

Talent

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Thank You for Your kind invitation. It is an honour facing this distinguished body of considerable and – talented – scientists. First this remark: English is certainly not my mother tongue. I know from earlier performances that being a Dane, I will at some point be stricken with fatigue exercising those muscles of the face, the lazy Danish language does not engage, unless one is very upset. I may have to pause now and then to revive my eloquence. So don't think I am done, just because I stop speaking.

Introducing myself: I am a journalist and a writer. I belong to an old species of grumblers. I have been so for quite a long time, born into the tradition of putting a question to every answer. Why do You always answer a question with a another question, the old rabbi was asked. The rabbi's answer: Why I answer your question with another question? What else would I do?

My starting point of education was that of college. In Danish the black school, in English: the strictly academic school – with

its roots and ideals deep in the past. The teachers of Frederiksberg Gymnasium in the 1960'ties were ambitious folks, however, seeing themselves as stranded, their talents lost for the world and the University. At that time only two of the kind: this one in Aarhus, which came in second to the real University, the old one in Copenhagen. That has changed, I know.

I was horrified at the prospect of ending up like these teachers in a profession never being able to exercise *my* special talents. I realized early that I could draw, I could write, I could speak – or shout; and that was what I wanted to do: draw, write and shout. Drawing became an appreciated hobby, writing and speaking and shouting my livelihood.

After the study of history at the University, I therefore drifted into the realm of journalism –public service – in the Danmarks Radio, in the radio and later the television news, as political editor, daily editor and newscaster for ten years or so. I was then appointed executive producer at the Danish Film Institute and hereafter for some years called as chief editor of the newspaper Information. Still I am doing my weekly grumbling column in Information also reviewing publications

on subjects of History. Since the late 70'ties I have myself published several books non-fiction as well as fiction.

I consider it a publicist's, a writer's duty if possible, to take on the role of the consistent critic. A developing democracy, in my view and without illusions, must be scrutinized and criticized around the clock.

In this particular procedure one has steadily to examine allegations, words, ideas, concepts used by politicians, authorities and everybody else participating in the debate. What are we talking about and why. That is the question. Politicians seldom or hardly ever carry matters to those extremes or even to a point, where you have a chance to estimate the phenomenons in their consequences. *Being* so, broadly speaking, politicians are attending a variety of considerations and tactical calculations depriving them the opportunity to go to the roots of the ideas even their own. In this respect the political environment, including a multitude of ambitious gentlemen and women of the press hoping to be or being public relations persons, in Danish spindoctors, are inclined to adopt the tune of the day exploiting popular trends to be sure they are heard.

Often in our political and cultural discussions we – the press as well – are operating ideas, conceptual systems and concepts *such as talent*, topic of the day, without any clue of what we mean:

Schmuel and the blind man.

The blind man asks what milk is. Schmuel answers: it is some white liquid from a cow.

The blind man: What is white?

Schmuel: a Swan is white.

The blind man: What is a swan?

Schmuel: A Schwan is a bird swimming on the water with a long bend neck?

The blind man: What is bend?

Schmuel demonstrates with his bend arm, and let the blind man feel on the bend arm.

The blind man: Now I know, what milk is!

And now the lecture:

Words undergo from time to time changes of meaning. For the most part for the better. Words are worn out, dismissed and replaced, or their original sense is lost in favour of the need for a new meaning.

Sometimes, if not very often, this process is causing confusion and *loss* of meaning. In Danish for example as well as in English the word ***udfordring***, challenge, has replaced the word ***problem***, problem or difficulty. Facing a problem is not as attractive as facing a challenge. Problem has an adverse effect and is in the defensive; challenge is offensive and dynamic. Interviewed people insist on their inclination – not to problems – but to challenge, which they face in a manly way. On the contrary a problem can very well turn up impossible to solve. The enigma of cancer might very well be a challenge, but it certainly is a problem. The researcher applying for money to his research is clever calling his field challenging rather than problematic.

Now for *talent* which little by little also underwent a significant and may be not so appropriate change.

