

Essay

Leaning towards the other?

An episode at NAV and an unforgettable meeting with a refugee

by

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Introduction

Rasula is a refugee woman in her 30s. She is new to the introduction programme, which is a full-time qualification programme for refugees in Norway, lasting about two years. I have recently started working as a refugee consultant when I meet Rasula in the apartment she recently moved into. Earlier this week, Rasula has explained to Lisbeth that it is extremely cold in her apartment. Lisbeth, whose position at work I am replacing, decides that we will visit Rasula. We will show her how to use a Norwegian wood stove, and through this endeavour, Rasula and I are introduced. Being a refugee consultant in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration, usually called NAV, is an all-round job in many ways. This includes picking up a refugee family at the airport to making an individual plan for each participant of the introduction programme, and sometimes giving instructions about a stove.

When an asylum seeker is granted refugee status and resettled in a municipality, there is a lot that needs to be facilitated. The person requires a bed, a general practitioner, a bank account, etc., things that most native-born people take for granted. If there is a need for basic qualification, refugees between 18-55 years are entitled and required to participate in the introduction programme. The aim for the refugee is to be integrated into society, participate in work and social life and become economically independent (Introduksjonsloven, 2003). Refugee consultants work with each participant to achieve this goal.

During one of the regular and more formal conversations, Rasula brings up a subject of deep importance to her. Naturally, we take our time as little misunderstandings make a big difference. The conversation is a mix between English and Norwegian, and we both struggle to understand each other's details. I notice that she repeatedly uses a word that is neither Norwegian nor English. After several visits to Brazil, I understand

the Portuguese language and I recognize the word as Portuguese. I interrupt her and ask; *"Do you know Portuguese?"* to which she quickly replies, *"Yes, I've lived in Angola."* I tell her that I also speak Portuguese, our surprised eyes meet and we start laughing. This episode changed something. The relationship between Rasula and myself became stronger, at least that is what I felt. Was it because the communication became easier when we suddenly had three languages to choose words from? Or maybe the feeling of having something in common? I am not quite certain.

The appeal

Every Tuesday, I work half a day at the office of the language school where the refugees learn Norwegian. As I am finishing up, and about to get on my bike, I hear someone calling my name. I look up, and see a tall and slim African woman running towards me. At first I do not recognize her, but as she comes nearer I see that it is Rasula. She usually straightens her hair, but today her hair is naturally curled. She looks distressed. Skipping the greeting, she immediately asks, *"Are you going to NAV now?"* I look down at my watch and politely point out that the time is almost one o'clock. I know she is aware that the school office closes half past 12. I do not get to say any more though, as the words just pour out of her. Rasula is extremely good at languages, she speaks five, and now she uses all of them. I cannot understand much of what she says, but her body language speaks for itself. Rasula is stressed out and seems desperate. After a concentrated effort on my part and a good amount of patience on hers, I finally understand what she is trying to tell me. Rasula looks at me with tearful eyes, and I know just what she is going to say next: *"Will you help me?"*

Now I find myself in a situation that will have consequences for our relationship, but most of all, consequences for Rasula. She looks at me anxiously waiting for an answer. In a single moment, 100 thoughts spin around in my head with dizzying speed. On the one hand, I have to be professional and also careful with my own time and private space. On the other hand, pieces of what she just told me play over and over in my head. *"They take them to the woods and kill them"*, *"My children are now homeless"* and *"Maybe someone will kill them."*

Finally, our eyes meet and as Levinas describes it, I see the appeal in her face (Eide, Grelland, Kristiansen, Sævareid, & Aasland, 2011). The appeal for help is so strong

that I feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Rasula's appeal has gone straight to my heart. Using Levinas again:

I believe that the beginning of language lies in the face. In some way, in its silence, it calls you. One's reaction to the face is a response, and not just a response, but a responsibility (Levinas in Rasmussen, 2002, p. 44, my translation)

Rasula's husband, Yasob, and their two girls of five and six have applied for family reunification with Rasula and the oldest child, a nine-year-old son that she brought with her to Norway. The family was separated when fleeing from their country. Yasob is now in South Africa with their daughters. The girls arrived first, and when Yasob made it to Johannesburg six months later, he discovered that some relatives had handed the girls over to an orphanage. They were reunited and now have legal residence as refugees granted by the South African authorities.

