

THE ESSENCE OF DIALOGUE

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Paolo Freire argued that the essence of dialogue is comprised of reflection and action. ‘Praxis’ he argued, is ‘reflection upon the world, in order to transform it’ (Freire, 2000:51). Such a process, if it is to be authentic, necessarily involves dialogue and reciprocity, a situated relational practice. My encounter with Freire, back when I was an undergrad, certainly steered me in a particular direction. I see little point in learning if it isn’t to be shared. I see little point in knowledge if it isn’t to be questioned, interrogated and held to account. And I see little point in knowledge if it isn’t to be used to challenge injustice or transform lives. Over the years, my ideas have evolved in response to a changing context, with new voices and new perspectives. I remain unapologetically political, in my academic work, in my teaching, in my practice and in the way I embrace, live, understand and experience the world. Challenging as it may be at times, I try to embrace hope as a political act towards understanding, social justice and transformation.

And so, I write this piece from my living room. I’d rather be sat on a beach somewhere, but Covid-19 put me in my place, and here I am, trying to compile a piece on my ‘community engagement’ and ‘the benefits which have resulted from them’... and I’m struggling. There are moments when it is difficult to see any positive outcome. The virus has demonstrated our shared vulnerability, and it has also exposed the structural violence that continues to destroy lives - some more than others. For vulnerability is not shared equally.

For the past 16 years I have been working in the field of asylum and forced migration. I have engaged as a researcher and academic, as an activist, as a youth worker, as a mother, as a returned Maltese migrant – for I am all of these things and much more – engaging with others in an effort to create something better, looking for spaces of convergence and the opportunity to transgress borders, metaphorical and physical, be they gendered, ethnic, national, political, or whatever. These ‘others’ have included my colleagues at university, refugees and migrants, policy makers and politicians, diplomats, lawyers, youth workers, teachers, social workers, doctors and other professionals, activists, mayors and religious people. The conversations are moulded by our individual and evolving situated experiences, influenced by the broader surrounding contexts and multiple belongings: our families (be they near or far), our classrooms (be they physical or virtual, in a building, or in a field), our place of worship (be it a church, a mosque, or on a rock near the sea), political, economic and social institutions (be they local, national, or beyond), our natural environment and relationships with friends, furry, feathered and otherwise...the conversations, the disagreements, the alliances, the tears, the fears and the beers have been many, across different contexts, in different spaces, at different times.

Locked inside, there is very little that we can do in the physical field right now. But the field migrated to a virtual space, and, as I write, my phone beeps, reminding me of an ongoing conversation on *Whatsapp*. We have a drop-in space for young people who came to Malta as refugees that has now shifted online. The group has continued with its weekly English conversational classes, it is a virtual space where the members discuss the day, share jokes and their favourite music. The group is made up of refugees living in Malta (some of them are quarantined in Hal Far), it includes volunteers living in Malta, and also our volunteers who have had to

return home, as far as the United States, and yet they remain with us still and are very present. Just like the virus that got us here, we too have transgressed borders.

That is where I am at right now, rejecting the dichotomy, for nothing is all good, or all bad.

The present detention policy is illegal, and this is particularly frustrating since it comes on the back of years of advocacy that resulted in the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruling that Malta violated articles of the European Convention on Human Rights ensuring the right to liberty and security (Art 5) and prohibiting inhuman or degrading treatment (Art 3). There are more than a thousand young men held in quarantine as I write, caught in some kind of infectious loop with no exit strategy. The physical structure of the centre itself (despite commendable efforts on the part of the management and staff) places the residents at a much higher risk of exposure and protecting themselves against infection is nigh on impossible. And once again, the Government of the day has used the context of 'exceptional circumstances' to justify some of the gravest violations of human rights. Echoing the deportation of 223 Eritreans in 2002, and the attempted illegal push-back of 2013, we witness human rights violations that can never be justified or excused. The recent push-back of a boat of refugees and migrants who had reached Malta's Search and Rescue area, resulted in unnecessary loss of life. Returning them to Libya, a context acknowledged by the Government and the international community as being at war and responsible for the most grotesque human rights violations, leaves me with a sense of frustration, anger and deep sorrow. In her reflections on the Nazi atrocities that occurred during World War II, Hannah Arendt (1951) concluded that the "world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human" (299). Those who pleaded with us to save their lives were not Maltese. They were beyond the protection of a Nation State, outside a political community. To be human, part of the human community, was not enough to be saved.

My coffee has gone cold. My writing has been interrupted by zoom meetings and texts – from friends and strangers, asking me how they can help. They too are angry, they too are hurt, and they too want to be a part of a solution that embraces justice, compassion and hope. They include refugees who have crossed the Mediterranean Sea in a boat, people who call Malta their home. And I guess this is the other part of our collective story. I hope that this virus may serve as a humbling experience and an opportunity to reflect on where we go from here. We are not in control. We are fragile. We live connected, inter-dependent lives. We are ultimately all faces in a crowd, trying to make sense of it all...

References:

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