

The Gift of a Stranger: Forcibly Displaced People and Hope-Gifting

Author: [Sacha Bermudez-Goldman](#)

Image: [María Figueroa Sánchez](#)



‘We look everywhere for people, things and experiences that might help us overcome this sense of hopelessness, but to no avail. Yet, a place to which most people have not yet turned is the lives of the forcibly displaced.’ And this is exactly where we should turn, writes Sacha Bermudez-Goldman as he explores a spirituality of hope in forcibly displaced people for [The Way](#).

Between 2008 and 2011, I served as director of the Jesuit Refugee Service in Sydney, Australia. As part of our advocacy efforts, our staff spent a good deal of time giving talks to various groups – schools, parishes, other organizations – about the challenges faced by asylum seekers and refugees in our country. One of the hardest groups I had the privilege of addressing during that time was a class of kindergarten students at a parish school, whose teacher was a friend of mine. It was hard because I needed to find a simple way of presenting complex issues to these very young children and also because the last thing I wanted to do was to traumatise them in any way!

We talked for a little while about conflict and war, and together we ‘brainstormed’ about all the things that refugees had to leave behind, only being able to grab in a hurry whatever little they could carry in their hands and on their shoulders as the sound of fighting quickly approached their villages. Most of the children seemed to ‘know’ about war, or at least had heard what a war was like, and could actually imagine themselves grabbing that special toy or pet or blanket as they rushed out of their homes in their parents’ arms. After a little while, a pensive five-year-old boy, who had been eyeing me with great intensity all along, raised his hand and asked

me: 'Does that mean their houses were all destroyed, that they won't have a place to go back to?' I replied that in most cases this would be so; that some of them might not return until years later, or perhaps never again. The image of children his age without a home must have struck a deep chord because he said: 'then I'll talk to my parents when I get home tonight and will ask them if some of those children can come and live with us'. A wonderful example of solidarity!

Sadly, one little boy who never made it back to his home country was Alan Kurdi. On the morning of 2 September 2015, the world woke up to images of the lifeless body of this three-year-old toddler – one of at least twelve people (including his five-year-old brother) who drowned attempting to reach the Greek island of Kos, en route from the northern Syrian town of Kobani. Of Kurdish background, Alan and his family were Syrian refugees, fleeing the tragic war still raging in that country today. The picture showed the little boy, wearing a bright red T-shirt and shorts, washed up on a beach, lying face down in the surf not far from one of Turkey's most fashionable beach resorts. The image, depicting the full horror of the human tragedy unfolding on the shores of Europe (and other parts of the world), and encapsulating the extraordinary risks refugees take to reach the West, went 'viral' on Twitter within hours of first appearing under the hashtag #KiyiyaVuranInsanlik ('humanity washed ashore'). Alan's father survived the shipwreck. I cannot begin to imagine the grief he must have felt at the loss of his two small children and his inability to save them; wanting to save them – from war and persecution – was what had impelled him to embark on the extremely perilous journey across the sea in the first place.

Alan's tragic death is just one example of the pain, suffering and even death that face many forcibly displaced people during their displacement journeys. Much has been written about their plight, but sadly in most cases the focus has not been on trying to find ways to alleviate their suffering but rather on the so-called burden they place on the resources of countries that feel forced to open the door to them. Some people even consider them a threat to their way of life, mostly because they see forcibly displaced peoples as 'different' – in culture, race, religion, traditions.

Little or hardly anything is ever reported about the benefits and gifts that the forcibly displaced bring to their new countries. But what if forcibly displaced peoples were to be viewed as assets instead of a threat or liability? What if, because of what they have gone through, forcibly displaced people could in fact be bearers of one of the greatest gifts our world needs today: the gift of hope? I explore here some of the characteristics of a spirituality of hope in the forcibly displaced, and then suggest some 'lessons of hope-gifting' that we can learn from them – lessons that we *need* to learn to overcome the pervading sense of despair and hopelessness in our world today.

In Need of Hope

Whether we want to acknowledge it or not, in the world today we are becoming more and more a *depressed community*.^[1] The Dominican theologian Albert Nolan speaks of our times as the 'age of despair'.^[2] We look everywhere for people, things and experiences that might help us overcome this sense of hopelessness, but to no avail. Yet, a place to which most people have not yet turned is the lives of the forcibly displaced; while, for those of us who have had the privilege to be invited into their

lives, this *is* in fact an obvious place to look. I would like to argue that the best response we can offer to the hope that forcibly displaced people have in us – as developed nations of ‘the North’ and sought-after places of asylum – is the gift of hospitality and solidarity, and that, through this welcome, forcibly displaced people offer us a great gift in return: the discovery and increase of our own hope, through their spirituality of hope.

