Radical hope in hostile times

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As punitive immigration policies generate despair, we need to create the conditions for hope to flourish

> We experience, of course, in the voyage we make, a tumult in our soul, a synthesis of contrasting feelings - the hope of immediate deliverance from the perils that surround us … along with a guilt-feeling at leaving one's world, one's soil, the scent of one's soil, one's folks. To the tumult in the soul belongs also the pain of the broken dream, utopia lost. The danger of losing hope.
>
> Paulo Freire, writing on his exile from Brazil in 1992[1]

Freire goes on to talk of the desire to keep alive the hope of return, of exiles who refrained from buying furniture for their new 'home' for years, of 'the tension between a today being lived in a reality on loan and yesterday, in their context of origin'.[2] Many decades later, for people seeking asylum in the UK there are the additional tensions of a hostile immigration system and an incendiary anti-migrant rhetoric that punishes those seeking 'deliverance from the perils' back home. Asylum claims that stretch on for years or even decades, teenagers seeking safety alone who become undocumented 'care leavers', the prohibition of work during the asylum process, the likelihood of destitution and homelessness, and a rise in racist and anti-migrant abuse and attacks.

At such a moment it seems unlikely that hope - for safety, for welcome, for a fruitful and happy life - could survive. And yet, it is precisely in such conditions that hope is most needed. As bell hooks argues, 'hope is essential to any political

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struggle for radical change when the overall social climate promotes disillusionment and despair'.[3] Hope in this instance does not amount to blind faith or misguided optimism, but rather is a considered response to the political, social and personal challenges faced not only by those seeking protection, but also by those standing in solidarity with them and in opposition to an increasingly brutal hostile environment. Seventy-five years after the launch of the 1951 Refugee Convention, as we witness the erosion of the post-second world war commitment to the principles of refuge in the UK and globally, there is a growing need for hope to become more radical in response, holding in mind what Les Back calls 'both socially produced trouble and hopeful openings'.[4]

Jonathan Lear's reflections on radical hope take as their starting point the story of Plenty Coups, the last great Chief of the Crow Nation, a tribe facing cultural catastrophe; for Lear it is the version of hope that emerges in times of extreme crisis: 'what makes this hope radical is that it is directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is'.[5] For those who have not only had to make the difficult decision to leave their home country, but also had to endure a hostile asylum regime and all the uncertainty that entails, radical hope can become a strategy of meaning-making in the uncertain present. In their exploration of strategies used by people seeking asylum as they try to regain agency, Kallio et al talk of 'tapping into the thin possibilities available here and now, however mundane and insignificant' in a 'move from hopelessness to radical hope'.[6] This necessitates a 'turn away from the idea of future defined by closed-off and unattainable goals - such as gaining a refugee status, getting an education, receiving adequate treatment', towards 'futurity as an unsettled and ambiguous horizon in which a meaningful life may continue'.[7]

This article looks at the work of Stories & Supper, a small charity based in East London, which for almost ten years has used creative practice, food and horticulture as a way of creating the conditions for radical hope to flourish for the refugees, people seeking asylum and other undocumented migrants that make up its community.[8] Alongside weekly creative workshops and allotment sessions, Stories & Supper hosts public events (such as supper clubs, story cafés and performances), has published books and videos, and has delivered school workshops in Waltham Forest.[9] This public facing work seeks to challenge and change negative migration narratives, bringing people together in more hopeful

contexts, as well as providing a platform for the work and ideas of people with lived experience of displacement. Food and stories are the common threads throughout all the work of the charity, hence the name.

The members of the Stories & Supper community have had a protracted, circuitous and needlessly cruel experience of the UK asylum system. Many of them have waited ten or more years to gain Leave to Remain, others are still waiting. Some arrived in the UK as teenagers but a decade on, as young adults keen to work and get on with their lives, still have no status. A high proportion have experienced homelessness or precarious housing and, in some cases, destitution. Most experience grief and depression due to the circumstances which forced them to leave their home countries and their prolonged distance from their loved ones. This is compounded by the UK asylum system, which removes agency by denying those seeking protection the right to work, to choose where to live, or even what to eat if they are living in so-called 'asylum hotels'.

