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Songs of Denmark, Songs to Live By: 
Cultural Values Expressed in Traditional Danish Music

by Joy Ibsen

This past August [2005] we published Songs of Denmark [Sange for Danskere], Songs to Live By, the culmination of a project that began to take shape three years ago at the 2002 DAHS conference in Omaha, when I met Sisse Brimberg. During that meeting I shared with Sisse my desire to publish a new Danish American songbook with lyrics in both Danish and English, one with beautiful contemporary Danish photographs—a book that would appeal to the next generation. Sisse, a talented National Geographic photographer, was enthusiastic and agreed to provide access to her photographic files for the book.

There is great richness in traditional Danish music, considerable wisdom and also spiritual healing. Too often we sing hymns and other songs with little thought given to the meaning of the lyrics. Some of our Danish songs, however, are like psalms and bid for our attention. Other nonsense songs, “fun songs,” are just plain enjoyable to sing.

My Danish American roots are in the Grundtvigian tradition. While not all Danes are Grundtvigians, my experience on the museum board and in the many different Danish communities has shown me that regardless of our backgrounds, we Danes share many of the same values.

In the introduction to Songs of Denmark I quote Walter Capps’s description of four Grundtvigian principles from a lecture he gave at Danebod Folk School in Tyler, Minnesota in August, 1991. Walter Capps was a theologian and a professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who became acquainted with, and then fascinated by, “what was going on in the Danish church in Solvang.” A man of Swedish background who became a U.S. Congressman, Capps unfortunately died of a heart attack shortly after going to Washington. His wife Lois Capps now represents California’s 23rd
Congressional District. During his lecture series, Capps said that he wished he could run as a Grundtvigian rather than a Republican or a Democrat.

The title of Capps’s series of lectures was “The Future of Grundtvigianism.”1 For me, hearing those lectures was a life-changing event. I had considered those of us who grew up in the Grundtvigian tradition in the United States to be an endangered species, a people from a rich and treasured past, whose ideas were now ignored and little understood. According to Capps the four principles of Grundtvigianism are: (1) Affirmation of Life, (2) Stay as Close to Nature as Possible, (3) The Goodness and Beauty of Ordinary Life, and (4) Lifelong Learning and Education.

After Capps’s presentation I began looking at N.F.S. Grundtvig in an entirely new light, as someone whose ideas were not only relevant but also necessary, who had refreshing approaches for meeting current and future challenges. While not all answers to today's complex problems can be found in Grundtvigian philosophy, Capps pointed out significant relevance in Grundtvigian thought for addressing many major challenges in America as we approached the millennium. Unfortunately, today most of these problems are much worse than they were in the 1990s and must now be considered from a more global perspective.

The first principle, the basis for all the principles, as stated by Capps, is “Affirmation of Life.” Enjoy Life! This is a wonder-filled world. Accept and love the world as it is. Do not lose yourself in fabrications of what should be or could have been. Be realistic: do not hide your head in the sand. It is our world that is in need of transformation and we are in the business of transformation. Affirming life needs to occur within a spirit of humility. Humility is a long-established Danish virtue, one which is irksome because it manifests in a variety of negative ways ranging from self-effacement to hypocrisy. To clarify, I am using the definition of humility as not pretending to be more than you are, nor less than you are. A clear understanding of self and one’s capabilities is difficult, perhaps a life-long quest. Affirmation of life becomes increasingly possible when we know who and what we are. Also, while living in the present, we look to the future. Take the long view. A major reason
for humility is a deep awareness that one does not have the entire picture.

A wonderful example of this is found in Kristian Ostergaard's "That Cause Can Never Be Lost or Stayed" ["Den Sag er Aldrig i Verden Tabt"; translated by J.C. Aaberg], 1892

That cause can never be lost
or stay'd
Which takes the course of
what God hath made,
And is not trusting in walls
and towers,
But slowly growing from seed
to flowers.

Each noble service that men
have wrought
Was first conceived as a
fruitful thought.
Each worthy cause with a
future glorious
By simply growing becomes
victorious.

And thus itself like a tree it
shows,
That high it reaches as deep it
grows;
For when the storms are its
branches shaking
It deeper root in the soil is
taking.

Though mighty tempest a
branch may shear
What then if truly they
cleanse the air!
The storms at harvest with
fury blowing
But open the door for the new
life growing.

And winter, even so cold and
white,
Is for the plants but a restful
night,
When wrapped in mantles of
snow securely
They waken anew in the
spring most surely.

