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EMPOWERING THE PATIENT ON THE WAY TO RECOVERY

An Action Research Report about increasing the
participation and responsibility of patients in
an alcohol/drug-abuse treatment.

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ront page, made by my
daughter, Soffía.
Trúður = Clown

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INTRODUCTION

I have worked with Alcohol/drug abusers for almost 14 years, and now and then it has happened. I found "the truth," "the right way," "the solution," or whatever I called those enlightened moments of mine.

"That is how it should be done! "

I thought or said in excitement. The gravitation of real life took me relatively swiftly down again, although I tried to hang in midair for awhile.

It took me years to find out, that there is no treatment or program that can help all addicts. I could improve the treatment and be more open to new ideas and other ways to treat addicts, but the perfect treatment was just an illusion. I was always on the way.

It was not until I started to question some statements and phrases I had learned in several treatment centres through the years that I began moving, in what I felt was the right direction for me.

The statements I questioned had mostly to do with those patients who dropped out of treatment or relapsed soon after fulfilled time at the Treatment Centre.

"He does not want to be sober."

"She has not found her bottom yet."

"He did not want to follow advises."

"She did not follow the program,"

are some of the phrases we used. The patient was blamed most of the time.

I began to turn it around, with questions like:

"Could it be that this kind of treatment does not suit her ?"

"How can you say he does not want to be sober ?"

"Is not this his third treatment here at this centre.?"

"Could it be that in his case, we had a wrong focus ?"

I did not get much response, mostly strange looks.

After nine years of work in three different treatment centres, in three different countries, (Iceland, Denmark and Sweden) I knew the time was ripe for me to start on my own. I opened up a day care centre in cooperation with Söderhamn, a small community in middle of Sweden. They were open minded and willing to try my treatment ideas. The base was AA's 12 step program in a close cooperation with the authorities in Söderhamn. The name of this new company became "Ventura Rehab. AB".

The name "Ventura" means to change attitude, and for my way of thinking it was a very befitting name.

I adjusted the treatment to the current needs in the town with advice and help from the social workers who had often been in close contact with my patients for a long time. I took new therapies and new ways of thinking into the treatment.

I held 24 hour courses for all personnel who worked for the authorities in Söderhamn and was in direct contact with alcoholics or drug abusers in their work.

From the beginning we had the same goal: to have a flexible treatment with the focus on the individual and always try to find out how you could help the patient to get a decent life. We never blamed anyone when a patient dropped out or had a relapse, but sat down and tried to figure out if it would be better for this patient to go to another treatment, or if we should try again and do it differently this time: change focus and put more responsibility on the patient.

Although much has happened in a positive way, it has become more clear to me that we could use the experience and power of each patient more effectively than we have done before and I became quite sure about another fact. More joy in the treatment would not hurt. With that in mind I decided to concentrate on changes in the treatment with focus on empowering the patient on the way to recovery.

VISION OF THE FUTURE

Increased empowerment of the patients:

I see a treatment where patients participate in a more creative way. More teamwork among patients that leads to improvements in the fellowship among them. Not only while in treatment, but also outside after the treatment. Increased responsibility for the outcome of his/her own treatment. Group work, where both those who are in treatment and those who have finished, can participate and focus on a special theme without counsellor. Groups where codependants meet and discuss various topics, without counsellor. Increased creativity during and after the treatment, that is in doing things together and enjoying it.

More zest:

If one has decided to change one's life and become sober, why not do it in the most joyful way possible? Too often sobriety and boredom is connected in the patients mind. Let there be more of letting go, lifting the spirit by laughing with others, without hurting anyone. Have more play as a part of the treatment

More flexibility:

Focus on where the patient is in his/her process and go from there, that is to adjust the treatment for every individual. Instead of standard assignments throughout the treatment, we give each patient specially designed assignments depending on what he/she needs to go further.

Social liberation:

Create more alternatives and choices for individuals, help them start different self-help groups and workshops. Break the isolation.

Collaborative ventures:

During the treatment and afterwards, to focus on various ways to do things with others, to travel together with each other or do something for fun together.

More pedagogic treatment:

Those who work with the patients change the scheduled program when they feel the patients are tired or without interest. The counsellors go by their feelings at the moment and do something different, if they think it would be better for the patients/patient.

PICTURE OF PRESENT

At Ventura we run a 12 step based program with focus on the individual and in a close cooperation with the authorities in Söderhamn. This is an outpatient program, with a maximum of 20 patients at the time and the patients stay in average for 6 weeks. We also run a parallel program for the families once a week for 8 weeks.

In many ways this is a traditional drug/alcohol abuse treatment, aiming for a total sobriety and a new meaning with life for the patients and their families.

Beside the traditional ways of helping the patients to change their attitude we use different therapies as Rational Therapy, Problem Solving Group Therapy and Eye Movement

Desensitisation Therapy. All those who want, get a 10 day acupuncture session to help them relax and better cope with their abstinences. We also teach them to meditate and relax in stress situations. We have also specialised in different addictions like gambling and overeating.

