

Empathy as a prerequisite for inclusion

Connect.Reflect.Act Talk by Stefan Hertmans, Belgian author

Abstract

The global dimension featured in the talk on inclusion by Belgian author, Stefan Hertmans. He spoke of how the disconnect of youths from society starts locally before they begin tapping into global networks of like-minded people. To counter this and to bring radicalised youths back, he believes in human connections at the local and community level. Neighbours need to find new ways to re-engage with each other, creating empathy. Here he believe the arts and culture are important vehicles for doing just that.

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There is a certain image of Brussels, and Molenbeek, that has gone around the world; an image of military presence. But there is another side of Brussels that you may not have seen and that is one of artists painting on the streets; a peaceful, creative atmosphere.

We need to ask ourselves why teenagers have gone astray. Particularly those who have Belgian passports, attended good schools, have been taught democratic values and speak the language. We also need to consider how we can include those individuals, who have chosen to exclude themselves. These are real issues which can only be solved through concrete actions, rather than abstract ideas.

Politics has become glocal – it is global, has to do with geopolitical problems, but is expressed in local areas, neatly chosen by people who want to destabilise our way of living. You know I am talking about ISIS, among others.

One of the push factors towards radicalisation is society's generalisations about Muslims, which creates exclusion. If we are to foster inclusion, we need to emancipate individuals and encourage individual contact and empathy. We all need to start interacting with those that we perceive to be different from us.

We speak about an identity crisis, but what is unclear is whose identity crisis we are in fact referring to. Is it theirs, or ours? I would claim that it's us, who are experiencing an identity crisis, rather than others.

One way of reaching these goals, encouraging inclusion and interaction, is through art. Literature, for example, is a way to practice empathy, by putting ourselves in the skin of a character. His play 'Antigone in Molenbeek' is an example. It got people talking. It was showed another way to engage with people.

We don't have time to waste.