

***Countries in mourning. Waiting for the party.***

***Giovanni Teneggi, January 2021***

The village, that day, was as festive as it had been in a long time. No one had made the day's programme known, but everyone, even the children, had left home as they used to leave for Sunday. Mass, chatting or chasing in the churchyard, lunch with everyone in the family. Then to the bar: the older ones challenging each other at broomstick and table football; the younger ones waiting to do so, clutching at the scoreboard and the coin thrower after the endless rematches of the former. People had that urge there again. The old men, leaning on the tables, enjoyed its memory as if in exile or at the time of transhumance. The grandchildren - many of them had never seen it on a Sunday in the village - had smelled it for days and breathed the anticipation: in the conversations of the adults, in their glances, in what they sought with their hands and eyes, anticipating the time. It was the sensuality of an adult and unpredictable falling in love. That birthmark there no longer had a name, and the more honest ones admitted that they had forgotten even people's names. That birthmark there had been forgotten on purpose, all at once, without anyone having ordered it but so that no one would think of remedying it. The exact day no one remembered, but they told themselves never to do it again.

***Orphans without heirs.***

Those who suffered most were the 50-year-olds. Legitimate heirs to the village and its life, they had been its first unwitting orphans: sent to study, to remove stones from roofs and to disown the land and the work of their hands. Mocked for their slurred dialect and the improbable nicknames they gave to places, they pretended to their children that they knew its secrets and participated in its history. That's what makes you an inhabitant of a place and makes it a place: they were the lack of it but still needed each other, still felt capable of it. They did it secretly, one by one, unbeknownst to *foreign wives and husbands*, until the children could be dragged along by the hand, as if curiosity were their own.

***Dreams, desires and fears. Good/desires.***

Someone had betrayed by giving in to the desire to resume history: transfuges, far from the country, with cafeteria and gym chatter between casual acquaintances. One had known and sought each other forever and all it took was a word (a nickname, a fact, a day) to be late to talk about it. It could have been a forest and a house or, for those who had nothing else to say about themselves, the memory of playgrounds and barns. At each meeting everyone would add a good reason to talk about it again, and on Sundays, on the way home, that game would hold the bar chair. Its closure had been announced for some time and the idea of making its resistance a game, a challenge and a joint venture was not crazy. The newspapers were talking about it because of what had already been done elsewhere, and all that talk of community - a little bit everywhere and even out of hand - encouraged them. It did not take long for the betrayal of silence to become known in the village. People soon divided between those who distrusted it, those who feared it, and those who would have liked to take part in it and would have come forward as soon as *the table circle opened*. Soon, before the end of last summer, a few meetings were even convened and the project came up, complete with minutes, drawings and lines for signatures of those who wanted to join and declare themselves. No one had had the audacity to post it, but the paper was circulating and would not stop, crumpled by the many who had turned it over and over to read it and see it as they wished. The astonishment that convinced the promoters to *take themselves seriously*, even to the point of setting up *a cooperative with the name of the village*, was because of what people had scribbled down and added: everything they were interested in doing in the village and kept hidden until then. Dreams, desires, fears never spoken. It was very strange that one could be judged for saying what was good about the village, its people and what could be done there, and yet everyone, up to that point, had made a belief and a pact. Having overcome the first embarrassments in finding the words and having the courage, there was nothing to do but to violate it, one by one, little to fear. A new pleasure: of a few old men - not all of them - who once again began to tell their stories; of children and grandchildren - not all of them - who pointed out vacant and closed houses for the hospitality of those who wished to inhabit them; of young sons of sons and friends who from afar would offer expertise and promote activities; of those who thought themselves lonely and foolish - until that paper - in dreaming of cultivating their land again or of reopening woods and paths left by fathers and mothers. *A blessing.*

*Inhabitant institutions.*

News of that movement could not go unnoticed by those who had never lost the word and - by vocation, necessity or office - distributed it with precise rhythms and rituals. A liturgy that marked the times of the country in weeks, months or seasons so that the civic, municipal or parish registers could be compiled to last in the counting of the living and the dead, at least on paper. Each institution had its own head, its own time, its own facts, and its own small group of devout observants to celebrate the tradition. The proloco, which bought wine and chestnuts to make it still the annual feast; the public assistance, with the safety or amusement it gave everyone to see and hear the ambulance nearby; the parish to dispense the sacraments. Confessions having fallen into disuse and baptisms and weddings having long since disappeared, the largest and most eagerly awaited attendance was at funerals: the only and *last truly communal occasion*. In the evenings at the morgue of the hospital in the provincial capital, the inhabitants still recognised each other from the same place and, in addition to the final farewell for those who had left and that of comfort to those who remained, there was that for those who only met on those occasions.

What was happening was completely new and disrupted *the institutional set-up of the village*. Such a wide-ranging and passionate conversation among the inhabitants without a death, a betrayal, a birth, the mayor to be elected and that it was not the second Sunday in November for the sour wine of *Ciabatta had never been seen*. One did not know in which register to write its fate.

Those who animated and participated in it were *publicly saying they were inhabitants*, interested in doing so, without being asked. The president - of the proloco and the public assistance together - wrote two identical letters - with the letterhead of one and the other - reminding everyone of the activities *unfailingly carried out in favour of the community*. The priest continued to limit himself to sermons and consecrations, confiding to his own, confidentially, that he *saw no interference* from that initiative. The mayor made some private phone calls to those who could tell him in detail *who and why attended* those meetings. There is no time here to dwell on how those days prepared others and there was much to discuss and wait for before those institutions really took an interest in what was happening among the people. It is enough here to believe that it happened and that it can happen again.

