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Danish Creativity and Resilience in the Face of Adversity

by
Delane Ingalls Vanada

Danish people are known for being innovative thinkers. They are independent, willing to take risks, able to stand up for their thoughts and beliefs, daring enough to commit themselves without fear of failure, and deeply trusting of each other. They are hardworking, flexible, and intellectual (Nordic Reach 2008). This is the stuff of creativity and the dispositions that support it, according to current research on the psychology of creativity (Piiro 2001). As the granddaughter of Jens Peder Jensen, a Danish immigrant who homesteaded in South Dakota in 1907, my life was shaped by the influence of our close family in both the United States and those who stayed in Denmark. From these family members I gained the power of story and tradition, close relationships, and group strength in times of extreme challenge and adversity. In this paper, I explore Danish family and culture as a model for supporting innovation and a balance of creative, critical, and practical skills as well as the dispositions so needed in every area of life, including education. As a designer/artist and college professor, I research the conditions that promote creativity—in particular, creativity that enables greater well-being through times of personal and familial challenges. How might the values instilled by Danish heritage affect future generations, particularly in the areas of creativity, lifelong learning, and resilience in the face of adversity? Are aspects of character and particular mindsets instilled, and if so, can they be identified?

My Family Story

My grandfather Jens Peder (J. P.) Jensen came to America from Faxe, Denmark at the age of twenty-two, as the winds of war blew across Europe. Anticipating homesteading opportunities, he had completed a five-year carpentry apprenticeship in Copenhagen, Denmark and taken a year of English lessons. He desired to start a new life

with his childhood sweetheart, Anna Hansen, who also came to the US from Faxe, albeit somewhat later. On May 1, 1907 J. P. arrived in New York City and soon after worked his way west by plying his trade—from Iowa to North Dakota and then to Chicago to build the Northwestern Railway Station. But he wrote that every day he “was thinking of the West, [of] owning land, building a home, and being my own boss” (Jensen 1999, 4).

In 1910, just three years after coming through Ellis Island, J. P. learned that land in western South Dakota was open for homesteading. He rode the Milwaukee Railroad as far as the line would go at the time, then walked the remaining forty miles to find the special place that would become home—181 acres of prairie that would grow to a five-thousand-acre farm before his death. Five miles outside of the new town of Faith, known as the “prairie oasis,” J. P. began to pursue his dream. A few years later, he and Anna were married in Chicago, Illinois. They became the parents of Edythe, Folmer, Edwin, and



J. P. Jensen in the US, around 1907

Margaret but sadly experienced the loss of a child when Folmer died of polio in 1922. While working the land as a farmer and eventually a rancher too, my grandfather utilized his creativity and carpentry skills as he helped to build the town of Faith, including the first hospital, the Lutheran church and parsonage, buildings on Main Street, a home and barns for the original homestead, and even an airplane. Through these years and the hardships of homesteading, losing a child, being far from his Danish family, going through the Great Depression, and enduring many prairie blizzards, Grampa Jens used his creative and



J. P. and Ida's wedding

technical skills along with the determination to succeed when the going was tough. Certainly, he was a tenacious risk-taker who followed his heart. At the same time, he was an exacting man who believed that anything worth doing, was worth doing right. The first time.

Then, tragedy struck again when Anna died suddenly in 1929 of a strangulated hernia. After Anna died, J. P. found himself raising a young family alone. When Ida B. Hegre, daughter of Norwegian immigrants in the area, answered his advertisement for a housekeeper, both of their lives changed. In 1935, at the age of thirty-two, Ida became

the second wife of the young-spirited, fifty-year-old widower. They had three children together: Marie (my mother), Volmer, and Eldon. Blending his two families, he insisted that there were no differences between half-sisters or half-brothers and put high value on the family being together at every holiday and birthday. As one of my uncles put it, "birthdays were a command performance....we'd better be there or be on our death bed" (Jensen 1999, 82). At Christmas especially, traditional Danish foods—*æbleskivers*, *julekage*, *frikadeller*, and *risalamande*—were



J. P. with son Eldon and grandson Duane.

prepared, now blended with the Norwegian ones such as *lefse* and *krumkake*.

