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Sharing Stories

Gabriel with Vicki Squire

Introduction, by Vicki Squire

I met the author of this story in late September 2015, just several days after we had both arrived for the first time to the Mediterranean island situated between Tunisia and Sicily, Lampedusa. We met on opposite sides of a wire fence that contains the people within the centre where he was staying, and clumsily attempted to shake hands through wire that is designed precisely to prevent any movement beyond its confines. Little did I know when I shared my email contact with him that I would receive a message a week or so later to tell me that he had spent nearly two weeks in the centre, that he had lost contact with the friends he had travelled with, and was now in a centre in central Sicily. Nine days after meeting we established contact via social media, and approximately 17,000 words as well as several telephone calls later, one outcome of our encounter is the following story.

My story, by Gabriel (chosen name)

I am a child from a small west African country called the Gambia. Both my parents are from the same tribe. I am from a small town where fishing is the main industry. My father cooks and sells meat at the ferry terminal.

I am the first-born male child of my mother. I have a younger brother and two younger sisters. I used to live with my father and my mother, as well as my brother and my two sisters. My father abandoned us to our mother about 3 to 4 years ago, with no assistance.

By the way, my father married two wives, and my mother was the second wife. My father's first wife has four children, and two of them are older than me.

I started going to school when I was three years old. I first started with the nursery level, where I spent three years, before I was promoted to the primary school at the age of seven. It was during my primary school years that I started to understand my situation bit by bit. At this time, I started doing some physical work, like fetching fire wood, helping my mother with some household chores, and at times I also followed my father when he went to work.

My mother used to sell breakfast and dinner some few meters away from the ferry terminal. I helped her in selling and cooking dinner and breakfast during my leisure time. She couldn't afford the cost of hiring a maid to help her, so we all helped her so that me and my younger brother and sisters could grow up a bit.

I spent six years in the primary school, and after passing my grade six exams I was then promoted to grade seven in the junior level. However, after I got promoted to the junior school, my family start facing some difficulties because the relationship between my mom

and dad got strange and complicated. My parents were on bad terms at that moment, and they ended up separating. I was 12 years old.

After the separation of my mother and father, I wasn't able to continue with my schooling anymore. My father had abandoned us. I stopped at grade 8, because by then my mother wasn't able afford my school fees. She was the only one taking care of us. It was at this time that I started following the fishermen to the seaside, to catch and sell fish to make life easier for my mother.

It felt good to go to the seaside and join the fishermen in catching fish. At times I learnt how to be the captain on a boat. It was at this time that the idea of finding a way to Libya came to me in the offing. I found it necessary to give it a try, because I wanted to help my mum and also my uncle. My uncle has been working tirelessly to try to help my mum and to support my future. He has been wonderful to us. He helped my mother to take good care of us all, making me very proud.

The story of my life from 2014 to 2015 will always stand out as "red letter days" for me: unforgettable moments in my life. The journey to make my life easier has actually been the most difficult experience I have ever faced in my life.

I started this secret journey without my mother noticing. At first she thought that I was fishing at the seaside, but when the boat returned to our village my mum couldn't find me. After several months had passed, she thought that I had died.

The first country I went to after leaving Gambia was Senegal, which neighbours Gambia. After spending several days in Senegal I then departed for Mali, a country where I faced lot of difficulties. My money ran out in Mali, and I wasn't able to continue my journey. I stayed there for three months and six days before heading to the next country. In Mali I did some physical work, including labouring jobs and helping people to carry their goods to various places. This gave me the required amount of money to continue my journey.

From Mali, I needed to go to Burkina Faso. It took two days to get there. I didn't want to waste any time in Burkina Faso, but unfortunately I wasn't able to pass through all the checkpoints without being stopped. It was at the second to last border point in a place called Kantchari where the police stopped me and took all of my money. I stayed in Kantchari for some days because the police detained us for one week.

Eventually the police allowed us to pass through the check points in Burkina Faso, and I then continued my journey toward Agadez in Niger. Before arriving in Agadez I reached Niamey, the capital of Niger, where I spent a few weeks. It was here that I experienced

even more difficulties in life. I had to sleep on the street and at times it was very difficult for me to eat because I couldn't always find work. Eventually I was able to move on to Agadez.

