



## HUMAN RIGHTS

*NYADOL NYUON is a Sudanese lawyer that grew up in a refugee camp. She told her story at the 2018 Refugee Ball organised by STARTTS.*

# Let hope triumph over horror

**O**n Sunday we were sitting around my older sister's living room, when her phone rang. I noticed she had answered it with the same laughter she normally greets my little sister with: "How are you doing?" Shortly after she went quiet and began to cry. I asked her what was wrong and she looked at me and said: "Grandma". I knew from how she had said it that my Grandma had died in Ethiopia.

You will see, as I give this speech, pictures of my grandmother kneeling and praying. I took them in 2013. That was the first time I had seen her in 20 years.

When I shared these pictures with the organisers of this event, she was still here and I thought I had time. I thought I still had time to learn more about her after 20 years of separation. I thought I still had time for my children to see her, so that she can bless them and she can love them. I thought there was still time for my children to learn about this formidable woman – this fierce woman, who had raised 20 grandchildren and now had 10 great-grandchildren. I had hoped she would hear the voice of my husband and the laughter of my child, but none of that will happen. Instead, my grandmother is dead and she died without any of her immediate family around her.

Mostly, I blame war and conflict. War had robbed my grandmother of a dignified death. It has scattered most of her children and grandchildren around the world so that we could not wrap our arms around her in her final moments and we could not bury her. We will never get to see her for the last time and the only thing that will be left is a grave marking where she laid.

This is what war does. It normalises what should not be normal. We are here today because of what war and conflict does – what it does to nations, cities, towns and communities; what it does to families and, in the case of torture and harm, what it does to individuals. The wounds it leaves behind can go so deep that they shatter the most inner pieces of who we are.

We are here to remember the humanity of those whose humanity may have been diminished, and to support and find ways to help restore that humanity. It is the reason I accepted the invitation to speak here because I believe stories are important and if we tell stories well, we are able to change perceptions and create an environment where empathy can thrive. And if by telling my story I can assist in this way, then it is worth telling it.

I have to admit, however, that I am still quite nervous whenever I am invited to these events, because it's a little over a decade ago since my family and I arrived in

Australia. So often when I find myself in a room like this, with much more distinguished people than I am, I often feel that maybe this is just a dream.

Having been born and raised in refugee camps, nothing in my early circumstances would have suggested I would be standing here today. It is never lost on me that only 13 years ago my family and I lived in an overcrowded refugee camp in northern Kenya; and only 13 years ago many of my dreams and goals were distant and appeared impossible.

Thirteen years ago I was stateless because since my birth, the life of my community, my family and I had been disrupted by years of war and for a long time we knew no other life. We were considered to be displaced people – then homeless people – without a country to protect us or claim us. Like many people my age, I ended up in Kakuma refugee camp where I spent most of my childhood. That refugee camp had no running water, no electricity and barely met our basic needs for survival. My family depended on food rations distributed fortnightly by the United Nations.

My mother – a single mother of seven children – was desperate to get us out. I believe my mum never wanted to leave her people and her culture behind, but she knew that without escaping the conditions of Kakuma, we would never have a future. It is not an exaggeration to say my mother sacrificed her life – at least the life she would have had – so that we could grow up with some dignity and hope; and the thing she wanted most was for us to have an education.

I attended Kakuma secondary college, one of the three secondary colleges serving a refugee camp of over 90,000 people. I recall sitting in a classroom of 60 to 80 students crunched each other on small desks, trying to see the blackboard. There were only four girls in my class and I was the loudest. I think I am still the loudest in most rooms. But it was not the overcrowding in the overheated classrooms that was the main problem. It was the fact that each day in suffocating heat and occasional dust storms, I would walk for nearly an hour to get to school and my mum thought that was enough, so she bought me a bicycle. You have to remember that we had little, very little, but still my mother decided to buy me a bicycle and for me, it felt like she took food from the table and placed it as wheels beneath me so that I could fly. It was a moment I recall often, a moment that shows the length that any parents would go to, to make sure that their children survived even in the harshest of conditions. It was also my mum who had the fortitude to apply to bring us to Australia and in doing so, she was leaving her language, her identity and her status behind to give us a new life.

We commenced our application to come here in about 2000 and as we waited to hear from Australian immigration officials. I recall my mother singing Gospel songs and praying each night, pleading that our application be approved. Sometimes I sang along with her, but mostly I listened silently waiting for my turn to persuade God of the wisdom of letting my family come to Australia.

When my mum stopped completely and had prayed and gone to bed, I then took over. I had waited until Mum had finished singing and praying because I believed that God would be in a better mood. When all was quiet, so quiet that I could hear my thoughts, I began the negotiations and I pleaded and promised God that if I made it to Australia, I would get a university education, I would be a very, very good Christian and I would always be grateful and never complain.

I also made the worst promise of my life, which was that I would always faithfully listen to my mum. I was desperate as you can see and at the time, I was in my final year of secondary school and I knew that if I didn't get out of that camp it was going to be very hard for me to pursue further education. There was no university in Kakuma and I knew that Mum could not afford to pay for a university out of the camp, but I was very lucky. I stand here as one of the very lucky people because I did finally make it to Australia and I did get a university education. However, I have found myself complaining when the Melbourne trams run about two minutes or so late. So, I haven't really stuck to all my promises, have I?

