No fish pudding

Steinar Bryn & Michael Noah Weiss

1. Prologue

Steinar Bryn, the dialogue partner of the following dialogue, is without doubt a known and renowned folk high school pedagogue, as was his great-grandfather, Lasse Traedal, who established four folk high schools, while his grandfather, Olav Bryn, has given lectures in every municipality in Norway.

In 1973, Steinar was a student at the Nansen Academy after he had written his thesis in high school about Kristian Schjelderup, who, together with Anders Wyller, were the founders of this academy (see Mikkelsen, 2015: 2017f). In 1935, Kristian Schjelderup lived in Germany, and upon his return to Norway, he worked to establish an academy for peace and reconciliation. In 1976, Steinar came back to the academy as a teacher. Except for his time studying in the US, he has spent his entire working life there, with the last 25 years promoting peace and reconciliation.

Nansen Academy represents a somewhat special interpretation of the folk high school idea as well as of life at a folk high school. What is meant by that is exemplified in a somewhat out-of-the-ordinary project on peacebuilding, which Inge Eidsvaag initiated and Steinar led for several years. And it is this project, called Nansen Dialogue, that is examined more closely in the following dialogue.

Though the project is of individual character, it points out the unique pedagogical opportunities that folk high schools have in general and that are not available at other educational institutions. For the developmental process that happened with the participants of this project, the intimate life, which implies living together over a longer period of time, turned out to be of pedagogical significance.

Furthermore, in the course of this conversation, a dialogical room is outlined consisting of four "walls". How these four "walls" provide for a good dialogue is investigated closer in the following dialogue, which took place on Zoom on a grey November day in 2021.

2. Dialogue

Michael N. W.: Steinar, you have organized and run a peacebuilding project that we will take a closer look at now, in order to investigate the question, "What is good folk high school pedagogy?" To start our dialogue, can you first describe the project, its intentions, background and challenges?

2.1. Concrete reflection

Steinar B.: Yes. Norway hosted the Winter Olympics in 1994, with Lillehammer as the main site of these Olympic Games. That brought us into contact with Sarajevo. Sarajevo hosted the Winter Olympics in 1984, but in 1994, the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina was in full explosion. It was a brutal, brutal war. We at Nansen Academy asked ourselves whether there would be anything we could do. We had dormitories, we had dining facilities, we could free up rooms, and so on. With financial support from the Norwegian Church Aid, the Norwegian Red Cross, and the Nor-

wegian Foreign Ministry, we freed up 16 rooms, and, in the fall of 1995, we invited 16 potential leaders from the conflicting parties in Bosnia-Herzegovina. They came here for three months for what I call “a long conversation”. When people have a conflict, they are often called to a “meeting”, and the meeting can last for hours, but that is it. In contrast to that, three months is a long time. It is in fact such a long time that I, in 2021, have trouble even imagining what we actually did in these three months.

When we started, we thought it would be a one-year project, but it developed, it continued, and it improved. Finally, it went on for almost 25 years. Altogether, probably 3000 people from the former Yugoslavia have been on my veranda, here at my house.

Michael N. W.: I would say it is an amazing sign of success that 3000 people went to this “conversation”, as you call it, in Lillehammer at the Nansen Academy. Can you say more about what you did because a conversation lasting for three months is pretty much out of the ordinary, isn’t it?

Steinar B.: Before I say something about what I did together with them when they were here, I have to mention what I did before they came. As I interviewed and prepared them for their journey, I spent physical time with them. I organized and provided them all with visas so they could travel. During and after the war in the former Yugoslavia, cities were divided, communities were divided. Literally, in cities like Mostar, people wouldn’t cross the bridge to the other side of town. It was hard for people from Kosovo, for people from Bosnia to leave their countries due to the visa regulations. The possibility of travel was obviously an incentive in these first years.

When they came here then, I created and offered them what I call a *dialogue room.* You can imagine this space consisting of four walls holding this space together, like the

four walls of a room. Metaphorically speaking, one wall was *educational*, and by that, I mean lectures on democracy, conflict resolution, and Human Rights. Another wall was what I call c*ultural.* That is, we would go to many concerts in town, we would go to museums, we would do cultural walks, that is, visit cultural sites. The third wall I call *social* in terms of social informal interactions like inviting them home to my veranda or going to a specific place in town that we frequently visited. The fourth wall then was *physical*, like teaching them how to do cross-country skiing. And there is something fantastic about cross-country skiing: It is so difficult when you do it for the first time, but it is nevertheless easy to learn. So, the first time you do a three-kilometer tour you fall 100 times. However, the second time you do it, you only fall ten times. The third time you do it, you fall three times. Hence, the idea behind the physical wall was that people could get the feeling of learning how to master something, like cross-country skiing. We in fact started skiing in circles around the school …

When these walls were in place – educational, cultural, social, and physical – they created a good dialogue space. Therefore, when you talk about folk high school pedagogy, you can say that this project could not have worked that well in a hotel or at a conference center. Rather, it is the folk high school itself that offers this unique opportunity for people to meet other human beings as a whole. For example, one man, who later became the head of the supreme court in Bosnia-Herzegovina, had kitchen duty at the Nansen Academy. It was probably the only regular kitchen duty in his life, but he had that kitchen duty together with his enemies from the war at home. Living together for 24 hours a day and 7 days a week is something completely different from negotiations where you can withdraw or where you can sit with your mobile phone talk-

ing to your own people and then go back into the negotiation room, etc., etc. Contrary to that, in our project, people would even fall in love with someone from the other side because of the space that folk high school provide.

There were many incidents that I could mention, but the development pattern was that people arrived with an ethnic identity. And that identity could be very strong, like "I am a Serb", "I am a Croat", "I am a Macedonian", and so on. Many would sit together with their own people, and they would hang out with their own people. After some time, we would hang up a basketball hoop on a wall outside the school since we knew that basketball was very popular in the former Yugoslavia. It didn't take long, and the people would start throwing the ball, trying to hit the basketball hoop. And they would admire each other's ability to hit the hoop, independently of their ethnic background. Hence, they discovered that people could have respect for each other, not because of their ethnic identity but because of their other capacities and other aspects of their personalities. There was a shift of attitude from "I hate you because you are a Serb" to "I hate you as a Serb, but I respect you as a great basketball player."

