THE COFFEE'S OF
THE SECRETARY-GENERAL
MALENE RYDAHL

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The Coffees of the Secretary

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Bringing New Perspectives to the OECD

Secretary-General’s Speech Writing and Intelligence Outreach Unit
Short Bio
Malene Rydahl

Malene Rydahl is the author of the book “Heureux comme un danois” (as happy as a Dane) published by Grasset in France in April 2014. The book became a best-seller and was awarded the prize of the most optimistic book in 2014. It has been published in Korea, Taiwan, Japan and will be published in Russia and Turkey.

Malene was born in Denmark in 1975. After 18 years of rich and extensive experience in the corporate world, most recently as Director of Corporate Communication for Hyatt Hotels & Resorts in EAME, she is now a full-time writer and speaker. She wants to share the secret of what the Danes can teach us about happiness and how we can all live better, more purposeful lives.

She has been part of the advisory committee for the Positive Economy Forum since 2012, an initiative led by Jacques Attali under the sponsorship of the President of the French Republic. She is also part of the advisory board for Europe Tomorrow, a movement for environmental and social innovations.

Malene is partner in a start-up company called 42° Raw, a new healthy vegan fast food concept with four current restaurants in Copenhagen. The company is about to further expand with future openings in Europe. In 2012, the French news magazine L’Express named her amongst the 24 women of the year and in 2014 she was appointed Goodwill Ambassador of Copenhagen.

In 2015, Malene embarked on an Asian tour to promote her book in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. She also furthered her research on the different Asian cultures and concepts of happiness. During this tour she also delivered a TEDx talk in Singapore on “Planting seeds of happiness the Danish way!”

She is now working on her next book which addresses the illusions of happiness.

Malene lives in Paris but travels all over the world.

Website: www.malenerydahl.com
TEDx Talk: https://youtu.be/biQGa89O5O4
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I am extremely happy to be here today, but to be honest, when Mario López-Roldán invited me to a meeting and suggested today’s conference, I actually said ‘no’. I said no based on the assumption that the experts at the OECD would know more about my topic than I do. Mario looked at me and he said ‘I believe you write about trust in your book?’ and I said that is correct, and then he said ‘I am asking you right now to trust me, I invented the series of the Coffees of the Secretary-General and I know that you have great things to say. In your book, you say a lot of the things that we do here at the OECD, but you say them in a different way. You talk to different people and we are interested in that’. So I said yes and it is a big day for me and a great honour.

Last Wednesday was an equally big day for me because I met a teacher from an apprenticeship school in Saint Louis near Mulhouse who wrote to me about 2 months ago saying that he had read my book and had decided to teach it in his school to a group of children who don’t like reading books. So he came to Paris to see me and he had many questions to ask me about the Danish model. I asked him why do the children want to read my book if they do not want to read books? He said because you deliver it in a different way. This makes me very proud.

1 The original transcript of the presentation by Malene Rydahl has undergone minor editing to ensure that the text published in this brochure is presented in a reader-friendly format.
His last question was the 1 million dollar question that people always ask me – ‘are you happy?’ Of course they will ask me this question, I wrote a book about happiness, I come from one of the happiest countries in the world. My answer was the same as it is every time, ‘of course! Absolutely happy...some of the time.’ In my case, most of the time, but definitely not all of the time. I think what is important here is that a country cannot give you a happiness model to make you happy all of the time, it is an illusion. A country can, in the best case scenario, give you a good base of well-being that you can build upon. Of course we have bad days and we have bad periods; and in that respect countries also have bad days and bad periods. And even though Denmark does well on these lists and in certain areas, you cannot ask from a country that it be perfect; there will be bad periods where you will say, ‘that doesn’t fit in with that model’. Unfortunately that is the truth.

I am going to develop on the dangerous illusion of permanent happiness. I do think it’s dangerous and I do think that the media – and all of us – are a little bit responsible about this. What I will talk about today are some of the main reasons why the Danish model works and why people seem to be expressing, repeatedly over the past 40 years, that they are satisfied in life and that they have a good base of well-being.

I am going to talk to you about three things: trust, the freedom to be you and individual responsibility for the common project.
Denmark actually has the highest levels of trust in the world, at 78% according to Danish Professor Tinggaard Svendsen who wrote a book on trust. To give you a point of reference, trust is measured at 22% in France, and in many African countries it is 5%. This gives the Danes a very solid peace of mind; what this means is you will see babies sleeping outside restaurants in strollers, and people outside Danish society will think ‘but no one is watching the babies’. On the contrary, I would say ‘everyone is watching the babies’. At the opera, people put their belongings in unsupervised wardrobes. So how does this work? Can it be exported?