Indeed, my grandfather was known for being fiercely loyal to family, community, and his adopted country. Out of his patriotism and wanting his children to succeed in school, he decided that his children would no longer speak Danish. When he finally returned with Ida to visit his homeland at the fifty-year anniversary of his immigration to the US, he told his Danish family that his roots were still in Denmark but that it was in America he had blossomed. Despite adversity. Despite loss. Upon their return three years later, the family would face much more. I was only nearly three years old when Ida died of breast cancer in 1961, but my vivid earliest memories of her are those in her last days, in the little pink house surrounded by family in Faith, South Dakota. A year later, in 1962, Grampa Jens died tragically, together with his son Edwin and daughter-in-law Althier, in a head-on collision with a drunk driver. In the blink of an eye, Edwin and Althier's three children were orphaned and the whole family left to grieve and wrestle for answers in what was a very dark time in our story. My three cousins were taken in by their father's sister, Edythe, to be raised with her own children that were near to them in age. And we carried on—together.

Little did we know it would prepare us for more to come. In the forty years following that fatal wreck, our family would experience a suicide, debilitating diseases and transplants, life-threatening car accidents, and divorce. Many served in the military, surviving World War II, Vietnam, and Afghanistan. I grew up strongly valuing the importance of living every day to its fullest and not putting off taking time to enjoy life with those you love. My immediate family would experience the complete loss of our home to fire, my brother's tragic premeditated murder which impacted the entire community, and my mother's stroke and, six months later, diagnosis of brain cancer. After undergoing high-risk surgery with one of the chief neurosurgeons in the country at Mayo clinic, she defied the odds that she would most likely be unable to walk or talk again. Once a teacher and school principal who went on to become a state legislator, this second-generation Danish Norwegian woman exhibited the same determined, positive persistence that so many family members before had exemplified. She

would survive subsequent cancers and a life-threatening lung disease. Although eventually she became wheelchair-bound and unable to care for herself, her life today illustrates her legacy of resilience. We had learned some of the keys to what it means to rise above adversity, not only from pioneering grandparents but also from our Scandinavian roots.

Creatively Rising Above Adversity

What is it that helps some people rise above adversity or failure? What causes people in the face of extreme challenge, hardship, or trauma not only to survive, but to thrive? Those are some of the questions that I asked as family of J. P. and Ida and as a professor and researcher in the area of creativity. Similar questions have been asked by researchers such as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1996). As a child, Mihaly was taken prisoner during World War II, along with many of his relatives and friends in Budapest. One brother was killed in combat and another taken to a forced labor camp. Witnessing others' responses to pain and suffering and those whose lives fell apart versus those who did not, he developed a theory of creativity called "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi 1996). Basically, flow is being captivated by a favorite activity, often the arts, play, or work—something that afterwards takes you deep into concentration and a state of well-being. In other words, Mihaly's curiosity about the roots of contentment and happiness in life despite adversity led him to understand that living with purpose rather than being taken down by external events is largely an internal state of being. Csikszentmihalyi is considered one of the founders of current positive psychology research, and his inquiries promote a link between creativity and happiness as it relates to meaning (Calhoun and Tedeschi 2017).

Researchers in the area of the field of positive psychology have raised awareness of the potential for adverse events and trauma to spark positive psychological and personal growth in the lives of survivors. Tedeschi and colleagues (2017, 6) label this phenomena "post-trauma growth," or the "experience of positive change that the individual experiences as a result of struggle with a traumatic event." The losses and pain are still there; but a person can experience the paradoxical coexistence of grief alongside gratitude, suffering alongside

growth, and loss together with gain. This growth, related to creativity, comes out of major life crises and is characterized in five main ways: improved relationships, a new appreciation for life, revived personal strength, better ability to find new possibilities, and spiritual and existential change (Calhoun and Tedeschi 2017). Adverse events force us to think about questions we never would have asked otherwise and provide the potential of turning points in the narrative of life.

