Paperwork

By [Ryan Dueck](#)
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I hate paperwork at the best of times. I hate filling out forms, grinding through the interminable bureaucratic labyrinths that seem to be part and parcel of modern life. Sign this waiver. Check that box. File this form. Send that release. Print it for your records. On and on it goes. Paperwork is slow death.

I hate paperwork even more today. I spent an hour and a half with [a young Syrian woman in our city](#) who is trying to get her family out of Lebanon and over to safety here in Lethbridge. We sit together, poring over documents, puzzling over official-looking documents with strange names like "IM0008" on laptop screens.

We answer questions as best we are able, we flag areas we're not sure about. We survey past correspondence with the people in charge, trying to determine which forms are necessary for which people and how old do you have to be for this form and what counts as a dependent here and what do we do if their identification documents are still in Syria because they didn't have time to grab them before they fled? We scratch our heads and "hmm" and "I wonder why" and "do you think they need?" … This paperwork. It's so complicated. And so much depends upon it.

At one point I look over to see her staring at her phone. I try to make conversation. "So, any news from Damascus today? Has anything changed since last we spoke?" She smiles sadly. "Actually, my friend died this morning. Her husband, too. They lived in our neighborhood." I stare wordlessly at her. She shows me a picture on Facebook of a burned out husk of a vehicle. "This was their car. The bomb fell while they were driving home from work. They have two children." She looks away.

I grope around for something to say, settling upon one of the useless things that people say in situations like this. "I'm so, *so* sorry to hear this." Of course I'm sorry. What else could a person be? She thanks me and pulls up a few pictures of her friends for me to see. Her phone displays smiling faces from happier times. Before the bombs started falling. Before precious children were orphaned. Before people started to flee. Before desperate people struggled to fill out incomprehensible

paperwork in far off lands to try to get loved ones away from all the madness.

I offer more of the useless words that people like me say in situations like this when we don't know what on earth we should or could possibly say. "I can't imagine how hard this must be for you." She nods. "I am frightened to open up my computer or turn on my phone each morning. I always wonder who will die next. Nobody is safe. Nobody. If I am out at a social gathering or somewhere with my family and I are trying to enjoy ourselves, I never check Facebook because I'm scared of what I might see."

We live in different worlds, she and I. We sit together, in the same room, fighting against this paperwork, but we inhabit different realities. My mind is thinking ahead to how I will approach Bible study tonight, what I will make for dinner, whether or not the soccer game I want to watch will be on television tonight. And she thinks about the bombs that are falling in the neighborhood she called home, on the people she loves, the people behind all of this paper.

And so, all of this paper will soon be sent off loaded with the weight of prayer and hope and heartsick longing. And it will find its way to some desk in some office in some official government building somewhere. Someone with an official-sounding title sitting at an official-looking desk will open up an envelope and see all these papers, all of these names and numbers and places and birth dates and histories, and they will look just like the previous hundreds or thousands of envelopes full of paper that they have opened up before.

They will not see the smiling face of a seven-year-old boy on a cell phone. They will not know about the sleepless nights or the trembling fingers that open the computer each morning. They will not have images of bombed vehicles and neighborhoods in their heads. They will just see script on a page. They will turn it into a file number. It will become paperwork for another person at another desk somewhere else in the world.

And a family will wait.

I was speaking with a friend and colleague yesterday who is also deeply invested in the refugee project in our city. We were talking about the frustrations of the entire process of sponsoring refugees with all its waiting and uncertainty. And paperwork. I told her that in order to combat the paperwork, I think of the airport scene that I have in my head and think of often. I imagine brothers and sisters and uncles and

aunts and nephews and nieces—one little family of all the families on God's good earth—coming together after many long years. I imagine tears and hugs and smiles and futures far from bombs.

I imagine paper becoming people.

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