In such circumstances, it might seem irrelevant to talk of hope, radical or otherwise, but, as hooks argues, at a time of despair hope becomes imperative. While the creative, culinary and horticultural opportunities offered by Stories & Supper cannot dismantle the political and social realities of the hostile environment, they are able to suggest that other futures are possible, generating moments of joy and lightness. As we have suggested elsewhere, the work of Stories & Supper demonstrates 'the emergence of radical hope; not in an imagined ideal future, but in the now, in the practice and the process of being together in a creative space'.[10]

Creating space for hope

On Saturday mornings at the William Morris Gallery in Walthamstow, Stories & Supper hosts creative workshops for refugees, people seeking asylum and local residents who volunteer to support the sessions (whilst also being active participants). Inside the award-winning gallery dedicated to the life and work of the Victorian socialist and designer, the room (provided as part of a community residency) fills with people whose home countries read like a map of pressure points around the world - DRC, Sudan, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, Sierra Leone, Vietnam - many still without 'legal' status. Aged from early twenties to seventies, people drift in and make a cup of tea before sharing something from the week that has made them smile: a flower, a walk in the park, singing in a choir,

speaking to a family member on the phone, gardening or, sometimes, nothing.

Using a variety of creative practices - including poetry, storytelling, drama, art, embroidery and more - the workshops create a space of welcome and encounter that differs from the essential therapeutic support, immigration and housing advice offered by other organisations working in the field. The activities take place in a gallery (rather than an advice centre or office) and happen on a Saturday, whereas most other provision is on a weekday. Sessions always start with light-hearted, humorous games that offer an opportunity for play and a chance to forget outside pressures. As member TR says, 'when I come to [the] workshop, most of time I forget my immigration [situation] and this kind of trauma … it brings me hope … Monday to Friday, very stressful … Saturday it's joyful'.[11]

To share laughter in this context might seem trivial or even inappropriate, but it can also be seen as audacious in the face of a dehumanising immigration system. In her work with unaccompanied migrants and young refugees, Jennifer Allsopp refers to the importance of humour 'as a subversive tool' and as 'a way of asserting … subjectivity in the face of structural constraints', as well as a way for those working with and alongside refugees and people seeking asylum to demonstrate solidarity.[12] During one of the writing exercises, Stories & Supper member SA shared that the 'happiness in my belly gives me hope' in spite of the '1,000 challenges I have faced in my life'. As Allsop says, 'The embodiment and vulnerability that comes with the comic, coupled with its transgressive potential … creates a tear in dominant societal structures and hegemonic meaning through which new ideas and realities can enter'.[13] Many members of Stories & Supper say the games are their favourite part of the sessions, precisely because they allow a rupture with the restrictions imposed in other aspects of their lives and allow a return to a time without control. As LM says, 'you're bringing your child again and you're laughing and you're making art'. These kinds of games also create a sense of equality as everyone becomes similarly ridiculous in the moment.

Creative writing and storytelling activities are a key component of Stories & Supper sessions but explicitly move away from eliciting trauma narratives about the reasons why people left their home countries, their journeys to the UK and their experience of the asylum system. While these issues inevitably arise, they are very rarely the main subject of exercises. People who have been forced to migrate are not defined by their immigration status but by the complexities that

make them human, their likes and dislikes, their loves and passions, their skills and life experiences. It is, therefore, important to listen attentively to individual stories, 'whilst also being acutely aware of the messiness' that lies behind them as a result of the lives that are being told and the context within which they are being produced.[14] Telling, writing and sharing stories can be way of asserting agency in dehumanising situations. As Michael Jackson states in *The Politics of Storytelling*, 'constructing, relating and sharing stories is basic to this reclamation of humanity - of turning object into subject, givenness into choice, what into who'.[15] By making time and space for poems about nature, stories about family and conversations about food to emerge, the sessions let everyday life back in and give room to hope's potential. A series of poems on the theme of tomorrow, published in Stories & Supper's anthology, demonstrate this desire for 'normal' life.[16] AG's humorous contribution states, 'Tomorrow I will have a passport / Change my teeth and get married.' For SK, 'Tomorrow is uncertain / Tomorrow is full of hope', and she also wishes for tomorrow to include visits to Edinburgh and the Bahamas. BK declares that 'Tomorrow I will sing and dance'. For AM, hope for tomorrow includes simple things like a day of sightseeing with a friend alongside dreams for a better future:

> Tomorrow I will open my eyes to a free day
> the dry sky will welcome me
> Tomorrow I will see my best friend
> we will visit simple places
> like the river, big ben, the palace …
>
> Tomorrow I will reach my English skills
> I will speak the language of confidence
> Tomorrow I will have a university degree
> and the energy to continue my journey.

