

Takk for Maten – Marianne Andresen’s House (Thursday 1st December)

Amongst other crucial matters of Norwegian protocol, I was taught by Tom Gresvig - one of the founders of our College – to beware finding oneself sitting at dinner to the left of the hostess; the duty would fall to that particular diner to deliver the ‘Takk for maten’ address.

Imagine my relief at seeing the first draft of tonight’s seating plan.

Pär Stenbäck, the Chair of our College Council, has the honour of being to the left of Marianne for this evening’s dinner but has, however, begrudgingly passed on the honour to me to deliver tonight’s address in my capacity as Rektor of UWC Red Cross Nordic.

I took it upon myself to script what I wanted to say to you all this evening. To my embarrassment a few years ago, I was unexpectedly invited to give an address to thank the hostess at a dinner to celebrate the retirement of a doctor from the Rehabilitation Centre with which we share a campus – I managed to launch into a tribute to the doctor full of anecdotes and superlatives but, in my enthusiasm and to the amusement of the Norwegian diners, I completely forgot the main purpose of thanking the hostess.

I shall not do that tonight.

Tonight’s dinner has been planned to thank our Board members drawn from across the Nordic region and our Oslo-based Council members for your unstinting support and commitment to our UWC mission and values. Our Board members are gathering at the Red Cross headquarters for a quarterly meeting tomorrow.

With our Board members in Oslo, Marianne kindly suggested that we have a dinner and invite other supporters and partners of the College to join us here at Smedbraaten this evening.

Marianne has been one of RCN’s staunchest supporters since the very beginning. Thank you, Marianne, for the supportive engagement, warmth and generosity of spirit that you continue to bring into our world.

This evening also gives us an opportunity to introduce new friends to our world and work as educators.

In tandem with the Norwegian Red Cross and as part of an educational cooperation between all Nordic countries and governments, from westerly Greenland to easterly Finland, our College has produced just over 2000 graduates in twenty one years – forged

in the Nordic region and heading out from the fjords as ambassadors for the United World College movement, for Nordic values, and for the Red Cross.

The Red Cross definitely remains an important part of our identity – with shared values and philosophy at the heart of our work – and it is, I believe, an essential part of what makes us distinct from the other 16 United World Colleges across the world.

Sven, as President of the Norwegian Red Cross, delivered an outstanding keynote speech to launch the UWC Congress in Trieste this October under the title of *‘Why the World Needs UWC’*. He received a standing ovation from over 550 delegates. We could not have hoped for a more relevant and thoughtful start to the Congress which fully underlined the value of the shared mission we have with the Red Cross.

It is with great pride that our students and staff have observed the Norwegian Red Cross taking a leading role in supporting those refugees arriving here in Norway and raising awareness across this country of the innocent victims of war. This October’s Red Cross-themed TV-Aksjonen featured a brilliantly challenging IKEA store installation of an apartment in Syria complete with IKEA price tags, from the child’s teddy bear to a plastic bag.

On campus, we suspended classes for the day and ran workshops on the theme of ‘the innocent victims of war’ – led by our students, many of them survivors of conflict from the countries focused on by the Norwegian Red Cross, with stories to tell and stories to share. Students from local schools and centres for asylum seekers (mottak) were invited to join in with the educational focus of the day.

The stories told that day and the desperate and haunting daily images of the migrant and refugee crisis in Europe remind us of the need for international and intercultural understanding and education for peace.

Earlier this year, Hans Von Sponeck, a German Diplomat responsible for selecting our Iraqi students - and formerly UN Assistant Secretary General for Iraq - opened our Model United Nations on campus with the observation that ‘Norway has a powerful reputation for making a difference in the world’.

At our College, based in the heartland of Fjaler, we ‘believe in changing the world one student at a time’ [Jens Waltermann]. We do this through partnerships.

It strike me as no coincidence that the crest of Fjaler - seen on entering our Commune by road - depicts a set of bridges on a red background in reference to the beautiful stone bridges built in the 18th century for travellers on the postal route running north from Bergen to Trondheim.

In fact, we are delighted the Mayor of Fjaler is here in support.

Tonight's gathering is based on building bridges to and from Fjaler and partnerships - from Oslo-based ambassadors to representatives of the Storting, from members of UWC Norge to our colleagues in the Norwegian Red Cross.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank one person in particular for her partnership with our College – Vibeke.

For the past twenty one years, Vibeke has been responsible for 70 students on our campus from SOS Children's Villages in 18 different countries. You have been a wonderful source of support and inspiration for all of them – and I simply do not think I have ever met someone with a kinder heart. Wordsworth, the English poet, perceptively wrote that 'The best portion of a good [person's] life: [are their] little, nameless, unremembered, acts / Of kindness and love.'

You have, indeed Vibeke, through your acts of kindness and love – been the patron saint of the orphans at RCN.

Here are some flowers to celebrate your retirement from SOS Children's Villages here in Oslo along with an invitation to come to campus to see the students – and to see us - whenever you would like.

We are proud of our diverse community - expressed in terms of geopolitical, cultural, gender and socio-economic diversity. Our distinctiveness is established at the very heart of our Educational Model. This 'deliberate diversity' can touch our insides at so many levels - *diversity* reaches towards the roots of our sense of human selves – but the alliterative ring of it must not detract from the challenge, the sensitivities and the educational purpose associated with a campus with 200 students of over 90 nationalities.

We strive at RCN to be a 'lighthouse' for inclusion within education in Norway and the Nordic region – through existing and new partnerships.

Looking through my diary over the past month, I see new partnerships being established – through the Rafto Foundation, educational projects in Pakistan and Poland, through SIU (the Centre for International Education), and the last piece of our Nordic jigsaw – a potential scholarship place for a student from the Shetlands.

Let us continue to build bridges through education for peace.

We are pleased to report that our College is in good heart at the moment – and, thank you, Marianne, for hosting a reception here at your home this evening and to the Smedbraaten

Super Team (Torunn, Svein, Harald, Frank, Maya, Siri, Lars and Marina) for kindly coordinating the logistics behind the event.

It is a privilege to be here.

Takk for maten

Richard D A Lamont
Rektor
UWC Red Cross Nordic
1st December 2016