

THE HAGUE ACADEMIC COALITION

**8TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE
FROM PEACE TO JUSTICE**

Peace diplomacy, global justice and international agency
Rethinking human security and ethics in the spirit of Dag Hammarskjöld
(1905-1961)

In Commemoration of Dag Hammarskjöld

Remarks at the official opening session of the conference

by

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In Commemoration of Dag Hammarskjöld!

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is a solemn moment. We have gathered here in the Peace Palace to commemorate the second Secretary-General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld. Our focus during the conference will be on rethinking human security and ethics in Dag Hammarskjöld's spirit.

We – all of us – have our own impressions of Dag Hammarskjöld and his thinking, and I am sure that this will be reflected during our deliberations. However, at this moment in the beginning of our conference we should focus on his person, his influence on us as human beings and the ethical heritage that he left us as his legacy.

Let me first share with you some personal reflections, based upon the fact that I was a student at Uppsala University between 1957 and 1962. This meant that I was also at Dag Hammarskjöld's hometown Uppsala in September 1961, when the shocking message about his death arrived. On 29 September 1961, I was a steward (studentmarskalk) at his funeral in Uppsala Cathedral – the National Cathedral of Sweden.

Little more than a year earlier, I had visited New York during my summer vacation which for the fourth time I spent as a sailor in the Swedish merchant marine. For the young student and sailor the United Nations Headquarters was an obvious place to visit.

I never met Dag Hammarskjöld in person. But he was very present in my mind when I visited the UN building. The meditation room that he had arranged made a deep impression on me. The idea that people, regardless of their faith, creed or religion, would feel welcome in this room was a true reflection of the United Nations and Dag Hammarskjöld's thinking.

Little did I know, sitting in this room watching the mural and the shaft of light shining on the shimmering rectangular block of iron ore in its middle, that I would have the honour of serving UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali for three years and UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan for seven years as the Legal Counsel of the United Nations.

Dag Hammarskjöld found his strength in several sources: nature, religion, literature, poetry, art, music. His own efforts over the years to write poetry are reflected in his "*Vägmärken*". In English "*Markings*" or "*Waymarks*" as some of us prefer. When my father presented me with this book, I understood that reading and writing poetry was an important source of strength and inspiration to Dag Hammarskjöld. I came to realise that a few lines of a poem often make a greater impression on the human mind than the ordinary prose of an essay or a novel.

Reading the *Waymarks*, one of them caught my attention in particular. In fact, it became a lodestar to me. Among other things, I would quote it when greeting new staff members welcome to the United Nations Office of Legal Affairs.

Allow me therefore to reflect again on this Waymark. Let us observe a moment of stillness and contemplate the following lines:

“Öppenheten för livet ger en blixklik insikt i andras livssituation. Ett krav: att från känsloringet driva problemet till en klart fattad intellektuell gestaltning – och handla därefter.”

In English – my own translation:

“Openness to life grants a swift insight – like a flash of lightning – into the life situation of others. A must: to force the problem from its emotional sting into a clearly conceived intellectual form – and act accordingly.”

How should this Waymark be understood today? How should we who have gathered here at the Peace Palace understand it?

“*Openness to life.*” Do we observe the world around us with sufficient interest and openness? Are we prepared to inform ourselves also about matters that do not directly or immediately concern us – or our generation? Are we receptive enough? Could we not all do better?

“*Blixklik*” is an unusual but very expressive word in Swedish, difficult to translate – “*like a flash of lightning.*” What comes to mind is the image that rests for a few moments on one’s retina when something is lit by a flash of lightning in a nightly thunder. A sharp, even painful impression, followed by attempts by the observer, again embraced by the darkness, to recall the picture.

The images from the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda come to my mind, as do the Killing Fields in Cambodia and the little children in Sierra Leone showing me arms with no hands and legs with no feet.

What is it that Dag Hammarskjöld wants us to see – and later recall before our inward eye? “*The life situation of others!*” Again: are we sufficiently open to be concerned about others? Or are we too self-centered? Maybe our greatest problem today is that we are inundated with impressions. It is difficult to digest all this. But that is not an excuse for being passive.

Another dilemma is that the impact on our minds depends on the way in which events are presented by the media.

Immediate impressions often cause a wave of sympathy towards those who suffer – and rightly so. Images from the “Arab spring” may be our latest experience. But why is it so difficult to master the same support for the victims of AIDS, malaria, famine, contaminated water and other hardships that every year harvest so many victims? Maybe because it is difficult for us to understand and fathom what is happening – continuously and with devastating impact on humanity – while we are struggling with our own lives.

And now the imperative: “*A must!*” To Dag Hammarskjöld, the obligation was self-evident and borne out both by his personality and the tradition in which he was brought up: the high ideals that the righteous civil servant should fulfil.

The message from Dag Hammarskjöld is clear: Indifference is not acceptable!

“*Force the problem from its emotional sting*”, he continues. Again a very colourful expression for what we all experience when something affects us. The immediate and intense pain, as when stung by an insect. The message is that we must not allow ourselves to get confused or lose our focus. Instead, we must make an effort, wrestle with the problem and force it “*into a clearly conceived intellectual form*”, as Dag Hammarskjöld puts it.

How this is understood depends, I believe, on our own situation: What is my capacity? What is my position – my responsibility? Is there anything I can do to address the problem? Does my profession allow me to offer my services? Can I engage myself working with others to help resolve the problem? Should I join an association or maybe a political party to influence development? Can I contribute funds?

And finally, when we have forced the problem in this manner and maybe identified what we could do, we must not leave it at that. We must follow through. “*And act accordingly*”, as Dag Hammarskjöld concludes.

To reflect on a Waymark is of course a very personal thing. Maybe your reflections would be different from mine. That does not matter. The main thing is that we engage in and address issues that concern humankind – other human beings – in a manner that all humans born on this earth may live in freedom and dignity.

Our immediate concern is maintaining international peace and security – now also threatened by terrorism and transnational crime. This is where the United Nations has the primary responsibility. But we must also address poverty, disease and other sufferings. We must strengthen human rights and the rule of law and work for gender equality. We must make sure that life on earth is sustainable. We are taxing the global resources heavily and need to get together to resolve the problems that humankind is facing.

The best way in which we can commemorate Dag Hammarskjöld – honour his memory – is to continue reflecting upon his *Waymarks* and his other marks in history and try to make a difference both for ourselves and for generations to come.

We must force the problems we encounter into a clearly conceived intellectual form – and act accordingly!

Thank you!