The process of applying for family reunification is long and complicated. Ordinarily, for the person applying for family reunification, it is required to have a certain minimum level of income. However, if the person is granted asylum and has a residence permit the claim is forfeited. The only requirement is that one must apply within one year from the date their residence permit is given (Utlendingsdirektoratet, 2016).

Yasob started the family reunification process as soon as circumstances allowed. He attained all the necessary papers and documents, such as birth and wedding certificates, sent from their country to South Africa by regular mail. In addition, the family of three needed an extended residence permit to apply for family reunification, which also took time. During this long and outstretched process, Yasob and the girls tried to live an ordinary life with work and school and everyday tasks. But now, all of a sudden, everything has changed.

Rasula tells me that her small family in South Africa is in great danger, so much so that she is afraid that her husband and her two daughters will be killed. The Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini has publicly stated that foreigners have to leave the country because they steal jobs from South Africans and raise the crime rate (Hanssen, 2015; Yan & Karimi, 2015). Because of this, several immigrants have already been killed, with several thousand people having sought refuge in temporary camps for fear of suffering the same fate. Rasula has been in contact with Yasob, and he tells her stories

of how foreigners are being picked up by cars, driven away and killed. The girls' school tells Yasob to keep the girls at home, as schools with foreign students have been attempted to be burned down. Now, neither the girls nor Yasob can leave the house for fear of losing their lives.

Rasula explains how she has tried to get in touch with the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration, but without success. She bought two prepaid phone cards, but ended up using up all the money on the cards before she got through to them. Rasula is confused, but determined to act for the sake of her family. She looks at me and repeats the question "*Will you help me?*" as a tear slowly rolls down her cheek and lands on her scarf.

I am deeply moved by the appeal in Rasula's face, though at the same time I feel angry. My heart beats faster and my cheeks acquire a deep and hot red hue. How can an empty prepaid phone card determine the fate of an entire family? Regardless, my anger is quickly replaced with a feeling of helplessness. At the moment in NAV, we are in the middle of the Lean process. This is an attempt to enhance efficiency and obtain greater value with fewer resources (Lean Enterprise Institute, 2017). We have been discussing our work tasks as refugee consults, and have defined which tasks we should undertake and which we should not. There has to be a limit, and I am acutely aware that Rasula's request does not fall under our responsibilities. However, the demand is so strong, and the empathy I feel for her cause so vivid, that it unavoidably changes my focus. My thoughts of defined work tasks are pushed aside.

I feel like giving Rasula a hug, and although culture or shyness or a bit of both keeps me from embracing her, I hope she sees the empathy in my eyes. Does she understand that I actually care for her? Am I capable of understanding someone in Rasula's position? She fled her country, and she has not seen her husband and daughters for over two years. Until Yasob appeared in South Africa several months ago, she was actually convinced that he had been killed. I do not know how this feels, but I can imagine how hard it must be.

I do not have the capability to fully understand Rasula and her given state of mind and emotions. I can try, but the truth is that I cannot fully comprehend her situation. I can

only grasp fragments, though that might be enough. Løgstrup ([1976] 1998 in Eide, 2011) states that we can imagine a given situation and what it involves.

According to Løgstrup, "the other" has a strangeness that I can never fully understand. I must not assume that I know how she feels, as it is problematic if you take away the strangeness of the other. "To grasp the other fully will involve that we with our concepts get the other in our power" (Eide, 2011, p. 73).

