

Why are you afraid to return to your country of origin? When you say you were tortured, can you tell me exactly what happened and who did it? When you say your spouse abused you every day, were there any specific instances or details you can remember? I know this may be difficult to talk about, but have you ever undergone female genital circumcision?

These are questions whose answers can lead to an immigration status for some people, which is a good thing. But they reflect experiences no human being should ever have to undergo. I ask these questions every day. As I work in legal services, I cannot legally tell you my clients' stories, but I can tell you my story. Like what it means to interview a military deserter from Eritrea, a county in east Africa, who was tied up and left in the desert sun for a week because his supervisors believe he is anti-government, a common experience. Or the devastation I feel as I fumble through an intake in Spanish with a domestic violence survivor from Honduras who has so internalized the anti-woman messages in her society that she will not call what her ex-spouse did to her rape. Or, I can tell you what it means to be a United States citizen, college educated, woman of color, assessing an asylum claim of a Gambian woman who was subjected to female genital mutilation when she was young because her state thinks that her body is dangerous and must be blotted out.

Asylum is a form of immigration relief for people who have experienced persecution in their home countries. In my JV placement as the asylum intake coordinator for the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project, I am the first point of contact for potential clients who are interested in applying for asylum or who must do so, to try to stop imminent deportation to their country of persecution.

I struggle with the practice and value of direct service. At times it can seem like we are holding up an already broken system, it can seem like we are making the system look like it works when it does not. I am critical of the continuation of cycles of oppression and systemic injustice in our direct service. My concern and frustration has increased in immigration legal services when we try to stem the tide of a deeply broken system one person at a time.

But, I was recently forced to temper my criticism. For the most part, asylum seekers must apply for asylum within one year of entering the country. Last week I received a call from a potential client whose one year deadline was the next day. I reviewed his case, and it was very weak, but he was in deportation proceedings so he had to apply. I had to squeeze him into an already busy day and I was visibly stressed and annoyed. We sat down and I proceeded to rush through the application, rarely looking up at him. As I was running back and forth between our meeting room and the photo copier, I realized, everything I am doing, my body language, the way I am saying things, all of it is conveying to this man, "Your presence here is not convenient to me. I would rather I did not have to do this." Which is hurtful and does not authentically represent what I more deeply feel,

- that I would rather live in a world where we did not persecute others, where our immigration system was not so broken, where my job was not necessary. But we don't, and I was essentially blaming a victim and survivor of those realities. I was misplacing the burden of my frustration. That is the value of direct service, that I was forced to encounter my participation in dehumanization, my failure to live in community with this client.

The work of JVs can be challenging. Greg tries to assist homeowners in defending their claims to their homes against multinational banks. Kristina struggles to shelter for people, when we continue to be a society that tells people, there is no room for you here. Jess educates young people who have been displaced from their high schools because, guess what: they acted like teenagers who have not had a stable life. JVs accompany people who have been told, we would really rather you were not here. And sometimes JVs are the ones saying it. But, without the worldview of JVC Northwest, without giving and getting support from my community and this community, I could not ask a torture victim exactly how he was tortured, or tell a domestic violence survivor we cannot help stop her deportation. Without a holistic approach to this world, I would fall apart. JVC Northwest is the program that facilitates the service, and in doing so, it can be the program that facilitates the conversion. Conversion through service is happening every day. It is happening in Kate's budding relationships with Real Change vendors, or Toni's joy in caring for the elderly of South Seattle, or Nick's commitment to a person's right to lunch without judgment, without attitude.

I reject the urge to find neat conclusions when reflecting on direct service. It feels too self-centered to say, "Well I have been changed, I hope that's enough." It is not enough. Not for the clients I meet every day. Not for torture victims or people who are without a home, or DV survivors, or the Duwamish river. It is not enough. When we say ruined for life, what exactly is being ruined and is there a real value of that conversion for every living thing, be it abstract or very concrete, in process or complete? I do not know. I'm sorry. I know that I could not before I came to JCV NW and I cannot now continue to live in a world like this. I have reaffirmed the importance of never losing the individual story in the analysis of systemic injustice. I have to live with my clients, and they have to live with me. It is uncomfortable, it is necessary, and it is an attempt at an honest expression of our humanity, mine, theirs and yours. But will it be enough?

Thank you for allowing me to tell you what you already know, and thank you for your support. I am even angrier, more unsettled, than the person who stumbled into Seattle last August. There is nothing neat or complete about it. But that is my story.