Also, we would go to jazz concerts, and course participants would discover, "Wow, we both like Jazz." Some people even played an instrument themselves. The first time they played, the other ethnic group might not listen. However, after a while, you realize that if somebody is playing Mozart, there is in fact not such a big difference between the Serbian or the Croatian way of playing Mozart. They would also discover that there is not such a big difference between the Serbian and Croatian ways of cross-country skiing. And there is not such a big difference between the Serbian and Croatian ways of throwing a basketball into the hoop. Therefore, I would confront them and ask, "What is the difference between the ethnic identities?"

And they would say, “Well, you know, it has nothing to do with this, and it has nothing to do with that.” And so on. Finally, I would say, “Well, what does it have to do with then?” Actually, my personal answer to that question is that it has to do with loyalty towards your own group. To be Serbian means to be loyal to the Serbian cause when the Serbs are threatened. And to cherish when Serbs are recognized, for example, whether it is Novak Djokovic playing tennis or after a movie when you see the credits and there is a Serbian name among the credits.

However, there is hardly anything in terms of behavior or habits that is specifically ethnic. I can tell you many stories about that. Like one participant, who in the first five years of his life was a Serb. He lived in Belgrade with his mother, spoke Serbian because his mother was Serbian. And then, after five years, he was kidnapped by his grandmother and brought to Kosovo. There he became an Albanian. He got a new name, he got a new mother tongue, Albanian. Today, he is one of the recognized intellectuals in Kosovo.

I think the greatest success of our project in Lillehammer at the folk high school was that we broke down the ethnic principle as the only organizing principle of the world, so to speak. With this ethnic principle, I mean that people vote according to their ethnicity; they send their kids to day care according to their ethnicity; they marry according to their ethnicity, etc., etc. Even in Norway, we had these strange stories in villages that people on the other side of the mountain, in the other valley, would be more primitive. For example, that the people on the other side of the mountain would only have one eye, located on their forehead. These stories come from this troll mythology. However, when people literally meet, they realize this propaganda-type of enemy image that they have been taught at home, in schools and so on, is not correct. When the participants in our course arrived, they were so sure that their grand-

parents and parents, their politicians, their journalists and so on, were closer to the truth than those from the other side. They thought that growing up in Belgrade gave you a more truthful view of the conflict. However, the people in Zagreb believed the same. The people in Zagreb, too, believed that they would have a more proper understanding of the conflict situation. Again, people in Pristina would say the same. During their stay here at Nansen Academy, however, they would discover that their belief in holding the truth was something they all had in common and that they were all self-righteous. They all believed that they knew better than the other ethnic groups. During conflicts and wars, there is a dehumanization of the enemy. During their stay at Nansenskolen, they often experienced learning unknown parts of their own history from others. It was a process of humanizing the enemy.

Michael N. W.: If I understand you right, then these people came from different contexts – cultural and ethnic contexts – and what you did was to put them into a context that was new for them all. You put them into a school where they had to live together for three months. This living-together involved very practical and actually mundane activities, like washing the dishes, visiting concerts together, and so on. Would you say that these practical, mundane activities contributed essentially to the outcome of that project or to what they felt when they were going home again?

Steinar B.: Without doubt. I mentioned when people had kitchen duty together with the people they were in conflict with, then they had at least to cooperate with them when it was about cleaning the dishes.

Another example of such mundane but nevertheless existential cooperation is the following: Once, out of necessity, I had to put a Serb and an Albanian together in the same sleeping room because we simply did not have

enough rooms. The Albanian arrived early in the morning, while the Serb arrived quite late. The next morning, both came to me and told me that it was impossible to stay in the same room. I answered, “Yes, I understand that. We in fact had a problem last night. We were short of rooms, but I will work on that.” I think this happened on a Monday. On Wednesday, they approached me again, asking, “How is it going with finding different rooms for us?” I repeated that I was still working on it but promised that I would fix this. Then Saturday comes and I go to them and ask, “How are things going?” And then they suddenly answered, “Well, we’ll survive.” In fact, the two of them became very good friends, and they are still very good friends twenty years later. Maybe it was the joint process of trying to get a new room that united them.

Michael N. W.: In other words, the practical things we do in life help us to see each other from a new perspective. However, would you also say that these things or activities are contributing to some kind of peace building?

Steinar B.: You can definitely say that. You know, this is the so-called *contact hypothesis*, which is pretty well known (see Allport, 1954). In general terms, this hypothesis says that under appropriate conditions, intergroup contact can significantly reduce prejudices with the group members (see ibidem). There is a lot of research documenting that when people have contact, they improve the quality of their contact (see Pettigrew & Troop, 2006). Of course, one could argue that such activities alone are not enough to make peace in the world. And surely, they are not enough, but they are definitely a helpful step along the way.

So, what did Nansen Academy do in this respect? We created a specific meeting space that was not just about coming to a lecture and listening together. You can go to the University of Oslo, the University of Bergen and lis-

ten to a lecture, and when you leave the lecture, you have not necessarily met any of the other listeners. In the folk high school environment, this is very different. After a lecture, for example, you would hang out in the school's living room or you would go to a common meal where you eat together, and then you clean up together after the meal. The environment of a folk high school also allows for taking walks. Like in Lillehammer, you have many nice walks, for example, along the river or along the lake. And even on the main street, there is quite a cozy and almost fairytale-like atmosphere.

I mentioned to you the use of the physical space, which I called the fourth wall of the dialogue space. One thing that I deliberately used in this respect was the sauna. For example, there was one Serbian woman and one Muslim woman from the same town. The Muslim one had escaped earlier to Norway, so she was actually recruited as a refugee in Norway, while the Serbian woman was still living in their hometown. I noticed that they did not talk at all with each other in the beginning, and in the first few weeks, there was no communication between them. As it turned out, both of them liked to go to the sauna. Once, I went to the basement of the school and turned on the sauna and left without knowing who would go there that night. It was the two of them. The ice between them broke in the sauna, and not in the lecture hall.