Hope is a lion who doesn't tolerate nonsense

In 2025, Stories & Supper ran a series of creative workshops looking specifically at hope and its pertinence for those experiencing displacement and uncertain immigration status. A game that mixed up nouns and their definitions led to new ways to describe hope. The clear favourite was 'hope is a lion who doesn't tolerate

nonsense', which summed up the anarchic and comedic mood of the activity. Meanwhile the lines 'hope is where you walk barefoot, where waves hit your feet and make you feel relaxed' articulate hope as a place of calm, safety and possibility, a respite from 'the disillusionment and despair' of the social climate. One group member spoke of hope as 'a small light inside me'. 'It stays with me every day. It helps me keep going even when life feels hard' - showing how hope goes hand in hand with resilience and can be a necessary protection for those living within the hostile environment.

Another exercise involved writing poems based on Maya Angelou's 'Still I Rise', which resonated deeply with many members of the group, including those who are usually more reticent about writing. GN has been waiting more than twenty years to regularise his status and for him hope is a source of strength to be mobilised in opposition to hostile immigration policies:

> Living in different countries
> where no one can lend a hand,
> having sleepless nights on pavements
> hope and patience make us stronger.
>
> Hostile environments are made
> to make us lose hope,
> rights are there to prevent us
> from being harmed.

DP also says she 'lost hope of life' during the years she was waiting 'without a paper / no work', but talks of how creativity and making space for joy help her. 'I write for my life' she says. 'When I have hope / I listen to my music / I dance'. SK's six-year-old daughter is called Hope and has been part of Stories & Supper since she was a baby: 'Hope my daughter is very special to me. I believe that our future can be brighter and better than our past and I actually have a role to play in making it better.' In this way, SK asserts her agency in making a better life for her children, in spite of the difficulties they faced back home and in the UK. These extracts demonstrate how, even when challenged by protracted and seemingly hopeless immigration battles, many choose to actively work towards what Lear described as the 'future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is'.

Acknowledging the many negative situations they might experience - homelessness, insecure immigration status, destitution, separation from their families - many members of Stories & Supper still focus on a positive outcome, keeping hope alive in the present so that they can imagine a future that is otherwise.

Seeds of hope

Stories & Supper has had a plot at Higham Hill Common Allotments in Walthamstow since 2020, starting its gardening project at the height of the Covid pandemic. Taking on the plot was essentially an act of hope during a crisis that affected everyone but affected the most marginalised more profoundly.[17] From the first time it was possible to meet at the allotment in a small group, due to a slight relaxation in lockdown restrictions, there was a sense of lightness at being in nature together as part of a new collective undertaking. All gardeners know that digging a new plot, sowing seeds, planting out a young plant is an act of hope. After battling with the weather, pests and diseases, city foxes and plants that give up for no obvious reason, every flower that blooms, every tomato or plum that fruits, is a triumph. For those who have experienced displacement, this cycle of hope, disappointment and joy has added poignancy. There is often an assumption that refugees mainly come from rural areas and will therefore embrace the chance to return to the soil. However, the vast majority of Stories & Supper members are urbanites and have no more knowledge of farming than your average Mancunian or Londoner. It is important not to romanticise the connection that refugees have to their lost land, especially as such discourses often reproduce nationalist tropes and contribute to the pathologisation of refugees as uprooted people unable to function in a new context.[18] Nonetheless the embodied work required by horticultural practice allows displaced people to forge new connections with place, whether that is by growing plants remembered from back home or simply watering tomatoes, courgettes and flowers in inner-city London. The opportunity to immerse your hands in the soil, put weight behind a spade, watch a seed you have sowed become a harvest to be shared, can be a source of joy and one that speaks of hope even in dark times. 'I feel at my best when I come there', says BT. 'The allotment makes you feel extra hopeful … spending time together, working with the soil as well as sharing conversations, laughter and those simple moments of joy and peace'.

