



Human & Civil Rights seminar

29 November – 11 December, 2009

At the start of our Human and Civil Rights seminar, one of the facilitators, Dr. Stefan Melnik told us that some of the most important and significant lessons we'll learn will be beyond the plenary sessions, lectures and discussions we'll have. Some of these great lessons may be shared over a cup of coffee, while having lunch or in the most unexpected time, he said. Personally, although the exchange of opinions and debates on various topics at the seminar room was very engaging and interesting, I believe that Dr. Stefan's nugget of thought holds true to my own experience.

The seminar always allotted a 10 to 15 minute coffee or tea break after every session. Through those breaks, I learned a lot from the participants' experiences in their countries. I found out from Yolande (from Namibia) that women in her country are in a very disadvantaged position and that "positive discrimination" is acted upon them for the sake of integrating them in the society. This, according to her, is not liberal at all for it still limits them from excelling in the society especially when they reached a "glass ceiling." Although this positive discrimination may be helpful at times like quotas for women in politics, it should only be within a sunset clause or only for a period of time. This perspective is also shared by most of the participants who also view women in their society as very vulnerable.

Apart from the stories shared during breaks, having lunch with some participants from the Asian region especially Qurrat from Pakistan, Kristina from Philippines and Lanny from Indonesia made me realize that more than our similar characteristics and love for food, I observed how closely related our concerns on human rights are. Poverty, corruption, hampered freedom of expression, etc... are some of the issues raised in our discussions

which are related to the existing culture of impunity in our countries. Talking with them and being in their company was indeed one of the most unforgettable experiences I had at the seminar.

My learning experiences were also not confined by the walls of the Theodor-Heuss Academy. For instance our trip to the Buchenwald Concentration Camp (which for me was one of the highlights of this seminar) was very informative and moving. Although we don't have a professional guide to tour us around the camp, the images we saw spoke loudly of how the people brought there were tortured and how agonizing it was to be there. The trip reminded me that there's a price in fighting for your rights and freedom, like those political prisoners executed at the camp. The sacrifice today may not be as excruciating as it was during World War II, but one has to come out of their comfort zone and learn to give up something for the sake of human rights. Saying and doing it at the same time, however, is the test to all.

Aside from that, one of the more relevant discussions in the seminar for me was on the media and the right to information. Although it didn't have a separate session, through the question raised by Golmina, one of the facilitators, on how does one have responsible media coverage, I realized that each one of us is the media as all of us have access to sources of information like the internet. Through our websites, blogs, newsletters, etc... we are contributing to a global perspective on various issues. There, I was convinced that I should be more pro-active in my work as a communications officer and really be critical in what I think or say.

Truly, being part of this seminar is both rewarding and challenging. Rewarding, in the sense that the learning I've experienced and every person I met gave me a wider perspective on human rights and life. The varying opinion on different topics left me (and I'm sure everyone) with more questions than answers after the seminar. These questions, on the other hand, makes the post-seminar experience challenging because I know that having

rights comes with duties. Since I accessed my right to information on human and civil rights, I know I now have the responsibility to share what I learned and to apply it in my decisions and actions. I should learn to be more open-minded and not to make hasty decisions without looking at both sides of the coin first. As what an inspiring quote say, "learn from yesterday, live for today and hope for tomorrow," I know I need to continuously be pro-active and dynamic in the field I'm working at, doing my share for the sake of the promotion and protection of human rights.

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