Broadly, spirituality is understood in terms of experiencing and responding to what is most profound in human persons: what brings up our deepest emotions and engages our conscience at that level. We see things through a certain framework or perspective which has become our habitual way of interpreting all reality. Then, because we see things like this, we habitually act in a particular way. These two things, our vision or *outlook* on life and the response or *way* of life which flows from it, make up what we call our spirituality. Defining spirituality in this way allows powerful images to arise connected to the lives of forcibly displaced people, which in turn speak of several possible *spiritualities of displacement*: a spirituality of sacrifice, of the desert, of the cross, of gratitude, of hope.^[3]

A Spirituality of Hope in Displacement

A first and fundamental aspect of the spirituality of hope in forcibly displaced people is that they must literally hope against all hope. They must continue hoping even when there are no visible reasons to hope anywhere around them. Living in extremely harsh environments, in many instances lacking the basic requirements of water, food and shelter, they often struggle to survive. Sometimes they do not. Particularly vulnerable, as we would expect, are the elderly and younger children. Despite acknowledging the darkness, bleakness and the apparent hopelessness of their situation, forcibly displaced people must continue ‘walking’, placing all their trust in the God of life, even when death is all around them. Their hope is then based on the *possibility of the impossible*, of believing that the impossible does happen.

Secondly, a spirituality of hope in the forcibly displaced is characterized by a great deal of paradox. This paradoxical character of hope points to the possibility that realities which, in principle, should be bearers only of damnation and death can become bearers of life and blessing: it *is* possible to love our greatest enemy, who by a twist of fate becomes our neighbour in a refugee camp, who offers a piece of bread or a blanket that saves the life of our dying child. It *is* possible that a life could be turned upside down and transformed as the fruit of an encounter – a child soldier who refuses to kill his brother and thus begins a journey of healing and reintegration.

Thirdly, this must be a spirituality of hope based on belief in a God who never abandons forcibly displaced people despite all evidence to the contrary: a God who is present in their extreme suffering – because God has lived it – and who will somehow make sense of that suffering, even if there does not seem to be a conceivable way for this to happen; a God who always finds new ways to come and meet them, who never gives up on them and never stops caring for them.

And fourthly, this spirituality of hope must be based on companionship, solidarity and relationship: forcibly displaced persons may not survive on their own. And if they do, they may never recover from the trauma they have experienced, for invariably their

survival will have been at the cost of someone else's loss. Hope that is shared is hope that is nourished and nurtured, especially when it is the last thing that is left.

The hope of forcibly displaced people is a hope that has had to survive the unsurvivable. And this is the reason that their testimony of hope is so credible. The key in the proclamation of hope does not reside in the consistency or the quality of its content, nor even in the way that it is transmitted, but in the credibility of the witness. In the case of forcibly displaced people, this credibility means that their hope can simply be expressed through a smile – words are not needed – because someone who has lived through hell and can still smile is an icon of hope.

Lessons of Hope-Gifting

Mark Raper, former international director of the Jesuit Refugee Service (1990–2000), was asked whether JRS staff and volunteers brought hope to a refugee camp, or whether they found it there already:

The richness of human spirit that we discover among refugees, including a vibrant hope, is always a surprise While there may be no rational grounds for believing that what a refugee longs for will actually come about, we also find hope Hope is a virtue grounded in suffering. It is a grace which gives strength. Hope is a promise that takes root in the heart and is a guide to an unknown future Hope is what enables us to live fully in the present moment The refugees have a message that our world needs to hear [and] learn from.[4]

I like to think of this message as the lessons of hope-gifting that the forcibly displaced can teach us – lessons that are offered to us, by them, as gifts. Here are some of these lessons.

Hope in the Lord, Jesus

Dostoevsky wrote: 'life without hope is impossible'.^[5] The hope of forcibly displaced people of Christian faith is in Jesus, in whom they see their own lives reflected. From the beginning of his life, Jesus had to flee into exile with his family to Egypt, escaping persecution and death. As they look at Jesus' stepfather, a poor tradesman, and his teenage mother embarking on a terribly perilous journey, many survivors of forced displacement see themselves. And that enduring memory shapes how they see themselves, as people who profess the Christian faith, in a way nothing else can.

