

Stay Human!

Written by the Students of Trento's Prison Summer School
(Class of 2017, Citizenship seminar)

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We are a group of students who are currently detained in Trento's prison (Italy). Here, we took part in the 2017 summer course 'Citizenship'. The course gave us a chance to meet our teachers Sergio, Simona and Paolo. During our meetings with them – each Wednesday and Friday, for three hours – we had a chance to discuss current issues and political concepts: democracy, freedom, justice, coexistence, equality, integration, and more. This piece brings our course to an end and sends out a message to those of you who are in prison, as well as to those of you who are outside. Our message is: "Stay human!".

Why stay human?

Within the reality of prison, it is essential to stay human. But often we are not clear about how to do that. We started this learning path on the assumption that it would be useful for us to learn about new concepts and discuss them during a dark moment in our lives – our time in prison. Our classes on citizenship helped us to understand that in order to stay human we need culture: the exchange of ideas, dialogue, and discussing of current issues starting from the news we find in newspapers.

When we reflect on our culture, we increase our capacity to interact with one another. Through culture, we can understand and better accept the use and customs of others. We can also better talk, collaborate, interact and transmit our own culture and ideas. Once we manage to better express our own ideas and discuss them with others, the risk of social isolation decreases. We can build relationships better.

Essentially, in class we got acquainted with the value of multi-cultural interaction. We can now say that, in our view, a society based on multi-cultural interaction is preferable to one based merely on integration. This is because integration limits itself to merely bringing someone

within a system. By contrast, interacting means giving and receiving in the spirit of exchange. A society that sustains multi-cultural interaction is one that promotes peaceful coexistence. And peaceful coexistence, in turn, helps us to be united as a society. It helps us to avoid alienation while also allowing us to respect each other as human beings. As one of us, Rochdi, put it in class, “Within a place that was created to divide [i.e. prison; ndr], culture and this piece of writing can bring us together!”

Obviously, the peaceful society we are talking about needs equality. We use ‘equality’ in the strongest sense of the term: equal rights, duties, opportunities, and dignity. This type of equality is challenging. Although it gives one rights, it is also extremely demanding; it asks of us an active participation as citizens. It is the type of social equality that gives us the right to vote, speech, to reunite, to property, safety, education, healthcare, and so on.

For us, freedom is not an abstract concept. It is also not the licence to do whatever one wants. It is rather the freedom one finds within the rules of peaceful coexistence. Here is an example. During the meetings of our seminar, we gave each other rules that were useful for discussion. One of our rules consisted in raising one’s hand when one wants to contribute to the discussion, so to have a fruitful conversation. Rules like this one helped us to express ourselves, coordinate with one another, and collaborate with one another. There is thus a sense in which these rules made us freer. This freedom is not freedom *from* something or someone (family, school, work, laws, state...). It is freedom *within* the social context.

The ideal society we have in mind allows for our preferred type of freedom, freedom-within. It is a just society. Within it, we respect each other as human beings. We have the same rights, and duties, and opportunities. And we have the capacity to give and have a second chance committing a mistake. Justice for us is also to have a fair investigation and trial, without discrimination due to socio-economic differences, religious differences, gender differences, or racial differences.

The justice and freedom we have in mind feed one another. Justice transmits itself through freedom. Freedom derives from a just and civil coexistence, a coexistence in which we all respect one another. This is an attitude that each of us needs to cultivate within oneself via,

among other things, a good education. Here is why. Hatred causes hatred, violence causes violence, and rudeness causes rudeness. Accordingly, we endorse the idea of a restorative justice aimed at healing social wounds and promoting the repentance of whoever intentionally committed a mistake, by reaching both their heart and reason. Without this sort of justice, there is no equality. Without equality there is no freedom.

For us, promoting the realization of the just society we have just described amounts to staying human. The more we approximate the ideals of freedom, equality and justice, the more we fully realize ourselves as human beings.

We hope that sharing our experiences and take-home lessons can be of use to all of you. We dedicate this article to all of our readers, but especially to those who are afraid of losing themselves and their hope. We hope that it will help you not to get lost.

Stay human, and keep your hope alive!