

The Relevance of Grundtvig's Teachings

by WALTER H. CAPPS

My interest in this topic was stimulated by our proximity to Solvang, and through the friendships that have been cultivated through the years with various members and leaders of the Bethania Lutheran Church in that fair city. From the time we first moved to Santa Barbara, we have enjoyed the Santa Ynez Valley, and have spent considerable time there. But it was along the way, and bit by bit, that I came to understand the reasons for the community's foundations and the rich spiritual, intellectual, and educational life that is embodied therein.

I have had occasion, from time to time, to speak to this topic, principally in Solvang, but also in Tyler, Minnesota. In such settings I have enjoyed the support of listeners who find Grundtvig's teachings congenial. Within each of these groups I have also come to know individuals who have been able to teach me more and more about Grundtvig, and the traditions that his stellar contributions set in motion. So it has become an ongoing learning process for me, in the midst of which, I trust, we have been able to bring some revivification to the teachings, and to discover new significant ways in which they are applicable to the issues and concerns of the present time.

The interest in life-long learning carries a special power. Grundtvig affirmed that education needs to occur throughout the entire span of an individual's life, and certainly cannot be restricted or condensed into, say, the typical years of college or university life, or even the more expanded span of normal formal education. My own experience of teaching at the university level has demonstrated for me that some of the most highly motivated students of all are ones who do not belong to these typical student age-periods, but, instead, are persons who have come back to school after having pursued other interests for a number of years or are persons who desire education to supplement and complement what they are doing with the rest of their lives. Grundtvig insisted that the educational challenge is life-long, and is never fully satisfied. Thus, it is not altogether appropriate to refer to an educated person if this carries any connotation that the educational process can be completed. As long as there is life and breath there is need and hunger for education. If we were to see and understand it in these terms, the courses and programs we offer would more deliberately and specifically be oriented to life-cycle interests. That is, courses of study would become more age-specific, and education itself would become more sensitive to the spiritual needs and challenges individuals face as they move through the periods of their lives.

Secondly, Grundtvig's insistence that education occurs within fully-articulated cultural environments is an idea worthy of most serious consideration. Too often, it seems, education is understood to have primary reference to what human beings are challenged to do with the concept-making capacities of their minds. Too often, too, education is understood to have chief reference to the reading of books and to the mastery of books' contents. All of this is well and good, of course. But Grundtvig wished to expand the range of meaningful educational activity to include what is done with the hands, the senses, the intuitions, the bodies, the instincts. Education is not only book-learning but derives directly from body-spirit interaction in all of its forms. To say this is to affirm that education is directly related to the construction and sustaining of culture, for it includes recognition of the place of music, dance, games, art, theater, and other forms of creative activity. Grundtvig believed in the harmony that relates these various cultural activities to each other, and was convinced of the individual well-being that accrues to the recognition and practice of such harmony. Too often, it seems, we approach education as being directed by a set of procedures that can easily be extracted (separated out) from the workings of culture. Instead of extraction Grundtvig saw immersion and interaction. One is an educated person to the extent that he or she is a full participant in the complete workings of culture, and is thus in position to respond as well as to contribute to those same continuing dynamics.

A third enduring principle pertains to the compelling way in which Grundtvig understood human nature. As a Dane living in Copenhagen, he was committed to furthering and deepening these ethos-factors in the ways in which his fellow citizens conceived of and practiced their individual identity. That is, it was crucial to him that individuals understood what it means to be Danish, Christian, Lutheran, and, yes, even Scandinavian as heirs of the Norse mythology. But while he construed these factors as being something other than circumstantial and accidental, he never failed to insist upon the basic humanity that individuals share. It is for this reason that emphasis can be given to "human first," prior to the list of necessary characteristics by which individuals are known. The corollary that follows is that what human beings have in common is much more extensive and far more important than what differentiates human beings from one another. The theological point to be made in this respect is that human beings derive their identity from their creation as well as their redemption, but not solely through their redemption. The God worshipped by human beings is creator, redeemer, and sustainer, and the redemptive and sustaining acts are not called for in order to negate or cancel the acts of creation. Human identity does not flow from second birth, but from the work of the creator. Thus there should be respect for other human

beings, regardless of the special characteristics and circumstances that are attached to the fundamental fact that they are human. In my judgment, Grundtvig's is a version of humanism that is thoroughly compatible with Christian biblical faith.