Jesus' incarnation is also a story of displacement, of God's migrating from a remote existence of divinity towards humanity, to be part of human history, not in an abstract manner, but in the concrete experience of establishing a dwelling in our midst (God is always with us) in time and space. This choice for *us* would end in Jesus' passion and death. For many forcibly displaced people of faith, it is this connection with the paschal mystery that gives them the greatest of hopes, for through it their suffering is united with Christ's suffering and finds its meaning. They affirm that their hope is

sustained by their belief that God always fulfils God's promise: 'I am with you always, to the end of the age' (Matthew 28:20). *God does not abandon us*. Some people might wonder how survivors of forced displacement are still able to say this despite all they have suffered. But they will say that God has not been the cause of their suffering, humanity has.

Listening

Christine, a Sudanese refugee in the Kakuma refugee camp in northern Kenya, wrote:

The life of a refugee is not easy. What I would say to people who work with refugees is that they should be patient enough to listen with care to what we have to say. Many refugees feel their needs and views are not considered.[\[6\]](#)

From the very beginning, listening has been a practice intrinsic to the exercise of hospitality. In attentive listening – listening with the heart – we are recipients not only of peoples' experiences but also of their suffering and joys, and of their own lives.

Often, survivors of forced displacement are asked to share their stories, to reveal their identities, their origins, their personal journeys, so that relief workers may get an approximate idea of what they have lived through, of what their needs might be. Many forcibly displaced people would say that through the gift of others' listening to their stories, they have felt transformed from needy strangers into people who no longer felt so distant, to people who felt welcomed. At the same time, the 'listeners' – companions and supporters – have often expressed how the words and stories of the forcibly displaced have also changed them: how, somewhere along this process, their way of listening changed. They stopped asking so many questions and taking so many notes, and became more comfortable with the silence, which often expressed more than any words could. And then they began to ask different questions, whose answers, it seemed, they needed to hear as much as the refugees needed to say them: *How were you able to survive such pain? What sustained you? Where did your strength come from?*

Listening is an art that must be developed. It requires the full and real presence of people to each other. When done well, listening can also provide a healing service to others and, from this point of view, every human person has the capacity to be a healer. In listening with attentive interest, to someone's joys and sorrows, pleasures and anxieties, people discover the wounds that need healing and are able to offer their solidarity with another's pain. This, paradoxically, is the beginning of the healing process – to heal one's pain one must share the experience of that pain with others. If one wants to learn about the hope of the forcibly displaced, one first needs to listen to them and to their stories. But one also needs to learn to listen to the hope that dwells in those around them. Listen to one another with ears touched by the Spirit and then allow grace to find a channel and let it flow, freely and abundantly.

Humility and Vulnerability

How difficult it is for those who lack humility to hope! How difficult too for those who see vulnerability as weakness and will not allow themselves to be vulnerable. This

might be one of the main reasons that there is so much hopelessness in the world. Pride takes over our lives when we believe that we are superior to others because of what we have – prestige, looks, intellect, material resources. We experience ‘invulnerability’ when we believe that what we have can protect us from all harm, when we feel self-sufficient, when we judge that we do not need others (including God) for our well-being and happiness.

Hope, on the other hand, is precisely what we have when we have nothing: when we have no control over our lives, not enough resources to cover our basic needs, no prospects for today or for the future. Hope is then what forcibly displaced persons have, since they have little or nothing else. They know that God is with them and present somehow in their lives, even if they lack the capacity to see how God’s ways will affect their future. Does this mean that only the dispossessed and the marginalised can have hope? Of course not. But it might be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is proud and invulnerable to experience hope (compare Matthew 19:24).

Christian love is rooted in humility, as Jesus showed at the Last Supper, washing his disciples’ feet. To maintain an attitude of Christian love requires great generosity and a constant struggle against our own selfishness and desire for self-affirmation. This is another lesson the forcibly displaced can teach us: that if people want to grow in hope, they must grow in humility and have the courage to make themselves vulnerable. Only then will they be able to see life – and all that it entails – through the lens of hope for what it really is: sheer gift.

Gratitude

‘There is no better gift for people in exile than the hope of peace’, wrote Miriam, a young woman refugee from Africa.^[7] As we have said, human beings cannot live without hope, for without it the human spirit dies. People need to do all that they can to keep hope alive, and the forcibly displaced assure us that one of the best ways to do this is through being people of gratitude. They have seen the difference this makes in their refugee camps and urban dwellings, over and over again. Those who are able to find reasons to be thankful seem to grow in hope. It is not simply a matter of being optimistic, of deluding themselves into thinking that things are not as bad as they are, but rather it is about being realistic, with a hopeful attitude towards the reality that is all around them. It is about learning to ‘count your blessings’, to discover them and then to share them.

