



*Making now precious:
Working with survivors of torture and asylum seekers*

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This paper explores bringing together a series of narrative principles and practices in response to those who are seeking asylum in Australia and also experiencing the consequences of torture and trauma. This work is a description of ongoing co-research with asylum seekers into conversations that can be meaningful in a context of unpredictability and instability. This invitational approach makes way for rich alternative story development, re-membering conversations, and bringing to light moments that sustain and nurture through hardship. This work emphasises an approach of 'making now precious' by creating pathways for narrative conversations to be carried in nomadic, transportable ways in the hearts of people as they face the long tumultuous journey of seeking asylum, safety and belonging.

Keywords: asylum seekers, trauma, interpreters, Christmas Island, relational ethics, alternative stories and territories

For the last few years I have been working with the Christmas Island Torture and Trauma service situated within the Indian Ocean Territories Health Service. Christmas Island lies in the Indian Ocean around 300km south of Indonesia and is considered a part of Western Australia. Asylum seekers arriving in Australian waters by boat are brought initially to Christmas Island where they enter Australia's detention network¹. My role within the service is to meet with newly arrived asylum seekers who have been identified as having experienced torture and trauma and to provide therapeutic counselling, advocacy support and, when appropriate, to refer them on to the Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma Network.

The people with whom I meet come from a range of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds and I have the opportunity to work alongside face-to-face interpreters for all sessions and conversations. I have had the opportunity to meet with men, women, children and families – some journeying alone, others with one another. The work is subject to daily change. Sometimes I have had the opportunity to meet with people over a period of six months, sometimes three months, sometimes a single session. It is common for referrals to our service to be considered 'patients with complex multiple trauma resulting from torture presenting with significant symptomology'. Referring notes often include the following descriptions:

- Difficulty sleeping including nightmares
- Grief and loss
- Feelings of guilt, shame and self-blame
- Disconnection with self and identity
- Intrusive memories, images, flashbacks
- Difficulty being in close confinement with others, sensitive to noise and crowds
- Symptoms of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder.

There are many excellent texts exploring and describing working with the effects of torture and trauma, engaging with asylum seekers and refugees (please see further reading). In this particular article, I explore how I am seeking to use narrative practices in this very specific context and the unique considerations it provokes. I attempt to place the microscope over the very initial period in which people arrive on Christmas Island and the conversations that I engage with people before they are moved on into the wider detention network.

In my initial months of working on Christmas Island, I was acutely aware of the overwhelming dominance of particular discourses that shape Australia's approach to immigration and detention. As one of the only services on Christmas Island for asylum seekers that is situated outside the detention system, at times we can feel like a tiny island at risk of being overwhelmed by the turbulent unpredictable ocean. As I question, 'How do I sustain this work and facilitate space for rich alternative stories to emerge?', the people I meet with are grappling with, 'How can I continue to sustain a sense of self and personal agency within this new chapter of Australian detention?', alongside, 'How do I respond to the multiple effects of torture, trauma, displacement and loss from day-to-day?' Over the last few years, I have embarked on a journey with asylum seekers to seek answers to these questions. While still not close to answers, the following principles of practice have emerged along the way:

- Embodying the opposite of torture
- Less pain, more gain
- Establishing an alternative territory, a welcoming space
- Invitational inquiry and co-evaluation
- Double-listening – what do they hold precious?
- Scaffolding for three – working alongside interpreters

EMBODYING THE OPPOSITE OF TORTURE, THE OPPOSITE OF THE DETENTION SYSTEM

People often share with me that what they find useful in our therapeutic conversations is the opportunity to experience comfort, relaxation, safety and acceptance in the company of someone who is fully present to them. When trying to understand the meaning of this feedback, I have found it useful to consider the four key themes of relational ethics illustrated by Bergum & Dossetor (2005): mutual respect, engagement, embodiment and environment. For me, in my practice, these themes provide a holistic framework through which to convey narrative ideas beyond the spoken and written word. In some ways, I have come to understand that through these relational ethics I am attempting to embody the very opposite elements of torture and trauma, the very opposite of the detention system that depersonalises, demands justification of people's experiences, and reinforces notions of power and non-choice.

