Global Campus of Human Rights

Podcast Series 2 – Hope-based human rights

Episode 3 – To hope for the human
Andrew Leon Hanna

Hi, this is To The Righthouse, a new podcast series by the Global Campus of Human Rights. From scepticism to hope, from utopia to empathy, we discuss human rights, riding waves, but also signaling where the light is. This podcast was recorded in Venice, Italy, on the island of Lido at the Global Campus headquarters.

Graham Finlay (GF) - Hello and welcome to the Righthouse. My name is Graham Finley and I have the pleasure to host the second series entitled 'Hope-based Human Rights'. This is the third episode and we're going to reflect on telling hope. We want to continue our journey to better understand what it means 'to hope' for the human and to do so we will talk about the power of telling a human story. And what better way to do this than by inviting an inspiring writer? It is a pleasure to introduce Andrew Leon Hannah, a lawyer, entrepreneur, international human rights advocate and author of '25 Million Sparks: The Untold Story of Refugee Entrepreneurs', named as a 'Financial Times Book of the Year'. A warm welcome to you, Andrew.

Andrew Leon Hanna (ALH) - Hey, Graham, thanks for having me.

(GF) - So, when we talk about refugees, human rights activists, media and politicians traditionally rely on crisis narratives, which may create a feeling of impossibility and hopelessness. Your book and the underlying message of power, determination and dignity shows how hope can spring from positive narratives on painful and inspiring human stories. What sparked your interest in such a hopeful approach?

(ALH) - Yeah, it's a great question. I think when I first started writing the book, my perspective was from that of a son of immigrants from Egypt who came through England into the US and made such a major difference in my home community. My dad was a physician who owned his own primary care practice and changed the lives of thousands of people and impacted the lives of thousands of people. My mom did the same through preschool teaching, and was a doctor by training in Egypt as well. So she's helped in multiple ways. I saw the way they kind of transformed my home community and neighbourhood and region. Then as the founder of a social venture that also helped highlight and support immigrant refugee and first gen entrepreneurs, I continued to see kind of the impact in the heart and the way that immigrants refugees, and first gen entrepreneurs, and asylum seekers and all kinds of migrants and their kids have made an impact on societies and communities, especially during COVID when a lot of their small businesses were struggling, but they still were able to give back to others. I had seen all this on one side. On the other side, there was what I would see on the news, and particularly in the summer of 2018, when I started writing the book: in the US it was primarily a lot about the Central American asylum seekers fleeing to the US border. It struck me as very incongruent between what I say 'victim or villain narratives' I would see in the news and by many politicians, versus what I would see in my own community, what I would see in many of the refugee entrepreneurs that I work with every day who are the most kind of brilliant, creative, inspiring people who dealt with so much, but yet have contributed so much and

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are wonderful people. So what I would see is either refugees in particular, but migrants more broadly, were portrayed as victims, meaning they are one-dimensionally 'weak and need help' only, or as villains, meaning they're going to come take our jobs, they're going to destroy our culture, they're going to commit crimes, all of which is not even factually accurate. So for me, it was how can I tell a story that can cut through all this political cloud of stuff and just say: 'here's a human being, few human beings, that you can follow their lives and understand just how inspiring and admirable these folks are.' And then maybe if you can change the hearts then, or impact the heart, then you can impact things more broadly.

(GF) - You have a lot of statistics in the book, but you don't belabor them, as you say: 'refugees are much more likely to be entrepreneurs, they have huge net benefits to communities'. But all those economic statistics is something you use as a sort of frame around the stories you tell. And, again: why? What do you think it is about these stories or stories that particularly is effective at communicating about human rights?

(ALH) - Yes, I think with stories, what I've seen is - if you go straight to the kind of statistics and economics or policy, what I've seen is - people tend to then rush to their kind of side; especially in the US these days - even more and more kind of divided and polarized politically - and trends all around the world as well (are polarized). But, I think you hear the word 'immigrant', you hear the word 'refugee' and I think people tend to rush to their side. It's the same with all kinds of topics and often one side or both sides are using that kind of community in a way for their own purposes. So there's certain groups that both sides sort of dismiss or use as political props. Refugees are just one category; prisoners, people who are in prison, people who have just left prison are another category, all kinds of folks who are painted in different ways. When the topic comes up about them, it feels like you have to sort of first align yourself on 'well, I'm a XYZ party member, so I think this is about that'.