People need to do all that they can to keep hope alive. The quality of our hope is manifested in our capacity to take risks, to face adversities with fortitude and patience, but also in our capacity to continue giving thanks for life, even when life feels unbearable and seems to lack meaning. We must give thanks and do it often, and also do it together. In learning this, people have also learnt the meaning of gratuity: to give of ourselves in love without expecting anything in return. A lesson that the forcibly displaced have learnt through their painful experiences is that the more we become ‘gratitude people’, the more too we will become ‘gratuity people’. We all are called to live our lives also in gratuity, modelled on the gratuity of God, who gives of Godself to us at every moment, in love.

Keeping Hope Alive for Others

In an open letter to *The New York Times* (February 2000), Adelaide Abankwah, a refugee from Ghana, wrote:

As a refugee who spent two years and four months in Wackenhut Detention Centre in Queens before I was granted asylum, I know how important it is to have support from people who come to help keep hope alive. I am a Christian, and I went to Bible study sessions in detention, which kept my faith alive when it was challenged every day. Refugees come to this country thinking it is a land of freedom – freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from persecution. Detention almost killed my soul. Prayer and humanity saved me.[8]

Simone Weil once observed, ‘the extreme greatness of Christianity lies in the fact that it does not seek a supernatural remedy for suffering but a supernatural use for it’.[9] Christianity has never promised a life without suffering. The Gospels in fact clearly state that in order to attain salvation one has to lose one’s life, take up one’s cross and follow Christ. But the message of the Gospels is that all this suffering should not be considered as loss. Suffering can surely cause bitterness, but have you ever met people who in the midst of their suffering have become a wonderful grace to others? I have, and many of them have been forcibly displaced persons.

For those who embrace the Christian faith, only Christ can give meaning to their suffering. How often so many people have found the strength to bear their suffering simply by bringing their fingers up to the crucifix around their neck and holding them there, for as long as they needed to do so? This is difficult to explain to people who do not share this faith, who are puzzled by others’ finding solace and comfort in looking up at Jesus, the Son of God, on the cross. Some would say, as others have before, ‘If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross’ (Matthew 27:40). But the gospel message, the message that gives strength and hope responds, ‘Because I am the Son of God, I remain on the cross’.[10] Yet, how often so many people seem to forget this message when adversity and suffering enter their lives! When they ask: *why has God done this to me?* or *why has God abandoned me?* Forcibly displaced people, through their suffering and their hope, are vivid reminders that God has not done anything or gone anywhere, for God has been there, all along, tied to that cross.

Hope Goes beyond Optimism

The optimist builds himself safe inside a cell

and paints the inside walls sky-blue

and blocks up the door

and says he’s in heaven.[11]

Optimism is not the same as hope. It is not that being an optimist is necessarily something bad or wrong. Optimism as an attitude and way of looking at life can be a factor in well-being and happiness, and can actually improve one's health. The danger lies in its degenerating into a refusal to see reality as it is and an insistence that all is well, even when it clearly is not. Believers are not optimists; they have hope.

Optimists are those who, analyzing the situation of the world, find in it sufficient courses of action to foresee success. They believe that things will go their way or turn out well. Believers, instead, hope – not because of their analysis of reality, but because they believe in God's promise and commitment to them that everything in their lives – joys, pains and challenges, and even their suffering – will make sense and is worth the cost, regardless of how things turn out. The analysis of the situation of forcibly displaced people has rarely led them to find 'sufficient courses of action' to expect success. But their hope has kept them constant and unwavering in believing that what they have gone through, and continue to endure, will unveil its meaning at the appropriate time.

Advent Time

Advent is one of the most beautiful seasons of the Church's liturgical year. It is associated with special colours, rituals and celebrations. The word *advent* derives from the Latin term meaning 'coming'. And of course, *what* (or rather *who*) Christians expect to come is the Lord. It is then a period of expectant waiting and preparation for the celebration of the birth of Jesus at Christmas.

With improving technology and communications we keep finding ways to reduce 'waiting time' to a minimum. And this is a pity, because as the capacity to wait is lost, the capacity to hope is also lost. The forcibly displaced, on the other hand, are *advent people*. Many have spent a great deal of their time 'in waiting': waiting for something to happen to them or for them, because they have little control over their lives. This can be very hard and frustrating, but they also seem to have discovered a hidden treasure beneath this painful reality.