Hold then no fear of the
storms that blow,
The Lord may use them His
seed to sow;
And if a tree by their might
they shatter,
What then—if thousands of
seed they scatter!  

Affirmation of human life is a worldview that recognizes and celebrates the goodness of God’s creation within the context of a strong sense of community. In a personal letter Grundtvig wrote, "All our [Christian] endeavors are wasted unless the response in
people to human mirth and joy is reawakened; for of what worth is
an eternal life, if we do not have a temporal life which we can
joyfully anticipate as being eternal ...” This statement places the
joyful acceptance of the present world and the earthly life which
God has given against a pietistic other-worldliness. ³

Central to the affirmation of life is what has become the summary
statement of Grundtvig’s religious philosophy, “Human First, then
Christian.” It is a statement that is often misunderstood. This is not
simply a humanistic philosophy. Quite the opposite. Grundtvig had
no illusions about human sinfulness and weaknesses. Grundtvig’s
theology emerged out of a renouncement of rationalism as well as a
protest against pietism. “Human First, then Christian” does not
lessen commitment to Christ; one is not “less Christian.” Grundtvig
believed strongly in the Apostles’ Creed as the basic expression of
the Christian Faith, primarily because it was so easy to equivocate
and interpret, (i.e., twist) the meaning of what is in the Bible. In
contrast, the Apostles’ Creed is specific and clear. In Grundtvig’s
feuds with rationalistic theologians, he had observed that the Bible
was subject to interpretation...whereas the confession at baptism,
the Apostolic Creed, was a “living word,” inviolable and above the
shifting winds of doctrine. ⁴ Christ was to be sought not in the past,
but in the living community, through congregational life, baptism,
communion, and the Apostles’ Creed.

Joseph Sittler described the Danish Lutherans as being different
from other Lutherans in emphasizing the first article of the Apostles’
Creed (“I believe in God the Father, Creator of Heaven and Earth”
over the second, “and in Jesus Christ his only son...”) “Human first”
is not a matter of priority, of one article of the creed being more
important than the other, but for Grundtvigians, it is rather a matter
of separation. It is of utmost importance to separate the two,
because Human First is the basis for recognizing and establishing
freedom, equality, and dignity. As stated by Axel Kildegaard, “We
have to work at becoming a human being. Christianity is a gift of
grace.” ⁵

The Golden Rule is found in every religion—Christian, Jewish,
Muslim, Buddhist, Confucian, Hindu, and some pagan religions.⁶
While the statement varies, all versions come down to this one
primary ethical concept: Treat others as you want to be treated—the universal basis for ethical behavior. All religions can be exploited, or misused, as rationale for violence and corruption. That is why “Human First” is so important, relating to one another on a Human Being to Human Being basis. Every war is a religious war. Christianity has been as guilty of making war under the banner of religion as have other religions. The way to address violence of all kinds is to live in a “human being to human being” mode. In doing so, we meet and celebrate one another.7

It is said that one can feel “Grundtvigianism” when one crosses the border into Denmark;8 I hope that is still true. I believe the major reason that Denmark rose to the challenge, as a country, in rescuing 98% of its Jewish population during World War II is because the philosophy of “Human First” was at its very foundation, in the culture’s subconscious. Christians in many countries gave their lives to the cause of freedom, but Denmark was the only country that rose up as a whole culture, while Christians in many countries, including ecclesiastic heads of churches, crossed over to the other side of the road in order to avoid Samaritans. In Denmark, an occupied country, entire professions and institutions including the church, medical profession, and police disobeyed a direct order to turn the Jews over for exportation to prison camps, and as a result saved virtually its entire Jewish population (more than 7,000 people.)9

It is all too easy to say, “That person is different from me,” justifying all sorts of evils, especially with regard to race and religion. Denmark showed the world that it is necessary for all of us to consider our common humanity. We all have the same creator. We are all of one community. Community is made up of both women and men. The concept of Human First is without reference to gender. Women’s rights in this country came very late, long after the emancipation of slaves. Most of our grandmothers were denied the right to vote when they reached adulthood, a right we now take for granted, but which came only after a very hard-fought battle. While it is true that women can be as “me first” as any man, it does not invalidate women’s rights to freedom and equality. From a more global perspective, how many of the world’s difficulties today have an underlying agenda of suppressing women? Grundtvig was a
champion of the women’s movement, and pushed for reforms. He stated, “At worst, a woman could also stand on her own in society ‘without becoming nearly so dispirited, or vapid, as erudite, highly educated men.’”

