

Interview with Delia Steinberg Guzmán, Honorary President of New Acropolis



Introduction

In 1991, Delia Steinberg took over the presidency of New Acropolis following the death of its founder, Jorge Angel Livraga Rizzi, under whose guidance she had worked very closely over a period of more than 20 years.

She is currently Honorary President of the International Organisation New Acropolis.

Under Delia's leadership, New Acropolis has expanded across the five continents, bringing Philosophy in the Classical Tradition closer to a wide range of people. This development has been implemented through its philosophical, cultural and volunteering programmes, which have provided new approaches while at the same time going deeper into the identity of New Acropolis, as defined in its founding principles. Thousands of Acropolitan members, friends and supporters from all around the world are living proof that the philosophical answers New Acropolis offers in response to the complexities of our times are valid and necessary, since they are based on the values of timeless wisdom, which has enlightened humanity at its most difficult moments.

If we had to highlight a single aspect of her tireless efforts at the head of New Acropolis, it would be her educational and teaching work, through which she has developed the curriculum of the School of Philosophy and drawn up programmes of applied philosophy, based on the most profound teachings for life and the inner development of human beings.

She is the author of many works on how to live philosophically, which have been translated into several languages, including French, English, German, Russian, Czech, Portuguese, Greek, and many others.

Among more than 30 titles we can highlight the following: "The Games of Maya", "Philosophy for Living" and "The Everyday Hero".

Alongside these activities, and as a former concert pianist and piano teacher, she chairs the international piano competition which bears her name and offers opportunities for advancement to many young pianists, providing them with her expertise and advice, because, in her view, music is the best companion for the soul.

We have asked Delia to tell us about her experiences of these years at the head of the International Organisation New Acropolis.

1. What was it like to live alongside Jorge Ángel Livraga?

During the 25 years I spent working closely with Jorge Livraga, I shared some exceptional moments that were marked by their human value. Both in the philosophy classes I received from him and in informal conversations together with other companions, we shared knowledge about art, science, history and many other subjects... This enriched us in a clear, simple and efficient way. Every day was special and, as for me in particular, I received theoretical and practical lessons which became references for the whole of my life.

It became clear to us that he had received a training from his own teachers, because no one can create a school of philosophy of this stature without having received a rich education in these human values. We know that he underwent several years of training, and that many lessons also came and went by post. He told us that, on one occasion, the assignments he had written were returned to him in an envelope. They had been carefully cut to pieces with scissors, without any further explanations, so that he had to look for the mistake and correct it, until he had found the right solution. Only then did more appropriate explanations arrive.

Perhaps it was as a result of this style of teaching that he was enormously patient and was always willing to answer our questions. He was the first person I had heard say on several occasions, "I don't know", and that inspired me with great trust. Only the vain think they know everything.

The way he related to people was kind and affectionate, although he also knew how to maintain the necessary boundaries so as not to distort human relations, but, on the contrary, to make them more dignified and serene.

I never heard him say a disagreeable word, and he had the ability to show us our mistakes as if we had discovered them for ourselves.

We used to call him JAL affectionately, using the initials of his name. It was a form of address that was both friendly and respectful at the same time.

It is difficult to meet a person of such great moral, philosophical and spiritual stature, who used such a natural language and examples that anyone could understand them.

Luckily, his writings and the images of so many delightful shared moments keep him alive in my memory and in the memory of many others.

2. What is your assessment of your almost 30 years at the head of New Acropolis?

If I had to sum up this time as objectively as possible, I would say that it is as if I had lived several lives, with an unending but intense series of experiences.

When I began my term as international president, New Acropolis was relatively small, with a few centres in different countries, but not so many as to make the task too difficult. We did things in a rather home-made way. Although we were clear about our philosophical aims and our programme of studies, our structures tended to be very simple, adapted to the needs and possibilities of the moment.

As people often say: those were different times, and there were other prevailing ideas and questions, and different ways of dealing with them.

But the changes quickly became more noticeable. There were changes in societies, in ways of living, in how people imagined the future. The idea of well-being became more important than depth of consciousness. Education took different routes and individual aspirations also changed. We had to become part of this new era.

I have known many people, many countries, many forms of culture, many languages, different ways of expressing feelings, of understanding and explaining ideas. I encountered an exceptionally colourful mosaic but with a similar background; in the innermost part of every human being there is a common factor: the search for the meaning and purpose of life, which includes intelligence, love and the will to live it, the desire for wisdom and to be increasingly better.