Another physical experience was walking down the 1000 steps of the ski jump together. This was challenging; the view expanded the horizon, but you also needed a narrow view of the next step. The process of shifting views and the steep walk obviously connected people.

Singing was also something important. Back in the old days in Yugoslavia under Tito, Tito wanted to create one nation out of the different people living there. And there were three important practices. First, to teach everyone the

Serbo-Croatian language. Second, sports were very important. The Yugoslavian people were supposed to become the best ball players in basketball, handball, in volleyball, etc. The third thing, then, was singing. They learned and knew a lot of songs. However, when I invited participants to my home, and if I turned on the music too soon, nobody would sing. It was very much about the right timing and finding the right moment. When I found the right timing, they would start to sing, and then they would start to dance. And these dance sessions were just fabulous. I think I have rebuilt the floor on my veranda three times since we started with that project. There was actually a woman who wanted to make a documentary about this project, and she made a big deal out of filming the floor. For her, it was the evidence of co-existence, so to speak.

2.2. Critical reflection

Social and existential pedagogy

Michael N.W.: That sounds amazing! And now, when you tell me all that, I think I have a good impression of what this project was about. I can even imagine some of its concrete situations quite vividly. When we go over to the question now, namely, "What is this project essentially about?", then there are two themes that come to my mind. The first one is *social pedagogy* and the second one is *existential pedagogy.* Obviously, all of these participants learned something during their stay at your school. However, what was it that they learned – not only in the sense of mere knowledge? What was it that was at stake in this project, on the one hand? On the other hand, what was it that the participants could develop and take with them?

The hidden curriculum

Steinar B.: First of all, I think that we had enough time. We had time enough to wait for respect to be built in other arenas of life than the ethnic aspect. It might sound stereotypical because there always are exceptions, but it is very

hard to make Serbs and Croats respect each other as Serbs and Croats. To explain what I mean, let me use myself as an example: What is Norwegian about me? How much do I have in common with a Norwegian fisherman? I don't even know how to kill a fish. How much do I have in common with a Norwegian farmer? I probably have more in common with Yugoslavian teachers than I have with a lot of people in Norway. To discover that your ethnicity is so much less of your personality than what you think when you live only among your own people was probably one of the things that were at stake in this project. Metaphorically speaking, when you only swim in your own swimming pool, you start to think that this is the only swimming pool there is. When the participants came to the Nansen Academy, they literally went into another swimming pool. As an ironic detail, the women who participated in this project have learned that in Norway, yes means yes and no means no. They came from a culture where no could mean maybe. So, during the project, we had to sit down and talk about gender interaction. That means respect for the opposite gender, for both men and women. This is a bit about what we could call *the hidden curriculum*. A curriculum that is not taught explicitly but nevertheless part of that living experience at the school. People in folk high schools are quite casual. Casual in the way they behave, casual in the way they dress, and so on. In contrast to that, the people from the former Yugoslavia would dress very formally, while the Norwegian students would sometimes come to breakfast in something undefinable. I exaggerate now, but you know what I mean. Nevertheless, that kind of informal, social interaction, also with teachers, was a discovery for many of these course participants. Then, on the other hand, they simply knew more than the Norwegian students. They knew more names of rivers in Europe; they knew more names of cities in Europe, and so on. When they ar-

rived in Lillehammer, they brought with them more factual knowledge, while the Norwegian students could talk about the focus of their education being more on personality development and critical thinking.

The hidden curriculum I mentioned has to do with social interaction, self-image presentation but also with relaxing. I think the course participants from Yugoslavia were in a way shocked by how relaxed the Norwegian students were, for example, in the way they got up in the morning. The best word I have for that is the hidden curriculum. In order to make you understand better, I have to put it like this: From 1995 until 2012, I literally bought 16 beds at the beginning of the school year. So, I was responsible for filling 16 beds with students from the former Yugoslavia. We got permission from the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training to register these students as short-term course participants. Normally, according to the Folk High School Act (2003), you were required to offer short-term seminars as so-called open seminars, something we could not offer since we invited people directly. In the Folk High School Act, there was also a regulation that said only ten percent of the students who came from outside the European Economic Area were allowed. We got an exception from this regulation. Since we were granted these exceptions, it somehow meant that these course participants from the former Yugoslavia were regular folk high school students.

For about 7 years, we had these 3-months seminars. Then we became more well known. At the beginning of the project, we needed help recruiting enough people for each seminar. We needed help from the Norwegian Church Aid, the Helsinki Committee, and from the Red Cross in order to find people we could invite. And I would always travel down to the former Yugoslavia and meet them before they came to Lillehammer. That was very important. So,

when they came to Lillehammer, I was a kind of confidant, somebody they would recognize. When they arrived, some would say, "Oh, there is that guy that we met last month." After 7 years, we could invite, let's say, the mayor of a town or the director of a school. However, those people could not come for 3 months due to their duties at home. They could only come for a shorter period of time. The reason why we had this high number of participants over the years was because around 2003, we started with shorter seminars, like eight weeks, four weeks, and then three weeks. In the last five years, the seminars lasted for one week, but we could have 20 seminars within a year.

When we had these shorter seminars, they were more targeted. For example, it would be teachers from one high school because some of the high schools in the former Yugoslavia were divided. They would have a Bosnian shift in the morning and a Croat shift in the afternoon, with eight teachers in each shift. These 16 teachers would come together in Lillehammer at Nansen Academy, and the Croat teachers would not know the Bosnian teacher, and vice versa. The Croats, who had the morning shift, left and closed the building before the Bosnians came. I remember one specific question from when these teachers were in Lillehammer. The Croats asked the Bosnians, "Have these days at the Nansen Academy changed your perception of us?" And then a Bosnian teacher answered, "No, because I did not have any perception of you previously. I did not know you worked in the same building as me." Two of the teachers who worked in the same building had gone to school together as children, as it turned out. However, they did not know about each other – that they were teachers at the same school.