Grundtvig’s great contribution to Christianity is found in the concept of “The Living Word”:

1. In the beginning was the Word.
2. Christ is not found in a book or the past, but in the living community.
3. Matchless Discovery—the Church existed before the Bible was written. Christ speaks his living word to the community, the word that creates what it names.
4. We work at becoming human beings. Christianity is a gift.

(Translated by Axel Kildegaard)

Grundtvig emphasizes the Word, the Logos, “In the beginning was the Word.” It was not a book that had produced Christianity, it was the Christian Church, which had produced the Bible. Christ Himself, not a book, was the Word. Christ speaks his living word to the community, the medium for presentation is the “living, that is the spoken, word by men and women who were themselves spiritually alive....” The church existed even before the Bible was written. Grundtvig’s “matchless” or “great discovery” is that the congregation is constituted by what is alive—fellowship in sacraments. One is baptized into the faith, not into the Bible. Jesus did not found a reading club.

Grundtvig did not ignore the Bible, as evidenced by his volumes of poetry and almost 1,500 hymns and songs. A large number of his hymns are adaptations of Bible stories and texts. He possessed an exceptional ability to grasp the essential implications of a text and present it with great force in his sermons. J.C. Aaberg refers to Grundtvig as the “Singer of the Pentecost.” While Grundtvig does not resemble what we now associate with “Pentecostal religion,” this is an accurate description of Grundtvig’s contribution to the Church: the Living Word, a vital living community. “In emphasizing the true indwelling of Christ in the creed and sacraments, he visualized the
real presence of Him in the church and underscored the vital center of congregational worship with a realism that no theological dissertation can ever convey.”

In S.D. Rodholm’s beautiful hymn, “The Word,” we have a summary of Grundtvig’s thought regarding the Logos.

With the word all things began,
Life in ocean, life on land:
With the word were man and woman
Raised from dust, created human,
Prince of earth and child of God.
Prince of earth and child of God.
When the soul of man was stirred
By a breath divine, the word
Was in heart of man created;
This on earth inaugurated Human life and history.

Environmental concerns are still being ignored, but with increasingly greater difficulty. It seems that we need the crises of hurricanes, oil shortages, or worse yet, the threat of a water shortage to give the environment the attention it needs. But eventually it will be too late, in spite of knee-jerk responses to crises. What we need is an entire shift of understanding about ourselves, what we are—a change in consciousness.

The second Grundtvigian principle, Stay as Close to Nature as Possible, is more than being attentive to the world we live in. This is not just about enjoying nature or even realizing that our survival is dependent on caring for planet earth. Again, it goes back to creation.
We are all made of the same “stuff.” Science is proving this to be true. We are made of stardust. It is for us to respect the world and care for it not only because it is in our best interests, but because of what we are, not just who we are: Human First—we are part of nature. In this lateral relationship, we can learn so much from the world around us. Many Danish folk songs and hymns relate what we learn from nature and celebrate our relationship. It is necessary for all of us to stay as close to nature as possible: Listen to what nature is teaching us. Connect with nature. Experience it. Be part of it. Go to the park. Take a walk. Experience the trees giving you blessings.

This past year I served as a member of Earthkeepers, an interfaith group in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. The group addressed environmental concerns as a spiritual problem all human beings share. We collected 46 tons of household toxic substances on Earth Day morning—more than the total collected in the 5 previous years. In preparing for that day, I was struck with the familiar Bible verse, “For God so loved the world ….” We would not have the second part of John 3:16, “that he gave his only begotten son,” without the rationale of the first part, “God loved the world….”

Love of nature is central to Danish music. Consider songs such as “Evening Star” [“Nattens Stjerne”] by Chr. Richardt, 1861, translated by S.D. Rodholm. Every aspect of nature teaches us something.

Evening star up yonder,
Teach me like you to wander
Willing and obediently
The path that God ordained
for me!
Evening star up yonder!

Teach me, gentle flowers,
To wait for springtime showers,
In this winter world to grow,
Green and strong beneath the snow!

Teach me, gentle flowers!
Teach me lonely heather,
Where songbirds nest together,
Though my life should seem unblest,
To keep a song within my breast!

Teach me, lonely heather!

Mighty ocean, teach me,
To do the task that needs me,
And reflect, as days depart,  
Heaven’s peace within my heart!  
Mighty ocean, teach me!

Shady lanes, refreshing,  
Teach me to be a blessing  
To some weary soul each day,  
Friends or foes who pass my way!