Criminals get special attention and assignments too.

Every patient has his/hers own counsellor to work with in private sessions.

After the treatment we have support groups once a week for one year. For those who need it we have special one week Relapse Prevention Courses.

We run a special program for the families once a week for eight weeks and take the families in private sessions when needed.

It is always difficult to give a statement about results of a alcoholic/drug abuse treatment; therefore I like to point out the change in AA/NA and Al anon and other related meetings here in town. When we started in the beginning of 1994 there could be found two AA/NA meetings a week, with 2-4 participants. Today we have 19 different meetings a week in Söderhamn and the number of participants varies from 10 to 25 at each meeting. For me this is the best measure of result of the treatment.

TRYING TO UNDERSTAND THE INDIVIDUAL PATIENT'S NEED

Our job is not seeing through the patient, but to see them through.

When I started looking for new ways of treating the patients, I remembered what my father, the carpenter, had taught me. "Measure twice, cut once." With that in mind I started asking my employees, what they thought was most important to focus on, now that we wanted to change the treatment. After several discussions concentrating on the patient's need we agreed on :

- a) Empower the patient. Give the patients more responsibility and increase their participation in their own treatment.
- b) Find a better way to discover where each patient is in his/her process in order to avoid missing necessary steps in the recovery process.
- c) Increase the fellowship among the patients. Find more effective ways, to help the patients to break the isolation that is characteristic for alcoholics, not only while in treatment, but also afterwards.
- d) Have more fun in the treatment.

It does matter, that more than half of my employees have been through some kind of treatment for addiction. It is easier to understand the needs of the patients, and to come with suggestions of changes, when you have been in their shoes

PLAN

At the same time as I started thinking about changes in the treatment , radical changes in my family were taking place. Three years earlier, me and my wife had taken a big decision. Our oldest child, Össur, was nearly twelve years old at that time and his dearest wish was to move back to Iceland and go to school there and learn to know better his relatives. He was only four years old when we moved from Iceland to Denmark and although we went twice a year to visit our relatives in Iceland, and we spoke only Icelandic with him, he had problems with this old complicated language. I did not want to move back.

We had started Ventura six months earlier and had no intention to break a two year contract I had made with Söderhamn. After a long discussion we agreed that we did not have the right to deny him this wish. He needed and wanted to learn more about his roots, the culture, the language and his relatives. The danger was that he would always feel like a guest in his own homeland, if he did not have the possibility to stay there, go to school and experience the Icelandic culture.

We decided to live in both countries. I would be the whole year in Sweden, they would stay with me over the summer and in Iceland over the winter. I would visit them as often as possible in the wintertime. This was not an easy decision, we had two more children, Soffia (4 years old) and Gunnar Örn (2 years old) and I was not sure if I could manage to be so much away from them, but we could not find a better solution. We also decided to do this for two years and then take a new decision.

I do not know how many times I have explained to people this arrangement. Some understood it, or said they did, others got confirmed in their beliefs that we were strange; for some we were divorced and did not want to admit it, and some did not care.

We adjusted ourselves as best as we could to this arrangement for three years, but when the fourth winter came we all felt that this was getting too painful and it was more important to live as a whole family again all the time. The children had got what they needed, they spoke Icelandic fluently, had established strong bonds with their relatives and friends and had a good feeling for their roots. It was time to move back to Sweden again.

We moved in the middle of the winter, and it was great to have the family again. Both joyful and difficult time was ahead.

After we had made the decision to move back, I started wondering if I could use this experience of radical change the whole family was going through, in my assignment. There were so many similarities in the changes they were going through and the changes my patients had to go through. Both had to give up something they knew, and felt secure in, and start with something new. Both lost friends and had to build new circles of associates. The mentality was different and in many ways they had to adjust to different thinking. I started to observe what my children went through and how they solved their problems alone or with our help. I wrote stories about their difficulties in new surrounding with new language and new friends. The plan was to use those stories and observations as a base for the changes I was going to do in the treatment. To find a new way to focus on the patient's needs.

Some of the stories I could use directly; other observations I took up at once with my employees and discussed the similarities and what we could learn from what had happened.

OBSERVATION - DIALOGUE

I took up each observation with my wife and employees in order to find out what likeness we could find with the experience of the moving and the treatment. The goal was to find different perspectives we could use to help us find new ways to make the treatment better.

The results of those discussions follow each chapter.

The first thing I observed was how and when the decision to move back to Sweden became a fact. It was only when the pain of being separated became so strong that we saw that the gain of living as we did was too small, compared to the losses. As right as the decision was when we took it, as wrong would it be to continue to live separated, now that we had got what we sought. It would be painful to go through the changes, but they were necessary.

The same people that never understood why we had moved at all were satisfied:

"I told you it would never work out," was one of the remarks I heard.

"It did work out, that's why we are moving again," I answered with a smile all over my face.

"I have known the whole time you would move again," was another remark.

"Me too" I answered. It did not matter if others understood this or not, we were doing what was right for us.