Even so, Levinas challenges me. His view on "the other" is different to that of Løgstrup's. Levinas states that to understand something, it has to be equal to something we already know. And because "the other" in so many ways differs from what we know, we simply do not have the ability to understand him or her. Thus, "the other" can never be grasped. Levinas would probably claim that I have to meet Rasula by not attempting to understand her (Eide et al., 2011). This seems impossible to me because I really want to understand!

Whether I think I have the ability to understand her or not, I need to act. Nonetheless, the Lean process and the discussions regarding work tasks pop into my mind, and it feels like being punched in the stomach. Family reunification is not on the list of our work tasks because it is too resource-demanding. What answer should I give her? Rasula is aware that it does not fall under my defined work tasks as a refugee consultant, and that it is actually her responsibility to initiate and complete this process of family reunification. I know this, because it is one of the first things I inform new participants of in the introduction programme. Nevertheless, Rasula is standing right in front of me with tears in her eyes, and asking for exactly what she knows I cannot give.

As a cool wind blows through the open schoolyard a thought hits me. If I do not act on her request, who will? The answer is probably no one. And if no one does anything, what will happen then? I dare not think about it, and when I look back at Rasula's face, her eyes are fixed on me. It feels like she's looking straight through me, standing there waiting for an answer. I cannot refuse her. I will not refuse her. At the very least, she can use the phone at the office.

Rasula's demand has done something to me. According to Løgstrup, by virtue of our relation to other human beings, we have some of "the other" person's life in our hands.

Precisely what in the other person's life is in our hands, what of the other person has been delivered over to us, may vary greatly. It may vary all the way from his or her most passing mood to his and her entire destiny (Løgstrup, 1997, pp. 25-26).

Rasula affects me, and my answer and actions will affect her. Nobody knows how this will play out, as any consequences of our meeting are opaque to say the least.

We enter the school together. For the second time today, I unlock the door to the office. I sense that Rasula is tired and frustrated, but most of all worried. I ask her to "*Please sit down,*" while I close the door behind us.

We call the Directorate of Immigration and after 45 minutes of waiting we finally get through to a human voice. We explain Rasula's situation, but according to them, the time limit for applying for family reunification expired 14 days before Yasob handed in his application. Now the only option left for Rasula's family is meeting the requirement of certain income, and this is simply not possible for Rasula. That makes it a question no longer of how long it will take to expedite the family reunification, but whether or not they can be reunited in Norway at all. However, there is small hope. The case can be reconsidered if there is a legitimate reason for the delay. To be processed, the case must be fully described with details, and documented and submitted to the Directorate of Immigration (UDI). Furthermore, if family reunification is to be prioritized as an emergency, another document must be filled in and a request must be stated through this channel. UDI states that we must act quickly for the case worker to receive this information before the case closes.

Right in front of me, Rasula's world falls apart. She is discouraged and speechless. I know that she, without my help, can acquire all the documents needed. But she will not be able to formulate and write clearly enough, so that new light might be shed on her case in an understandable way. If I am going to help her, it will take me at least half a day. And I am not waiting for her to ask me again. I put my hand on hers in an attempt to comfort her, and I tell her "*I'll help you!*" With this simple gesture I am immediately aware, that in a moment of spontaneity, I have taken on a responsibility that was not mine before. But is there an alternative?

Split personality?

That same night I lay in bed thinking about the choice I made. Why did I respond by offering my help? My first thought was that I acted out of compassion. I pushed my professional side away and acted as me, as a private person. I thought about this for a while. Now, after reflecting, writing and further reflecting, more questions come to my mind. What does it actually mean to act professionally? Is it to be a refugee consultant who only focuses on the values and standards of NAV?

Christoffersen (2011) might have a response to this. He claims that our knowledge has several sources, and that our professional practice is based on these. To understand what lies behind our judgement, Christoffersen brings up six sources of knowledge: professional knowledge, conventions and routines, professional experience, personal experience, role models and view of life and view of human life. I would say that everyone has his or her unique knowledge. I have my experiences, and they are different from other peoples' experiences. I am of the opinion that not two people have identical life experiences. I am the only one with my specific knowledge, which in turn affects my specific judgement.