When the tomatoes or plums are ripe, the Stories & Supper allotment team sit

under the grapevine and enjoy the literal fruits of their labour after the work is done. In these pauses, these quiet moments of rest and pleasure, they can legitimately stake a claim to the physical space of plot 96, the land that they have worked and sweated over. CZ says, 'the allotment gives me a sense of peace and tranquillity. It is a space where I can feel free with people that I trust.' In this way the hopeful act of gardening allows Stories & Supper members to assert their right to be in this corner of the UK at least, and acts as a rebuttal to the hopelessness of the hostile environment which excludes people seeking asylum from meaningful labour and from being part of the community.

A simple meal is shared at the end of allotment sessions, and creative workshops signalling the possibility for more 'normal' life and routines to exist, both in the present within the Stories & Supper community and again in the future. Preparing and consuming food is a seemingly banal everyday practice which is often denied to those in the asylum system because of a lack of access to cooking facilities, limited money to buy food, or having to eat food provided in hotel accommodation. Many displaced people also face the unsettling experience of eating alone for the first time if they have migrated without their families. As CZ says, 'in DRC we like to eat together, we like to share meals. In the UK, I had to learn to eat on my own'.

Food is also used by Stories & Supper to connect with the local community, a way of gathering people in while generating more radical and hopeful narratives about migration. Allotment produce is used in three-course feasts showcasing the skills of refugee chefs at supper clubs, in huge pots of curry at informal events and in jams sold at local markets. Cooking is an embodied practice which carries with it the reminder of meals prepared and eaten in other locations and with other people in the past, as well as being a rehearsal for meals that will be shared again in a more hopeful future. At public events, cooking and serving food allows members of the group to demonstrate the kind of hospitality they would have shown back home, reclaiming agency by taking on the role of welcomer rather than guest, client or dependent, thereby unsettling the power relations inherent in the notion of hospitality.[19]

Towards a more hopeful migration narrative

The public facing work of Stories & Supper is an opportunity to challenge prevailing political and public opinions about migration and provide a platform for people with lived experience to share their experiences and creativity, while engaging with

the political work of countering despair. However, these events are not political meetings or rallies which, while often well intentioned, can exclude the very people who are at the sharp end of immigration policies and anti-migrant rhetoric. Rather they bring people together over food and stories, creating spaces for alternative narratives, laughter and friendship to grow. This chimes with Back's assertion that 'fostering a different kind of attentiveness to the world is a resource in the service of hope' as it seeks out 'emergent alternatives, directions or possibilities'.[20] A Stories & Supper event during Refugee Week in 2026, which set out to celebrate the power of community and the value of friendship at a time of rising hostility around migration, used a chat show format for members of the group to share their passions. JB spoke of how being an Arsenal superfan gives him joy and the strength to deal with the immigration and mental health challenges he faces (football surely being the ultimate example of hope over experience); BT shared how he advocated for himself when sleeping rough by going to the library to find out which charities he could email to ask for help, developing a love of Catherine Cookson while he was there.

Stories & Supper also deliver school workshops bringing young residents into contact with refugees and people seeking asylum. In previous years this has entailed one-off workshops using a mixture of games to explore facts about migration and creative writing about home and belonging. In 2026, the charity delivered a longer-term project in one primary and one secondary school to develop a culture of allyship. Students taking part in the Welcome Project developed two guides, one for new refugee or asylum-seeking pupils coming to the school and another for the school on how to be a place of welcome. In an exercise asking students to write postcards to a potential new arrival, the most common verb used was hope: 'I hope life gets better from now on', 'I hope you are safe now and not in distress anymore', 'I hope you do well in your new home', 'I hope I get to know you more and that you can make lots of friends', 'I hope you are settling in', 'you are so brave and I hope you feel welcomed'. The project built a culture of empathy and compassion in the schools, demonstrating that hope is not just about wishing for better things for one's own life, but also for the lives of others. A discourse that demonises or seeks to criminalise refugees, people seeking asylum and other migrants not only sets out to kill hope for those individuals so that they may give up, go somewhere else or never arrive in the first place, it also renders hope defunct as a project for all. Embracing radical hope involves finding and cultivating hope in the most desperate circumstances. As Raymond Williams famously said, 'to be truly radical is to make

hope possible, rather than despair convincing'.[21]