In Agadez things were also very hard for me, because I arrived during the rainy season and at that time it was difficult to get job. I stayed there for less than a month in total, and for a while without doing anything. I wasn't able to look after myself well, because it was difficult for me to buy food and to pay for my transport in the city. Luckily, one day when I was on the street looking for work I met a connection man, who helped arrange to take people to Libya. After meeting with him, he told me that I should come and stay with him - so I did. I was working under him, helping him with household chores like cooking and sweeping his room. Also, at times I would go and find him more customers who wanted to travel to Libya. We were doing those kind of things together until one day he told me that he would be moving me to Libya also, and finally he did that.

After leaving Agadez for Libya, we first had to face crossing the Sahara Desert. This took a number of days and we had a lot of problems and difficulties before reaching Libya. Unfortunately, as we left Agadez our 4 x 4 Toyota pick-up broke down. We were left in the desert in Niger without our driver, until he came back to repair the car. We spent two days there, sleeping in the desert. We waited for our driver until our food and drink were all gone, and we felt extremely hungry and thirsty. Fortunately, one passer-by in a car saw us and came to speak to us. We explained all our problems to him, after which he gave us some food and water to drink. Following the return of our driver we continued our journey to Libya. It took a total of eight or nine days to reach Libya.

When we entered Libya the first place we reached was Qatrun. We understood that we would only spend one night there, before continuing our journey. Unluckily we were kidnapped by some Arab people there, and we spent three months in their hands. They kidnapped us thinking that we were the group that borrowed money from their driver - but that wasn't us. With the belief that it was, they tortured us almost everyday, pouring water on us. Almost all kinds of mistreatments were done to us during our stay in their hands.

One day they decided to give us a mobile phone so that we could call our families and ask them to send money for our release. Fortunately, during that process one man came and told them that we were not the people who took the drivers money. He told them he had found the group that took the drivers money. That was how we were freed from their hands. Later on they regretted all their mistreatment of us and asked for our forgiveness. Then they then took us to Sabha without even asking for payment. I personally spent only 28 days in Sabha, because by that time there was a conflict between two rival groups and tensions remained high. So with the instability in Sabha I moved on to Tripoli, the capital city of Libya, which I believed to be a little better.

It was on my arrival to Tripoli that I called my mum to let her know that I was alive. When my mum heard my voice she couldn't believe it, and even started crying because she thought that I had died a long time ago. I then asked her to help me by sending some amount of money, but she told me that things were very hard for her because at that time she was the only one taking care of the family.

I was managing okay in Tripoli, and often connected with my mum at that time. Then one day I met with one Arab man who just seemed to like me, and he decided to give me a job. Early every morning I went to the man's place to wash his car and sweep his compound. Then he would give me some money and food to eat. I was doing this kind of work under that man for three good months, until in my fourth month in Tripoli things started getting harder. This was due to insecurity and instability in the environment in Tripoli.

Finally, conflict broke out in Tripoli. It was not safe anymore for living. Everyone's life was in danger; it is not safe to live in a place where there is a war. Then the people started taking to the Mediterranean Sea and crossing to Italy again. In order to protect myself and save my life, I eventually made up my mind. With the little money I had, I would pay to take the dangerous sea journey to Italy. That is how I came to Europe.

I saved the money that I got from working for the Arab man to pay for my boat journey. The man who I paid found a taxi so that I was able to get out of Tripoli. It's far away to get to the boat, and they hid me inside the taxi so the police officer could not see me. I went to a connection house, where we spent almost two weeks before taking to the Mediterranean Sea.

A connection house is a place near the sea in which people are packed for some days before travelling. It consists of buildings meant for only people traveling. During our time in the connection house, we couldn't even sleep. The only thing that we could do was sit, because the place was so congested. I personally faced many nightmares there, because the place was so uncomfortable and we ate just once a day.

After some days the weather was good enough to take to the sea. It was by that time, on one special night, that they came for us and we went to the sea by foot. On that night at the seaside the connection man and his men fixed the rubber boat. We were there for an hour and a half. Once the boat was fixed, we carried it to the water and started to get in one by one. The connection man chose one person to be Captain of the boat. After everyone had entered safely, the connection men ordered us to start moving. That was how we finally left Libya, going towards our destination.

