**The Sneetches**

**“Now, the Star-Belly Sneetches-Had bellies with stars. The Plain-Belly Sneetches-Had none upon thars.”**

Seuss’s story, *The Sneetches,* has long been used to teach children about discrimination. At first the elitist star-belly sneetches go to great lengths to exclude their plain-bellied counterparts, saying things like **“We’ll have nothing to do with the Plain-Belly sort!”** But in the end they realize that they have much in common, and the stars are just a detail. They celebrate their abundant similarities, rather than dwelling on their trivial differences, and everyone ends up gaining.

Like the Sneetches, we are constantly “othering” fellow humans along divides of race, gender, class, politics, religion, sports-- the list could fill this whole column. We all do this, and it can be useful in defining our sense of self. We Tufts students are proud of our school and glad we don’t go to stuffy old Harvard (or at least that’s what we tell ourselves). This summer, many of us will cheer on the USA when it competes against other countries in the Olympics. But what happens when these divides cause us to demonize others and overlook their humanity? A timely example is that of the refugee.

An opportunity presented itself for me to go to Greece and meet some refugees from countries including Syria, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. I was excited, but also admittedly a bit afraid of the unknown. I had been warned to be careful, because ISIS might be hiding among the refugees. I was uncertain about whether we could communicate through language and cultural divides. I didn’t know if I would have much to talk about anyway, since I come from a different continent, speak a different language, and would most likely have different religious beliefs.

Where I anticipated cultural divides, instead I found people who were warmly welcoming me into their spaces and offering me food and tea. I was a comfortable tourist with free mobility, and many of them had spent their life savings on a harsh journey thousands of miles from their homes to a place where they were confined until further notice, and *they* were offering *me* tea. They had sacrificed every bit of normalcy in their lives in order to escape danger, and they were concerned about my comfort.

We were wearing similar clothes, using the same iPhone apps, and sharing stories about our families. When I read the news at home, refugees had seemed very far away. I couldn’t bring myself to feel much more than the obligatory sympathy for their displaced lives. Through my lack of empathy, I was living complicity as a star-bellied sneetch, scoffing at the thought of sneetches with plain bellies. In person, our shared humanity prevailed, and I wanted to help in any way I could.

One way to contribute was to play games with children, since most parents were exhausted and preoccupied with worries about their family’s futures, and children had few toys. I was overwhelmed by the children’s willingness to set aside the horrors they had seen and play pretend. I pretended to be an alligator, and they ran in circles around me laughing. If I stood still for a second, I became their jungle gym. We didn’t speak a common language, but they made heart shapes with their hands and directed them toward me. They picked dandelions from the parking lot where they lived and gave them to me. I wondered if these innocent, adorable children even knew what was happening to their families.

That question was soon answered. One girl showed me pictures she had drawn, and among them was a drawing of ISIS and Taliban soldiers with bloodied knives and severed heads. When we made paper airplanes, one child made a paper gun and pretended to shoot the others. I wondered how these subconscious wounds would manifest when these children are my age.

One father asked that I help spread the story of his ten-year-old daughter, Fiza, and I promised I would. Fiza said that when her parents asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up, she said she wanted to be a doctor. However, their family wasn’t safe in their home country, Iran, so they immigrated illegally to Greece. Now, in Greece, the walls had closed around them. All she wanted was a home where she could study to become a doctor.

Fiza’s grandfather was killed by the Taliban. While she told me her story, her mother was in the hospital. Fiza would soon have a new sibling. Her mother had been pregnant with twins, but one died in the womb while making the journey to Greece.

After I left I continued to think about these children who were caught in the middle of religious persecution. I thought about my grandmother, who immigrated to the US to flee persecution from the Nazis at the same age as those children. Her relatives had literally been forced to wear stars. These families who had made it to Greece were doing everything possible to protect themselves and create a better life for their children. The stars on our bellies disappeared. Our shared humanity emerged.

Seuss’s book ends on an inspiring note.

**“[That] day they decided that Sneetches are Sneetches…That day, all the Sneetches forgot about stars. And whether they had one, or not, upon thars."**

In our world, voices like Donald Trump reinforce divides and play off the fear many Americans have of the refugee, who seems far away, otherworldly, and dangerous. The United States is doing very little to help people like Fiza find a home. I hope that in my lifetime, stars will continue to disappear and we will celebrate our shared humanity.

Hey Jordan,

As you know I think that humanizing this crisis (as in trying to push back against lumping all refugees together into one dangerous/otherwise not ideal group) is important and also tricky…I made some comments about specific words etc. where I think there might be a risk of equating experiences/sounding different than I think you are desirous of sounding! I think it might be worth exploring the question of the impact we had on their community when we were there—as in was it problematic//we are able to prance in there and say hello while many people we met have no ability to even leave the detention center they are kept in…just a thought!

-Maya  
  
  
  
  
Hi Jordan--really good start. A few comments: I think you should talk a little more about the context/detail of your trip there – how you ended up going, what sort of place it was, what your official role was etc. You could also provide some detail about Greece's refugee policy in practice as you saw it. I'd try to expand on the reasons for the mistrust and fear of immigrants and how this mistrust and fear is manifested in terms of public opinion and governments' responses to the refugee crisis. What allows refugees to be humanized, and what prevents them from being humanized and therefore feared/reviled? (Maybe talk to a social psychology professor about this.)   
- Will