For Stories & Supper, making and taking space for creativity, nature and welcome is not a peripheral activity or a brief distraction for those living in harsh and extreme conditions, but is radical action 'in the service of hope'. It can be hard to quantify the outcomes of this kind of work, which are often intangible, incremental, quiet and only obvious at some point in the future. However, as we face some of the most hostile attitudes and policies ever seen towards refugees and people seeking sanctuary in the UK and beyond, creating spaces to counteract these narratives becomes essential. Nourishing and nurturing hope and refusing to give into despair is a form of resistance that remains available when other possibilities for agency become limited. Likening the hardships and immigration struggles he and others have faced to the experiences of the pigeons he rescues, JP looks towards the uncertain future and remains hopeful that at some point life will be better: 'one day it will come / the same as for this bird / everyone is going to fly / freedom will come'.[22] Like JP's pigeons, cultures of hope need space to breathe and to breed.

Helen Taylor is the Director of the charity Stories & Supper. Her doctoral research looked at the meaning of home for Cypriot refugees in London (*Refugees and the Meaning of Home: Cypriot Narratives of Loss, Longing and Daily Life in London*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

Notes

1. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Robert R. Barr (trans.), Routledge, 2006 [1992], p24.

2. *Pedagogy of Hope*, p24.

3. bell hooks, in South End Press Collective (eds), *Talking About a Revolution: Interviews with Michael Albert, Noam Chomsky, Barbara Ehrenreich, Bell Hooks, Peter Kwong, Winona Laduke, Manning Marable, Urvashi Vaid, and Howard Zinn*, South End Press, 1998, p52.

4. Les Back, 'Hope's Work - The 2019 Antipode RGS-IBG Lecture', *Antipode*, 53, pp3-20, 2021, p18.

5. Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope - Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, Harvard University Press, 2006, p103.

6. Kirsi Pauliina Kallio, Isabel Meier and Jouni Häkli, 'Radical Hope in Asylum Seeking: Political Agency Beyond Linear Temporality', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 2020, p6, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1764344.

7. 'Radical Hope in Asylum Seeking', p6.

8. https://www.storiesandsupper.co.uk.

9. Stories & Supper, *More Than a Recipe Book*, 2019; *In the Morning Birds Were Singing: An Anthology*, 2021.

10. Olivia Sheringham, Helen Taylor and Kate Dufy-Syedi, 'Care-full Resistance to Slow Violence: Building Radical Hope through Creative Encounters with Refugees during the Pandemic', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol 50, No 13, 2024, pp3359-3378, p3371.

11. Members of Stories & Supper are referred to by their initials throughout.

12. Jennifer Allsopp, 'What's So Funny about the European "Migration Crisis"? The Use of Humour among Unaccompanied Young Migrants and Refugees to Assert Agency and Subvert Authority in the Face of a Hostile Reception Regime', *Journal of Youth Studies*, Vol 29, No 6, 2026, pp875-890, p876.

13. 'What's So Funny about the European "Migration Crisis"?', p879.

14. Olivia Sheringham and Helen Taylor, 'On Stories, Storytelling, and the Quiet Politics of Welcome', *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 2022, Vol 21, No 3, pp284-302, p289.

15. Michael Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling - Violence, Transgression and Intersubjectivity*, Museum Tusculanum Press/University of Copenhagen, 2006, p104.

16. *In the Morning Birds Were Singing*, pp65-66.

17. 'Care-full Resistance to Slow Violence', p3360.

18. Helen Taylor, *Refugees and the Meaning of Home: Cypriot Narratives of Loss, Longing and Daily Life in London*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p103, p99.

19. 'On Stories, Storytelling, and the Quiet Politics of Welcome', p287.

20. 'Hope's Work', p4.

21. Raymond Williams, *Resources of Hope,* 1989.

22. *In the Morning Birds Were Singing*, p140.