

A Free Choice and Participation Group

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“My name is George. It means the earth-worker, the farmer. When I was a baby, I was dressed in blue like all the boys and played with toy car. I watched cartoons on TV, was afraid of the dark and prayed before going to sleep. Even when I was too sleepy, I never went to bed without saying my prayers.

“When I grew up I went to school, fell in love with my girl schoolmates, scratched lyrics and graffiti on the desks. I tried my first cigarette, tasted alcohol, played truant from school to go for coffee before returning home. I took part in fights, skipped school and went to parties thrown by my classmates. Even if I was in no mood for going or had to go somewhere else, I never missed a class party.

“I have never done farm work. I am 26 years old, unemployed. I finished school at the age of 18 and then entered university. I graduated and did my military service. When I demobbed, my parents bought me a car as a present, the same make as my father’s car. A nice and reliable car, as he alleges. Lately, I do not drive much, because often I cannot afford the petrol.”

“We thank you for sharing all that with us, George. Now I’d like you to attempt to tell us again all that you have already told us but in a different order. Start with what you remember more vividly without necessarily following chronological order.”

He hesitated for a moment, looked around the hall and saw that everybody was staring at him. He felt like he needed some air.

“Could we open the window?”

“Yes, of course, George. Why don’t you open it?”

He walked to the window and opened it. He turned round to us and began: “I didn’t miss my class parties. I was afraid of the dark and prayed before going to sleep.”

“Why did you open the window, George? Someone might be cold,” she interrupted him.

“But I asked and you told me to open it...”

“Please, call me Helen. You are George and I’m Helen. I only replied for myself, but I can’t know how all the people who are in this class feel. Shouldn’t you have asked the other people before opening it?”

“But nobody said not to... I thought if someone didn’t want me to open the window, he would say so.”

“And you, why did you go to your class parties even if you didn’t want to?”

He was troubled by the question. He started to waste his breath.

“Because... because my friends went... and because...”

“No!” she shouted so loudly that everybody in the class turned and looked at her. George stopped speaking at once and shut the window quickly.

“Why did you shut it?” she asked him very angrily.

“I... I didn’t want to... I don’t know...” George was about to cry.

In a moment, her facial expression changed completely and for the first time a smile appeared on her face. At first shyly, but then it seized her whole face and her expression relaxed.

“George, take your seat, please. Excuse me if I went too far. Welcome George to our group!”

“Welcome, George!” all the people in the class said, following her suggestion. They rose, shook his hand one by one and gave him a hug. Then they returned to their places and after a while George rose and said to all of them: “I’m glad to be with you.”

“Who would like to share with us a free choice and participation experience?”

“May I speak?” asked a young woman of about 30 years with pretty green eyes and dishevelled hair.

“Certainly, Maria. If the others are ok with it, we are listening to you.”

They nodded as Maria cast her eyes round the class and then started speaking.

“Yesterday morning I mowed the lawn in my garden. When I finished, I thought it would be a good idea to mow the lawn in the little park in my neighbourhood as well, because the municipal workers don’t do that often. By the evening I was done.”

Maria’s face glowed with a smile. When she finished, they all applauded her.

“How did you feel, Maria?” asked Helen, when they stopped clapping.

“I felt strong. I felt I had the power to change something I didn’t like, to improve my life and my neighbours’ life.”

“George, what do you think of this?”

Helen’s question startled him. After reflecting for a while he said in measured words.

“I wouldn’t do it. It’s not my job. There are people who have to take care of the parks.”

Maria’s face became gloomy and her light green eyes like young leaves turned into cypress green. When the others saw the girl’s reaction, they began to murmur and looked at George critically.

“I didn’t want to say... I meant that... I didn’t want to...”

“No, stop!” Helen broke in on his excuses. “You have your opinion and this is respected here.”

After these words he realized that the mumbling ended.

“Yes, I’m not sure, I don’t know.”

George seemed confused and not at all secure about what he was saying or what was on his mind.

“I’m addressing myself to all of you,” Helen said in a serious tone. “We are a free choice and participation group. You are here because you believe you don’t have a free choice in your life and you’d like to change that. But free choice also presupposes respect for the choices of others. But always based on freedom and dignity.”

“And the participation?” George asked.

“Could you reply to this question, Kostas?”

Kostas, a middle-aged man with scanty hair, rose from his seat and addressing to George said: “The participation comes after and strengthens the free choice. Each choice presupposes action and self-action. When we take part in an endeavour to achieve what we choose for us and the people around us, we feel efficient and strong.”

George listened to him carefully. He grinned in a strange way for some seconds. His eyes misted as if a dream had flashed through them. When he finally decided to talk, he asked:

“What happens when a choice is difficult? What happens when a choice requires that you should risk something important? Your life, for example?”

His question came along with a gesture like taking a handkerchief out of his pocket. But then they saw him holding a gun.

For some minutes the class was so silent that almost a blinking eye could be heard. You would say that after a while this silence became a habit and no one liked to break it. Lastly, trying to keep her voice steady, Helen asked:

“George, why do you need this gun?”

“I’d like to put a hypothetical question to the group,” he said holding the gun down.

“We are listening,” said Helen being the only one holding herself together.

“Let’s say that I threaten to kill someone among you.” As soon as he completed his sentence he levelled his gun blindly at the group. “We all know that this would be a mistake. This is my question: how easy is it for someone to act so that such a thing could be avoided?”

He stared at them one by one holding the gun and trying to get an answer. As he realized that no one wanted to speak he went on: “Let me be more specific. Let’s say that I threaten to kill Kostas.”

While he was saying that, he levelled the gun at Kostas and pointed at his chest. Kostas’s face became pale and he leaned back. He came over all dizzy. He felt his heart beating so wildly that he thought it would stop. George, pointing at Kostas with the gun, looked at the other eight men and women, one by one, who formed the free choice participation group. When he gazed at them, each one reacted in a different way. Some of them hid their face in their hands; others screamed or didn’t stir an eyelid as if they couldn’t believe what was happening right before them. Maria had gone into fits of laughter resulting in sobbing and crying.

George burst into loud laughter and his eyes found their colour again. Kostas felt relieved, ready to seize the slightest chance that would make him feel better. This relief spread in the class automatically and some people started to smile shyly and reservedly.

“The gun is a fake. As I told you, my question was hypothetical,” George said and pulled the trigger which only clicked feebly. “But I think I have proven that if the action

requires some risk, then it is more difficult to make a choice.”

“It isn’t always easy to get over our instincts” Helen retorted. “But anyway we are aware of the right and we fight for the best. Man is a social being and society works properly if its members uphold its cohesion with their action and participation.”

“May I say something? I’d like to share an action and participation experience with the group.”

Now Kostas was calm; he seemed to have already left behind the fact that some minutes before he had been threatened with a gun, supposedly loaded.

“Surely, Kostas. If you are ready, we are all ears.”

He rose from his seat and approached George. With a jerky movement and before George had time to react, Kostas punched him in the face. He knocked him down and began to kick him in the ribs and the face. The others watched without reacting to the successive blows against George, who was bleeding helplessly; only their faces winced with the yells of pain.

When George was too exhausted even to scream, Kostas returned to his place, quite composed. Before taking his seat, he met Helen’s glance, and as if she had received a secret message, she rose and hit George hard, who was lying doubled up.

“We thank you for sharing your story with us, Kostas,” Helen said while she was wiping away a blood stain from her shoe. “Is there anyone else who would like to share a free choice and participation story with us?”