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Grundtvig's Concept of Learning for Life: a Conference Report

Asoke Bhattacharya

On February 17-19, 2017, Kalyani University of West Bengal, India, hosted a two-day international conference on lifelong learning. The program featured eminent scholars from Denmark, India, Malta, Norway, and the U.S.A. who presented papers and participated in a post-conference workshop to develop a comprehensive syllabus for a Master of Arts degree in Lifelong Learning. Many of the papers and many of the ideas shared related to Grundtvigian educational philosophies and practices, thereby introducing Grundtvig into new cultural contexts. The conference represents a significant coming-together of experts of Grundtvig's ideas and how those ideas might be applied in global contexts.

In his opening address, Vice Chancellor of Kalyani University Professor Sankar Kumar Ghosh emphasized the need for lifelong learning in countries like India. He asked the invited speakers to deliberate especially on lifelong learning programs for senior citizens, since many of them had time and interest for further learning. Renowned scholar in the field of Lifelong Learning, Prof. Peter Mayo of the University of Malta delivered the keynote address. Mayo traced the trajectory of the concept of lifelong learning from its original broad humanist foundations to its current narrow economic emphases. In order for lifelong learning to properly serve its professed goal, Mayo argued, it must be holistic in its approach and bio-centric in its scope and purpose. It must embody the broad humanist goals propounded by UNESCO. The next paper was by Margaret Ledwith, professor emeritus of the University of Cumbria, U.K., Prof. Ledwith could not attend the conference so Professor Asoke Bhattacharya of

Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India, presented her paper. Ledwith emphasized the central role of community development which, in her opinion, is another name for adult education—an idea rooted in the pedagogy of Paulo Freire. Ledwith explained that neo-liberalism is a politics of greed-over-need, and she called for it to be discarded by lifelong learning practitioners.

The first plenary session began with an address by Professor Anders Holm of the University of Copenhagen (Denmark). Holm spoke about the life and work of N.F.S. Grundtvig and his contribution to today's field of lifelong learning, especially in the area of learning for life. Reverend Doctor Synnove Sakura Heggem from Norway spoke about what she called Grundtvig's "Heart Rhetoric," which she positioned as a key to lifelong learning. Dr. Marilyn Wilhelm, a renowned educationalist from the U.S.A., followed Heggem's theme by emphasizing that education is an art of healing of social maladies. Prof. Xicotencatl Martinez Luis from Mexico could not attend; he sent his scholarly contribution separately. Rev. Mette Geil, also from Denmark, gave some historical background for the first Danish folk high school and non-formal educational institution, which was established in 1844 with Grundtvig's blessings and encouragement, at Rødning. Geil described the school and its on-going operations. Prof. Mark Bradshaw Busbee from Samford University (U.S.A.) spoke about one characteristic of Grundtvig's educational philosophy, that is, his belief in the educating power of native literatures — in the case of Denmark, medieval Norse myth and legend — for the purposes of engaging the interest and passion of the people. And Ingrid Ank, Director of the Grundtvig Academy, outlined aspects of the Grundtvigian research and education being carried out today at the Vartov in Copenhagen.

Subsequent panels featured a range of papers. Indian scholars V. Reghu, Adinarayan Reddy, Prasenjit Deb, and Asoke Bhattacharya spoke on topics related to lifelong learning and Grundtvigian education. On the last day of the conference, these scholars gathered with their American, Danish, Maltese, and Norwegian counterparts to develop a comprehensive, Master-level curriculum for lifelong learning. Prof. Peter Mayo acted as the expert discussion-leader, while Prof. Prasenjit Deb, Head of the Department of Lifelong Learning and Extension at Kalyani University, and Prof. Asoke Bhattacharya of Jadavpur University, served as workshop coordinators.

In all, approximately 160 papers were presented at three separate venues at Kalyani University, presenters were treated to a rich variety of spectacular cultural programs, and scholars and students from three continents were engaged in mutual learning, much of it involving the ideas of N.F.S. Grundtvig. The conference and workshop laid the foundations for many future intercultural collaborative projects.