

# What does it mean to be human?

**Transformation – or development – is a natural part of our on-going life at this planet. But what does transformation look like in the future? Next practice is a transformation that is taking place between spiritual openness and new igniting and generating fields. And part of this change is reinventing what it means to be human – today and tomorrow.**

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Transformation has been a driving concept in modern development, but perhaps the challenge now is to understand and conduct transformation in radically new ways. One may say that we need to transform the very idea of transformation.

## **What is transformation?**

Transformation can be seen as an important medium for profound change, but where transformation until now has been understood in evolution-

ary ways, aiming towards improving adjustment or perfecting realization, transformation now appears to be a forced reaction to discomfort or a psychological irritability. Today's form of transformation is as globalized as the consumer and revolves around blind competition for material goods and financial gain. Economic growth without foundation and purpose has been made the driver of an undescribed development and an unimaginable realization.

It is a point zero which may be critical, but which may also be treated as a potentially constructive invitation to radically alter our

understandings of transformation. It is not so much a matter of establishing new visions as asking questions about the purpose of and the way we cope with transformation.

The rational mentality, which is the foundation of our modern culture, has introduced an idea of humanity and being human through the realization of the nation state as a political-ideological project and through the form of the institutionalized practices related to the nation state, that is our law, democracy, institutions, etc.

But how can we move on from here, when we begin to sense that the world as we knew it no longer exists and business as usual is never coming back. How then shall we realize humanity and human potential?

## **The humanistic idea is changing**

The foundational humanistic idea together with the practices of management in not least the public sector, are rapidly changing. It's not only the nation state but also the very form of management and its value system. We are witnessing the decline of the welfare state and the weakening of the nation state in a globalizing world where the sovereignty and power of nations are fading. Instead we see ideas of the competitive society and New Public Management or Governance, conducted in centralized management and manifested in regulations related to regional, supranational and global agencies.

It is our constitutive narrative of human existence and our basic – local-life conditions, which are now being suspended. It is a situation,

which is not easily solved with new visions, because it is not possible to define probable and meaningful narratives at present. We are still so much under the influence of our present ideas and views and that makes us unable to think differently and innovatively. It would be naïve and wrong to believe that we are able to formulate visions, which can constitute new paradigms and new cultural development at present. Again, the point is that we need to rethink how we cope with transformation and what it will be in our future.

## **Establishing new igniting fields**

Therefore, the actual task for everybody engaged in societal development is not primarily to find new narratives or visions, but rather to focus on transforming our very idea of transformation. This is not a matter of making a change from or to something different, rather, the task is to find constitutive fields, which can generate new forms of transformation. Rather than wishes or goals for transformative processes, it is necessary to work with frames in which new structures and forms can generate and manifest as outlets for dynamic interactions, processes and inspirations.

Goal-set visions may be powerful, but they are also vulnerable to the unexpected and difficult. Furthermore, such visions are typically strongly determined by the prerequisites which have caused the need for new visions – thereby leading to problem solving rather than innovative approaches.

## “It will be naïve and wrong to believe that we are able to formulate visions which can constitute new paradigms and new cultural development.”

Therefore, the present challenge is to develop the ability and the competence to define constitutive criteria, which can contribute to the establishment of igniting and generating fields. These fields must be dynamic, open-minded and “open-hearted” fields creating room for new approaches and processes that allow significant meaningfulness. In other words we need to reintroduce the core question about humanism: What does it mean to be human, and how do we develop human qualities? How can being human and humanity be understood in relation to nature and the social contexts we are part of? What is our human potential and responsibility in this larger perspective?

This is the constitutive or igniting questions about “Being” and “Becoming”, calling for new understanding in cohesive, holistic and spiritually inspired forms.

### Openness and goal-setting

If we define the present need as the need to initiate constitutive rethinking about the human being and becoming, the task is to establish forums for generating, imagining and exchanging such views. There is a need for profound, slow and complex explorations, and we need to create processes in which new images and ideas may form.

In our time, the rapid tempo and the global mass society have such an

impact on us that it may be hard to find space for this kind of generating forums and processes. Therefore, it is necessary to consciously create awareness and competences to define and establish constitutive fields as both individual and common project forms which can contribute to the development of new basic understandings. It is a double-sided task as, on the one hand, it has to be aimed towards a historically and ideologically adequate idea about being human, while on the other it must be focused on preparing the criteria and the structure of such a generating and, in the positive sense, visionless project.

It is a duality of openness and goal-setting, which has to facilitate a radical and all-encompassing transformation. In this formulation it is an abstract, unwieldy and idealistic claim, but it is also very concrete as it confronts us with the need for such generative work in many areas of common Danish and global everyday life.

An example may illustrate this: as mentioned, the nation state and the institutionalized practice fields are undergoing profound changes. This change is of significant importance to our lifestyle, but it is still not quite realized. We meet these changes in experiences of standardization, dehumanization and de-professionalism, leading to a loss of meaning and disorientation. But the implications are

much more significant, as they reflect foundational existential ideas about being human.

Today it is impossible to operate with a unifying idea of humanity due to our relativistic and diverse experience. This, of course, is a known and accepted banality, but the consequences may not be fully understood. It is our entire conceptualization, categorization and understanding of reality that is challenged. The generalized concepts we used can no longer embrace and contain the new multiplicities of changing ideas, identities and practices.

### Co-existence

The task is to create forums which can make space for ideas of transformation, to create ways of working with transformation of our ideas of transformation, to define constitutive positions and to establish generating fields, which can give voice and meaning to more and different aspects than the standardized mass culture that is threatening to take up the empty space after the humanistic narrative of what it means to be human. As I see it, this is the crucial and urgent task to start working on in forums like the “From Best to Next Practice” symposium at Samsø, and that’s also why I enjoyed being there.

After the spiritual reason and aspiration of humanism we shall perhaps enjoy the modern homelessness or liberation of spirituality and trust that spirituality and inspiration may pave the way for innovation, new understandings of life and co-existence. I hope so.

