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Moving Forward: Essays On Civil Courage

Prologue - Svetlana Broz

“Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, today is a gift.” - Anonymous

“You must be the change you want to see in the world.” - Mahatma Gandhi

The Schools for Civil Courage, organized for 218 young people between the ages of 15 and 25 by the GARIWO non-governmental organization with the help and support of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (DEZA) and the Royal Norwegian Embassy in the summer of 2006, gave rise to this book of selected thoughts from participants who found ways to articulate their anxieties, fears, doubts, longings, hopes, desires, needs, and also opinions.

The essays, chosen by a committee, have been edited to preserve each author's thoughts and message while representing a stylistically coherent whole for easier reading. The first readers and the critics of this book will, indeed, be its coauthors.

The handwritten manuscripts of these essays may seem fragile to the superficial observer, but to the more knowledgeable reader they are powerful messages of young people who have known or have just discovered what they want, and, more importantly, what they do not want. Moving Forward presents the messages and opinions of the young people of western Bosnia. You, who have learned - go out and teach those who still do not know; you, who do not yet know - seek out those who do, and all of you together, call on your teachers, instructors and professors to learn with you and from you.

You are living in a society in which you first must define and clearly state what it is you do not want in order to come to what it is that you want. Only when you articulate what it is that you are against can you seek ways to give voice to your feelings. Every act of your defiance is an act of civil courage, because the authorities which are pressuring you to conform will not stand by peacefully and watch. That is why you must cultivate your own civil courage if you are going to voice your defiance and say: enough's enough. You took the first steps in the classroom and at the School on Civil Courage. The next step is putting what you have learned into practice. The Latin saying: *repetitio mater studiorum est* (repetition is the mother of learning) holds true

here.

Keep in mind: every time you win a struggle against a negative authority, you will understand that he or she is just a human being just like you, in fact more vulnerable than you are because he or she is in the wrong. Your arguments are the truth and uphold the cause of justice, while their only argument is force, which is not as powerful as it pretends to be. So do not fear those who despise you yet depend on you. Wise men said long ago that reason rules, while force rolls logs. Do not allow yourself, with the powers of reasoning you possess, to become one of the logs.

With this book you have shown that you are not afraid of saying what you think; now you need to prove that you do not flinch from your friend's invitation: No longer will I live a lie! I will not. I cannot! Enough is enough... I, too, want to fight! And I will fight... But I cannot do it alone... I need a friend... I need you! And I need your friend! Use your rights! Stand up on your own two feet! You have what it takes! May the horizon be too small for your dreams! Start packing your suitcase today. So much awaits you beyond the door! Move forward... move forward...

Have you the right not to respond?

November 2006 - Sarajevo

I. Pin No Labels on Me - My Nation Is Humanity - Marija Vranić

Better keep yourself clean and bright;
you are the window through which you must see the world.
George Bernard Shaw

Man was created free—is free
E'en though he were born in shackles.
Friedrich Schiller

I am Marija Vranić and I defy all labels! Please stop thinking about my nationality and religion, because why should they matter anyhow?

I am a human being by nationality, I acknowledge no divisions, no invented borders, I do not acknowledge the "prisons" they put us in, dividing us up by the place we were born, the dialect we speak, our first and last names, the God we believe in.

Why divide up something when it is really all the same? Why pin labels on a person when he has a soul, a heart, reason? Who came up with all of this?

I often wonder about that and I always come up with a similar answer - one and the same person invented it, someone with no soul, with a poisoned heart and disturbed reason.

This is my thinking, and you, if you have the courage to ask yourself about the same things, if you have an open soul, a heart full of love, and you think for yourself, you will come to the same or a similar answer.

Yes, civil courage is necessary for everything; the courage to be your own person, and not to spit into someone else's hands which are, often, the hands of evil.

We should be living a life of love, understanding, goodness, because only then will we be happy.

What is a person without happiness? In my opinion that person is a sorry excuse for a human being, seething with hatred, rage and egoism, a person who is not living for life, but for death. We must not allow such people to run our lives, to marshal us in their ranks, to pin labels on us, to brand us like cattle.

We must have the civil courage to speak out and show in our work that our souls are open, our hearts full of love, and our minds reasonable.

We will be happy because we know who we are. We will know that we are people and we will not flinch from saying and showing it.

I am so glad we have gotten to know one another!

Please, PIN NO LABELS ON ME!