So what I was hoping to do is: take away that element and just say 'form your own opinion by following the story of a person, or three people in this case, and the many others that I talked about who dealt with this situation', you may… and you know partly why I picked these three in particular is: you may have never heard about Syria aside from ISIS, aside from the kind of violence after the war began, aside from Alan (Kurdi) the kid I mentioned who was washed up on the shore, passed away, and that kind of got a lot of media attention. So you're seeing a lot of things that should be covered in the media, because they're major events, and they're tragic events. But if that's the only thing you've seen, or if the only thing you've seen is a presidential administration saying: 'we need to ban Muslims from coming into the US', or anything like that, then that might be the only opinion you can have if you've never met a refugee or a Syrian person. So the concept was: how can we bring that personal experience to you and follow the life of this person, invite you to be a family member or a community member with this person, just for the duration of the book, and then come to your own conclusion? We'll support you with stats and policy too on what I believe, but at the very least, I think it starts with feeling like: 'Okay, I got it, this person is a person with equal dignity, that deserves to be treated with dignity for who they are, no matter what they do. Although, by the way, now I know that they do a lot for our communities, but even if they didn't, I understand it. Then let me start from there and think about policy and other things.' But if you don't get to that first point, I think then people kind of rush to their positions. They've never really thought at the heart level about who these folks are that we're excluding or mistreating.

(GF) - Yes, that's why I want to ask you about how you ended up in Za'atari camp in Jordan, and got to meet your - and I'm trying to figure out the exact words - 'interview subjects' doesn't really describe it - I'm tempted to say 'friends', or 'partners', all the three stories you're telling. So how did that happen?

(ALH) - Yes, definitely friends. I whatsapp with Asma and Malak quite a bit to this day. I met them through... I had a partnership with Save the Children Jordan, in Amman and they were able to create the access into the camp, get the permit and everything like that. They helped introduce me to a bunch of folks who had done entrepreneurial ventures. That's how I met them. The reason I picked Za'atari in the first place? I went to a few different places… I knew for the book it would be helpful for engagement to try to have a place-based situation where you can kind of get to know one place and feel immersed in one place. So I had thought about talking about Utica, New York. I went there, for example, a city that is kind of a Rust Belt city, factories closed after it was on its way to being a very kind of top populous city. It's a burgeoning city, but then after the factory closures, it started declining dramatically. Then refugees sort of rejuvenated it and brought it back to life. So it's a beautiful story there: it's about a quarter of refugees there, of all kinds of countries; I think 40 languages or something are used in the public schools. So that's still featured, but I think Za'atari compelled me the most, partly because my parents being from Egypt, I think about the region a little more and I thought Syria in particular is one that's been cast in a light that is very one-dimensional. You don't hear a lot of hopeful and inspiring stories in the national media or international media.

Then the second (reason) is (that) just after meeting the three women - Asma, Malak, Yasmina - it just felt to me like something I had to write about. I got to sit in, for example, [with] Asma in her trailer, with the kids kind of running in and her telling stories to the kids. For a bit of background for those who haven't read it: Asma is a storyteller who basically dealt with unimaginable pain coming from Syria to Jordan, across the borders to the Za'atari camp and she always wanted to be a teacher. So there was a nonprofit called 'We love reading' that made the opportunity to get a few books, for children that have Syrian or Middle Eastern protagonists in Arabic, that are more hopeful. She got a few of those books. Then that was 'the seed', 'all the seeds' she needed really to start up a major kind of storytelling initiative in the camp. So I got to witness it firsthand where kids would stomp into her trailer, sit around her in a semicircle. She would read these stories, and she would know all the kids and be a mentor to the kids. She did much more than that, too, as her own writing and poetry and many other things she has done. So, being able to see that firsthand, I felt like I had to write about this. It's the same with Malak - with the art that she does impacts people; and Yasmina with her kind of wedding goods shop and her very significant commitment, entrepreneurship - selling all of her wedding jewelry early on, knowing she was going to have to stay in the camp and taking a big risk. So yes, I think it was a combination of wanting a place-based narrative, caring a lot about Za'atari and the Syrian diaspora, and then those three people, really, is what was a major factor.

