



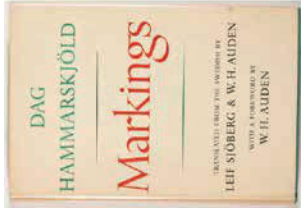
60 YEARS AFTER THE PLANE CRASH: A NEW READING OF DAG HAMMAR- SKJÖLD'S DIARY MARKINGS

by **Birgit van der Leeden**

Dag Hammarskjöld was born on July 29, 1905 in Jönköping, Sweden. In 1953 he became the second Secretary General of the United Nations and gave a new profile to the world organization by establishing the UN Emergency Force with its concept of “blue helmet” troops in 1956. Like most top-ranking politicians he was both admired and attacked. While Belgian Congo had gained its independence in 1960, its Southern province Katanga split off. Because of the escalation of this crisis the UN were asked to help. Hammarskjöld, a dedicated advocate for decolonization, tried to mediate again and again but did not succeed in preventing the shocking murder of Patrice Lumumba, the first democratically elected president of the Republic of the Congo, in early 1961. He had to operate against many stakeholders both on the Western and the African side and was aware of the high risk of his mission. He died in the night of September 17, 1961 after a crash land-



Dag Hammarskjöld paid a visit to a kindergarten class in the school of Givath-Jearim, a village for new immigrants in the Jerusalem Hills, in May 1956.



Dag Hammarskjöld's book *Markings* (*Vägnärken*) was first published in 1963.



Premier Patrice Lumumba of the Republic of the Congo and Dag Hammarskjöld at United Nations Headquarters on July 24, 1960.

lusioning break, sometimes reminiscent of expressionist poetry: "Midge dance. Blast-furnace smoke/ Adder asleep/ Near the wild strawberry patch",⁹ then they come together again to create meaning. "Landscape-only your immediate experience of the detail can provide the soil in your soul where the beauty of the whole can grow."¹⁰ Through his orientation of pictorial analogies, the experience of nature becomes an integral component in Hammarskjöld's uniring search for insight.

A significant cornerstone of the diary is the connection between personal observations with quotes from the Bible and Swedish and international literature, as well as allusions to trends in philosophy, theology and the history of ideas. What is important for Hammarskjöld here is more than the search for insight—he is looking for a trail-blazing ethic beyond all cultural and religious differences.

THE MORAL CONCEPTS that the diary entries unite in this way betray the significant influence of medieval mystics such as Meister Eckhart and Thomas à Kempis. In two prayers—one written in 1954 and the other in July 1961¹¹—these fundamental values are expressly united in the plea for a "pure", "humble", "loving", and "devout" spirit.¹² Yet, it is not only here that Hammarskjöld's closeness to mysticism is expressed. In contrast to the strict rationality for which he is known as a politician, he sets an "inner knowledge, a philosophy of premonition"¹³ in the faith which is "God's marriage to the soul"; you are one in God.¹⁴ This "unification of God with the soul"¹⁵ leads to an inner freedom that makes possible "a union in self-surrender without self-destruction"¹⁶ and a fundamental thankfulness for life. Here too Meister Eckhart's ideas are obvious:

"[...] we who for every service have long ago been overpaid"¹⁷ And not least, the concept of sacrifice, which bears crucial significance in mysticism, characterizes the diary from the very first page—dated 1925. Hammarskjöld takes the Pauline postulate of giving one's life for others in emulation of Christ as the maxim for his own conduct: "The only value of life is its content—for others."¹⁸ The concept that every man has God within him was imposed on him when he was a young man, with a view of life that was "Ready at any moment to gather everything/ Into one simple sacrifice",¹⁹ although he constantly doubted his ability to meet his own standards:

You asked for burdens to carry—and how/led when another sort of burden?²⁰

Yet, he was able to see his duty to humanity in relative terms. Here Meister Eckhart's spirit is noticeable once again:²¹ "The great commitment is so much easier than the ordinary everyday one—and can all too easily shut our hearts to the latter"²² and "It is better for the health of the soul to make one man good than to sacrifice oneself for mankind".²³

His politics, just as much as this book, which he described as a sort of "white book of his negotiations", with himself and with God, demonstrate that he was guided by high ethical standards. "Yet, through me there flashes this vision of a magnetic field in the soul, created in a timeless present by unknown multitudes, living in holy obedience."²⁴ he writes, hoping for a workable spiritual community of seekers before he took up office as Secretary General of the United Nations the following year.

