



Welcome to Canada

*Kindness is like snow — it beautifies
everything it covers.*
—Kahlil Gibran

A number of years ago I worked at a reception centre for newly arrived refugees. The initial stage of the project involved conducting focus groups. Over several weeks, I met individuals and families who had often arrived with nothing more than their hope for a better life for their children and/or themselves. Their experiences, their courage and strength, and their hopes for their future in Canada made a lasting impression on me. It was an honour to meet them. They were no different from current refugees; only the family names change, and sometimes the countries they fled.

"Tell me about your journey before coming to Canada," I would begin. After a moment of silence, slowly and quietly the focus session would begin — first with one person, and soon others joining in.

"We are from Afghanistan. I was a dentist... we had a good life... but my father spoke out against them, then just disappeared one day. Things began to change for us... my brother and his family went to Pakistan... my wife would not leave the house because she feared they would accuse her of some wrongdoing. I knew it was only a matter of time before they came for us."

Every so often their speaking voices were so soft the words floated in the air around the room, barely heard. "We are Colombian... I can

still hear the machine guns firing as I carried my daughter... we ran down our village road... my daughter screaming... I thought she screamed because she was so frightened, but that wasn't the reason — a bullet had hit her leg."

Other times those who related their own stories spoke with such depths of anguish their words seemed like emotional projectiles that hurtled through the air, compelling others in the room who wanted to remain silent — who did not want to reopen past memories — to speak.

"They arrived around mid-morning. My mother and I ran into the woods. Others did the same but they came after us... killed some... took others back to the village. By late afternoon, the stillness in the air told us what we already knew. We hid in the woods until the next morning. We were afraid they might still be in the village, afraid that if we did go back they would return and find us. We feared what we would find when we did return, and we feared knowing we would have to return to find supplies, because the few of us who had survived knew we had no other choice but to leave. We found the bodies of my father and brother... We walked for days to get to the refugee camp in Kenya... A year later I buried my mother. I have no family, so I have come alone to Canada. My life is here now."

Usually, when I asked my second question — tell me about your expectations for your life in Canada — the answer varied very little from group to group. Their hope for the future was that they could build a better life — for first their children, and then for themselves.

"I want my child to be safe. I want him to be able to play outside and not worry about being shot." "We want our children to get good educations so they can have a better life." "I just want my children to be able to walk down the street, without me worrying about whether they will return."

They made me feel proud to be Canadian when they said these things. I came to realize that all the things I value and love about my country are the same things that newcomers also see, want and value about this wonderful country. Truly, it is a privilege to live here.

Occasionally I am asked the question, "Were you born in Canada?" I had never particularly reflected on my family's past. But from the

very first time I had to answer this question, I suddenly recognized the similarity between their journey, and my own family's journey to Canada.

"Yes, I was born in Canada." I began, "My family was of German / English descent, and had originally settled in the United States. When the States were fighting for their independence from England, my family, like other families who remained loyal to England, feared for their safety. They fled to Canada, part of a group called United Empire Loyalists. So, my family's journey was much like yours; they came as refugees."

The mandate of the reception centre was to assist refugees with initial settlement services, as well as provide them temporary on-site accommodation. Arrivals and departures could occur on any day or evening of the week.

I only observed the arrival of a new group once. I had stayed late to complete some work. It was after seven o'clock when they arrived. Our staff had prepared a light supper for those who would like something to eat; rooms were ready for those who wanted to go straight to bed.

I sat in the front office and looked at the group arriving. Men, women, and children quietly stood in the entrance hallway. They looked tired and anxious. Some parents gently stroked their child's shoulders; others bent down to speak quiet words that only their child could hear. Other parents, whose children clung to their sides, wrapped a loving arm around them. Actions that offered assurance to their children, and perhaps even themselves, that everything would be okay. Once they were gathered, a staff member greeted them, first in English, and then again in their own language, with words that pushed them a little further from their previous lives, and brought them one more step closer to their new future;

"Hello; welcome to Canada and to your home for the next few days."

The following week I was back at the reception centre. That same front hall which the week before had been filled with subdued anticipation was now alive with the hum of comfortable conversations. I recognized two women from the previous week sitting and chatting

on a sofa, in the same hallway where only a week before they had stood quietly, tired and apprehensive. They smiled as I passed them, and I smiled in return. I headed toward the dining room for my focus session. Three young boys came charging down the hallway. They ran past me, then came back, and stood in front of me, wearing big smiles. I could think of nothing else to do other than return the smile. Then, only silence as they stared at me. I was about to say "Hi" when the one boy carefully said, "Hel-lo."

"Hello."

"Hel-lo," repeated the other two boys.

"Hello."

The first boy stepped closer toward me. "How-are-you?"

"I'm fine, thank you. How are you?"

The three of them looked at each other, than back at me.

"I-am-fine," they all said at the same time.

Then, just before turning and running off again — all three of them chorused, "Wel-come — to — Can-na-da."

That day I was delighted to answer back, "Thank you, and I welcome you to Canada also."

~Wendy D. Poole
Markham, Ontario