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CHAPTER 1

Telling the Stories of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking and Refugee Children

John Simmonds

It might be difficult for some people to understand about refugee children. If they want to stay happy then they do not want to hear our story.

Abdoul, a young man from Somalia (quoted in Kidane, 2001: 38)

Introduction

Social work with unaccompanied refugee children presents social workers with a new challenge. The position of children so completely dislocated from their parents, family, country, culture, language and religion is not replicated in the issues facing professionals working with UK children. Added to this is the traumatic experiences of many children who have faced war, civil conflict or persecution. And lastly there is the unresolved issue of their status as asylum seekers. This makes them an extremely vulnerable group. However, within this there is much evidence of enormous resilience, strength and determination. Finding a way of relating to this very challenging issue means understanding some very complex stories. These stories have many dimensions to them – political, social, psychological and historical. Bringing this together in a chapter which reflects this complexity has meant identifying some helpful concepts and then exploring them in a way that illustrates not only how they might be used but most particularly how they might develop over time. I have chosen to do this by re-telling the story of Andersen’s ‘The Ugly Duckling’. The reader is then invited to use their imagination to make connections between the concepts outlined at the beginning of the chapter, the words of unaccompanied children themselves and a fairy tale.

Stories and their meanings

Stories about unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people often tell us about victims, villains and those who try to help, roles that exist in an intimate triangular relationship with each other. They are often very complex stories that span thousands of miles, mountains, plains and rivers; of courage, chance encounters, kindly gestures, heroic struggles, pain and sometimes even death. They are stories that need to be told, they need to be listened to with a curiosity about their meaning and context (Cecchin, 1987) and with respect. But they are stories that can easily be distorted because they become part of the narratives told by others – narratives that emphasise the securing of a country's borders or the fear of strangers, unknown lands, strange tongues and customs. The child's story then comes to have meaning not just for itself but because of the part that it plays in the greater narrative of the state. For instance, an unaccompanied child's age no longer tells us when they were born and when to celebrate their birthday but whether they can stay in the United Kingdom, what and how much they should get of the state's resources and whether they might be sent back to where they come from. Whether the story of their age should be told at all or told truthfully becomes an issue of great significance because of the implications that it may have for decisions about the child. However, too fierce and quick a pursuit of truth about a young person's age can become a dangerous thing and can easily be the making of both a villain and a victim when it is a part of the state's story telling for keeping children out.

When I arrived we were asked by the Tigrinia translator how old we were. I could not remember the word for eight and by mistake I said I was nine. (Rahwa, an 8-year old Eritrean girl (Kidane, 2001: 16))

Social work and stories

Story telling in either oral or written form is a deeply embedded part of human culture and most people become adept at doing so from an early age. Social work has a primary interest in people, their relationships, circumstances, histories, tragedies, loves and losses. To be a good social worker, you have to be able to tell a good story and that story will inevitably include you as one of the characters. If you don't have an interest in stories, then you probably won't find social work very interesting or rewarding. If you don't feel comfortable at becoming a character in other people's stories, then this may come to dominate how you go about doing social work – anxious, avoidant and disconnected. Having said this, social work is not commonly thought of as a story making or a story telling activity. If anything it has attempted to distance itself from such a description by wrapping itself in the cloak of science – its evidence base, technology – needs assessments, care planning, purchaser/provider

split, or bureaucracy – political, regulatory or resource accountability. All of these are stories in themselves – albeit cast in a particular narrative mould. They may need to be listened to and may well have important things to tell us but it is important not to confuse these stories with the stories that those people who come into contact with social workers as service users or clients might tell. Their stories will almost certainly focus on a narrative, which talks of respect, love, belonging, being listened to; of grief, tragedy, loss and despair. When social workers come into contact with these stories, it is essential that they treat them with respect. While it may be important to be curious about these stories in order to understand them, this curiosity must proceed with care. Human beings are remarkably resistant to their stories being re-interpreted or re-told by others particularly when they are people with power. Stories are precious to people because they define who they are, where they come from and what they are connected to. Re-telling them needs to be done with considerable care if they are not to be experienced as nonsense, a lie or an assault. Social workers need to be expert at listening to stories and expert at being storytellers.