In Norway, we don't understand what a divided community is. A divided community means that I can today meet a 25-year-old Albanian from Pristina who has never

in his life spoken to a Serb. This is a little bit like in the South of the United States, where you had one toilet for white people and one toilet for black people. It is the same in Kosovo, where there are not many public toilets used by both Serbs and Albanians. Simply because they live so divided. However, this is voluntary. You can say that in Kosovo and in Bosnia-Herzegovina, you have areas with voluntary apartheid.

Michael N. W.: I see what you mean. Let us once again return to this term you used – the hidden curriculum. What you described about the seminars – even if it was just a one-week seminar – was that astonishing meetings between people happened. As you said, some of them were actually working at the same school but had never met before. And all of a sudden, at Nansen Academy, they could see each other. Seeing each other in the sense that they could not only meet but recognize the other, so to speak. And in this respect my question now is, when you use the term *hidden curriculum,* what do you mean by that? You already mentioned some aspects, like social interaction and so on. But is the hidden curriculum something that you have in the back of your mind like a blueprint that you can describe, or is it something more tacit that you rather can sense and feel than put into words?

Leading and learning by example

Steinar B.: The hidden curriculum is very tacit in the sense that we don't talk so much about it. In fact, we hardly talk about it at all. It is more something that the students observe and experience. In a way, you could say that the hidden curriculum is a form of situated learning in terms of leading and learning by example (see Lave & Wenger, 1991). In this respect, I can also say that it has become very important for me personally to have these seminars at the Nansen Academy. I had some groups stay in a hotel in Lillehammer, and that did not have the same effect. The

importance of being and staying in the building of Nansen Academy, to stay there with other students, made that hidden curriculum visible for the participants. Contrary to this, the participants missed that hidden curriculum when they stayed in a hotel. There, it was not visible to them.

2.3. Theoretical reflection

Strangification

Michael N. W.: What you are describing now somehow reminds me of a specific methodology in the philosophy of science. And here, I have to mention that a main question in philosophy of science is, "What is knowledge?" Now, this methodology I am thinking of was introduced by Fritz Wallner, a professor at the University of Vienna. Wallner said that in order to develop knowledge – knowledge, here, meant in terms of understanding and not in terms of mere information – you have to take an entity out of its familiar, original context and transfer and reframe it into an unfamiliar, strange context (see Wallner, 1992). By observing how this entity is behaving in the new context – and it probably does in different, maybe even unexpected ways – you get a better understanding of this entity. This methodology is called *strangification,* and it does not only work with certain objects but also with people (see e. g. Greiner, 2003). When traveling to a foreign culture, for example, one is leaving his or her familiar context and getting into a new one. In this way, he or she can become aware of his or her original attitudes, values, beliefs and so on. As an oversimplified example: Someone from Asia, who is used to eating food with chopsticks, comes to Europe and gets served vegetable soup (see Slunecko, 2008: 189). Soon this person will find out that trying to eat the soup with chopsticks makes no sense. In other words, this person is realizing that one of his or her implicit assumptions, namely that food is eaten with chopsticks, becomes obsolete. In this way, that

person gets a better understanding not only of the foreign culture but of his or her own.

With respect to this method of strangification, it seems that what you did in this project was to take people out of their familiar context and bring them into a new context, namely the Nansen Academy. In this new context, they would live for several months or weeks together with their enemies. Due to that change of context, you can become aware of who you are, you can understand better who the other actually is. You also become aware of the way in which you previously saw the other, in this case, your enemy. And by that, you may realize what is essential and not essential for you with regards to your own identity and the identity of the other.

The narcissism of small differences

Steinar B.: I think I have an example for that. And in this respect, I want to bring in Freud's *narcissism of small differences* (see Freud, 1991: 131 & 305). I don't know how it is for you, but I can definitely hear a difference between Swedish and Norwegian folk music. Someone from the Balkans, however, cannot. And I assume that if you hear music from Albania and Serbia, then it would sound very similar to you too. For them, however, it is very different.

There was one funny incident in this respect: Back in the 1990s, we would have a lot of that typical Norwegian food. One dish we would serve was fish pudding. It was at a closing ceremony before they went home again when one Albanian said, "Norway was a nice place to visit, but I am so glad that I am going home to a country where we have fish without pudding and pudding without fish." In Belgrade, they would use the Norwegian term for fish pudding, which is *fiskepudding*, as the password to get into their computer system … Sometimes we had this kind of food, and you could not really tell what it was. You could see the participants dissecting it on their plates, wondering

whether it was fish or meat. In fact, they made a lot of jokes about our food. And it was by means of such small, mundane incidents that the participants discovered what unites them and not only what is different between them. They had something in common different from Norwegians.

Another thing was noise because they were so used to noise. And when they came to Lillehammer and walked out in the street in the winter – the time when people mostly stay at home – the streets were empty, and there was almost no noise. It is a literally peaceful atmosphere. Experiences like this with the noise strengthened the unity between them. So, when they lived in their own bubble – when they swam in their own swimming pool, to refer to the metaphor I used previously – separation, difference and segregation were the norm. However, switching their context by coming here to Nansen Academy in Lillehammer, made them explore their commonalities as human beings when confronted with the Norwegian way of life, which was new for all of them.

These environments I am talking about here cannot only be found in Lillehammer. Almost all folk high schools are in a rural, almost isolated location, and I think that some other folk high schools do have the same potential in this respect. If we had done this project in Oslo, however, there would have been too much distraction. In contrast to that, when you are at the Nansen Academy in Lillehammer, it is a waste of money to buy a pedometer because you take so few steps. You just walk a hundred meters to the dining hall, you just walk a hundred meters to the lecture hall, and so on. Everything you need is in one place. And this is the same for most folk high schools. They are far from where the action is, to put it bluntly. I assume this also contributed to the successful outcome of the project because it made people stay more together.

