



# CIVIL COURAGE PRIZE

## Acceptance Speech

Nicola Gratteri

2014

Every time I look at myself in the mirror, I realize that more and more, I resemble my parents. Roots are everything. My father and my mother made me understand the importance of sacrifice, of honesty, of loving your neighbor and from my father I learned rectitude, also temperance of feeling. I remember that my parents were measured, even when an event happened that justified being joyful. They said “Pari Brutti”, meaning It is ugly to express excessive joy; as we do wrong to those who are worse off than us and who have no reason to rejoice.

In the 1950s, my father Francesco bought a small truck in which he carried grain and gravel around in the villages of Locride, in Calabria, for farmers and merchants. Later, he took over a general store from his uncle and began to sell pasta, as well as wine that he made himself with grapes bought in Ciro. He spent the last 15 years of his life in a wheelchair as a result of a stroke, which also left him unable to speak, but he spoke eloquently with his eyes.

From my infancy, I was very lively and never sat still. But a glance from my father sufficed to bring me to a stop, and I would often be punished. To this day I remember all the reasons for which my father would give me a cuff. But what I remember best is his generosity. He had a piece of land where he grew everything. Every year he harvested two pigs, one for the family and another for local poor people. There would be a festival and a great sense of community.

In Gerace almost everybody would buy with the ‘Libretta’, on credit, They would pay once a year, after they sold their livestock at the market of the Madonna del Carmine. And my father would say “Poor them, they also have to eat” so as to justify their continuous delays in payment.

My mother, like my father, was very restrained in showing her feelings. But she knew how to be sweet and affectionate while, also, being very strong. She sized people up with a glance, her judgments were final and she never made a mistake about people. Like my father, she had studied very little, finishing only third grade. When she was young, instead of school, girls would go to a seamstress to learn how to sew.

I too went through a similar routine and, for that, I’m very grateful to my parents. As a boy, every summer I learned a trade. I was a cobbler with Master Felice, then a mechanic, a baker,

and a laborer. I learned how to be with people, and how to understand the importance of work and sacrifice.

I remember one classmate, a quiet boy, whose father was ambushed and killed by the Mafia. He didn't like being asked about it, and many years later he ended up like his father, having entered the same clan. In my class, there was also the daughter of a famous 'Ndrangheta boss. Yet Another one of my playmates, whom I later confronted in court, who like me, was the son of farmers, lived near my aunt Savina, in the Gabella quarter of Locri, and we would play hide and seek. As he grew up, he began to hang out with the Cataldo clan and, in the course of a search, the police found an arsenal in his house. As prosecutor, I sought and obtained his conviction for illegal association with mafia activities, and possession of military arms and ammunition. In court, we looked each other in the eye and said many things without speaking. Then our paths parted again.

Besides being lively, I didn't study much. I had an excellent memory and could remember everything my teachers said in class. Then when I got home, I got on my bike and peddled for hours. Every now and again I played soccer, but I wasn't very good. Later I bought a motorbike and started to enjoy the pleasure of speed, zooming around like crazy.

I would work on many different things to keep myself busy and, in 1974, having helped my parents in the grape harvest, I took a ride around Locri on a friend's motorbike, a Caballero. It was September, still hot, and I did a thoughtless U-turn and was bowled over by a passing Citroën. The impact was horrible and I was in a coma for 12 days, then unable to walk for 3 months. My father had my motorbike tied to the rafters of our garage and, after that, I was on foot.

The next year something happened that changed my life. My uncle Antonino, my mother's brother, became seriously ill. He was diagnosed with a pancreatic tumor and died in a short time. He was a highly regarded civil lawyer who knew the classics and could recite Shakespeare's tragedies by heart.

In his last months, we slept in my grandmother Sina's house and in the evenings I sat by his bed and was enchanted by the stories he shared. I realized that I had to change my life, and began to study. Having received my high school degree, I enrolled in the University of Catania law school. I went there to get away from Messina, where many of my friends and acquaintances from Locri had signed up. I began to study furiously, shaved only once a week and almost never went out at night and stayed home reading everything. But I was obsessed with time and the need to get my work done. I ate yogurt, tomatoes and sandwiches, and scarcely slept at all, and usually fell asleep with the light on. One night during a storm, a short circuit set fire to my bedding, but luck was with me that time.

I also slept very little because I felt guilty about my family and didn't want to spend too much of their money. My brother and sister had been to university before me, and there were two more children who were still studying. Also, my father was not well. He was slowly expiring in his

wheelchair, but with his eyes bright and proud as ever. I was able to graduate in just four years. At the ceremony, there was only my roommate, Antonio Angelico, who is today a lawyer in the province of Siracusa. I was very happy. But when I was back home, I pretended it was nothing. Like my father, I learned how to keep my emotions under control.