I would say trust starts with the population and with ourselves actually choosing to be trustworthy people. This can be done by creating communities of trust, even starting with a small community of 5, 10 or 100 people, or even following the example of Mohammed Yunus the Nobel Peace Prize winner who created the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, a country with 5% trust. He gave loans to thousands of people and 95% of them were paid back.

I think that with this example in mind, it should be an inspiration to all of us of that we hold individual responsibility in changing the society and actually being or acting the part of the society that we would like to be in. And I think that what we are seeing in Denmark is that trust actually leads to an increase in trust. You see other people acting this way and this is why you replicate. I like to emphasise the point by saying that I do not live in Denmark, I have been living in France for 20 years. I come from a country of complete trust and live in a country with 22% trust – and yet my environment of trust in France is around 80%. Because it is a choice that we make every day of how we behave towards others and this is one of the things that you learn from the Danish model.

What can governments do to improve the trust situation? They can start by fighting corruption. In fact, Denmark also comes up as the least corrupt country in the world according to Transparency International and has been for a number of years. Our last corruption case took place a few months ago when our Prime Minister forgot to declare some bills for his clothing on his tax declaration, this was a small crisis, he should have declared those suits that he wore for public events. But the crisis really broke out when the media found out that he had, in fact, declared underwear on the tax form. The public thought, ‘we may pay for his suits, but who is going to look at his underwear?’

On my second point, the freedom to be you, what I actually mean is, how free are we really to choose our lives, even in democracies in the western world where we feel really free? I actually call it the freedom of the ‘buffet’ where you feel you are making a choice, but in reality the pre-selection has been made for you.
One of the reasons why the Danes are freer to choose their lives is mainly because of our educational system. Because the main purpose of the system is to develop the personality of the child. We do not rate on subject at school more highly than another—whether it is maths, languages, sports etc. We want children to understand that what role they choose in society will be important to society. Because when you go out in life and have this solid base and feel like no matter what your talent is, you are important to society, you actually have an extraordinary foundation to choose a life that corresponds to who you are.

On a further note, more than 70% of Danes leave home when they are 18 years old and a student grant is given to every young person in the country. This gives them the ability to make their own choices. Parents cannot project their own ambitions on their children. Parents will always argue that they are trying to do their best, but when children are completely free at the age of 18 to say, ‘well this is my passion, this is what I want to do’ it gives you a better chance of actually ending up living your life and not a life. About two-thirds of Danish children also work from the age of 13, they are taught independence from an early age, making a little pocket money and taking on individual responsibility—such as opening up a bank account.

I also want to talk to you about a different expression of freedom to choose who you want to be in the Danish society and more specifically about gender equality. Denmark has very good numbers of gender equality, it was recently voted as the best country in the world for women to live in. In fact, more than 37% of MPs compose the Danish parliament and there is only a 5% difference between men and women in the Danish workforce, so we are doing pretty well. But the real difference that I see is that Denmark has achieved something which is key in further developing this question, we have liberated men.
Most people would think men have always been free – but have they really been free? Have they not been stuck in the same role for many years? Are they really free all over the world to choose, to be fathers who are present, who leave early to pick up their children? Are they free to say, ‘I just had a baby, I want to take care of it’; are they free to be less ambitious and not to be laughed at?

Thinking about the model, if you only liberate the woman, if you only free her to be like the man, thereby only steering the model in one direction, the model falls. So getting more equality for women and freeing men to choose the role of the man have been an interesting development in Denmark.

I want to talk to you about the individual responsibility of the common project. A few years ago, a major crisis broke out in Denmark. A man called Robert gave an interview in the media and said, ‘you know what? I’m unemployed but I think that’s ok. I don’t want to go and work in some fast food restaurant. So I will not look for a job.’ A crisis broke out after this interview, he was named Lazy Robert’, because Danish people said it was not ok not to feel individually responsible for the common project. This is a story that perfectly encompasses the responsibility aspect because you cannot have that attitude. This is why 7 out of 10 Danes say they are happy paying the heaviest taxes in the world. It makes sense to be part of the common project, the welfare state. And the welfare state is one of the things that Danes say they are most proud of being part of. Participating in this society where people have equal rights, equal opportunities and medical care creates a good base for well-being.