Perhaps a way to explain it is to say that although they live in real time, they also live in 'suspended' time. They live their own time now, but also live in hope for their children's time in the future. They hope for the time in which their children will not have to suffer any more. They hope that their children will have the home that they have lost, and perhaps have an even better home; they hope that their children will have the education they have been denied and will be able to fulfil their vocation; they hope that their children will have the peace that was taken away from them through the violence and hate of others. Of course, they hope for all these things for themselves too! But they do not limit themselves to what they need or want. And that is part of what this hidden treasure has revealed to them: *time-in-waiting* makes more sense, has more meaning, when one waits in hope for others. So, while the forcibly displaced live in suspended time, they also live in real time.

Prayer

In the letter to the Romans we read: 'Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer' (12:12). Karl Rahner used to say that praying consisted simply in opening one's heart up to God.^[12] This suggests that the point of departure for

our prayer should not be letting God know the things we need, but taking cognisance of them ourselves so that we can then open ourselves to God.

Many people have wondered how, after all that has happened to them, many forcibly displaced people can still pray. It would seem that the only possible answer is that the invincible power of faith in their lives impels them to hope against all hope and to pray against all apparent failure. And they could have learnt this only from Christ. His prayer during the passion, full of realism (*take away this cup*) was filled with total trust in his Father (*I know you always listen to me*) and of unconditional surrender (*not my will but your own will be done*). Christ's prayer teaches us that we need to centre our own loving in God and in God's love. Only in this way are people able to hold the two things together: anguish and trust; will to live and readiness to die; surety in being heard and absolute surrender of their need to be heard according to their own plans.

This is the mystery, and the lesson, of forcibly displaced people's lives as people of faith and of their prayer as Christians. Who can understand this? Only the one who prays and pleads. If you want to understand it, do what they do every day: pray, beg and weep if necessary.^[13] Pray, and wait, as they also do every day. Prayer is not about searching. Searching suggests an activity – *I have to do something* – an impatience. Prayer is waiting. As we have just mentioned, the act of waiting places the emphasis on the other person who is to come, and all we can do is to wait for him or her to arrive. Through waiting we express our powerlessness and our inability to make things happen, and this should be our attitude towards God. We cannot make God come to us. All we can do is wait and be present. Prayer is, then, to lose control, become vulnerable and allow God to guide us. Prayer is waiting, and this act of waiting moulds and shapes our personality. If we learn to wait, we will become different people – more attentive, contemplative and receptive; we will stop asking and will instead worship and love.

The Gift of a Stranger

I have attempted to present briefly what a lived spirituality of hope through the eyes and experiences of forcibly displaced people might look like, how that spirituality sustains them and what it can teach us as we continue our journey together towards God. In summary: trust in Jesus, listen, strive to be humble, allow yourself to be vulnerable, be grateful, be a source of hope to others, let hope take over when optimism fails, learn to become advent people and never cease praying. These are some of the lessons of hope-gifting that the forcibly displaced offer to us. Personally, my life has been changed by the forcibly displaced people and ex-refugees whom I have met. They have taught me about hope simply through being present to one another; I have witnessed their courage and strength in the midst of suffering, and I have experienced hope, especially, as God's gift in our companionship.

To be sure, forced displacement brings out the best and worst in people, and two temptations should be avoided: either romanticising them, their lives and motivation, or judging them and their actions. People who have gone through so much suffering, who have lost loved ones to violence and have experienced violence, are not immune to turning violent themselves. Experience, however, has shown that for forcibly displaced people of faith this has not usually been the case. I believe this has

to do with their faith and their hope, which in turn has led them to act with charity and care towards those around them. Not all forcibly displaced people can sustain that faith. But I speak here of those who have; for them faith, hope and charity have helped them stay true to who they are and who they have been created to be. While hope does not take away their pain and suffering, they welcome it as God's gift. That gift is enough to know that 'God knows' them, loves them and cares for them. That is the greatest lesson they share with us.

Sacha Bermudez-Goldman SJ completed a PhD in spiritual theology in 2019 at the Universidad Pontificia Comillas and is currently on the staff of the Jesuit College of Spirituality in Melbourne, where he lectures on Ignatian spirituality and the Spiritual Exercises. He lives at Newman College (the residential college of Melbourne University) and contributes as one of the Jesuit chaplains there. His main ministries have been with young adults and with asylum seekers and refugees.

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