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N. F. S. GRUNDTVIG AND THE FOLK HIGH SCHOOLS

Only barbarians and tyrants can imagine that this root and kernel of the people—tenants and freeholders, large farmers and small, artisans of all kinds, sailors and tradesmen—does not need any more enlightenment than can be obtained behind the plough, in the workshop, on the ship and behind the counter.

N. F. S. Grundtvig

NICOLAJ FREDERIK SEVERIN GRUNDTVIG was born in 1783 in the Udby parsonage as a son of a Danish country priest; he died ninety years later as a great poet, bishop, historian, and educator.

Grundtvig lived a sheltered early childhood in the religious atmosphere of his home, with an understanding father and a gentle mother who opened to him the wonderful world of fairy tales and poetry. Already, as a young boy, he had become greatly interested in Danish history. Thus the three key forces of his mature life—religion, poetry, and history—have their roots in Grundtvig's early childhood.¹

When he was nine years old, he went to live with a parson at Thyregaard to prepare himself for the Latin school in Aarhus. During his stay at Thyregaard he came into close contact with unspoiled nature and with the simple but goodhearted peasants of the region.

The Latin school in Aarhus with its antiquated methods, infinite insistence upon detail, and constant drill in the catechism was a shaking experience which hardened Grundtvig's heart for a long time. In his later life Grundtvig never did forget and forgive this degradation of his humanity, and he wrote and spoke against the Latin schools as "dead schools". In 1800 he went to the University in Copenhagen, but there also he remained enclosed in the cold and rational shell which he had acquired in Aarhus.

In 1805 he became a private teacher at Egelykke on the Island Langeland. There he was greatly fascinated by the lady of the house, Constance Leth, and this

startling and painful experience opened his heart. Through Constance Leth he was led to German literature, especially to Goethe, Schiller, Fichte and Schelling. He became influenced by the German and Dutch romantic movement and wrote several small volumes concerned with Old Norse mythology.

Around 1810 Grundtvig experienced a keen revival of his Christian faith. He became almost a proselytizer, and during 1811 and 1812 he served as a "vicar" in his father's church in Udby. Soon, however, he realized that the Bible could never give him security, and about the year 1825 it occurred to him that Christianity must have existed before the Bible, among the disciples and in the living Church. Christianity, to him, was thus not a doctrine but a religious community. Like George Fox, Grundtvig reacted violently against the conception of the absolute sinfulness of mankind:

Man is not an ape, destined first to imitate other animals and then himself to the end of the world, but a matchless and wonderful creature in whom divine power will proclaim, develop and manifest itself for a thousand generations—a divine experiment revealing how spirit and dust can impregnate one another and be glorified in united divine consciousness.²

Thus the way to Christianity, for Grundtvig, was not to be found through a denial of what is human, but through a development of it. Through enlightenment, human qualities can be enlivened, made clear, and unfolded.

Needless to say, his religious views brought down upon him the wrath of the established Church. The time covered by the ban which the State Church imposed on the publication of his writings was used, however, for research in Norse mythology and Danish history, and for several trips to England. The results of these years were the influential *Norse Mythology* (1832), a *Handbook of World History* in three volumes (1833-43), and several smaller writings.

Eventually, the Church not only allowed Grundtvig to publish his works, but with the liberalization of the Danish State and Church in the late 1830's he became a parson in the hospital church in Askov in North Jutland. There he soon gathered a circle of friends, and his church community came to exercise great influence on Danish religious life. During his long life, Grundtvig also wrote over a hundred hymns and songs which became the treasure of both the Church and the folk high school movement. At last even the Church had to recognize his greatness officially, and he was made a bishop in 1861.

During his late years Grundtvig became not only a spiritual but a political leader as well. In 1848 he entered the Parliament and was for many years an out-

standing fighter for freedom. In 1866, at the age of eighty-three, he vigorously opposed a reactionary amendment to the Constitutional Law of 1849.

Throughout his life, with the exception of the dark years in Aarhus, he remained close to the common people in whose goodness he believed and to whose spirit he dedicated much of his writing and poetry. It was for these men and women that he thought of a new school, a "school for life", where the "living word" would open soul and heart. Grundtvig died, after a life devoted to the glory of God and service to people, and only hours after he had delivered his last inspiring sermon, on September 2, 1872.

According to a famous scholar, "The Danish national education has three secrets of success: it is given to adults; it is residential; it is essentially a spiritual force."³ In the many pamphlets and small books in which Grundtvig expressed his idea (mainly *The Danish Cloverleaf*, 1836; *To the Norwegians on the Folk High School*, 1837; and *School for Life and the Academy in Sorö*, 1838), these three cornerstones are always in the foundation together with the fourth, *det folkelige*, an untranslatable Danish concept which will be discussed later.

