



Debating cards from
N.F.S. Grundtvig



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N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783-1872) is perhaps the most influential person in Danish history, and he is often referred to as 'the man who formed Denmark' as a free, stable, and enlightened democratic society. These cards are intended to initiate open talks about freedom, democracy, identity, faith, love, education, everything in between – and more. They are based on some of Grundtvig's thoughts but deal with questions concerning our present.

HOW TO:

- Form groups of 3-4 persons
- Take turns drawing a card
- Read the card out loud and open the debate
- Keep going as long as there is something to talk about. Move on to the next card

Published by Grundtvigsk Forum 2023
www.grundtvigskforum.dk



There is no exam for life.

Is this true?

If so, how do we find out what is important?

INFO: Grundtvig insisted that the people's high school should be exam-free. People want to learn and understand. *Without a stick or a carrot.* And we are only free to think freely when we do not have to waste time and energy on guessing what the teacher wants us to say.



"For the heart, life is simple. It beats as long as it can. Then it stops."
(Karl Ove Knausgård, writer)

Outside that muscle of the heart, life is more complicated.

So...why are we here?

INFO: "Clarity is the goal, not the pilgrim's staff," wrote Grundtvig. In other words, we should try to understand the mystery of life. But we are on the wrong track, if we are looking for simple answers and easy solutions.



How should we show consideration for the different religions and views on life in the public space?

INFO: In 1827 Grundtvig received a letter from a 70-year-old man who was going out of his mind over the quarrels on religion in his home. He was under obligation to his landlord to say prayers every morning and evening, but he lived in a house with children from different marriages and there was no agreement as to how often or what form the prayers should take. What was he to do? Grundtvig advised the man to continue to say prayers with those who wished; those who did not, could say prayers in another room the way they wanted. Or not, if they so wished. Just so long as they did not bother everyone else.



If there is no freedom, there can be no honesty. And if there is no honesty, we cannot discover the truth.

In what circumstances is it difficult to be honest?

INFO: While himself being a Christian pastor, Grundtvig fought for the Danish Jews to have the right to vote. It was for him a frightening thought that the Jews should convert to Christianity simply in order to get the franchise. "That would be dishonest. The use of force in religious matters made liars of people."



How do we choose with 'the heart'?
And how does 'the heart' learn to choose right?

INFO: Love and falling in love are not the same thing, says Danish Professor of Psychology Svend Brinkmann. We should therefore not expect, either of ourselves or our partner, that we can be madly in love all life through. Grundtvig married three times and fell in love on other occasions. He underlined that we have reason, imagination, and feelings. Feelings are a living part of a living person. "What would Grundtvig and Brinkmann have said to one another?"



"The Church exists for the people and not the people for the Church."
(Grundtvig)

How does the Church 'exist' for you? (If it does)

How does the Church 'exist' for others?



One child in two (in Denmark) has never seen a hedgehog, although they are quite common.

How do we gain a relationship with nature?

What does nature mean to you?

INFO: "The forest leaves are fading fast," wrote Grundtvig, but are they? Grundtvig used many images from nature in his hymns and songs – especially birds and trees. But they are often metaphors for something else, such as human language or God's Spirit. He did not have a particularly close relation to nature and managed to live in 22 different homes in Copenhagen.





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“We won the election. The election result is a fraud!” (Trump supporter during the storming of Congress on 6 January 2021)

Can one be too stupid for democracy?

What does it demand of us to be citizens of a democracy?

INFO: Grundtvig did not distinguish between the elite and the people. Instead, he distinguished between being ‘common people’ who may be ignorant and ‘conscious members of a people’ who are educated. To be conscious of ourselves we all have to get up on our toes.

 GRUNDTVIGSK FORUM

When we allow the same freedom to ignorant and dangerous people as we do to ourselves, we are trusting that in spite of everything, all will be well.

What do you think of the future of ‘free society’?

How far do you trust that ‘all will be well’?

INFO: “You are not free, unless you allow your neighbour to be free,” wrote Grundtvig. He believed that it was best to allow others freedom, even though freedom can also be dangerous. His optimism rested on his trust in God.

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Life matters. Grundtvig criticised his contemporary pastors who believed that faith had more to do with life after death than before it. They undervalued human life when they praised ‘the blessings of death’ and ‘the blessed corpse’.

What is faith all about?