All this poses something of a challenge because the state and its systems impose their own ways of story telling – scientific, technological and bureaucratic. For example, enormous energy has gone into the subsequent telling of the story of Victoria Climbié's appalling death at the hands of her aunt and new boyfriend after they arrived from West Africa to make a better life for themselves. However, while it was her carers that killed her when they were meant to care for her, most people will remember a story of failed bureaucracy – of the lack of social work, health and police action despite numerous opportunities to do so. This resulted in one of the most significant public inquiries for a decade (Laming, 2003). It was a tragedy of epic proportions, with an innocent victim, numerous villains and no happy ending. Nobody wanted to know or could bear to hear the unfolding story of Victoria or her Aunt from the point at which they arrived in the United Kingdom or their journey together eventually to be joined by a boyfriend who tortured and then killed Victoria. While many people got to know of them as characters during this journey, they existed as disconnected and superficial elements in the story that health and social services told because the connecting narrative was wrongly reported or hidden and largely unknown. Nobody could see or tell the unfolding story before them because it was something that existed only in transitory fragments in different professionals' minds. It was therefore a story without meaning, impact or consequent action. There was an absence of curiosity but unlike the cat, it was this absence that resulted in a killing.

The way the story was eventually, formally, told by Lord Laming has itself generated another energetic story with new primary legislation, a wholesale shake up of the system for delivering children's services and the introduction of a vast computer system for tracking every child in England. What it has also done is to give a stern community warning to professionals, as good stories should do, 'Do not become a part of a similar story as villainy beckons you.'

But if curiosity is the key to the prevention of a killing or indeed the resolution of other human issues, then professionals must become engaged and involved if they are to understand the story, tell it in a helpful way and maybe even do something helpful to change it. After all, computers don't tell good stories. But the problem with becoming involved in these kind of stories is the threat of then being seen as a professional villain if something goes wrong with all that can be meted out to them. Listening to and telling the story of others in vulnerable situations needs to be carefully handled. Professionals in such positions are very exposed. They need to be able to tell their own stories, about what they have seen or done, to somebody who will listen also with curiosity and respect – in supervision, to colleagues or consultants.

The power of stories

Telling and being told a story is something that is a part of every child's experience. Stories can be exciting, upsetting, scary and moving. They have a beginning, a middle and usually a happy ending. Stories rely on facts but their meaning is in the imagination they conjure up and the emotions they evoke. Stories work by involving children with characters in the story that they can identify with – heroes and heroines, witches and villains, animals, relationships, love, worries, triumphs and even disasters. The child's identification with these characters is something that happens on the insides of children – in their minds – although the story describes events that are discernibly on the outside – on the page, in the film, on the stage or more likely on television. If the distinction between what is in the imagination of the child and what exists in reality seriously breaks down, the child may be having a nightmare or developing a psychotic illness. The problems children have in managing this distinction can be seen in Hodges and Steele (2000); (Hodges et al., 2003) in the development and use of story stem narrative techniques to assess their emotional development. In these, children who have been seriously maltreated can be made so anxious when asked to complete a short story involving an imagined child or animal, that they can have great difficulty in engaging with the story, beginning to think how it might end or when they do, invent violent and bizarre endings.

While stories are constructed in imagination, they work because they represent an important truth about reality although this may be in an exaggerated or a one-dimensional way. If the story does not link to something that has the ring of truth about it for the listener or reader, then the story serves little purpose or interest. The development of a child's capacity to construct and to understand stories is complex. It relies heavily on the concept of 'mind mindedness' (Fonagy et al., 2002; Howe et al., 1999; Howe, 2005) – that other people have minds that work in particular ways and influences the way that they feel, think and behave. Understanding this is directly related to the way

