frankie Andrews

The Diary of a Young Girl is arguably one of the most important texts in modern history. But what makes it such a compelling and important piece of literature? After all, it is simply, as the title suggests, the diary of a girl. Of course, it is the context of World War II and the Holocaust that makes it so extraordinary. Yet, at the core, Anne remains; she was no politician, she was no radical. She was a 13-year-old girl, caught up in something bigger and more tragic than could be comprehended at the time. She was a refugee; forced to flee her home as a result of her religion. After first fleeing from her home of Frankfurt, Anne was displaced in the Netherlands and eventually forced to hide in the Annex that became the central setting of her story. Through her writings, Anne describes her longings to return to her old life, to be with her friends, to go to school.

When considering Anne Frank’s legacy, one contribution in particular stands out. In her accessibly personal narrative, she helped to humanize the Holocaust for a modern generation. I include myself in the numbers who accept the Holocaust as a horrific genocide but are unable to comprehend the humanity rooted in the suffering. To millions of people, the experience of the Holocaust is simply a distant tragedy. We look at pictures of starving children, of the gas chambers, of the crematoria, and yet a separation of “us” and “them” still remains. To me, these were victims of unspeakable tragedy, yet I could not comprehend their humanness to any full extent. How could I relate to any of these people, whose hardships in life far surpass anything I have gone through? The answer to such a question lies in narratives such as Anne’s. When I first read *The Diary of a Young Girl* in middle school, I was struck by a sense of relatability. Here was a girl who died in the world’s most infamous genocide. My life was radically different from hers, yet reading her diary made me realize that she and I were so similar. This is the effect Anne had on so many people. Especially for young people like me, Anne provided an adolescent’s view on the Holocaust and on her experiences as a refugee. She helps people comprehend the humanity behind the Holocaust, that those who suffered are no different from us. Through her personalized narrative, Anne’s story provides an accessible viewpoint which allows readers not only to connect to her, but also to all other refugees.

Unfortunately, the parallels between the pre-WWII Jewish refugee crisis and the modern crisis are all too apparent. Between 1933 and 1945, over 340,000 Jewish people fled from Germany and Austria in hopes of protection and refuge from the Third Reich. The United States, perhaps the most secure country in the world at the time, refused entrance to thousands upon thousands of Jews hoping to gain protection from aggressive anti-Semitism. The most notorious instance occurred in 1939, when 908 refugees sailing aboard the “St. Louis” from Hamburg were denied asylum. Of these, almost 300 were later killed in the Holocaust. Later, despite reports of the genocide of Jews in Nazi territories, the US State Department passed even stricter refugee regulations, stating reasons of “national security”. This would be considered an outrage by modern standards. The thought of the US rejecting Jews who faced extermination in the concentration camps is appalling, and few would agree with the State Department’s decision. Yet the same thing continues to happen to this day. No hindsight is necessary when history is repeating itself before our eyes.

As refugees from all over the world attempt to come to America, millions are rejected. We often hear reports of refugees being forced back to hostile areas of war and destruction, or the infamous “Muslim ban” of Donald Trump’s first year in office. Despite reports of civilian bombings, gas attacks,

beheadings, terror, and rape, we continue to shut out people who seek our help. The similarities between this and the rejection of Jews cannot be ignored. But the question remains as to why we continue to ignore this plight of modern refugees. Pope Francis once begged the question "How can we not see the face of the Lord in the face of the millions of exiles, refugees, and displaced persons who are fleeing in desperation from the horror of war, persecution and dictatorship? For every one of them, each with a unique face, God reveals himself always as the one who courageously comes to our aid. Like Veronica, the woman whose face is unknown to us, who lovingly wiped Jesus' face." Pope Francis provides further insight into the inherent humanity that should be recognized in all refugees.

In today's world, particularly in America, the separation between refugees and ordinary citizens remains more than physical. Why is it that we have forgotten our common humanity which also bonded us to victims like Anne? I would argue much of it stems from a stigma surrounding non-Christians, particularly refugees from the Middle East, who tend to come from Muslim backgrounds. The United States is often considered one of the most religious countries in the world. Many people are devout Christians, and many politicians claim to use their "Christian values" as guidelines in their lives. Yet it is often these same politicians, who claim that Christianity as the main driving force in their lives, who also reject refugees vehemently, ignoring the values of "brotherhood" and "love for thy neighbor" that Jesus himself stressed.

An example of this hypocrisy is the current foremost figure of American political Christianity: Texas Senator Ted Cruz. In a GOP presidential debate, Cruz once stated, "I am blessed to receive a word from God every day in receiving the scriptures and reading the scriptures. And God speaks through the Bible." He must have ignored the dozens of passages asking us to "love thy neighbor" and "accept the foreigner" when he stated his desire to end all immigration of refugees from countries "where there is a significant al Qaeda or ISIS presence", which, to him and many others, constitutes most of the Middle East. It is this type of hypocrisy from supposedly "Christian" politicians that promote the stigmatization of refugees.

Because of the stigma surrounding non-Christian refugees, we are bombarded with stereotypes of refugees that cause feelings of fear and paranoia. In the eyes of certain media outlets, refugees are not human beings; rather, they are "Muslims", "terrorists", "people who hate America", and so on. These are sentiments that I have heard repeated over and over again in my school. Donald Trump, Jr. repeated another popular allegory in a tweet: "If you had a bowl of Skittles and I told you just three would kill you, would you take a handful?" We live in a world in which the lives of millions escaping war and destruction are reduced to a simple-minded metaphor. It is this lack of recognition of our common humanity that is the root of all issues surrounding the acceptance of refugees.

I cannot begin to ascertain the perfect solution to the refugee crisis, but I believe a change in the stereotypes surrounding refugees is paramount, so that countries like America will be more receptive to helping those in need, regardless of race or religion. We must end the practice of stereotyping refugees, and instead we, must embrace their inherent worth as human beings. In my own life, I want to strive to help in this process of showing the human side of all refugees. At my school, there is an unfortunate number of people who believe that refugees are dangerous and should not be allowed to enter this country. It is through my interactions with these people that I can contribute to solving the issue of refugee stigmatism. Harkening back to Jesuit principles of common worth and dignity, we are reminded of the fact that refugees are people, just like us: men, women, and children. I must attempt to help

others connect to refugees in the same way that I connected to Anne, on a deeply personal and human level. Refugees are not terrorists; they are people like Alan Kurdi, the three year old who drowned in the Mediterranean while fleeing Syria and whose lifeless body, faced down on the beach, broke hearts of millions worldwide. Perhaps, in helping to change the hearts of those deceived by stereotypes and fear, I can help people to empathize with refugees, and I would urge all young people to adopt similar ideals. We must strive to fulfill Anne Frank's optimistic view of us as human beings: that, "in spite of everything, people are really good at heart."

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