I now see my decision to help Rasula as a result of my complex knowledge. It is not easy to remove our personal experiences from our workplace environment. Our knowledge is part of us. Christoffersen (2011, p. 82) states that there is no dividing line between our general assessments and our professional assessments. If there were, our personality would be split.

Still, it is important to be aware of how general knowledge is linked together with professional knowledge (Christoffersen, 2011). Therefore, I need to critically reflect on my own thoughts, feelings and reactions – on my own power of judgement.

Moreover, I need to deepen my social and cultural understanding to have an optimal viewpoint for decision-making. In summary, to make a good decision requires that I look inside myself and outside myself with regard to the circumstances (Askeland, 2011). It is important to bear in mind that knowledge is not static, and therefore neither is judgement. Knowledge is seen as something constructed and contextual in postmodernism, and this is also the case for critical reflection (Askeland, 2011).

In hindsight, I understand that before this episode with Rasula I usually assessed situations based on the rules, values and principles of NAV. This means that when I met Rasula at the school that day, many norms and values were already defined for me. When she asked for help, her question, originating in the private world, had to be adapted into a public system of categorization in NAV. Rasula's specific question had to be changed to fit in with the laws and regulations of the system (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer in Nordstoga, 2013). My first instinct was to turn the focus from the specific to the general, and had I done so, I would have trampled Rasula. But is it at all possible for us to avoid categorization? We categorize to organize the world (Eide & Skorstad, 2013).

By organizing we systemize, and by systemizing we can describe a condition or diagnosis that we use for the legitimation of a certain act or treatment. If the welfare state, hospitals and NAV were forced to avoid the use of categories, they would simply stop working. Nevertheless, it is important to note that categorization greatly affects our view of the individual (Eide & Skorstad, 2013).

Either/or?

Rasula's question requires an answer. What should it be? The situation forced me to think outside the box and outside the categories. Was that the first moment in which I saw Rasula as a human being and not as a welfare client? Something happened to me. I pushed the rules and principles aside and simply let Rasula and her situation truly touch me.

Was it the spontaneity of compassion that made me do this? I think Løgstrup would say so. He claims that even in the hate of an enemy or the indifference to a stranger, there is a form of spontaneity for the promise of love. Løgstrup states, "And in the accident, it is the humanity of the other, on which we cannot yet become hateful, that appeals to us" (Løgstrup, 1996, p. 27).

Some situations cause humans to carry out spontaneous acts of caring, even towards a stranger or an enemy. When a child falls into the sea, we do not make ethical considerations and check what rules apply to the situation. According to Løgstrup, there is a demand between human beings. The demand is simply to take care of the

life of “the other”, and this demand is always present in the meeting between human beings. It is fundamental. Therefore, to compare this demand with moral rules and principles would be to reduce it to something less than it actually is. Moral rules and principles simply do not compare, as they are inferior values. We need them for predictability and they give structure to our work, but it is possible and quite normal to find ourselves in a situation or dealing with a challenge not described or mentioned in our rules and principles. This is where we realize that rules and principles are insufficient values on which to base our decisions (Løgstrup, [1961] 1995, in Eide et al., 2011). There is a big difference between a principle-based approach to decision-making and a realistic or experience-based approach. The latter responds to the demand we meet in a human being (Eide & Skorstad, 2013).

Is one approach more correct than the other? Does it have to be either/or? As previously mentioned, we do need categorizations, routines and procedures to be able to work efficiently. Nevertheless, if I did not meet Rasula with as comprehensive an understanding as I possibly could, the categorization would reduce her stature (Eide & Skorstad, 2013). Both approaches are important, but Løgstrup considers the realistic approach to be the primary one, and the principle-based to be secondary. The rules and principles that we work with need to be assessed and challenged according to the ethical demand (Eide & Skorstad, 2013).