that the child's own mind has developed based on early intimate experiences of rhythmic synchronicity with primary caretakers. When this works well, feeling, thinking and behaviour become integrated into a coherent image of both the self and others. The development of this coherent sense of self is the basis for predicting how other people might respond to the individual's needs and also determines how they might respond. If a child has a predictive expectation of a warm and friendly response from other people expressed as a warm and friendly approach towards them, this is more likely to produce a warm and friendly response. This then has the potential to become a self-reinforcing cycle of positive emotion, thought and behaviour experienced in that relationship. However, a predictive expectation of a hostile or angry response from other children coded into a child's unfriendly or hostile behaviour towards another child might well produce an unfriendly, anxious or even hostile response. Developing the capacity to anticipate the world of relationships in the mind in a realistic and helpful way is crucial to being able to form cooperative, meaningful and satisfying relationships. But equally, fearful anticipation heightens the risk of a fearful response and can be a significant risk factor for the child and the cause of much misunderstanding and unhappiness. The development of a working and workable model (Bowlby, 1973) of relationships is core both to the development of self and the capacity to relate well to others (Winnicott, 1971).

These are complex child development and human relationship issues. But given they are so fundamental, the means by which ordinary people in ordinary circumstances develop and express them cannot be so complex. They must have a routine, everyday, comprehensible presence in the lives of people going about their business. This is why story making and story telling is so important. Stories convey the way that relationships are structured and the underlying meaning that these relationships have for the people involved in them. Whether these stories are spoken – the gossip in the street, over the dinner table, at work, over coffee or played out through 'soaps' or drama or printed in airport novels or more weighty literature, they are important because they continually present back to people a picture of the way the world works.

Karpman (1968) has identified a basic structure for understanding three critical roles that are present in and drive most stories. There are three principal roles – the role of victim, persecutor and rescuer. Each of these has their own dynamic. First, there is the overt role – the way that the character typically behaves towards other characters in the story and second, its function as a defence against feelings which are experienced as unbearable. For example, when a character takes the role of 'victim' in a story, it acts as a defence against that character's own aggression or hostility; the role of persecutor is a defence against vulnerability and distress; and the role of rescuer is a defence against the individual's vulnerability and aggression. The character's role and the associated defence are complimentary to each other. While therefore the role might have painful consequences as 'lived experience', for example, being a

victim, it is necessary for the character to stay in that role because the feelings being defended against are feared to be more painful and/or unbearable. For each character there is an internal splitting into the role that is lived out as the story unfolds and the denied feelings. The defence operates by splitting off the unbearable feelings and projecting them into a character whose role then directly expresses these feelings. For the victim, aggressive or hostile feelings are defended against by being split off and projected into an individual whose necessary defence against vulnerability puts them in the role of persecutor. For the persecutor, feelings of vulnerability are split off and projected into the victim. And for the rescuer both sets of unbearable feelings are respectively split off into the victim and the persecutor (Liotti, 1999).

While then the three roles are distinct and identifiable with characters in the story, the process of defensive splitting creates powerful complimentary relationships – that of persecutor–victim; rescuer–victim; rescuer–persecutor. Each role is interlocked with another role and cannot exist without it. When these roles become characters in stories, the impetus of the narrative sets out how the victim becomes victimised by the persecutor and eventually rescued by the rescuer to produce what is usually a happy ending. However, in order to make stories interesting, the characters' roles may change. as the narrative develops. Persecutors may become victims and victims, persecutors. Although the underlying structure of these roles and their relationships may be quite simple, the art of the story teller is in weaving a narrative around these roles that is rich, dramatic, entertaining and identifiable.

These two different components of mind mindedness and the drama triangle need to be brought together. Relationships can be thought of as having two different components to them, the cooperative, reciprocal, needs meeting, problem solving component (Heard et al., 1997) built on the general expectation that the 'other' (person) is attentive, open, responsive and engaged. The other component is defensive. Individuals need to defend themselves, especially when they are emotionally vulnerable, from encounters with 'other' people where openness, responsiveness and engagement are not present or cannot be relied upon. While these defences are emotional/cognitive in operation, they are structured in relationships on the basis of how one person experiences the other. I have suggested elsewhere (Simmonds 1998; 2000) that the development of a working and workable awareness of the three roles described by Karpman and their accompanying narrative in the mind of a child becomes a map of the way defences are constructed in relationships. This builds on the contribution of attachment theory as the most highly articulate view of the importance of internal models of experience in relationships as the basis for the capacity to relate to others in the emotional and social world.