The context of unpredictability and instability on Christmas Island highlights the importance of working

towards making every moment precious. Physical action, choice and 'doing' are limited to a great extent within the context of detention, however, these restraints thankfully cannot fully penetrate the realms of human relationship, engagement, conversation, sharing of stories, rituals and dreams. Conversations that move into realms of preferred identity, connection with family, friends, heroes and heroines can exist despite the fences of detention. People take up each opportunity for connection and conversation and share with me the preciousness of those moments, the relief they provide, the sense of relaxation and restoration.

At first, alarmed, I thought to myself that these conversations, these precious interactions, don't change things! It's true they may not change the circumstances and situational factors, but they do influence people's internal worlds that are hidden from the prying eyes of detention, the internal worlds that are so precious and that require nurturing and care. Like the plant that appears dead in the winter but brings forth new growth and blossoms in the new season, detention requires people to weather the storm, to direct what energy and strength there is to nurturing the internal world of self and identity, until once more they have the opportunity to take action in life.

LESS PAIN, MORE GAIN

I have particularly connected with the writing of Angel Yuen (2009) who proposed the model of 'less pain more gain'. Rather than frameworks that suggest trauma work requires exploration and articulation of the very details of traumatic experience, which can often bring distress, in my practice I have found that healing trauma work has potential to happen in every conversation, interaction and engagement, and in relation to day-to-day experience, not just the extraordinary. If someone wishes to explore descriptions of traumatic events, I respond in ways that attempt to slow down the process and that will develop alternative storylines as platforms of safety to facilitate the telling.

I am warmed by the willingness of people to search for those conversational moments and those memories that will give reprieve from the domination of despair, loss and uncertainty. I find myself invigorated by the metaphorical works people undertake in which they describe landscapes, seasons, local tales and legends, sports, animals and other imagery in order to evade torture's firm grasp and shine light on preferred values, memories,

dreams and legacies. These are the sources that can overcome – even if only for that present moment – the consequences of their experience.

ESTABLISHING AN ALTERNATIVE TERRITORY, A WELCOMING SPACE

While we often talk metaphorically about alternative territories, I have found in this work context that I am part of a team and service which is committed to establishing a physically alternative territory to detention and its dominant discourses. By being externally located to the detention centre we, as a team and as individual practitioners, seek to create an alternative welcoming space that does not require those who see us to justify or reason their case, where they are unconditionally accepted and respected, where they are listened to without judgement and responded to with transparency and honesty. The therapeutic posture and position I endeavour to embody is supported by the therapeutic environment and team. As explored in Bergum & Dossetor (2005), 'environment is created by our everyday action. It is an ethic for the present, yet it is an ethic that creates and protects the future' (p. 165). We as practitioners seek to stay connected rather than isolated, and to practice non-harm and non-violence in our interactions with each other and external agencies. In turn, this strengthens our ability to maintain our therapeutic posture of working within and standing apart from a culture of violence and detention.

INVITATIONAL INQUIRY AND CO-EVALUATION

I am mindful that by the time I meet with a person for the first time they have already been through a series of mental health appointments with a formal assessment model for the purpose of diagnosis, assessing the severity of symptoms and the creation of a treatment plan, often from the expert/patient perspective. In my practice, I endeavour to avoid re-creating this assessment model by offering an invitation to embark on a rigorous co-evaluation with the person into their responses to their experiences of torture and trauma.

To offer this model of inquiry requires energy and freshness from the counsellor. It also requires an ability to hear and be aware of the dominant problem stories - to *stand with* the person in their experience of the problem story - while at the same time to *stand apart* from the problem story with an attentive alertness for glimmers of

momentarily obscured territories, sources of sustenance and vitality.

DOUBLE-LISTENING – WHAT DO THEY HOLD PRECIOUS?

Michael White (2003) referred to this process as 'double listening'. I consider this to be not only a technique but also a therapeutic positioning/stance, a bodily experience as much as an attitude. By taking a stand of not joining in with the dominant story, space is made available for considering alternative stories of identity. It is an invitation that will continually be offered regardless of the compelling evidence and arguments of the dominant story that is causing so much harm.

In my practice, one of the key messages I try to convey is that regardless of the compelling conviction of the dominant story that causes harm, I remain unconvinced of its totality. I am committed to co-researching the practices of that person's life that have potential to assist in undermining the power and influence of the dominant story. This is not to say I work in a confrontational manner or dismiss or diminish the far-reaching consequences of the dominant story on a person's life. Rather, by adopting a stance of loving kindness, patience and tolerance of the dominant story, this seems to reduce its ability to draw on an oppositional energy that often increases its power and dominance. After acknowledging and accepting the presence of the dominant story, energy may be redirected into co-researching other aspects of life and identity.

