

INTERCULTURALISM AS LOVE

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Our societies are constantly changing. They are undoubtedly multicultural societies, with all the resources and difficulties implied by this. People belonging to different age groups, with different cultural backgrounds, stories and lives, are invited to meet, to coexist and to build a new shared world. They are asked to overcome rigid and monotonous thinking and behaviour patterns, which are very often based on the presumption of being superior and perfect.

The “other”, the “foreigner” always poses a challenge: it may awaken in each person, and in the society, fears, prejudices and defence attitudes that sometimes become offensive.

We believe that what is called for, is acting within the interculturalism prospect, which is founded upon meeting, reciprocity and upon the coexistence of differences. Love is the key to all this.

Within the human reality, we often witness “*disencounter*” (as claimed by Martin Buber), both at a microscopic level (close relations) and at a broader level: we face “apartheid” (intolerance, cultural boundaries...), “assimilation” (adjustment to what is standard, conformity, reduction to the “one thinking”), as well as “trivialization of differences”, that too often take place in our living contexts – and in the relations among different cultural identities - .

Sometimes such phenomena are imposed by the dominating culture – either in an open or in more subtle way. In other cases they are simply adopted by the “just arrived”, who can either entrench themselves within their own cultural boundaries in their own group or, at least on the surface, self-assimilate themselves, completely rejecting their cultural roots.

From the pedagogic perspective, what is called for, is analyzing these complex situations, understanding the possible causes and, of course, pointing out the integration processes which hinder a genuine meeting among cultures.

What we believe is that if we are to build something, we need to play with love, the only means able to create constructive and mutual relations. The only means that can draw positive results from the encounter among different cultures. We therefore need to focus on the sometimes difficult and problematic, yet precious, experiences of opening up towards the other, of deep and respectful dialogue. Through these experiences both interculturalism and a positive coexistence of differences – which are never to be taken for granted nor are they definitive – can be built. We are now going to listen to the experience of Anna Granata as an instance of what I was talking about.

Anna Granata's experience (Università Cattolica, Milano)

I would like to introduce myself. I have just finished a PhD in intercultural pedagogy and I am now cooperating with the Research Centre for intercultural relations of the Università Cattolica in Milan.

Some friendships with people from different backgrounds and cultures played a pivotal role within my education and research process as far as interculturalism is concerned.

In these cases friendship, a privileged dialogue space, takes on a very special role. The curiosity about the other's thoughts turns this exchange into a true interculturalism laboratory.

A few years ago I got to know Myriam, a young Lebanese lawyer, at a congress held in Rome. From the very beginning, we found out that we shared many passions: politics, civil engagement, study, research. We also share a similar communication style: passionate, sometimes ironic, sometimes angry, especially when important issues are at stake.

From the day we met, an intense exchange has started between us: e-mails, phone calls, chats, in our constant strive to mutually understand the contexts we are living in, and our lifestyles. Quite often I felt her thoughts and feeling as my own, even though they don't actually belong to me. For instance the fear that a new war might break out, the terrible sense of injustice about a situation apparently without a solution, but also a simple stronger attachment to my country. Thanks to this exchange, our perspectives broadened a lot.

Travelling. Until you visit somebody's house, you hardly know that person really well. As time went by, this firm belief of mine led me to strongly desire to visit Myriam in her country, and that is why I made the decision to go to Lebanon.

The memory of the war is still definitely to be felt there. Walking through the streets of Beirut you can imagine how it might feel living in the constant terror of a bombing raid, hiding into the bomb shelters, hearing the horn going off and people running. The electric power supply is cut several times a day, as the electric system has not yet been replaced after the last war. But the situation is quite clear simply by entering a supermarket: in order to do that, you need to get through a metal detector, due to the constant fear of bombings.

In my bedroom at Myriam's there is a picture of her with some friends: they stand in front of some houses completely destroyed by the bombings in a Beirut neighbourhood. Even though houses can be rebuilt, getting rid of the consequences of so much suffering and destruction is not easy.

Within 10 days I started to perceive danger in a different way, seeing it as something constantly influencing the possibility to move within the Country. I also acknowledged and made mine another life rhythm, slow and relaxed, typical of the Middle East, as well as sounds and expressions belonging to a different language, thanks to which Myriam's stories turned tangible.