Take, for instance, a secure attachment script – 'If I need comfort because I am distressed after a brief separation, then the person (attachment figure) I turn to will respond directly and in an appropriately comforting way (happy ending).' There is much that the child can positively infer from this narrative sequence, especially when it is numerously repeated, about their self-worth,

what they can expect from significant others and how they can find comfort if they need it. As a story, it is reassuring but its interest is probably elsewhere, as it should be, because as a narrative sequence, it releases the child from whatever anxiety and discomfort they are experiencing to explore and find out about the world 'out there'. However, where individuals have attachment scripts that are continuously activated, they are compromised in their capacity to helpfully explore the external world as the following script highlights. 'If I need comfort because I am distressed, then the person (attachment figure) I turn to responds in a way that leaves me feeling confused, distressed or frightened (a victim persecuted by their attachment figure). Maybe somebody else will comfort me (rescuer).' There is much that a child might infer from this narrative sequence. Is it because of who I am that the person I have turned to has responded in a way that has left me feeling distressed/frightened? If I am a person with bad feelings, then I must be a bad person. I will not let anyone else see my distress or maybe it is better not to get distressed in the first place or look for any comfort. As a narrative sequence this has the potential to create a victim in children who are powerfully locked into a persecuting relationship with their attachment figure. They cannot satisfactorily turn away from their attachment figure to explore the outside world because of the uncertainty about their availability.

The story of the ugly duckling

Many children and adults will be familiar with Hans Christian Andersen's story of the 'Ugly Duckling' although this may only be with the tidied up, modern version. In its original version it is a powerful and haunting tale of great psychological and social complexity and intensity. What is remarkable about it is the fact that the story is told in just a few pages and is therefore highly condensed. Although the story has a relatively straightforward narrative to it, the relationships and their context can be understood as symbolic representations of a much deeper and universal reality. The opening paragraph sets a scene of rustic tranquillity, with a mother duck waiting and watching for her nest of eggs to hatch. There is a description and awareness of a wider world beyond the nest but the river's edge is the place where the baby ducks can and will belong. However, two facts disturb this apparent tranquillity. The first is the absence of the mother's partner – 'the wretch, he never comes to visit me!' But this part of the story is never told – we don't know if his absence results from irresponsibility in caring for his pregnant partner or maybe from matters outside his control – is he imprisoned for political activity or maybe he is fighting in the army. The second issue is the presence of the one egg that won't hatch. An older duck gives a dire warning about the likely identity of this egg given its size and appearance and suggests it may be a turkey. Family and community cohesion seem to be threatened by its presence and the mother duck is advised to abandon her care of the egg. She resists this but when it does hatch

she is horrified ‘How big and ugly he was!’ and she tests his identity as a duck by forcing him into the water – sink (death) or swim (survive). He swims and survives and despite his size and his ugly appearance, she identifies him as one of her own and develops a real pride in him.

Look how beautifully he uses his legs and how straight he holds himself! He’s my own child and make no mistake! He’s really handsome if you look at him properly! (216)

Having claimed him as her child, she wants to show him off in her community. She takes her responsibility as a mother seriously. She teaches all her children to show respect for the status of other community members and particularly to be deferential in their behaviour to the elders in the farmyard. It is an important lesson for the ducklings as new community members. But we also come to see that this is also a community under threat. Food is scarce and fights take place and the presence of this new family as competitors for scarce resources produces a violent reaction from existing community members. And as the individual that stands out, it is the ugly duckling that is seen as the source of the threat and receives the brunt of hostile community feeling and over time ‘it grew worse and worse’.

The poor duckling was chased about by everyone; even his brothers and sisters were unkind to him, and kept on saying, If only the cat would get you, you ugly thing!’ ... The ducks bit him, and the hens pecked him, and the girl that fed the poultry kicked him with her foot. Then he ran off and flew away over the hedge. ... He came to the great marsh where the wild ducks lived. There he lay the whole night, he was so tired and unhappy. ... all he wanted was leave to lie in the rushes and drink a little of the marsh water. (218)

Now while this is not written as a story of an unaccompanied asylum seeking child, it has much of the perplexing anxiety and uncertainty of trying to make sense of who this newly arrived child is, ‘so tired and unhappy’ when they arrive at the great marsh of Heathrow or Dover. Where do they come from? Why are they here? What did they do? Who sent them? Is it their fault? Where are the parents? Are they a victim? Should we attack them? Let’s send them back!