There were 135 people on board. We were a mixture of nationalities, with just two women. The Captain had a phone and kept in contact with the connection man throughout the journey. We were comfortably sailing across the water until we totally left the Libyan sea. During our second day at sea we entered international waters. Then we started having some problems with the boat. There was a hole in the front, and water started entering. Thank God - we were so lucky because the place that broke on the boat wasn't too serious or big. Also people were so understanding of each other on the boat, which helped so much.

We had travelled far from Libya when this happened. We were lucky, an Italian navy ship passed us and we were rescued. We were transferred to the big ship where they provided food and medication. After one day there, we were transferred to a Guardia Costiera boat, which took us to Lampedusa, Italy, in less than an hour. That's how we finally reached Europe, and our lives were saved.

The day we were rescued by the Italian navy we were all transferred to the big ship that was going to a small island in Italy called Lampedusa. We reached Lampedusa on Friday afternoon, and travelled by bus from the port to the camp.

They kept us inside the camp, where they kept searching us. Later they prepared a lot of things for us. The first thing they did was give out food for us to eat, and allowed us to rest. In the evening they started to give out phone cards so that we could inform our parents that we had arrived at Lampedusa.

Everyday, they cooked food for everyone - in the morning, afternoon and evening time. A week after I arrived we celebrated the Eid-Mubarak (Tobaski) day on Lampedusa.

I was fingerprinted in the centre. Eventually, after a week or so they started separating the people who arrived on the same boat. They took people from my boat to Sicilia, separating people between different towns and villages.

The key difficulty I faced there is that all the people who I came with the same boat were transferred, except for me alone. There were other people I met, I stayed with them over the two weeks I was there until later they transferred me too. That's how I managed until I got to Sicilia. The centre I am in now is a good camp to be in, because they give us each a bed to sleep in and we can play football and volleyball in the centre grounds.

My friends who I came with on the same boat, we used to sit together and asked questions to each other, and about the country we belong to – that is how we coped until we got to Europe. I am not in contact with them any more.

Sharing stories, by Vicki Squire

There are many things that can be said about Gabriel's story, and many complications in sharing it publicly. Disturbingly, this story is neither uncommon nor is it the most distressing story from many that I have heard in the context of a so-called 'European migration crisis'. Still, it is shocking to share a story like this, and to reflect on the struggles that remain ongoing for a person as young as Gabriel – as well as for many others of various ages and circumstances. Thus, while sharing this story is not straightforward, it is nevertheless important in unpacking the critical questions that this edited collection addresses.

So how precisely does sharing Gabriel's story speak to the themes of migration and the secular/religious divide? While it is relatively self-evident that this story speaks to the issue of migration, one may ask why it is relevant to concerns about religion and post-secularism. Religion is often problematically connected to migration in debates about social cohesion and/or religious fundamentalism. It is also connected to migration in the legal emphasis on providing protection for people who experience persecution on the basis of their religious belief. Yet these elements do not stand out as particularly significant in Gabriel's story. For somebody reading it for the first time, his story may therefore appear disconnected from religion and the post-secular. Having co-written Gabriel's story with him, however, my reading of this is somewhat different.

Instead of simply engaging this story through a process of analytical dissection, sharing stories with Gabriel in a more sustained way has facilitated a deepened appreciation of his experience on my part. This is not to dismiss academic analysis, which is important in my first reading of Gabriel's story as raising concerns about the limitations of existing categories of migration. Nor is it to imply that I have some kind of superior understanding or reading of his experience. Rather, it is to offer reflection on aspects of Gabriel's journey and experience that otherwise might be overlooked or misunderstood. While Gabriel's story is presented in this chapter as a singular story, it was actually written through a process of sharing stories in a much more detailed way – we told each other about our childhood and family; about our experiences of leaving home and travelling (as well as in failing to travel); and about our journeys to Lampedusa more specifically. We also shared how faith relates to all these experiences for us. This is reflected in my second reading of Gabriel's story, which is based on an appreciation of faith as both an integral and unremarkable dimension of our encounter.