Result of dialogue:

It is a known fact that a alcohol/drug abuser does not seek help or agree on going into a treatment until the pain is so strong that it is less painful to accept help, than to continue the abuse. Therefore is it important to make it easy for patients to come back to treatment, both those who relapse and those who drop out of the treatment: Help them understand that it is a part of the process to make mistakes.

They had done a lot by coming in the first place and most likely they would succeed by trying again. We also discussed, feeling that a solution or a way out of the pain for one, does not have to be a solution for another one, though the problems are similar. It was necessary to keep in mind the individual's need and listen carefully to what they said.

Stories from my observation of the family:

EARNESTY

This time it was Soffía who took Emil home with her after school. She told her mother that Emil was going to decorate the cake house with them.

Gunnar Örn was not satisfied, he wanted to have his sister and his mother for himself in this business. When Emil went to the bathroom, Soffía said:

"Gunnar Örn, Emil has never decorated a Christmas cake house, or any other cake because his mother never bakes cakes. If we do not allow him to help us with this one, maybe he will never decorate a cake house." G.Ö sat silent for a while and then he said:

"Ok. this is a big house, he can help us."

"Why aren't you wearing your glasses ?"

Soffía asked, shortly after Emil had missed a window and smeared blue cream on the wall, looking straight into Emil's slightly cross eyed eyes. There was no defence, just straight answer,

"They call me names when I have them on".

"You see better when you have them on," she said without blinking an eye.

"Yes" he said.

"They know nothing about glasses, don't listen to them," she said .

"And you don't have to play with them " came from G.Ö.

"Can I try them on ?"

he asked and took the glasses Emil had got out of his bag. He put them on upside down and kept on decorating, they all laughed a lot and then Soffía had to try too.

When Emil at last put them on after two rounds on everyone nose they were all coloured, but it did not matter, they had a great time and they had laughed so much that the teenager had seen himself forced out of his cave to participate in the enjoyment.

My wife told me this the same evening when I called from Sweden.

"What does the house look like ?" I asked .

" They think it is fabulous" she said laughing, and that is the main thing."

Then she added:

" Össur helped us, and afterwards he told me he missed those moments when we sat only three of us and decorated the house before Christmas."

I noticed my heart getting heavy and a slight moist in my eyes appeared, when I sat down between them in the kitchen and helped them drowning the house in different sugar- colours, laughing our head off.

Afterwards I stood by the window in my kitchen in Söderhamn and stared out into the night, although I was staring into myself, listening to my heart talk and wondering what I could learn from this.

"More fun, how can I have more joy in my daily life ? More of letting go, lifting the spirit, by laughing with others, without hurting anyone ?"

I missed them a lot.

Result of dialogue:

Being earnest without hurting others. It is more effective for patient to hear the facts about himself from another patient, than from the counsellor, and therefore it is important to find ways to increase that. We need more zest in the treatment to help the patients to laugh at themselves and with others. We need to play more, enjoy small things in daily life. Find ways to help those with handicaps to face the problem and talk about it. Hidden handicaps like dyslexia and illiteracy were probably more common than we had known. It is also necessary to focus more on how patients can get more healthy relationships with relatives and friends.

One of the things we decided to emphasise was mobbing; many of our patients had been mobbed in schools and later in life in various ways. The same patients had often problems in groups, they felt like before, outside, no good and so on. To help them talk about it and work with it would surely improve their changes to get a better life.

TOO FAST - TOO MUCH

"When we sit on the aeroplane, I will begin to relax;" I had said to Mjöll two days earlier, sitting on the floor in our house in Reykjavik, trying to figure out how we would manage to do everything we had to do, before leaving the country.

I stared at the list we had made over our tasks. It seemed endless and I felt I was running on my spare tank.

" Relax we will make it,"

she said and gave me her hand to help me stand up again. The break was over.

I looked at her, where she sat with Gunnar Örn lying half over her. They were both asleep. Össur who sat by my side was sleeping too, and we had only been in the air for twenty minutes. I looked at Soffia who sat and read some book in Icelandic, and the questions I could not answer, began to come alive again.

Although I had been awake for 24 hours, I knew I was too tired to sleep, and my mind was spinning, trying to answer questions like:

"What will we do if the children do not make it in school ? Össur hated the school he was in four years ago, what if the same happens in Söderhamn ? What if they can't find new friends ?" I felt the responsibility and the worries, pouring over me. " Who says this was the right decision?" My mind was racing. "Is the food on the way ?"

It was Mjöll asking, she sat up smiled at me and said:

" We made it, you do not know how happy I am to be on the way, I have been waiting for this for a long time."

She stretched out her hand over Soffía and the corridor between us and touched my outstretched hand for a second, looked deep into my eyes and said:

"God, I love you."

I felt the relaxation sink into me and I was asleep before the food wagon came.

We came Saturday, and Össur went to school on Monday. We went too, and talked to his teachers. They were prepared for his arrival and as he spoke Swedish fluently, they wanted to see if he could participate in everything from day one. Össur did not want any special arrangements to help him in the beginning.