I-Thou encounters

Michael N. W.: When you are telling all this, I think of what the philosopher Martin Buber defined as the *I-Thou encounter* (see Buber, 2010). By that, I mean that under such circumstances, it was suddenly possible to see the other not only in terms of an *I-It relation*. That is me and the enemy, and the enemy is something abstract. Rather, I and the other in terms of a unique meeting between human beings. This unique meeting, this I-Thou encounter, was possible because everything was reduced to essentials. By that, I mean the participants had this life at the school; they had their rooms and their beds; they were washing the dishes; they were singing together, listened to lectures together, and so on. Also, when you say that folk high schools are located in more remote areas, then this obviously contributes to a focus on the basics, on the essential. And it is this that makes an I-Thou encounter even between enemies possible. I don't know whether you agree, but this is what comes to mind when I see what you described by means of Martin Buber's philosophical approach.

Dialogical truth

Steinar B.: I think you are on to something. I-Thou is a meeting where you can say in a way that you are exploring a kind of dialogical truth. The problem with these groups that came was that whatever had happened at home, they had different stories and narratives about it. If the question was, who shot first, then one side would say to the other, "You shot first!", while the other side would say the opposite. Let me give you a concrete example: In 1991, there was a poisoning scandal in Pristina. If you were to fly to Pristina today and you step off the plane and ask the first person you meet, "Is it true there was a poison scandal in Pristina in 1991?" and that person answers, "Yes! The authorities were deliberately releasing poison into schools. Children got poisoned, and I experienced it myself," then you know you talk to an Albanian. However, if that person

answers, "Are you crazy? Do you believe in that rubbish that the authorities would poison children? It did not happen," then you know you talk to a Serb. The Serbs and Albanians have completely different interpretations in this respect. The Serbs assume that the Albanians know that they are playing a game. In other words, the Serbs assume that the Albanians know that they are lying, which is even a double loss of respect. "Not only are you lying", the Serbs would think, "but you are making up a story that is so sick that we can only despise you." The Albanians, on the other hand, think the Serbs were informed beforehand so that they could keep their children at home from school and away from the poison. For them, this was the explanation why no Serbian kid was hospitalized. In short, both sides believe they hold the truth, and both sides also believe that the other side also knows the same truth, but they are denying it.

After they had built up some mutual respect in other arenas here at Nansen Academy, the participants would talk about this incident, the poison scandal. So, one of the Albanians was telling how he experienced this incident. And at that moment, one Serb said quite shocked, "You really believe we poisoned you?!? Now I understand why you hate us!" Up to this moment, he was all his life convinced that the Albanians knew that the Serbs did not poison them. For this Serb, that moment was a revelation. By discovering that the Albanians really believed the Serbs had poisoned them, the whole conflict-laden situation between them and why the Albanians did not like the Serbs suddenly made sense to him. He also admitted that if he believed the Albanians had poisoned the Serbs, then he would have had the same impression of the Albanians as they had of the Serbs. This conversation was an eye-opener due to this trustful moment where they really listened to each other. If we had just come together to a meeting in Pristina to discuss this

poison scandal, it would just have been like playing table tennis, to put it like that. The arguments would have been thrown back and forth and back and forth.

Time and space

Michael N. W.: It appears that this was a moment of authentic dialogue in the sense of uncovering hidden prejudices. What I am still wondering about, though, are such "hard nuts" in terms of these very strong convictions and beliefs about the other, and how to open them up. You did not use a "nutcracker," to put it like that. Rather, what you used and offered was time and space. And by means of time and space, you were able to open these nuts. Or, in other words, by means of time and space, the participants suddenly were able to investigate universal aspects of the human condition together. Investigating universal aspects of the human condition, by the way, is a definition of the activity of philosophizing often used by philosophical practitioners (see Lahav, 2016: 20; Weiss, 2017). Examples of such universal aspects would be listening to music, eating food, but also love, responsibility, sorrow, courage, and so on – these are aspects we all can relate to, in one way or another. To discover that these aspects are something that connects and even unites us as human beings became possible for the course participants, not due to long theoretical lectures on the subject or intensive debates. No, discovering that became possible because of the actual living conditions the participants experienced at the Nansen Academy.

The role of caring

Steinar B.: I think that I can even add something here. Their idea of a professor was that they would probably sit in the auditorium, and then the professor arrives. He goes up to the podium, gives the lecture, then gives the option to ask questions. He would wait ten seconds, only to find out that there were no questions. Then he would thank everyone for attending and say, "See you next Monday in the lecture again." And then he would leave. A folk high school

teacher, however, is someone who literally eats with you. If you have a class before dinner time, then you would eat with the class after the lecture. A folk high school teacher has the duty to hang out at the school a couple of times during the week. There, you can just have informal talks with the students more or less about anything; you can have small talks, or you can talk about essential issues in life. A keyword here is *caring*; you do not only care about the content of your lecture, but you care about the students and their lives. For example, back in the 1990s, some students could be worried that they had gotten AIDS because it was such a big issue back then. And we would help them to go to a medical doctor and take a test. We would also show that this is not something shameful, but on the contrary, that it is important. My role as a facilitator in the conflict helped them to discover and see me as a person, as the human being that I am. I remember, in the first 3-month seminar, I was with the participants almost every minute. I did not leave them. That was, of course, very demanding. For example, when we invited an external lecturer, I joined the lecture with them, and I would be with them in the breaks too. It was sometimes even to the point where I was wondering what kind of breaks this program makes. Because the most important thing in this seminar was not the official program but the breaks in between. I recently asked a participant, What is your strongest memory from the Nansen Academy? And she said that you followed me to the washing machine and showed me how to use it.

If you have a 3-day conference in Norway, then people can come from quite far away because the country is so stretched geographically. Let us assume that the topic of this conference is "Integration of Refugees," and then you would have a very good discussion about the integration of refugees. The discussion is exactly why everybody came and why some traveled so far. And then the organiz-

ers come and say, "We are sorry, but we have to interrupt and stop this conversation now because the next lecture on the program will start soon. And the lecturer has travelled far in order to come here." The loyalty of the conference participants is then stronger towards the next lecturer than towards the discussion going on at that moment, and that is the actual reason they attended the conference in the first place.

