



GÁBOR GOMBOS

A TRIBUTE TO OUR CRPD GURU



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{So long as the superstition that men should obey unjust laws exists, so long will their slavery exist. And a passive resister alone can remove such a superstition. Mahatma Gandhi

We should never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was "legal" and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was "illegal" - Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Why We Can't Wait, 1963}

These were among Gábor's oft quoted sign offs, referring to the absurdity of following a bad law (viz. Mental health law).

When we heard about the passing of Gábor Gombos, it brought a lot of memories for us in the Bapu Trust and TCI. We had not heard of the CRPD until about 2005-2006. Among many other titles he held, Gábor was a board member at the World Network of Users and Survivors of Psychiatry (WNUSP) at the time. Around that time, Dr. Amita Dhandra represented Bapu Trust for Research on Mind & Discourse (BT) in the WNUSP. I remember that I was interviewed just before this, by Tina Minkowitz, to gauge if I was a 'user and/or survivor'. That's when we engaged more fully with the Western movement of users and survivors of psychiatry. For at least two years, until the CRPD got adopted, we heard a lot of inspiring things about Gábor. Along with Gábor, Tina Minkowitz, Chris Hansen, Amita and some of the legendary users and survivor leaders at the WNUSP at the time, we actually got a CRPD that inspired us and gave us what we wanted.

In 2007-2008, Gábor visited the Bapu Trust in Pune, to support Dr. Amita's work on legal harmonization and to also help ignite a movement of users and survivors of psychiatry in India. He spent six months with BT in Pune. During that period, India was working on legal harmonization of different legislations vis a vis the CRPD so Gábor and Amita travelled throughout the country carrying the messages of the Convention and supporting the initiatives, engaging with stakeholders. They also led a national "Bill of Rights" conference organized by the Bapu Trust, to proclaim the birth of the CRPD era in India. We were honoured that his headquarters was in Pune. We had the full blast of his ever-present wit, sharp intelligence, his extraordinary Reason and his wisdom. He was tireless. Together, Gábor and Amita taught us what the CRPD is and what kind of future it foretold. In BT, after a 3 day retreat, we changed our Human



Resources policies to suit the CRPD. We learned about what is Reasonable Accommodation and how to support our people.

These exchanges set the foundation for the Trust to change all its programs in the direction of the CRPD and brought in an international dimension and momentum to the work of the Bapu Trust. Several years later, building on this initial momentum of 'world wisdom and the CRPD', this international stream became 'TCI' (Transforming Communities for Inclusion), a global OPD of persons with psychosocial disabilities that focusses on the right to live independently and be included in the community.

One of the things that I really respected Gábor for was the last message he left us in BT, before he went back home to Budapest. He said, "You are sitting on a time bomb. On one hand, you have mental health service providers who work with a traditional mental health framework. On the other hand, you also engage with all the peers who come your way because you are a survivor and you are working with peers who need peer support. Both of this is happening in the same organization, in the same spaces and one day it is going to blow in your face because these two paradigms do not mix together. You have to make a choice."

Sooner than later, this is what happened. The peers in BT felt ousted by the service providers leading to intense conflict. And making a choice came with a price. 'Outing' my survivor status meant that stakeholders looked at Bapu Trust very differently. Funders withdrew. I was no longer invited to make academic presentations. The 'mental health activists' shunned me from their policy consultations and change activities. The traditional service providers, frustrated by a suddenly evolving 'survivor' leader in the Bapu Trust, and pushed by the pressure of knowing what the CRPD is, left BT. Realizing that health care funding will always come with coercive practices, we closed all the community programs of the Bapu Trust.

Eventually, in 2009, after the CRPD was adopted and India ratified the Convention, we turned to our communities to educate us how to do CRPD in a more practical way, to suit low-income communities. Dr. Amita remembers these days at BT, the dialogues, the closure and says that, "Only mad persons would do this" (evoking the sensibility, reason and wisdom of Mad Pride). I was humbled by those 6 months with Gábor, a fellow mad person, who gave me the courage to make impossible decisions. Left alone, I started travelling in Asia region, meeting fellow peers who were also similarly searching for direction after the advent of the CRPD.



Gábor's life and work was fuelled by witnessing his mother's and his own experiences with the horrors of the mental healthcare system. He made it his life mission to overhaul and dismantle the oppressive structures of psychiatric care. He strongly advocated against institutions, established forums and organizations and mobilized "patients" to become active social change agents. Gábor is widely known for his work on deinstitutionalization, exposing the violence and horrors of institutions in Europe. As a member of the CRPD Committee, he brought us the General Comment 1 on legal capacity of persons with disabilities. He was the *Grand Master of Legal Capacity*. His passion and determination to use every opportunity to proclaim the CRPD, and his integrity towards its meaning and significance, was extraordinary. He was one of the most inspiring Messengers of the CRPD. He was very forthright in not diluting the content of the CRPD, he gave it to us as it is, however difficult it was to eschew. Many of us carry the torch that he lit for us on the CRPD.

BT, inspired by the comprehensive human rights vision of the CRPD, continued to walk along the less trodden path of creating a 'zero coercion' 'CRPD compliant' support program for persons with psychosocial disabilities in Pune. The international stream, TCI, was supported by Gábor Gombos and various others at the International Disability Alliance who developed a super intensive CRPD training program ('TOTAL-CRPD'). For the next years, we had the chance to participate in continued learnings from Gábor, through this and several other initiatives. His tenure as a CRPD Committee member brought us all closer to the UN, his work, influence and guidance on General Comments 1 and 5. Gábor had a unique way in which he could delve into the CRPD text and shape a conversation, a dialogue or an oration, with the intense experiences he himself had, being a person with a psychosocial disability. He was not afraid to bring the most vulnerable parts of himself to the table, if the context demanded it, and only to better explain the CRPD!!! Everything was grist for the CRPD mill!!!

Among the many formidable tutors that Bapu Trust and TCI have had over the years, Gábor Gombos was tops. Your works and words will continue to guide us for a very, very long time. May you rest in power, my friend.

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