Cascade Policy Institute OREGON

Cascade Commentary

August 2016 #16-31

Summary:

The genius of Sigrid Undset's novel *Ida Elisabeth* is the connection on the level of the heart between decisions made within personal relationships and a philosophy of self-centeredness that paves the way for far-reaching social change and loss of respect for human beings.

Word Count 973

"…[W]hat will obligate future generations to honor the debts of their forebears, if people no longer believe that other human beings—just like themselves—possess innate and inalienable value?"

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Freedom in Fiction: *Ida Elisabeth*

By Kathryn Hickok

Ida Elisabeth had every reason to leave her husband. He was foolish, immature, irresponsible, and unable to change. She couldn't respect him. She had never really loved him. When he had an affair with another woman, it was her chance to leave and take the children—and no one blamed her.

Nobel Prize-winning novelist Sigrid Undset placed *Ida Elisabeth* in her own contemporary 1930s Norway, a period of escalating social change prior to the Second World War. People spoke skeptically of the beliefs and assumptions of previous generations, doubting that conventional ethics would outlast their lifetime. Socialist-type welfare policies were becoming popular in noncommunist Western countries. Democratic governments, responding to the demands of the electorate, promised citizens more and more—and supplanted many social roles formerly played by spouses, families, local communities, and private charities. The modern world was unfolding—uneasily.

In a key conversation, Ida's older mentor muses about the rise of the modern welfare state and Norway's path to unsustainable public debt:

> "…[T]he qualities which put a man in power and those which make him feel responsibility are not necessarily associated, nor do they necessarily exclude each other," [he said.] "…We had an institution here in Norway in the saga times which was called debt-servitude. When a man had incurred more debts than he was able to pay, he could hand over his children to his creditors, and they had to work as thralls until they had earned enough to cover their father's indebtedness. I don't believe children are told anything about this debt-servitude in the schools nowadays. But they're destined to experience it."
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> Ida Elisabeth nodded: "They won't have a good time, those who come after us."
>
> "No. And…[w]ill those who come after us be content to bear all the burdens which *we* still feel it our duty to shoulder? To help all that neither can nor will help themselves?...Especially when the young are aware that the old have taken upon themselves to determine, *that* they should come into the world, and *when* they should come, and how many should be put into the world to take over the burdens when they themselves are no longer able to bear them."

In Ida's time, the modern welfare state was already detaching individuals from reliance on those around them. While the state-run systems—"almshouses," etc.—seemed streamlined, efficient, and economical ways of relieving people of the need to personally care for others, the underlying philosophy of utility was already becoming disturbing.

Ida's friend wonders what will obligate future generations to honor the debts of their forebears, if people no longer believe that other human beings—just like themselves—possess innate and inalienable value? In the modern world, no one needs to be

bothered with others any more than they think is reasonable, children come into the world solely at the convenience of adults, and family bonds may be broken at will. Who will decide what price is too high to meet the needs of the elderly, the sick and disabled, and those who cannot "pull their full weight" in society? (By the end of the decade in which *Ida Elisabeth* was published, these questions had begun to bear bitter fruit in Germany. In the novel, these musings were still largely theoretical.)

As the novel plays out, "big government" (or the welfare state) appears to be a symptom (or symbol) of another, more subtle disease: the human decision to put one's own needs and desires ahead of the call to serve others, relinquishing individual responsibility to a nameless, faceless state. The genius of *Ida Elisabeth* is the connection made on the level of the heart between decisions made within personal relationships and a philosophy of self-centeredness that paves the way for far-reaching social change and loss of respect for human beings.

But the novel isn't about government. It's a love story of a mother and her children, her husband, and the man "who should have been." When Ida Elisabeth falls in love with a man who shares her wishes and desires, she is forced to confront a struggle of conscience that is hard for the postmodern reader to accept. Ida tries to reconcile her mind and conscience with cutting herself off forever from family members from whom it once seemed right to separate.

While she is not a religious person and does not base her decisions on what is left of Norway's conventional morality, Ida cannot fully agree with her secular friends that it is best to abandon those who couldn't possibly make her feel fulfilled. "We at any rate can't watch people drowning because they can't swim, and not care," she says. Her fundamental choice is between a "happy ending" and the needs of her family. Her choice determines their futures, her character, and her understanding of the meaning of life.

One of the lessons Sigrid Undset teaches so adeptly in her fiction is the step-by-step nature of discernment: Decisions made today may need to be adjusted tomorrow, because mercy has claims as well as justice. Undset deprives the reader of an easy ending because real life is often difficult. Happiness does not always appear in the form for which we wish. Deep human longings, passions, hopes, and personal needs may clash with what we know in our hearts must be done. The mysteries of life can't be shoehorned into simplistic answers to complex problems. Codependence is not a virtue; "tough love" is a necessary, difficult road. But once Ida Elisabeth decides not to abandon the source of her sorrows to the public almshouse (so to speak), the way begins to become clear—a road of thorns for her at first, but a path of light, understanding, reconciliation, and peace.

Ida Elisabeth is a novel to be pondered with an open mind and heart—and more than a few good tears.

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