

Homeland

As the crow flies it takes about 560 miles to travel across my home state of Montana. It would take over two and a half Montanas measured back to back to come close to the 1,500 mile exodus from war torn Syria to the relative safety of Greece. The journey walking thrice across Montana has seldom been accomplished, however, the perilous journey from Greece to Syria has been completed millions of times.

I know deeply the people of my home state of Montana. We are an adaptive and stubborn people, learning anatomy from hunting endeavors, geology from clambering on rocks, history from artifacts found in our back yard. We are a mix of Carhartt clad ranchers, Patagonia sporting ski bums, and everything in between. And yet, as constant as I can feel my sixth generation Montana blood pulsing through my veins, I feel we are on the precipice of change.

Montanans are facing the decision of whether to allow Syrian refugees space in the Big Sky State. On one side, the opposition is concerned about economic and social turmoil inflicted by a “foreign” population. The constant flow of media, portraying those who identify with the Middle East as the embodiment of “evil” leaves a bitter taste in the mouths then in turn freely use the word “terrorist” to describe the Middle Eastern refugees. As I listen to my neighbors bare their teeth and snarl with resistance, I sense familiarity. I walk on indigenous land, my skin color shades lighter than those of the Blackfeet, Salish and Kootenai Montana tribes. I have heard tumultuous tales of my own people, fresh from Ireland fleeing violence to form roots on the rocky spine of Montana. Their entrance was not graceful, as millions of lives were eradicated because of these fair-skinned newcomers. This process of remembering the past as a multidimensional layering compressed with time and weathered by the different breaths of the retelling raises questions concerning who decides Montana's future.

The other side of the debate aligns closely with words such as “privilege,” and “humanitarian,” keying into processes that allow for a more inclusive discussion. Montana has

the shelter that these refugees need. We have mountain air and clean water to promote healing. We have opportunities, compassion and security. We have the safety in community needed to sustain survival.

However, coming to know the position of allowing entrance of Syrian refugees, I am cautious to believe that Montana is the land of unlimited resources. I see our own refugees such as the homeless, the imprisoned, the addicts, the mentally ill, the veterans, the forcefully resettled Native Americans, seeking safety on the sometimes unforgiving soil of my homeland. It is crucial to include these individuals in this process of discernment.

Just as the crow flies, I can see the issue of allowing Syrians entrance from multiple perspectives. Once the ballots are drawn, however, I will be brought to earth as a voice for one of many sides of this journey.