(GF) - I think your description of the enterprises of the very various people you talked to, the three women you talked to, is really, really important. What's really striking about refugee entrepreneurship is, of course, they have an extra layer of uncertainty, an almost sort of planned uncertainty because they want to be somewhere else, usually, and yet they take these steps and

they venture out into the world to try and set up a business or a social enterprise, with all the risks, which are added on to its temporary nature. I wonder if you could talk about that. But before we go on, I have to say: you leave us hanging about Asma. The book ends with her going up for an interview with Canadian officials about possible relocation, one of these ways in which refugees can move on from displacement. Did she get to go to Canada?

(ALH) - Yes, I'll start with that one: she did end up getting relocated, which is great. Not her full family, which is unfortunate - another kind of issue with the system - but she was relocated to France. So she lives in France now. Actually, there was a film done about her recently, which is quite cool. We're hoping to do a kind of a joint book event soon. She was able to be featured in Harper's Bazaar recently in a cool article, too. But obviously, she's dealing with a kind of transition to a new country. It's also a big blow to the camp community, but a great opportunity, as well, for more stability.

On the point of entrepreneurship, it's an interesting phenomenon, because migrants and refugees and migrants more broadly, tend to be much more entrepreneurial. Refugees in particular are 1.5 to 2x more entrepreneurial than native born citizens in terms of starting businesses, and they're small and large. So, something like 50% of '*unicorns'* - 1 billion plus valued companies - are started by at least one immigrant founder, and a huge percentage of fortune 500 companies are led by immigrants and refugees. The phenomenon is even more impressive to your point because of the starting point. So as a refugee, (you) usually (have) almost no capital that you're bringing; Yasmina brought a bunch of her stuff put in trash bags in the back of a truck. Because you have to, usually it's a sudden thing, (you have a) very limited access to capital.

So part of what I do with one of my social ventures is how do you provide loans and zero interest loans to entrepreneurs because they often don't have credit scores, there's often discrimination in the lending system. There's the trauma for refugees in particular of leaving and having seen sometimes family pass away, having their own injuries, mental and physical. You have language, of course, and then you have a lack of a network, in the new place almost entirely sometimes - so all of those obstacles are incredibly huge. But then they tend to be more entrepreneurial. And part of that is because they're more resilient, they've dealt with so much, they're able to get through so much, they're more committed. Again, in Yasmine's case, when she sold that wedding jewelry - that was it - it was 100% commitment. It wasn't an entrepreneur like me who has a backup option or can get another job. Often getting a job is very difficult, because of legal restrictions, lack of work permits, and then also just companies and organisations not recognising and credentialing what they did back at home. So yes: commitment, resilience, there's also risk-taking ability, of course, they've had to take risks their whole lives; there's cross-cultural advantage.

So I tell a lot about Razan, who is also from Syria, and was relocated to Yorkshire, England, and she started Yorkshire Dama Cheese, which is a cheese company that, in her mind and her words, kind of combined the British milk and the British resources and a kind of Syrian concept, Halloumi kind of squeaky cheese. For her, she described to the UNHCR - having a lot of qualifications, but not getting a job - she has described it as 'getting stabbed in the heart multiple times'. So she finally said: 'okay, let me do my own thing'. It was only a £2500 loan that got her going. It's now £100+ revenue, World Cheese Awards, which I didn't know was a thing. But she's won all kinds of things, and employed many people. So the reason, there, is partly cross-cultural advantage:

knowing other markets, knowing other ways people consume products and use products, and there's many others. It's amazing that starting at that point, they're (...), so it kind of doubly emphasizes those advantages.

(GF) - Yeah, I think it's really striking when she says not having a job is like 'being stabbed in the heart'. It makes me think about how jobs but especially entrepreneurship figures in our human rights talk, right? I mean, do you think it's neglected when we talk about human rights or in the human rights conventions, even the whole panoply of commentary and promotion of human rights? I don't see a lot of entrepreneurship in there, but you're the expert. I'm sure you can tell me.

(ALH) - Yes, I think why it should potentially be more highlighted - and definitely it should be more highlighted - is that I think with entrepreneurship, it's a situation where you're investing, sometimes very little, like I mentioned, £2500 - with Asma it was just a few books; with Masika, another one we talked about, who lives in the Sherkole camp, it was just $72 or so (as part of an incubator programme that started a bread cooperative, that's very successful in the camp). With entrepreneurship, it's like providing capital in the hands of people who have the best ideas about their community and then letting them do what they need to do with it. So that's why I personally find it to be - and with the track record that I just described - not just immigrant and refugees, but a lot of disadvantaged populations, they have ideas that can be made into something special that can impact their lives, and then not just their lives, but everyone else in the community. But they're not being invested in and often the aid is more dictated in particular ways.