His attempts to find supporting pillars for this spiritual force field are reflected early in his career. Before concentrating on economics and politics, Hammarskjöld devoted himself to the study of the arts. Lyric poetry, sculpture and music played an important role for him even in his early years. Later, he tried to create spiritual and cultural links to the reality of politics, which all too often stood in opposition to the arts. His initiatives to set up a meditation room at UN headquarters, arrange exhibitions and concerts, and make reference in his speeches to his spiritual models may serve to illustrate these attempts.

RARELY DO WE SENSE in the diary entries as much faith in his own abilities as during his early days as Secretary General: "Goodness is something so simple; always to live for others, never to seek one's own advantage",²⁵ he writes, suggesting the concept of a world determined by transparent dualistic structures that man faces:

"It did come—the day when the grief became small. For what had befallen me and seemed so hard to bear became insignificant in the light of the demands which God was now making", and "To say Yes to life is at one and the same time to say Yes to oneself".²⁶

Here we can see how close he is to Albert Schweitzer, who demands this affirmation despite all his realistic assessments of a reality characterized by tragedy:

[...] Affirmation of life and the world is more comprehensive and deeper than optimism and pessimism: it is not a way of judging things but a certainty of the will.²⁷

And yet his thoughts stray again and again, as in this previous years, to inner monologues and hint at brief arguments between the ego and a critical alter ego:

Did you choose your words carefully enough, what impression did you make, did they think you were trying to be ingratiating, etc.? Are you no longer confident that your instinctive reactions will guide you right? If so, you know why. You have allowed your hunger for "justice" to make you self-conscious [...].²⁸

Attributes that Hammarskjöld accuses himself of having are arrogance, excessive ambition, self-pity, baseness of reactions, jealousy, and "lust of the flesh",²⁹ as if he were a personal lack of restraint. Hammarskjöld makes no secret of his personal vanity,



Dag Hammarskjöld, Secretary General of the United Nations, photographed in front of the Headquarters' buildings, 1953.

that mixture of narcissism and self-justification, of a euphoric and desperate sense of self, that is specific to man. Sometimes he makes truly frightening revelations and accusations:

The arête that leads to the summit separates two abysses: the pleasure-tinged death wish (not, perhaps, without an element of narcissistic masochism), and the animal fear arising from the physical instinct for survival.²⁹

As a man who has to become a public figure facing expectations concerning both his actions in the field of world politics and his ability to assert himself, he believes that often he does not fulfil his claims of truthfulness and personal authenticity:

It is not the repeated mistakes, the long succession of petty betrayals – though, God knows, they would give cause enough for anxiety and self-contempt – but the

huge elementary mistake, the betrayal of that within me which is greater than I – in a complacent adjustment to alien demands.³

In this way the courage to change transforms itself into a seemingly insurmountable dialectic world insight:

The most dangerous of all moral dilemmas: when we are obliged to conceal truth in order to help the truth to be victorious.²²

Not only does such taboo-breaking honesty reveal self-doubt, however; it also shows reciprocally that productive self-criticism and appropriate self-awareness are mutually dependent. For Hammarskjöld, despite many an elite tendency that can be discerned, this means “not to brood over my pettiness with masochistic self-disgust, nor to take a pride in admitting it – but to recognize it as a threat to my integrity of action, the moment I let it out of my sight.”³⁰

Inner dialogue becomes difficult and not uncommonly melancholy when it is really intended for a “you”. Relationships with other people seem to have been more important than many of his contemporaries suspected, but they probably took place more in his mind than in face-to-face meetings.

