

“INNER TRUTH”

I was asked to talk about what was in the genesis of Casa João Cidade, and for that I have to tell you about my sister Elvira. She was one year older than me and all my life – up to six months ago – I’ve known her living in a body with a deep mental deficiency.

We were both raised in a farm under the protective care of our paternal grandmother. Forty years ago there were no schools, therapies or support for people like her. Although she was lucky to live in a protected environment, this was not enough to make her recover from the consequences of the encephalic fever which stroke her when she was two years old.

She lived in a complete apathy, all she did was to eat and to sleep, but curiously she sang. Music was the only thing which made her turn her head to someone who tried to come up to her.

After the death of our grandmother, ten years ago, Elvira came to live with me and my family. I think it was then the whole story began. I spent so much time wondering about her role in this life, about the way we were connected to each other, about what her needs would be besides basic care, about what could give her a better quality of life and make her happy in her condition. Above all I looked at her and wondered what she would ask me if she could speak.

I talked about all this with our doctor, João Rego, a man of great sensibility who encouraged me to look at the reality of deficiency as an opportunity in life, if only we want to seize it.

He once wrote me the following text, “Inner Truth”, the title I chose for this presentation in both his and my sister Elvira’s memory:

*“To know a person with a mental deficiency can be an opportunity to know our inner truth...
...the meeting with the reality of mental deficiency can be a moment of pause and reflection, because of the main characteristics of socialization itself with these persons... It is not at all an immediate socialization. The presence of a mental patient brings to socialization some elements whose daily positive experience is forgotten to most of us: the act of taking time, the expectation, the attention, the gap between incentive and reaction, the gap between question and answer, the unknown middle-term between cause and effect. All these elements are permanently present in our lives, every day and minute, but all we constantly do is to run away from their presence, when we get impatient and angry about waiting times, delays, lack of efficiency of persons and services, refusing to try them and to live with them in a positive way, refusing to believe that the lack of efficiency can also be of use to us.*”

... Mental deficiency is therefore a challenge both to impatience and to patience. But if it brings time and continuance to human relations, it is without any doubt a humanizing factor, because – as we know from books – what distinguishes mankind from animals is the ability the former have to evade the physiological automatism, to introduce the virtues of the rational spirit between stimulus and reflex, to think and to know, to think and to taste. Will it then be true that the less productive among the human beings contribute to the humanization of mankind?

... As there is a lapse of time which is first perceived as lost, and then experienced as free, the lapse of time between stimulus and response, between our command and the response the so called mental patient can give, as this lapse of time occurs due to the deficiency itself, this lapse of time will be filled. By creating a time of genesis, which is the real time, mental deficiency is the repeated and present stimulus of imagination, the faculty which divinizes the human beings, because it is the creative faculty of the spirit... ”

Being well advised, as you can see, I began to understand that the formula was not too complicated and that the solution was close and had only to be made real.

Here I have to introduce two other persons: Nazareth, at the time 4 years old, and Matilde, 3. My two daughters lived in a complete understanding with their aunt Elvira, of whom we thought until then that she understood nothing, as she paid no attention at all to what people said, she did not speak and had no autonomy at all. There was, however, an almost telepathic understanding among them. They played together and laughed – I could not say what about – they talked and above all they sang, they climbed to their aunt Elvira’s lap, while she looked and smiled, shook her body and head, and let life happen through her two nieces.

They had a relationship of reciprocity, a relationship of equals, without any strangeness among them. For the children any attitude or action which meant affection was the right one. They had time – and I would like to stress this point – they had the time to be there.

When Nazareth and Matilde were not at home, they attended the “Oficina da Criança”, a permanent children’s workshop created by the city, where they had access to different artistic activities. The artistic language was common to all children attending the workshop, regardless of their colour, social condition or age, including children with mental deficiency. My daughters showed there the same happy and relaxed faces as when they played with their aunt at home, but unfortunately Elvira was an adult mental patient and could not attend such activities.

A place like that but for adults could be the solution I was looking for. A place of entertainment and therapy, a place where things could happen slowly and with time, meant to make happiness possible for the persons who attended it, using for this purpose the art in its several forms of universal expression.

I thought at the time that the project could be even a more enriching one if all this could be experienced in a place close to nature. The contact with nature and its rhythms and the freedom of life in the open air could be an alternative to the isolation of the usual closed spaces.

I began to talk to more and more people about this idea. As you know, when we fall in love with an idea it seems that everything converges in our direction. After a short time a group of persons got together and an enlarged proposal resulted from the group debate: the creation of a socio-therapeutic community in the country, in close contact with nature, a place to live in. It was a period of time of great creativity and energy for all of us. From the work of the whole group resulted the project Casa João Cidade, which I will schematically describe as follows:

CASA JOÃO CIDADE

It is a Private Institution of Social Solidarity, whose main goals are to build and to keep in operation a socio-therapeutic community which promotes the socialization and the insertion of young people and adults with mental deficiency.

The founders of Casa João Cidade deeply believe that the well-being of mental deficient persons in a community is an issue concerning in first place the community itself, and that solidarity can only be achieved with hard work, respecting the following principles:

- The integration of the mental deficient is not an imitation or a search for normality, but rather the act of living with and of valuing the difference.
- The physical and mental bodies which are available as an instrument to an individual may not enable this individual to communicate and to participate according to the prevailing codes. The artistic language, because of its universality, is the only one capable of performing the perfect communication among the different forms of perception.
- Experiencing the nature as the mother and common principle to all life affords the essential rhythms to the development of the feelings of safety, stability and previsibility.

- Life in community is centered on helping each other and on the sharing of all tasks and responsibilities according with each one's capabilities.

The two main facilities of Casa João Cidade:

Residence: **Casa Elvira**, for groups of persons with different degrees of deficiency, living in their own house and with a central role in managing their lives. There will also be persons trained to accompany them 24 hours a day in performing all duties as well as in the organization and cultural activities in the house.

These daily tasks, which have a therapeutic effect in themselves, are performed according to the capabilities of each resident and are part of a wider scheme of activities in artistic workshops.

Workshops: **Oficinas da Cidade**. This building is ready and it has several rooms available, where the attendants can develop activities with guests from different artistic areas, thus enabling a permanent creative process.

According to the wishes and capabilities of each individual, and as without diversity there can be no choice, we propose two thematic areas: the **Art of Doing** and the **Art of Saying**.

Besides these two areas of mainly plastic expression and in the open air, there will be other projects in the areas of theater, music and body expression.

The first workshops in Oficinas da Cidade took place in the summer 2007.

Our offers will also include home attendance and support to families, as well as programs of inclusive holidays.