

## ***VIRTUES – THE TRUE FOUNDATION OF DEMOCRATIC VALUES***

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Teaching Democratic Values for a Sustainable Society was the exciting topic of the Values in Education across Boundaries conference in Umeå, in October 2003. We all know that this theme is of utmost importance. Its selection indicates an awakening general insight into both the dangers of a weakening democratic system and the promising opportunities that values education can provide.

If democracy has become weaker, it means that democratic values in some sense have lost their meaning and should be scrutinized. Furthermore, since many countries in all parts of the world are now striving for democracy, we must be ready to produce a trustworthy democratic model by strengthening its values foundations.

### **The Origin of Virtues**

This article intends to demonstrate that democratic values are strongly associated with virtues, and can in no way be separated from them. Virtues are the energizing force that keeps values alive in a dynamic sense. "Virtues are the oldest ideas in the world," is the simple description given by Linda Kavelin Popov (referred to in Appendix 3). Virtues seem to originate from the world's great religions. They are to be found in the ancient recordings of the Hindus, in the Buddhist scriptures, in the Zoroastrian and Jewish holy books, in the Old and New Testament and in the Quran as well as in the sacred writings of the youngest of the world religions, the Baha'i Faith. They have been repeated, proclaimed and interpreted by seers, philosophers, poets, statesmen etc. throughout the ages. The world religions could also be regarded as educational systems viewing man as a spiritual being. Accordingly they demand a high degree of personal responsibility in man to develop his character.

In Appendix 1 a few examples of virtues are given by quoting from some of the sources mentioned above. Such quotations, often called "words of wisdom", appear frequently on many websites, a matter that reveals a resurgence of interest in ancient wisdom. (These words, though simple, can actually be an appropriate tool in the curriculum of Values Education since they call for reflection, analysis and discussion.)

### **Virtues and Values Education in Swedish Schools**

For the last several decades Swedish schools have had tremendous problems with misbehaviour among students and bullying at all levels of school. This has led to an increasing awareness of the need to teach values and life-skills at school. Different kinds of values education programmes are launched. Some are quite successful, but still large problems remain at many schools. The work must go on and become more effective. Programmes based on conflict resolution and the training of virtues have shown good results in many Swedish schools.

## **Virtues Connected with Democratic Values**

The increase in crime, corruption, violence and the exploitation of women and children has gone so far that no discerning eye can deny an obvious need for new standards. Lately there has been an intensive discussion about the need of a higher standard of ethics and morality in society.

In his doctoral dissertation *Towards Social Well-being in Schools* (see Appendix 2) Olle Åhs refers to Patricia White who in her book *Civic Virtues and Public Schooling* (1996) mentions virtues that should be trained in democratic societies. These virtues include hope, confidence, courage, self-respect, self-esteem, friendship, trust, honesty, decency and justice. After taking a closer look at the values that are identified as democratic, it can be seen how necessary these and many more virtues are at this time.

For instance, the freedom of speech and of the press require a higher degree of the virtues of justice, honesty, moderation and decency. Liberty demands greater self-respect, dignity and respect for the rights of others. Liberty, so highly treasured in most societies, is a very comprehensive concept that ought to be more carefully analysed. It has been described as the symbol of the animal, which is absolutely free to follow its instincts and impulses. As a democratic value, liberty is of utmost importance, but it must be handled with great care and be balanced in its application.

Diversity is regarded as a natural and important component in most democratic societies. Once greater tolerance, understanding, respect, genuine appreciation of others and an ability to co-operate are well established, then harmony among the diverse races, creeds, nationalities and cultures can be made a reality.

With its many different aspects, equality is a core value of any democratic society. During the "virtues workshop" at the Umeå conference the participants were asked to name some virtues supporting gender equality. The examples given were the following: compassion, honesty, justice, respect, caring, courage, tolerance, fairness, self-sacrifice, love and understanding.

One might notice the apparent weakness of people's belief in democracy by their distrust of politicians. In many countries, large segments of the population even fail to go to the polls in elections, thus discarding their right to vote. There is a general feeling that no one really cares about people's opinions and that they have lost contact with their elected representatives. This problem could be solved on the part of political leaders by developing virtues such as stronger personal commitment, honesty, responsibility and idealism. People in general could also do their share towards developing democracy by showing more alertness, perseverance, unity and frankness.

