

A Place of Refuge

Friday, 3 July 2015

A Personal View

Let's not pretend, my prime purpose of coming to Lesbos was for a holiday and that my interactions and understanding of what I've seen is cursory at best. That said I've tried my hardest to understand what I've seen and present it back as is. But I'm left with many personal thoughts and feelings and on my last evening here I want to try and capture.

In the time we have been here (13 full days) well over 1000 people have arrived in the area surrounding Molyvos. On the days we helped we met nearly 200 if not more. These facts should highlight the unprecedented situation being faced by Greece. In the time we've been here we've also seen representatives from the UNHCR, Doctors without Borders and other smaller voluntary organisations. This should have offered hope and at the very least the start of solutions to managing the human influx. But in the two weeks we've been here I've seen no permanent help provided. Everything is "coming" or on "procurement". Plenty of questions, plenty of notes written in their notebooks. But when will there begin to be action?

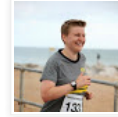
The action all comes from those who have their homes in Molyvos. What I've witnessed in these past two weeks is an unprecedented outpouring of human kindness. Instead of standing on the edge of life watching it pass by, hoping someone else will help, wishing it will all go away they have jumped in without a thought as to how they will cope on a long term basis. It is without doubt the greatest display of humanity I've ever seen. To then see this humanity reciprocated in the eyes of those they help, with gracious thanks wiping away the fear they faced travelling across the water from Turkey. Sometimes tourists passing by asked us which agency we were from. I'm not sure anyone realises that those doing this day after day are locals or those just passing through for a couple of weeks.

My fear is how long they can keep going and as the numbers swell just how they will cope on donations and the goodwill of others. Today they have fed over 400 people. The numbers rise each day instead of decrease. People won't stop coming - because they can't stop coming. They have no other option - a well written UNHCR report published just two days ago makes it clear these are refugees. They are all fleeing war torn countries, persecution and danger. This is more than looking for a better life. This is about trying to stay alive and doing all you can to make that happen - even if that means taking risks along the way. We are witnessing something that needs a fundamental re-think from the nations of the world (not just the EU) to find a way of managing this. I'm not sure we can solve the conflict and threats that underpin all this but we need a unilateral response to the consequences.

Although it's been heartbreaking at times (lots of times) I am lifted by the people we've met. We read so much every day about hatred, anger, destruction and fear. I never imagined that through tears of sadness I'd find deep kindness, compassion and acceptance. The best of people. People from all around the world driven to show others they care. We should all be proud of what these people are achieving here. We should take this into our lives and find ways to honour this. Perhaps by being less afraid of what we see back home? Realising that behind every torrid headline is often a simple human story. That in the end there are only good people and bad people. What they do in the name of religion or politics is a smoke screen to hide their own weakness.

On the beautiful holiday island of Lesbos I have met only good people. We've tried to help where we could. It's felt inadequate at times and even selfish as we enjoyed our holiday. We will go home and spread the word that those helping here need help themselves. We will try and ask those agencies that discuss a plenty what they are actually going to DO. We can push politicians to embrace the solutions proposed by the EU and if we don't agree with them, let's improve them and not ignore them. And we will tell everyone to come to Greece. Come and have a wonderful holiday, come and capture the spirit of human kindness and take some of it away with you. I'm glad I did and I look forward to returning and seeing again the friends I've made through this tragedy.

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- ▼ 2015 (6)
 - ▼ July (2)
 - [A Personal View](#)
 - [Another Day in Molyvos](#)
 - ▶ June (4)



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