Let us examine each of these cornerstones in turn. The new school would have to be an adult school; about this Grundtvig was convinced, and would have agreed with Sir Richard Livingstone that "the period of boyhood is not the right school-time. Whoever is to profit by learning must first have lived a while and paid heed to life in himself and in others, for so only does he get into a position to understand books that describe life."⁴ Grundtvig understood the lesson of history that many epoch-making developments have been brought about by education of adults. In Denmark too, the turn of events was to prove him right.

In the residential aspect of his idea he was no doubt influenced by his several trips to England in the 1830's. Grundtvig was very much impressed by the residential colleges of Oxford and Cambridge, especially with the spiritual and character-building aspects, but he found them to be the preserves of a privileged class. In the midst of the violent emotions aroused by the July Revolution in France, he came to feel deeply that education is the only answer to revolution and to chaos, and that this education must be based on genuine "people's schools": "Unless the schools are reformed and converted from a tomb into a place where life can grow and mature, all I can see is that revolutionary death struggles will sweep the new democratic world, wiping out both the learned and the ignorant."⁵

Grundtvig did not forget his experience of the Latin "dead school" in Aarhus. His new school, therefore, was to be a school for life. He saw clearly the absolute necessity of breaking away from the book standard of education if the deeper importance of human development was to be made clear. The educational value of doing one's life work must be recognized. He granted the value of academic knowledge and the part books must play, but mere facts he regarded as of no importance in and of themselves. These were only valuable if one had the desire and the will to use them rightly. Grundtvig realized strongly the prime necessity of arousing the desire of the people for a more true and deep understanding of life, and a more pure and vital expression in the service of a better nation and a better community. Once aroused, however, the individual must be free to develop in his own way. Grundtvig always stressed first a natural development of full humanity, which was then to lead into spirituality. He believed that only the "living word" can cause such an awakening in the people.

The "living word" and *det folkelige* are the two central and closely related concepts of Grundtvig's educational idea. Not through books primarily are people stirred to a higher life, but through contact with personality. He develops his theory in great detail. A spoken word is not necessarily a "living word": "Living presupposes an element of inspiration. Something of the flame of the prophet and the bard must fire the tongue of him who would kindle youth to action. The "living word" has its source in lofty idealism, in a deep belief in nation and humanity. It cannot draw its power from books alone."⁶

Latin education was aristocratic and foreign to the people. It was dead, bookish learning. The people's school must be closely related to the language of the common people—the mother tongue—and to their entire mode of life. The school should foster and further a culture in which all people share—a *folkelig* culture. This is not merely a narrow nationalistic indoctrination, but rather education concerned with appreciation of the rich heritage of the Danish and Old Norse culture, while not forgetting that it forms but a part of humanity.

From this brief exposition of Grundtvig's basic educational ideas it is clearly evident that the folk high school was to provide true liberal education. The Latin school was to him illiberal, a corruption of the original idea, since it bred security-minded Church and State officials. While he did not lay down specifically the subjects for the new school, he stipulated that they were to be cultural rather than practical; it was to be education for life, not for making a living. He would combat any subject that tended to divert the aim from spiritual development to material considerations, and he regarded as loathsome examinations that became an end in

themselves and put an end to striving. "But what could such an 'unpractical' education offer to the backward peasants in the villages?" This would be the standard question of our technologically minded, pragmatical society. We shall see how this idea, put into practice by inspired and devoted folk high school principals and teachers, changed both the life of the people and the face of the countryside.

There is a well-known story of a visitor to a Danish Folk High School who, after seeing round the school, was walking through the village with the Principal. "And what are the fruits of your teaching of Danish Language, Literature, History, and the rest?" the visitor asked in a somewhat sceptical tone. As he spoke, a healthy, eager and intelligent-looking young farmer passed him and greeted the two men. The Principal turned to his guest: "There are our fruits."⁷

Grundtvig hoped that his educational ideas would materialize in a central academy at Sorö, but the death of his friend King Christian VIII, and the opposition of the Ministry of Education, brought the plans for a "Royal School of Life" to a standstill. Paradoxically enough, the liberal cabinet after 1849 had also shelved the proposal. The realization came from the grass-roots, and folk high schools began to appear spontaneously throughout the country. This popular movement was undoubtedly more congenial to Grundtvig's idea that a central Royal Academy could have been.

