



Word of thanks

On the occasion of the handover of the Comenius Award

On March 30th in the Grote Kerk Naarden

By Mrs Mardjan Seighali

I believe that life is a gift. And ever since I was a little girl, I've wanted to taste life. On my own terms, let's be clear. In the end I succeeded, but it wasn't easy. That is why, as I stand here, I feel both pride and joy – and I have a message.

I am very grateful to be the recipient today of the Comenius Prize, named after the great educator and philosopher Jan Amos Comenius.

I feel as if I could have been the main character in his important and sole literary work, *The Labyrinth of the World and The Paradise of the Heart*. The character's name is Pilgrim, and during his wanderings he encounters only the evil side of humanity, such as malice, pride and envy.

During my years in Iran, I too encountered a great deal of evil. Just like Pilgrim.

Before we decided to flee Iran, my husband and I welcomed our firstborn. We named him Pouya, which means 'pilgrim'. I'm almost inclined to believe that there is no such thing as coincidence in this world.

Comenius had to face the harsh realities of life from an early age. He was orphaned at the age of twelve. Later, as an influential advocate of ecclesiastical and theological freedom, he was forced to flee for his life again and again.

I feel a connection with Comenius. Like him, I had to face the harsh realities of life from an early age. As a seventeen-year-old, I was a fierce activist. I wanted to be free. My political ideals landed me in a notorious prison where they tried to break my will. There was only one thing I could do to survive: toughen myself up.

My mother was very worried about me, but she knew my character. She understood why I continued my activism even *after* my imprisonment.

In the end, I realised that I would not survive the malice of the Iranian regime. We had to flee. And, like Comenius, we found the Netherlands.

We found a country where we could speak our minds, decide for ourselves what we wanted to do, and go wherever we wanted to go. I finally got the country I was fighting for. Only it was another country altogether.

What you see before you is someone who struggles constantly to strike the right balance between toughness and tenderness. I truly am gentle and sensitive by nature, but to survive I had to toughen myself and switch off my emotions. The danger is that toughness alone will cause you to neglect the subtle nuances. You start fighting for your beliefs every bit as fiercely as you fought against other beliefs. That could easily have happened to me.

Fortunately, I found a way to escape the labyrinth of my world. I found the Netherlands. It turned out to be the ideal starting point for my journey to the paradise of my heart.

It isn't that difficult to toughen up, certainly not if you have faced trials and tribulations. If you are forced to leave hearth and home and learn a foreign language in a foreign country, you realise how necessary toughness is. At the very least, you have to be tough on yourself!

But toughness is a bit like having rank weeds in your garden. It proliferates in your mind and your body.

I see this happening to people in the Netherlands as well, in the labyrinth of their world. All they feel is anger and frustration. Some of them wear yellow vests, others rant anonymously on Twitter, and yet others are people who – like me – once had to flee their homes. If these people feel that there is no place for them in society, if they end up disappointed and encounter only indifference, they may seek refuge with populists or so-called brothers. Their aspirations are left unfulfilled, with all the risks that this entails.

But I also see rays of hope. In my position as director of the Foundation for Refugee Students UAF, I regularly meet young people who remind me of who I was almost three decades ago. They have found freedom and almost all of them now have access to a good education. Like me, they have an opportunity to study, thanks to the Netherlands and the UAF. Comenius' dream, that children from all walks of life would have access to an education, has come true in the Netherlands.

It isn't that difficult to toughen yourself up. Later, however, you have to master the art of balancing toughness and tenderness. Every person who has endured hardship, atrocities, and deep sorrow must relearn that art. And that is precisely what Comenius describes in his book. There is only one way to respond to hopelessness and misery: to return to your heart and shut the door behind you when you do.

After fleeing Iran, it took me years to become whole again, to become someone who could appreciate the subtle nuances, someone who had needed to be tough but could now also be tender again. It was a very steep learning curve. It meant that I had to embrace my own turbulent history.

It also meant accepting that my life in a free society differs from the lives of my beloved parents, sisters and their families. They live their lives in Iran and must accept, day after day, that they are subject to manipulation and restrictions. I find that very painful. It tears me apart every time I am reunited with them here in my free Netherlands and then have to say farewell when they return to their unfree country.

It is not only we refugees who must learn to become whole again; the same applies to the Dutch who lived under the yoke of the German or Japanese regime during the Second World War.

Our memorial centres and museums are filled with photographs, objects and documents that bear silent witness to the murderous regimes of the Second World War, when people were stripped of their identity. Those in prisons and concentration camps were turned into nothing more than a number. Some were only able to survive by being tough, on themselves and, later, on others. In the nineteen fifties in particular, the victims of the war were abandoned to their fate. There was no support for them, and no sympathy. I would like to quote from an address given a few years ago by the speaker who preceded me, Jet Bussemaker, during the National Remembrance Day ceremony in Leiden. She recounted how she finally got her father to talk about his experience in a Japanese internment camp. Bussemaker said something very important in her address. She said: 'I feel a personal responsibility to relay this history to subsequent generations. Not only as the child of parents who lived through the war, but also as the mother of my own child—a child that has so far been able to grow up in peace and freedom. Will she and her generation continue to fight for freedom so that they can carry on living in a peaceful and tolerant society?'