Evening sun, descending,  
Teach me, when life is ending,  
Night shall pass and I, like you,  
Shall rise again, where life is new!  
Teach me, sun descending!

Or the Christmas hymn, “Beauty Around Us,” by B.S. Ingemann, 1850, translated by S.D. Rodholm:

Beauty around us, glory above us,  
Lovely are earth and the smiling skies,  
Singing we pass along  
Pilgrims upon our way  
Thro’ these fair lands to Paradise!

Ages are coming, roll on and vanish,  
Children shall follow where fathers passed.  
Never our pilgrim song,  
Joyful and heaven born,  
Shall cease while time and mountains last.

First to the shepherds, sweetly the angels,  
Sang it at midnight, a song of morn:  
“Glory to God on high!”  
Peace and good will to men,  
Today is Christ, our Savior, born.”  
Glory above us.

A Grundtvigian goal is to live a “plain and active, joyful life.”¹⁸  
We are not about equipping and concentrating on a life of competition against others, one which is geared to putting others down. Life is not about beating the other person. We Danes have
been criticized for lack of killer instinct. Perhaps by the end of the Viking Age, we learned there were better ways. Greed and a consuming ego do not make for happiness. An abundant life is not full of things. This should not be interpreted as exalting a life of poverty or failure that are equally destructive to the human spirit. But we need to eliminate the stuff that crowds our lives, especially when things interfere with a life that is plain, active, and joyful.

There is great integrity in working with one’s hands. Engaging in such creativity is available to everyone. Every life is both ordinary and extraordinary. Religion, one’s world view, comes from life; life does not come from religion. Living is real, not something artificial. We are part of community. We find meaning and happiness in our relationships with one another and in what we are called to do in this world. Consider “The Tiller” by Mads Hansen, translated by J.C. Aaberg:

I am a tiller of the soil,
A farmer frank and plain;
I love my home, its life and toil,
Its field and wooded lane.
There countless flowers are growing
In beauty rich and rare;
Mine is the brooklet flowing,
And mine the fragrant air.

When this song was written, 80 to 90% of Denmark was rural. Today, few of us make our living on farms. There are many more other paths in life now than when the song was written. But “The Tiller” can be a metaphor for understanding how to value ourselves and the work we do. We can achieve that same sense of who we are and what we do, both for and in our community and world. It all still fits. Consider some more modern renditions:

“I am an accountant in my firm.
I add and I subtract.
I balance books, I make forecasts ...
I sort the false from fact.”
"I am a teacher in the school.
I have a hundred kids..."

In the introduction to _Songs of Denmark_ I write that when Garrison Keillor spoke at Danebod, we sang “Happiness Never Depends on Success,” and he said, “Only the Danes would sing such a song.” Perhaps that is true, but if so, it is a wonderful compliment. The key word is “depends.” Certainly failure does not result in happiness. It takes a lot of ability to handle success. The point is simply that richness of soul means your happiness doesn’t depend on “winning.” We don’t leave our fate to having money or succeeding or in beating someone else. Our joy in life is not dependent on particular outcomes.

“Things” do not make us happy. Well, they might make us a somewhat happy, but that is down the scale from the kind of happiness that comes from relationships and from nature. This is a theme throughout much of the music. We do not depend on stuff or fame to be happy. This independence provides us with confidence, protects us from fear, makes for generosity of spirit, helps us see life as an adventure, and always with a sense of modesty, because we know we have only a piece of the picture. The Danish ideal for social existence is “that few shall have too much and fewer still too little.”

A great challenge today is handling the overwhelming materialism of our culture. Most of us don’t need more stuff. We need simplicity in our lives, and not _more_ simplicity, because that too can keep us churning in the game of “more”—just plain simplicity. As we become older, the sparkle of materialism dims. We can no longer afford to dissipate energy or time by allowing stuff to get in the way of what is so much more valuable.

Finally, in the love of life, there is the fun of singing for the fun of singing. Singing is energizing. “The Danish Hiking Song” is literally correct: “If your strength gives out, lift your voice and shout. You will find your second wind in song.” Fun songs, we always call them, such as “The German Band, The Crafty Crow, etc.” Or “I
traveled over sea and land in sun and rain and dust and sand ...” (From “Travelogue”) are energizing.