Whilst attending to the descriptions and stories of traumatic experience, and the consequences on life and identity, the following lines of inquiry guide me in double-listening:

- What does the person hold precious in life?
- Who do they choose to be connected with, why and how?
- How do they sustain themselves during hardship?

At the end of a session, I take time to consider with the person:

- Do we have a clear understanding of the key dominant stories and the impacts they are having on the person's life?
- Do we have some alternative ideas or stories about that person when less obscured by the dominant story? Who else knows about this?

- Do we have some ideas about strengthening the connection to preferred self and identity?
- Do we feel clear about what happens next in the event of meeting again and also if we don't meet again?

SCAFFOLDING FOR THREE – WORKING ALONGSIDE INTERPRETERS

Early in my training in narrative therapy, scaffolding (White, 2007) was a metaphor that greatly assisted me. I initially held the image of bamboo scaffolding, flexible, moved by the wind, organic and creative, complex and supporting, but not without risk. Scaffolding for me is a responsive, reflexive technique that provides a supportive structure within conversations while offering freedom of movement. It is a process that takes on different possibilities when working with translators.

Working alongside interpreters is a challenging and greatly rewarding experience. Interpreters teach me so much every day and I value their skills and dedication to contributing to understanding, connection and comprehension. Having a third person in the counselling room brings differing dynamics and on Christmas Island it is rare to have the same interpreter for the same person for each session. This further contributes to making now precious. Each session is unique. There can be no reliance or expectation of continuity between sessions. Discontinuous change has become my new best friend!

For me, working with an interpreter is not a neutral input output system, a mere robotic translation of words from one language to another. Interpreters are people with complexity and personality, who come with their own experiences, values and beliefs. I believe that in the counselling context we must aim for shared understanding or common ground between three people (or more) in order to engage effective therapeutic work. When there is resonance between three people, the conversations have endless potential and possibility. As a 31 year old Iranian man remarked at the end of one conversation, 'It's like we went to the same place together'. When there is discord or fractious connection this can be a source of frustration that requires attentive care and consideration to name and work through.

Scaffolding has become a particularly important technique for me when working alongside interpreters. At times the careful scaffolding is as much for the interpreter as it is for the person I am meeting with,

taking time to feed back the person's words and ideas, making sure I have heard and understood them correctly, also allows space for the interpreter to become acquainted with previous conversations to which they may not have been present. It also paves the way for opportunities for elements of outsider witnessing (White, 2002). At times it may not be appropriate to invite reflections from the interpreter but it does not mean that they can't be meaningful witnesses to stories, especially rich descriptions of preferred self and alternative aspects of life. As I reflect back what I am hearing, it takes on resonance and emphasis as the interpreter conveys the reflection. The pace and practice of interpreting often leads to a story being told several times in different language, by different people. It creates a rounded conversation where the person can share and then hear their words back through two people, echoes and emphasises. When working through interpreters, I am aware that people's facial and bodily movements, suggestions of feelings and responses, are important to enquire about and explore. As the interpreter is talking, I am attentive to the interactions that are occurring. Not being able to follow the language enhances my sensitivity to tone, visual cues and bodily responses, all which indicate resonance, difference, and can act as openings for further meaning-making.

STORIES FROM CHRISTMAS ISLAND

The people whose stories I will now share have given their permission for me to do so, however, they have requested I change their names as many are still within their journey of seeking asylum in Australia's detention network. The stories I wish to share relate to ways in which together we are:

- co-researching alternative stories
- making 'home in the heart' through re-membering conversations
- undertaking migrations of identity
- making visible the histories of skills and strengths
- making now precious through attending to goodbyes all the time

CO-RESEARCHING ALTERNATIVE STORIES

When I met with an Iranian man I will call Mehdi, he conveyed a strong desire to speak the details of his torture. We spent a considerable amount of time

discussing how this telling might occur, what would be needed and what roles we might play. Together we developed a plan of multiple story-telling where Mehdi gave me permission to interrupt and slow down his telling by asking questions that would assist developing storylines which could run alongside that of the torture story as platforms of safety and alternative identity. Mehdi and I were both surprised at the richness and difference of stories that arose from the telling of the main story of torture. Mehdi spoke of a memory he had during the torture where he had begun to chant the words from political protests songs. Mehdi recalled the sense of power he felt upon realising that he could still take action, still stay connected to his beliefs, that he could act in refusal, in defiance, of the torture inflicted upon him. This rich development of an alternative self, a self capable of taking action in even the most desperate of situations, became a very important story for Mehdi. It became a source of sustenance and self-knowledge that would play a part in Mehdi's ongoing journey of seeking asylum in Australia.