Perhaps a great love is never returned. Had it been given warmth and shelter, by its counterpart in the Other, perhaps it would have been hindered from ever growing to maturity. It gives us nothing. But in its world of loneliness it leads us up to summits with wide vistas – of insight.³⁴

Hammarskjöld cultivated contacts with public figures such as Martin Buber, the French author Alexis Léger (alias Saint-Jean Perse), the Swedish painter Bo Beskow, and the Sani human rights activist Andreas Labba. Since the end of the 1950s, not only a lively exchange of ideas but also a deepening friendship connected him with the British artist Barbara Hepworth (whose works among others are exhibited in the Hammarskjöld house, now a memorial site, in Backåkra in the south of Sweden, and who created the bronze sculpture *Single Form*, which stands in front of the New York UN building). Nevertheless, the diary entries bear witness to the dominating feeling of a loneliness that Hammarskjöld both felt as a burden of life and also accepted as an opportunity: “The vista of future loneliness only allows a choice between two alternatives: either to despair in desolation, or to stake so high on the ‘possibility’ that one acquires the right

to life in a transcendent co-inherence”³⁵ and “Pray that your loneliness may spur you into finding something to live for, great enough to die for.”³⁶

He clearly could not escape this feeling right up to his death. A few weeks before the plane crash he noted: “Tired/ And lonely/ tired/ The heart aches”,³⁷ but the next day he wrote a letter to Barbara Hepworth that expressed closeness and harmony:³⁸

His observations about closeness and distance between people stray into philosophical discourse about insight and establishing the truth. Similarly, he turns the experience of others not being able to understand him into a reminder to accept this form of being abandoned as a matter of necessity.

FROM 1958, THE LYRIC CHARACTER of the diary entries becomes more intense. On the other hand they gain a further dimension of universality. They can be interpreted as saying that he would like the personal to remain even less known, and that the poetizing is a means of concealment. Both may be equally true. If *Marrings* were a fictional diary, one might say that the foreshadowing of death was a structural feature: “red evenings in March. News of death”,³⁹ he writes, and on Christmas Eve 1960, in martyr-like exaggeration: “[...] For him who looks towards the future, the Manger is situated on Golgatha, and the Cross has already been raised in Bethlehem.”⁴⁰ To an extent these observations are disconcerting: he appears to have the elitist attitude that he has been called – as a kind of Messiah. As an authentic perspective they seem too vitudinal – some even interpret them as suicidal.⁴¹

As a young man Hammarskjöld already tackled the problem of the decline of life, both deliberate destruction and unavoidable transitoriness. Thus, on the very first page of his diary he wrote: “Tomorrow we will meet/ death and I/ He will thrust his rapier/ in a man who is awake.”⁴²

Observations of this kind are comfortingly taken up in images in country/pastoral companion pieces:

Autumn in the wilderness: life as an end in itself, even in the annihilation of the individual life, the distant vistas clear, the neighborhood calm, at the moment of its extinction – this evening I would say Yes to the execution squad, not out of exhaustion or defiance, but with an untroubled faith in the co-inherence of all things.⁴³

In the last year of his life the reminders of death can be understood as a realistic estimate of the potential for danger to which the Secretary General was exposed. On the fatal flight, the aim was obviously to fly in a roundabout route over the eastern shore of Lake Tanganyika, which belonged to Tanzania, to avoid flying over Katanga.

It is striking that there are hardly any personal observations

between December 1960 and Whitsun 1961. There are just a few sparse quotes from literary works and undated notes such as: “Asked if I have courage/ to go on to the end./ I answer Yes without/ A second thought. Dumb, my naked body/ Endures the stoning, dumb/ When slit up and the live/ Heart is plucked out”,⁴⁴ and finally, on June 8, the question “Sleepless questions/ In the small hours:/ Have I done right?... Over and over again/ The same steps, / The same words:/ Never the answer”.⁴⁵ The last as always without context.

