

The Story of the Little Fish, the Octopus and the Syrian Civil War

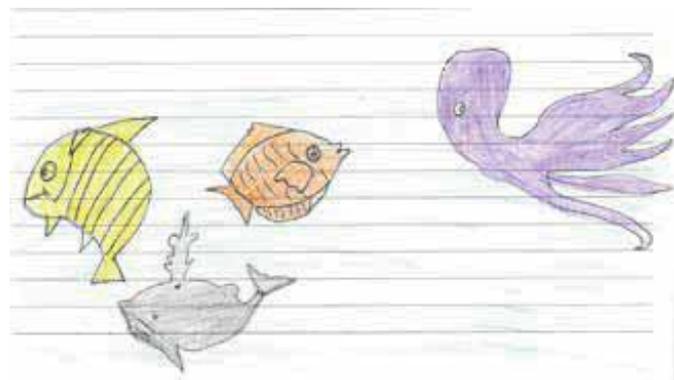
by Rosemary Dewan

To celebrate the very first World Values Day in 2016, the Human Values Foundation began an annual competition for young children, asking them to write a short story about a value that was important for them. We had a fantastic response from schools all over the world including a number for refugee children in Gaza, Jordan, The Lebanon, Syria and West Bank run by the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).

The competition proved a huge success and we were all amazed at the creativity and passion for values that this competition had unleashed. Not only were the stories themselves often very powerful, but the illustrations that accompanied several of them were so fresh and imaginative. Many of the best entries were from the UNRWA refugee schools.

Early in 2017 we published 40 of the stories from the competition in a small book and received some wonderful feedback from parents and schools.

Then towards the end of 2019, we heard from a big educational publisher in India who had seen the book and particularly liked two of the stories. One of these was *The Octopus and the Little Fish*, by an 11-year-old girl called Sham, which told how a shy but plucky octopus rescues a little fish from being swallowed by a dangerous predator. The publisher asked if his firm could use the story in one of their textbooks to illustrate the value of courage. We told them that this would need permission from Sham and her parents, and said we would try to track them down.



As soon as we had checked the location of Sham's school we were filled with trepidation. It was in Syria, at that time (and even now) ravaged by a desperate civil war.

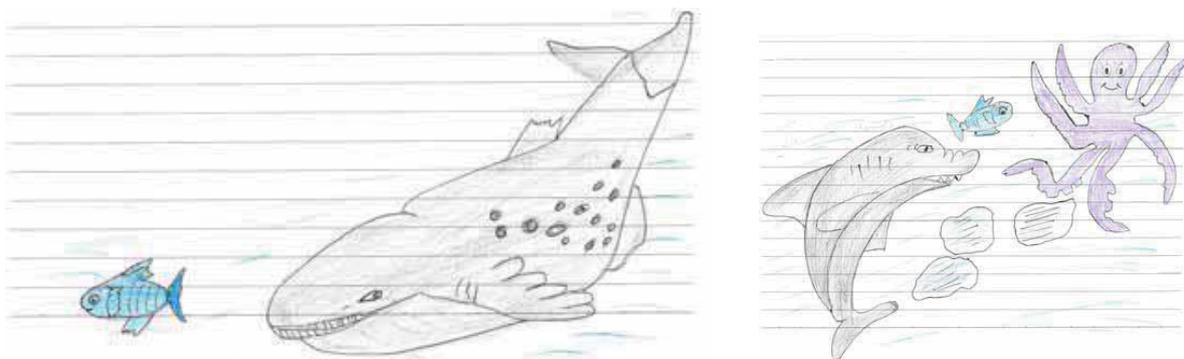
From the details given to us by UNRWA we worked out that Sham and her family must have lived in Yarmouk refugee camp just outside Damascus. On the internet we read it had been the scene of severe fighting between the various armies and militias in the war, including ISIS. Almost all the buildings in the camp had been destroyed by barrel bombs, mortars and other devices. We saw photographs of the almost total devastation in the camp. Nearly all the buildings, including the schools, were in ruins.

Meanwhile UNRWA and their field officers in Syria were trying to locate Sham and her family for us. They found no record of her at the school or the camp. Undeterred, they extended their enquiries but still without success. It didn't look good.

But the UNRWA team didn't give up, and at last a clerk from the Education Department in their Field Office in Syria wrote with the news that Sham's family had been found. They were just about coping amidst all the turmoil. Relieved and delighted, we were able to connect Sham with the publisher in India. Like us he was overjoyed to know that Sham and her parents were safe. He asked us to pass on his gratitude to the UNRWA representatives, and also his profound admiration for their work in the troubled region.

So, like the Little Fish in her story, there has been a happy ending for Sham and her family. Let's hope that Sham will derive much happiness from her marvellous ability to write and illustrate stories. And perhaps we can all learn something from the values shown by that shy but brave Octopus.

To read Sham's story and other stories in the 2016 Stories on Values book (and books of stories from more recent competitions) on the Human Values Foundation website: [click here](#).



Rosemary Dewan is CEO of the Human Values Foundation, which creates and promotes values-based personal development programmes for children and young people including the recently launched programme for primary schools, [The Big Think](#).