Why do we care about the Danes when we don’t live in Denmark and when we are not Danish? My conclusion to this question is that these are not Danish values, they are human values, I don’t live in Denmark – I was raised with these values and I exported them to France and I still live by
those values. I like paying taxes here. And when it comes to trust, I will go back to choosing that person and creating that kind of environment no matter where you live in the world. Many people will also argue that their school systems are not similar to those of Denmark. Maybe not, but you are still free to send your children to a Steiner school, you are still free not to judge other people when they try to make free choices and when they try to break out of the traditional system – the norms of society. This is the freedom that all of us have every day, not to judge but to encourage and support other people’s choices.

Our individual responsibility as citizens, not only of a country but of the world, is the role that we choose to incarnate every day in society. Are you a trustworthy person? Are the people around you free to choose their own lives? Well then you are part of that change. Because if we wait for politicians, or for anybody else, to change the system for us, I think we are going to wait for a long time. The change is actually going to come, in my view, from the societies and the communities we create from the bottom up. Inspire other people to see things a different way, to not be victims of the system but to be a part of it. If you feel you are a victim of the system, you are passive, you cannot do anything about it. But if you are part of the system, you have a role and you become part of a bigger project.

When I did my book tour in Asia, I did a conference at a book fair in Seoul and many Koreans were fascinated with the Danish model. In fact Korea is about to introduce the concept of post-school which was invented in Denmark, where there are about 150 of these schools. They cater to children around the ages of 14-16 who are not sure of what they want to do in their lives. They specialise in all kinds of creativity and ideas such as mechanics, dancing, painting, culture etc. They focus on building up young people so that they can become proud of doing what they do and understand that they have value in society.
On this book tour, after my conference, a young Korean man said that he read the book and liked it and that he lives by these values every day. He said he gets up in the morning and fights to change his society, to have more trust and more freedom for people to be themselves and not feel so compressed and obliged to do what their parents expect and what society expects of them – and to feel more engaged in a common project. But he also said he felt alone, swimming against the tide and I replied by telling him that I was sure he knew why he got up in the morning and what his purpose in life was.

This is actually one of the key findings in this conversation about happiness. If you have meaning and purpose in your life and if you feel you are part of a greater project, it becomes a very good base to create a happy life.
Question 1. Have you found any links to innovation when looking at happiness?

Malene Rydahl: What we have found, particularly in the educational system, is that the more people are free to express their creativity and their innovation, the more they are able to create. This has also been a big subject in numerous corporations, looking at the well-being and the happiness of their employees for the simple reason that productivity actually increases and in turn so do creativity and innovation in corporations.

Question 2. In my country (Hungary) happiness is taught as a kind of upward mobility. We ask tackle the happiness question on a larger scale: 'When will we reach the level of western countries?' In our personal lives, happiness questions are also linked to social mobility and catching up and when we cannot achieve this, we are unhappy.

What do you think about countries aspiring to reach a certain level of well-being? How can their citizens be happy?

Malene Rydahl: Generally speaking, there is a great difference between individual happiness and the collective well-being of a country. Of course many people believe that wealth will lead to more happiness and they aim for that; but studies have shown that this is not true. The longest study on happiness conducted by Harvard University over 75 years on 273 men shows that the one thing that matters is the quality of relationships. It is a fascinating study made on a large number of people from different social backgrounds over a long period of time, giving us, therefore perspective on what they say.
The second answer I will give you relates to having meaning and purpose in life. This can mainly come from the educational system, what we can teach our children. When you take a country like Mexico, on the world happiness report it stands in 15th place. Mexico has huge levels of corruption and more than 50% of the population is poor. Scientists say that 50% of your happiness potential is genetic, 10% is what happens to you and 40% is what you do with it.

**Question 3. Aren’t Danish citizens the highest consumers of anti-depressants in the world?**

**Malene Rydahl:** Thank you for that question, it is very interesting. Denmark, compared to all of the other 10 happiest countries in the world, is the highest consumer of anti-depressants. How can that make sense? Let’s establish that anti-depressants do not make people happy – they make people neutral. One of the reasons that these countries come up high on the list is that we are actually free to say when we are not ok.

