

Council 2014 - Speech

It is a pleasure to welcome the members of Council and other guests, on behalf of all those at UWC Red Cross Nordic.

Looking back through world history, the 25th April marks the liberation of Italy in 1945, national Flag Days for Swaziland and one of our Nordic partners, the Faroe Islands - alongside World DNA day and Malaria Awareness day.

An auspicious date for this year's Council Meeting.

It has been an exciting time here on campus during April – first with Her Majesty Queen Sonja's visit and, more recently, with glorious weather, adventures and activities over the Easter Break. We now look forward to the 17th of May when Norway will celebrate the 200th anniversary of the signing of its constitution. 1814 possesses an almost mystical significance here in Norway when the Eidsvoll Assembly created a remarkably modern democratic constitution modelled in part on the British system of government, the American federal and state constitutions and, most importantly, the French revolutionary constitution of 1791. The Norwegian constitution declared Norway a 'free, independent and indivisible realm' and embodied both radical and traditional values at the heart of its design.

Norway, at the time, had the moral stamina but lacked the military and economic resources for absolute independence – Swedish control resumed five months later in October 1814 but the 17th May became a date to be remembered and treasured and has proven to be a rallying point for Norwegians over the past two hundred years.

Last year at RCN, we introduced an annual 17th May lecture in advance of the event itself – with Kåre Willoch, the former Norwegian Prime Minister, delivering the inaugural lecture. This year, we have invited Sven Mollekleiv, the President of the Norwegian Red Cross, to give the lecture.

We too have our own constitution here at Red Cross Nordic in the form of our statutes, first drafted and adapted in 1993, which define both our governance model and the aims and principles of the College. For the benefit of the students, I have displayed an introductory slide behind me which outlines the governance model of Red Cross Nordic. The Council gathers once a year on campus and the Board twice a term, alternating between College visits and other locations throughout the Nordic region.

We have designed the programme for this year's Council Meeting so that it provides members of our Council with concrete opportunities, through careers workshops for students and working parties on areas of strategic importance, to contribute to the present and future architecture of Red Cross Nordic. The annual report, as a printed encapsulation of our work, is available from today at Reception and in the Kantine – and serves both as a reflection on the year gone by and the direction in which we are going. We are a unique college within the UWC, with our Nordic heritage and partnership with the Red Cross - and it is important that we work alongside all constituencies, including the essential contributions of our Board and Council, to establish a strategic plan which preserves the values, traditions and spirit that distinguish the community but, at the same time, prepares the College and the students for the demands of a new world.

This morning's session in the auditorium includes an insight from Pär Stenbäck, the Chair of our Council, into the legacy of Nelson Mandela and an introduction to Edvard Munch by Dr Simon McKeown, commissioned originally as part of the RCN Nordic Pillar's contribution to the 150th anniversary of the Norwegian artist's birth. Pär met Mandela just after his release from Robben Island in 1991 – with Mandela taking the opportunity to thank Pär, in his capacity as General Secretary for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Geneva, for the visits of numerous Red Cross delegates to the prisoners on Robben Island. It will come as no surprise that Mandela remembered the names of many of the Red Cross delegates who had visited the prison.

So - Munch to Mandela

Both individuals were pioneers making unique and unparalleled contributions to their own respective artistic and political landscapes; both championed equal status – be it on behalf of women in Norway or those denied their human rights; both challenged and dissected the human mind – one on a political platform and the other on canvas; both faced misunderstanding and hostility in the pursuit of their visions; both suffered the twin sensations of exile and homecoming; both saw the diversity, the versatility and the possibility of colour; both, as part of their impact and legacies on subsequent generations, have changed the way we think. Both pioneers, operating in different times and spheres, with stories that should be heard, should be cherished, should be remembered.

Last year, I used the image of the sea eagle as a metaphor for this speech.

Some of you on the journey from Førde Bringeland airport will have observed a change in the Fjaler landscape. The winding road along the Dalsfjord now disappears into a long tunnel (opposite a spectacular fosse) and is met by a fluorescent blue rock roundabout – with one exit taking the traveller onward to Dale and the College and the other emerging over the newly constructed Dalsfjord bridge.

The bridge was opened in mid-December with a brass band, speeches from those responsible for the campaigning, planning and construction of the bridge, and a huge turnout in a draughty tunnel by locals from this region alongside a representative group of students from Red Cross Nordic.

Visitors to the Rektor's House will perhaps have spotted that Kathini and I have placed a print of Breugel's 1563 oil painting of 'The Tower of Babel' in the entrance to our house. It serves as a reminder of the story in the Bible's Book of Genesis of the attempt of a monolingual humanity to build a tower vertically to the heavens – a story of vanity and pride punished as God intervenes to scatter the people and to introduce multiple language as an impediment to progress.

The Dalsfjord bridge – a feat of engineering captured by local photographer David Zadig's exhibition in Dale – was designed and built by Norwegians, Dutch engineers, Germans, Slovaks, and Indonesians, to name a few of the nationalities represented in the construction of a bridge spanning 523 metres and 4.2 kilometres of tunnels into the mountainside.

I take the bridge as my metaphor today – the crystallisation of a project first dreamt up and launched over 30 years ago. The bridge serves to connect the Fjaler and Askvoll communities by road. At the point of first connection, the two mayors bravely headed across the precarious provisional infrastructure to greet each other.

In contrast to the vertical aspirations and crumbling foundations depicted in Breugel's vision of the Tower of Babel, the Dalsfjord bridge provides a horizontal connection between two communities, separated historically by landscape. One of our second years, Mahlet from Ethiopia, has written her Development Studies coursework essay (under the guidance of Daniel and her host father, Lars) on the impact of the opening of the bridge on the businesses in Askvoll and Fjaler. Indeed the bridge – testament to the ability of individuals drawn from many languages and cultures to work together - represents new connections, new possibilities.

Much of what we do here at RCN is built on building bridges. We too, with all the constituencies represented in this room, must work together to build bridges, to forge new partnerships.

Thor Heyerdahl, in his speech in 1988 at the Nobel Institute in Oslo as part of the first Nordic United World College seminar, identified that:

'Our colleges work for peace, not through dominance or a continued arms race, but through bridge-building between nations by an ever-increasing army of young men and women who return to their families and friends with the message that black or white, east or west, we all belong to the same family of Homo sapiens, with the same needs, the same desires, the same rights'.

Thank you to our members of Council for your invaluable support of the College – you continue to act as our ambassadors, our network, our bridge-builders, and our voice across the Nordic region.

Richard D A Lamont
Rektor
25th April 2014