## **Virtues Connected to Consultation**

Fundamental to a sustainable society is the ability among its members to manage a democratic problem-solving and decision-making. In this respect it would be valuable to learn the virtues of consultation. In a book by John Kolstoe titled *Developing Genius* (1995) the author discusses how to reach good results and synergy in consultation. He mentions seven virtues in this respect: purity of motive (no hidden motives), a positive

spirit (enthusiasm and a positive outlook in finding good solutions), detachment (being free from preconceived conditions) attraction (interest of hearing the thoughts of others), modesty (moderation), patience (for example as in listening), service (an attitude of service gives priority to the group over the self).

The definition of consultation by the author is something to reflect on in these times when there's so much harsh criticism, stubbornness, discord and pride, which can be seen in the behaviour of elected representatives at every level of government. They often disagree, even when it comes to urgent and pressing problems.

*"Consultation is a process of sharing thoughts and feelings through talking things out with others in an atmosphere of love and harmony with a commitment to accomplishing some definite, common purpose."*

The principles, attitudes and virtues of consultation, that can be found in instructive book such as Kolstoe's, is a way of laying the corner-stone of a practical democracy on all levels, in family life, in schools and enterprises, in municipalities, communities and other institutions. Consultation does not have to be limited to any particular group. Even small children could learn it by the help of talented teachers and parents.

### **Virtue Talks in Involvement Education**

The various kinds of "involvement talks", according to the Involvement Education theories as put forth by Olle Åhs in his dissertation are also a way of building democracy in the minds of people. These talks train its participants to listen with interest to others, to express their opinions freely, to not interrupt, to not be condescending, thus fostering self-control, assertiveness and courage. One natural out-come of the talks should be more self-esteem and a feeling of security and fellowship among the participants. Among these talks there are also *virtues talks*, where one discusses a certain virtue, starting by identifying it and ending up by making a plan for one's own practical application of it. On page 69 Åhs writes, "The main part of the structure for these talks has been taken from Kavelin and Popov, et al. (1993). See Appendix 3.

*Virtues talks* can also be a normal part of any family meeting. Children could easily learn good behavior, courtesy, compassion and love, which could be accomplished in an atmosphere of love, caring and good example. The family has been described as the heart of mankind and the smallest social unit. It could be a democracy in miniature where all those skills which prepare children and youth for further education and constructive work in society are taught. Unfortunately, today the family atmosphere is not always so ideal. The status of the family should thus become more recognised and parents as well as children should be assisted in all ways by society.

### **Virtues Connected with the Declaration of Human Rights**

Let our thoughts drift from the smallest social unit to the largest, the human race, the global family. As there is a rising interest all over the world for democracy, this is indeed the time for peace education, education of human rights.

A historical document from which we can learn more about values and true democracy than from any other worldly document is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). This unique declaration is a secular one, though it is still spiritual in nature. It confirms what the founders of the world's great religions proclaim. The first article of the Declaration states

*"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."*

The principles mentioned in article 1-3 form the basis of a view of humanity, further outlined in article 4-30.

Article 2 and 3

*"Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty."*

*"Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person."*

Since 1948 genocide has occurred in several countries especially in Africa and in Asia. Moreover, armed conflicts and various forms of persecutions have led to the displacement of more than 20 million people. These are only a few tragic examples of how the ideals put forth in the Declaration have been violated.

The reasons for this sad fact are complex, but it seems obvious that most countries neglected their apparent duty to inform and educate the masses as stipulated in the opening words of the Declaration, proclaimed by the General Assembly of the UN:

*"Following this historic act the Assembly called upon all Member countries to publicize the text of the Declaration and "to cause it to be disseminated, displayed, read and expounded principally in schools and other educational institutions, without distinction based on the political status of countries or territories."*

The failure of this great undertaking could also be seen as an apparent lack of certain virtues within the institutions and governing bodies of the member states including responsibility, foresight, idealism, faith, will-power and commitment.

Considering the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, which has been described as "a failure of humanity", we see a total absence of maturity in the world community. Even the United Nations failed at that fatal moment to hold on to its own solemnly extolled principles and values. Most blameworthy were the memberstates of the Security Council that withdrew their aid, when there was still time to stop the approaching catastrophe. Seldom was the total lack of compassion, reason, justice, trust, courage, duty and decency so conspicuous as in those traumatic days. Instead such traits as passivity, hypocrisy and national egotism became truly manifested. The question continually arises whether the decisions and actions of democratically elected bodies really represent the majority of people.