Srbac

II. A Lesson - Bojan Ilić

Vengeance is often considered petty, a poor delight of feeble minds. -
Latin saying

Everything was going fine at school. We the students got along well with the teachers; there were few clashes between pupils and teachers. The best and most interesting of the faculty was our biology teacher, whom the students respected quite a lot. Unfortunately, an accident happened. Our favorite teacher tripped on the stairs, fell, and broke his leg. This meant he wouldn't be teaching for a month, and someone else would have to substitute for him. The substitute teacher turned out both good and bad for us.

Our regular teacher went on sick leave and the new one arrived. There had always been an easygoing atmosphere in the classes with our 'old' teacher, and never were there instances of bullying behavior on an ethnic basis. Accustomed as we were to the relaxed atmosphere in class, with the new teacher we were thrown out of class immediately, and with us often was a boy of Muslim background, out of no fault of his own.

Later it happened, when we had been the ones to do something wrong, that he was the only one penalized, and often enough he had to stand up before the blackboard

and would get flunking grades. We did nothing. We were mute observers. Stories began to circulate pretty soon around school that whoever stood up to the teacher would be given bad grades, and would probably fail biology. Even if you'd studied everything, he'd ask you a question that only he knew the answer to. That was why no one had what it took to stand up to him and say 'enough already.'

This went quite far, because the boy had nearly failed biology, and was about to be suspended from school for the black marks he'd been given, most of which had come from the biology teacher.

And then the other kids began to get the idea that it was time to stand up to the discrimination. All that I knew was that one person alone cannot accomplish much, and that it is much better when everyone joins together, a whole class, to oppose a biased teacher.

We worked together and organized things well and finally took action. The next time when the professor did what he had done so many times before, i.e. he made the innocent boy stand up by the blackboard only because he was of a different nationality, we stood up one by one and said: "That's enough, you cannot do that!" He said "Oh, yes I can. I can fail all of you, you traitors, how can you stand up for a Muslim?" We did not give up, until finally the half-drunk impassioned nationalist professor ended up in jail.

The worst of it, and what still embarrasses us, is that our friend had to put up with this terrible injustice until it finally got to us, and then we reacted and changed things. It was a lesson to us for the future, to react sooner and we have what it takes to stand up to all bad things and people.

Srebrenica

III. Little One - Alma Lišić

I absolutely renounce all higher harmony.
It is not worth one little tear of even that one tormented child.
Fyodor M. Dostoevsky

My life, my past, present and future, are tainted by sadness and fear, and there is a deep and painful brand upon my soul.

I was a child of the war; that is how they call my generation, we the children who, far too young, were faced with the evil that was looming over our beloved homeland. When I should have been having a great time, I was stuck in the four clammy walls of the cellar, which is what I remember when I think of my childhood, all for the sake of the barest survival. I wonder who had the right to shatter my dreams? To make me spend my childhood in darkness and fear, never sure whether my father would be coming back alive or not, when I should have been at play?

I remember a cold morning. Having seen my father off to the front line, my mother put on her coat and went out to the village where my grandmother lived, to bring us something for dinner. I watched her leave, knowing she was worn down from it all, but still she was ready to risk her life so that we'd have something to eat. The hours went by, I peeked out hoping to see her face, just to make sure she was OK.

"Good Lord, where can she be?" I heard my father say. The shells were falling and I prayed to God that none of them would hurt her.

"Here she is!" I heard my father say, and I ran out and finally saw my darling mother. But, there something was strange. In her arms she was carrying a little girl who stared at us all, bewildered. When she'd come down into the cellar, Father asked her, "What is this? Whose child is this?"

Mustering the courage, she explained that she had found the child in front of a burning house, the home of people who had been our neighbors, and then, overnight, they had become belligerent Serbs. The Muslims had killed her parents and my mother couldn't leave her to her fate, so small, only a year old, to die out there in front of the burning house. We stared at her, and the little girl, Slavica, looked very tired, staring back at us, unfamiliar to her, with her big blue eyes. Father was furious. He said:

"How could you save a Serbian child? The Serbs killed your brother, your father, your mother; they may yet kill your children."

I remember Mother's answer that still rings in my ears today:

"She has done no wrong. We will share with her whatever we have to eat. I do not have a heart of stone. I could not leave her."