I experienced several episodes in that seminar that were similar to what I just described with this fictional conference. My problem, however, always was that I never knew in advance when there would be a breakthrough in the dialogue process. I would have days where we did not have any plans, but we just had an open dialogue. Often, in the first half an hour, nothing really happens. And in that moment, it is easy to give up. You could then just suggest, "Let's take a walk", or "Let's see a movie", or just "Let's do something else." However, when I had the guts to hang in there a little longer, then often somebody would suddenly break the ice by simply sharing something that was important for that person.

As an example: One day we had scheduled a trip to a museum in Lillehammer. We had booked a guide for 1 p. m. Not long before we left, we were close to one of these breakthroughs in the dialogue. And all of a sudden, my colleague opened the door to the lecture hall and said, "Steinar, we have to hurry because we have to go to this museum." I replied, "Well, we cannot go there now. We are in the middle of an honest and serious conversation." And then my colleague says, "But the taxi is already here." So, I asked her, "Are you crazy? Is the taxi driver more important than this process here? Pay the taxi driver and the tour guide, but we cannot stop this conversation here." Making decisions like that was experienced as controver-

sial. Conflicting loyalties could cause irritation when we came too late to the meals.

We would also sometimes have conferences at the Nansen Academy where we would struggle with whether to progress according to the program or whether to progress according to the process in the room.

Learning about life cannot be squeezed into a curriculum

Michael N. W.: And here, to me, you mention something quite important with this example of the taxi driver and the tour guide. Today, in the conventional school system, it would be unthinkable to send away the taxi driver and cancel the tour. In a quite general sense, you stick not only to the rules but also to the schedule; that is, you stick to the official curriculum in the conventional education system. Whatever the official curriculum requires from you as the teacher, you stick to it. However, what you just suggested with your example is that actual learning as a human being in terms of learning about life cannot be squeezed into a curriculum. That is, into an official plan or schedule. Rather – if I understood you right – you say that things happen, and when they happen, you want to let them happen and unfold instead of just cutting them off. And such an attitude I read as a critique of the common pedagogy, which is so widespread today. In this pedagogy it is almost impossible that you don't stick to the curriculum because if you do that, you get a problem with your rector, with the parents, with the authorities.

The difference between the instrumental and the relational approach

Steinar B.: And it is not only the teacher. What you just described I call the *difference between the instrumental and the relational approach*. I am actually even lecturing about this at the police academy because the police are often forced to be instrumental. By instrumental, I mean following the handbook, like "Follow the 10 steps", and so on. If policemen make a mistake, as it, for example, happened in the terror attack in Kongsberg, someone will immediately

check whether these policemen followed the routines and whether they performed the right steps. If you, as a policeman, just use common sense and you make a mistake, you are in deep trouble.

My wife is a medical doctor, and she is facing the same challenge. Her common sense is sometimes telling her something because she has a very thorough experience with diagnostics. However, if she uses her common sense and she makes a mistake, then she gets a big problem too. That is exactly why we made all these rules and frameworks. We developed this instrumental approach so that common sense would not take over, and, in that way, we would avoid mistakes – that is the idea behind this instrumental approach. The point, however, is: A lot of people use their common sense, and they make the right decisions. In order to do so, you need to be trained in what Aristotle called practical wisdom (see e. g. Gadamer, 2004: 18f; Heidegger, 1997: 39; Biesta, 2015).

In general words, you could say we are all 'schedulized' – we follow the schedule. It is so hard for us to break free from it. It is so hard for us to just say, "Let's do something else today." In a folk high school, you still have this freedom – the freedom to follow the process and not only a predefined procedure. You don't need to follow the schedule.

Phronesis and pedagogical freedom

Michael N. W.: There was one thing that you just said that made me wonder. You brought up Aristotle's idea of practical wisdom, and you also mentioned the freedom to follow the process. With regards to that, I am wondering about the following question: Is it only to follow the process or, actually, the freedom to follow your practical wisdom (*phronesis*)? And with phronesis, which some also translate as prudence, I mean to know what to do in a given situation with regards to the good life overall (see Weiss, 2021: 248). In

other words, in the example you gave about the taxi driver and the tour guide, you realized what the situation required in which you found yourself in. You had an unexpected but important dialogue going on, and you were very close to a breakthrough. All of a sudden, your colleague comes in and tells you that you have to leave for the tour to the museum now, while your practical wisdom tells you, "No, don't do that!" The folk high school approach to education gives you the pedagogical freedom to say no and the pedagogical freedom to follow your phronesis. What do you think about that?

Phronesis and intuition

Steinar B.: I think what you said is pretty accurate. Instead of phronesis, you could maybe also use the word *intuition* (see e. g. Bajwa et al., 2015). And intuition is more than an educated guess because when you work with this process-oriented pedagogical approach all the time, you start to sense when you will have a breakthrough in the conversation. You start to know when you have succeeded with that, which is the main goal, that is, to create an open atmosphere in which people start to speak more freely and honestly about those powerful experiences. When those breakthroughs happen, it would be so stupid to let them slip away by saying, "OK, we'll continue this conversation later." The fact is, you cannot continue this conversation later because you cannot recreate that moment. Having this freedom to not stop the conversation is one of those aspects that made the whole thing a more successful project – because it took place at a folk high school. This is also why I think the folk high schools, more than others, need to fight to resist the instrumentalization going on in other educational institutions.

In this respect, I can tell you about another conflict that I had going on for quite some time. It had to do with the meals. We always had dinner at 2:30 p. m. If I came to the

dining hall with my group at 2:45 p. m., it was perceived as disrespectful towards the people working in the kitchen, not necessarily by the kitchen staff but by others. They need enough time to clean up and close in order to pick up their kids from kindergarten on time. It is easy for me to understand that their right to leave work on time is as important as whatever I am working on. But still, it was not a given that the kitchen schedule should overrule the conversation we had going on because these people had travelled all the way from the Balkans in order to have this conversation. If we invite them to dialogue and then we stop the dialogue because we are supposed to go and eat, then this does not seem right. I have to admit that this particular and concrete problem grew a little bit out of proportion. Probably for a while, I was perceived as someone who thought that my project and what I was working on were more important than other people's work at the school. I could have been better in using dialog in the conversation with my own colleagues.