There are 350 million people today in the world who suffer from depression – only 25% of them are treated, probably in the happiest nations where they are free to say I’m not ok, I’m getting divorced, I got fired, I lost somebody, I need a little support. Probably close to 100% of people in Denmark who need support would do that. If you take other countries, Portugal, Spain or Brazil, I’m not sure that people are free to publicly say ‘I’m not ok’ and to publicly seek medical help – it’s a taboo, and in Denmark it is not.

**Question 4. Could you put the history of Danish people into perspective? When did it start? Was it at the very beginning, during the Viking period?**

**Schopenhauer** said that human nature is comprised of only three elements 1. Self-love and self-interest; 2. Maliciousness and schadenfreude; and 3. Altruism. It seems to me that what you have said about the Danes, that you have no maliciousness, you do not worry about widening income gaps or inferiority complexes. You enjoy a good mix of self-love and altruism.

**Also Denmark is a small country, would it be feasible for larger nations to replicate your model?**

**Malene Rydahl:** We don’t know exactly where the trust comes from. But looking back at the Viking period, when they were trading, there were no papers and there were no contracts. Everything was done on a handshake. Maybe people were a little scared of getting their heads cut-off. Trusting people on their word has simply developed and carried on since then. My book is published in Japan and I visited your country. I believe it is one of the most civilised countries in the world and I understand why you would ask ‘is there nothing malicious in Denmark’ and of course my book also talks a little about the downsides, but for the purpose of this exercise I focus on the reasons why it is a good well-being model.

Can the size of the country be a determinant factor? If you look at the World Happiness Report and you take the top, the middle, and the last third of countries, there is nothing that really points to the fact that the size of countries matters. In the top 10, the biggest country is Canada with 35 million people, while the largest country at the top of the list is Mexico at number 15 with 120 million people and the United States at number 16 with 340 million people. Denmark has a very liberal economy and if you look at the way it is setup, we do not waste a lot of time distrusting each other, we liberate a lot of people and they are engaged in what they do in society.
Question 5. To what extent do you believe that higher levels of trust and the notion of contributing to a greater good depend on homogeneity in society? In other words, is it easy for a very culturally, economically and socially mixed society to be happy? The very large population movements that we are seeing across the world currently and some countries’ responses to that have been interesting.

Malene Rydahl: The refugee crisis is a global issue and unfortunately some countries around the globe have closed their borders and are not willing to help. In the case of Denmark, as in many other European countries, some of the political decisions have been surprising to many of us and to many Danes as well. Denmark is the second country in Europe that takes the largest number of refugees per capita and it is one of the 5 countries in the world that meets its international aid numbers. So yes it is surprising and disappointing to see how the response has been handled. What I can establish is that the law that was voted regarding the jewels, is a Danish law that applies to Danish people living in the country. It specifically states that if you therefore ask for any financial help you are not allowed to have more than 1,300 Euros in your bank account.
Question 6. You spoke a lot about children and young people taking their own path and feeling liberated. What happens in the case of senior citizens? In Asian cultures you have a lot of family dynamics where the entire family looks after each other, children and grandchildren look after their parents and provide for them. In a world where you free everybody up and give them individual power, they may not have that same incentive to look after their parents. They put them in nursing homes where they may end up being lonely. Do these kinds of personal relationships suffer in Denmark?

Malene Rydahl: I think in terms of relationships and love, if you love your children and give them the support to choose who they want to be, they will take care of you. Do you want to create a dependent system or a free love system? I have been very independent, I left home when I was 18, I paid my first rent when I was 18. But I take care of my parents, because I love them and because they took care of me. They gave me love, freedom to choose my life and supported all of my life choices. I love them back but I am not dependent on them, I don’t do that because I have to, but because I want to.

Question 7. You spoke in length about trust in others, why relationships matter, in being happy and trust in oneself. But less so about trust in the future, and trust in the power of change. My standpoint is France, and why are the French unhappy? It seems to me that it very much relates to these issues.

Malene Rydahl: Young Danes feel very free to choose their lives, more than 60% of them say I am free to choose the life that I want to lead. This is a very high number, they believe in the future. Having optimism and thinking that you can create a good life and having equal opportunities is important. Being the son of a carpenter and knowing that you can become a lawyer as much as the son of a lawyer creates optimism and that, in turn, creates a sense of fairness and belief in the system.

Photos: OECD/Julien Daniel
The Secretary-General is delighted to present

Malene Rydahl

“A Conversation on Happiness”

24 February 2016
18h00
(CC7)

“What the Danes can teach us about happiness and living better lives”

“Heureux comme un danois: Prize of the most optimistic book in France in 2014”