I always wanted to do something for the region I came from, and I have always hated bullies. After I earned my degree, the idea came to me to take the examination to become a magistrate but I kept the notion to myself. I went to my uncle's old law firm, and began to prepare myself for the examination. For two years, uninterruptedly, I was glued to a chair. Nobody knew what I was doing but, my mother's words wandered through my mind - obsessed as she was with the idea of not making a 'brutta figura', of not making a spectacle of myself. How many times I have heard the same words. I passed the written test 17th out of 12,000 candidates. When I passed the oral exam, my father and I communicated with looks. My mother, however, patted me on the back and said, "Never forget who you are and where you came from."

I owe a lot to my parents and I will never stop thanking them.

My new involvement in the world of magistrates was thrilling and my colleagues helped me understand my profession. Soon I needed to make an important decision: Where to practice. There were other posts available but I chose to stay on in my native Calabria, which was not a hard choice. There is no better place to work than where you were born and grew up. I decided to remain, knowing it would be rife with difficulties, but with the conviction that I could help solve the problems of that region. I remained close to my roots in order to build a future, both my own and for my family.

I never regretted this choice, although there have been difficult times. I remember my first investigation. I had the Director of Forestry arrested, as a result of which the regional council had to resign. With that my problems began and I started receiving threats by telephone and by mail. Someone fired shots at my fiancée's house, followed by a phone call telling her: "You are marrying a dead man." After which I was assigned a bodyguard. In an informal meeting of the National Magistrates Association, an older colleague tried to explain the threats by suggesting that it was a rival lover who had fired shots at my fiancée's house. I began to realize being a magistrate was not going to be easy.

1993 brought more threats. I learned that another attack against me was being plotted and the atmosphere around me was very oppressive. I had made some investigations into drug trafficking, in which the Locride family was involved and the sudden plunge into the world of the 'Ndrangheta was a furious, intense and formative experience. A number of lawyers criticized me for supporting the local police too intently and I had to pay attention to every little signal. My family was concerned, even though they understood that I had no alternative. We did not propose to live as cowards.

In 2005, two members of the 'Ndrangheta were overheard in the prison of Melfi discussing how my bodyguards and I should be blown up. "Why so much blood?" asked one of them. "Because

Gratteri has ruined us.” A few days later near Gioia Tauro, the police found a whole arsenal: handguns, rocket launchers, Kalashnikovs, a kilo of plastic explosive, and some hand grenades. I tried to keep calm and to continue my work. Fortunately, I haven’t lost my nerve, and now I am used to it all. You learn to live with death. When my father died, I couldn’t even bear to go to the funeral. That was then, but now it is different and I have to live with constant death threats.

I have always acted very carefully, avoiding false friends and ties with either authoritarian or arrogant people. I have never humiliated anybody by abusing my power. However, I have always asked that my role be recognized. There has always been a table placed between me and the gangsters.

A magistrate’s work consists of keeping an eye open to detect a network of signals. For a Calabrian like me, that’s the way things are. In dealing with the ’Ndrangheta there’s a message in everything. Everything has a meaning. Sometimes silence is the equivalent of a thousand words. Nothing is without significance.

All this implies a life of sacrifice. For reasons of security my private life is heavily affected by my work. For the last 20 years, I have never been to the movies or been able to watch a soccer game at the stadium or even to take a leisurely walk. But two things I have never given up: first, cultivating my piece of land, and second, going to schools to explain to children why it is a very bad idea to become a follower of the ’Ndrangheta, I inherited a passion for agriculture from my father at Gerace where I live with my wife and two children. We have always had a piece of land, which we cultivate.

I do have my moments of freedom. Speaking to young people is deeply gratifying, because it is like cultivating the earth: cultivating youth in the hope that it will bear fruit. A dear friend of mine, Antonio Nicaso, asked me what was my first thought when I woke up. I answered, “hoping to see myself in the mirror without self-reproach.” And the last? “Going to sleep with my conscience clear.”

Hans Kelsen, a great legal scholar, said that a single person can never achieve happiness by himself because the only possible happiness is being happy together. Social happiness is called justice, which does not come to us as a gift, but is something you have to build day by day. This yearning for justice is true of all human life. Without this idea of justice, there can be no liberty, no happiness, no progress.

I thank you for the recognition represented by the Civil Courage Prize. It inspires me to do better. I am happy that this prize comes to me in America, a country I love, which has brought a happier future to so many of my honest hard-working compatriots. I thank you and I hope to be worthy of this prize, which I dedicate to the memory of my parents.