

A Trip to World Water Week, Stockholm

October 2015

When I got the okay from my university department to spend two whole blessed weeks in Sweden to attend the August 2015 World Water Week conference, I could not pack quickly enough. Sweden is dearer to me than nearly anything. It's always been a matter of "A thousand miles seems pretty far but they've got planes and



A prayer for Sweden from Heaven

trains and cars, I'd walk to you if I had no other way."

So here I was arriving in the airport in Stock-

holm, and catching a ride first on an airport train, then on the blue metro, and then on a red bus, and finally walking the last mile through quiet wind-riven paths to where I was staying near the seashore.

I had some time before the conference started, so I got in touch with my dad's old boss in Linköping. Even though my dad studied physics under Dr. Sven-Erik over twenty years ago, he still sends us UNICEF cards every December, so he was definitely someone I wanted to see. He wrote back, "what a nice surprise!" and 'Welcome to Sweden!' and we worked out a plan for me to visit him on a Wednesday.

I rode a train to Linköping. It was the dearest train imaginable. It was warm amber-colored on the inside, and rode as smoothly as a flute over the train tracks, past little towns called things like Flemingberg and Kolmården and Nyköping. I pressed my face against the window and saw meadows purple with wildflowers, that then swapped for stands of white birches that grow in rings of five, that then switched for the silver glimmer of a lake behind a long, long field.

My seat-mates at first were teenagers who were holding a serious discussion on feminism, while I tried most assiduously to force my laptop's power cord into the seat bolts, because I could not accept that they were merely seatbolts when even the Amtrak has power outlets, for

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crying out-loud. The teenagers all disembarked in Nyköping and two young brothers took their place, one holding an Asterisk comic book and the other with a long spool of yarn twined around cardboard. They talked softly, and the train hummed steadily, and I felt so safe, so secure.

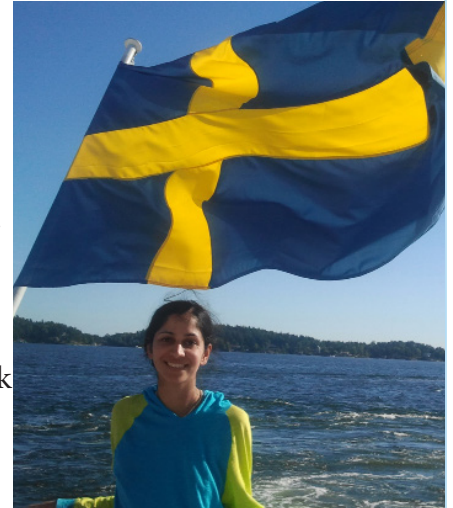
Dr. Sven-Erik has become something of a family tradition because he was always so good to us. We talk about him all the time, and meeting him was so nice.

He drove me to my childhood home (which the blasphemous present owners have shorn of its original red and painted a drab blue) and I saw the birches where I used to play, and the hill where all of us children used to go sledding.

Then we went to my dad's old university, and we met Ulf and Kenneth, both classmates with my dad 'back in the day'. I kept taking pictures and sending them to my dad, and kept getting 'wow' and 'gosh, I miss them' in response.

I took the train back from Linköping a tired, happy soul, and just a little edge of sadness mixed in.

On the Friday before the conference, I visited a school in Stockholm. I really like visiting schools when I go someplace new, because kids always think they are the center of the universe, and I suppose it can't hurt to indulge them in that assumption. I met with a class of seventh-graders,



Dr. Sven-Erik's halo suits him well!

and I was full of enormous hopes that by the end of my talk with them, they would be just as enthused about my PhD work (using satellites to monitor water pollution) as I am.

I started off by introducing myself to the kids, telling them about North Carolina, and they in turn asked me the standard questions all kids ask: how old are you and are you married?

Next, I showed them satellite images of the Chesapeake Bay (my study area), which they thought was very beautiful, and then I had a surprise for them:

I showed them a mystery image, and they all said, 'oh! That's Sweden!' They even guided my finger along the coastline exactly to where Stockholm lies.



Does this look like Sweden to you?

My real surprise for them, though, was that I wanted them to help me make a short animation that summarizes the research I do as a PhD student. I had prepared an animation file with all the pictures we would need, and as I told the class about my research, I picked student volunteers to come up to make the animation in step with each learning point.



