

Responsibility



DUJ DŽSÉNE ONLINE

Imaginary Interview with a Creature Named Responsibility

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I teach pupils in an elementary school. Anyone familiar with this age group knows how restless they can be and how difficult it is to get them to pay attention for as long as possible and as well as possible. Teachers always try to come up with something interesting, new, and even things that take the children by surprise in order to gain their attention, so that they can succeed in their studies and master every new material. And when a teacher covers for a colleague, it is even harder to keep the learners motivated. Today's movies and TV shows contribute to making school-based teaching and learning more difficult. It's hard to compete with a colourful and fast-moving image.

Once I came up with a story. I told the children that I had a dream that night and saw a strange creature in it. It whispered in my ear that he knew in which class I was going to cover for a colleague. But the creature wanted me to tell stories to him rather than the children. To ramp up the excitement even more I told the kids that this strange creature had no eyes but very sharp ears. So, if the children were loud, it would come into the classroom, kidnap me, and then I would not be able to tell stories to them—only to this strange creature. The pupils must have seen plenty of strange creatures in cartoons because they did not ask what my strange dream-creature looked like. Given their age, the children truly believed that if they did not stay quiet

and took care of me, this strange creature would kidnap me. They were practically motionless for the entire class. They tiptoed around, spoke quietly, and took special care even to put the chairs back to their place without a sound.

I was amazed at their strong sense of responsibility; how strongly they believed that my fate was in their hands. It was up to them—and their behaviour—whether I would be protected from the creature I had imagined. This story was enough to make them feel responsible: that they were in charge of my safety. They left the class with sparkling eyes and they were very proud that they had managed to protect me. They felt responsible for me and wanted to be true to the commitment they had made. I did nothing else but make them feel important—both individually and as a group—for a cause which was still like a fairy tale, but which foreshadowed that life, too, consists of a series of responsibilities. If they do not take on that responsibility, they might lose something important. I acted out this story in several classes, and pupils kept asking when I would finally come to their class to do it there, too. I kept wondering why they yearned for a serious sense of responsibility and why they enjoyed so much to be able to rise to this challenge.

I think I got caught up in this game so much that I ended up actually and truly dreaming about it. I was a reporter, and strange creatures were moving and walking around me. I quickly pulled out my microphone and started asking them questions. “Who are you?” I asked. “I am Historical Responsibility”, “I am Individual Responsibility”, “I am Collective Responsibility” they answered. I could not stop shaking my head in disbelief. A thin little voice also spoke up beside me: “I am responsible for integration, so, I am Integrational Responsibility”. The others, who considered themselves to have more serious, greater responsibilities, immediately snapped at Integrational Responsibility in their deep, solemn voices, saying “you—you just keep quiet; you have not managed to become a serious responsibility even over decades, or even centuries. But look at us!” Not even in my dreams

could I step out of my role as a teacher, and as a reporter I immediately sided with tiny, high-pitched Integrational Responsibility. I tried to defend her. Historical Responsibility immediately seized the floor: “I represent the acts that people committed in the past” he said. “They don’t always take responsibility for these.” Collective Responsibility and Individual Responsibility immediately began arguing. They pointed fingers at each other. Each considered themselves important, but they all shied away from the consequences deemed negative. Sidelined, soft-spoken Integrational Responsibility summoned up all her strength and shouted over them: “Stop blaming each other! I can’t get by because individuals shift the blame onto groups, and communities shift it onto individuals!”

That was the point when I woke up and started reflecting on my dream.

It seems I had a guilty conscience about responsibility since I dreamed about it. My entire working life was about bringing Roma children as close as possible to a better life. What is a better life? Often, I myself become uncertain about this. Generally, we consider it normal for everyone to own a house and live comfortably there with their family. I know that many Roma children live with relatives or extended families, and many do not have their own home. Some do not have a bathroom. Many parents are often left without a job or regular income. I also see that some parents neglect their children. Integration is taking a stand against this and fighting it—and we are familiar with some of the causes. We hear and read about social and educational integration, integration at the workplace and in healthcare; yet we feel that we are not really making progress. I see it differently. Because there is indeed progress; there is positive change. When I first met the children on Széles and Keskeny Streets, the main streets of the segregate, there were many who were malnourished and neglected. I would recommend to anyone a visit to the classrooms attended exclusively by Roma children today to see how neat and clean their appearance is. They come to nursery and school wearing very fashionable clothes. Even today, however, there are children for whom this is not available, unfortunately. They miss school regularly;

they skip classes and they appear neglected. Ambitious Roma families want to move out of the segregated neighbourhood which harbours so many negative prospects. But even so, Tiszavasvári is already called a “Gypsy town”, and many non-Roma are practically fleeing from here. We can and must examine how we got to this point.

When looking for historical responsibility, we are quick to blame those who came before us. It is possible to look back at the processes and decisions which led to the creation of the segregated Roma neighbourhoods at the two opposite ends of the town. However, I believe that we cannot judge a past era based on the context of the present. We do not know the power dynamics of the time. Often, those who made the decisions believed they were doing good—for example, by building new houses. Thirty or forty years ago in Tiszavasvári no one could have imagined that there would be Roma children at the central, non-segregated Kabay School. The schools on opposite ends of town, near the segregates, struggled to ensure that every educational institution had Roma children, whose numbers were far smaller than they are now. There were hardly any Roma children going to nursery. But we can also examine collective responsibility. The town’s non-Roma residents were—and still are—reluctant to have Roma people working alongside them in the workplace. Yet, since the labour force has decreased, we now encounter Roma people in more and more places; places where they can prove that they are good workers.

When examining individual responsibility, several questions arise. How do we make a Roma child feel welcome in a classroom full of non-Roma children? How can parents help? How do we feel when a Roma family moves in next door? People say that a house loses value if our neighbour is Roma. At the same time, I also see that when a Roma family moves into a street, the house next door is immediately put up for sale. Often, it is other Roma who buy it. This jeopardizes integration on a local level entirely. Will streets become segregated again? Our research group is looking for possible avenues for coexistence. We want to do this for the town, since both Roma and non-Roma share the same goal: to make our city a pleasant place to live in, free from crime, drugs, and violence. There are people who claim that this is impossible.