**S**ince arrival, our lives have changed dramatically. Within 13 years we have moved from being stateless and refugees to enjoying the privilege and protections of being Australian citizens. I now have a passport and I recall a moment at Melbourne Airport where one of the immigration officers looked at my Australian passport and said: "Welcome home." I finally had a home. Within those 13 years, I have moved from sitting in overcrowded classrooms to graduating from the University of Melbourne and on May 2016 I achieved a long-held dream of becoming an Australian lawyer, something that I had wanted since I was 14 years old.

I know very well that all these dreams would have not been possible without the generosity of so many people who have supported me since arrival; but more importantly, they are dreams that would have not been possible without the opportunity to have resettled in Australia – an opportunity that I am well aware millions of people around the world are hoping for.

I share my story today because I think it demonstrates what many refugee stories have shown before, which is that given a small window of opportunity, many will turn it into a lifetime of achievements. In the current political climate across the world, where people fleeing persecution are vilified and prevented from seeking asylum, are regarded with suspicion and subjected to punishment, we cannot lose sight of the fact that it is people just like me – people, not numbers, not statistics or headlines – that we are talking about here today.

I have often wondered about the children in detention centres in Australia who would, if given the opportunity like me, make their big, impossible dreams come true. How many like many refugees in the past could have become businessmen or doctors who might find the next cure for cancer, or change this very country for the best? I wonder about how many never get the chance to try and instead remain those terrible numbers and statistics.

I know from personal experience that many refugees take the dangerous road to safety, that many cross dangerous and unpredictable seas for the chance of having their children thrive; and as put so eloquently by the British Somali poet Warsan Shire, this is not an easy decision to make because as she writes:

"No one would leave home unless home is the mouth of a shark. No one would leave home unless home chased you to the shore. No one leaves home until home is a sweaty voice in your ear saying: 'leave, run away from me now. I don't know what I have become, but I know that anywhere is safer than here.'"

You only run for the border when you see your whole country running as well, fire under your feet and hot blood in your belly. You have to understand no one put their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land."

What Warsan Shire writes is painfully true, but so is the resilience of so many refugees. I stand here today as an example of what the generosity of a nation can afford someone who was once considered stateless. I stand here today as a statement of what, given a chance, many can do and are able to achieve. I hope for those who continue to do this very difficult job – many of you sitting in this room today – that events like this are able to renew your spirit and inspiration to keep doing this job. For we must keep on speaking for and on behalf of those whose voice remain unheard.

I say purposely unheard, because everyone has a voice. However, we still live in a world where we are yet to value all voices equally. We must continue to advocate for the displaced, for the vulnerable, because in the current environment it is vital that we do not lose hope.

I often recall a quote by one of my favourite authors,

*“No one leaves home  
unless home is the mouth  
of a shark. No one would  
leave home unless home  
chased you to the shore”.*  
*Warsan Shire*

Toni Morrison, when times are dark and I feel a bit defeated, and it goes: “There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That’s how civilisations heal.”

I also urge you to remember that those who continue to do this work and who are here today, that we are made for these times and here again I borrow the words and language from people who say it better than I can. I want to end with an encouraging essay by Clarisa Bencomo, where she writes, “My friends, do not lose hope. We were made for these times. I have heard from so many recently who are deeply and properly bewildered. They are concerned about the state of affairs in the world now. Ours is a time of almost daily astonishment and often righteous rage over the latest degradation of what matters most to civilised and visionary people.

“You are right in your assessment. Some have aspired too well in doing acts so heinous against children and elders, everyday people – the poor, the unguarded, the helpless; yet I urge you and ask you gently, to please not spend your spirit dry by bewailing these difficult times. Especially, do not lose hope, most particularly because, the fact is that we were made for these times. In any dark time, there is a tendency to veer towards venting of how much is wrong or unmended in the world. Do not focus on that. There is a tendency, too, to fall into being weakened by dwelling what is outside your reach,

by what cannot yet be. Do not focus there. They are spending the winds without raising the sails. Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world at once, but of stretching out to mend the parts of the world that are within our reach.

“Any small, calm thing that one soul can do to help another soul, to assist some portion of this poor suffering world, will help immensely. It is not given to us to know which acts will cause the critical mass to tip towards an enduring good. There will always be times when you feel discouraged. I, too, have felt despair many times in my life, but I do not keep a chair for it. I will not entertain it. It is not allowed to eat from my plate.”

I hope you will forgive me if I sound so aspirational. I have tried to share my story, not because it’s the most important story or the most interesting story, but merely to demonstrate how people who come from some of the harshest situations can rise and I think it’s partly what we are doing here today – to remember those who have survived and to find ways of making sure we help others in the future.

I am also aspirational because in some ways I am still that refugee girl. I am still that child who used to lie on her back daydreaming about the impossible, yet I stand here having had the great fortune of having many of those impossible dreams and goals come true. For to be a refugee, in so many ways, is to still have hope in the face of crushing impossibilities. R