It is not easy when people ask you lots of questions all the time – the Home Office, social workers, teachers, doctors – they all want to know why you are here. And sometimes it is difficult to tell everything. (Saadia – 15-year old girl from Somalia (Kidane, 2001: 38))

And what is the child to make of this terrifying experience – is this just a story or is it for real? Have I imagined this? What did I do? Is this a nightmare, am I going mad? The children’s perspective on what has happened to them will determine how they explain and understand their story. It may also determine

their capacity to survive these events. A child that explains difficult events or experiences as ‘That’s because I’m so ugly!’ is not in a strong position to develop a helpful internal dialogue that mediates the emotional and practical challenge of life. Whether these events are the emotional roller coaster of family or peer relationships, the challenge of school, physical development or the asylum process, children and young people need to be able to draw on both those resources they have inside of them and what exists in the world around them. These need to be seen and experienced in a helpful and supportive way.

There are also untold stories in Andersen’s tale as there often are with unaccompanied children – what did the ugly duckling’s mother make of the disappearance of her child – was she relieved, was she grieving for him, had she noticed at all with all the mouths she had to feed? And the siblings – what had they noticed, did they care, might he come back? This quotation from a 12-year old poignantly describes this.

My head is filled with worrying about my parents, my sister and my brother who is not eating that well and he cries in his sleep. We have been in London for a week and I still find it difficult to not think about you all. What time would it be there now? What might be happening at school? Which teacher will be teaching? It is as if my heart is still there. (Letter to a friend in Eritrea from a 12-year old but never sent because there was no known address to send it to – Kidane, 2001: 17)

Both policy and practice in relation to unaccompanied children take a strong interest in these stories and what they mean. Immigration and social services can impose stories of their own – political and bureaucratic – scripts dominated by concerns about border control, asylum determination and then by the statutory framework to assess and plan for a child’s care. But the official story is not the only story – there might need to be accounts of political and community unrest and conflict, of mothers that defend and educate their children as best they know how, of mothers who struggle with their own survival and see their children snatched from them or disappear. Or the story of the journey itself.

Taking a journey is something that most people do – it may be for work, it may be for a holiday, it may be temporary or it may be for good. Like a story, journeys can be exciting, upsetting, frightening and moving. We might try to minimise a sense of being unsettled by using a reputable travel agent, being specific about when we want to leave and arrive and where we want to go, how we want to travel and where we want to stay and eat and what we want to do. But taking control in this way is not a guarantee that things will work out as expected or that we will not be disappointed or upset. There are risks in taking journeys.

For unaccompanied children, the journey they take from their homeland can be understood as a personal journey but it is also a family, community and a political journey. But as a journey, it may share little with the process described above because it is marked by the overwhelming feature of fleeing from a place (called home) that is intolerable, by way of a journey that is also

intolerable, to something that is unknown (asylum). The ugly duckling's journey is neither planned nor safe. It is a desperate response to dangerous and intolerable attacks from within the community where his instinctive need to survive and to protect himself is overwhelming. The risks in the journey quickly becomes apparent as he is befriended by two geese who point to another marsh where 'some lovely sweet wild geese, young ladies every one of them' live. They advise him to 'try your luck with them!' But as is the case with fellow travellers or traffickers all is not quite as reassuring as it seems for 'Bang! Bang! ... both the wild ganders fell down dead and the water became red with blood.' A shoot was in progress and the sound of war continued to echo around the marsh filling the ugly duckling with more terror, especially as a 'frightful great dog ... thrust his muzzle right down towards the duckling and bared his sharp teeth' ... but then disappears without touching him. Even this lucky escape is interpreted by the ugly duckling in his own way 'I'm so ugly that even the dog will think twice before it bites me!'