## **Virtues in Creating Social Welfare**

Since the Declaration of Human Rights and the whole concept of democracy also include social and economic welfare, the problem of poverty in the world must be fully solved, especially when it is now so clear that poverty is the most common cause of war and conflict. More knowledge in this area makes it clear that humanity is an organic unit, and that we in many ways are dependent on each other, just like a family.

We live in a global world and this calls for global solidarity, an ideal that requires an extra-ordinary supply of virtues among both the industrialized and the developing countries: self-sacrifice, solidarity, generosity, compassion, competence, honesty, responsibility, self-esteem, justice, unity and will-power just to mention a few.

The prerequisites for also creating welfare in impoverished countries may seem distant, but they exist and will in due time become fully investigated. However, the overshadowing requirement for making the road towards a sustainable and peaceful global society passable is education in values and character-building among the younger generation and a greater effort among adults to be better examples. The sense of being a world-citizen and part of building a new world order of peace, justice and brotherhood will also provide young people with a long-lost feeling of meaning, hope and idealism, that is hard to live without.

## **Conclusion**

Society would benefit from the inclusion of programmes teaching life skills, human rights, values and virtues as a *compulsory subject* at all levels of school and on a global scale. Strangely enough, in Sweden, it is not yet compulsory. The clear purpose of such an education should be to strengthen self-esteem, raise awareness of the benefit of developing one's character and practising virtues in daily life. Students must be assisted in this. School teachers and staff must be deepened in this subject. It would be preferable if municipalities, schools and other agencies also could offer courses in child education for parents and other interested people.

We could thus, step by step, become true world citizens and build a better world. This is the great challenge of our time.

## **APPENDIX 1**

### **Quotations about Virtues from the World Religions**

He who experiences the unity of life, sees his own self in all beings, and all beings in his own self, and looks on everything with an impartial eye...

*Bhagavad-Gita VI, 29*

He that oppressteth the poor reproacheth his Maker: but he that honoureth him hath mercy on the poor.

*Proverbs 14:31*

With chanting praises I present all good thoughts, good words, and good deeds, and with rejection I repudiate all evil thoughts, and words, and deeds.

*Yasna 11:17 – Zoroastrian scripture*

Without knowledge there is no meditation. Without meditation there is no knowledge. Sweeter than the perfume of sandalwood or of the lotus-flower is the perfume of virtue. Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings: radiating kindness over the entire world...

*Buddha*

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.  
Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.  
Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

*Matthew 5:7-9*

If you give to charity, give without grudging; if you are a leader, lead with enthusiasm; if you help others in distress, do it cheerfully.

*Romans 12:8*

Pay homage to God...and be good to your parents and relatives, the orphans and the needy and the neighbors who are your relatives, and the neighbors who are strangers, and the friend by your side.

Among His signs is that He created spouses for you among yourselves that you may console yourselves with them. He has planted affection and mercy between you.

*Quran, 4:3 and 30:21*

The betterment of the world can be accomplished through pure and goodly deeds, through commendable and seemly conduct...

Beautify your tongues, O people, with truthfulness, and adorn your souls with the ornament of honesty.

A kindly tongue is the lodestone of the hearts of men.

Say, O brethren! Let deeds, not words, be your adorning.

*Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*

Truthfulness is the foundation of all human virtues.

Do not be content with showing friendship in words alone, let your heart burn with loving kindness for all who may cross your path.

*Paris Talks, Abdu'l-Bahá*

## **APPENDIX 2**

### **Involvement Education**

Since the methods and strategies of Involvement Education deal with the question of virtues it would be seemly here to present a few facts about it, starting with a quotation from the doctoral dissertation by Olle Åhs *Towards Social Wellbeing in Schools – An Implementation Study of Involvement Education* (2002, HLS Förlag).