A 22 year old Afghan man, who I will call Abbas, taught me a lot about the gentle perseverance required to co-research alternative stories. When I met with Abbas for our one and only session, I was struck by the strong presence of Helplessness and Hopelessness. It seemed these two were working together to paralyse and silence Abbas. As Abbas spoke, it was like it seemed to be taking him a great deal of effort and energy to impart his words. He persevered, however, to share the effects of Hopelessness and Helplessness and their long histories in his life.

As the conversation progressed, it seemed Hopelessness and Helplessness were working very effectively together to thwart any invitations I put forward in search for other experiences of self. As this dynamic continued through the conversation, I had the strong sense that Hopelessness and Helplessness were consolidating their dominance. I was, however, unconvinced of their totality, their domination, and worked hard to shake the shadow of doubt cast by these two devious characters. I wracked my brain trying to think of the knowledges and skills shared with me by other Afghan men of ways to connect to alternative stories of identity. My mind travelled over landscapes, seasons and then maybe, possibly, 'Abbas, this may sound like a strange question and you have been ever so patient with me asking so many questions. Can I ask you, if you were an animal, which animal would you be?' Abbas response was quick, 'A bird!' Abbas described a black and white bird that was a common sight where he was from. I asked if he knew any stories about birds

that he might be able to share with me. Abbas thought for some time and then shared a particular saying, 'Even if you take the sky away, the bird will keep flying towards freedom'. Well I'm not sure what Hopelessness and Helplessness thought about this development but suddenly they weren't so central to the conversation. A thin but meaningful alternative story had begun to emerge. Abbas began to share with me that he had always been resolved to keep trying in his life, that this was the one thing that he holds precious and that sustains him through difficult times. Abbas, the interpreter, and I were connected in a sigh of relief, a sense that through our hard work together we had shone the light through the firm grasp of Helplessness and Hopelessness and illuminated a pathway to an alternative landscape of identity.

MAKING 'HOME IN THE HEART' THROUGH RE-MEMBERING CONVERSATIONS

On Christmas Island, I am responding to people who have experienced multiple losses – people, pets, homes, country, communities, identity, ability to communicate, hopes and dreams. In this context, people have shared with me the importance of finding ways of 'making home in the heart'. This idea of re-establishing people, places, stories, rituals and other significant memories within the heart in transportable, nomadic ways, hold particular meaning and strength for those travelling on the journey of seeking asylum.

I met with a man on a number of occasions, an Afghan man who I will call Mohammad. Mohammad had been on Christmas Island over 18 months and expressed feeling at a loss as to how to respond to the overwhelming effects of long-term detention layered upon a history of torture and trauma. Mohammad connected strongly with remembering conversations (White, 1997), drawing on his memories of the countryside of his childhood, the daily rituals and tasks around the farm and house, the stories his parents used to tell him, the seasons, the rhythms of the animals through the seasons, and the preparation of particular foods. We noticed together that during these conversations Mohammad's body would begin to relax, a sensation and experience that had escaped him for many months. Mohammad would remark on feeling sleepy at the end of a conversation, an indication perhaps of deep relaxation, which had evaded him in his prolonged experience of sleeplessness. Mohammad's experience highlighted to me that, alongside reconnecting with identity and self, narrative conversations have the potential to facilitate relaxation/meditation – a whole body/mind experience.

An Iranian man, who I will call Daryoush, similarly was struggling with the effects of long-term detention, in particular a new self-view that he was 'a bad person'. I declined the invitation to ask questions that may bring about rich descriptions of this dominating self-view 'a bad person' and instead enquired about the person before this period of detention. Daryoush had appeared somewhat suspicious and surprised at my line of questioning but decided to accept the invitation and began to tell me about the young man Daryoush who had been an active and involved entrepreneur at a bazaar in Iran. I was curious about the twinkle in Daryoush's eye as he began to connect with his preferred self through the eyes of others – the way he conducted himself in business, the ways in which he could always be depended upon, and took his role of contributing to the community very seriously. Daryoush stopped mid-sentence to remark that this was the first time in over a year of being in detention that he saw himself again as capable, caring and able to contribute – in that moment Daryoush had found his antidote to 'a bad person'.

