

So That Life Becomes Bigger

Johan Lövgren and Michael Noah Weiss

1. Prologue

Johan Lövgren, the dialogue partner of the next dialogue, has worked for over 20 years as a teacher at Grenland Folk High School. He was involved in many pedagogical development projects, and, as one of the few, he also has a PhD in folk high school pedagogy (Lövgren, 2017). In 2020, he became an associate professor at the University of South-Eastern Norway (USN) where folk high school is an educational field. He is the main editor of the extensive anthology, *The Nordic Folk High School Teacher* (Lövgren, Hallqvist, Rahbek, & Lysgaard, 2023) and author of several research publications on the subject. He designed and runs an academic education program for folk high school pedagogy at his university, and last but not least, he is also a member of the core committee of the Global Network for Folk High School Research. In other words, Johan not only has a broad overview of the pedagogical landscape of this type of school, but he is also a leading figure in research on the matter.

Johan and Michael are colleagues at USN. They frequently work together on both studies and research on folk high school, and the following dialogue represents just one of their collaborations. The question of how students can learn to deal with difficult feelings like grief and sorrow is

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examined closer in this dialogue where a respective course is presented and reflected upon. Getting prepared for life was a central goal of the school where this course was carried out. How this goal is related to questions of ethical and existential values and how a folk high school can deal with and work with such heavy feelings like grief and sorrow is further investigated in this conversation. Finally, throughout the course of this dialogue, it is also examined how learning activities, such as the previously mentioned course, relate to the question of good folk high school pedagogy and which role responsibility plays in such a case.

2. Dialogue

Michael Noah Weiss: Johan, my question to you now is whether you can recall a concrete experience or a pedagogical practice of which you would say that this is a proper example of good folk high school pedagogy.

Johan Lövgren: My problem is that I have several examples. I have experiences on more existential themes like death and sorrow, more analytic and theoretical subjects such as Jungian psychology and philosophy, but also more fun classes on topics like falling in love. So, you can choose whether you want a “heavy” one or one that is more easy-going.

Michael N. W.: We can try a heavy one. But just one, so that we can investigate it more in depth.

2.1. Concrete reflection

*A course about
grieve*

Johan L.: If I were to pick one that I would see as a “heavy” one, then maybe the theme of sorrow would be suitable. It is a theme that I have worked on at folk high

school for over 20 years. I did so in quite different pedagogical formats, but finally I landed on something – a thematic half day seminar – that I thought was good folk high school practice. I put a lot of work and energy into developing this course, and I always felt apprehensive as I prepared it for new students. I did this because I see this as a central theme for all of us – we all have to handle grief at some time in our life.

To describe this course further, I first have to give you some of my own background in working with death and grief. I have a background as a pastor and counselor and have been a member of different crisis teams. As a parish minister, the theme was a central part of my everyday practice.

In my later work as a folk high school teacher, my main responsibility was to develop courses on philosophical, existential and religious themes. The overall objective for all these classes was to prepare the students for the challenges they would meet in life and to help develop tools to handle these challenges. From my experiences with grief counseling, I saw the possibility of developing a course on grief, but I also saw it as a great responsibility to bring up such a theme. To give room for this kind of heavy, existential theme, I also had days when the main object of the class was to just have fun together. In a class about “falling in love,” we could, for instance, have a competition announcing a prize for the group who could write a text for a love song with the most clichés in it. A somewhat more serious class would include ethical themes where we could both laugh at and discuss different attitudes towards such things as driving too fast or making moonshine vodka, depending on where you come from in Norway.

The classes on grief were the ones I prepared myself the most thoroughly for. A part of my job was to have one afternoon a week set aside for counselling. Many of the stu-

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dents used this opportunity to share areas in their lives they needed help with. From these counselling sessions, I knew that there were students who had been through very serious grieving, maybe losing a parent or a sibling. This made me feel even more responsible, knowing that I entered a very private and hurtful area in these students' lives.