A fourth abiding insight has to do with the status of words. Grundtvig believed that the ability to make, form, and express words is the capacity that most distinctively separates the human being from all other beings. It was from this vantage point that he paid eloquent tribute to the creative power of the Word, as in "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Anyone with such convictions is encouraged to pay heed to the power of words to bring vitality to all that they represent and touch. Before studying Grundtvig on this point, I considered words the way I would appreciate elements within an arsenal; that is, I was grateful that I had them at my disposal because in every situation I had real need of them. But since studying Grundtvig I have also come to look upon words as functioning like friends, for they become the most effective way for me to lend expression to who I am, and in this way serve as the primary elements within the constructive process. The native American writer, Scott Momaday, author of *House of Dawn* and other superlative books, describes our dependence upon words by suggesting that even thinking involves "talking to oneself." By such insights I am reminded of how thoroughly dependent I am upon the ability I have to sound words. But Grundtvig contributes considerable force to these insights by recognizing that this power that human beings have been given is directly rooted in that essential activity in which the Creator of life is most fully engaged. To be co-creator with God is a magnificent privilege. Indeed, no higher honor can be accorded to human beings.

Finally, the relevance of Grundtvig's teachings can be directed most significantly, perhaps, to his insistence on the unity and harmony of life. Some may regard such convictions as being pious or platitudinous. But when one considers the alternatives, the force of Grundtvig's insight becomes immediately apparent. Most of the descriptions of contemporary life call attention to the pervasive dissonance, dysfunctionality, and lack of coherence that is rampant today. That is, groups of people are at odds with other groups, individuals are at odds with individuals, and selves are even at odds with themselves. Of course, the alternative to this cannot be accomplished by fiat or even by good intentions. But any powerful resource that is available that might lead the way to the restoration of a fundamental harmony of life must be treated with respect since so many of the prominent forces today pull human beings toward disharmonies and disunities. Robert Bellah, Berkeley sociologist, has devoted several studies toward trying to bring the individual into harmonious relationship with the community, and vice versa. Wendell Berry, the

Kentucky poet, farmer, and essayist, has worked diligently to demonstrate that the wholeness of life requires that land, work, community, and virtue be in reciprocal balance with each other. Following the death of her father, Hillary Rodham Clinton spoke longingly of a philosophy of meaning wherein her political, emotional, and spiritual life were all of the same piece. Vaclav Havel can talk this way too when describing his aspirations in the geo-political realm following the end of the Cold War. And such views are congruent with the affirmations of many ecologists and environmentalists. N. F. S. Grundtvig could talk about the integral coherence of human life, but always on a spiritual base. Clearly here too his vision can constructively inform the current discussion.

But I cannot finish this brief sketch of such connections without offering a word of caution. Yes, it is true that Grundtvig's teachings are eminently relevant to some of the most significant challenges of our time, and yet the application of his perspective to present challenges cannot occur by mere transfer. That is, the task is not to revivify Grundtvig's perspective without regard for the historical circumstances to which it was directly attached. Rather, in recognition of these historical factors, the task is to draw upon the spirit of the vision so as to address contemporary challenges constructively. In a sense, this requires that we be as creative as he was, we in our time, he in his time. If he were here today, we can be confident that he would enunciate a vision that would correlate beautifully with the historical circumstances of our time. As we have noted, there are sufficient parallels and overlaps to make such correlations possible. And as we have attested, there are sufficient strengths in Grundtvig's teachings to render such correlations promising. But it is a task that still needs to be performed.



- Det er trist med disse halvtomme kirker, Pastor!
—Jeg kun nu bedre lide, de siger halvfylde kirker, Jensen!
—It's pretty sad with these half-empty churches, Pastor!
—I'd like it better if you said half-full churches, Jensen!