That is an extremely important question.

It is no easy feat to endure terror and then give your offspring a 'normal' childhood. For it is not only extreme violence that toughens you. Hunger, cold, insecurity or constant fear can alter anyone. You go into survival mode. Again and again. You live minute by minute.

Today, people are again being deprived of their freedom, forced to live in precarious and distressing circumstances, fearing for their lives. In particular, young people who come from loving homes, as I did, and whose ideals drove them to militancy may be marked for life.

They have forever lost their innocence. Their childlike joy has vanished for good. For the rest of their lives, they will be on the alert. It is truly an art to feel free again then, to follow your heart and to make your own choices. And the supreme achievement is to feel tenderness again.

Tenderness does not mean fuzziness. Neither does it mean that you isolate yourself from society and go live in a cabin in the woods. That's hiding.

As an attribute, tenderness is the true counterpart of toughness. It allows the survivor to recover the human capacity for subtleness.

I owe much of my life to the deep love that I feel for my husband and sons, but also to the love I was able to feel for the Netherlands.

I feel profound love for 'my' Almere, for the water and the polder. I love the sports grounds where my sons have played field hockey, first as little tykes and then as young men. I love our Dutch heritage, wonderful novels, magnificent landmarks and lyrical poems. But I also love the inspiring spirit of my team at the UAF in Utrecht.

The beauty of life is an antidote for the tormented soul.

I would not be worthy of this prize if my soul had been so tormented in Iran that I was unable to rebuild my life or to understand what it means to live in a democracy.

By now I have lived in the Netherlands longer than in Iran. You would be tempted to think that a prize like this makes my life complete, but I have not quite reached the paradise of my heart.

I learn something new every day. It is only at this stage of my life that I am learning what inspiring leadership means. Comenius described the requirements perfectly. In his book, he calls on us to show inspiring leadership in times of chaos. We must recognise how all the separate problems are interrelated so that we can work together on comprehensive and visionary solutions.

That is why my team and I at the UAF focus on corporate social engagement. We make agreements with the managing directors of small and large companies and we inspire them to work with us to develop a strategic agenda for the labour market for refugee professionals. And it works! Our motto is not: let's help refugees find work *as quickly as possible*. Instead, our motto is: let's help refugees find work *that's as suitable as possible*! That calls for a personal approach, close collaboration, engagement on both sides, and investing in long-term relationships.

I have travelled a long road to get to where I am today. I have achieved many things by willing myself to do so, by following my heart, and by working hard. Looking back, I see that tenderness and subtle nuances have nourished me all along.

I was in Amsterdam when I received the news of my mother's death in Iran. It felt so far away. I wept, but I could just as well have been angry at everyone who had separated us. It was impossible for me to attend the funeral myself. A colleague and I went to a pub on the Herengracht and we raised our glasses in a toast to my mother. My colleague had never met her, but she felt my pain. That evening, in our house in Almere, my husband and I shared stories about my mother. That is how I learned to taste the salt of my tears again. Not because I felt pain and bitterness, but because I felt sadness.

The message that I wish to convey in my acceptance speech is that it is vital to be tender as well as tough in our magnificent democratic society. That is how we learn what 'subtleness' means.

There is tenderness to found in integrity, beauty, warmth, honesty and the patience to defer judgment. Those who find it, may well love life. I hope that *all* the fierce, idealistic 17-year-old activists of today will find it, eventually, whether they were born in the Netherlands or came here as refugees.

At the UAF, I see many refugee students become whole again. To be allowed to be yourself, feel free and achieve your ambitions: all these things are enormously energising. That is why I

also believe that being a refugee is not a lifelong identity. Being a refugee is an experience that need not dictate the rest of your life.

Even so, I think we can all get lost in our own labyrinth. For a refugee who has experienced oppression, persecution and torture, getting lost in the labyrinth of the harsh world is almost an inevitability. Fortunately, however, every refugee has a heart! Comenius knew that. I know that. My young students know that. You know that too. To escape from the labyrinth, we must return to the heart.

I dedicate this prize to my parents. Without them, I would not have become who I am today. Above all, I dedicate this prize to my eternal loves: my husband and two sons.

I also owe my great fortune in receiving this prize to Dutch society, which has given me so many opportunities. I have seized each and every one with both hands.

Fortunately, our Dutch society is still based on values that I fought for as a 17-year-old: freedom, solidarity, equality and education for all.

I hope to be able to pass on these democratic values to the young people around me for a long time to come... but I invite all of you here to demonstrate to yourselves, your communities, and the young people around you how important it is to also embrace the tender values by taking an interest in and showing respect for one another.

And no matter how different our history or background may be, it is only by listening to one another, asking questions, deferring judgment and being open that we learn to appreciate the subtle nuances. Only then – as Comenius once wrote – can we return to the heart and shut one door before opening a new one.

In these times of turbulence and change, that is a rewarding prospect to be able to contribute to, for you and for me.