All of us need to be constantly learning about our world, ourselves, our history, where we came from, and everything we can about the future. Education must be much more than making a living, important as that is. Grundtvig’s idea was to educate for the whole of human life; the high school was to be a school for all people. Grundtvig, the “Father of the Folk School” was the champion of the movement to raise the intellectual standards of the Danish people. At a time when force was the principle resource of governments in Europe against the growing threat of revolution, Grundtvig’s message was that of a “School for Life,” which offered the ordinary man the opportunity to educate himself in order to take over political and cultural power in a democratic society. The aim of such education was not to “mold the masses” but to challenge and assist people to grasp their own identity and look after their own affairs and interests.

This was accomplished by the living interaction between students and teacher. After attending Grand View College, which then had a two-year program, I went to Shimer College, an experimental college based on the great books philosophy and discussion style education of Robert Maynard Hutchins. I learned from Walter Capps that Hutchins had studied Grundtvig, and I see the relationship. A successful class is an alive classroom, where together, students and teachers arrive at fresh insights.

The folk school curriculum was composed of storytelling, reading, writing, mathematics, singing, gymnastics, and lectures. Proceedings began and ended with singing. Students lived on campus. Great importance was attached to the constant discussion that took place involving both teachers and students. The folk school concept is anti-academic, anti-elitist. But knowledge of Danish history and the Danish language were necessary for a democratic state. It is interesting that Grundtvig was suspicious of sectarian folk schools; he had a somewhat ambivalent relationship to them. While happy to take the side of the peasant, he saw tendencies in these sectarianism efforts the opposite of what was “folkelig....” 22 Folk schools were to prepare students for life, not exams. A love of
learning replaced the cult of expertise. Obviously, there are situations in which we need and want experts. Our highly technological society depends on experts, but it also relies on the sound judgment of ordinary people who think, ask questions, and come to new understandings. While we need experts to operate on our bodies and build our bridges, our culture cries for a love of learning and a shared community experience.

Grundtvig was against imperialism of any kind; he espoused freedom—political, economic, educational, ecclesiastical, social, and cultural freedom! All human beings, by virtue of being human, not because they belong to one religion or another, can embrace justice, fairness, and decency. How can we build relational community in a world where there is great poverty, wide diversity, and ethnicity, a world that breaks down into acts of exploitation and even genocide? How do we learn to get along? We have learned we must not be naive. We must not allow our principles of freedom and regard for other human beings to be exploited by those who do not share a philosophy of respect for human beings, those who have total disregard for human freedom.

But how does one do that? The folk schools suggest some possibilities. It is significant that the folk schools were a crucial factor in the rise of a “conscious social class,” but not as the result of particular teachings. The schools talked more about happiness than indignation, more about what was wonderful in the world than what was reprehensible. What we can do, human being to human being, is to live in relational community. We can affirm Grundtvigian principles in our own lives. Putting good into the world has more effect than we will ever know.

To conclude, the Grundtvigian principles, once more, are:

1. Affirmation of life.
2. Stay close to nature.
3. The goodness and beauty of ordinary life.
4. Lifelong learning and education.

The presentation was followed by the audience singing songs that reflect those values. Some of the songs are included within the text.
Material attributed to Walter Capps was taken from audio tapes of his lecture series in 1991 at Danebod, Tyler, MN.

Ironically, Ostergaard wrote these words at a low point in his life following the closing of his folk school in Denmark due to lack of political and financial support, the death of his wife leaving him with 6 children, and his own impaired health. (World of Song, Biographical Data, Copyright 1958 by the American Evangelical Lutheran Youth Fellowship, Grand View College, Des Moines, Iowa.)


Ibid.

The resource for this paragraph is the audio tape of Axel Kildegaard’s lecture “Grundtvig Today,” August, 1998, Danebod Folk School, Tyler, MN.

A few examples follow: “For a state that is not pleasant or delightful to me must be to him also; and a state that is not pleasing or delightful to me, how could I inflict that upon another?” (Buddhism, *Sumyutta Nikaya* v. 353); “One going to take a pointed stick to pinch a baby bird should first try it on himself to feel how it hurts.” (Yoruba Proverb, Nigeria); “Not one of you is a believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.” (Islam, *Forty Hadith of an-Nawawi* 13); “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor; that is the whole Torah; all the rest of it is commentary; go and learn.” (Judaism. *Talmud. Shabbat* 31a); “You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Christianity, *Matthew* 22. 36-40).


For the complete text of this and other Danish songs not printed in their entirety, see “The World of Song” or “Songs of Denmark.”


19 Ingeborg S. MacHaffie and Margaret A. Nielsen *Of Danish Ways* (Minneapolis, MN: Dillon Press), p. 70.


22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.