"Relax, I can handle this, if I need help, I will tell you," he said and we understood he wanted us to leave.

Soffía started the day after as planned and I took care of GÖ. The day after he went with Soffía and his mother and they came back at noon, as Soffía wanted to try to handle the situation in school by herself.

In short, Össur and Soffía made it, they solved each problem they faced and in a surprisingly short time they had adjusted to the new school. The problem was Gunnar Örn.

The applications we had done last year for his Kindergarten, were not to be found and there was no room for him in any Kindergarten in Söderhamn.

"You will have to wait like everyone else," was an answer we soon came to dislike.

"It is not our fault, you lost the application," we argued

"You did not confirm he was coming," was the answer

"Why did the other two get room in their schools on applications made at the same time, " we argued.

"You will have to wait like everyone else."

"I have work waiting for me and I can not start working until this is solved." Mjöll argued.

"Why should you get a special service, you have to wait like everyone else."

"It is extremely important, that GÖ learns Swedish as fast as possible, otherwise he will feel being outside." We argued

"You will have to wait like everyone else."

Their truth and our truth was not the same!

This became Mjöll's department, she was on the telephone or meeting people more or less the first days in order to find some solution for GÖ.

On Friday she told me that a solution was found, Gunnar Örn was to start on Monday in the same school as Soffía; they had some kind of Kindergarten there and he would be in the next building to Soffía.

"Great, will they help him to learn Swedish?"

I asked, after I had grasped the meaning of the news.

"I assume they do, according to Swedish law they have to," she said and kissed me on the cheek.

Everyone in the family was exhausted, and stressed. Our household articles and the children's toys and clothes would come next week. They did not feel at home, and they told us so whenever they needed something. We were too tired to argue and used a lot of bribes the first two weeks.

"How was Kindergarten?"

I asked when I came home and met GÖ and Mjöll after their first day there.

"Let's sit down and have some coffee,"

This answer was definitely a sign of a problem.

She told me this was not a Kindergarten he had got placed in, but first class in the school. The children were one or two years older than him and had been together as a class since last autumn. She had her bad feelings about this, but said she would try, and hopefully GÖ would accept this arrangement.

"The food is disgusting"

All three children agreed on that. The food they got at lunch in school was not edible.

"You will get used to it. The food is different here, after some days you will like it,"

I argued.

"You would never eat it,"

This was a small problem, the biggest worry now was GÖ, he did not adjust to this arrangement. He and his mother went to the school every morning and came back after lunch.

"He really tries, but this is too much, the others are older and have been together for six months, and he does not want to learn Swedish."

Mjöll said three days later. I did not know what to say and asked her what solution she saw in the situation.

"We need help, we need to talk to someone who can give us advice, someone who can see this situation from a different perspective,"

she answered and looked me in the eyes.

I thought about this for a second, this was not the first time she wanted to seek help early. I was different, I tried to solve everything by myself, and often I could see afterwards that it would have been wiser to ask for help earlier.

"Ok. whom can we call?"

I answered, knowing she was right.

Result of dialogue:

Recovery from addictive disease is a process that requires a long period of time. The most serious problems caused by addiction require two to three years to resolve. Although addictive disease can be controlled, it can never be cured. there is always the possibility of relapse. The Development Model of Recovery (Terence T. Gorski, *Passages through Recovery*, 1989, Hazelden.) and in Process of Change (J. O. Prochaska, J.C. Norcross, C.C. Diclimente, *Changing for Good* , 1995, Avon Books, New York.) suggests that successful recovery is dependent upon completing specific recovery tasks in specific order. Failure to complete certain recovery tasks will leave the patient unprepared to cope with more complex recovery tasks. One must remember that recovery is a very individual process. No two people recover in exactly the same way. We decided to use both of the models as a guideline, not as an absolute picture of recovery.

Grief

The third week in Söderhamn went smoothly until the fourth day. GÖ refused to go to his School.

"I do not want to stay here, they don't understand anything" he said, referring to those who worked there.

Mjöll told me he had hit one of the women who worked there when she tried to force him to eat lunch.

" Does he hit you often ?" had the chief asked Mjöll and given her a strange look.

My wife had decided to play calm and explained to her that this was not his normal behaviour, but now, he did not have the language, his friends to play with or his usual surroundings, and that made him very insecure. He did not have so many tools he could use in such situation.

We decided to take it easy and have him at home for awhile, he could not take all those changes and a new language in such a hurry; he needed more time. The time point was rather inconvenient, I was going for a week to Ljungskile, and could not change that.

"It is ok, I will take care of this,"

my wife said and helped me pack my suitcase. I called a lot under the week and heard about GÖ saying things like,

"when can we move back to Iceland ?"

"What about Dad, Soffia and Össur don't you think they will miss us?" my wife asked.

"They can always come and visit us,"

he answered. The day after he decided it was better to stay, but it was only right that the Swedish learned Icelandic, and he talked clearly and slowly in Icelandic to everyone he met.