One way to work with grief is to invite participants into the experience of grieving through sharing the experiences of others. The format I ended up using connected to this by mixing the stories of my own experiences as a grief counsellor with songs, texts and scenes from movies. Examples of such films I used would be "The Brothers Lionheart," which deals with the borders of death (Lindgren, 1973), or "My Sister's Keeper" (Cassavetes, 2009). One student asked if we could also include the grief of losing your dog and use the end of the movie "Marly and Me: Life and Love of the World's Worst Dog" (Frankel, 2008). Songs like "Tears in Heaven" (Clapton, 1991), where Clapton sings about losing his son, or Björn Eidsvåg's "Eg ser" (1983), which connects grief to a religious perspective were included. Between the songs, the films and the texts, I would present examples of cases (anonymous) from my own experiences as a grief counsellor. My idea here was to lead the students into an experience by inviting them to engage in these stories, films and songs. In crisis therapy, one way you can become stronger and face a certain challenge is to experience a "light version" of the trauma through entering into someone else's experience. The controlled experience of grief in you then goes through your imagination and is essential in order to be able to process the possibility of experiencing such a situation in real life.

So, what I did in this course was to take them through different steps, from the experience of grieving to the handling of sorrow. The aim would be to start a process of handling some of the vital questions grieving poses to us.

Not that I have the answers – that is very important to mention. I would never say that I have a ready-made answer for them, but rather that I can start a dialogue with them about different religions’ ways of talking about life after death or about a God that is present in darkness and suffering. The dialogue was central here – most of my students had no religious background. For me, it was important that in the written course evaluation, there were only positive responses to these classes on grief.

Michael N. W.: Could you give one example from one specific class or one student who was taking that class?

Johan L.: One student had a father who was very sick with cancer at the time the student took the course. His father did not die during that school year but shortly afterwards. For many students, if they had been in such a situation, they would have said, “Johan, this course is just too heavy for me right now”. But this student attended the class. He sat a bit to the side and by himself (I always try to find rooms where you can have some private space). From time to time, he would weep when listening to the stories and watching the films. In the counselling session after the class, we would use examples from the texts and films in order for him to express his own thoughts and feelings. The students were always offered the possibility of such follow-up talks as a part of the course.

Michael N. W.: What would you say – what kind of processes did the student you referred to go through due to that course? You said that experiencing sorrow through other people’s eyes is central to this course. You make that happen by using stories, songs, films and so on, so that the students can get into the feeling of sorrow without having to relate to a situation from their own personal lives. However, the feeling would still be evoked. Now my question

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is, what are you doing further on after you have provoked this feeling of sorrow?

*To open-up
human
potential*

Johan L.: *Provoking* is a word that I wouldn't use in this case. It is interesting that you use it because, in a certain sense, I maybe do exactly that. But for me, it is more like an opening-up. My pedagogical ideal is not to put anything into the students that is not already there from before. Rather, I try to create a resonance to humanity. And here, I refer to Grundtvig's idea of humanity – his anthropology where we are all very closely interrelated and interwoven in the same “fabric”. A “fabric” that is good, so to speak, and that thrives for wholeness (Korsgaard, 2011; Wingren, 1983). So, when I use the term resonance here, I mean it as part of a process of healing, a process of thriving for wholeness as individual human beings, but also as humanity as such. Therefore, the goal with this course is not to provoke but, in some way, to make healing possible and to open up human potential.

*To resonate
with humanity*

Michael N. W.: I think I understand. So, *to resonate with humanity* or *to resonate to sorrow* is what is happening in this course. You also said that a process of healing sets in. In this respect, I would assume that if you experience sorrow, what you wish for is healing. Therefore, my question is, what is happening with the students along this way towards healing, how do they express that?

Johan L.: At the end of the course, I put all the texts, films and songs that we worked with on display. Then the students choose those that touched them most and that were most meaningful to them. After they have chosen a text, they work with three questions:

- 1) Why did you choose this text?
- 2) How have you experienced sorrow?
- 3) What do you think happens after we die?

