

Address to the Ambassadors at the Nordic Association October 6th 2014

Thor Heyerdahl

Today Monday 6th October marks the centenary of the birth of Thor Heyerdahl – the Norwegian archaeologist, author and explorer. He earned international acclaim for his voyages of navigation in the Pacific, Atlantic and Indian Oceans as he advanced his theories of ancient seafaring migrations and he was perhaps best known for his leadership of the 1947 Kon-Tiki expedition – the first great post-war adventure story to catch the imagination of the world.

Some of you here today will know that he was one of the members of the founding team of UWC Red Cross Nordic and gave addresses both at the Nobel Peace Institute in September 1988 and at the official opening of the College on 30th September 1995. The slightly faded hand-written original of his inaugural address at the opening is now framed on a wall in our Admin Building – a reminder to future generations of Red Cross Nordic students of his commitment and legacy.

In his address in 1995, Heyerdahl explained to the first generation of RCN students what he had learnt on his own personal odyssey across the Pacific Ocean, from South America to the Polynesian Islands, on board the Kon-Tiki: ‘I sailed on rafts across the world’s oceans, with a crew as diverse as you are now... You will learn here what my crew and I found out on the rafts: that there is indeed only one human family.’ And he finished with the request that members of the RCN community hold out ‘an open hand to fellow humans everywhere’. This message has, I understand, been very much at the heart of our teaching for every generation of students at Red Cross Nordic.

His first expedition on the Kon-Tiki was distinctly Nordic – with a crew of five Norwegians and one Swede. By the time of his expedition in 1969 to cross the Atlantic from Morocco to the Caribbean, on Ra - a papyrus boat named after the Sun God -, he had decided deliberately to select a crew representing a real diversity in race, nationality, religion and political viewpoint. He wanted to demonstrate that at least on their own little floating island, people could cooperate and live peacefully. His crew consisted of representatives of Chad, USSR, USA, Italy, Norway, Egypt and Mexico – and what a melting pot of difference it was! One crew member was unable to read or write, another a university professor, one an active pacifist, and another a naval officer. Tensions in the Suez were high with military jets thundering over the Sphinx and pyramids with wars being waged on all five continents and with the omnipresent fear of a nuclear strike. Heyerdahl was intent on showing that, in spite of the

‘psychological petrol’ of expedition fever, a papyrus boat sailing along in the grip of the elements could be a micro world’ with the crew drawn together to tackle a common cause.

This is very much at the centre of the Red Cross Nordic experience. Each student is placed in a room in the Student Village with four others from across the world. They learn, we hope, to understand and respect what Louis MacNeice, the Northern Irish poet, called ‘the integrity of difference’. We currently have two hundred students drawn from 96 different countries. Our Nordic students - from Greenland, Iceland, the Faeroes and Åland, as well as Norway, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland – play a significant role in representing and promoting Nordic values and a spirit of cooperation. Heyerdahl took great pride in flying the flag of the United Nations on his expeditions across the seas

The summer months have seen new and old tensions emerging across the world – from the intensifying conflict in Ukraine to hostilities in Gaza, from civil war in Iraq to the emergence of ISIS. The death toll in Syria increases as the world looks on. Last year, we invited Sven Mollekleiv, the President of the Norwegian Red Cross, to deliver the annual Constitution Lecture in May – he told us that more Red Cross delegates have been killed during the Syrian conflict than throughout the entire Second World War. The respected international immunity of the Red Cross symbol is under threat for the first time in its history.

Heyerdahl was no stranger to the madness of his own world. His expedition on Tigris came to an unexpected end when it became the victim of the wars raging on every side of the Red Sea and Horn of Africa and was impounded in Djibouti. In protest, he wrote an open letter to the then UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim ‘against [the] inhuman elements in the world of 1978’ and appealed for ‘intelligent collaboration’ to rescue the world from the ‘insane reality of our time’ – and then his crew lowered the flag of the United Nations and symbolically burned their ship and gave her this epitaph: ‘Tigris will have a proud end, as a torch that will call men to reason, so that they might resume the cause of peace in a corner of the world where civilisation first found a foothold’.

Ambassadors and other guests – thank you for gathering here today at the Nordic Association and giving us the opportunity to introduce you to the work of our College. We strive to promote moral and social responsibility and to encourage all to understand perspectives other than our own. The shared experiences and conversations with students and staff from many different cultures, religions and countries is, I believe, part of the magic of an education at Red Cross Nordic.

I hope that Heyerdahl would be proud of what we continue to strive to achieve at UWC Red Cross Nordic. I found myself standing on the steps of the Heyerdahl family house in Larvik in late June this year and wondering how this young Norwegian (born in 1914) went from starting a cabinet of curiosities at home and developed into one of the greatest explorers of the 20th century.

Graham Greene, the novelist, observed: ‘There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in’. For many students, their arrival at RCN is that precise moment – and we do our very best to support them in exploring new possibilities, new futures. Our continued and valued support from the Nordic countries make this possible.

Undoubtedly unorthodox, I like very much Bengt Danielsson, the only Swedish member of the original Kon-Tiki crew’s description of his skipper – ‘Thor builds his pyramids upside down’. A reminder to us all to think differently, to think elastically and sometimes to build our pyramids upside down.

Richard D A Lamont

Rektor

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