



# Seeds of Dialogue

Guest post by Maria Flora Mangano

This idea of a symbolic gift for students at the end of a course occurred to me in 2017. At that time, I was teaching transcultural dialogue to undergraduates, in addition to a course in communication of scientific research intended for doctoral students.

I prepared “seeds of dialogue,” as I called them, by using the seeds of seasonal fruit I had at home (such as oranges or apples), which I washed, dried, and stored. It was also a sustainable gift, as I packed the seeds using recycled materials: transparent cellophane and strand of raffia for the envelope, which I stapled onto cards made of reused wallpaper.

The intent was to wish for the students to continue to plant seeds of dialogue in the Other, as we had experienced during the course. The proposal was to place them beyond our class, and beyond the academic context, with the aim, far more broadly, to give these seeds a place in our everyday lives.

The students’ reactions were diverse: some were touched and remained silent; others smiled and observed the seeds, by holding them in their hands; a few tried to hide emotion using irony or even asking general questions: “May we plant them?” “What are they, how did you make them?” or “Will they really grow?”

Since then, I have been preparing and donating seeds of dialogue to the students at the end of every course. Over these last several years, I also have given them to alumni with whom I was in touch, to colleagues and relatives, and to friends on special occasions – birthdays, ceremonies, or weddings. I also have used them as place cards on Christmas or New Year’s Day at the table for lunch, as well as on Easter.

The reactions are different: mainly surprised, for receiving something unexpected and not immediately understandable; moved, as it is typical is to feel obliged to return a gift, rather than just accepting what is given. But instead, the seeds have always been offered without any expectation of reciprocity. This symbol often impresses the receiver, who is called to make a free choice in understanding its meaning, and responding to it, by doing the same, or just by keeping and storing it.

Some people planted the seeds: some brought them to an office, or a lab; others planted them at home, in their garden or balcony, some on their farm. Some have sent me pictures of the growing plants, with flowers, or even fruits. Others have written to tell me, even after a long time, that they continue to keep the seeds of dialogue on their desk, and to take inspiration and courage for the hard moments.

Thanks to students and friends drawn from multiple countries, the seeds of dialogue have reached almost all of the continents. I sometimes ask students to put the seeds in places where dialogue seem distant or impossible: countries involved in conflicts or eternal tensions, towns where riots or terrorist attacks have taken place, or natural disasters, accidents, or tragedies.

The seeds of dialogue have been put into the cracks of the Western Wall in Jerusalem, for instance, and at the bottom of the Wall that divides Israel from Palestine in Bethlehem. They have been placed in Egypt, along the road in Cairo where the body of Giulio Regeni was found (a young Italian researcher who was kidnapped and tortured to death in 2015). They have been placed where some Italian politicians and journalists were killed during the years of terrorism against institutions, which occurred in the 1970s and 1980s in Italy; they have been put in Northern Italy (Milan and Brescia).

They have been left under the bridge of Genova (Northern Italy), which collapsed in 2018 injuring dozens of victims, as well as in villages, streets, and churches damaged by earthquakes, or floods. Finally, some have been set on tombstones, to honor the memory of people who contributed to making the world a better place: artists, scholars - among them, Peter Praxmarer, an active member of the Center for Intercultural Dialogue's network, and who suddenly passed away in 2017 - and politicians - including David Sassoli, President of the European Parliament, who prematurely passed away in 2022.

The seeds of dialogue have thus become, for some researchers, friends, and colleagues, symbols of possible bridges among people, countries, cultures, faiths. They are only seeds of fruit, but the meaning of the seeds as symbol is immediate: each of us, wherever and whenever, may begin to create a relationship with the Other by building a bridge, by planting a seed. It may happen in our daily lives, without waiting for an appropriate moment or context, and without expecting a response, or an immediate outcome. The main thing is to begin, even with just a few seeds.

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