

The Mouth of a Shark

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During September of last year, a picture taken by a Turkish journalist shocked the world. The subject of the photograph was a three year old boy named Alan Kurdi. The image showed him, dead, face down in the sand on a Mediterranean shore. In an attempt to seek refuge from the Syrian civil war in another country, Kurdi's parents paid over eight thousand U.S. dollars for four spaces on an inflatable boat after being denied entry into Canada. Kurdi, his brother, and his mother all died in the escape attempt after the boat capsized. The image of the little boy, his face buried in the sand and his red shirt clinging to his frail body, became an international symbol for the Syrian refugee crisis.

Unfortunately, Kurdi's family is not alone. Currently, half of Syria's pre-war population, about 11 million people, is on the run. Refugees risk their lives by boarding unreliable boats, hiding in smuggler trucks, and even travelling on foot to escape their war-torn homeland. Although some refugees manage to find safe places to live, the majority live in crowded refugee camps where violence, rape, and disease are commonplace. Even though these Syrian refugees are forced to live in such dire conditions, several developed countries are shutting down their borders and refusing to grant refuge to those who need it.

After the Paris Attacks and similar events, countries like America and Britain have been reluctant to accept refugees. A shocking thirty one states in America have explicitly announced that Syrian refugees are not welcome. The irony in this situation is the fact that these powerful countries that refuse refugees are part of the reason why people are escaping Syria in the first place. America, France, and Russia regularly rain bombs, missiles, and gunfire down onto hospitals and civilian areas in Syria. Why is there always enough money to buy weapons, but never enough to help those who need assistance? When we think of these airstrikes in the Middle East, we imagine bombs killing potential terrorists and the "bad guys." What we rarely think about are the hundreds of innocent children, men, and women that are being slaughtered (not to mention the people who join ISIS to seek revenge for the deaths of

their families, but that's another topic for another day). Just this past July, the United States bombed a maternity hospital. How is it possible that we have the audacity to bomb civilian hospitals and villages, and then add insult to injury by denying the survivors refuge? Powerful countries need to take responsibility for their actions instead of ignoring the blood on their hands.

Warsan Shire, a Somali poet and writer, once said, "No one leaves home, unless home is the mouth of a shark." Imagine what it would take you to abandon everything you know, everything and everyone you've ever loved. Imagine if leaving your home forever and climbing into a dangerous boat was your only option for survival. Imagine worrying that your child's eyes will never see tomorrow. By denying refugees, we are shoving human beings right back into the metaphorical jaws of the shark they are trying to escape from.

There are many humanitarian groups in Syria trying to pick up the pieces, but there are not enough people that care. There is not enough being done. When I watch the news, I see hands reaching out for help, but none reaching to help. I see people crying in pain and desperation, but no one crying with empathy. I see fires burning in Aleppo, but no burning compassion. I see people calling for aid, but no one calling back. I see humans, but no humanity.

I may only be one person, an insignificant high school student. I may not have the voice to change the world. I may not be able to convince national governments to change, but to everyone in the audience today, I say: have compassion. Have empathy. One day, it could be *us* in their shoes. And after all, how can any of us be safe until we are all safe?

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