The history of Involvement Education, a concept used in Scandinavia and created by Nissen (1979) goes back to a form of psychotherapy developed by William Glasser in the 1950's in the USA. Called Reality Therapy, this concept is still used in the English-speaking countries. The term *Involvement Education* has to do with the use of the method in schools and preschools – not as a kind of therapy or as a method mainly connected with special education, as in "Education through Involvement" – the concept used by Nissen (1992)

Poul Nissen who was a psychologist attended Glasser's institute and translated his books *Reality Therapy* (1965) and *Schools without failure* (1969) into Danish. A few of Nissen's own books were also translated into Swedish. *Involveringspedagogik* was published 1979. In Sweden Involvement Education has become further known by a book by Olle Åhs with the title *Bortom bråk och hårt klimat* (1998, Runa förlag) and moreover with the dissertation mentioned above which is the first larger study of Involvement Education as being implemented in Swedish schools.

Something ought to be said about the theory of basic psychological needs, upon which Involvement Education is based. These emerge originally from the thinking of Glasser but also other researchers have given their share, among them are Alfred Adler and Aron Antonovsky. All these have a positive outlook on man.

In the dissertation by Olle Åhs four basic psychological needs are proposed:

1. The need for positive relationships
2. The need for positive self-esteem
3. The need for coherence and structure
4. The need for meaning

The teacher can help his students to fulfill these needs by actively caring for each one, seeing his or her potentialities, and making them conscious about the responsibility they have for others and how their conduct will influence the experience and feelings of those around them. This can be accomplished by deeper communication between teacher and children. It is here that the different types of involvement talks fulfill their task. They include open talks, conflict-solving talks, talks about standards and virtues talks.

The goal of the methods used within Involvement education is to foster sound self-esteem among students, create a friendly social atmosphere, train good qualities (virtues) and teach positive ways of solving conflicts. The methods and theories have been much appreciated by teachers, pupils and school leaders. The findings of Åhs' dissertation indicated that the method was successfully implemented in schools in Central Sweden.

### **APPENDIX 3**

#### **The Virtues Project**

*"Virtues are the essence of soulfulness. They are a great mystery because they are both within us and beyond us. An act of love, or justice, or creativity or any of our other virtues is essentially an expression of our spirituality."*

The Virtues Project is an international organization dedicated to character education with a holistic approach. It regards education as a key to transformation but it stresses the importance of developing the spiritual side of man.

The initiative to this project came about at the end of the 80's in Canada, inspired by a wish to strengthen individuals and families – independent of religion and culture - to develop spiritual qualities – virtues, "the gifts of character".

The founders, Linda Kavelin Popov, trainer and psychotherapist, her husband Ph.D. Dan Popov and her brother John Kavelin, designer, cooperated in publishing the very first book of the Virtues project *The Family Virtues Guide*. This happened in 1991 - within two months the book was in over 20 countries, today in at least 80.

In the International Year of the Family, 1994, The Virtues Project was honored by the United Nations Secretariat as "a model global program for families of all cultures". From then on the book, mentioned above, became more popular and was eventually published as a Penguin Book (1997). It has been described as a "multicultural, interfaith handbook", explaining and discussing the meaning of 52 virtues – one for each week of the year.

The structure for learning about a certain virtue and how to practise it looks like the following: definition – for instance – what is honesty? Why practice honesty? How do you practice it? What would honesty look like if... (simple examples of situations to reflect on and talk about). Signs of success and an affirmation of the virtue are listed at the end of each chapter. The affirmation in the case of honesty is worded in the following manner:

*I am honest. I have integrity. I tell the truth, kindly and tactfully. I have no need to impress others or follow the crowd. I do what I know is right.*

The book, which has the sub-title: *Simple Ways to Bring Out the Best in Our Children and Ourselves*, has been used not only in families but in all kinds of programmes in many parts of the world.

Another book of the Project is *The Virtues Project Educator's Guide* (2000). It is intended for schools and offers "character awakening activities and practices for Grades K – 12 to counselors, teachers, caregivers and youth leaders."

The five strategies of the project are explained in both books, here summarized:

1. Speak the language of the virtues
2. Recognize teachable moments
3. Set clear boundaries
4. Honor the Spirit
5. Offer the art of spiritual companionship.

The strategies are thoroughly explained in both books. Some short explanation is also presented at the Virtues Project website – [www.virtuesproject.com](http://www.virtuesproject.com)

For those interested, books and related materials can be ordered at the same website.

Note. The quotation at the beginning of Appendix 3 is taken from the above-mentioned website. It illustrates the spirit of a book written by Linda Kavelin Popov: *Sacred Moments, Daily Meditations on the Virtues* (1996).

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The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) can be found at several web-sites, among others at: <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>