

Learning to see utility in futility

ATLE HETLAND

EN ROUTE

When I went to secondary school well over a generation ago, at Bergen Cathedral School in Norway, we were serious students, to such an extent, it must have been, that one of our old teachers (or at least we thought he was old) reminded us that entertainment and cultural activities are not luxury. They are simply essential for a healthy and balanced life. Lecturer Knag stressed that we should not just sit in class, read our textbooks in math, English, French, history, physics and all the other subjects. We should play games, engage in sport, go to dancing parties and watch movies, play music and attend art exhibitions, and many other extracurricular activities. We must have been boring and utilitarian and Lecturer Knag must have thought that we already had become grown-ups and sedate prematurely. He must have worried that we were about to lose some important part of our imagination and ability to think outside the box, or just do things for fun, explore the world and discover all that we had no idea even existed. Yes, learning to see utility in futility.

I am not sure that Lecturer Knag was entirely right about his assessment because not all the students were all that serious, and we also had an expanded curriculum in art subjects. There were two twin brothers playing in a pop band named 'Saft' (squash, in English), and there was one classmate who was taking classes in violin to become a professional violinist – no wonder being the grandson of one of the Norway's greatest composers. Harald Saeverud. The girls were all into fashion and film, admiring all the stars that were older and better looking than their classmates or, that was at least what we worried about.

Lecturer Knag's reminder was important though. If he had said the same to Pakistani students today, it would have been even more timely because every student seems to be so worried about getting good grades and doing well at exams, especially at secondary level, learning by heart everything in the textbooks in the overcrowded and quite stale curriculum. Unfortunately, not necessarily to learn and explore things, be creative and curious, but to pass tests. Are there some 'Lecturer Knag's' in Pakistani schools today? Yes, some, but we need many more.

True, we should conform and grow into the culture we belong to, but we should also be allowed to become independent and take time to make up our minds. We should not 'close all the windows in the morning', to put it in figurative or literary language. We should try to look over all hills and fields, lakes and seas, and see what is in other villages, towns and lands. But to do that doesn't mean we abandon our own heritage and the local culture, neither in the local community nor the country as a whole. And it would normally also mean that we stay with own religious and moral beliefs, but with openness and tolerance to others.

This was possible in the past, too, but in our Internet-age it should be easy and that is one of the positive things in our time. But we don't need Internet either; we just need some books, journals, newspapers – and our own ability to think, reflect, communicate and see and enjoy what is around us – even if we live in a remote village or deprived city neighborhood.

Is it not impressive that writers from small far-away corners of the earth can create world class literature – and that educational degrees don't always make us better writers or readers? It may help to have a good portion of education, but not necessarily all the statistical, factual and utilitarian details. What is more important is to have the rounded and broad orientation, the open mind, the eyes and heart for fun and creativity, and the ability to sit quiet and reflect. Perhaps the latter is particularly important.

In my home country, there is one great poet who (strangely) has become popular among young and old in recent years. He is *Olav H. Hauge* (1908-1994), with many books translated into English. He had just a basic primary school, and he suffered from some psychological illnesses, too. Yet, sitting on his little orchard farm overseeing one of Norway's picturesque fjords, he wrote book after book with deep, universal insights and wonders about life. He taught himself foreign languages, including some Chinese and Japanese; he was an autodidact and a world citizen living far away from the four-lined highways and hectic metropolises. In one of his poems he reflects on that; he says you stand at the centre of the city and wait for something to happen to you, because it must and should happen, it has to happen, even without any cause or own effort. We dream "that we one early morning will slip into a harbor that we have never known".

Young readers, too, find his short little words of wisdom, sometimes like Pashtu sayings or Japanese Haiku verses, tranquil to read in their busy and competitive century. They discover that there may actually be utility in some worthless little poems?

Jostein Gaarder is another important author. He wrote *Sophie's World* (1991), translated into over fifty languages and also filmed. It was the world's most sold fiction book in 1995. And yet, as the under-title says, it is a novel about the history of philosophy, yes, it is a textbook in disguise – and that isn't something one would immediately think would be of interest to young people, and not of utility to many. It again proves that there is utility in futility. We begin to realize that it is the 'unimportant' topics that in the end are the important ones.

But Gaarder is not only an abstract writer in the sky; he also writes and talks about topics of the day. Some years ago, during the Israel-Lebanon conflict in 2006, he created an intense debate in Norway after criticizing Judaism for being an 'archaic and warlike religion', and the state of Israel for its treatment of Palestine.

I believe it is essential that writers, poets, novelists, musicians, painters, sculptors and all other creative people talk about reality in prosaic forms, too. They create art, which we often think is futile, but they should also communicate in everyday language; they should be part of the contemporary world they live in, in their art and in their other activities.

It is through compassion and participation we all contribute, not through being aloof, looking down from an ivory tower or staying in our hidden retreat. But participation is multifaceted – and to be utilitarian, practical and useful is also multifaceted. To communicate in forms and formats, media and channels that attract audiences is indeed an art – and it takes artists to it. Surprisingly, the least useful may indeed be useful.

When the Islamabad Literature Festival opens tomorrow, just after the World Book Day which was on 23 April, I am sure there will be a lot to learn. But I hope it will be far from the education, research and NGO seminars that the capital has so many of (with such an overrepresentation of idle and retired citizens, especially from the army and diplomacy). I hope the Festival will not only be for the smart and famous, either they are writers or readers, or the grownups and elderly. I hope many who are a generation younger than me will come - those that Lecturer Knag spoke to and those he should discover the wonders of the world, or just wonder about the world, with all the mysteries and unanswered questions around us. The young are the readers and writers of the future. They will explore the utility in futility and just in their ways – and just enjoy themselves together with the rest of us.

The writer is a senior Norwegian social scientist with experience from university, diplomacy and development aid.