My general assessment is good. We did what we could, with a few mistakes, which is natural, but our confidence in the innate possibilities of the human being allowed us to develop many new things that had not been considered until then. And we did it with confidence and joy.

3. What has been the most complicated aspect?

The acceleration of time. The 20th century – perhaps the “shortest” of all centuries, as I heard a prominent person once say – had us believe that everything would develop progressively, without any sudden changes. But that is not how it turned out.

Suddenly, we found that the world was moving at a speed and in directions that were unthinkable before, in all areas, often for the better, sometimes for the worse, and all this had to be dealt with at the same time, although it was never possible to act quickly enough.

The diversification of concepts resulted in many of them going “out of fashion” in a matter of months, and it was not always easy to combine such variability with the stability that is proper to philosophy. Perhaps the most complicated thing was to find models of action and expression that would combine the volatility of interests with the permanence of a timeless philosophy, essentially aimed at human beings as a whole.

4. You were there from the beginning. Has New Acropolis changed a lot? In what ways?

I was there almost from the beginning, long enough to appreciate changes that were not always visible at the time, but can only be seen at a distance.

Yes, New Acropolis has changed, especially in its forms, as all living beings do. A five-year-old child is not the same as that child when he or she becomes a thirty-year-old adult. The changes in form are the result of the growth of New Acropolis and its adaptation to the needs of the times, just as clothes, language, ways of relating, the manner in which problems are solved by using different tools, also change. And changes will continue to occur.

The important thing is to keep the permanent essence. The 30-year-old adult knows that he or she is the same being as the five-year-old, in spite of the changes. The types of clothing may be different, but the body that wears the clothes is the same, apart from the fact that it can grow taller, and become fatter or thinner. Maturity based on recognition, on self-recognition, is fundamental to the existence of identity.

The philosophical ideas that have given rise to New Acropolis, based on centuries-old ideas that have been held by many great thinkers, are the same. Opinions and ways of living are constantly changing.

As we read in “The Little Prince” by Saint-Exupéry, “what is essential is invisible to the eye”. However, that is what is most important, and it is what supports what is visible to the eye.

5. It is clear that we are living in times of great confusion.

It is very difficult at the moment to find stable values that are grounded in the meaning and purpose of life, which is equivalent to saying that, to a large extent, we lack any future. Uncertainty casts its shadow over today and tomorrow, and this situation particularly affects the younger generations, who lack support and hope.

It is widely known that psychological disorders are on the increase, along with tendencies to escapism from reality and even suicides. The outlook does not look rosy, unless substantial changes occur, which will not give immediate results. But it is necessary to start as soon as possible.

We must turn to the timeless remedies that have produced their fruits in the darkest periods of history. Even if we refer to the European Middle Ages, which are closest to us in time and most familiar to us, Art in all its facets brought together some remarkable souls and established bonds of Love that gave rise to the Renaissance.

6. All human beings want to know Love, whether they have it already or are searching for it.

Philosophy is based on love, precisely because that is the root of the word ‘philosophy’: it is Love of Wisdom, and one who searches for wisdom learns to love everything and everyone.

We could affirm that most people are searching for it and a few privileged people have it. And even those who have it keep searching for it in order to perfect it.

Today it is common to restrict love to sex, forgetting many other planes of expression of the human being, such as sensibility, intelligence and spirituality. This impoverishment of the concept of love makes any kind of union weak and short-lived. However, we all need and are looking for love, especially a love which is shared in spite of difficulties. The fruitless and misdirected search for love leads people to be satisfied with unstable substitutes that create even more uncertainty.

Love is the force that drives us to do things well, in which case it is related to ethics and morality, because it induces us to act in an appropriate way in our lives. In this way, it leads us to peace, tranquillity, fullness and well-being with ourselves and with others. To quote the words of a wise man:

"We do not know what love really means. We know only the love that is based on attachment and possession.

... the real nature of love is the light from within that reveals the beauty that is hidden in things." (Sri Ram)

What we are interested in is love in its widest spectrum, dedicated to the whole of Nature and, of course, to people. In New Acropolis a person's sexual orientation is not important, because that is a matter for the individual; what we are interested in is for everyone to be able to experience love as "light that reveals the immaterial beauty that is hidden in all things".

7. What is the role of beauty in life?

Art brings us into contact with beauty in its highest sense, it brings us closer to harmony and to inner and outer equilibrium. It is true that at times of uncertainty such as those we are living in, there is a tendency to confuse things, to look for what is easiest, what is most exciting and what attracts perhaps because of its ugliness. "Uglism" has become so prevalent that we accept any creation as art, even if it goes against the most elemental criteria of beauty; and it takes a lot of courage to say "I don't like it".