The first school inspired by Grundtvig's ideas was founded in 1844, in Röd- ding in North Slesvig. The prime task of the Röd- ding Folk High School has been to maintain Danish language and culture in the midst of German influence and cultural domination. The next folk high school was established at Uldum in South Jutland. Both these experiments were closely connected with the peasant class. The third and most significant folk high school came into being in 1851 at Ryslinge on Funen, with Kristen Kold as founder and Principal.

The names of Kold and Grundtvig appear side by side in the history of the Danish folk high schools. Grundtvig conceived the ideas and inspired interest all over the country: Kold created a deeply characteristic and intensely personal school. This was to become the pattern of the Danish folk high schools, as a recent observer has attested: "The extremely personal quality of the schools is one of their greatest attractions—from one point of view they seem to be an expansion of the personality, including at certain times the eccentricities, of the Principal . . . the ideal Folk High School combines homeliness with enlightenment."⁸ Kold was also the first to organize courses for women in Denmark by having a winter term for farm hands

and a summer term for girls. This pattern is still followed by most of the folk high schools, although many schools now have co-educational winter and summer terms.

The folk high schools offer traditionally these two terms, but recently an increasing number of the schools offer several two-week courses instead of the summer term in order to bring more of the city people to the folk high schools.⁹ The entrance age is eighteen years; there is no age limit upwards, and many adults in their late twenties and early thirties attend the schools. The curriculum varies but includes as a rule Danish Language and Literature, History, Arithmetic, Group Singing, Religion, Philosophy, Arts and Crafts, and Languages. There are no examinations, and no certificates are issued to the students.

However, it was the war of 1864, which resulted in the loss of South Jutland to Prussia, that was the decisive event in the history of modern Denmark and of the folk high schools. Grundtvig's "outward loss, inward gain" became the motto of the movement after 1864. The number of folk high schools grew rapidly: by 1870 there were fifty schools; by 1880 the number had increased to sixty-four; and by 1900 seventy-four folk high schools were in operation. Among the best known and most influential schools of the movement was the Askov Folk High School in North Jutland. With its extended courses and excellent teaching staff, Askov was from 1878 on of decisive importance not only to Denmark, but to the movement spreading all over Scandinavia.

By the turn of the century the Danish peasantry was transformed from an underclass to a well-to-do and politically progressive middle class. The face of the country assumed the appearance of a well-kept garden. Economically, the farmers and smallholders learned to know and to use the advantages of co-operation, which turned out to be the basis of their growing prosperity. Individually, the rural people became awakened and deeply interested in the higher values of life. The further growth of the movement manifested that practical benefits have not been its sole motive. The enlightened farmers now sent their sons and daughters back to the schools which had changed their own lives. In 1910 the number of folk high schools reached seventy-nine and the enrollment 6,700. Since then the number of the schools has fluctuated between a low of fifty-five and a high of sixty-seven. The enrollment too has had its ups and downs, but in 1961-62 it reached for the first time the 10,000 mark. Can there be a better tribute to the "unpractical" education of the folk high schools and a better expression of the wisdom of a nation?

Grundtvig's deep interest in the revival of *det folkelige* was not restricted to

Denmark alone. There is an obvious affinity among the Scandinavian nations and their culture. As early as 1837 Grundtvig had exhorted the Norwegians to establish a folk high school, where the revival and use of the genuine mother tongue should be a fundamental feature. Here, too, the idea of shedding enlightenment on human values, expressed in the daily life and language of the common people, was what concerned Grundtvig most. The first Norwegian folk high school was established in 1864 at Sagatun, followed in 1877 by the Vonheim Folk High School. Both of these schools had a close link with Askov Folk High School in Denmark.

By 1875 over twenty such schools spread across Norway. Internal dissension and struggles hampered the development of the movement towards the end of the nineteenth century. The Norwegian County Schools, established by the State as a competition, also helped to slow down the growth of the folk high schools. Whereas in Denmark the schools successfully resisted government control in spite of increasing government grants, in Norway the folk high schools were made equal with the County Schools and subjected to State control.¹⁰

In Denmark and Norway, the folk high school movement sprang up to a large extent directly from the villages. In Sweden, on the other hand, the movement was set off primarily by the academic circles associated with the universities. The impetus for the movement came no doubt from Denmark, but the emphasis was not on a struggle of a people's culture against an academic one. On the contrary, Swedish academic cultural life has greatly influenced the ideas of the folk high school world. The need for enlightenment on citizenship, realized after the democratic reforms of the 1860's, was one of the central concerns. Science also formed an important part of the Swedish curriculum, in contrast to those of Denmark and Norway.¹¹

