



by Jana Tikalova

# HOW TO MAKE HUMAN RIGHTS

**My greatest challenge has been to connect my understanding of and beliefs on human rights and human rights education to trying to live those beliefs daily as an ordinary human being and not only as a trainer. A significant part of that challenge has been to put all this into words and produce this article. My intention is not to engage in a general exposition of what human rights are and are not. Rather I focus on how we live human rights.**

I am struck afresh by my frustrations in defending my own rights in my own country. What is striking is that I returned to my homeland, the Czech Republic, with – I can see, looking back – a perfect illusion. I decided to drop anchor in a post-communist country where human rights, even today, are in their infancy – in other words, they exist in the legislation but not in people's lives. I shed a tear at the thought that it is almost fifteen years since the so-called iron curtain was torn down and yet democracy and human rights protection are still often only words on paper. I naively assumed that it would not be all that hard to enlighten people and get them to fight, and fight hard, for what belongs to them – their rights! Nevertheless the vacuum of anxiety, mistrust and apathy that kept our socialist regime in place for years is powerfully fixed in people's minds, including my own. But is it only the socialist regime that made us weak about living our rights daily? Or is there something else?



# EDUCATION

## REALLY COME ALIVE

### ► In the trainer's shoes and out of them

I recall Mrs Felice Yeban, a speaker at a training course on human-rights education for young people, sturdily telling the plenary of the European Youth Centre in Budapest that we were already suffering from fatigue. We were simply too tired to fight, even though we were fully conscious of the importance of fighting. This brings us to what Felice called the "burden of consciousness". Are we conscious, or fatigued, or both? If we are conscious – we fight. If we are fatigued – we do not fight. So what do we do if we are both?

Try to put yourself in the role of a trainer giving a training course, and in the role of anyone other than the trainer running a course. Reflect on your convictions and buoyancy about human rights and ask yourself: "**Do I create any contradictions in teaching and living human rights?**"

Can we talk theory whilst wearing the trainer's shoes, yet not apply it to the hard realities of life when we take them off? I am well aware how complex it is to achieve a high degree of human-rights transparency in actual practice. Dealings with existing institutions inevitably involve compromises, for instance. I could give dozens of examples. Nevertheless, if there is no interconnection between theory and practice in human rights then our work must be seen as superficial, false and dishonest. Or am I mistaken here?

### ► Trainers' rights

Obviously trainers' private lives are profoundly affected by their work. Their ordinary lives become extraordinary, and soon they are shuttling between extremes that are hard to avoid. They are not trapped by personal fatigue as such but they are trapped by being conscious of other people's fatigue, and that is why they need to actively do something about it.

I know many trainers who, for the sake of making human rights visible in the world, tend to sacrifice their families and their personal lives. I can only say that good trainers have influenced many people (and still do) and they have earned the right to take off their trainer's shoes in the office. Never forget your own rights whilst bringing human-rights education alive!

### ► The teacher believes human rights are "rubbish", the trainer claims the opposite

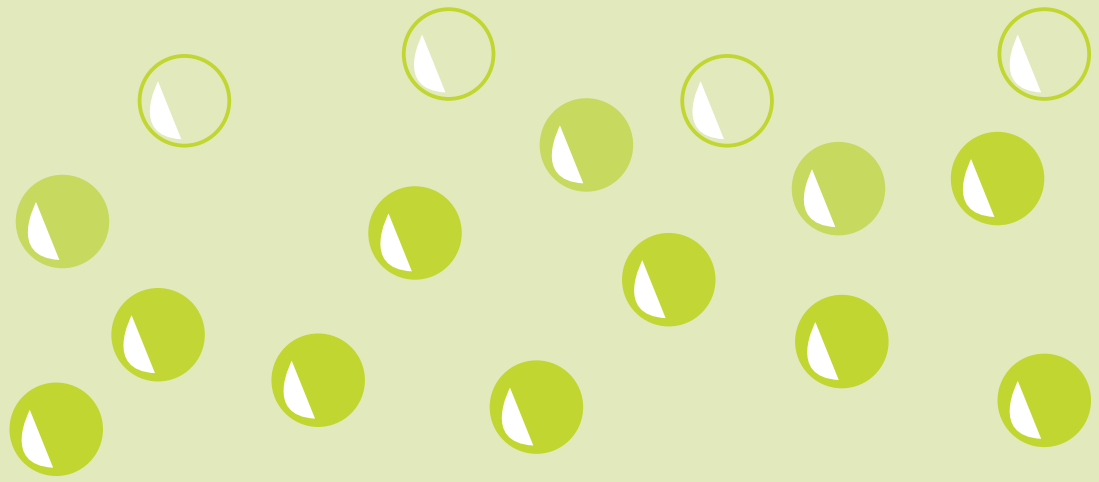
Let's look closer at the implications. To make myself clearer I will take an example from a pilot project funded by the European Youth Foundation and organised by OPIM (*Organisation Supporting the Integration of Minorities*). The project consisted of several training courses in human-rights education run in Czech secondary schools.