The desperate journey continues until the ugly duckling is taken in by an old woman, her cat and a hen. This becomes a short-term foster placement where the old woman offers a three-week trial on the understanding that the ugly duckling will produce duck eggs. It is a strange reversal of what the duckling needs – somebody who understands and can relate to him and his story. Instead, he finds no place in this family. They are too preoccupied with their own values of 'cleverness' to care for the duckling's need to swim and dive. Kidane's (2001) collection of refugee children's voices and experiences echoes the duckling's sense of displacement, and confirms that finding a place of your own, in a new country, in a new culture, with a new family when its members are preoccupied with stories of their own to defend, is a very difficult thing to do. If finding a place is to happen, then it needs to be driven by a combination of respect, curiosity and engagement on the part of those that are the host. But it means opening hearts and minds to loss, distress and the inevitable vulnerability that comes from this. When the duckling can stand the foster home no longer, his 'going out into the wide world' is not an act of independence or rebellion but an act of despair. It continues to put the duckling in the role of victim and powerfully creates an image of a persecutory old woman, her cat and the hen. In the nature of a defensive script, it resolves nothing and perpetuates danger for the duckling. There is, however, some glimmer of hope when the duckling catches sight of a flock of swans 'shining white with long graceful necks ... they spread their splendid great wings and flew away from those cold parts to warmer lands and open lakes' (224).

There is a hint of rescue here with the duckling being instinctively drawn towards his own ethnic group but after losing sight of them and diving to the bottom of the lake, he surfaces in an agitated state,

He did not know what the birds were called nor where they were flying to, and yet he felt more deeply drawn towards them than he had ever been to anything.
(224)

This is a powerful emergence of an attachment script, a mother lost, glimpsed in the distance and stirring up deep, powerful memories and feelings of longing and identification. But his mother knows nothing of this. The duckling reminds himself that he is the cause of this great tragedy ‘poor, ugly creature that he was!’ and is immersed in a bleak, freezing emotional and social landscape ‘he was tired out; he lay quite still and froze fast in the ice’. The brief glimpse and memory of a past relationship where his mother was proud and caring ices over.

But he is rescued from this terrible episode in his journey by a farm labourer who breaks the ice and takes him home where he recovers (Harris et al., 2001). On the surface this is a more friendly foster family full of lively, playful children, warm milk and tubs of butter. But the duckling has become traumatised and fearful and the children’s playful approach to him is experienced as an attack and in a panic, he flies into the butter and then the flour. His foster mother strikes out at him to defend her home, her children fall over one another to catch him and in a desperate attempt to defend himself, he flies out of the door ‘into the bushes and the new fallen snow – and there he lay as if in a swoon’.

What therefore starts out as a rescuer foster family ends up with a powerful description of the duckling being persecuted by them. But equally, the duckling is experienced as the persecutor of the family and their belongings as he misinterprets their inquisitive and lively interest in him as an attack. The defensive dynamic is played out again with a quick switching of roles. The vulnerability and traumatised position of the duckling is not understood and this becomes another experience where he is rejected and abandoned. Without the presence of a parent figure that can take up the role of reflective, respectful and curious adult, the duckling is locked into an endlessly repeating traumatising script. But then memories stir of what he once had –

And right in front of him, out of the thick hanging branches, came three lovely white swans, ruffling their feathers and floating lightly on the water. The duckling recognised the magnificent birds and a strange sadness came over him. (226)

These become dangerous memories powerfully associated with his own sense of ‘ugliness’ and expectations of rejection and abandonment. He is both author of the script and victim to it. While his first response to the sight of the swans is to be mesmerised by them, his sadness is overwhelming and this is quickly followed by a wish for death. ‘I will fly over to those kingly birds and they will peck me to death for daring to come near them. I’m so ugly.’ At this point, he remembers all the rejections, abuse and trauma and decides that death is to be preferred. He flies towards the three swans who, seeing him rush at him.

Only kill me! said the poor creature, bowing his head towards the water and awaiting his death.

The tragic consequences of this journey have finally come to a point of searing tension. The victim presents himself for sacrifice, the full weight of his life experiences having destroyed his will to communicate, to reach out, to be loved and to live. But in bowing his head towards the water he experiences something that quickly transforms the sense of who he is and what he might expect. The defensive and destructive power of the drama triangle evaporates and what is reflected back to him is a picture not of narcissistic but transformative love – ‘he was no longer a dark grey bird, ugly and repulsive – he was himself a swan’. But this is no magic resolution because what has happened has come through the natural growth that results from a reflection back to the duckling of who he actually is – not a duckling but a maturing swan. He is seen for who he actually is and whatever perceived ugliness there might have been, in the eyes of a curious and respectful adult swan, this is transformed into something of beauty that is real and against which there does not need to be a defence.

