

Taylor Bozich

Listening

Here at the International Summer School, students graciously and humbly open their arms, ready to embrace new perspectives, new understandings, and different ways of interpreting this crazy world we live in. They are listeners first but are willing and excited to share their stories when asked. Needless to say, I am inspired by this attitude. How do I contribute to the greater conversation, without making too much background noise? I believe the answer lies in simply listening.

Last week, I had the incredible opportunity to interview one of the advisors at Kirkens Bymisjon, one of the largest humanitarian organizations in the heart of Oslo. The NGO provides care for the homeless; implements programs for those with substance-abuse problems; provides services for the mentally ill; helps those trapped in the industry of sex trafficking; and provides care for those with HIV/AIDS. As part of the Peace Scholars program, each of us is tasked with carrying out some type of research project that reflects our interests and contributes in some way to the conversation of peace building. With my interests falling somewhere between public health, medicine, and marginalized communities, I have chosen to research homelessness in the context of the Norwegian welfare state with the hopes of developing some preliminary policy/initiative recommendations. Thus, I found myself at Kirkens Bymisjon conducting an interview with a man so passionate about this issue that he was often close to tears. Though an interview typically involves several rounds of question and answer, I made a point to simply listen to whatever the man had on his heart in each moment.

The man's first language was Norwegian, though his English was excellent. Just like engaging with people at ISS whose first language is not English, our conversation was carefully crafted, with each of his words wholly considered so that he made sure I would fully understand what he was saying. My interview with this man was one of the most thoughtful and intentional I've had in a long while. We talked about some of his first-hand experiences, the work of the organization, and the current situation throughout Norway. We talked about these invisible communities and the structural violence that contributes to the ongoing problem of homelessness. He told me about the large-scale European migration and the resulting increase in asylum seekers and refugees, and how he believed that Norway's restrictive immigration laws were doing a poor job of addressing this. For most of the conversation, I just sat there and listened as he described the beauty of the people he works with, his disappointment in some of society's ways of dealing with marginalized communities, and his hope in the possibilities of the future.

After the interview, I exited the headquarters and passed a long line of homeless individuals outside waiting to get into the food bank and shelter. It's a very busy street, with Oslo citizens hurrying home from work, hiking trips, and meetings. The thirty or so homeless individuals were invisible. Certainly, people saw them, but no one acknowledged them. It's a trend seen in so many cities across the US and throughout the world. I refuse to believe that the marginalizing and ignoring of these communities is a product of a preoccupied society, but rather a lack of knowledge about what to do and how to help. I hope that through the process of listening with care and intention to the stories, views, and opinions of others, I will be able to contribute just a letter or word to the greater conversation.

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