

# Keeping refugee advocacy alive

Andrew Hamilton | 17 June 2021

In the cruel world of the nineteenth century Industrial Revolution, English poet Arthur Hugh Clough wrote an ironic version of the Ten Commandments as practiced in Great Britain. The Fifth Commandment was: 'Thou shalt not kill, but needst not strive/Officiously to keep alive.'

In common usage 'officiously' then did not mean 'bossily' as it mostly does today, but as 'one of the duties of your office'. The lines implied that, although



governments and employers were not entitled to kill the people who depended on them, they had no responsibility to prevent them from dying of starvation.

As we mark World Refugee Day this year Clough's lines speak to our world, too. In the world preoccupied with COVID-19 and with the difficulties of finding protection from it, people are tempted to focus exclusively on their own lives, their own families, their own interests and their own nations. They may see people who are outside their own group or their own country as threats to their health to be expelled and excluded, sometimes as a burden. Certainly, as

people to whom they have no responsibility. Around the world politicians, who should lead people in commending a shared concern for the common good, often encourage xenophobia and introduce harsh measures to humiliate the already excluded.

The present climate offers little encouragement for people anyone who cares for refugees and wants to press their cause. It would be rash to think that things will change soon. It is understandable that people's attention should turn inward to their close connections and immediate interests.

In public debate, too, governments will win more support than they lose by treating refugees brutally. Those who care for refugees must be in it for the long haul, encouraging one another 'officially to keep alive'. They must be in the business of lighting candles, not of cursing the darkness or pretending that the darkness is an acceptable place in which to live.

If we are 'to keep alive' we must constantly strive to move beyond the abstract characterisation of refugees, whether as innocent victims or as competitors for our jobs. We should instead hold in our imagination their faces. The reason why refugees matter is not because they are many, but because each is a person with her own hopes and sorrows, his own inalienable dignity, and their own right to help shape our world. They are not strangers, but brothers and sisters who should first be welcomed, wept over and laughed with, and only then be counted and classified.

In Australia this last week we have seen the moving image of four-year-old Tharnicaa Murugappan, comforted in her illness on Christmas Island by her sister Kopika. It has made more poignant our imagining of Tharnicaa and her mother as they were separated from the rest of their family, and of Kopika in her agony of isolation from her. Now returned to Perth, they will continue to live in anxiety. Dwelling on these images, which are emblematic of a policy based on inflicting suffering on one group of people in order to deter others, might make us think that there must be a better way, and that we are better in this.

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Coincidentally we have also seen the image of Artin Irannezhad, a smiling baby whose body was last week found and identified in Norway after he and his family died in the boat that sank as they were crossing the English Channel. He gave a face to the millions of women, children and men who have fled from a war only to be shut out of a living place.

In a self-centred time it is important to dwell on the faces pictured in such images. Not as weapons to use against those whose eyes are focused on people and needs closer to home, nor against government ministers who are preoccupied with waterproofing policies against compassion. We do so to remind ourselves of the truth to which all societies and governments must return, that refugees matter because each is a human being.

The stories we store can give us heart to keep reading the latest stories of refugees, and to allow ourselves to imagine their faces as they stand crowded behind barbed wire, die lost at sea, are abused, and suffering from mental illness. It might give us heart also to visit and listen to refugees, to speak on their behalf to our friends and in the media, to keep writing to government ministers and our members of parliament on their behalf, to press for compassion for such people as the Murugappan family as they become the public face of Australian policy towards refugees, and to advocate for policies based in respect.

Keeping alive the images of refugees, too, may maintain our hope against hope that when the national mood swings from suspicion of outsiders to a more hospitable outlook, possibilities might open. The little things we can do on the behalf of refugees may one day bear fruit.

When Clough's contemporary, Charles Dickens, wrote about conditions in the London of his day and represented those stories and faces, this seemed ineffectual at the time. Yet they changed public attitudes to the brutal practices he described. For future generations, too, they have come to describe and judge the England of his time. Truth won out, as it will eventually when our society, too, is judged by our children's children.



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Main image: Tharnicaa Murugappan in a hospital bed with her sister Kopika (Supplied/AAP)