Extraordinary openings. At Mass, the priest explained the *multiplication of the loaves and fishes* by talking about the community oven, which, thanks to that *providential* movement, could be rekindled. Privately he wasted no opportunity then to suggest to wealthy families of land and stables to make them available to young people who had written that they wanted them open and productive. The old woman who wore the perpetual's robes and the bell-ringer who followed her left in confusion when, outside the church, she went so far as to speak of the *offertory* in mentioning the gift of the vicarage to the cooperative to host new tourists there, provided they were respectful.

The proloco and public assistance proposed to change the name and purpose of their annual festivities.

The mayor voluntarily came to one of the meetings to listen and take notes. He took the floor at the city council meeting - and spent it well - to propose that the old school be made available to the cooperative so that, *thanks to those ideas, it could become useful again for everyone*.

Among the younger ones there were those who had never seen the mayor and had also never been educated about his function before. Among the older ones, on the other hand, some had returned to the Mass attracted by those strange homilies. To feel expected and important for something and to be told about it *as if one were inside a parable* - so the bishop had written in a letter to the inhabitants concerning those events, recalling nothing less than encyclicals and popes - filled many - but not all - with emotion and a certain responsibility.

The help of many and the good advice of those who had seen so many of those stories before making them or studying them in books was helpful in preparing themselves properly for that new celebration.

#### *A new spirit. Transformation.*

The liturgy, the ribbon cuttings, the institutional greetings, the signalling of the social and cultural associations present with their commitment, the silences and the applause, on the day of the celebration, appeared in the right order. From the glances, gestures and words, everyone understood that *these were not facts of circumstance but signs of a journey made together for real*. Unexpectedly at that point, with an emotion of regard, also came the thanks to the many in the community who had allowed themselves to be involved in what they *could do or produce and sell*. When they said *community*, along with everything else and in

front of those images, the square fell silent as never before. It was not out of respect, as at conventions, or out of fear, as in church, not even out of fairness, as in the council chamber. It was to savour the taste and pleasure of what felt right and beautiful at that moment together. A common sense of value and reason that had been forgotten and thought lost.

Even the reference to *those from outside who, from the city or other bell towers*, had lent a hand and wanted to collaborate did not divide the small square full of people, as it probably would have done in other circumstances. The dialects were broad and understandable to all, the Italian simple, some of the old men held conversations in gestures with passing foreign tourists. Everyone had become attentive and intrigued. Even the most shy had come out of their homes, not at all intimidated and full of confidence.

Even *the most difficult words came*. Just enough time to get used to the *community* - said in those ways - that another, longer and more complicated one, silenced the square again, between church and town hall. *Transformation. Nothing could be like before.*

*"Every word spoken in person also had to become social". "It was urgent to become a story". "No house and no thing could be out of it, ugly or closed". "Everything had to serve its former use together with another to be invented". "Nothing had to be just for those who worked there or owned it". "It was necessary to go beyond the boundaries of the country,"* one of those speaking had even said, *"in order to be,"* he had continued, *"of the big world and of everyone.*

The reasoning thereafter had challenged the patience of the older ones and even some of the younger ones struggled to follow along. *Sustainability, awareness, social innovation, digital, global:* terms that pushed the discourse far beyond what could be believed and saying those things, though necessary, made some go back to their homes or get lost in chatter among themselves. Those who remained to listen, however, were immediately part of it and *agreed to work for everyone with the aim of attracting to the village those who were needed for those achievements.* From the nearest villages, returning from the city or arriving from more distant worlds, people had to arrive who wanted to live a day, a month or a whole life in the same way as them. To be its inhabitants.

*A possible task. Citizenships.*

On the television in the bar - in front of a sleeping old man - all they did was talk about world goals for the good and long life of a man-sick Earth. That evening, in the village, the televisions turned off and the telephones unreachable, many, listening to the cooperative's project, realised that it is not possible to heal the Earth without someone adopting it again, without a good and long life of its people, without inhabited and worked landscapes, without places with a name to pass on to their own or other people's children. *The co-operative project had revealed this as a possible task in order to effectively call oneself a citizen.* That was the right pact.

*The bar was full of the country and each full of the others. A joint venture.*

Despite the fact that autumn was not so late, the evening came early and the lighting of the street lamps gave *all the senses* a taste of what it was like to think of *the village as open, illuminated, useful to people and beautiful to look at.* From the houses came out savoury pies, cakes and every other good thing ready or prepared on the spot. They filled the village square, its bar and the streets around it. The priest's accordion and the guitars of some young people, who no one knew where they came from, provided the *music.*

More pages would be needed to tell about the rest, not all of them so happy and many tiring and sad. Suffice it to say, however - lest the reader here be disappointed in the appreciation of these in a journal of society, economics and politics - that the project passed the test of that blessed Sunday and became an enterprise, de facto in fact. They called it a community and soon realised that being a community could not be a *village fad or nostalgia.* It was the key to *making each day possible in its meaning, its usefulness and the work* it had to give people to earn the next. So it was that this enterprise also became a school, a training ground and a joy of what *the whole of that mountain needed to build:* culture as a narrative of the living, society as a bond and skill, the land as a site of beauty and utility, the world as its own land and a common destiny.