Did I act ethically correctly or incorrectly in my meeting with Rasula? Should my loyalty lie with her or with NAV and its interests as an organization? Back at the office, when my hand seized Rasula's, I must admit to not feeling any tension between her and NAV's interest. I did not think of this as a being a value choice or a matter of conflict (Nordstoga, 2013). My action was spontaneous; I acted and did not think either for or against.

What if I had not been overwhelmed by the spontaneity of compassion? Is it possible to be immune to this demand and to not respond? Would anyone be passive if they saw a child about to drown in the sea? In my understanding of Løgstrup, my early opinion was that this is simply not possible. However, Arendt (1996, in Eide, 2014) claims that it is. She addresses the importance of constantly checking oneself with a “two-in-one dialogue”. According to Arendt, we must always consider and create an

opinion on whatever affects and influences us. We need to discuss these events, thoughts and values with ourselves, like an inner dialogue so to speak. She argues that not having this constant inner dialogue equals not thinking at all. What might be criticized about this approach is the nullification of the individual's ability to make a stand.

Arendt (1996, in Eide, 2014) uses Adolf Eichmann, a key player in the Third Reich programme for the eradication of Jews, as an example of a person acting without thinking. Eide (2014) states how Eichmann showed blind loyalty to a system at the expense of the affected Jews of course, but also paying a price himself and losing sight of what it means to be a human being. Eichmann stood by his actions in court, but saw himself as either a doer or a follower. He argued that the outcome would have been the same had he refused, and that if he had not followed orders someone else would have. This shows that he saw a firm line between his professional role and his person, as such (Eide, 2014).

Was this also how I saw myself, relating to Rasula, at first? Lying in bed, thinking that I had acted as a private person? Did I really have an understanding of myself as a professional self and a private self?

It is obviously not my intention to draw similarities between Eichmann and myself, but the image helps to provide a perspective. What I have only later realized is that had I not been seized by the spontaneity of compassion, I would have done what the job required of me. No more and no less. No one at NAV could have reproached me for not performing my duty and I could have gone on to the next case, not giving it a second thought. Or could I have? Would my conscience have allowed me? I think and hope not. When routines are made into absolutes, it becomes problematic. If the routines are considered absolute, they no longer have a use as working tools for judging what is good and bad, but instead impede the process of making good decisions. Organizations must see routines in a continuous light of renewal (Christoffersen, 2011). In my case, had I not seen Rasula in her entirety, but objectified her as a case within a category, I would have deprived her of her status as a subject (Eide & Skorstad, 2013).

Lingering doubt

What if another welfare client the following day had asked me for help with the same problem? Would I be forced to act in the same manner? Does this one act of compassion mean that I am obliged, by my own conscience, to respond equally to all cries of help? A quote from Buber relieves me of a bit of the moral burden. Buber believes that one cannot just act out of a norm:

... like a new-born child, a new face, that has never been before and will never come again. It demands of you a reaction which cannot be prepared beforehand. It demands nothing of what is past. It demands presence, responsibility; it demands you (Buber, 2002, p. 135)

I responded to Rasula's demand, her cry for help. I cannot change that, what is done is done. Even so, my decision to help her is still something I consider and ponder quite a bit. Did my action have any negative consequences? What damage might it have caused for NAV if all employees had their own way of doing things and ignored the given guidelines? Would refugee consultants who followed the rules be perceived as less friendly because they, according to the rules and regulations, have to reject a family reunification inquiry?

My actions cannot be reversed, but should I have done it differently? What about this problem in general, should I have not discussed it with the management and my colleagues? Instead, I chose to handle the situation on my own. I could have argued that sometimes, procedures are a burden for good practice. I could have described how sometimes situations cannot be described in either black or white, and that grey zones call for your own judgement (Van Genep in Irgens, 2011).