Sweden's first three folk high schools were established in 1868 at Herrested, Onnestad, and Hvilan. Around 1880 close to twenty-five schools were in operation and the movement was growing. The Swedish folk high schools were based on a county system like that of Norway, but they preserved much more independence from the State.¹²

The folk high school movement spread to Finland by 1889. The folk high schools there divided into a Finnish and a Swedish-Finnish group; the Finnish group characteristically drew inspiration from Denmark, while the Swedish group looked to Sweden for an example. The folk high schools became an important force in the resistance to imposed russification towards the end of the last century.¹³

After the turn of the century, the folk high school movement became known all over the world, and increasing numbers of educators from many countries came

to Denmark and to Sweden to study the schools. Among these was Tom Bryan, who became Warden of Fircraft College near Birmingham. Newbattle Abbey in Scotland was established as a college after Lord Lothian visited the Swedish folk high school at Sigtuna. The spread of the movement in the United Kingdom was slow, partly because of different economic and social circumstances; but by the beginning of World War II, there were some ten residential adult colleges, influenced to various degrees by the Scandinavian folk high schools.¹⁴ On the Continent, the movement spread to Germany and Poland but was destroyed by Nazism and the war. Overseas, attempts to transplant the intact folk high school to the United States remained on the whole unsuccessful, but one or two schools of this type have taken root in China and Japan.

From this brief outline of the spread of the folk high school idea abroad it can be seen that the movement gained considerable success, with some modifications, within the Scandinavian family of nations and in some of the mainly agricultural areas abroad, whereas it remained largely unsuccessful in the more industrialized and in more pragmatical nations. This pattern, which has some implications for the future, was also repeated in the worldwide reconstruction after the last war.

Even during the war, considerable interest was evident in Great Britain with regard to post-war educational needs. The Institute of Adult Education published its report on *Adult Education after the War*, and the writings of Sir Richard Livingstone, especially *The Future in Education* (1941) and *Education for a World Adrift* (1943), contributed greatly to creating considerable interest in residential adult education. Through the Education Act of 1944 the idea received additional impetus, and many residential colleges for adults have been established across the country in the post-war years. They differ considerably in organization from their Scandinavian counterparts and from the pre-war English colleges, but in spirit they are an adaptation of Grundtvig's idea to English needs. Their main drawback is the short-term residential course (weekend, week, or a fortnight), which cannot develop the best potentialities of human character as well as the longer term can do. Similar encouraging development has taken place in the Netherlands, West Germany, Austria, and in the United States and Canada, where the short residential term became established after the war.

The most significant spread and development of the original folk high school idea can be observed however, in the new developing countries of Asia and Africa.

With their overwhelmingly agricultural population, many of the leaders have realized the applicability of the Danish example, and the Danish Government and the folk high school movement have advanced any possible help with establishment of folk high schools in these areas.¹⁵ Several such schools are now established in India, Tanganyika, Ghana, and other countries, and their influence in the development of these countries may turn out to be of great importance.

Nevertheless, it is not only the mainly agricultural and developing countries that can benefit from the folk high school idea. One might argue that the Western industrialized nations have an equal, if not a far greater, need for the development of residential adult education. At no other time in the history of mankind has there been a more evident need for a truly liberal education of the adult. Never before has the threat of the atomization of society through overspecialization been so great as in our technological age. In the era of the computer, our society needs liberal, humanistic, "unpractical" education without which mere technical excellence turns from a blessing to a grave threat to humanity. To work toward this goal is the best possible tribute to N. F. S. Grundtvig, divine, poet, and educator.

NOTES

1. "N. F. S. Grundtvig", *Salmonsens Konversations Leksikon*, 1920, vol. 10, pp. 181-186.
2. Quoted in S. Stephens, "Bishop Grundtvig and the Danish Folk High School Movement", *Social Science* (June-August, 1953), p. 67.
3. Sir R. Livingstone, *On Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954) p. 44.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
5. Quoted in J. Novrup, "The Danish Folk High Schools", *Danish Foreign Office Journal* (January-March, 1950), p. 18.
6. Quoted in J. C. Möller, *Education in Democracy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1944), p. 25.
7. Stephens, p. 68.
8. Stephens, p. 70.
9. The folk high schools draw to a considerable degree on young adults from rural areas but have failed thus far to attract any significant number from the cities.
10. R. Lund, *et al.*, *Scandinavian Adult Education* (Copenhagen: Det Danske Forlag, 1952), p. 167.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 168-170.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 227-229.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 87-91.
14. M. F. Forster, *School for Life* (London: Faber & Faber 1944), p. 90.
15. A new organization for educational aid to underdeveloped countries was founded in Denmark in June by the representative organizations of the folk high schools and the Old Students Union.