As Billy Graham once said, “Suffering...tends to plow up the surface of our lives to uncover the depths that provide greater strength of purpose and accomplishment. Only deeply plowed earth can yield bountiful harvests” (Graham and Toney 2011). Not only is post-trauma growth related to creativity, it is related to a person’s inner landscape—one’s mental outlook, ability to learn from ambiguous and confusing circumstances, and resilience.

There is ample evidence that personal and social creativity may play a supporting role in improved well-being in the wake of adversity (Csikszentmihalyi 1996; Seligman 2011). As a problem-solving venture that requires known traits associated with creativity—flexibility, openness to experience, tolerance of ambiguity, and ingenuity—it makes sense that resilience (rising above adversity) draws upon creative thinking. We need imagination to overcome and rise above unintended circumstances.

All people innately possess creative intelligence, and creativity is something that people can choose to activate in their lives, even if they do not consider themselves creative (Kaufman and Gregoire 2015; Sternberg 1997). Creativity, while it contains multiple definitions, can be generally defined as “any act, idea or product that changes an existing domain or that transforms an existing domain into a new one” (Csikszentmihalyi 1996, 28). The creative process may be more important than a creative product. We know that creative thinking leads to innovative thinking, the ability to adapt to change, and is a way to celebrate life (Milbrandt 2011). The act or process of creativity involves the reshaping of something, which resonates with Masten and Powell’s idea (2003) that the process of recovery from adversity can be a creative act as well. Again, in this process, the traits associated with creativity can be put into play.

Like Csikszentmihalyi (1996), cognitive psychologist Anna Craft (2001, 45) highlighted the necessity for a contemporary definition of creativity known as “little c” creativity which focused on problem solving and practical innovation in people’s everyday lives. “Big C” creativity (45) denotes truly original creations or discoveries that have a major impact on others, yet most of human creativity is in the “small c” realm. This is a view shared by Claxton (2007), who pushes for a real-world definition of creativity in education, and Paul and Elder’s claim (2006) that creative thinking “must be demystified and brought down to earth” (34). Sternberg (1997) has also argued that creative thinking is best understood together in its interrelationship with analytical and practical thinking, or what Ingalls Vanada calls “balanced intelligence” (Ingalls Vanada 2011). Creativity, critical thinking, and practical wisdom are what all people need for success in life.

My Danish American heritage has been shaped by both “big C” and “little c” creativity. We know that an environment that supports creativity breeds further creativity. Cultivating a culture of innovation fosters the freedom of new ideas. From my Danish grandfather’s perspective, what could be more wide open and full of possibilities than a brand new start in America and a chance to utilize his craft to build a city? In his deep respect for being a US citizen, he would agree with Milbrandt’s comment that “our country’s Constitution and protection of personal freedom laid the foundation for creative endeavors” (2011, 8). Like many pioneers, Grampa Jens, as well as my paternal Ingalls family, creatively found ways to utilize the resources at hand, making sure not to waste anything. They had to be creative, to find multiple pathways to solving a problem in both practical and innovative ways. Living forty miles from the closest prairie town, practical creativity was absolutely required. It is this heritage—the practical creativity, freedom to choose in life, and learned optimism, along with self-reliance and an inclination towards hard work—that I believe served to bring our family through some of life’s curveballs and toughest challenges.

Thriving despite challenge is not an individual venture, however. Although the traditional Western European values of independence and autonomy were valued in our Danish American family, interdependence on each other and on neighbors was essential. We were a

close-knit, affectionate tribe, and family gatherings were filled with laughter. These reliable, caring relationships served as a “buffer against the worst that fate can hand them” (Van der Kolk 2014, 112). Attachment bonds, as research indicates, are essential to recovery from traumatic events; people rebound and learn self-care from the ways that they are cared for and find emotional attunement that way (Van der Kolk 2014). Relational-cultural theory (RCT) views resilience and creativity in the context of culture and relationships, promoting the idea that mutual empathy and mutual empowerment naturally foster positive growth (Hartling 2005; Metzger and Morrell 2008).