Unfortunately, we were delayed by technical difficulties, and when the school day closed, we had finished only half the animation. The boys all exploded into chatter and made a beeline for the door. I was so disappointed. But the girls stayed after and kept working until the animation was entirely finished. I was really impressed with them. Every single girl got to contribute. When we were finished, before they went home to their families, they all gave me a hug. The completed animation is [available here](#).

I rode the two blue metros and the red bus back to my place by the seashore, exhausted and realizing I am more out of touch with teenagers than I had previously thought.

Finally, the World Water Week conference -- the official reason for my visit -- began with great fanfare. The conference had almost 300 sessions over six days, and we 20 junior rapporteurs were supposed to cover each of them, take detailed notes, and sort out the major themes to relay to our supervisors. In between, I tried to take selfies with as many of the important and famous people in attendance as I could track down. On the first day alone, I managed to snap a shot with Malin Falkenmark, a noted water scientist who is now in her nineties and yet still gave a talk; with Johan Rockström, who heads the Stockholm Resiliency Centre and is a leader in ecology and human impacts on the planet; and Mattias Klum, a very famous Swedish photographer.



Selfie with Mattias Klum

On the second day of the conference, the Swedish Prime Minister himself turned up! He was going to give the keynote speech, and it became my avowed mission to take a selfie with him, too. I clung, as inconspicuously as I could, close to the conference entrance, and a fellow rapporteur who is better versed in these things told me about the type of car in which the Prime Minister might show up.

We lingered and loitered, even as crowds were streaming into the lecture hall, and were rewarded when Angelica poked me and said: "there he is, Mejs, there he is!" I dropped my purse, bag, and jacket, and rushed over, cell phone camera in hand, but alas, the processional hurried along too fast for me to get closer, and then every time I tried taking a picture, something got in the way.

So we rushed into the lecture hall, me conniving ways to ambush the Prime Minister the whole way. But I was thwarted at every turn, so I finally had to content myself with giving the Prime Minister a big smile all throughout his speech.

He gave a very nice speech. He said things like: in Sweden, we can take a swim even in the middle of the

city, because the water is so clean, but we still have challenges with chemical and pharmaceutical contaminants. And he added that Sweden is still committed to setting aside 1% of GDP to help relieve global poverty and inequalities, with an emphasis on improving clean water access. This got big applause.

Then, the Swedish Prime Minister addressed the president of the Marshall Islands, a hunched, rather pitiful man due to the fact that his country is slowly but surely sinking into the ocean, and who, when it was his turn to give a speech, never dared to lift his eyes from his note-cards. The Swedish Prime Minister said: “Mr. President, I share your quest for a fair, binding, legal agreement to keep temperature increases as far below 2 degrees Celsius as possible.” That also got applause.

After his speech, Angelica said she thought it was rather mediocre, and that he had merely said what she expects every Swedish Prime Minister to say, but I know that this is not true. No one *has* to say anything, and the fact that the Swedish Prime Minister says so many wonderful things is just, quite simply, wonderful.

The next night, we were all invited for a special dinner at the Crown Hotel at which the Crown Princess Victoria was in attendance. This time, it was not just me wanting a selfie with Victoria, but all the other junior rapporteurs, too. But these things are simply not allowed. So we emerged selfie-less, but it was a classy, elegant, sparkling evening nevertheless.

World Water Week was not all chasing royalty and world leaders. I heard discussions about new innovations and cooperations all over the water world. One session included members from the Swedish Armed Forces, university researchers, the Swedish Rescue Squad, and the business community, discussing how each entity was cautiously starting to feel out working partnerships with the others in a quest to distribute water during natural disasters.

I also got a feel for how complex issues can be when I attended a debate on wetlands. One of the teams took the position that all wetlands in Africa ought to be drained! I thought for sure they were going to get laughed off the stage, but while the debate was indeed

very entertaining, the Drain-All-Wetlands Team had a competent, though snarky, answer to every challenge from the pro-environment teams. It really showed me how complicated resource decisions can be.

I saw how important dialogue and communication are. A lot of water scarcity issues are messy affairs that affect people of different cultures and countries all at once.

For example, the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) is

doing a lot of work in the Mediterranean in helping to build the space and structure for Palestine, Jordan, and Israel to create water-sharing partnerships peacefully.