The word and concept *talent*, which means weight or heaviness, contains both ambiguity and double meaning.

In the American movie: The talented Mr. Ripley it becomes obvious, that Mr. Ripley's talent is not of a kind to advantage for his fellow men. The talent of Mr. Ripley is neither to Mr. Ripley's own advantage.

That type of a talent is of the car'nivorous kind. And the talent of Mr. Ripley is his very character – born more than bred, deeply rooted in Mr. Ripley's genes, and of a sort that no one can learn. Mr. Ripley, for all his horrible deeds, is a true, born artist of deception and crime. The actor Matt Damon performing Mr. Ripley is in his interpretation of the character defending this deadly talent presenting it to the audience as precious as the richest treasure of nature herself. Mr. Ripley cannot help being Mr. Ripley , the talented gifted man, whose nature it is deceiving and corrupting and destroying, whatever he encounters on his bloodstained but invariably way. He kills and destroys, because that is what he does. That is his talent. There is really nothing he can do about it, but do it.

Often in American fiction also in the past You will meet this fatalistic interpretation of the human condition certainly

meant as a bitter commentary to the idea and troublesome ideal of the dream: total freedom of individuality.

In the famous or notorious tv-soap: The Sopranos the main character, the mafia boss Tony Soprano tells one of his victims: I am a thief, that is my nature and that is why I now destroy you!

Tony Soprano's trade is stealing and robbing, *his* talent is surviving in the liberal jungle. The consequence of the notion of the individual precedence in modern society, where man is man's own destiny, must at the same time be the worship of individual qualities.

If You are the architect of Your own future and Your success, as ardent liberals and the spirit of time want the world to think and live after, then the individual – in the individual's sum of talents – must be paramount for achieving this success. The talented Mr. Ripley or Tony Soprano or Lance Armstrong or Lehman Brothers – or Milena Penkova for that matter – with all their talented methods of paving their way to fame and fortune are containing the conditions to becoming modern heroes - no matter how corruptive and damaging their

behaviour may be, and no matter that some of them are revealed and some brought down by law.

Their talent was simply not sufficient.

The talented Mr. Ripley is however not only an ardent critical work of art concerning and indirectly debating our golden age of individual proliferation – at worst into disaster; The Talented Mr. Ripley is as well a commentary to art *as a work of art itself*.

True art, is among other things a performance of reckless truth, respecting nothing but the artistic demand of truth and recklessness. Art and science in the romantic sense – like in so many other senses – are equivalent.

Einstein, encapsulated in his outstanding talent and genius of understanding nature, could not help understanding nature and relativity and energy and for ever changed the world.

Beethoven, encapsulated in his talent and genius for making music, could not help to do it, for ever changing the face of music.

In this respect talent is not a democratic affair, but individually rooted, which in ordinary sense would tell us that

genius and talent is a conservative élitist value - a fact there is not so much to do about. Nature or God has created man, and we cannot change this human condition: some people got talent, some did not.

But it is obviously against human nature not to try modify or change human nature, like we modify and change ideas and conceptions. Sometimes to the better.

If You look up the word *talent* in older dictionaries, it is explained as an inborn ability. Even in the age of Enlightenment, philosophers no matter how eager they were to change the human condition and soften society, this understanding, as far as I can judge, was then common.

But the dilemma was already, long time before the democratic age, obvious: How can one change human conditions, if human conditions are decided by nature, and human talent given by God?

If You Google the word talent now, You will find Wikipedia insisting on the opposite: the idea of talent as different from the traditional sense. That is: talent as far more than an inborn ability. Talent is something You may *learn*. If it is soccer,

boxing, skiing, creating works of art, researching brain tissue, whatever. In that respect this rather surprising etymo'logic explanation is matching, hand in glove, modern market and the idea of the modern market on human endeavour and enterprise.