Unpredictable pedagogical approaches

Michael N. W.: This leads us to the point where you either can say, "I, with my project, stick to the rules of the kitchen because I also understand those working there." Or you could ask, "How can we find a way that fits both of us?" With the latter, you would, of course, try to change institutionalized limitations. So, here we are talking about flexibility. Flexibility takes a lot of effort from all involved; it takes an effort from those working in the kitchen; it takes an effort from you. And again, it takes planning to make this work out. However, when it comes to such pedagogical processes, can we ever say something about these processes in advance – because obviously we cannot plan them?

When we apply a scientific method, then we expect a certain outcome because the method is standardized and

applied under similar circumstances; the method should lead to similar results. Otherwise, we would not acknowledge this method to be scientific. In contrast to that, the pedagogical approach you described now is not predictable. Therefore, the question is, how can we deal with an unpredictable approach? For some pedagogues, working with an unpredictable approach would sound almost a bit dangerous.

Dialogue is not cozy talk

Steinar B.: Some of those things that I found really worked became almost instrumental for me after a while. For example, in the beginning, it was very important for me to go to the airport and welcome the participants when they arrived. When we started to have these one-week seminars, that was too much for me. I could not go to the airport every time. However, I made a big effort to greet them when they arrived at the Nansen Academy. There would be a minibus bringing them from the airport to the school, and I would stand there and welcome them. Even if it was 2:30 a.m., I would be there. In one way, this was kind of an instrumental act from my side because I always made sure to greet them. Then you can say, in the dialogue itself, unpredictable things can happen. And if there is something we have learned – and this is a discussion I had with many international organizations working with peacebuilding – then it is this: Let's say I come in April to an organization and tell them, "Look, this is the situation. Here, we have a breakthrough. And if we do this and that, it will have this and that potential outcome, and the work is worthwhile." They would then reply, "Steinar, we agree with you. However, what you suggest would blow our budget. There is no way we can do it." I started to realize that these organizations are so focused on their annual financial plan as well as on their annual report. If they can report that they did what they had planned, then it has been a successful

year. In other words, they would stay within the limits of their budget, and they would just do the projects that had been planned in January. This is how they defined success. However, in April, May and June, it was something completely different. According to practical wisdom, they should have done the project I suggested, but that was not foreseen in January, for obvious reasons, nor was it criticized in December, for obvious reasons. Therefore, what was then presented as a success is not really a success due to a lot of missed opportunities during the year that did not find their way into the budget.

To be honest, what I am saying now is not something radical. The whole world learned at the beginning of 2020 what a waste the strategic planning was that was done in January of that year. When the pandemic arrived, everything had to be changed. One reason for our suffering is probably that as a society, we were too slow. We were too slow to make the necessary changes because our plans were pointing into another direction.

Another reason why the process-oriented approach is despised by some is the following: Once a diplomat said to me, "Steinar, you know the problem with dialogue is that it is too womanish." What he meant by that was that dialogue was not perceived as difficult talk. My experience, though, tells me something else because I have many memories of dialogues that were difficult talks. I know that there is this image that dialogue is cozy talk, like people coming together on a beach or in the mountains, and they have a good time together. To me, this image is completely wrong. Nevertheless, this wrong image also goes together with the assumption that some have, namely, that dialogue is something benefiting those in power. For example, they would assume that Israel has nothing to lose by getting into dialogue with Palestine, while the Palestinians might have something to lose because they will not gain anything but

a conversation, while what they actually need is change. However, my experience is the opposite. Let's take an example: We had a meeting in Lillehammer between the county of South Trøndelag and the South-Sami people. Before the meeting, the Sami people would say, "There is no point for us to attend this meeting because the other side will not listen to us anyway. They haven't listened to us for hundreds of years." So, I argued, "OK, but what can you lose?" So, finally, they came, and at that meeting, there is a municipality adviser from Rennebu municipality. And she says, "I did not know there were Sami people living in my municipality." So, through participating in this meeting, the Sami people made themselves visible.

I have had a similar experience with Palestinians and Israelis where the Palestinians said, "No, we will not come and talk to the Israelis because this means to honor and to respect them in a way we don't." In one case, I came down to Bethlehem, I sat down with the Palestinians for one day, and I asked them, "Do you think the other side knows the truth about your life? Do you think their teachers speak the truth? Do you think their politicians speak the truth, their grandparents and parents?" The answer was a clear "No." So I asked, "Well, shouldn't somebody tell them?" And here they replied, "Of course!" "Great" I replied, "because this is what I am inviting you to – dialogue!" They thought dialogue was what was going on in Camp David, in the sense of some kind of political talk where you defend your positions.

Michael N. W.: To round up our dialogue: What you are saying now is that there is a certain value in dialogue, even if the dialogue does not yield a solution to a conflict.