It is important to note that the students do not have to answer at all, or just answer one or two of the questions. I try to make this a time of reflection by playing music that can help as a background for answering these questions. The freedom to use or not to use this time is very important. Some students leave after just a short time, while those who stay the longest would sit there for 20 minutes or half an hour. In that reflection process, I also offer them support by telling them, “Please let me know if this is too much for you” and “We, the teachers, are here for you if you need someone to talk to.” To me, this is a necessary safety net. It would be irresponsible to do something like this without such a safety net. The folk high schools are very safe places for this kind of personal development classes. As folk high school teachers, we are together with our students not only in classes. The framework of a boarding school requires that a staff person is always available for the students, not only during classes but also in the evenings and weekends.

Michael N. W.: Which “place” do the students arrive at emotionally after they have finished the course? You just mentioned some of the answers that the students would give on these three questions at the end of the course, but where do they stand emotionally?

Johan L.: Emotionally, especially with the ones who stayed after I posed the three questions after the course, they would feel good. When I talked to them, even those who cried would say, “It is good”. Even though they felt quite different feelings at that point – one would grieve for her grandmother, another one would miss his dog, others would just be puzzled about the complexity of life – their emotional tenor, so to speak, was a good one.

Michael N. W.: What you describe here is quite fascinating because what you do with this course is that you bring the students into a process. A process where they get in

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touch with a fundamental feeling of being human. And that feeling is sorrow. I think, in one way or another, we can all relate to that feeling. Now, in this course, in this process, you are using different pedagogical ways of bringing them into this feeling. You described it as *experiencing sorrow through the eyes of others*. But still, the feeling is there; they start to resonate towards that feeling. And then throughout the course, if I understood it right, the students arrive at an emotional place where they say, “It’s good.” In this regard, you also mentioned that through this course as well as through the whole school year, the students perceive their lives as “becoming bigger”, in the sense of being enriched. In other words, for me, this is a good description of hope. In short, the students gain hope in life. For me, this just sounds beautiful – that young people are getting hope (again) towards life. They probably experience that life is bigger than what they thought it would be when they came to the school.

*The
Grundtvigian
idea of a
common
humanity*

Johan L.: In this respect, there is one essential aspect that really amazes me and that verifies the Grundtvigian idea of our common humanity and wisdom that we carry, and that is that this feeling of hope is not linked to any religious conversion at all. The idea of the course or the school in general was not that you become religious or a believer. No, what was central was that the students experienced that life has become bigger. Maybe as a student, I got a deeper understanding of religion; maybe I got a deeper understanding of life or of humanity throughout the school year. And here, it is vital to note that the school absolutely abstained from luring and locking the students into a common set of values or a common belief. For precisely this is what you can call the litmus test, whether such a school is a folk high school or not. Because if a school forces you to share a certain set of values in order to be a part of the fellowship, then

you are not a folk high school. A folk high school should be in dialogue with all viewpoints and open to the diversity of life.

There are some basic values that are common at a folk high school, but these values are rooted in democracy. These are the values our society is based on, and these values we often forget because we take them for granted.

2.2. Critical reflection

Michael N. W.: If we now go over to the next step in the dialogue, which is about figuring out some more universal and general themes inherent in the practice of that course you described, could we then say that hope in terms of “life becomes bigger” – as one of these universal themes – is a transcendent value transcending religious beliefs? Here, I mean that even though the students would be from different denominations or even from none, they can relate to that. *Life becomes bigger*

Johan L.: Absolutely, because this is the ingenuity of Grundtvig’s anthropology. In this anthropology, there are some keys to a good or better life in terms of the development towards an enlightened humanity (Korsgaard, 2011). Examples for what I call “keys” are dialogue, experience-sharing or developing common human values (Rahbek, 2019). *Enlightenment*

Michael N. W.: When it comes to the question of what it is that is at stake in what you said, then there might be also another general theme or dimension, which I would call “To become whole again.” Because the students were going through this experience of sorrow, they also could relate to sorrow from their own lives, like the student whose father had cancer. I do not say that they were “whole again” after the course. Rather, I mean the prospect of developing towards becoming whole again. And here, the question is *To become whole again*

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whether healing means to become whole again. Furthermore, to put it bluntly, would you say that becoming whole again or going through a process of healing should be one of the pedagogical core themes of folk high school?