So that's why I think we're seeing in some camps, like for example in Za'atari, different incubator programmes, different loan programmes, where it's like: you have the ideas, we're just trying to foster you getting through the obstacles to make the ideas, just to have an equal shot at making it successful or close to an equal shot as possible. So my take is that I think there needs to be much more of that because, while entrepreneurship isn't the answer for everyone, when you're kind of in parallel working on jobs and companies reforming their policies, but while you're locked out of many job opportunities, that's many immigrants, refugees and other disadvantaged populations' only kind of route to success. So the more you can invest in that, and the more you can empower folks to have the capital and believe in their ideas, the more you can kind of change lives, I think, and allow them to change their own lives.

(GF) - Yeah, you mentioned in the book, Kiva - kiva.org - as an option for listeners if they want to contribute to microlending to refugees. Do you think that route is particularly helpful or maybe a more structured kind of programme is the way forward?

(ALH) - Yes, that's a really good one. That's our partner for the venture I mentioned that does zero interest loans. You can kind of scan through people all around the world, (see) pictures of them with their businesses, there's some… feel some connection to them and lend as little as $25, usually [with] a very high repayment rate (in the US it's zero interest, but internationally I think it's… there's an interest rate, but not a large one, as I understand it). And your loans are sort of recycled, so once it gets repaid, you can keep going, and that's a really nice way to do it.

The other thing I always mention is: refugee resettlement centers around the world are often understaffed, and the staff are underpaid - these are the kind of the frontline people who figure out

housing, figure out jobs, figure out language training, and so even just thinking about any refugee that you've seen in your community, those are usually the people who try to reach out to them and welcome them - so providing resources to them through your company, through your faith group, through yourself. I've had some people read the book, and one person said that she welcomed a Ukrainian refugee to her house for a while. So, if you feel, if you have that opportunity, and you're listening, you know, maybe this is all you need to kind of push to say: 'okay, let me connect with the local welcoming center, relocation center, and/or faith group and ask is there someone I can either bring in or help with a little bit of funding, help with connecting them to resources - sometimes all it takes is somebody who knows the city and can help connect you to people. So those are a few routes. And then of course, the international ones, too, that are doing great work in camps. But you know, camps are only a portion. As I mentioned in the book, a lot of them are hosted in these, and 1%, only, less than 1% of refugees globally are resettled every year. There's a lot of folks in camps or cities who are feeling very temporary, often don't have full access to rights. So the more you can help organizations near you, or around the world that help them to accept the funding, that would be great too.

(GF) - So you talked about funding and some of the other economic sides. I'm kind of interested in the governance side as well, because you talked about successful refugee entrepreneurs all around the world, including the US, the UK, Kenya, Ghana, and of course, Za'atari in Jordan… How the economic, but especially the political surroundings affect the success of refugee entrepreneurs? I mean, are there ways in which refugee camps could be constituted and structured that would enhance the chances of these entrepreneurships succeeding and how does that relate to refugees' human rights?

(ALH) - Yes, definitely. You know, the first kind of thought, a little bit outside of the question, is (that) 85% of refugees are resettled in low or medium income countries, not higher income countries. So one element is making sure that some of the higher income countries step up more. There are about 30 to 40 nations who participate voluntarily in the kind of UNHCR resettlement programme, and they set their kind of caps and the US historically was on the high end, and then dipped significantly and still hasn't really recovered much. So in other countries they have been a part of it, but could certainly need to step up. I wrote the book, it's called '25 Million Sparks'; I wrote it in 2018, there were 25 - or started in 2018 - there were 25 million refugees. Now there's 30+ million, 200+ million displaced, and then there's the whole kind of climate refugee thing, which is many, many estimated refugees, they'll have to leave because of climate change issues. So to me, it's overdue that we as a global community recommit to welcoming refugees and not to kind of denying folks at the border, who are asylum seekers, which is something that the US has done recently, in the last couple of years and has continued.