At one of the training sessions we (*the students, the teacher and I*) were having a general discussion about racism and discrimination in our town and in our country. Predictably, we slid into discussion about the Roma, who are a controversial issue in our society and surely will remain so for a long time.

I was already aware that something was going to happen because of some jokes about Roma at the very beginning of the session. Some of the students, 16- and 17-year-olds, made their views clear on the Holocaust, the gas chambers and all the rest. In short, as they saw it, Roma people belonged in the gas chambers or ghettos and so on and so forth. I tried various tactics to cool the discussion down and make some basic points about human rights and humanity and justice and dignity. My attempts were slowly gaining some positive reactions from the students. My satisfaction at bringing them round to seeing some value in the things and people we were talking about, and at getting some perspective on the whole question, vanished in a puff of smoke.

**The training session was completely undermined, and a wave of frustration hit me as a trainer, when the teacher blurted out: "Ten years ago I didn't mind Roma but today I hate them." And she added: "Discussing it isn't going to change anything, I'm a racist anyway".**

The teacher's remark certainly made an impact. The situation that followed could be described as perhaps entertaining for the students, a matter of indifference to the teacher, and a threat to me. It was ultimately the teacher's right to express her opinion, though clearly she was interfering with the training session. Tactfully I managed to handle the chain reaction from the students. Nevertheless, my mind was full of huge doubts and dilemmas.



The most burning concern was whether it was possible to train in human-rights education when there was such deep-rooted ignorance and hatred. Perhaps it was the frustration of realising that one day my own children would be educated in that environment, with the teacher spouting racist ideas and the students competing to air their prejudices and spew out xenophobic jokes, totally oblivious of human rights. Or possibly it was my awareness of having myself once had schoolmates of a different skin colour – Roma, as it happens – whom the teacher and the school treated with total disrespect and lack of consideration. At the time there was no such thing as human rights. The most frightening thing was my mistaken assumption that today, in our so-called multicultural society, it was much easier to be aware of peoples' values and be tolerant than it had been when I was a thirteen-year-old schoolgirl.

I realised that if I gave up now, when I became a mother I would blame myself for not having done more to protect my children. That made it possible for me to go on.

I dusted off my trainer's handbooks, found relevant examples and activities to motivate and enthuse the students, especially after their teacher's remarks. Then I took my folders and the following week I marched proudly back into the classroom. The students were waiting for me impatiently to discuss and study our next topic. The teacher was replaced for the project by another one (the original agreement with the school staff allowed this).

During the lesson I returned to the incident I have described, curious to find out how the students viewed what the teacher had done. Sadly, they saw it as normal and not worth making a fuss about. The challenge for me personally was not to let the matter drop. I had a short discussion with the school director's assistant and we agreed that, inevitably, teachers needed training too. So that's my next task! I only hope that it will not take them long to realise that being xenophobic in front of the students is not normal or permissible.