There is no shortage of defenders of uglism as a way of denouncing or ridiculing an unjust society, or one which is too rigid in its concepts. But this is not a constructive criticism; it is not enough to show the ugly, one has to find the truly beautiful.

The "edifying" tendency of this type of uglism follows some of the parameters laid down by Nietzsche:

"152. The art of the ugly soul. Art is confined within too narrow limits if it be required that only the orderly, respectable, well-behaved soul should be allowed to express itself therein. As in the plastic arts, so also in music and poetry: there is an art of the ugly soul side by side with the art of the beautiful soul; and the mightiest effects of art, the crushing of souls, moving of stones and humanising of beasts, have perhaps been best achieved precisely by that art."

Clearly, this will not help us to make the world a better place. The lack of aesthetics and, on

occasions, of morality, even if it seeks to offend an over-conventional sensibility, does not offer an edifying model, nor one worthy of being imitated.

We need to introduce positive elements that decontaminate the consciousness, so that we can cope with all the disasters we are living through.

Aesthetics, combined with beauty and art – a quintessentially harmonious whole – develops a more refined sensitivity and, therefore, sentiments of the same type, as well as ideas that are more purified from prejudices.

What we are aiming at is for the human being to attain greater dignity through their thoughts, feelings and the actions that derive from them, all of which is the product of beauty, balance and harmony. We would like to highlight the value of inner beauty, which is difficult to define, but radiates grace, warmth, intelligence, elegance and charm. And even if these qualities may not be perceptible to the physical senses, they endow those who have them with a great attractiveness.

We have to consider that the perception of beauty is a subjective experience, which varies from one culture to another and one individual to another. And yet, there are works of art that we could well describe as universal and immortal because they go beyond these individual and cultural differences.

8. In New Acropolis there are different levels of knowledge and associated practical exercises. Can you explain a little more about these levels?

As in any kind of institution, there are levels, like those we find in universities, schools of education and businesses in general.

Philosophical discernment cannot be provided or understood in a single day. These levels relate to the indispensable time and forms needed to make the best use of knowledge. In fact, the programme of studies of New Acropolis' School of Philosophy has seven levels with their respective subjects, which are accessed in a progressive manner.

Some subjects require practical exercises to reinforce the theoretical learning; in general these are simple exercises of psychology, memory, reflection, imagination, oratory and others related to our volunteering actions.

Why a School of Philosophy?

We approach philosophy as a way of life, not only as an accumulation of theoretical knowledge which is not applied in everyday situations – whether difficult or not. Hence the need to understand the practical dimension of philosophy.

Why a School of Philosophy? Because none of the normal schools, institutes or other educational bodies provide valid instructions for life. To put it briefly: no one teaches us how to live, how to enjoy existence or to solve the problems that are constantly arising; we don't learn

anything about true fraternity, or about living together in harmony, we lack courtesy and good manners to make an appropriate use of freedom.

Probationary Course

The programme starts with a course that we call the Probationary Course, which is a name we give to the first level of studies. It refers to a trial period for those who enrol. With a variable duration of a few months, about two or three hours per week, it sets out in general terms the themes that will be developed in the following levels. It provides a trial period for both parties: for those who start the course, so that they can decide whether they are interested in continuing, and for those who teach the course, so that they can assess whether or not the students have passed the subjects.

Once they have passed this introductory course, students receive a certificate of completion. It is then up to each student whether they wish to continue with the following courses, both at this level and at the subsequent stages.

There is also the School of Living Forces

This is a level aimed at those who, after years of learning and action, decide to go more deeply into their inner development and to support the activities of New Acropolis more directly. This school is also a matter of free choice. It begins with a preliminary theoretical and practical course, and is open to those who show that they have the necessary qualities to access these levels. It is about giving more meaning and direction, more strength to life, and feeling precisely more alive.

In particular, it is responsible for looking after the basic needs of the School of Philosophy, helping with the cultural activities, giving information to people who are interested and carrying out all kinds of volunteering actions, selecting those who can act most efficiently in different situations.

The opportunities for men and women are the same, and the decision to leave these groups is also a matter of free choice.

Participating in these groups responds to a need for human development which includes factors that are not always contained in the levels of study, even though they are not different, except in terms of their application.