*Resonating
with others*

Johan L.: Here, we need to be careful with the terminology that we are using because it can easily be misunderstood. And in that respect, I have to say that the word “healing” becomes very problematic to me. It is a beautiful picture, but if we are about to explain folk high school pedagogy, I would rather talk about expanding your relationship to a common humanity, finding the resonance of the Other in yourself, enlarging your heart, even though these sound like clichés too.

Michael N. W.: You are suggesting that we should replace what I called becoming whole again or healing with something else. And what you were describing now has more to do with opening up towards and resonating with the world.

*Learning to
know others
and oneself*

Johan L.: Yes, or resonating with the Other. One of the findings in my research on folk high school is that by finding yourself, you develop a deeper relationship towards the Other and a deeper understanding of the Other (see Lövgren, 2019). There is some kind of reciprocity or double resonance. You resonate with the Other and that resonates within yourself. Both processes are happening in a folk high school. In my interviews with folk high school students, many of them would say that what they valued the most in the folk high school were these meetings with the Other. And connected to this would be the second biggest thing, “finding myself” (Lövgren, 2017). This is what I mean with double resonance.

2.3. Theoretical reflection

Michael N. W.: What you are telling now reminds me, *Intuitive resonance* metaphorically speaking, of this phenomenon with two guitars. If you put two guitars next to each other and you pull the A-string on one guitar, then the A-string of the other guitar would automatically start to vibrate too. So, if we go over now to some more theoretical reflections, Joachim Bauer can be mentioned, who used this phenomenon in order to explain his research findings on mirror neurons (Bauer, 2005). To describe what he found out, imagine a dentist's waiting room. You sit there in this room, and all of a sudden you get a stomachache. You have no idea why you get that now, but it could be that there is someone sitting next to you having what is called "dental anxiety." You kind of resonate with that person, without consciously knowing it, by having a stomachache because it is your mirror neurons being activated by this other person in the room. Since this comes from research on intuition, maybe it does not have so much to do with what you were describing. Nevertheless, the metaphor with the two guitars could eventually explicate what you are saying about the term "to resonate"?

Johan L.: Well, I think it does. Just as an example, one female student would tell me, "*Learning from others about oneself*" I am a girl from the countryside. I've lived a very safe life, and so have my friends. Our moms and dads were around; we had a safe surrounding, and I know very little about the real complications of life. I came to folk high school, and in my class we all got pretty close. In that class, there is a girl, and in her family, there has been incest. Her father had a drug habit, and she ended up taking drugs herself. Now, at the school, when we talk together and when we sit together, on a bus, in an airplane, we might hold each other. And I understand why some people struggle much more than I've done. In

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some way, her life experiences become mine”. For me, this is about resonance, and I can surely imagine that this resonance is physical too, in terms of what you just said about the mirror neurons. I truly believe that by resounding, resonating with another, you are deepening yourself. As with the girl I quoted, saying that “her life experience becomes a part of me too”. And then, when you go through life with such a mindset, you become a more democratic person (Gustavsson, 2013). My way of being in society will not be the same again, as it would have been if I had not come so close to another.

The closeness between students at folk high schools is hard to find in other educational situations because students seldom get that kind of quality time. In folk high school, you get another context, and it creates another kind of learning, growth and understanding (Mikkelsen, 2014).

*Narrative
imagination,
emotional and
spiritual
intelligence*

Michael N. W.: What you described now about the specific kind of learning and developing at folk high school, especially what you said about becoming a more democratic person by learning to resonate, reminds me of three theoretical approaches:

1. In her article, “Education for Citizenship in an Era of Global Connection”, Martha Nussbaum suggests three abilities that need to be fostered in order to promote global citizenship:

The Socratic ability to criticize one’s own traditions and to carry on an argument on terms of mutual respect for reason; (2) the ability to think as a citizen of the whole world, not just some local region or group; and (3) the “narrative imagination,” the ability to imagine what it would be like to be in the position of someone very different from oneself. (Nussbaum, 2002: 289)

In what you said, “narrative imagination” appears to be promoted throughout the whole school year but particularly

in the course you described, which is about seeing sorrow through the eyes of others.

