

Lessons across borders

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Every day, we learn from other people, either they are highly educated or not, or they are from the same village, town or city, or from far away. We learn from people meet, listen to on the radio or TV, or from voices in books and newspapers. Nowadays, we don't need encyclopedias and other reference books as much as before; we just Google key words and find out all kinds of things on Internet. The challenge is more to evaluate and select information.

It is important to have an open mind to new ideas and knowledge from own and other cultures, religions and cosmologies. Most people who live abroad for long, including the undersigned, learn to appreciate the land and the people where they live, not always agreeing with everything, but still finding a wealth of knowledge that enriches one's own 'luggage from home'.

Some of us develop special interests in certain countries, cultures, religions and so on, or we may develop likings for certain thinkers, writers, and so on, yes, even everyday heroes. I have done that many times in my life. And now, as I have just turned 65, I do have a big 'guest list' in my heart and mind. There are so many people and ideas that I admire from far and near. No, they are not all doctors and professors; my heroes can be from any walk of life; their lessons travel across all kinds of borders.

Today, I shall draw attention to a few great Swedes. Since I have learnt from them, I believe you will too. The first one is Lina Sandell or, Karolina Wilhelmina Sandell. The second is Jon Henrik Fjällgren.

'Day by day' is the title of one of the most loved hymns by Lina Sandell (1832-1903), who was a Swedish poet, hymn writer, theologian and women's activist – by example rather than speeches on the barricades, although the latter is also important. Lina Sandell wrote some 1700 poems, mostly published just with her initials L.S. on the title page. In her time, women were supposed to be quite invisible in public life. Lina Sandell married Oscar C. Berg, a businessman and politician in Stockholm, who was advocating workers' rights and abstinence from alcohol. He was seven years her junior, and it is said that she only accepted his marriage proposal after having thought about it for several years. The couple's only child died in childbirth.

Lina Sandell worked as an editor and writer for of the publishing house of the 'Evangeliske Fosterlandsstiftelen', and was in charge of children's magazines and popular booklets, calendars and more, with a wide circulation. Her hymns became popular all over Scandinavia, much thanks to Oscar Ahnfelt, who set her verses to catching Gospel music, loved by the people but disliked by the clergy at a time when the Lutheran church was a government institution; all visiting preachers had to seek the parish priest's permission to hold religious meetings. However, after Ahnfelt had sung some of the hymns to the King Karl XV of the united kingdom of Sweden and Norway, the king gave Ahnfelt permission to continue his work, clipping the outdated rights of the church. The 'Swedish Nightingale' Jenny Lind also promoted Lina Sandell's hymns by singing them in concert halls.

Lina Sandell's hymns were certainly religious, carrying theological messages for everyday people, beyond denominations. If there had been Muslims in Scandinavia that time, I believe they too would have embraced Lina Sandell's messages! Her hymns carried universal words of wisdom and

comfort in people's everyday life – recalling, too, that most Swedes were very poor people that time, sending huge numbers of emigrants to America, only second to that of Ireland and Norway.

Let us remember Lina Sandell today, her husband Oscar C. Berg, the composer, singer and marketing manager Oscar Ahnfelt, the sensible King Karl XV, and all the great, ordinary people who took to heart the messages in the unique body of hymns. We can only be impressed by the religious and political work of Lina Sandell. We can draw lessons across the borders of countries, religions, cultures, and historical and development situations. Lina Sandell, her husband and many others contributed tremendously to what later became the social democratic movement and eventually the welfare state. Religious and moral principles about faith and fairness were fundamental that time as today. No, Scandinavia has not abandoned religion, if you thought so. They have made it universal and personal, encouraging people to interpret dogma and traditions so it is relevant for each of us, today and tomorrow.

And then, let me tell you something about my second hero, yes, an everyday hero; a young man who belongs to the Sami community, the small group of indigenous people in the north of Sweden, Norway, Finland and Russia ('Nordkalloten'). He is Jon Henrik Fjällgren, a 28-year old reindeer owner and herdsman living in Sweden's remote Härjedalen's hills bordering the Norway. He is a popular artist who came to national fame when he won 'Talang Sverige' last year with a song named 'Jag är fri', in Sami, 'Manne Leam Frijje', and in English, 'I am Free', written by the artist and three of his friends, underlining some aspects of the Sami philosophy, that human beings must live in harmony with nature and people, and maintain the spiritual and religious dimensions in life. When Swedish TV broadcasted 'Daniel's Jojk', there were no dry eyes in any sitting room anywhere in the long land; Jon Henrik had written about his friend Daniel who had passed on very young, and he was drawing attention to faith, expressing hope that all pain was gone, that he was missed, expressing hope that they would all meet again sometime, in the life hereafter.

Jon Henrik Fjällgren was born in an Indian village in Colombia in South America, then called Montoya. He was adopted by a Sami couple in Sweden when he was 6 months old. Today, he considers himself a Swedish Sami artist, a 'Jokare', singing in the unique melodious Sami way, traditionally used to shorten the time when herding the reindeer animals. 'Jok' is said to be a 'song without words', yet, describing moods and feelings to be understood across all borders.

Isn't it interesting that Jon Henrik from the indigenous, minority culture in the highly modern and efficient Sweden can win 'Talang Sverige' and melt everyone's hearts? Isn't it interesting that a young pop artist has the courage to talk about the loss of his friend in such a personal way, and about his faith - yes, in secular Sweden where religion is considered private? Isn't it also interesting that an immigrant has indeed become a Sami, deeply part of the indigenous minority culture, and at the same time, part of the majority Swedish culture?

We live in a world when immigration is common, yet, also with growing intolerance, when secularism and materialism are on the rise, and when our individual search for happiness and success often win over our social conscience and solidarity with others.

And then, there are many great people in the world, yes, in our own families and communities too, who are not entirely different from Lina Sandell and Jon Henrik Fjällgren. I have just written about those two. We should look for such heroes and heroines in our everyday lives, because they are there. They don't have to be from afar; they are here and now; they have lessons to teach us, and maybe we to have something to say, too, in words and deeds, as we remember that there is greatness in every human being, as we are all created in God's image.

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