I wanted to hug this brave little hero through the phone, but he did not want to talk to me.

"Take it easy", my wife said, he is in grief. The problem now is that Soffia is jealous and wants everything he gets."

"How is Össur ?"

I asked in lack of a better question.

"He is testing the boundaries, do not worry, I will handle this."

I felt powerless. I lay in bed and recalled a situation from the week before. Össur came to me when I was in the kitchen unpacking box number 150 or so, a harmonica had appeared out of the box. He took it and started blowing it and then he went out of the kitchen blowing.

"Be careful, it was your grandfather's."

I called after him. One hour later he came back sat down, handed me the harmonica and said:

"I remember grandpa playing it for me. I have been downstairs playing and thinking about him. It is strange, but while playing my memory sort of opened and I could remember situations with him I have not remembered before."

"You were only two and a half year when he died" I said softly.

"But I remember him and how he played with me" he said.

I did not want to argue about this and added after a while.

"I still miss him a lot, he was so alive and creative. Your mother takes a lot after him."

He looked at me and I kept on:

"He loved you a lot and could never get enough of you, it did not matter how difficult you were, he could always handle you.

As a matter of fact he let you blow this one a lot," I said and blew it to get some notes.

"I remember how I fantasised about how he died," he said, staring into the distance.

"Some men were chasing me and threw spears after me, but then he came running and threw himself forward to protect me and the spears hit him instead."

I sat dumbfounded.

"He would have done it," I said.

My 15 year old rap singing teenager gave me his hand and touched me with a soft "five" on the fingertips and went downstairs.

I lay in the bed in Ljungskile and it came to me that Össur was also working on his grief over everything he had lost by moving to a new country.

"They are all grieving" I thought; no matter how positive the changes are, you always lose something, you will always miss something.

Result of dialogue:

All changes mean you lose something, although it is a great turning point to quit misusing, you also lose a lot of things.

You lose friends, activities, your daily routines and so on. The important thing here is to put words and feelings on what you miss, what you lost.

We need to focus better on how we can help the patients to talk about what they miss, so they can start accepting what they lost. Help them find ways to compensate what they lost, find a new meaning in everyday life. Help them to work with different prejudices against alcoholism, treatment and counsellors.

DREAMS

Gunnar Örn had nightmares, I woke up every time it happened, hearing those fast light steps and then he came jumping into our bed and cuddled himself into his mothers arms and fell asleep.

The day after he told us about his dreams. They were similar in many ways; he was left alone, like in the dream he had had about all the family going to cinema.

"We were all outside a cinema on our way in. The ticket cost one krona and each had his own krona and I could not find my one krona, I searched and searched and searched, but could not find it" he said while eating his Corn Flakes. To make it short, we all went into the cinema leaving him outside alone, and it was then he woke up.

I did not feel well and the breakfast did not taste so good anymore. My wife told him it was only a dream about what he was dealing with in the new country, and we would never leave him alone, and how much we loved him.

Össur had gone to his school, and Mjöll was on her way out of the door to drive Soffía to her school.

"We will talk about this later today" she said, knowing me only too well.

I dressed and waited for her to come back and take care of GÖ, so I could go to work. I asked him if he wanted to do anything special with me, and what he was going to do today.

He said he only wanted to watch TV.

I stood in the doorway and saw him sitting there alone in the big sofa in his pyjamas and I started to understand.

Everyone in the family had plans for the day and were going somewhere except him. Everyone in the family came back and told the others about what had happened today, except him.

I felt increasing anger and sorrow build up inside me.

The picture of him sitting alone in the sofa and me just looking at him haunted me the whole morning. At lunchtime I told the others I was gone for the day and called my wife. I asked her if they would like to meet me at a restaurant and have lunch with me and then we could do something together afterwards.

They came and we had a good time and then we went to pick up Soffía.

When we came home my wife told me about another dream our 5-year-old had told her about.

He had been outside playing with Soffía and two of her friends, when the sun came; it had legs, no arms and a big mouth and it ate small children. They all ran as fast as they could, but the sun got him and lifted him up in the sky and he could see above our house and how Soffía and her friends escaped inside the house.

"They had to run you see, because otherwise the sun would have taken them too." he explained so she would not think he blamed Soffía.

"Did he wake up there ?" I asked. not feeling too good.

"No", she said, " high above the ground he started to change into a tree, he became stiff and branches grew out of his face and he became a tree hanging in midair, then he woke up." Earlier we had discussed his dreams and how they reflected his loss of friends, surroundings and private life, where he could choose and have influence on what happened in his daily life, where he felt secure.

This dream was deeper and its significance as we understood it, more clear than in the others. Although the message was partly the same it could also be understood how he was trying to be himself, how he was growing in a painful way.

We both knew that as long as he did not get structure in his daily life and could not speak Swedish properly, he would suffer from this insecurity we witnessed.

"I will not accept their excuses any longer," my wife said, meaning the authorities in Söderhamn, that denied having any responsibility in helping us. Hiding behind each other and waiting lists at different Kindergartens.

