

To my friend Sandra Pò

Dishwashers

The story

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Before leaving for Congo, my dearest friend Sandra Pò came for a visit. I had just moved into a beautiful apartment and away from the big city to this little town where you can hear birds singing and bells ringing! So this time instead of a tiny house with a broken flush and packed to the rims with books, paperwork and newspapers, I was able to offer a wonderfully ample, clean and well-lighted space -- the 50 square meter attic upstairs, with ensuite bathroom! My partner and I had just finished a one-month process of unpacking, cleaning and tidying up the newly painted house (whose rent was a bit too expensive, but hey, *carpe diem*, let's live it up!)... The house was furnished with the basics, and we were determined to keep it that way, so as to have tons of space to move about. (As you grow older, wiser, you make things much simpler!) My partner was now away on a holiday, and there we were, Sandra Pò and I, ready to sit back and relax, enjoying the few precious days we were about to spend together. The timing and the space couldn't be better!

Throughout two decades Sandra Pò and I have been meeting every now and then all over the world: the first time was at a Nonviolent Direct Action training in the north of Spain. Then we bumped into each other (so to say!) in Guatemala, where we were volunteers in an independent international pacifist NGO operating in countries at war. After that, she sometimes visited Spain, because of (paid) work, and she would take advantage of that to do some (unpaid) work for our grassroots network, which included meeting up! I also visited Belgium a couple of times because I had a relationship then with another Belgian activist, and because a bunch of total resisters from the CO movement and I decided to drive in an old van to an international pacifist meeting in Namur.

Just imagine it all - Sandra Pò and I could be eating beans and *tortillas* (small and thin pancakes) on a dirt floor house where people had been threatened by death squads, or having a beer in the ad hoc *bar* of a squad in multicultural Lavapiés (a neighbourhood in Madrid), or tasting the most delicious wine in her cozy little home in Brussels. We had the physical strength to be committed to on-the-front activism (Good old times! Now my strength is just mental!!!) - which entails not having private things or spaces and undergoing and "solving" all kinds of privations (you're cold, you're thirsty, you're afraid, you're exhausted or overwhelmed, you're hungry, you're lost) - but we also tried to keep our capacity of appreciating the good things in life, doing so without feeling guilty.

When I had to get back to Europe at the end of the eighties, in the midst of war I told a nonviolent activist (who, in the past, had been a member of one of the Latin American guerrillas which sought social justice and the end to all the horrors people were being subjected to) that I might feel guilty in Europe each time I were enjoying the good things in life. He replied, "The question is not that people who have the chance to be happy renounce that opportunity. The question is that all of us have that opportunity." I certainly agreed. His words allowed me to avoid any confusion thereafter! I had always sensed that sacrifice was not a *must* in striving for a better world. Since then, I've always tried to be loyal to that idea, and avoid the kind of activists who emotionally blackmail and guilt-trip every single living being! (You see, there's a better world also within the realm of activism!)

My friend Sandra Pò is the kind of activist that understands that idea, too. We're two of a pair! We can spend hours and hours together, just being there, or talking non-stop, or talking and then being in silence. We can have, or have not... (Although time wears you out, and

then there's certain things you cannot go without, like an eight-hour sleep or a proper bed to lie in!)

And now that Sandra Pò is literally risking her life and well-being in Congo, I look at the dishwasher and smile, or giggle, or laugh. When we moved here, the kitchen had a dishwasher, and I thought, "Oh my!, dishwashers stink. They are also useless. What am I going to do?" "We won't be using it," I had told the landlady. "Well, just keep it," she replied. And then Sandra Pò came for a visit and taught me how to use the dishwasher, and also this little story:

When an activist who was having lunch at her house saw her placing the dirty dishes in her dishwasher, he exclaimed "You *have* a dishwasher!!," accusingly. And then, "You live on your own and you *have* a dishwasher!!" (Did that also mean, "You're a *woman* and you *have* a dishwasher!!"? Did he know that having guests for lunch involves working out the menu, doing the shopping, cooking the meal, setting the table, *clearing the table*, doing the washing up and putting the dishes away...?) Patiently, Sandra Pò replied, "I've got better things to do."

Sandra Pò was not going to discuss the matter with him. You can often sense when people are incapable of listening or understanding that the world is not only what they think it is - that there may be different reasons to do or not do things. (To be, or not to be!) She didn't tell him that she had studied the issue carefully and realized she saved more water and washing-up liquid using that gadget. She just told him something which was simply true - she had other priorities. Nowadays in some countries of the world women *may* have other priorities other than doing the housework. *Human beings* can have all sorts of priorities in life, *when free to choose*, and most of those deserve some respect, even if it's *women* having them! Sandra Pò needed her time for her priorities, and that's all there was to it.

Ah, throughout the years, I keep wondering... Why is it that people are most demanding with the people who give the most?

Now that Sandra Pò is away, in our dearest beloved superexploited forgotten-by-all violence-ridden Africa, I look at the dishwasher and regret not having taken a picture of how skillfully she maximized the space when she loaded it the week she taught me how to use it. She knew it all about the best soaps to use (*c'est bon marché ça*), she even knew in what direction to place things to get this or that kind of wash! I deeply regret not having taken a picture of Sandra Pò pointing at the full racks and smiling. Or one of Sandra Pò and I in front of the dishwasher drinking to... dishwashers? Or one of the dishwasher all alone, and us in a different room having a drink of rum or wine and chatting away in the dead of the night. I miss Sandra Pò each time I use the dishwasher. I also smile to myself, even laugh, each time I use the dishwasher *and* remember Sandra Pò replying to the outraged young man.

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