Welcoming New Scots into society from the day they arrive

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She's jumping, giggling, gleeful as only a two-year-old can be. "Abay, Abay" she shouts for me "Look at me! Look at me! Jumping in muddy puddles! Abay, Abay! Come in. Come in." And then there were two – a little human and a big human – jumping in muddy puddles, just like Peppa Pig in the East End of Glasgow.

There are few such signs of hope and normality as children at play. At first glance this seems so normal, and is so normal. Here we are all wrapped up in wool and under the January sky. It's the only way we can meet under lockdown.

"Abay" – that's me. That's her name for this expansive role I play in her little life. It means 'Granny' in Tigrinya. It means the world to me. But it also symbolises so much more. It is quintessentially a moment of perfect integration.

My granddaughter was born in the UK, to a refugee mother from Eritrea, my foster daughter, and she is a UK citizen. Her jumping in muddy puddles today would not have been possible without the work of the British Red Cross, amongst many others: when my daughter was a destitute asylum seeker aged 16, the Red Cross was one of the places she went for help.

My granddaughter today is a huge fan, like so many two-year-olds, of Peppa Pig. I watch as she lays down the foundations for a life that in later years will be filled with this common store of rich childhood memories that signify home, and were made at home. Her mother has memories too, those of her teenage years which were forged with us: Edinburgh Zoo, BBQs in the garden, a residential on the Isle of Mull with her college mates, graduating with a degree in civil engineering. She has other older memories of life before Scotland: of backyards, fresh milk, places to swim, dances in the village and neighbours dropping in and out of each other's houses with berbera spices and coffee, and flora organza dresses.

And of being forced to flee.

So much attention is paid to the often short but agonising period in a refugee's life when they have to leave. Many refugees' experiences of fleeing are seen as epic, constructed into stories which aid agencies, researchers and the media find to be necessary and palatable. The more dramatic the story, the reasoning goes, the more likely that attention will be paid to it.

The other stories, of what it is like to rebuild your life in a country of refuge, of waiting for life to be liveable again, of being reunited with family and of integration, are less often told. The boredom, hard work, nappy changes, shopping, and the many forms to fill out. The last is a reflection of the systemic disbelief that is built into the asylum process: systems that are set up to say 'No' in a language even I struggle to recognise as my mother tongue.

There are also the joyous and emotional stories of newly arrived refugees being welcomed into communities. There is a refrain used repeatedly by Ministers of State and by refugee support organisations, that the UK has a 'proud history' of welcoming refugees. That in itself is disputable and disputed by academic historians, not least

when the figures for refugee settlement in the UK are compared to those in the majority refugee hosting countries of the world, countries with nothing even approaching our wealth or infrastructures – Pakistan, Uganda, Jordan, Sudan, Kenya to name but a few in the 'top ten.'

But what about the less sexy stories that come after the initial welcome? And what about the real work of integration that takes place on both sides of that initial welcome? What about the everydayness of saying hello to people who don't greet you, in the pouring rain? Of learning new languages, and discovering there is a system of municipal refuse collection. Of the discovery that when there is black ice you need shoes with good grip. Of finding TV programmes that over time will be part of a common story of living together, in a part of the world, that will make your integration as a human being into the ways of life common to you there. Of the new songs, the new stories and new routine of your morning walk to the bus stop. Of the having and holding of a house and home. Over years.

These are not stories the media will prize, but this is integration. These stories are part of my life, as I live the contours of refugee integration in the UK both personally and professionally. "But what can you do?" – this is the everyday mantra of refugee integration.

Integration is a devolved responsibility. The Scottish Government is required to attend to the care of all migrants in Scotland. As the number one city for dispersal of people seeking asylum in the UK for over twenty years Glasgow, and therefore Scotland, has learnt hard lessons about hosting newly arrived populations.

Scotland was one of the first countries world-wide to develop an integration strategy, and it did so resting on the academic frameworks of Ager and Strang: insisting on integration for all from day one, and on integration as a multilateral task.[24] It is not something that can be reduced to the individual tasks of finding a house, learning a language, or acquiring an NHS GP, though these are vital to those newly arrived or new recipients of refugee status. Instead, it is the work of the people.

To emphasise this, the Scottish Government titled its 2018-22 refugee integration strategy and the committee which oversees this (of which I am Chair) 'New Scots.' It emphasises that integration

is a creative task of making room for others within our midst, of refugees making room for those who did not share the songs of their childhood, and, for those who sing songs about Peppa Pig and muddy puddles, of making room for new cohorts and generations of children and parents and grandparents.[25]

From the emphasis on welcome as a constituent part of hospitality in all cultures of the world, I like to turn to the old Scottish idea of fostership.

