

# BILDUNG

**KEEP  
GROWING**

LENE RACHEL ANDERSEN



Report to the Club of Rome

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by  
**Lene Rachel Andersen**



**NORDIC  
BILDUNG**

**Bildung** – Keep Growing

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# FOREWORD

## By the co-presidents of the Club of Rome

The publication *Bildung - Keep Growing* by Lene Rachel Andersen has been accepted as a Report to the Club of Rome. This book is a thoughtful and thought-provoking guide to enable humanity to re-focus on what is essential and to understand life-long learning, education and thinking as a unifying force. It is rich in comparisons between the phases of Developmental Psychology and Bildung as a complex interplay between individual development, learning and collective culture. Importantly, this book has a regional, European narrative but a global ambition.

Bildung is here presented as a tool for personal development into a self-authoring stage that enables one to function as a confident responsible citizen able to express unique individuality within a shared cultural value system. Lene Rachel Andersen makes a bold foray into proposing the concept of the Bildung Rose to represent unity in diversity and nesting humanity in nature, of which we are a part.

A better understanding of the power of Bildung as a unifying force is essential as humanity exits COVID-19 and as we need to build greater resilience and solidarity in community evolution as we prepare for future pandemics and crises. The concepts of Bildung, Circles of Belonging and the Bildung Rose promote the possibility for a new brand of national identity which is centered on a holistic approach to the "self", "peoplehood" and "community." An identity built around a compassionate pride of belonging that is accepting of all cultures and thinking rather than today's brand of extremist nationalism or populism.

*Bildung - Keep Growing* is of high relevance to everybody thinking se-

riously about knowledge exchange, education and life-long learning as anchors for holistic economic and political development at the community, national and global levels.

Reports to the Club of Rome do not necessarily represent the opinion of the Club of Rome as an organization, nor the opinion of all its members. The acceptance as a Report to the Club of Rome indicates that the Club of Rome appreciates and promotes the publication as an important intellectual contribution.

Sandrine Dixson-Declève  
Co-President, the Club of Rome

Mamphela Ramphele  
Co-President, the Club of Rome

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Bildung is moral and emotional maturity. Bildung is also to have the education and knowledge necessary to thrive in your society; bildung is to be deeply embedded in culture and community while having the autonomy to carve your own path in life. Bildung is always personal and unique.

Bildung is a German word that has no word in English. Beginning in the 1770s, German philosophers explored bildung as a secular form of inner development and it became popular among the bourgeoisie.

In Denmark, a pastor realized in the 1830s that the peasants needed bildung too, and he envisioned a new kind of school: the folk-high-school. In 1851, a Danish teacher, Christen Kold, figured out how to teach in such a way that young farmhands learned to think for themselves: he told them moving stories and let them ask questions. Once he had their attention, he could teach them new farming techniques, science, philosophy, history, religion, literature, art, economic theory, and political science.

Norway, Sweden and Finland copied the folk-high-school concept in the 1860s and by 1900, a critical mass of youngsters in the Nordic countries had upgraded their skills and their thinking, and the Nordics had gone from being among the poorest countries in Europe to being among the richest. This development and the bildung that carried it also meant that the Nordics made the transition from agricultural feudal societies to modern, democratic, industrialized nation-states peacefully.

As we are facing new challenges from digitization, globalization, a pandemic and environmental changes we need bildung for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the book concludes by exploring what that might look like.



# PREFACE

## Humanity at a crossroads

*Atman*, a Sanskrit word, means inner self, spirit or soul, and breath. *Atmen*, a German word, means to breathe. The connection between the two words is not a coincidence; both have the same Proto-Indo-European root. Danish is an Indo-European language too, a Germanic language in fact, and in Danish, to breathe is *ånde*, while spirit is *ånd*. The Hebrew word *ruach* means wind, breath, or spirit, and when the Bible opens by telling that God's spirit sweeps over the water, it is *ruach*. When God threatens to kill all life on Earth in a flood, it is the *ruach* of all life that is to disappear. Later in the Bible, *ruach* comes to mean the individual human soul, mind, or consciousness, that which is of higher awareness than mere instinct, that which can contemplate and serve God.