If You try hard , as the queen would say in her New Year's address, if you really make an effort, if you meet the challenges – not the problems: *challenges* – meet them with an open mind, then you will go the distance and stay the course and *Though shallst succeed.*

First and foremost: The public will applause, the ovations are certain; the media will pay you respect, and the *grant-awarding authorities* will be on their alert, because the person who went the distance and stayed the course is worthy, and on him and her you place your bet and your money, here success will flourish.

Visibility, willpower, determination, goal-direction and success are synonymous features with quality and – *talent.*

Are you recognized as talented, as gifted you are talented and gifted. Modern media prefer success holding high the good and positive and challenging story. The upcoming newsdirector in

the recent Danish tv-soap *Borgen* is not a figment of the imagination, but a sardonic portrait of this forceful trend in the media: Modern media want stories about the half full glass, not the half empty one; about the e'nigma of cancer solved and nothing about the many problems and setbacks. Challenges, no problems.

The multitude of audition-shows in the media tell the story about talent as willpower and the way to prove the glory of being the mentioned architect of fortune. The determination of the performing participants or competitors to perform, whatever they are performing and competing about, transform them into gifted, talented individuals or even personalities in the eyes of the media.

By performing and competing and hereby overcoming their fear of performing and competing, they are become heroes of the media belonging to a certain band of brothers.

Accepting the challenge of conducting a symphony orchestra, like it took place recently in Danish public television, though the participants did not know how to read music or knew the slightest thing about conducting, distinguish the hopeless amateurs making foolish gestures in front of the orchestra.

First of all because they boldly met the challenge and put themselves at stake. Were they hidden talents then? They were not.

What is interesting here is the transformation of the *act and art of conducting*, which professionally demands extreme talent, a very long education and a lot of experience. The transformation of making music into the act of self-conquering and courage to make a fool of oneself. That is what it is about – not amateurs conducting a professional orchestra, which is absurd and no way to discover or develop talents, but Wahol's 15 minutes as expression of talent .

Without being dramatic and hysteric about this, I do think that you might locate a trend here and that you might observe this trend in your own world.

The universities, every one of them and not only in America, like the media, like almost every field of society in these years of continuing widespread worshipping of the market, do what they can to get as much visibility as possible.

Come to our university and get talent and fame! We do whatever we can to lift up and present in the media our supercandidates getting superscienceprizes and whatever.

Not always the number of guinea-pigs is quite exact or existing, but our researcher obtained his or her talent at this very university, for that is what we promised to provide for as many students as possible. We are second to none on talent. This may be far fetched, and some might find me out of line. But just give it a thought: we all may be out of line. We are, I think, in the midst of an intellectual or spiritual crisis, deriving from a certain distortion of things, stemming from great structural and impenetrable changes of the institutions and the following political demands.

The then liberal prime minister of this country set the tone in 2002, when reducing knowledge and expertise compared to *matter of fact down to earth common sense*. Experts, that we are ourselves, as he put it, the talent is ours, we have the votes. Later on, interpreting freely Danish history of the 20th century, the powerful man demonstrated the meaning of performance before knowledge – or the unwavering will of the individual to see the world from the one and only standpoint – ones own.

A man enters a museum and asks the attendant: How old is the vase in that exhibition case? The attendant answers: It is 3008 years old.

How can You be that precise?

Well, the attendant answers, when I was appointed here at the museum it was 3000 years, and I have been here for 8 years!

The following years the demand of performance was again and again put forward, which later was transformed into the notorious sentence: ***Fra forskning til faktura***. *From invention to invoice* – in my best translation.

The then minister for research clearly underlined, mildly spoken, in which light he interpreted scientific spirit and talent.

From there to spin the road is short.

And suddenly You might understand certain entrepreneurs who make their fellow man believe that one not only can develop talent, but can teach talent. And that the process of learning only is up to the student's wish and will to meet the challenge. Because, when the claim is made that talent is

delivered to the student, the responsibility fully rests on the individual person's shoulder. An man is liberated – alone. Talent is reduced to a question of individual willpower and courage to face this special offer as a challenge. That is a distortion of language and moral. And that is in my view wrong.