INFO: Grundtvig was a pastor and a hymnwriter, who wrote ca. 1,600 hymns and songs.

 GRUNDTVIGSK FORUM

“Sometimes I think, which minority will I be blamed for having overlooked tomorrow?” (Joan, 72)

What do all people have in common?

INFO: Grundtvig was very concerned about what was ‘specifically Danish’ – yet also about what was ‘specifically human’. He believed that all people, whatever their origin and faith, are created in God’s image and are therefore invested with a special dignity. “Man is a divine experiment of spirit and dust,” he wrote.

 GRUNDTVIGSK FORUM

How are you connected to people who have lived *before* you?

What have you inherited?

What will you pass on?

INFO: When we look at a cell through a microscope, we zoom in on a minute part of the world and strip away everything else. In this way science has made enormous discoveries. But there is another way of looking at things and seeing relations and coherence. Grundtvig called this ‘insight’.

 GRUNDTVIGSK FORUM

“Blah, blah, blah...”

What makes a meeting between people and ideas fruitful?

What is your definition of ‘dead interaction’?

INFO: Grundtvig spoke of “living interaction”, meaning conversation between people or between the various fields of life, such as faith, learning, art and politics.

 GRUNDTVIGSK FORUM

“I just feel that economics and people are two different things.” (Peter, 32, an investor who does not see a problem in investing in the weapons industry, wherever they may end up)

What links the various fields of human life?

What questions keep recurring in all fields of life?

Which fields of life do we need to keep separated? And why?

INFO: No one is in the same league as Grundtvig when it comes to grappling with educational, poetical, theological, political, philosophical and existential thinking and linking them all together.

 GRUNDTVIGSK FORUM

“The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him,” said philosopher Hannah Arendt.

How far do you think the future is ‘open’?

INFO: Grundtvig called human life “historical-poetic”. The word ‘poetry’ comes from the Greek word for to create, to act. Human beings are not just copies of one another or a product of our genes and upbringing. We are also free to act. History is the narrative of acting people – people who did not always know what they had set in motion.

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Who owns our children? The state or their parents?

Who should teach us to be good parents?

INFO: Grundtvig fought for freedom of upbringing. He supported the idea of 'free schools', which guaranteed parents the right to establish their own schools, based on the values that they wished to pass on.

GRUNDTVIGSK FORUM

"I read and read for one exam after another and just wished that it was all over, without knowing, what next?" (Grundtvig)

What are the three best arguments for ending secondary and tertiary education with an exam?

What arguments can be brought against this?

GRUNDTVIGSK FORUM

"I learned then, poor sinner, in midwinter's cell that light without heat is a torment of Hell." (Grundtvig)

When does something that was originally well-intended do more harm than good?

INFO: Grundtvig wrote about what engaged his attention: about the inner and outer struggle between light and darkness, about myths, history, and Christianity. In 1824 he wrote a 312-stanza poem called New Year's Morning, where he explored how human life cannot be explained by reason alone but must be lived with the heart, and therefore open to life and feelings.

GRUNDTVIGSK FORUM

"I will vote at every election. I will express my opinion. I will take part in the work of associations. I will take part in public meetings. I will take part in debates on the internet.

What would you do if you had a good idea for a solution to a problem at school/at work/in your association/in your town or village/in parliament?

What arguments can be brought against this?

GRUNDTVIGSK FORUM

"We must approach books not as bookworms that live off corpses and carrion, but as living people who seek to learn from books what we cannot tell ourselves." (Grundtvig)

What is the difference between being 'knowledgeable' and being 'wise'?

When did you last learn something new?

INFO: Grundtvig is one of the most important thinkers behind the Danish people's high schools. These are 3-to-6-month fee-paying boarding schools for post-18-year-olds with no entry requirements, no fixed curriculum, no exams and no grades. Students can freely choose from a wide variety of different subjects and classes. The people's high schools offer cultural education.

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GRUNDTVIGSK FORUM

I can order a pizza in Italian. I can go to a conference in English. I can write a song in Danish. (Sanne, 42, Danish)

Why should immigrants also continue to speak their own language?

What do we learn from struggling to learn a foreign language?

INFO: Grundtvig called his mother-tongue "the language of the heart". He knew Hebrew, Latin, Ancient Greek, Old Icelandic, Old English, German, Norwegian, Swedish, and English – but Danish was the language of his heart.