It is perhaps no big wonder that breath, spirit, and consciousness are connected in the spiritual traditions and in different languages. After all, our consciousness and life itself are what disappear when our breathing stops.

It is a diabolic irony that through our very breath, humanity is now connected. Not through wisdom of the spirit, but through a virus; not through life, but through the risk of death.

While we have created technologies and economic infrastructures that connect us around the globe, we forgot to upgrade our understanding, our consciousness, our sense of responsibility, and our conscience; our spirit. We forgot to study, learn, and teach to everybody that which is at the core and the forefront of human knowledge. We forgot to think, and we forgot to understand ourselves as connected around the globe

and to protect life. We also forgot to see ourselves as a part of nature and to pay heed to the spiritual traditions that, different as they are, all tell us to treat Earth's resources with humility and respect. We were poor stewards of the Earth we inherited; we are poor gardeners.

Sufficient knowledge to understand your circumstances, the emotional maturity to act appropriately in time, and the cultivation to express how and why are all summed up in one German word: *Bildung*.

To solve the existential crises we are facing as a species, such as climate change, mass extinction of species, surveillance capitalism, artificial intelligence (AI), terrorism, skyrocketing inequality, and financial collapses—and pandemics such as the COVID-19—we need *bildung*, and we need it at a massive scale and fast.

We are the first generation to experience a global disaster unfold within months, and be able to watch it unfold globally in real time. We are also the last generation who can claim we had no clue. We are the generation that will be defining the future for all of humanity. It is our political and technological choices that will define the climate, the wellbeing of eco-systems and the technological infrastructure of coming generations. We have their quality of life, their prosperity, and their level of freedom in our hands. It is our responsibility. If we choose to implement constant surveillance everywhere in order to regulate people's behavior, we will have forced it upon coming generations; if we choose not to implement constant surveillance, we will have given coming generations the same freedom, responsibility, and choice: to take away freedom from future generations or to keep it. Similarly with nature: if we destroy it, we hand that destroyed planet over to coming generations; if we save it, we hand over the responsibility.

Instead of robbing everybody of their freedom, responsibility, and a green planet, we can mature. We can see ourselves as an integral part of nature, and we can become responsible. We can promote *bildung*.

To introduce and explore *bildung*, and to suggest a path forward towards a wiser and green planet, this book is comprised of five parts:

- The human spirit; what makes life meaningful?
- Meaning-making and bildung: emotional development and the society in which it takes place.
- How Denmark turned bildung into folk-bildung, exported it to the other Nordic countries, and how this changed the Nordics.
- More and better bildung; a better understanding, framing what happened, and making it operational in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- Some personal reflections on the wider implications of bildung.

Bildung is an elusive phenomenon, and I do not suggest that by reading this book, you will have a manual to start a program or a new school, but I am certain that you will have a new foundation for understanding our potential as individuals and as a species. I also hope the book will inspire you to start a conversation about better education, bildung, and the potential of the human spirit wherever you are.

With this book, I hope to reach those who are interested in the future of humanity and the wellbeing of our planet. I write with policymakers and the curious and conscientious citizen in mind, and I aim to write in plain language though I often use very abstract and academic concepts. If we are to solve the major crises that we are facing, writing different books for academics and everybody else will not foster a meaningful conversation among us. Facing the gigantic paradigm shift that is necessary if we are to hand over a habitable planet to our children and grandchildren, we need shared frames of reference.<sup>1</sup>

There is no need to try to hide that I am writing from a European perspective, but I have done my best not to make the book too Eurocentric. However, since the topic of the book originated in Europe, it is hard to avoid.

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<sup>1</sup> Speaking of references: In order to increase readability, footnotes and references have been kept to an absolute minimum. There is a literature list at the end of the book and, since the first half of the book is based on *The Nordic Secret - A European Story of Beauty and Freedom* (Fri Tanke, 2017), there is an online collection of sources by topic, which can be found on the website of that book: <https://www.nordicsecret.org/sources-by-chapter/>

I am also writing from a Danish perspective; I am Danish and was born and raised in Denmark. In my late 20s, I went to the US several times; I went there as a Dane and returned as a European. There are aspects of Denmark that I hate so much that sometimes I just feel like yelling at my country. Our appreciation of mediocracy, for instance, and the ever-present “*hygge*,” which became “Word of the Year 2016,” but which is really just a way of dying without living first.