"Do you want me to go over their heads and talk to higher authorities ?"

I asked her.

"No not yet, let me try one more time," she answered.

I could feel her anger and frustration and asked:

"What can we do to help him now ?" trying to hold back my own anger and frustration.

"Have you tried praying with him?" I asked.

" He says it does not help."

she answered, and continued after awhile:

"I do whatever I can imagine that could help him and entertain him, but I am his mother not his friends."

"Where is the Dream Catcher ?"

I asked referring to an Indian feather construction we had bought two years ago.

That same night I explained for Gö and Soffía the function of the Dream Catcher, it catches all bad dreams before they disturb the person who is sleeping near it. Gö decided to hang it up on the wall at the head of the bed. Soffía said she did not need it, if she woke she prayed and fell asleep again. I said my own silent prayer and kissed them good night.

The day after we were curious to hear about his dreams.
" I had two good dreams and I do not remember them,"
he said when we all sat eating breakfast. We all cheered and
laughed and Össur said:

"Give me five," and they slapped hands.

This same evening my wife said to GÖ:

" Tomorrow when the others have gone we will play basketball
and I am going to beat you."

Usually he would have been eager to take this challenge, but
this time he said:

"I can't, I have to watch TV."

It was only the day after we figured out what his problem was.
He was trying to make some structure in his day, something he
could go to, making the day meaningful, but his tools were so
few and having no better he used the TV, which we detested.
He had found a way too help him solve his problem, but this
was not a good way.

He really needed our help.

Result of dialogue:

The importance of planning one's day and stick to it. Find a
meaning in what you are doing was also a important thing. The
discussion about how to give the patients tools to break their
own isolation was lively and many ideas how we could change
focus so it would help the patients to take initiative in
order to be more social, came alive.

What is a traditional solution to a problem? Solution is a
solution ! Find new assignments, that probably has nothing to
do with alcoholism and see what happens. Try and try again.
What works, works.

Backup

I called my friend Hannes last Saturday night. He had moved
to Kansas, USA from Iceland two years ago with his family. He
is a physician and studying to become a psychiatrist, but for
me he is Hannes my friend, who loves me and my family,
understands my jokes and respects my way of thinking and
living; he is also the one who I can ask for advice in family
matters. Last but not least, we love to tell each other
stories.

"You want to hear a good story ?"

he asked me, after we had covered the most important things.

" Yes."..

"Are you ready?"...

"Yes."

"This is a good one."..

"I am ready.!!!!!"

He laughed and began:

"This happened here not long time ago to a married couple who have a three-year-old daughter. The woman was expecting in the ninth month, and everybody was looking forward to having a new member coming into the family. The little girl asked frequently when the baby would come and when at last her baby brother came she was at least as happy as her parents.

"When can I be alone with him? "

she asked two days after he came home with their mother. The parents looked at each other and avoided a direct answer. The little girl kept on asking. Every day the parents heard the same question.

"When can I be alone with him, it is very important," she added when they gave no straight answer. The parents discussed what to do and when they asked her:

"Why?" she answered:

"I can't tell you, but I have to be alone with him for awhile."

They could not tell her they did not trust her and talked between themselves about a video camera or some kind of listening equipment, but at last they decided to trust her. She became very happy and they left her in the bedroom where her little brother lay in his cradle. They closed the door and waited in the kitchen.

After a while they stood outside the door, trying to listen to what was going on in there. When they were on the verge of opening the door it opened and the little girl came out. They rushed in and saw the little boy smiling very happy. They took him and went to the kitchen, where their daughter sat and asked her if she was satisfied.

"Yes ", she said smiling.

"Why was it so important to be alone with him ?" they asked.

"I had to ask him about something."

They looked at each other and then at their daughter. She explained very softly:

"I asked him to tell me about God, because I have started to forget so much."

"Did the hairs on your arm stand up ?"

Hannes asked and laughed.

" Yes, as a matter of fact they did,"

I answered and enjoyed the softness of my mind, the story had brought to me

"Mjöll is insisting that we participate in Qi-gong course, but I am not sure if I am interested ," I said a little later.

"Of course you go, it will help you to relax and reduce your stress." Hannes answered firmly.

I came with my arguments, but Hannes did not give in.

"How much have you done of what we have been talking about the last six months?"

I tried to change subject but without result.

"If you skip this course I am coming over and I will hurt you badly," he said.

"It would be nice to have you here," I answered.

"Don't be too sure about that." he answered.

I promised him I would go and give him a report later. Mjöll talked to him too and was satisfied that he backed her up in getting me moving.

We took coffee and tea and went outside the house. It was 2 o'clock, and the night was light and mild. We lit a candle and sat in the silence for a while, savouring the dreams floating by.

We love those moments of togetherness, alone without any disturbance. I told her the wonderful story Hannes had told me, and asked her afterwards,

"What have we started to forget?"

She thought for awhile and answered:

"Enjoying life more, and our contact with the nature."

