(This presentation discussed how the cultural values that are reflected in traditional Danish music are significantly pertinent to today’s world problems. The presentation was followed by the audience singing songs that reflect those values. Some of the songs are included within the text.)

In August 2005 we published *Songs of Denmark, Sange for Danskere Songs to Live By*, the culmination of a project which 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. However, some of our Danish songs are as beautiful as psalms. 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 Danish Immigrant Museum board and from living in several 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’ description of four Grundtvigian principles from a lecture he gave at Danebod Folk School in Tyler, MN in August of 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 US 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 as a Republican or a Democrat.

The title of Capps’ series of lectures was “The Future of Grundtvigianism.” 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. After Capps’ presentation I began looking at N.F.S. Grundtvig in an entirely new light, someone whose ideas were not only relevant but also necessary, someone with refreshing approaches for meeting current and future challenges.

<table>
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<th>Four Principles of Grundtvigianism</th>
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<td>• Affirmation of Life</td>
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_Walter Capps_

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 that they were in the 90s, and must now be considered from a more global perspective.

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<th>Major Challenges of Today</th>
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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 often manifests in a variety of negative ways ranging from self-effacement to hypocrisy. To clarify, I define 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, and can be 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 doesn’t have the entire picture.

A wonderful example of this is found in Ostergaard’s, “That Cause Can Never Be Lost or Stayed.”

That Cause Can Never Be Lost or Stayed
Den Sag er Aldrig i Verden Tabt,

Kr. Ostergaard, 1892
Translated by J.C. Aaberg
J. Nellemann

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 what is usually considered 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 a 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 that 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, they all 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. 

It is said that one can feel “Grundtvigianism” when one crosses the border into Denmark.; 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 populations 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, the medical profession, and the 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 (over 7000 people.)

It is all to easy to say, “That person is different from me,” justifying all sorts of evils, especially when it comes 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, this does not invalidate women’s rights to freedom and equality. From a more global perspective, how much 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.”

– Axel Kildegaard
Grundtvig emphasizes, the Word, the Logos: “In the beginning was the word.” A book did not produce Christianity; the Christian Church which produced the Bible. Christ Himself, not a book, is 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 1500 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:

**The Word**

N.F.S. Grundtvig  
Adaptation by S.D. Rodholm  
Aage Sorensen, 1940

With the word all things began,       Not the clever hand or brain       Can humanity explain  
Life in ocean, life on land:       Can humanity explain       For its secret is the spirit;  
With the word were man and woman       Only in the word we hear it,       Self revealing, heaven born.  
Raised from dust, created human,       Self revealing, heaven born.       Self revealing, heaven born.  
Prince of earth and child of God.  
Prince of earth and child of God.  

When the soul of man was stirred       Only in the word ascends  
By a breath divine, the word       Man beyond the life that ends:       In the word he breaks his prisons,  
Was in heart of man created;       Soars aloft to higher visions.       Comprehends eternity.  
This on earth inaugurated       Comprehends eternity.       Comprehends eternity.  
Human life and history.  
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.

### Principle II

**Stay as Close to Nature as possible**

1. Enjoy nature.
2. We are made of the same stuff; we are part of nature.
3. Listen to what nature teaches us.
4. God so loved the world … treat it accordingly.
5. We live in a world of incredible beauty.

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 of the 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: “God loved the world …”

Love of nature is central to Danish music. Consider songs such as “Evening Star.” Every aspect of nature teaches us something.

### Evening Star

*Nattens Stjerne*

Chr. Richardt, 1861

Trans. by S.D. Rodholm

| Evening star up yonder,        | In this winter world to grow,                  |
|                               | Green and strong beneath the snow!            |
| Teach me like you to wander   | Teach me, gentle flowers!                     |
| Willing and obediently        |                                                |
| The path that God ordained for me! |             |
| Evening star up yonder!       | Teach me lonely heather,                      |
|                              | Where songbirds nest together,                |
| Teach me, gentle flowers,     | Though my life should seem unblest,           |
| To wait for springtime showers,| To keep a song within my breast!              |

Carl Mortensen
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

Or the Christmas Hymn, “Beauty Around Us”:

**Beauty Around Us**
*Dejlig Er Jorden*

B.S. Ingemann, 1850

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.”  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 which 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 own 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”:

The Tiller
Bondens Sang

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 mind the fragrant air.

Principle 3 – The Goodness and Beauty of Ordinary Life
“The plain, active, joyful life”

1. Life is not about competition, winning, beating others, greed, or any particular outcome.
3. “A good world is one with only a few poor people and a few rich people” – Grundtvig
4. Happiness comes from relationships and what we are called to do.
5. There is great integrity in working with one’s hands.
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— 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.” Or "I am a teacher in the school”….etc.

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 what a wonderful compliment! The key word in the song is “depends.” Certainly failure does not result in happiness. It takes a lot of ability to handle success. The point is that richness of soul means your happiness doesn’t depend on “winning.” We don’t leave our fate to having a great deal of money or succeeding in a particular way or in beating someone else. Our joy in life is not dependent on any particular outcome.

“Things” don’t 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 Danish folk music. We don’t 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 own 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 called them, such songs 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”) These songs are fun to sing and 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” 20 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. 21

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, when together, students and teachers arrive at fresh insights.

The folk school curriculum was comprised 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. A knowledge of Danish history and language were necessary for a democratic state.

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 where we need and want experts. Our
highly technological society depends on experts, but it also relies on the sound judgment of ordinary people thinking, asking questions, coming to new understandings. While we need experts to operate on our bodies and build our bridges, our culture cries out for a love of learning for its own sake and a shared community experience.

Grundtvig was against imperialism of any kind—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 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 affect that we will ever know.

The principles once more:

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

1. Material attributed to Walter Capps was taken from audio tapes of his lecture series in 1991 at Danebod, Tyler, MN.

2. 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.)


4. Ibid.

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

6. 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, Sūnyutta Nikāya 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).


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