It was left at that and no one ever spoke of it again. All of us adored Slavica, even my father who had so many prejudices. The days passed, and no one came looking for Slavica. We got close. I was like an older sister to her. All the villagers frowned on what my mother had done, but she did not give up and showed everyone that she is a great WOMAN who has genuine courage.

Slavica flourished with us. We gave her everything a family can give. She got completely accustomed to living with us. No one asked for her; either none of her family was left, or they didn't dare. She lived with us for six years, until 12 February 1999, when she was taken by her aunt and uncle. It was very hard for us when she left, and I know how hard it was for her. But the law says "each must go to his or her own" although we felt that she was ours, because she was a one of us.

Little One, as we called her, still spends every other weekend with us. We eroded the barriers of nationality and stepped across the divide erected by the 'leaders'. My mother lived through many hardships as a result, but we knew that she was a symbol of civil courage and humanity and that many envied her that. Slavica says she will be grateful to Mother as long as she lives, and I will always be grateful to God that he gave me such a mother from whom I can learn how to live.

Zavidovići

IV. WaterFall - Tamara Cvetković

The highest activity a human being can attain is learning for understanding, because to understand is to be free. - Spinoza

Fear is the parent of cruelty,
and therefore it is no wonder if cruelty and religion have gone
hand in hand.

Bertrand Russell

When I heard I would be coming to Sarajevo, or rather to Igman, I was overjoyed because I love traveling, and I have heard stories since I was little from my parents who worked here before the war. But the next moment my thoughts were inundated by total darkness. A period of time has long since left these thoughts, life's stage, with no flood lights. I cannot say that this is a period of my own life, but it certainly is a period which has been burned like a brand into my consciousness. You yourselves know that the monotony of everyday life does well to mask what you carry in yourself, or perhaps more precisely what you are forced to bear when society, the media, even your family impose that burden upon you.

That is the same burden borne by innocent children, dressed up as soldiers, when they stand by the coffin of the late president of a non-existent state. Confused, with no choice, they get drenched in the rain and listen to what the embittered, arrogant, proud people say, poisoned by hatred.

Well, that is not enough, because the young people of today are not interested in anything which isn't silicone or vulgar or they haven't seen it on television. Because of this they have no chance to learn what it is that they, in essence, carry in their genes, and this is a shame...

All they are feeling today, regrettably, is - self pity. They are raised to think they have it worst and that life is the toughest for them. They are so blind to the world around them that they do not even notice the fact that if they were to contribute to the happiness of others, they would be building their own personality and adding a small but significant droplet to the waterfall. After all, without all the droplets there would be no waterfall.

Together, we, at this seminar, are not making a waterfall, but a sea: harmonious, infinite and omnipotent.

I came saddled with prejudices and a fear of ethnic and religious discrimination, and I am leaving with fifty new lives inside my own, a unique experience and a clear message: "We need to have what it takes for new things..."

Each time a chilly wind blows down from Igman, I think of the staid community I will be returning to, the dead sea in which the worst prejudices hold sway, if you don't

make waves.

But I have learned from the teachers, and the other people here - to muster my courage and fight for my convictions...

Kragujevac

V. If You Don't Throw It Out In Time - Jasmin Alić

What's in a name?

That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.

Shakespeare

I live in Europe. I live in the Balkans. I live in the country of Bosnia and Herzegovina. I live in an entity called the Federation. I live in the Canton of Tuzla. I live in Tuzla. I am a Muslim. But what good does all that do you if you don't know what kind of a human being I am, or whether I am a human being at all.

When the war began I was only five. I was someone who had no idea who was a Serb, Croat, or Muslim. I was someone who drew no distinctions and didn't know how to draw distinctions. I was a child.

I didn't know anything about it, but they taught me. The people teach you, the situation teaches you. They teach you at home, they teach you in school, they teach you everywhere you go. In the end, the images on the TV screen teach you, and the people who manhandle other people, humankind, also teach you. People teach you who are not aware that they are doing so. Yet why and for what reason?

A thousand questions and no answers to be found. Again, as always, it is only the ordinary people who suffer.

What a sad place the Balkans are! I have the feeling that it is the source of everything bad. We cannot uproot the evil. We cannot even name it. The evil is something that is not named, yet nonetheless it happens. That is how evil works.

What can be learned from all this? That evil doesn't come from a whole nation but from individuals. The individual is a bad apple in a basket full of fruit. If you don't cast it out in time, it will rot the rest of the fruit.

