

## Symbolism and reality

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Yesterday, Malala Yousafzai and Kailash Satyarthi received the Noble Peace Prize in Oslo. It was more than an exciting day for Pakistanis, Indians and people who believe in children and youth all over the world. Malala has become the world's main advocate for Education for All, especially girls' education and peace; Kailash for the same, with emphasis on advocacy for children's rights and rescuing children from child labour, bondage, slavery and abuse. Malala is the youngest ever to receive the high award, and she represents 'symbolism politics' more than practical action and results. Kailash also represents that, but in addition he has had a generation to pursue his ideals. He can show concrete results for his work.

In all what we human beings do, there are two dimensions, theory and practice, idealism and pragmatism, dream and reality, yes, even good and bad. Nothing can happen unless we have a vision for what we do and where we want to go. And then comes all the practical work, with success and failure on the way to paradise and nirvana, well, in that direction.

A generation ago, I was a student and young university staff in the social sciences at the University of Oslo. We were blessed with optimism, perhaps more than young people today, believing in change and development, correcting 'old men's mistakes' made by old men, and a few women, before us. In some fields, such as gender issues and the environment, achievements have been made. But in many other fields, it is the current and the next generations that must 'keep the fire burning' and do what we who are now getting old men and women could not do. Let us make sure we have the vision right for where we want to go and we what we want to achieve.

In my youthful years, we genuinely had many ideals right, albeit not well defined. It was often symbolism with little pragmatism. For example, we thought that war in Europe was unthinkable, and Europe engaging in wars elsewhere. We were wrong. We thought that the Soviet Union had many positive aspects to it, along with its broken institutions, but we never thought it would collapse, with its mixed success afterwards. We believed that the Western capitalism had many shortcomings, but we also believe it could be changed, to include betterment for the poor in the West and with fairer relations with the rest of the world. We have seen little positive macro change in the last generation. Yet, the West and capitalism have begun to admit that there are broken institutions and promises in the system itself, indeed in the finance institutions.

At least, though, in the liberal capitalist West, we can criticize the system and work for change. In other countries, such as China, the world's second largest economy, and also the other BRICS countries, it is more difficult to work for such change that is not on the authorities' agenda. In India, the world's most populous country, the authorities and politicians may listen, but due to corruption and many frozen structures, change is very slow for the bottom half. Sadly, in the West, we are going backwards in some fields, notably as regards inequality; it doesn't shrink but grows. Politicians don't seem to know what to do, or they don't have their goals right, their vision and symbolism. And the private sector lives its own life, separate from political and social responsibility. The so-called 'social corporate responsibility' (SCR) is mostly just window dressing, a form of wrong symbolism, which is diverting from real commitment to sharing with society and their own workers.

Some change has happened in my life time; apartheid in South Africa is gone; race relations and international understanding have improved; class inequalities have shrunk at the middle-class levels; and most

people have better access to information and knowledge across all kinds of borders without thinking of each others' status, creed or cradle. Wiki Leaks and Julian Assange, and also Edward Snowden, did a service to all of us when leaking documents about secret (and illegal) government activities. Yet, their methods can be questioned, and not everything should be put on Facebook, Internet and gossip-TV, especially not about people's private lives.

Sometimes it is shocking how ignorant otherwise modern and clever young people are. They have outdated values and opinions, lacking thought-through philosophies and ideologies. They have little vision and little understanding of symbolism. They live here and now, with impatient expectations for immediate reward for efforts. Young people, yes, all of us, often base opinions on scattered, half-backed 'Internet knowledge'. Right-wing European political parties, in France, Sweden and elsewhere, belong to that tradition, searching for enemies who can be accused of obstacles to their already high individual well-being in the Western welfare states.

The main reason for this state of affairs is that the societies, led by the politicians, have not debated the difficult issues. We sweep them under the carpet. We don't take time to formulate our ideals clearly. We have become so pragmatic that symbolism is 'out', only action is 'in'. We are afraid of talking about difficult issues, worrying that we may be politically incorrect. In politics, religion, cultural and social fields, we must find ways to talk together again. Essential is then that we also include those we disagree with, not just hold cozy talks among like-minded.

I am a strong believer in organizations, in defining ideologies and beliefs, and reflecting about where our journey should take us. We must detail rules and regulations for how to operate in politics, business, social and cultural life, including religion. We cannot always pull out trump cards from up the sleeves, come up with clever arguments off the cuff, and think on a standing foot. Off the cuff remarks may invigorate a debate, but results need concentrated efforts. So, I still believe in the symbolism from my youth, the focus we had vision. But today, we also need to pair it with pragmatism to get results.

In politics as in academic studies and research, much is about debating, asking the right questions and drawing the right conclusions. We must also learn to think; we must study and consider what others have thought and said; and we must search for solutions that can be implemented, not just remain symbolism – in Pakistan and worldwide.

And then, the day after the Malala and Kailash received the Nobel Peace Prize, representing both symbolism and pragmatism, let us wish for the two to walk hand in hand, noting that nothing is more practical than good ideals and theories – and that without ideals and theories, we can be swayed in the wind because we don't know where we are heading.

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

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