‘The Ugly Duckling’ is a powerful psychological, political and social story. It is a story of a long and arduous journey by one individual at great risk compelled to search for a better life. In the process, he discovers who he is and the hatred he has developed for himself from life experiences and the responses of others becomes transformed into something of real beauty. The psychological process is both internal to the duckling – something he comes to see in himself and external – something that is reflected back to him by others. But it must be emphasised, this is not brought about by the avoidance of pain or the ugliness he sees or experiences. Andersen does require that we see and remember this as the story unfolds.

What is powerful about the story is the way Andersen gives an account of the intricate and complex emotional and cognitive processes underlying human development but through a story that has had immediate appeal to hundreds of thousands of children. It is a simple tale with an enduring moral message but its deeper meaning must move us beyond the pull of seeing the duckling as victim, the rest of the world as persecutors and the potential for social workers to become rescuers. This resolves nothing because these scripts are defensive traps, perpetuate themselves endlessly and do not stimulate growth. The whole story needs to be told, not just those parts of it, particularly the end, that create a sense of relief that the pain is over and the duckling has been saved.

Conclusion

The challenge for those working with unaccompanied asylum seeking children is in trying to see the whole story. It can be very appealing to see that work as the parallel of the ugly duckling story. What could be more enticing or rewarding than to be one of the three swans rushing over to rescue the duckling and convince him that he is also a swan. There are many barriers that make this

difficult – the persecuting Home Office, the resource strapped local authority, the exploiting and dangerous traffickers or even the children or young persons themselves. But being identified with the role of rescuer is not helpful. We know from the story itself, that a primary identification as a rescuer (as with the farm labourer) does not prevent, the child experiencing us as a persecutor or indeed that we may experience ourselves as victims – of lies about age or the whereabouts of family or country of origin. Distancing ourselves from the triangle will not help either as the distance is likely to be experienced as persecuting.

If we become involved, we will need to understand the background and parallel stories that are integral to the unfolding narrative. First, we need to understand the story of what is happening inside the children, who they are, what makes them into the person they experience themselves as being. Second, we need to understand the story of what is happening between the children and those others that they are in a relationship with. And lastly we need to understand the influence of those group and inter-group factors that come from the social and political world. While each of these factors is a story in its own right, each influences the other in important ways. The ethnic tensions in the farmyard have a history behind them and can become the basis for hatred, violence and war. The pressure on the duckling's mum to reject him have a history. The outbreak of sibling rivalry has a history. They all come together in an outbreak of persecution and violence which is experienced as personal, but is generated by the political and the social world. In the end, this is what causes him to flee. None of this can be said to be his responsibility as it is described. The duckling is caught up in something that is not of his making particularly as a young child. But in his own mind it creates an ugliness that seriously interferes with his development. As the traumatic journey develops, it also influences his behaviour. The story then is of something that starts out on the outside of the duckling but ends up on the inside of him. But in his own experience this distinction is irrelevant because right up to the eventual resolution, the nightmare has become who he is.

Social workers inevitably become caught up in the swirling tensions of these issues – the political, the social, the inter personal and the personal. However, their capacity to actually influence most of them is negligible but this does not make them victims. But even if their relative lack of power is real, their position allows them to stand as observers to these events and their responsibility to the children and young people is to understand and tell these stories. But they need to be told by facing the 'ugliness' of fleeing and the conditions that bring it about. These need to be thought about and put into words. If young people's stories only exist as fragmentary, disconnected elements, they will have little impact and can become very dangerous. Re-telling them as bureaucratic, technological or scientific stories needs to proceed with great care and must not to be confused with the child's own story. In the end, what releases children and young people to grow and experience themselves as valued people who belong, feel love and can love is not the avoidance of ugliness – pain, loss

and despair but facing it. Children need contact with people whose minds are open to this and are not afraid. At that point their experiences can be transformed and they can grow to become someone of real beauty.

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