As an academic who dissects stories analytically even when I would prefer not to, one of the immediate things that stands out for me in Gabriel's story are the forces driving his decision (or multiple decisions) to travel. As a critical academic who identifies as European, what strikes me here is the failure of current categories that divide migration as either forced *or* voluntary, political *or* economic. These categories fail to grapple with the fluid and fragmented journeys that people like Gabriel have to take (see also Squire et al 2016). Moreover, they are oppressive in defining some as worthy at the expense of others who are not. Gabriel's story starkly demonstrates how journeys are rarely 'voluntary' in any straightforward way, and how even when people do not qualify strictly as forced or 'political' migrants they can nevertheless be escaping conditions that necessitate movement. This story thus highlights how fragmented and fluid journeys do not neatly fit into the migratory categories that Europeans have created and sustained over time.

Beyond my response as an academic, and reflecting my position as a person simply seeking to reach out to another, what also strikes me is both the reassurance *and* discomfort that sharing stories can involve. I hardly need to raise the word privilege here, because it is clearly evident in the way our shared stories are differently presented in this chapter. At the same time, Gabriel's care in engaging with my story as I engaged with his brings reassurance that, despite the inequalities that differentiate our experiences of life, we can encounter each others' lives in ways that are not simply defined by (or confined to) such differences. Indeed, this can take us by surprise in terms of the relations that we forge, and in ways that are not always comfortable. "That sounds really hard", Gabriel said in response to something I shared with him. "Um, really? No, not really", I replied, wondering how to express my discomfort that someone who has experienced so much can express such incredible empathy with what seeming like relatively minor difficulties in comparison.

Going further, there have of course also been moments during our encounter when hopes and expectations cannot be met. Such moments are bound up with discomforts and frustrations, which often raise deeply troubling questions that go by unanswered, or inadequately answered. Sometimes things get confused in the exchange, and that can also cause worries and concerns. Sharing stories in this sense can be a painful reminder that empathy, far from being an experience of achieving accurate understanding and emotional equivalence with another person, is a messy process that is caught up in privileges and differences that endure even when we wish they would not. The stakes, of course, are particularly high in the exchange documented here. Nevertheless, far from giving up on our exchange due to the difficulties arising, giving *in* to empathy as an imperfect encounter has effectively deepened an affective and political appreciation of the relations that both bind and open up our divergent lives to one another (see Pedwell, 2014).

The importance of this engagement became clearest to me when I was discussing with somebody a wider range of stories that people migrating to Europe have shared with our research team. The project I was discussing is different from the research leading to my encounter with Gabriel because it is a larger scale project with a qualitative interview-based approach. However, it is related in important ways. In particular, the insights arising from sharing stories with Gabriel became apparent in my discussion with this person of the ways in which young sub-Saharan's travelling to Europe often appeal to 'God's will' in navigating their journeys. This was interpreted by the person I was discussing the stories with as a form of fatalism leading to migrants' increased vulnerability to smuggling networks. Such an interpretation was one that I found difficult in light of my research more broadly, particularly given the broader tendencies of Europeans to victimize (if not criminalise) people on the move without authorisation (Squire et al, 2016).

Indeed, having shared experiences of faith with Gabriel, this interpretation raised a series of more specific concerns for me around questions of agency. Questions about the ability of people to make decisions that affect change are particularly significant to debates about the religious/secular divide. Put in the most simplified of terms, secular perspectives are often associated with a subject who has autonomy and is able to affect change, while religious perspectives are often viewed as antithetical to this (see Vasilaki, 2016). An understanding of the vulnerability of migrants to smuggling networks in this case involved an implicit

assumption that to trust in God necessarily involves a non-agential form of fatalism. From my interlocutor's self-defined secular perspective, this was directly presented as something that is very difficult to relate to as a person without religious faith. In other words, a secular bias can easily reduce faith to passivity and victimhood.

