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On Being Strange – The Encounter of EGS with Malta

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The fist, too, was once the palm of an open hand.

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On July 24th, 2015, The European Graduate School celebrated 20 years of teaching and learning. As part of the occasion, Evarist Bartolo, the Minister of Education and Employment of the Republic of Malta, addressed the audience of faculty, students and honored guests. Malta, a member of the European Union, has recently accredited EGS as an institute of higher education – a long awaited milestone in the development of the school. All summer long, the faculty labored over the accreditation forms, in addition to our intensive teaching schedule. Now that a representative of Malta was here in Saas-Fee, I anticipated a bureaucratic presentation that would be exceedingly long and boring. Much to my surprise, Evarist, as he asked us to call him, began by talking about the World War I poetry of Wilfred Owen and the meaningless carnage of men from nations that were foreign to each other, a slaughter that took Owen's life as well.

In the midst of the desolation, he told us, individual soldiers met in No-Mans-Land, the space between the battle lines, in an attempt to encounter each other beyond their differences. Evarist's poetic presentation gave us something of the pathos of these encounters. He also reminded us that several of the soldiers involved in them had been shot as deserters. To encounter the strange can be a dangerous endeavor.

He went on to say that EGS itself was strange – and so was Malta! A tiny island in the middle of the Mediterranean, Malta developed its own culture through the centuries-long conquests by continental powers. As islands tend to do, the country maintained its proud insularity and sense of difference. Now it was facing an influx of refugees and immigrants from North Africa – again a case of the strange meeting the strange. I had the sense that Evarist, who was soon to add Civic Rights to his portfolio, understood the plight of these migrants and was sympathetic to their situation.

To be a stranger in a strange land is an ancient theme in human culture. It makes me wonder what makes us strangers to one another – and to ourselves. There is a story that Franz Kafka was asked by his friend Max Brod why he wasn't more involved in the Jewish community. Kafka is said to have replied, "What do I have in common with the Jews? I don't even have anything in common with myself!" And, perhaps, that is precisely what he had in common with the Jews – and with everyone else. As a Jew myself, I resonate with this tale. We have been wanderers for so long that wandering has become part of our identity.

And yet all wanderers long for home, a place where they can finally be who they are. I wonder if this longing is part of the human condition – and I also wonder that if we try to eliminate our longing, do we run the risk of losing ourselves? With migration rapidly becoming central to human life in the 21st century, can we accept our strangeness as part of our existence? If we could, it might make us more open to those who are different from us. "You shall love the stranger, for you were once strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 10:19).

EGS has been a strange school for twenty years. Saas-Fee is itself a world apart, as all mountainous places are. Mountains and islands all tend to insularity. Our own difference from other institutions, at least in the Expressive Arts programs housed in the Arts, Health and Society Division, has been a source of both pride and a longing for acceptance. I often felt that the "normal" world of the contemporary university, with its formalistic standards of acting and thinking for students and faculty, was foreign to our spirit of creativity and innovation, the way we broke disciplinary boundaries and were free to develop new forms of learning that were themselves poetic in nature. And yet from the beginning the idea of the university was to form a world apart from everyday life. Plato, who witnessed the persecution of his teacher Socrates for offending those who held power in the city, conducted his philosophical instruction in the "groves of academe," an isolated garden where free thought could flourish and traditional norms could be challenged without fear of retribution. We often deride the concept of an "Ivory Tower," where the concerns of the world are notably absent; yet does not poiesis, the birth of the new, depend on this freedom from social constraint?

As much as I have long wanted EGS to be recognized by others for what it is, I also feared the normalization of the university and the consequent loss of our vitality and verve. In one of the doctoral classes this summer, the concepts of rigor and vigor came into play. We all agreed that the ideals of rigorous thinking and research were necessary to avoid groundless opinions and biases, yet we also felt that rigor without vitality was without meaning and value. Life

demands that we go beyond ourselves in a constant striving to welcome what has not yet been born. It was for this reason that Socrates called himself a midwife, helping others to give birth to new ideas.

Perhaps the encounter of EGS with Malta will allow us to keep our strangeness. It may even bring about the arrival of an unanticipated guest, as new programs and collaborative efforts bear fruit. This guest would be the "Third" of which we often speak, something that emerges between us and that can never be predicted. W.B. Yeats writes of the "rough beast" which "slouches towards Bethlehem to be born."

I wonder what this beast will be like. And I hope we can welcome it with hospitality, as we are told to do with all strangers. Let us welcome our own strangeness as well – and never give up our poetic vocation. Only in this way can we be open to the strangeness of others and together give birth to the new.