That is something like what happened to us, the peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina. There are apples like that everywhere. The people who came before us did not throw out the bad fruit. They did not get rid of the evil.

I hope, it is my fondest wish that these schools will send out people who will know how to find the cures for what troubles us.

Tuzla

VI. We All Loved One Another That Summer - Dino Jazvin

Let a man overcome anger by love, evil by good, the greedy by liberality, the liar by truth (...) Hatred does not cease by hatred, but only by love; this is the eternal rule. - Buddha

My name is Dino Jazvin. I am from Sarajevo. I was born in 1985 and spent what should have been the best years of my childhood in the war. The suffering, pain and hatred I experienced during my childhood cannot be described, but at this moment, as I write this essay, I am not thinking about the ugly things that happened to young people in the horrors that have passed. And yet I am full of love, and this love, too, cannot be described.

It is the summer of 2006 and I am wondering if this is truly happening or am I dreaming. We are all together like the old days, it seems to me that we even love each other and respect each other more than we did before. I have been flooded by emotions. As I write these words, the tears keep flowing and I am thinking could it be, oh, Lord, that I, a guy, am crying, so that I can turn the hatred of people just like myself that has been imposed on me by others into a great love?

I will not hate. I will not obey my elders who have misled me. I want to love all people! Why should I hate a person whose name is different than mine but who has done me no wrong? No! I will not hate, I want to love, and that person most certainly will love me.

I am not eager to venture into a reality where people hate each other, but I must go right the wrong attitudes of the older generation. I have learned enough, in a short time, and I am a courageous person.

Now I walk among people with my head high, to tell them how to love and be loved, and that they should no longer sin. I want to tell them to stir from their hibernation and for us, together, to launch an attack on evil.

When I get home, I'll tell everyone that good people do exist and that they are always prepared to fight for a better tomorrow.

And that is why, my friends, join us so that we can fight together, side by side, to live and love each other!

Father and mother, I refuse to obey you. I want a wonderful future and lots of friends.

Sarajevo

VII. We Will Keep Our Centuries-Old Harmony - Vanja Šikman

No country has ever risen without being purified through the fire of

suffering. - Gandhi

Ever since humankind began, for centuries, and even today, evil has been accumulating in the world. The condition we are faced with on our planet right now is that there are many wars going on, hatred is blazing at a maximum intensity among people and it is a fact that almost every second person has lost part of his or her humanity.

Man, who used to be reasonable, perfect, has been transformed into a monster with the stench of cowardice on every breath, whose eyes gleam with hatred for every human creature, even for themselves.

The picture of this world resembles Dante's inferno, in which all people carry evil in themselves, some more, some less. From that dark hole at first it seems as if there is no way out, yet a small number of people who have succeeded in preserving themselves from the avalanche of evil are losing hope that they will ever, anywhere, be lit by a ray of light.

There are people all over the world who believe in good, and there are even people like this in our small but very special country, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

This special little country has "held" within it, for centuries, all manner of nations, cultures, customs, religions. Because of the evil and envy, however, which crop up among some people, even here, sadly, there is no harmony, as the bloody wars show that raged in the Balkans only ten years ago.

But here we are, young people, who will work to change all that. We are prepared to shrug off prejudices of our fellow citizens of other nationalities, which our parents and grandparents completely erroneously planted in us.

We are prepared to be courageous and to stand up to those who erode the harmony, so sorely needed in order for the country to advance, and for us, finally, all together, to enjoy peace. We will be helped in learning how to have what it takes to stand up to evil, and how to fight for the peace we want by "older" people of good will, who are here for us. They have come together in one place, the members of the GARIWO non-governmental organization, and they founded the Schools of Civil Courage.

The school brought secondary school and university students from the whole region together in one place in the wonderful setting of the Bosnian mountain of Igman, and helped them get to know each other, encouraging feelings of respect and esteem for others and ourselves, and fostering awareness of the possibility of choosing between good and evil. We saw and heard many examples of civil courage, which inspired us to build peace and a better future here together.

And in closing, all that is left is for me to thank all those who took part in this special form of education, and for the seven wonderful days spent with remarkable people.

I promise that I will justify the trust that has been placed in me when I was invited to take part in this seven-day school.

Mrkonjić Grad

Translated by Ellen Elias-Bursać - © 2007 Ellen Elias-Bursać

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