Resilience and Well-Being

Resilience, or the ability to bounce back and recover from stressful, traumatic, or long-term challenges, is one of the key factors of flourishing in life, according to Martin Seligman (2011), and resilience is something at which the Danes apparently excel. In a University of South Cambridge study of twenty-three European Union countries about what it means to “flourish” or have overall well-being, Denmark came out on top, with thirty-three percent of its citizens flourishing in terms of the following features: positive emotion, engagement/interests, meaning/purpose, self-esteem, optimism, resilience, and positive relationships (Seligman 2011, 27). Well-being theory is not the same as happiness alone; rather, it is a system of feeling good together with purpose in life, interdependence, and accomplishments. Rydahl (2017) also believes that the Danish reputation for happiness comes less from drumming up an emotion and more from an inner sense of well-being—and more from a loving family and social system that allows individuals the freedom to make choices and find their own way in life. In *Happy as a Dane* she writes, “The Danish system is the cornerstone on which solid individual foundations are built. Since the system is based on confidence, equality, a degree of realism and a sense of community and solidarity, it gives everyone the opportunity to find their own place, which is a valuable starting point for finding long-term happiness and well-being” (2017, 121).

Danes have been labeled “realistic optimists” (Sandahl and Alexander 2014). It is ingrained in the culture to see the bigger picture and focus on the positive aspects of a situation, while still being aware of

the negative, a strategy known as reframing. Being able to reframe negative situations is the ability to take awful events in life and see challenges as opportunities, which is highly related to optimism (Seligman 2011). Resilient people take a stance toward “learned optimism” (Seligman 2011, 189) rather than helplessness; they have the ability to manage stress and adversity, in part because of their ability to reframe. Those who can reframe and learn from difficult circumstances in the midst of ambiguity build stronger internal resilience. Interestingly, a person’s ability to handle future stressful circumstances, and therefore their resilience, is strengthened by repeated incidents forcing them to practice it (Seligman 2011; Calhoun and Tedeschi 2017). As a term often used by artists and designers, reframing has to do with “making sense out of chaos” or making sense of ambiguity and seeing things in a new way (Kolko, 2010, 15). Reframing links to attributes known to creativity, such as being able to view situations from new perspectives, to imagine alternatives, and to see possibilities. As Van der Kolk (2014) says, “resilience is the product of agency.” It is about knowing that your life makes a difference and that even if you fail, you will get up and try again.

Resilience requires creative problem solving, perseverance, and “grit” (Duckworth and Seligman 2005). Character is not built by living free of adversity, escaping hardship, or always finding the easy way through life. Adversity can be a teacher; it can shape character and the core of who we are. Danish American immigrants certainly had a lot of practice at managing hardship and building character. They possessed what positive psychologists call “grit” (Duckworth, et al. 2007, 1087). Grit is a malleable character trait that involves high effort and persistence along with resilience in the face of failure. It has a lot to do with the exercise of conscious choice (the will) and self-discipline over talent. In studies on grit, effort and self-discipline consistently outpredict IQ for academic achievement, at twice the success rate (Seligman 2011, 116). Grit and resilience are related to what Dweck (2008) calls a growth mindset, which is to believe that one’s abilities grow and improve throughout life when faced with challenges, rather than thinking that one’s capacities are fixed or inflexible.

Self-discipline and effort were especially valued as the descendants of Scandinavian immigrant-pioneers survived the Great De-

pression and numerous hardships. Through both the way we were parented, as well as the family culture surrounding us, grit was valued in the form of character, honesty, hard work and self-discipline. Similar to grit, the Finnish term “sisu” describes taking action in the face of extreme odds or adversity with an unbreakable perseverance; it is finding the ability to push through when you feel you have nothing left to give. “Sisu” is also the idea of owning your own destiny, not giving up, and taking charge of your life. This ideal of autonomy and independence is “deeply ingrained in the Danish psyche,” says Rydahl (2011). The key factors of well-being outlined by Seligman’s “Theory of Well-Being” (2011) are strikingly similar to values instilled by my Danish American upbringing—values necessary to resilience and creativity in overcoming traumatic events. There are five measurable pillars of well-being:

- Positive emotion (of which happiness and life satisfaction are factors)
- Engagement
- Meaning and purpose
- Relationships
- Accomplishment

The first pillar is positive emotion, what we feel: pleasure, rapture, ecstasy, contentment, etc. Engagement involves a deep psychological connection to an activity or group. Meaning/purpose refers to serving something or feeling connected to something you believe is bigger than oneself. Positive relationships are other people in life that bring feelings of intimacy, social caring, integration, and support. Accomplishment involves having a sense of achievement and an ability to reach for one’s goals and see how these goals might impact others. Seligman (2011) posits that these five factors contribute to the ability to flourish in life and while each may be pursued for its own sake, no one element by itself defines well-being.