Will I dare to trust my judgement the next time I meet a person demanding more than the established norms and rules allow? Maybe it might help if our routines were revised and first and foremost not understood as absolutes. To me, it is problematic that the basic human relationship between the helper and the client has been wiped away. The ideals that institutions such as NAV are built upon are based upon the trust between client and social worker, and that this trust grows through flexible and human actions (Bergström & Fog, 1990 in Uggerhøj, 2005). It would seem as if the original intentions do not correspond with today's practices. Bergström and Fog (1990, in Uggerhøj, 2005) see the inconsistencies in this, and claim that nowadays "instead of leaning towards

the citizens, public institutions are more or less talking about citizens' leaning to the system and its rules" (Bergstöm & Fog in Uggerhøj, 2005, p. 83, my translation).

Is there a solution to this problem? Can we create an alternative to the routines found in the rational and bureaucratic machine (Christensen & Molin, 1983 in Uggerhøj, 2005)? My hopeful answer to this question is yes. It is not the bureaucratic organization that demands rationality, procedures and rules, but rather the culture that prevails in these organizations (Christensen & Molin, 1983 in Uggerhøj, 2005). Culture is neither easily definable nor visible, and is not something presented to new employees as such, like an organizational plan or managing structure would. Instead, it is something we are socialized into (Uggerhøj, 2005). Social workers who become carriers or continuers of norms and routines make the system work as a stable, efficient and coherent 'organism' (Christensen & Molin, 1983 in Uggerhøj, 2005). In this process, however, the organism becomes perhaps somewhat narrow-minded. Reflection in fellowship and developing a culture for reconsideration of the status quo in these organizations is therefore paramount. Reflection must be a vital and crucial part of the culture (Uggerhøj, 1996).

Before, as well as after my episode with Rasula, I leaned towards the culture of my institution (Uggerhøj, 2005). But that day at the school, I did not. I leaned towards "the other". I leaned towards Rasula.

A grain of hope

The following day I return to the office at the school, remembering that I had uttered the binding words "*I'll help you!*" Rasula is already waiting for me in the hallway. I can see that she is still worried, but I can sense hope in her eyes when she looks at me. At the office, we review and write up the events of the family reunification in chronological order. The level of details makes the process comprehensive indeed. Yasob has sent us some documents with place and date stamps by e-mail, but some of the stamps are unreadable. It requires multiple phone calls to clarify the documentation. After a few hours of concentrated work, we have completed the first document.

We take a short lunchbreak before continuing with the next document, which presents the family reunification case as an urgent priority. Facts need to be written down, and

this seems like a straight and easy task, at least to me. But Rasula has to fight to keep her tears back when we write down what we fear is going to happen to Yasob and the girls. Eventually, she cannot hold them back anymore. I see the small drops of tears land on my desk in a slowly growing puddle. After a gruelling day of physical and emotional work, the two documents are ready to be sent. We are one click away from having done everything in our power for this to succeed. Rasula clicks the mouse, and one last tear slides down her cheek, perhaps one of relief.

The weight on my shoulders is gone. Not only because I kept what I promised, but because I have a hint of hope that this might succeed. Nonetheless, I still feel a kind of sadness. I know it will take at least a month to process Rasula's request, and it pains me that we do not know what might happen to Yasob and their daughters in the meantime. I am also affected by the fact that I may never know the end result. I am only a temporary substitute in this job, and I will be leaving in just six weeks. Rasula and I have our last conversation five weeks later. At this time, we are still uncertain about the outcome, as the future of her family is still undetermined.

On a warm summer day, approximately three months after I finished my term at NAV, I receive a text message on my phone. The message only reads: "*My family is coming to Norway tomorrow*", followed by a smiley face. I do not know the number, so I assume that it is mistakenly sent to me. Nevertheless, I look it up on the internet. when I see that the owner of the number is named Rasula, I get a lump in my throat. A tear rolls down a cheek, but this time it is my own.

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