UNDERTAKING MIGRATIONS OF IDENTITY

When I met with a 56 year old Tamil man from Sri Lanka, who I will call Raslah, we planned what might be helpful to discuss in the session we were to have together. Raslah shared with me that he initially wanted to give a brief outline of his story to orientate me with his life, but that then he wanted to focus on discussing exactly how he might go about speaking about his experiences. I enquired further to understand what Raslah meant and Raslah shared with me his story about repression, the wish to speak out and the fear of the consequences of speaking out. Raslah shared with me that, now that he was away from Sri Lanka, he felt like he was 'bursting' to speak about his experiences, however, he feared the 'volcano' situated in the bottom of his stomach that threatened to erupt and spew volatile emotion. I enquired with Raslah the significance and meaning of sharing and speaking out about his experience. Raslah shared many stories of his strong connection with social justice and the actions he had taken throughout his life in accordance with his values and beliefs. As Raslah was speaking, I could visualise the journey metaphor often referred to in the migration of identity (White, 1995). I spoke with Raslah about this metaphor and enquired as to whether it was a useful framework for his ideas of finding expression. Raslah's enthusiasm was catching and his ideas came through thick and fast (this was much to my delight and to the interpreter's dismay as she kept waving her hands trying to keep up!). Raslah decided

to call his journey of identity 'Repression to Expression' and his beliefs and values around social justice were the materials that were to propel this migration.

Nearing the end of our time together, Raslah shared that he felt a sense of energy and commitment to his journey 'repression to expression' and a sense of hope that he could take action despite the strong continuing effects of torture and trauma. Raslah shared that developing a metaphorical map and plan had provided clarity and structure. I asked Raslah if he thought it might be useful to write a summary of his plan, and he decided to note some of his ideas in a notebook that he always kept with him. Here are the four key themes that Raslah recorded in writing:

- Raslah decided his story is his legacy and that by sharing it he gives collective voice to the Tamil people, their history, customs, culture and persecution.
- Raslah decided that telling his story was an act of refusal to the persecution he experienced.
- Raslah decided that connecting with others would sustain him and assist in telling his story.
- Raslah identified that a key step in developing new friendships, which was a difficult task for him, would involve developing personal insight into what conversations felt okay and what to do when conversations began to provoke strong emotional responses. Raslah decided he would start out by playing cards with a group of people and would focus on the game to stay in a 'safe territory'.
- Raslah shared that it was important for him when sharing his story to take his time so that he does not miss important stories that may risk being overshadowed by the dominant stories of suffering and torture.

This was some of the important knowledge that Raslah developed in the process of his migration from 'Repression to Expression'.

MAKING VISIBLE THE HISTORIES OF SKILLS AND STRENGTHS

Two therapeutic conversations that I shared with Keetha, a 30 year old Tamil woman from Sri Lanka, illustrate the diverse ways in which it is possible to uncover the histories of people's skills and strengths.

Upon meeting Keetha for the first time, I was struck by her exhaustion, a tiredness that entered the counselling space and settled down with heaviness. When Keetha and I discussed what might be helpful conversations for our time together, I noticed Keetha's big sigh as she explained that she felt too tired to talk about much but thought it might be useful to share with me about her family, especially her role as Auntie that was very special and important to her. At the very end of this session, Keetha, quite offhandedly, mentioned that she had studied classical Indian dance ... but followed this up with a conclusion that dance seemed like a waste of time in the context of her experiences. I expressed my curiosity for Keetha's experience in dance but, sensing the theme was not resonating at this time, left it there.

I wasn't sure I would see Keetha again, but was pleasantly surprised to see her the following week. With the passing of a week, Keetha had had an opportunity to rest and recover to some degree from the journey to Christmas Island. I enquired with Keetha whether it would be okay to ask her more about her experience with classical Indian dance, and Keetha indicated that this would be okay. As I started to ask questions about this particular style of dance, knowing very little myself, Keetha began to describe and explain the intricacies and the arduous training required by this method of dance. At some point in the explanation the interpreter, Sainuka, had asked me if it were okay for her to draw a diagram for me as the language was very specific and hard to interpret. I requested that the interpreter seek Keetha's agreement and I also clarified with the interpreter whether she had some of her own experience and knowledge about classical Indian dance, which she confirmed. I noticed Keetha's curiosity spark at hearing the interpreter was acquainted with dance and I started to wonder about the possibilities of Sainuka taking on an outsider-witnessing role (White, 2002). As Keetha spoke, key alternative stories began to emerge:

- Keetha identified 'Determination, Courage and Never Giving Up' as qualities that had supported her to undertake the required seven years of training in dance in order to graduate.
- Keetha linked 'Determination, Courage and Never Giving Up' to what had sustained her during her experiences of torture, trauma and displacement.