On the other hand, I have to admit: Denmark has it pretty much figured out. In international surveys, the Danes are the happiest and have low corruption and the highest levels of trust in other people and in public institutions, and Denmark is amongst the top countries for business.

As my Swedish colleague, Tomas Björkman, and I explored in our book *The Nordic Secret*, the secret behind Denmark and the other Nordic countries is: bildung.

## **Thank yous**

Two people, in particular, have contributed to this book. My colleague Tomas Björkman with whom I wrote *The Nordic Secret – A European Story of Beauty and Freedom* (Fri Tanke, 2017); many of the core insights from that book are also in this book. My colleague Mette Hvid Brockmann with whom I work every day at Nordic bildung and who is also my editor. There is no need to be melodramatic, but I could not have written this book without you.

This book has also benefitted tremendously from comments and input from Stefan Bergheim, Sturla Bjerkaker, Bo Heimann, Gregg Henriques, Christer Nylander, Zak Stein, Ane Storgaard, and Ernst von Weizäcker. Thank you all for your feedback.

*Lene Rachel Andersen,  
Copenhagen, May 2020*

## **Food for thought**

When was the last time you made somebody grow?

How did that feel?



# THE HUMAN SPIRIT

## Making life meaningful

Why are we here?

And now that we are, what should we make of it?

The first question has intrigued humans, probably for as long as there have been humans around. Every culture on Earth, including the smallest and least technologically advanced hunter-gatherer tribes, have creation myths explaining how the world was created and why. The second question is rather new, because throughout the majority of human history, the struggle for survival was occupying everybody, and what to make of life was rather obvious: survive and make sure your children do too!

Today, at least in the wealthy West, both questions hit us differently.

To some, the first question has a religious answer: God put us here, and life came with obligations and moral value. To others, the question has a rather bleak answer: DNA emerged, mutated, and evolved to build cells around itself. Cells evolved into multicellular life, vertebrates, primates, and eventually humans; life has no intrinsic value; we just happen to be here because previous generations reproduced well and survived successfully. If there is to be any deeper meaning to life, we must create it ourselves. Which leads us to the second question:

What to make of life? Once survival has been taken care of, what's the point? We find perhaps the oldest known struggle with this existential emptiness in Ecclesiastes: "Utter futility!—said Koheleth—Utter futility! All is futile!" and then it goes downhill from there... 2,500-year-old nihilism in the face of life's meaninglessness. In other words, if life is to be meaningful, we have to make it so!

With productivity as high as it is in the most technologically advanced societies, we are about to find ourselves in the existentially awkward situation that we are no longer necessary for our own survival. Hypothetically, robots could produce everything. Life is thus in our own hands now, much necessity is gone, and it is up to us to make it meaningful, find a purpose, do what is important and fulfilling, and engage ourselves in what makes us thrive and feel lasting meaning and joy.

There are two major obstacles to this: our inner world and personal choices, and the outer world that defines a number of circumstances over which the individual has little or no control.

We, therefore, need to see ourselves both as individuals with autonomy and as beings, who are integral to and embedded in something bigger, be it family, community, country, or the globe as a whole. That we are integral to a community or system means that even though we may feel that we are in no control, we still contribute to there being the community or the system. Without our being in it, the community or system would be different. Maybe just a tiny bit, but still different.

This double existence, as both autonomous and integral, can be weaker or stronger.

We can be so lacking autonomy that the only truly individual aspect of our life is our bodily functions; this is the condition of the newborn, but it is also the fate of the concentration camp prisoner.