GRUNDTVIGSK FORUM

"You don't discover libraries until they're no longer there." (Edith Aller, senior lecturer – in connection with funding cuts)

What do you get from:

Google?
Facebook?
Wikipedia?
Public libraries?

INFO: Grundtvig was indirectly responsible for a number of Danish words beginning with *folk*, meaning 'public' or 'people's': public libraries, public information, public debate, or people's high schools, the people's church, the people's parliament.

GRUNDTVIGSK FORUM

"When we sing The National Anthem, I feel that we are all together." (Peter, 46)

"When we sing The National Anthem, I feel excluded." (Samar, 23)

Why is it important to have an idea of a common culture, even if it doesn't reflect everyone?

What would be missing if no such idea existed?

How do we make sure that the common culture is an open culture?

INFO: Today 'being Danish' is a much-discussed subject, but in Grundtvig's day it was fairly new to think of yourself as a 'Dane' or a 'German'. Grundtvig helped to create the idea of a Danish national identity. He realised that it was important that society was a kind of community, while at the same time being free.

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What is women's liberation about today?

INFO: The bourgeoisie of Copenhagen were scandalised in 1851 when 20-year-old Mathilde Fibiger published her first novel, *Clara Raphael, Twelve Letters*. It was about women being liberated from the social norms, dominated by men. Grundtvig defended her, and while he was a member of parliament he supported a bill for the emancipation of women, giving them the franchise and access to trading independently of their husbands. The bill failed.

GRUNDTVIGSK FORUM

President Putin has decided what 'truth' is in Russia – regarding e.g., the definition of the war in Ukraine. But if there were no freedom to tell lies, there would be no freedom to tell the truth either.

So how should we fight 'fake news'? What must there *not* be freedom to think or believe or say? And why?

INFO: "Freedom for Loki as well as for Thor," wrote Grundtvig about the Nordic gods. Loki is a liar and a truth-twister. Or at least now and then he is, for we cannot always be sure when he is lying! But Grundtvig argued for full freedom of spirit: freedom of expression, freedom of religion, freedom of association, and freedom of schools. Constraint and control are always worse than freedom – even when freedom can be dangerous.

GRUNDTVIGSK FORUM

"I myself decide who to vote for when I go into a ballot box, but it's my boss who decides the job." (Nicklas, 28)

Why isn't there more democracy and joint ownership in the workplace?

How could this come about? (And *should* it?)

INFO: Grundtvig believed that popular education at the people's high schools should be for the peasant farmers in particular. Indirectly this led to the idea of co-operative movements, e.g. for dairy products, which were often led by farmers who had been to one of these schools, who understood the benefits of economic co-operation, and who worked towards them.

GRUNDTVIGSK FORUM

"If you do not know the history of your own people, you need a psychologist or a historian who can tell you what it is that lies behind a people's behaviour." (Bertel Haarder, Danish politician)

Name three peculiar things you know to be characteristic of your own culture.

Name three things you are proud of in your own culture.

GRUNDTVIGSK FORUM

Who should decide what we are to learn in school?

INFO: For Grundtvig the word 'enjoyment' was determining. "That's no fun!" says the teenager, and the parent or teacher feels like kicking them up the backside. Grundtvig believed that there was actually a lot that we want to do, like understanding ourselves in the world and digging deeper into the mysteries of life. The student's joy of understanding more should be the aim of a school.

GRUNDTVIGSK FORUM

"Even if the entire nation were to pool their ignorance, no wisdom would come of it." (Grundtvig)

What are the disadvantages of majority voting?

How do we prevent the majority from making *bad* decisions?

GRUNDTVIGSK FORUM

"Early morn is golden born, and 'gold' betokens 'gladness', for ev'ry day is glad and bright when lived alone to God's delight, though it be touched with sadness." (Grundtvig)

What is 'gladness'?

"We have friendly neighbours. They always say hello – but we never talk to them." (Syrian man in Denmark)

What makes you feel that you belong somewhere?

INFO: In his song 'Of a people is our watchword' Grundtvig writes: "Of a people' all are members/who regard themselves as such,/find their mother-tongue sounds sweetest/and their fatherland love much./All the rest like goblins evil/turn their backs upon the people./bar themselves from kindred tie/and their birth right too deny."

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