I felt no need to argue about that and nodded my head.

"I talked also with him about my problems, the tiredness self pity and my moment of emptiness." she said.

"What did he say?"

"I knew most of it, but it is important for me to hear others confirm it," she answered.

"What did he say?"

"He told me to take better care of myself, to be more selfish and do more of the things I enjoyed, try something new. He also explained to me what I had forgotten in all the stress, the necessity of grounding earth, because when you move you take up your roots and they need to be grounded. This was very important for me. Then we talked about common difficulties in moving with the family to another country."

"What are you going to do for yourself?"

I asked, a little anxious, getting a picture of changes that would mean more of something for me.

"Let's go much more, play more, enjoy life more." she answered. I understood it would be like that and she would pull me with her. I would protest, then I would give in and afterwards I would talk about why we had not done this before.

"Good," I said. after I had covered this in my mind.

"You will love it," she said, reading me like an open book.

I needed to take a stand somehow and after a while I said firmly:

"I will not under any circumstances that we wear identical sport outfits, that is where I draw the line."

Result of dialogue:

Here the discussion circled around the necessity of having a sponsor and how the fellowship among the patients could be increased, both while in treatment and after it.

We agreed on taking more of the treatment outside the building, to have more assignments, that were different from the usual assignments we had had. The thought was to increase the teamwork, and help the patients to see the town and its surroundings from different angels. The spiritual part of the program was next in the discussion, and the question was if we did enough to emphasise the strength in trusting Higher Power and if not, how we could do that without mixing it with religion.

Death

"What happens when you die?"

This question came from GÖ when he and Soffía sat alone in the dining room. My wife who sat in the next room, put down the book she was reading and waited curiously for Soffía's answer. "You see" she started, there is a soul in your body, and the soul will never die, but when you die the soul changes into light and travels away."

"You become a ghost then?" GÖ asked.

"No" Soffía laughed, "some call it angels, but it is a light."

Little later GÖ came to his mother and said:

"If I die and you see something that is almost not there, it is me as a ghost "

"Will you not be an angel?"

she asked, although she did not like this subject. After a while it became clear why GÖ did not want to be an angel. He would not under any circumstances be in a white dress down to his ankles.

"I'm sure you can wear something else as long as it is white", she argued.

"Ok, then I will be an angel in white jeans and white sweater,"

he said and went out of the room.

This same afternoon we sat in the sofa and talked about death and dying and how differently children experience death compared to adults.

We talked about our friends and relatives who had passed away and what they had given us before they died and what we missed from Iceland. A comfortable silence embraced us and Mjöll took my arm, lifted it and put it around her shoulders. Her head on my chest, her feet curled up under her. I felt at peace. After a while she broke the silence and said:

"I think I would go insane if we lost any of our children."

The magic silence was gone and I felt pressed to answer:

"You can't know how you will react if that would happen and I try myself never to think about this possibility,"

I said, not sure if I believed this myself.

Mjöll continued:

"I have never told you how much and how long I suffered after the accident with Soffía. I was terrified, I saw my father and my brother when they lay dead and there was nothing I could do. I really thought I had lost her too. For weeks afterwards I sat with her in my arms for hours while she was asleep and you were at work. I did not dare to leave her for a moment. I got afraid of life, constantly afraid that one of you would die. It took years to get over it, probably I never will." I thought about how the accident had made me more observant when the kids were eating, it had made its imprint in me in many ways.

"Still I do not understand how this could happen,"

Mjöll added after a while,

"I had cut the chicken in such small pieces, and I double checked it before I allowed her to eat it. I must have missed something."

The kitchen in our house in Näsviken where we lived six years ago came alive again. We had visitors from Iceland who stayed for the night, it was Helgi, a psychiatrist I had worked with in Denmark, his wife and their two children. We sat around the big table in the kitchen and had just started eating dinner.

Össur was joking with the other kids, Mjöll was cutting a piece of chicken in small pieces on Soffía's plate. I was telling a story, while serving the guests and had just sat down when I saw Mjöll drop the knife and fork she had in her hands and grab Soffía who sat beside her, open her mouth and put a finger into it, then she took her out of her stool, while yelling:

"She has something stuck in her throat !!"

Before I had grasped the seriousness of the situation, she was holding Soffía upside down, shaking her. This was so unreal, Helgi and I jumped up and Helgi took over.

Soffía threw herself the one way and the other, no sound came out of her and she had turned red. Helgi forced open her mouth, then he turned her upside down and shook her violently.

Soffía's pink hair ribbon with the white flower, fell silently to the floor. She had turned blue and did not move.

"We must cut her throat, get a sharp knife or razor blade."

Helgi ordered and kept on trying to force what she had stuck in her throat out, without result. I yelled at Mjöll to help me find a knife, but they were all too dull. In desperation I took out the bread knife and Helgi said

"We will try."

He handed me the lifeless body of my not two-year-old daughter. There was no sign of life and she had turned white. I laid her on the kitchen floor and knelt by her side. My head was cold, it was like I had cut off all feelings. Mjöll who was pregnant in the fifth month, paced back and forth, screaming and crying, Helgi's wife took care of the children.