2. Daniel Goleman's theory of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995). What you described has to do with developing emotional intelligence, in my view. That is, it has to do with how you relate to others, how you respond to others, how you resonate with others. In other words, there seems to be quite some emotional learning going on.

3. Especially in the course you described, there still seems to be more to it than emotional intelligence. And that "more" appears to be what Zohar and Marshall called spiritual intelligence (Zohar & Marshall, 2000). Spiritual intelligence has little to do with being religious but rather with the ability to become aware of what could be called ultimate meaning, as Viktor Frankl put it (2000), or a meaning that is bigger than yourself. Not in a mere religious sense but more in the sense of becoming aware that life is bigger than you and what you actually think of it (see Zohar & Marshall, 2000). So, it appears that, among other things, it is also spiritual intelligence that is fostered in your course. For example, when you ask, "What do you think about life after death?", then this is clearly a spiritual question but not necessarily a religious one. For some, it might be, but not for everyone. Now, to sensitize oneself and to open up to that question, to me, seems to be about spiritual intelligence or developing spiritual intelligence.

Furthermore, after all they have been through during this course and due to the school year as a whole, the students can say that life has become bigger to them. And for me, this indicates a fundamentally existential learning process, on the one hand. On the other, with Martha Nussbaum's suggested "narrative imagination" as one of three abilities to foster global citizenship, it seems that it is also a democratic learning process that is triggered (see Nussbaum, 2002). However, last but not least, there is also spiri-

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tual learning taking place, in terms of Zohar and Marshall's spiritual intelligence (see 2000). That young people learn within the spiritual domain cannot be taken for granted. In fact, not many schools go in that direction.

Using personal stories

Johan L.: And not many folk high schools do either. And that is not a criticism. With my experience as a pastor, my advantage is that I have a language for that domain. Of course, it is a certain religious language, but – and this I have worked on for the last 20 years now – if I can be true to my heritage and at the same time opening it up, it can become a *resource* for everyone. A resource not in the sense of a teaching but in the sense of a source of inspiration.

An example here can be a special kind of open service, a mass, that I developed in the school chapel, called “Thomasmesse”. When it comes to religious backgrounds, my students mirrored their cohort of Norwegian youths. Normally, 90% of these young adults would not go to a church or take part in religious services. At these gatherings in the chapel, as many as 90 percent of the students would come and take an active part. One year, we actually had to move the service from the chapel to the gym to make room for all the students that turned up. Again, I would say that what made the students want to come to these gatherings has to do with resonance. The whole program for the service, the texts that were read and the stories I shared, were chosen because they are open to everybody; they can make life bigger for everybody, no matter whether you are religious or not. An example could be when we talked about the problem of evil and suffering. To show that we all share this pain, I would tell them about my experience of being a young pastor and having to bury a six-month-old baby. I knew the family, having baptized the little girl just three months earlier. Now the parents asked for me again, after having found her dead one morning with-

out any warning. They asked me to help them by holding the cold little body so that they could put on her baptismal dress. After having dressed her in the robe, we had to put the baby in a specially made little white coffin. It was such a brutal experience of how meaningless suffering and death can be. Later at the funeral, the parents cried in their helplessness, and I have to say, I cried with them. I remember leaving the church after this funeral saying, “God, this is not possible – I can’t do this. I can’t talk about an almighty God when life is like this.” This is not something I like to share, but my honesty, my doubt, and my tears can create a resonance to the truth that we can never understand suffering, whatever we believe. In the pain and doubt that this story holds, the students can resonate with me, as a human being. I create resonance by being honest and by being personal, very personal. If this is done with wisdom and integrity, it opens up for a resonance with the teacher.