Well-being as measured through factors like resilience, self-determination or agency, and optimism suggest a close link to the Danish values of freedom and independence, realistic optimism, equality, and loving relationships (Rydahl 2017). As mentioned previously, in an international study of overall well-being conducted by Huppert and So, Denmark ranked highest (Seligman 2011). For that study the factors

used included (1) positive emotions, (2) engagement in interests, (3) positive relationships, (4) self-esteem, (5) optimism, and (6) resilience.

As suggested in this article, not only does creativity support resilience, but the dispositions or attitudes known to the creative spirit are closely linked to the ideals of overall well-being. Through her research Piirto (2011) has identified the five core attitudes that support creativity as openness to experience, group trust, self-discipline, risk taking, and tolerance for ambiguity. These attitudes known to creativity are strikingly similar to the well-being factors evidenced in the Danish survey as well as those recorded in numerous accounts about my grandfather and the Danish American family in which I was raised. While this could be true of any number of brave immigrants to this country and the ancestors and countries from which they parted, my personal research has led to my awareness of the following strengths that helped support our positive growth through hard times:

Positive emotions / optimism

- J. P.'s adventurous, pioneering spirit; following his heart; family's realistic optimism and humor

Engagement

- High community, civic, and political engagement

Finding meaning and purpose

- Christian faith and serving something larger than oneself was important to J. P.

Relationships

- Close, intimate relationships and dedication to family

Accomplishment

- Raised in a culture of hard work + attitude + skill with a sense of agency; freedom to fail.

Pertinent to the discussion of well-being and positive growth is how the Danish values of self-esteem, optimism, and resilience were fostered. Particularly as a young woman, I was not held back or treated differently in terms of goals in life. The sky was the limit. I had the example of J. P.'s daughter as my mom, who broke what was the norm for most stay-at-home moms in rural America at the time. I was given responsibilities at an early age, trusted to follow the path for my life

that I wanted to follow, and raised with the agency to make my own way in life.

A Danish Legacy

While my family has experienced much adversity and suffering, I believe a sort of mental toughness and interdependence was handed down that allowed us to become not bitter but determined to live life better in spite of and because of what we experienced. Søren Kierkegaard, the nineteenth-century Danish philosopher, theologian, and poet, promoted the idea that what matters is to find purpose, saying, “Not until a person has inwardly understood himself and then sees the course he is to take does his life gain peace and meaning.” Can we take the losses and live to be better people because of them? Did we take our failures and learn from them? That is what I have watched my family do. I’ve watched one uncle turn empathy for others’ pain into a successful mortuary business and another uncle become a successful engineer. I’ve watched a cousin survive the horrors of war in Vietnam and become a lawyer, my mother defy the odds of several near death experiences with brain cancer and lung disease, and my strong rancher dad bend to live a life of service to my mother in her physical decline. We have a creative class of family members who are poets, literary translators, architects, rodeo riders, landscape designers, teachers, visual artists, singers and musicians, therapists, ranchers, farmers, builders, athletes, a jewelry designer, welders, engineers, stay-at-home moms, military pilots and statesmen, textile artists and seamstresses, a PhD and several MFAs, published writers, photogra-



J. P. with granddaughter Delane

phers, and a social science researcher and fashion designer. While we all benefited from the many creative skills inspired by Scandinavian ancestors, perhaps more important is that we have experienced the power of positive dispositions or mindsets instilled by our Danish American family at large. We are a legacy of which I know J. P. would be proud.

The challenges and disappointments of life become catalysts of growth and change. As the apostle Paul in the New Testament said, "We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; and perseverance character." In many ways our Danish heritage gave us the bedrock foundation from which to creatively make our way, persevere individually and collectively, and ultimately flourish.

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