

Hilsen ved åpningen av Human Dignity-konferansen på HL-senteret 25. juni 08

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Dear Friends,

Good morning, and welcome to Norway and the University of Oslo! It is wonderful that Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies has arranged its 2008 conference in Norway and, as such, that you can take part in the bicentennial celebration of the birth of Henrik Wergeland. To welcome this conference to UiO is a pleasure for me and an honour for our university.

Henrik Wergeland is known as one of Norway's greatest poets and lyricists, and viewed by many as one of the most important founding fathers of the modern Norwegian state. He held a social perspective that is still central today. Wergeland was a person of many talents whose life held many apparent contradictions. Professor Sigmund Skard once wrote, "His biography is full of the strangest detours and leaps; that is not the mark of genius". But, in spite of controversy and criticism, Wergeland left his mark in several fields—not least as a poet and as a teacher to the underprivileged. He was critical of the status quo and was an ardent supporter of the poor, the oppressed, and the persecuted. He wanted to see the underprivileged break out of their circumstances and create a better life for themselves.

At the University of Oslo, Wergeland had a relatively short career as second amanuensis at the university library. The aspect of Wergeland that the university most identifies with is his work as a teacher. This is not without irony because, rather than achieving fame as a university lecturer, he is best known as a teacher of the people. He was able to convince a national welfare organisation, "Selskabet for Norges Vel" to issue a series of publications written for the populace—called "For All". He handed these out personally to key members of many communities in this region of Norway. In the winter of 1833 to 34, he gave free language classes to the sons of farmers in Romerike so that they could read, write, and express themselves confidently. Years later, many of these farmers' sons went on to become active members of society. Wergeland was not just a theorist. He backed up his ideals with action and helped to convert knowledge—from a commodity wielded by the privileged—to a resource accessible to everyone.

During the last two centuries, the University of Oslo has worked—through teaching and the development of knowledge—to strengthen the principles of dignity and equality in Norway. In modern, democratic, Norway, everyone—

rich or poor—has equal access to university education. Social status and personal wealth are not barriers to entrance; admission is based on intellect, motivation and ability.

In addition to degree studies, the university offers a large portfolio of Life-long Learning courses. Some of these courses, such as those in dentistry or archiving, provide cutting edge knowledge to specialised professionals, but there are many courses available for people who want to develop their knowledge of the arts and sciences out of a personal interest. Whether students take these courses to improve their professional prospects or personal potential, we believe that giving more people access to knowledge strengthens society as a whole. In this way, we are carrying on Wergeland's commitment to offering knowledge and expertise to everyone.

The University of Oslo has also, in cooperation with government agencies, entered into partnerships with many universities in the developing world to build up academic institutions in those countries. Cooperative research programmes between UiO and institutions in developing countries have been beneficial to all parties involved—for both institutions and individuals.

The development and dissemination of knowledge is an integral part of civil society. Indeed, in the absence of free expression, the rule of law, or democracy, academic institutions may serve as the only bastions of civil society. This is partly because academics belong to a larger, supra-national, community whose presence must be begrudgingly endured—as almost every nation understands the danger of separating itself from the ever-changing, constantly advancing, stream of knowledge—and partly because the pursuit of knowledge, in and of itself, can strengthen the values of respect and inclusion. Universities are often at the forefront of the fight for dignity, equality, and democracy. Often, and in too many countries around the world, the price for this activism is all too high. It is, of course, possible to cite examples of oppression, persecution, and violent mistreatment of the academic community—throughout history and from the daily news—but I am confident that education is the engine of self-respect, of respect for others, and—with time—of justice.

One reason that the University of Oslo is concerned with academic freedom and the role of academia in civil society is that this university was closed for a time during the Nazi occupation. In response to unending protests and demonstrations, the local administrator, Reichskommissar Terboven, closed the university. Several hundred students and teachers were sent to concentration camps. It was an attack, both physical and psychological, on Norwegian society, yet it served only to strengthen the people's resolve to resist their oppressors. Norway also gained the sympathy of other nations for our plight. In the end,

closing the university was judged an incredible miss-step. Today, 65 years later, we still remember this dark time for our country and our university.

The struggle to establish human dignity for all people will be along as long as exclusion and partisanship are seen as profitable enterprises. It will likely be a long struggle, but I believe that it is a winnable struggle. Through communication, network building, public pressure, and access, it is possible to nurture human dignity through education. This, as I said, is one reason that I am so happy to see all of you here today. You represent a network of people who have come together to state calmly, confidently, and consistently that human dignity is a right that must be afforded to all people everywhere.

This, I think, was the way that Wergeland saw it when he fought for the right for Jewish people to come to Norway, when he supported the struggles for freedom in Poland, Ireland, and Brazil, and while he worked to educate the common Norwegian citizen. He understood, as many in this room understand, the value of diversity, fairness, education, and solidarity. It is often said that none of us can be free until we all are free. Human dignity is much the same: while human dignity is denied to any person, our own can never be complete.

I have seen from the conference programme that you have a very full schedule over the next few days and, frankly, I am envious that my schedule does not allow me to take part in more of the conference. Best of luck with the conference, and with your work in the spread and growth of human dignity for all people everywhere.

Thank you.