Keetha went on to speak about experiencing discrimination towards the Tamil ethnicity within the context of dance. A specific Tamil dance was never taught

with the other central Indian dances and was considered a 'lesser' dance. Keetha shared that her dream was to one day teach dance to children, with the Tamil dance taking its rightful place alongside the other dances. Through the conversation, Keetha shared that she had started to see how her journey with dance mirrored her journey of life and how dance had taught her many of the skills and strengths that she draws upon to sustain her through difficult times. I asked Keetha if it would be okay if I asked Sainuka what it was like to hear her story. Keetha looked surprised at first but agreed that it would be okay.

I was mindful to keep a tighter, reassuring scaffolding of my questions as this was a new experience for Sainuka and I wanted to be considerate of her professional framework. I asked Sainuka what it was like for her to hear Keetha's story. Sainuka replied to me in English and then to Keetha in Tamil, 'I felt such admiration of Keetha as I have also spent many years training in classical dance and I know what it was like for me to keep going especially when it became very difficult'. I asked Sainuka if there was something specific in Keetha's story that she felt she had learned from or wished to take away with her. Sainuka replied that what was most precious to her was the idea of teaching the Tamil dance as a main dance and responding to the discrimination and persecution of the Tamil people through this creative way, not through a confrontational, aggressive way. I asked Keetha what it was like for her to hear Sainuka's response to her story. Keetha reflected that she felt very proud and happy. Keetha shared that she felt a sense of relief and clarity in how she might move forward in life, that she had a vehicle to give expression to her experience, beliefs and values. There was a sense of joy and celebration at the ending of this conversation and I believe the three of us were left with the colourful image of Keetha dancing, with many students around her, the traditional Tamil dance.

MAKING NOW PRECIOUS THROUGH ATTENDING TO GOODBYES ALL THE TIME

As I bring this article to a close, I want to make mention of what is perhaps my most significant learning in relation to meeting with asylum seekers – making now precious. On Christmas Island, it has become important for me to discuss ideas around endings and goodbyes with people at the very beginning of our therapeutic conversations.

In contexts of uncertainty, unpredictability, and not knowing, greetings and farewells are particularly significant. I am continually surprised at how conversations about endings at the beginning rouse clarity and purposefulness in therapeutic conversations. I witness people accepting the invitation with a focused resolve and become precise in articulating what they hope to speak about, what is most important for them in that moment.

When I met with Ali for the first time, a 16 year old young man from Afghanistan, he had thanked me with a solemn politeness for making the time to meet with him but he was not sure he wanted to speak with me. But of course that was okay I replied, was he able to share with me his main concern about speaking with me in case there was something we could do together about it? Ali replied simply that anyone that he becomes close to disappears. I enquired further about the effects of people disappearing from Ali's life and he shared that the most challenging aspect was the not knowing, not saying goodbye. I thought about this and asked Ali if it would be okay if I could share with him the things that I did know and the things I did not know about counselling on Christmas Island. Ali wasn't sure that this was going to be helpful but generously gave me the benefit of the doubt.

I spoke about the uncertainty and unpredictability I had noticed in my work and shared with Ali some of the ideas I had been trying out in response. I spoke about this idea of attending to goodbyes all the time. At this point Ali interrupted me, 'So we could pretend that this is the only time we meet, and I could talk about whatever I need to right now and won't need to feel sad because we know we won't meet again?' I replied, 'If we did try that out, do you think there are some possible things you'd like to talk about?' Yes was the enthusiastic response, and off we went guided by what was most important for Ali in those moments.

Through this process of 'making now precious', I hoped Ali had experienced an alternative ending to the dominant story of people disappearing. I hoped that Ali could be in control of what it was we spoke about, and that he could prepare and plan for the fact that we may not speak again. Guided by Ali, we had the opportunity to work for another three months together, and in those three months our work stayed centred around attending to goodbyes every time.

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NOTES

For more information about Australia's mandatory detention of asylum seekers see: www.refugeecouncil.org.au/ff/as-det.php

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