Fostership is humdrum, ordinary, everyday but it requires generosity that goes, as Alistair McIntosh writes, beyond the bonds of blood and into the bonds of milk.[26]

Were it not for this idea of fostership, my granddaughter would never have stood in muddy puddles shouting "Abay, Abay".

Our refugee family of second cousins, sisters, uncles, aunts is spread across Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt, Libya, Italy, Germany, Sweden and Canada. Staying in touch with them requires us to incorporate multiple means of communication – WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram – into ordinary life over many, many years. It is through these channels that we foster the relationships to our wider family, sharing the images of children slowly growing up, of new haircuts and braids, of implausible moments at zoos, or picnics by lakes in the far north.

These efforts to remain an integrated family, while living apart, are an experience that has become more familiar to non-refugee families under lockdown. Pandemic passports and weeks of quarantine are now bound, structurally, into the experience of separated families who – like my own – have no clue when they might ever meet again, separated as they are by so many bureaucratic immigration processes. Families like ours have no hope of physically meeting beyond the long-term hopes of family reunion, laid out in the Refugee Convention and the operations of organisations like the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

"Abay!" "Abay!"

Every now and then, though, miracles happen. They are hard-wrought. The stories of miracles in religious and mythological literature are always accompanied by a great deal of drama and tales of defying nature, and established power. I can hardly bear to recall what it actually took for all my foster family in the UK to actually get the right travel documents, and the correct visas for us to be able to visit a safe third country in sub-Saharan Africa in 2012. A country where each of us, with our differing statehoods and histories, is actually allowed to be with a visa.

This first journey together was before there were any grandchildren, and after many years of struggle and waiting to be reunited with our extended foster family in a country which was, at the time, mutually safe, and mutually accessible. There have been subsequent journeys, and I can say that my granddaughter would never have met some of her other family members were it not for the Red Cross in Sudan working with refugees. Internationally, the Red Cross helps with refugee registration, food distribution and, as they did with my foster daughter, supporting people to trace their families who have become lost as they criss-cross the world, swept along by the randomness of where refugees end up.

Over the years this journey too has become more precarious, with warfare and conflict, mass refoulements of refugees from previously 'safe' third countries. In 2021 the social media apps still contain the greetings for peace, but they are muted, constricted and full of the fear of what is happening 'back home', and of what the long, long silences in the phones might mean.

“Abay!” “Abay!”

Survivors, elders, cousins, uncles, aunts and children run round in circles and shriek with delight as we arrive. The process of integration into our family begins with welcome. The words are written in misspelt English, in candles on the floor, surrounded by rose petals. In the days that follow under the warm, delighted embrace of this foster family of strangers, we begin to integrate as family and into the cultural life of refugees in limbo, living, not in a camp, but like the majority of refugees worldwide, in a large city in the expanding and highly precarious refugee quarters. The children drag us into their games – a pillow fight, dressing up in strange new clothes, and making up songs and chants, full of laughter.

Good integration is mutual, it’s relational, it happens with the support of state and NGO structures, but it’s about making new families, new communities.

In my long experience, those who are best at this kind of integration are refugees themselves, and the more policy-makers empower refugee and asylum-led groups to enable such work, the more successful and frictionless the integrating can become.

In Scotland, as opposed to other countries, integration occurs from day one of the asylum claim. People seeking asylum do not have to wait to integrate until years later, when they might receive their refugee status. People are part of Scottish society from the start, and this allows civil society in Scotland to learn together, about each other and about difference. This means that the deep suspicion which can build up during a fraught and often awful experience of gaining asylum, is mitigated with processes of building trust and relationships with institutions of the Scottish Government, with community and with other people. The success of this approach is clear from public attitude surveys undertaken in Scotland. Of course, it is still possible to find hostility, but it is more muted, and the direction of the policy has been towards tackling hostility, and building up human rights education around asylum and refugee policy. To see this policy extended to other parts of the UK would be a positive step.

In the all too human processes of integration, repeated in every life of every refugee, these are the moments when we become whole, when the bureaucracy and the waiting and the agonised separations are replaced by the ordinary wonder of being alive and being with one another.

When we miss this – in our policies, strategic plans and fundraising drives – and when we forget that it is for life, for the possibility of grandchildren with their grandparents, jumping in muddy puddles, then we miss why the Refugee Convention is a sacred bond in modernity, beyond the bonds of blood. Into those of mud.

“Abay!” “Abay!”

“Come in!” “Come in!”.