The moral compass

Steinar B.: Yes, absolutely. The value of a dialogue is that you better understand the logic of the other, which previously was not logical to you. Sometimes I use the word

moral compass because what is dividing people is not an ethnic difference, like Norwegians and Swedes, but we as people have different moral compasses. To divide between *us* and *them* is a common phenomenon of being human; you find this phenomenon all over the world. And this is not a problem in itself. The problem first occurs when *we* have a conflict with *them*. For when we have a conflict with them, we are sure we are right, and they are wrong. Sometimes I argue with my wife; however, I never argue with her if I think I am wrong. I only argue with my wife when I think I am right. This self-righteousness is often based on our own moral compass. For example, a very common moral compass in Norway is the "Law of Cardamom Town," which in simple terms reads: *Care for others and don't bother them.* Then there is another moral compass: Oppression for liberation. But when you fight oppression, you have to bother the oppressors. You have to do harm to people. These are two moral compasses in conflict. Nevertheless, whether you have the one compass or the other, you want to go North. That is, you want to do the right thing. Therefore, when we judge other people based on our moral compass, we kind of misjudge them because we put our own compass inside them instead of trying to understand what compass they have. A compass can be about loyalty and betrayal – a compass that is very widespread in the Balkans. As I said previously, to be a Serb means to be loyal to the Serbs. It means to cheer for them when they play soccer against Portugal, for example. To be a traitor is the worst for them. If you crossed a bridge in the former Yugoslavia to the other side where the enemy lived, you were watched by bridge watchers, and you could eventually get beaten up when you came back. For what did you do on the other side? And why is it so dangerous to go to the other side? Probably because you could discover that they don't only have one eye on their forehead, to use

this old Norwegian myth, but they actually have two eyes; they are normal. A few times in Lillehammer, I said to the course participants ironically, "We are like a Quisling school; we make you traitors. And when you come back home, you have a different perception of the enemy. People will confront you." That was the reason why we built up Nansen Dialogue Centers in the Western Balkans. It was previous seminar participants from Lillehammer who established these dialogue centers, and at one point, we even had ten of these centers there. Around 50 people who worked for twenty years. Altogether, that is 1000 years of peace work coming out of one folk high school.

Michael N. W.: That is amazing indeed! Steinar, I think this is a good point to stop the dialogue here. Thank you very much for the conversation.

3. Epilogue

In the course of the previous dialogue, different aspects and examples of a peacebuilding project carried out at Nansen Academy were presented and reflected upon. In this project, people from conflicting parties in the former Yugoslavia were invited to stay at the academy for a longer period of time. As it turned out, the rather remote location of this folk high school and the everyday life there, which was rather reduced to the essentials, contributed centrally to the success of the project. The participants could learn to meet each other on a personal level, seeing beyond their conflicting differences and rather encountering each other as human beings. In order to facilitate this sort of encounter, in terms of Martin Buber's I-Thou relation (Buber, 2010), Steinar opened what he called a dialogical room. This room emerged – metaphorically speaking – by establishing four walls: an educational, a cultural, a social and

a physical one. The educational wall consisted of lectures and seminars on democracy, conflict resolution, etc.; the cultural wall was about visiting concerts, exhibitions and the like; the social wall meant going out for a coffee together, meeting on Steinar's veranda and having a dance evening, and so on; and finally, the physical wall was about physical activities like cross-country skiing. The dialogical space that arose due to and in between these various activities was of a rather informal character. However, due to its nature, this dialogical space gave the participants the chance to meet on a personal and existential level. On that level, they could learn about each other's moral compasses in terms of the logic behind their values and beliefs, something that fostered mutual understanding – and sometimes even friendships – in the further course of the project. In the course of the dialogue, it was pointed out that the developmental process the participants went through would not have been possible if one had used an instrumental pedagogical approach, that is, just applied certain methods and techniques. Learning about life cannot be squeezed into a curriculum, as it was mentioned in the dialogue. Instead, the success of this project was due to a relational approach, where the relational situations that occurred spontaneously between the participants formed the "playground" for pedagogical interventions by the pedagogue. These interventions could not be planned for since the relational situations in which they were practiced came up unexpectedly. Hence, good folk high school pedagogy in this case essentially depended on the pedagogue's intuition, that is, on the way one responds to these unexpected situations, that is, an ability to act and react to what one is confronted with in a prudent and mindful manner.

References

Allport, G. W. (1954): *The nature of prejudice*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books.

Bajwa, S. U., Kitchlew, N., Shahzad, K. & Rehman, K. U. (2015): "Brief Communication: Phronesis Knowledge as Enabler of Intuitive Decision Making." In: *Knowledge Organization*, 42(1).

Biesta, G.J.J. (2015): "How does a competent teacher become a good teacher? On judgement, wisdom and virtuosity in teaching and teacher education." In: Heilbronn, R. & Foreman-Peck, L. (eds.): *Philosophical perspectives on the future of teacher education.* Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.

Buber, Martin (2010): *I and Thou*. Mansfield Center, CT: Martino Publishing.

Freud, S. (1991): *12. Civilization, Society and Religion*. New York, NY: Penguin.

Gadamer, H.-G. (2004): Truth and Method. 2nd revised edition. London / New York, NY: Continuum.

Greiner, K. (2003): "Vacation, Strangification and Self-Knowledge – Versuch einer Epistemologischen Verhältnisbestimmung von Alltag und Urlaub." In: Greiner, K. & Wallner, F. (eds.) (2003): *Konstruktion und Erziehung. Zum Verhältnis von konstruktivistischem Denken und pädagogischen Intentionen*. Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovac.

Heidegger, M. (1997): *Plato's Sophist*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Lahav, R. (2016): *Stepping out of Plato's Cave. Philosophical Practice and Self-Transformation.* Chieti: Solfanelli.

Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991): Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mikkelsen, A. (2015): *Frihet til å lære. Frilynt folkehøgskole i 150 år.* Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk.

Pettigrew, T. F. & Tropp, L. R. (2006): "A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory". In: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90 (5).

Slunecko, T. (2008): *Von der Konstruktion zu der dynamischen Konstitution: Beobachtungen auf der eigenen Spur*. Vienna: WUV.

The Folk High School Act (2003): *Act relating to folk high schools* (LOV-2002-12-06-72). Lovdata. https://lovdata.no/dokument/NLE/lov/2002-12-06-72

Wallner, F. (1992): *8 Vorlesungen über den Konstruktiven Realismus*. Vienna: WUV – Universitätsverlag.

Weiss, M. N. (2017): "Philosophical Mindfulness. An Essay about the Art of Philosophizing." In: HASER – International Journal of Philosophical Practice. Vol. 8.

Weiss, M. N. (2021): *Daimonic Dialogues. Philosophical Practice and Self-Formation. A Research Report on a Series of Philosophical Guided Imageries Carried out at a Norwegian Folk High School*. Vienna: LIT publishing.