Having shared stories with Gabriel, however, my take on this was somewhat different. I do not see Gabriel as a religious fatalist that simply lets things happen to him regardless of the consequences. Certainly, he makes decisions (as his story makes clear). Certainly these decisions affect change in terms of his circumstances (as his story also clearly demonstrates). Certainly he faces constraints in the decisions that he makes, due to the conditions that he finds himself in (as is also clear in his story). And certainly these conditions render him vulnerable to various forms of violence along the way (which his story also makes clear). Far from simply being a victim of smuggling networks based on a form of religious fatalism, Gabriel's experience is much more complicated, and highlights wider relations of injustice that serve as conditions under which irregular migration and people smuggling arise in the first place.

Indeed, debates surrounding postsecularism precisely point to the complicated relationship between religious and secular subjects, while highlighting the consequences of such subjectivities for our understanding of political agency. For example, Judith Butler (2008) highlights the ways in which religion and secularism can run in parallel through a liberal ideology that seeks to civilize subjects, and that thus renders some forms of subjectivity and political agency more acceptable than others. Furthermore, Saba Mahmood (2005) points to the failure of secularist discourses to recognise forms of agency that do not fit with the cultural norms of the liberal autonomous subject. For critical and feminist postcolonial scholars, postsecularism in this regard can draw attention to continuities between religion and secularism, while also acknowledging different forms political agency with reference to diverse religious subjectivities (Vasilaki, 2015).

Without going into too much detail into these debates about postsecularism, I want to emphasise their importance in challenging assumptions about what it means to be a person of faith. As two people who have experienced diverse religious influences throughout our lives, and as two people with distinct religious or philosophical beliefs (Muslim and Nichiren Buddhist respectively), Gabriel and I frequently referred to our experiences of faith while sharing our stories. This is evident in subtle rather than exceptional ways Gabriel's story above, such as in his expression of gratitude that the hole in the boat the travelled to Europe in was not too big, as well as in his reference to celebrating the Muslim festival of Eid/Tobaski while he was in Lampedusa. To reduce these statements to a form of fatalism or failure to think and act for himself would be to overlook the complexities of his story.

Indeed, Gabriel's experience of faith, like mine, cannot be separated out from his story. One of the things that we have shared in our discussions are the ways in which faith provides a means for making sense of our experiences and for guiding our action. Though our religious or philosophical beliefs are quite different, and though 'faith' itself means something distinct for each of us, sharing faith through dialogue nevertheless supports the deepening of trust, respect and mutual understanding, precisely in the midst of grappling with the messiness of the encounter. For me, to see Gabriel as a person who is vulnerable to violence because of a

fatalistic belief in God's will is totally counter-intuitive. This is neither because he has never expressed views about his faith that might be interpreted in such terms, nor because he has not experienced such violence. Rather, it is because sharing stories opens up a much richer appreciation of his experience as one that has involved a multitude of difficult decisions that are grounded in faith. Such engagement undermines a reduction of Gabriel's faith to fatalisms - even if I am not able to fully understand what faith means to him.

The secular and the religious are both contested terms. The secular can be seen from a liberal perspective as the autonomous subject's freedom from authority, and it can also be seen from a critical perspective as bound up with the violence of a religion such as western Christianity. Similarly, religion can be seen as antithetical to the political agency of subjects, or as shaping such agency in diverse ways. What sharing stories with Gabriel highlights for me is that these contested secular/religious relations, along with the formation of political agency, is much more complex and messy in practice – just as sharing stories can be.

Sharing stories as Gabriel and I have done both here and through our personal exchanges is a critical yet far from straightforward process. The ease with which this story could be manipulated by elements of society who fear and threaten people who are on the move is a continuous concern. The political implications of sharing details about why somebody decides to migrate, about the route and method of travel, and about experiences of arrival are uncertain and demand constant vigilance. Nevertheless, sharing this story while ensuring that Gabriel cannot be identified is important in various ways. I hope that it deepens appreciation of why people like Gabriel come to Europe, while also fostering greater understanding of how faith can support a person to navigate a situation that is in many respects unthinkable. Far from being a victim of his circumstances, Gabriel is a person of incredible courage, perseverance, generosity and understanding. Sharing stories has deepened my appreciation of this.

Gabriel's story was published in full at Open Democracy on 7 June 2016. A different reflection on the story was published by Dr Vicki Squire on the same day. These links are included in the select Bibliography below.

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