So that's kind of an initial thing that the kind of political landscape or the economic landscape people kind of end up in, has a big effect. Again, this goes back to shifting the narrative, because some people will hear that and say: 'oh, yeah, but we have a lot we have to deal with in our country.' Yeah, that's true. And there is a cost early on welcoming refugees. But you know, the stats bear out that they're the biggest assets you could bring; the US 10 year period $63 billion in net fiscal impact positive from refugees. So it's like, I tell people like if there's a Venn Diagram of morality and economically wise ideas, you should be in the middle. If something's in the middle, you should do it. And I really think that's why the narrative is the problem to some degree, because

there is a world where people thought of this completely differently. For example, in the US, the one I know the most, and people heard 'refugees' and they said: 'oh man, we need to have more of them. But can we advocate and push to have them resettled here in Jacksonville, or here in Charleston?' And actually, some mayors do that, and it's worked out well for them, like in Utica for example. But because the narrative is so divisive, that's not necessarily people's initial response. And because what they see in the media is different.

But to your question, there, on refugees in camps and the kind of governance of it, one of the problems is partly because they're often in camps in lower or lower medium income countries there and partly just because of the narrative and everything, there's a reluctance sometimes to say: 'we're going to fully welcome folks', because it's meant to be temporary, hopefully peace returns back in the home country. And so there's kind of a say: 'okay, let's temporarily put them in a camp with a lot of restrictions and then they'll return back and it'll be back to normal.' But the problem is Za'atari has been 10+ years in existence. Dadaab in Kenya has been 20+ years, and much more than that, I think. And so, there's a need to rethink that and say: 'okay, let's be realistic about it, and make sure that there aren't refugees living in lack of freedom of movement, locations where there's walls all around the camp, places where you can't get a work permit… in Za'atari, they a few years ago changed that and said: 'you can get a work permit.' And before that, I think the businesses were just sort of operating, technically, illegally. So yes, making sure they can get work permits, that they're fully kind of citizens or on the path to citizenship as kind of full rights of movement and work. I think those are the two big ones, where in camps that doesn't exist.

(GF) - I thought one of the key parts of the stories you tell is their ability to leave and come back to the camp and to build up clients outside the camp. And I know, Jordan has really experimented with Za'atari to link it up with the local special enterprise zone. And so it does seem like a closed camp, it would be an even tougher place to be an entrepreneur, and the outside world is a really big part of their stories.

(ALH) - Yes, definitely. Yes.

(GF) - So you only mentioned in your acknowledgments, and I really have to ask you about this, you say that your Christian faith is really central to your work with refugees and for refugees? I mean, can you tell us how it informs your work? And do you think the religious approaches to human rights are particularly based on hope?

(ALH) - Yes, definitely. Yes, for me, I kind of mentioned faith in different ways throughout the book: the fate of the three women, I kind of mentioned the Bible verse that talks about welcoming strangers. To me, I think, with different faith backgrounds it's an interesting one, because you can tap into talking about going past politics, you can tap into something I think deeper in people that is much more important to them than politics, like their deepest values and honor. I don't know of a religion that would in this case say not to welcome asylum seekers or refugees, it's almost like laughable to think about that. And for me, as a Christian, the most foundational thing would be to do that because in Jesus's life, he was always there for the stranger or the one who was outcast or mistreated. And so I do think it's really powerful to tap into that, because, again, it goes past politics. And one thing I've seen is, especially with faith groups, and Christians, for example, in my home region, across the political spectrum, they appreciate the book and the film that I did, things

like that, because I think it helps tap into the human story. And so, maybe I don't know if it'll change their decision on who to vote for based on refugees, and maybe they have other issues that are still a priority, but at the very least, they've seen something that maybe they hadn't seen before, or they've, we've gotten onto the same page about this topic. And with hope-based I do think it tends to be a little, maybe a little more hope-based. For me, it certainly is because it's the idea that we're all equal. We're all equally, in my belief, equally beautiful, but also equally flawed. And so I think if you can get that, or everyone on the same page with that, then it becomes a question of: 'well, if we're all equal, then why are the outcomes so different?'. And well, it should be that we should remedy that. And I think there's a little bit of a fight there, fighting for justice that comes out. And so I do think, there's a hope that we can do better, that can be informed by faith or really any kind of value system where you start with the point of view: we're all equal, it's not fair that I was born here and they were born there, let's kind of try to figure something out.

(GF) - Thank you very much Andrew, both for your inspiring work and for making all of us reflect more on the importance of positive human stories, looking for them even in the most dark circumstances.

(ALH) - Thank you Graham, likewise to you. I appreciate it so much.