The School of Discipleship

This system has been in use since the remotest antiquity, in all cultures and civilisations, in order to establish a correct transmission of the teachings that help human beings to travel the path of life. We have been left with outstanding examples of the disciples who regularly attended the classes of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, to mention a few well-known philosophers. But there have always been sages who gathered disciples around them and dedicated themselves to them fully, while the disciples had to fulfill what was required of them:

to want to learn, authentically and seriously.

This level is unrelated to any past or present religion, political ideas, differences of races or sexes, nationalities or social classes, as New Acropolis establishes in its Principle of Universal Fraternity.

The School of Discipleship covers the same teachings as those contained in the programme of studies, but places more emphasis on the development of moral, philosophical and spiritual values.

But it contains one of the greatest goods, which is at the same time the most difficult to develop and to live: the bond between master and disciple. It is a bond of natural and free-flowing transmission, it is love in the purest sense of the concept, since there are no personal motivations or subjective situations that interfere with it.

It is appropriate to clarify who we consider to be masters.

In the first place, we take as a basis the great figures who have stood out in all civilisations, and of whom we have sufficiently valid historical references, whether through traditions or written works. We consider them “great” because of the contributions they have made, not only on an intellectual level, but in their efforts on behalf of the inner evolution of human beings.

Based on this model, the teachers – or “little masters” – who teach in New Acropolis are those who have accumulated more experiences that have been demonstrated over time and proven by what they have achieved in their work with their disciples.

There are masters of art, conductors of orchestras, high-level professionals, and there are also masters of philosophy, following the same principle.

A disciple is one who aims at something more than knowledge or recognised qualifications; they sincerely seek to be better as a person in all aspects, increasing the depth of their consciousness and their sensitivity to the needs of humanity.

Their union with the master establishes a bond that is strengthened by the way in which they integrate the teachings, which, in turn, they will be able to give back to others in the future.

9. Can any member gain access to these different levels?

As in other institutions of learning, each level and subject requires the student to pass examinations. Once these have been passed, any member can access the following levels, in a progressive and voluntary way, as set out in the programme of studies. These levels are not “secret”, but are achieved gradually and by merits.

The whole programme of studies has been legally registered.

Similarly, members are subject to a Constitution which is also registered and conforms to all the

legal requirements.

Attached to the Constitution of New Acropolis is a Code of Ethics, which is applied in specific cases of serious misconduct where there has been a contravention of its principles and aims, which may lead to the loss of membership status and, therefore, access to the studies.

Alongside the Constitution and Code of Ethics, there are decrees or rules of an administrative nature; they are regulations that facilitate the best possible coexistence and agreement between those members of New Acropolis who voluntarily take up posts that ensure the smooth running of the institution. These decrees are reviewed and amended annually according to the needs that arise.

10. What is a leader in New Acropolis?

As the name indicates, leaders are those members who, after several years of work and experience in their own development, and in the educational and administrative work of New Acropolis, are willing to take on posts of responsibility in different areas. Their duties are unpaid and voluntary, and they are periodically reviewed at the annual meetings. The emphasis is placed more on the spirit of service to others than on bureaucratic aspects. They do not impose their will on anyone; rather they help and teach, support and cooperate in whatever is needed.

11. From your experience over all these years, how do you see New Acropolis in the future?

To speak of a long term development is uncertain, although, as the fundamental goals are aimed at the evolution of the human being, they are inherently long term.

But we can refer to the short and medium term.

In the short term we have to consider the necessary adaptation to the needs of the times, which are definitely accelerating. The fact of having a new International President for the last two years already indicates the advantages of handing over to a new generation with its own approaches and actions. I would like to emphasise the deep discipular relationship that exists between the new President and myself, which has been strengthened over many years. It is a similar case to the discipular relationship which I myself had with the founder of New Acropolis, Jorge Angel Livraga, who, in turn, and as we have already pointed out, had his own masters, who led him along the path of philosophy in the classical tradition, that is, a practical philosophy.

In the medium term – which depends on the short term – we need to extend our international action to reach the greatest number of people with philosophical and spiritual aspirations, based on a renewed morality.

The world lacks values, many people feel isolated, misunderstood and with a lack of faith in the future. We must show these people new ways of outer and inner development. This requires a reinforcement of our own development and organisation in order to meet these needs: a greater professionalisation of our leaders, a greater expansion of our courses and teachings, of our



presence in the media, a more clearly defined presentation of our ideas and an extension of the scope of our actions.

I feel highly committed to these aspirations, in the short, medium and long term, and I have total confidence in those who are responsible for putting our principles and aims into action.

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