Detachment from others may mean that we are not an integral part of any family or community. If this deprivation happens in early childhood, few develop properly. Later, we can be so lacking connectedness to others that we have no meaningful or true relationships at all; it is possible to be so emotionally, culturally, and morally detached from others that we despair. This may happen due to tragic personal loss, but it may also be the fate of the individual in a concentration camp or authoritarian system where no personal relationships or autonomy are allowed. Under these circumstances, existence is neither autonomous nor integral to human life; it is rather the absence of both.

In some respects, this loneliness and detachment from others, from culture, from shared morality, norms, and emotions, is what we have done to ourselves, to our societies, and our educational systems in the postmodern West. Liberalism and capitalism at their best set people free and create wealth; at their worst and with no correction from tradition and morality, they pit us against each other and break down the social fabric and our symbolic worlds. Schools that are reduced to PISA and other tests, to measurable indicators, to constant competition, and to “teaching factories” producing nothing but a competitive workforce are starving the human soul. They are detaching children and young adults from that which makes life worth living. Autonomy is squelched; attachment does not fit into a spreadsheet.

The far more meaningful, rich, fulfilling, and fun alternative is, of course, high degrees of both autonomy and integration. Upbringing, schools, communities, and societies that develop that which is unique in each child, that create strong social bonds, and that foster independence and connectedness to both people, culture, and society, provide scaffolding for meaningful growth. Likewise, meaningful is the adult life in which we have the ability to be in charge of our own life-situation, where we can seek and access information freely and express ourselves. A life of autonomy and integration is a life where we are free to enjoy the arts and aesthetics of our own and other cultures, their richness and depth, to provide for ourselves in the surrounding economy, to study and learn, to develop a moral and ethical backbone and the ability to speak up for oneself and on behalf of others, to know our ‘place’ in history and have a sense of rootedness in the collective journey of our country and of humankind. To be empowered and active as a citizen, to engage in the organization of one’s society. It is deep integration into the social fabric, which provides all those enriching elements in one’s life. It is freedom, obligations, independence, interdependence, and responsibilities at the same time. Furthermore, it is *bildung*.

## About bildung

There is no English word for *Bildung*, so the German original will have to do. (You pronounce it *bild-ung*; the 'ung' part with the same short 'oo' as in the name of the Swiss psychologist Jung.) It comes from the word *Bild*, which means image, and originally referred to forming oneself in the image of God or Christ. In the mid-1700s, it became a secular phenomenon, and the *Bild* one was aiming for, was the personal image of one's fully developed self. It was the German Idealist philosophers of the late Enlightenment and the early Romantic era, such as Johann Gottfried Herder, Friedrich Schiller, and G.W.F. Hegel, who explored this kind of secular bildung in the decades around 1800.

Bild-ung is thus both a formation process and the result of a formation process. The reason for not just using the English word *formation*, is that bildung comes with a rich philosophical tradition.

Bildung represents a complexity that makes it hard to fully grasp. Even to Germans who, for the past couple of generations, have reduced the word to mean no more than education in the most ordinary sense of the word: the school stuff that can be measured in a test.

## About the book and our opportunities

Because bildung is both a foreign word in the English language and an elusive concept, this book has several goals:

- To briefly trace the Greek, Czech, Swiss, French, Scottish, and British roots of the otherwise very German concept of bildung, and to thus show that bildung is an aspect of the European heritage that we have forgotten.
- To explore the concept of bildung and present it to people outside the Germanic tradition.
- To re-introduce it into the German vernacular in its original, complex sense.

- To share how the Danes transformed bildung into folk-bildung in the 1800s and laid the foundation for the success of the Nordic countries.
- To show that bildung is an essential human phenomenon that we overlook at our own peril, but which points towards a better future.

As these lines are written, it is still too early to say what even the short-term outcome of the COVID-19 virus and the lockdown will be, but one lesson already learned is this: when governments really want something, they can find the money to pay for it.

Folk-bildung may be the best way to restore our societies and their economies in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Every human being has the potential for autonomy and deep integration, the capacity for emancipation and responsibility; everybody has the potential and deserves access to bildung. That ought to be our overall political endeavor.

## **Food for thought**

When was the last time you changed your mind on a political issue?  
What did you fear the most: Being wrong after you changed your mind  
or looking silly?