Intercultural shock. One day we were walking very close to the border to Syria. Myriam went deep into her experience with war: when she was 12 she witnessed one of the bloodiest bloodsheds in Lebanon's history, which left a permanent mark in her memory. And then she told me about the more recent memories from the 2006 war, source of new fears, new nightmares, as well as a profound feeling of uncertainty concerning her future.

She also tried to explain what it means having to coexist with an enemy, what it feels like inside - an experience that I have never gone through myself. We talked about her relation to Israel (Lebanon's main opponent), with whom Lebanon lives in a constant state of war, among attacks and extremely serious and violent injustices. And I told her about my relation with Israel, the Jewish state. With the land where so many survivors of the Shoah took refuge with their sons and nephews.

While I was speaking, I suddenly had the feeling a chasm had opened between us: I was an European, with my history of profound respect accompanied by a guilt sense towards Israel; she was a Lebanese, with a life of sufferings, crimes and violations perpetrated by a state trying to dominate, yet without any right, her land.

We found ourselves speechless, with our two apparently irreconcilable views. For the first time I had the impression I was going through what was defined by Carmel Camillari and Margalit Cohen-Emerique (2003), two major interculturalism scholars, as "choc de cultures", this being a sudden communication predicament between two or more people as a consequence of a conflict of views - which causes a true shock in the people involved.

We then decided to look into each other's eyes and made an agreement: we would continue communicating our points of view, turning this chasm into a chance to grow.

Two windows. Once back home, after this experience, I was sometimes tempted to reject my own story and ideas to embrace Myriam's ideas. After all, I thought, who can tell me more than her how I should see the land where she lives and which she suffers for? Moreover, I believed that all the sufferings she had gone through were simply too strong. I felt they maybe needed to be accepted without filters, refusing my own beliefs, which would probably have been the easiest way.

All the great scholars dealing with the art of dialogue, though, taught us that we need to have our own personal

ideas and we need to be faithful to them, if we are to discuss with someone else. The wall we place between ourselves and the other cannot generate an exchange, but neither can the complete melting with the other. Starting from this point our friendship entered a new phase.

A few months ago Myriam came to Milan and we organized a meeting entitled: "Two windows on the Middle East". Our challenge consisted in trying and involve other people to take part in a "dialogue laboratory". We started by telling our story about the cultural shock, and soon the dialogue started. There were about 30 people, sitting in a circle. Myriam opened, with great honesty and courage, her window on the Middle East, telling about her life, her painful experiences, her deep questions and personal considerations, and we tried to open our window, as Europeans.

At some points the "excess" experience - as defined by Martin Buber - became tangible. It means that when we open up and let ourselves be enriched by the "Other's perspective", there is an excess of thoughts, experiences, sensitivity and feelings that became part of ourselves through the other. This experience does not necessarily modify our thoughts, yet it changes the dialogue's goal. The aim is not finding an easier path and a shared compromise, but linking the threads that enable us to profoundly understand our own as well as the other's point of view.

Giuseppe Milan (Università di Padova)

I really liked Anna's sentence: "Until you visit somebody's house, you hardly know that person really well." Interculturalism means, after all, being able to host and, being a host, getting to know each other and building a "shared world" together. (P. Freire). A host is a person who knows how to invite and to welcome somebody else - making people feel themselves at home-. It is a person who is able to decentre himself and go to someone else's house, putting himself in his/her shoes and seeing himself and the world from that different perspective.

This opens up for us the stimulating question of a "welcoming" didactics that involves all subjects, and is able to transform our culture into a "welcoming home". And at the same time makes us travel and get to know other cultures - with all their beauty. What we care for is the "world", seen as a space shared by everyone. If considered in this perspective, true education cannot be but intercultural. It involves us all - not only, as too often assumed, the "foreigner" coming from a different culture. We are invited to become "intercultural people" - not only because this is required by the challenge posed by our times - but also because we believe in the human being as "relation", "dialogue", "interculturalism".

Achieving this goal requires, so Edgar Morin, a "good brain". And I would add, also a "good heart". In short it requires being able to love using our intelligence.

The research process in the "intercultural pedagogy" field hinges upon these issues, analysing them more deeply and exchanging and acknowledging meaningful intercultural experiences. It implies the creation of new pedagogy projects and the implementation of innovative - and often alternative - intercultural strategies in every context (such as family, school, town...: everywhere!)

I believe that we, members of EDU, should continue discussing and working on these themes as well as on possible research fields to be shared.

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