

## Exploring communication, storytelling, and experience on the margins: A journey of understanding for humanitarian palliative care

By *Megan Doherty*

The recent [PallCHASE](#) (palliative care in humanitarian aid situations and emergencies) webinar on January 20, 2022, focussed on the role of storytelling for individuals affected by humanitarian crises and palliative care.

The webinar included a discussion from Smriti Rana (Pallium India), Lucinda Jarrett (Rosetta Life) and Sophie Kieffer.

Smriti reflect that “storytelling is at crux of all human interactions”. She shared how storytelling has an important role in humanitarian crises, because it helps us to addresses our need to make sense of the crisis.

At first, we may seek to understand the crisis through figures and statistics about what is happening, but Smriti reminded us that “at the heart of all these data and stats are living breathing stories” and that these stories weave together to form part of the tapestry of the human experience of the crisis. The social nature of storytelling can allow it to be a sanctuary for an individual and an agent of change.

Smriti described three key components of the storytelling experience:

- The storyteller’s experience:
  - In a humanitarian crisis, the story will draw on the storyteller’s challenges and experiences from before the crisis
  - The story will also reflect the storyteller’s hopes and dreams and how these have been changed by the crisis, as well their grief and loss which has been shaped by the crisis
- The listener’s experience:
  - “Bearing witness to a story is not a passive act, it can be an extremely powerful things to do”
  - Listeners must bring the skill of listening with generosity, more than simply hearing the story, their listening can facilitate the story being told
  - Yet even while listening, the listener must be conscious of what they are projecting from their own experience onto the storyteller
- The facilitator’s experience:
  - The facilitator can draw out the story which is inside of each of us
  - The facilitator must also be conscious of how the story can be shaped by what they feel is important and should remain focussed on what the storyteller wants to share

Smriti shared that the way a person's story is received, held and reflect back can actually change the meaning of the story for that person. Storytelling can be an opportunity to change the narrative, allowing both storytellers and listeners to reflect on the story and what has it inspired them to think more deeply about.

We all have a tendency to want to "fix" things, and this extends to when we are listening to the stories of others. Particularly in a crisis, this can diminish the story for the storyteller and can do more harm than good.

Finally, Smriti challenged her listeners to go beyond just active listening and engage in "generous listening", suspending out internal thoughts and questions and simply receiving a story in its entirety.

Lucinda Jarrett shared her experiences with Dream a Difference which connects children in crisis situations from 11 countries around the world in shared creative projects. The children come from diverse crisis experiences, including living in refugee camps, those in foster care or in hospitals, and those whose schools have been destroyed by forest fires, as a few examples.

Through Dream a Difference children connect through shared moments of learning, recognizing that "the site of learning and healing is actually the playground". Lucinda shared her perspective that if you enable children to connect, understand, engage and create together, then healing occurs as the children play and connect together.

Lucinda reminded the audience that the world is becoming increasingly insular, and connecting across countries and experiences is so important. She emphasized the importance of peer-to-peer learning, sharing the example of the "fish is my hero" poem written by an 8-year old boy in Uganda.

Fish, fish, fish  
You are great  
You are my hero

My grandmother sells fish  
My mother sells fish  
All to get money and pay my school fees

Fish, fish, fish  
You saved my uncle from death!  
He was poisoned but mummy sold fish  
The money saved my uncle!

Fish you are so great  
Fish you are my hero

Lucinda emphasized that the project is not about looking at others with pity or compassion, but about shared learning among equals. She shared another example of a connection between two young girls, one in Palestine and one in the UK, both who had a close friend die. One girl shared a poem with the other, offering healing to the other.

In storytelling, children can create together, and the emphasis is not on storytelling driven as therapy, but as creativity. Creativity is healing in and of itself, as it touches all of us at the heart of our humanity.

Lastly, Sophie Keiffer shared her reflections, beginning with a particularly memorable image. "On world theatre day, Walid Al-Rashed went out among the ruins [in Syria], he sang in Arabic the words of a famous song "how beautiful it is to live in peace and wellness" as he wrote on the wooden board while the sounds of bombing were heard in the sky".

Sophie discussed the challenges of the lack of play and creative expression in budgets and programs, particularly in humanitarian crises and conflict settings. She asked us to consider, how is play and creative expression measured and valued in these programs and how can you prove its success? She shared the example of one organization wanting to count children's' smiles when a clown came to visit!

Sophie emphasized how creative programs in health facilities can benefit not only children who are sick, but also the family, siblings and caregivers at the bedside. For example, when a magician visited the hospital, many of the mothers on the ward were eager to help as the magician's assistant.

She highlighted how activities such as music and dance can reach across cultural and linguistic barriers and reach many people at the same time.

The webinar provided diverse and detailed ideas about storytelling and creative expression is an important component of healing in humanitarian crises.

The full recording of this webinar can be watched [here](#) on the PallCHASE YouTube Channel.