

## **SWEDISH SUMMER CAMP FOR GAY REFUGEES**

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Often I hear the question, especially from majority (OK, I'll say it: heterosexual, white) male colleagues and friends: Why do we spend so much time on Diversity? So often, in fact, that I think it bears reinforcing in this column through a bit of storytelling. I want first to contextualize this issue in an atmosphere of encouragement and open discussion, not of annoyance or opposition. Perhaps I hear the question as often as I do because I am a white male myself. In any case, I want to reinforce the message that multicultural competence is good for psychologists in an increasingly diverse society. But I also want to underscore that multicultural awareness is vital for our continued ability to thrive in a diverse society. Regardless of our professional roles or personal situations, the ability to connect with persons of varying ethnoracial and cultural identities, sexual orientations and gender identities, ages, socioeconomic levels and ability statuses is increasingly vital. As you read my own summertime story, I'd like to encourage you to consider your own experiences of, and relationships to, people of diverse and socially marginalized groups.

You may wonder how it was that I, a white American gay male, ended up in a wilderness refugee camp in Sweden. I was raised in a relatively bilingual home (English and Swedish), because my mother, a single parent who worked a variety of jobs, left me in the care of my immigrant Scandinavian grandparents with whom we lived off and on until I was 9 years old. I learned the Swedish language and loved it; it is firmly rooted in my soul. Every so often, I return to the Motherland to revive and enhance my language skills. This summer, I went to a wilderness camp for people seeking to learn/improve their Swedish.

The Camp was in an extraordinary setting, even for Sweden in the summer: a vast lake bordered by acres of forest, with spectacular sunsets and moonrises at about 11 PM. As advertised, the mornings would be spent studying the language in group discussion of readings, films and other exercises. I'd understood that the afternoons would be spent enjoying typical summer camp activities: hikes, swimming, crafts, or just lazing around. I'd not expected that the majority of my fellow campers would be refugees, many of them gay. But there ends the similarity between my life and theirs: they were fleeing persecution in their own countries, mostly in the Arab world and Africa. Their chances of being granted permanent residency in Sweden were greater if they learned the language.

One fellow called himself "Dan", wanting to anglicize his Arab name. He fled his home country, Iraq, after having been imprisoned for four months for having engaged in homosexual activity. He was 22 years old when his father discovered that he had a secret boyfriend. It was Dan's own father who called the local police, who took him to the station and beat him before sending him to prison to await a trial. In prison, he was beaten further and raped numerous times by the guards. Inexplicably, he was released four months later and somehow found his way to Sweden where he awaits a decision about his search for asylum.

Toward the end of his story, as we sat in the lingering Swedish twilight on a pier by the lake, Dan could see my jaw had dropped in shock, and my eyes were filled with tears. He held up his hand. "Please do not cry", he said to me (in perfect Swedish). "I know this is hard to imagine. But I am a survivor of these events and I will be strong. I will not have your pity, just your support". Dan's was not the only story of violence and displacement. There are others who have been put to death throughout the Arab world and Africa who we will never meet. I still feel many things when I remember Dan and the others: how relative our individual suffering is,

and above all, how we are called to exercise compassion in our striving to connect with those like – but at the same time very unlike –ourselves.

I return to a world in which the current political topics in our community continue to be marriage equality; the ending of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”; and the rights of LGBT individuals as adoptive parents. I fully support having a national conversation about these issues. But there is something that lingers from summer in a far land, whispering in my ear: let’s not forget those around the world who are in a daily struggle for their very lives.