When the Norwegian Trygve Lie, first UN Secretary General, resigned, he received Hammarskjöld before he took office with the sentence: “You are going to take over the most impossible job on earth”.⁴⁶ Those words gained an unexpected explosive effect and a new dimension of truth during the Congo crisis and since the Iraq war: The speech that Hammarskjöld made in an emergency session in the UN Security Assembly on February 15, 1961 reads like an apology for the United Nation’s attempt to prevent a proxy war of the great powers in Congo in the shadow of the cold war. But between the lines you can read the acknowledgement of limited possibilities and helplessness as if Hammarskjöld says:

I can’t offer new solutions. But still I’m absolutely convinced that the only possibility for the African continent to fight a tragic development towards an international conflict is to remain a part of the United Nation’s common aims.”⁴⁷

A former “marking” already shows the burden that he felt in his duty. “Your responsibility is indeed terrifying.”⁴⁸

As a cosmopolitan he was a pioneer of a way of thinking that still is central to all economic globalization: respect for the different. The spiritual substratum of his doing, of his diary and of his speeches could be of existential importance for a sustainable peace. The nucleus of global terrorism that overshadows today’s world is also based on the fact that ethnic and religious groups were not noticed in their identity, oppression and disadvantages. Kofi Annan, who had an affinity to Hammarskjöld – not only because of his second homeland Sweden – paid tribute to him on the 40th day of his death in 2001:

His wisdom and his modesty, his unimpeachable integrity and singleminded devotion to duty have set a standard for all servants of the international community [...] which is simply impossible to live up to”⁴⁹. The respect that was shown to Hammarskjöld was for example expressed in a program in Zambia to train young African people as messengers of peace.

HAMMARSKJÖLD’S IDEALS SEEM to be more strange than ever in an ego-centric society, whose spirit is just the opposite of a life

“ASA COSMOPOLITAN HE WAS A PIONEER OF A WAY OF THINKING THAT STILL IS CENTRAL TO ALL ECONOMIC GLOBALIZATION: RESPECT FOR THE DIFFERENT.”

as sacrifice. In his inaugural speech as UN Secretary General on April 10, 1953 he said: "I'm here to serve you all ... It is for you to correct me if I fail."⁵⁰ For Hammarskjöld humility is both important before nature and as a social maxim. "Humility before the flower at the timber line is the gate which gives access to the path up the open fell."⁵¹ By that he doesn't mean the negative connotations of submissiveness, but that kind of freedom that equally means to be free from other people and *for* other people. "Humility is just as much the opposite of self-abasement as it is of self-exaltation .../Praise and blame, the winds of success and adversity, blow over such a life without leaving a trace or upsetting its balance."⁵² There are differing voices as to whether those "winds" actually left any traces: "In reality he had been completely paralyzed. The Russians and the French didn't talk to him any longer, and a large number of other people no longer wanted to have anything to do with him. At the end of his mandate he was done". On the other hand Hammarskjöld had "faith in the future of mankind, as he had trust in the moral compass of people". The last speech he made at the UN General Assembly on September 8, 1961 seems to be borne by hope:

Let us work in the conviction that our work has a meaning beyond the narrow individual one and has meant something for man.⁵³

In remembrance of Dag Hammarskjöld Sami architects and artists – among them Andreas Labba – built a chapel in the small village of Kaitum. The altarpiece consists of a glass window wall through which you can look into a birch forest – for a devotional dialogue with nature during the change of the seasons. In its simplicity and silence it reminds one on the UN Headquarters meditation room in New York that was designed according to the ideas of Dag Hammarskjöld and that is accessible to all visitors in the Public Hall. At least the most northern part of Sweden's famous trail "Kungsleden" was named after Hammarskjöld on the initiative of Bishop Rune Backlund. Beside this trail there are verses of the diary carved in many stones both in the Swedish and in the Samish language. So Hammarskjöld's markings have become *pointings of the way* even in the literal sense. ❌

Birgit van der Leeden is a German author with an interest for Scandinavia and Sweden in particular.

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