To be honest, it was a little hard for me to wrap my head around at first. Some of the sessions very bluntly said: our achievements are in convening meetings and having dialogues. “A bunch of talk” can seem a little insufficient and wishy-washy to meet a challenge as large as water access and shortages. But then, I started to realize that these dialogues, if structured properly, are among the most important work that can be done. They are building the venues through which countries can have the important conversations they must have about how to allocate water and how to combat corruption.

The most inspiring session I attended centered on a Brazilian program called Cultivating Good Water. The program

began in 2003, and this year they won the Water For Life “Water Best Practices” Award. I could soon see why, after listening to the speech of the Brazilian

man in charge of it. He explained how they had planted 43 million trees and created passages to reconnect fish to a lake after a dam had blocked them, but those were just structural changes. At its core, the program was a big environmental education scheme. They have been able to get people onboard and to change behaviors without a single lawsuit. I especially loved it when he said: “We try to touch the hearts and minds of people, we never



The uncooperative Prime Minister chose the moment I snapped my camera to put his badge on.



Loved this lunch with Angelica

blame or point fingers. Rather than having and conquering, we try to get people to think about loving and caring.”

And he said even more: “We need research on how to train people to work with people. We need training in wisdom.” It left me with an overwhelming feeling of: oh, dear, I wish I knew how to do all this, seeing as I couldn’t even manage 20 seventh-graders just a week earlier!

The conference ended, we submitted all our notes, we had a final lunch together, and I was left with the unquiet realization that I had a mere 19 hours remaining in Sweden, out of which I had to pack, shower, sleep, and travel to the airport.

Before I could face doing all that, I got off the blue metro at Bergshamra, where if you walk five minutes you come to a beautiful stretch of water called Stocksundet. I sat there and wrote Dr. Sven-Erik a card (UNICEF, of course) in thanks for hosting me.

I wrote him first that I wished an earthquake could



I miss morning meetings with my lovely rapporteur team

except for clinically destroying the airport, so that my stay could be extended; and then that I was tired and a little scared that it would be a long time before I again got to see the sunrise in Sweden, or see the half-moon rise over the water in Stockholm, or get to pick blackberries and blueberries and gooseberries abundantly wherever I went, and the birches! I would no longer see birches.

But, I think now that I was just skimming around what really I was a little scared of, and didn’t quite know how to express. I think I was touching on another fear altogether, more in communion with what the North Carolina author Thomas Wolfe means when he says, “you can never go home again.” The thought of never going ‘home’ to Sweden again is agony.

“Rather than having and conquering, we try to get people to think about loving and caring. We need training in wisdom.”

- Nelton Friedrich, World Water Week, 2015

I feel a little better when I think of the things I got to do on that last happy trip: I played *Idas sommarvisa* and *Härlig är kvällen*, *Fredful och Ren* on a piano we chanced to find in the Linköping University cafeteria, to an audience of bemused students while Dr. Sven-Erik clapped; I spent the long hours on the plane and the train ride on my laptop, making animations about all lovely things in Sweden; and I got to eat ice cream and breathe deeply of the

clean, earthy smell in the Danderyd hospital metro stop, where I always transferred to the bus, and see spikey blades of grass and the broad shoulders of trees tugging softly onto the mist every morning, holding it close.



March through Stockholm: One World, One Water!

What didn’t I get to do? I didn’t get to tell everyone just how much they mean to me; I didn’t get to explain just how beautiful I think the whole country is, just how important it is to me, just how haughty I’ve always acted in the US because although decades have made me a firm American devotee, it was always with the underlying sense that I once lived in the very best spot of earth that ever has existed. Out of the billions or trillions of human species that have ever lived, I am one of the infinitesimally few who lived *in Sweden*. This realization has always been a bulwark against inconfidence, a stalwart ally when I am confused. Sweden is the very underpinnings of my faith in goodness, fairness, and love.

But this is a grief-stricken, crippled world, where we are not allowed to love what we want to love for fear of being called delusional and stupid, where efforts to spread love are certainly never encouraged and always ignored, and where giving the very best of ourselves to the things most precious to us is not going to be enough. There is no respite, no haven, no chance to daydream, and only a constant unendurable dread that what happens tomorrow will be worse than what has already happened today.