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Opening Remarks

Abstract

The 9th Disability Science Conference took place on the 23rd of November 2023. The conference was dedicated to the memory of Gábor Gombos and was entitled *The Boundless Roominess of 'We' – Relationships and Alliances*. Below is the opening speech delivered by Steven Allen, representing the Validity Foundation.

Keywords: Gábor Gombos, Validity Foundation, psychosocial disabilities

Nyitó beszéd

Absztrakt

2023. november 23-án került megrendezésre a Gombos Gábor emlékének dedikált 9. Fogyatékoságtudományi Konferencia. A konferencia A „mi” határtalan tágassága: Kapcsolatok és szövetségek címet viselte. Alább olvasható Steven Allen, a Validity Alapítvány képviselőjének konferencián elhangzott nyitóbeszéde.

Kulcsszavak: Gombos Gábor, Validity Alapítvány, pszichoszociális fogyatékoságok

Opening Remarks

9th Disabilities Studies Conference | ELTE Bárczi Gusztáv Faculty of Special Needs Education
23 November 2023

Friends, Colleagues, Distinguished Delegates,

On behalf of the Validity Foundation, I am humbled to join you today, and we are deeply thankful to all of our co-organisers for the spirit of collaboration in organising this important conference.

It is indeed an honour to welcome you all as we take this opportunity to reflect on the life, works and achievements of one of the foremost thinkers and human rights activists of our age, Professor Gábor Gombos.

The boundless opportunities of 'we', I think, is a wonderful framing for this event.

Today is an opportunity for us to reflect on Gábor's unique contributions to the world, and we at the Validity Foundation are proud to have known him as a friend, colleague, and deeply respected guide.

Gábor's contributions are indeed vast and are enduring. In his long career of fighting for the rights of persons with psychosocial disabilities, and indeed for us all, he inspired countless advocates worldwide to fight for equality and justice.

He demanded, rightly, that both the physical and legal cages that restrict persons with disabilities must be dismantled.

His strident commitment to fighting discrimination reflected Gábor's own lifelong struggle to escape the grips of deeply coercive systems of psychiatric power and control. His advocacy was grounded in a deep commitment to dignity and autonomy – two essential components of our shared humanity, two components at the very foundation of international human rights law.

All too often, these rights – to dignity and autonomy, and to equality before the law – continue to be denied to persons with disabilities due to paternalistic guardianship laws and abusive psychiatric practices. These systems are premised on coercion and control, and result from deeply ingrained discrimination that we continue to fight to this day.

As many of you know, this wasn't merely a legal or theoretical battle for Gábor, as he himself was frequently subjected to the harsh realities of compulsion, psychiatric detention and forced drugging on multiple occasions; abusive practices that remain all-too-frequent to this day.

It was his own experiences of psychiatric detention and forced treatment that informed Gábor's advocacy and leadership, and that has served as a key trigger of the growing movement worldwide to end systems of coercion and restraint, as well as to end the imposition of abuses under the guises of 'care', 'treatment' and 'control'.

Indeed, his experiences are eloquently narrated in the volume we are proud to publish today, along with our esteemed colleagues György Könczei, Veronika Kalász, Borbála Bányai, and Validity's chief advocate, Dr. Sándor Gurbai.

Gábor himself narrates one formative experience in an interview that György conducted with him. I will read a short passage:

"The first human rights monitoring of my life took place in a psychiatric in-patient facility. I accompanied an American NGO – then called the Mental Disability Rights Initiative (MDRI) – on their trip. I won't say which psychiatric facility, because we actually saw similar circumstances in several facilities. There were nineteen cage beds in a building that had once been used as a stable, and twenty disabled or psychiatric patients were housed in them. There was one cage that housed two people. My earlier experience of a young man next to me in a cage left a particularly traumatic mark on me, but the sight of *nineteen cage beds in a former stable building, with twenty people in them*, made it impossible for me to sleep without nightmares for weeks to come." (Könczei et al., 2023, p. 14).

He goes on:

"We tried to put strong pressure on the local government maintaining the beds to remove them. We realised that some of the residents in this institution had been living in these beds for years. They did not just go there to sleep, but spent the whole

day in these cage beds, apart from the short time when they were attended to in the evening by the nursing staff.” (Könczei et al., 2023, p. 14).

The Validity Foundation continues to challenge abuses such as these to this very day, alongside numerous human rights advocates who themselves have been inspired by Gábor’s leadership and deep conviction that these harmful practices must finally be consigned to history.

Gábor took his message worldwide, and is today rightly regarded as one of the founders of modern international disability rights law, among others, based on his participation in the drafting of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and his subsequent election as a member of the UN Disability Rights Committee. He became the second representative of Hungary working at the highest level of the UN to promote the rights of people with disabilities worldwide, and the very first person with a psychosocial disability in this position.

A better face for Hungary on the world stage.

Yet, Gábor’s work and thoughts were not restricted to human rights alone. An irrepressible thinker, he was also deeply engaged in the worlds of physics, ethics and modern scientific innovations, leading him to investigate the laws of nature and thermodynamics, and undertake profound introspections on what he termed “the colourful nature of the human mind or psyche”.

His inquiring mind and searching spirit took him from Budapest to Kaposvár, from New York to Geneva, and to India – a place that held a special place in his heart, as it does in my own – bringing him into critical engagement with concepts such as normality, the limits of sanity, neurophysiology, and the wonders of the human senses. His broad expertise shone through in his oratorical prowess, with countless advocates worldwide today testifying to his uniquely engaging – *and genuinely authentic* – ability to advocate for change.

Gábor continued working until his last days, even as he was again threatened with detention and guardianship, purportedly in his “best interests” as his health began to fail – a cruel irony indeed, and particularly so given that he was one of the drafters of General Comment No. 1 to the CRPD on the right to equality before the law of persons with disabilities. Despite this, we are deeply grateful to Gábor that, even in those difficult days, he offered his time and wisdom, reminding us that law reform advocacy is indeed difficult, but that our central goal must be to humanise justice systems. That message grounded us then, and keeps us grounded today in these challenging times and within the increasingly challenging world of human rights advocacy.

Two simple, but incredibly powerful motivating concepts: *dignity* and *justice*.

Today, we are honoured to be joined by some of the people who knew Gábor the best, including György Könczei, Amita Dhanda and Dalma Bíró. Thank you so much for joining us to share your experiences and reflections on Gábor’s life and contributions. And thanks to you too, Sanyi, for all the work you have put into making this event happen. I am deeply proud to have witnessed your own deep commitment to the rights of persons with disabilities, including here in Hungary.

At this point, it only remains for me, on behalf of the Validity Foundation, to provide our sincere thanks to the team at Bárczi and ELTE for their sterling cooperation in organising this event. Not only do we have a large number of participants joining here in Budapest today, but we also welcome all those joining us online worldwide.

Today, we at Validity remain inspired by Gábor's rich heritage, and remain committed to fighting for the rights of persons with disabilities everywhere. We hope that the event today, the volume and website being published today, and our shared commitment to human rights, will continue to inspire us all.

I thank you.

References

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