Michael N. W.: I think this perspective that life is bigger and that it also becomes bigger for the students is one of the most valuable gifts that you can get from education. In this respect, though with a strong focus on social injustice, Paulo Freire spoke of a “Pedagogy of Hope” (1994). In a broader sense, a pedagogy of hope means that you become aware that there are many potentials in life that can be further developed, and this gives you hope. It gives you a healthy attitude towards life. As the teacher in this case, you are not trying to pass on your own opinions, but rather you try to inspire others so that they can find their own attitudes and ways in and towards life. I also think it is in this respect that something is happening with regards to becoming a democratic person. That is, you know your own standpoint, and the best you can do is not to convince others of your standpoint but to inspire them. That is probably a very central and fundamental dimension of democracy.

*Pedagogy of
hope*

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Only if such an inspirational attitude is in place can true democracy happen, I guess. Furthermore, as you said, this also relates to authenticity. How can I become an authentic person? How can I support others, like as a folk high school teacher, to become authentic persons too? For only as an authentic person can you truly contribute to democracy, I would think.

*The relevance
of a teacher's
value base*

Johan L.: Yes, I agree. I think authenticity and autonomy are really essential – both with regards to being true to myself as well as with regards to having my own right to choose. Furthermore, it seems to be especially the current generation that needs autonomy. Autonomy appears to be their basic platform.

Folk high schools are free to choose their value base, and this allows us to be in different places when it comes to areas such as politics or religion. For me, it is good that there are schools which do not have the same value base as my school, we are covering different areas or needs in the prospect students. As long as the schools operate dialogically, that is, as long as they are open-minded, it is good. For it is in line with the Grundtvigian idea of these schools (Grundtvig, 2011).

The whole idea of the possibility of standing on a value base or belief system and opening up in a way that gives others a totally free choice is very hard for us in our society to understand. However, I believe that in order to be a person who can resonate with young people, you have to have a belief system or value base. And as a system, it can be seen as limiting because you stand for something, you have something that you believe in. And you honestly have to say that to the students. I am a pastor, and I stand for this. I believe in the basic beliefs of the Christian Church. Saying that is not a problem to me, even though I am also very aware of the dark sides of Christian history.

I understand that one view would be that you can open up and give total freedom for students to find their own way through life by representing no standpoint at all. But to me, this is both naïve (we all stand for something), and I don't think it is what gives the most resonance. I think you have to stand somewhere, and from that standpoint, you can open up. This is also a thought that I find in Bakhtin's discourse analysis (Bakhtin, 1981; Lövgren 2017, 2019).

Michael N. W.: What you just said I interpret in terms of Biesta who assumes that as a teacher, you cannot teach your students anything, but you only can inspire them (Biesta, 2013). However, in order to inspire them, you have to stand for something. For with what would you inspire your students if you don't have anything and if you don't stand for anything?

*You cannot
teach anything,
you can only
inspire*

Maybe this is a good question to wrap up this dialogue now. Thank you very much for your valuable contributions and your insights!

3. Epilogue

In the beginning of the previous dialogue, a course about grief and sorrow was presented. The idea behind this course was to create a space in which the students could learn to approach such heavy feelings in a safe way. For example, by using respective texts or films that were read or shown and then reflected upon together. Though the course let several students go through a sometimes challenging process, at the end they had the impression that their 'horizon' was somehow broadened and that their lives became bigger, so to speak.

Since preparing for life was a key goal of the school in general, supporting the students to learn to approach such feelings was assumed as a vital aspect of this preparation.

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Furthermore, as it came forth in the dialogue, by learning to respond to these feelings, the students also learned to resonate with and respond to each other. They got to know and understand each other better. Learning to resonate with each other is also a way of learning to “resonate with humanity” – something that relates to the Grundtvigian idea of a common humanity in the sense that we all, throughout our lifetime, have to experience such feelings and that this can help us to better understand each other. In a way, this common understanding also represents a central aspect of enlightenment, as it was discussed in the dialogue.

Furthermore, the dialogue partners assumed that in the long run, learning to resonate and respond to each other also essentially contributes to the formation process of becoming a democratic citizen. How a teacher responds to and resonates with his or her students was seen as a key aspect in this regard. The way of responding – e. g. through sharing personal stories and experiences – turns into the response-ability of the teacher in terms of a learning by example (see also Lövgren, 2020: 20f).

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