### ► Is human rights just words?

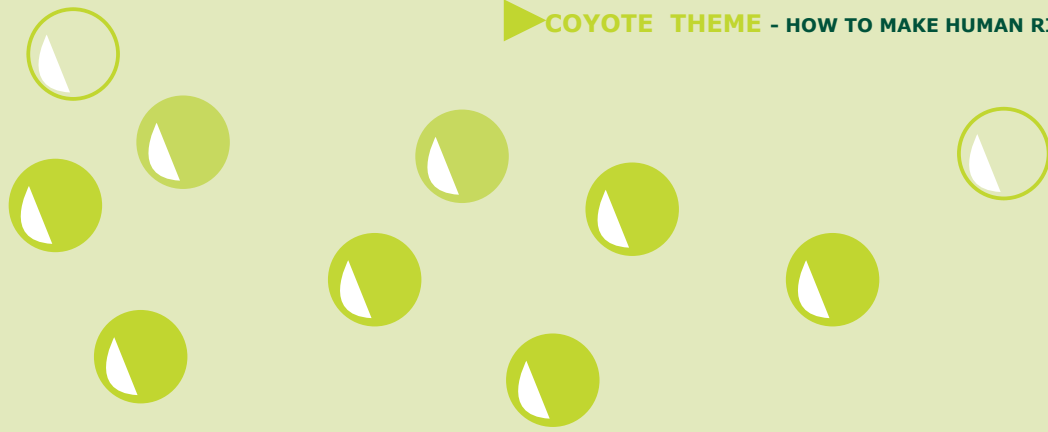
Countless times my determination to deliver human rights received setbacks. The one that really took the biscuit was at the tax office in my town. I was defending my rights to do charity work and support my organisation and to be treated as a human being who had not done anything wrong and was not a criminal. With endless patience and courtesy I explained how co-financing works in NGOs and enlightened them about support in forms other than cash – “in kind” support. I was rewarded with the comments that ‘some’ minorities had it good living off the country for nothing, it was rubbish to talk about ‘money in kind’, and they wouldn't lecture me about NGOs if I didn't lecture them about fundraising. . . I felt (and still feel) under attack when I attempt to make my voice heard and exercise freedom of expression.

They can take me to court but I won't give up. There is no point crying about it. I help people who need my help, and I do it with patience, respect and a clear mind.

I am convinced that many of you have similar stories. I would be interested to know what you have gained or lost from your experiences of making human rights come alive.

The ones I have described here did not diminish my desire to strengthen consciousness of human rights and develop human-rights education. The most valuable outcome was that I shook myself free of the dangerous “fatigue” trap that I referred to at the beginning of this article. It is a trap that anybody can easily fall into.

The really crucial point I have to make is that none of us trainers and human rights educators should ever give up. In this world it is so easy to slip out of your role and choose another path. If we choose another path we might return home every day from our eight-hour shift, cook a dinner, switch on the telly and keep



moaning about what the hell is going on in the world, and that the politicians do nothing but talk about how to make the world better. I can only say that it is so easy just to complain and groan... You need to keep in mind that everything you do, and who you train, teach or educate, is extremely meaningful in a world where human rights, for many people, only exist on paper and are not something they ever actually experience.

▶ **There is no recipe - but there is something!**

How do you combine your work as a trainer with everyday life? I am sure that many trainers experience fatigue and that feeling of not getting anywhere in their teaching, training and facilitating. Then, human rights can easily just become a cliché.

I am convinced that there is no simple recipe for turning human rights into a living thing – for putting human rights into practice in our everyday lives. Nevertheless, I am also convinced that we have enough training and enough techniques and tools to motivate and influence people and develop their awareness through human-rights education.

The term "multiplying" was invented for a good reason. Multiplying in human-rights education does lead to definite change – change in people's lives and actions, not only in yours.

I am sure you have read the European Convention on Human Rights. Take Article 10, about the right to freedom of expression: "*This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority...*" Read that bit again and try to think of some situation when you felt that that right was neglected or disregarded.

Did you end up with just your anger or resentment or did you take some action? What worries me is that many people regard the European Convention on Human Rights as just printed words. But those words have a purpose that goes beyond your personal knowledge of the Convention and your experience of teaching about it in human-rights education. I believe that the Convention can have a larger impact on our everyday lives if we really want and do take action.

***So, what tools do we have for bringing human-rights education alive?***

If it is not clear from everything I have said here, then let me add one more thought. I have no hesitation in saying that human-rights education is meaningless if we store away everything we have learned in dubious theoretical drawers and don't put it into everyday practice.

*It is only with energy and determination that we can really bring human-rights education to life.*

▶ **Last but not least**

I want you to regard my final words in this article not as a closure but as a challenge. I will be happy just to have given you some food for thought. I believe that you always have to be sure in your own mind that what you are doing is meaningful. Then it will be easier convincing other people and opening doors in their minds. You always have to start from YOU.

So ask yourself "Do I really identify my work with myself, and do I really live human rights?" If not, stop for a while and think... If yes, great! Just keep going, train, reflect and multiply!

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