While I took Soffía's head and put my hand under her neck, waiting for Helgi to cut, I buried her in my mind.

Helgi found the spot on her throat and started to saw, the blood began running and I opened her mouth and put my finger into it and down the throat as far as it could go.

"Stop," I cried out,

"Be quiet, I heard something."

The silence was total and I heard again the whispering sound of air going down her throat and then she gasped for air and came alive. Helgi examined her and said after a while:

"The danger is over, but we had better take her to a hospital to check out if she has got anything in her lungs. I did not get through the windpipe but the wound need to be sewn together."

Mjöll cried and I took Soffía and put her in her arms; I could not cry, I was still in my ice cold numbness.

That night at the hospital Mjöll held Soffía in her arms while she slept, and I held my arms around Össur in our bed at home while he slept. Neither me nor Mjöll slept that night.

"What happened to the dress she was wearing that night?"

I asked Mjöll and took her closer to me.

"You had washed it when we came home, but I could not stand it so I burned it."

"Isn't it strange how little we have talked about that night, I mean just the two of us?" I asked.

"No, she said, it was too much, I still have a problem talking about it."

The dinner was almost ready and we stood up and got the kids. Ironically we had chicken that night.

"Take care," I said when GÖ and Soffía started eating ;

"You remember Soffía what we told you about the accident when you got the chicken stuck in your throat ?"

The answer took us both by surprise.

"It was not the chicken it was a blue pearl I put in my mouth"

I looked into Mjöll's eyes as if to ask,

"Do you know something that I don't know?" She was as surprised as I was.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked and Soffía explained:

"You see, I had been playing with a blue necklace and it broke, just before you took me and sat me at the table," she said to her mother.

"I had one of the pearls in my hand and I put it in my mouth and it got stuck in my throat."

We didn't know what to say.

"You thought it was the chicken?" she asked with surprise in her voice.

"Yes. we thought it was the chicken," I answered.

"Everybody knows you don't put pearls in your mouth," GÖ said.

"But I was so little, I did not know then, and maybe I thought it was candy," Soffía argued and then they started talking about dessert and Ice cream.

Mjöll looked me in the eyes, smiled and I could read in her body language:

"It was a pearl after all, it was not the chicken."

Result of dialogue:

The necessity to be aware if there is an unsolved trauma that is an obstacle for the patient in his/her recovery and work with it. We also discussed our own fear of talking about death and dying and working with the patients in their work of grief.

One lecture and an assignment was not enough and it would be wise to help the patients to understand better their grief of things they had lost by abusing and quitting abusing. Another aspect came up; enjoy life every day, you never know what is in the future. There is no guarantee for tomorrow. (If you want a guarantee, buy a refrigerator !)

UNEXPLAINED

"Let's try something,"

my wife said to Soffia. We sat by open fire outside our house, relaxed after our little barbecue feast. It was springtime and the afternoon was mild and relaxing.

"Close your eyes, think of some article and send it to me in your mind and I will try to see what it is."

When Soffia had grasped the idea, she sat down facing her mother and they closed their eyes. Gunnar Örn sat on my lap and we waited, not sure for what but we kept quiet. After a while, Mjöll opened her eyes and said:

"It was a yellow flower."

"That is right, Soffia answered, and then she added,

"I was not sure if I should send you blue or yellow, but then the yellow came."

I was going to comment what had happened when Gunnar Örn said:

"I want to do it too,"

and he slipped off my knee and told his sister to change places with him. Soffia sat on my lap and GÖ and Mjöll closed their eyes. After a while Soffia burst out laughing:

"Gunnar Örn !! you are sending to me, instead of to mother."

We looked at Soffia and I said:

"Whisper in my ear what he thought of."

She put her hands around my ear and whispered so low I could hardly hear it,

"A Spider man figure."

"What did you think of ?" I asked GÖ. He looked at me and answered:

"Spider man."

I nodded my head towards Mjöll. She smiled and said:

"I did not get anything from him."

"Of course not," Soffia said, he send it only to me."

The children went inside and after some silence I said:
"You know she loves flowers, you knew she would probably think of them."

Mjöll smiled and said:

"She loves many different things but there was no doubt in my mind. I saw the flower clearly and nothing else."

I took a sip of my tea and wondered if the time would ever come that this woman stopped surprising me. I looked at her and felt I doubted that very much.

It was only a couple of days later that my doubt became confirmed. I was sitting in the kitchen, reading a newspaper. Össur was downstairs and Mjöll had taken the smaller ones for a walk in the woods. I heard them coming and when they came into the kitchen they told me all about what they had accomplished and showed me all kinds of objects they had taken with them, stones, flowers, branches and so on.

When the children had covered the table and my paper with all the things they had brought with them they went outside again. Mjöll sat down by the table.

She did not see the mess there was something else disturbing her.

I looked closer at her and saw she was more excited than I had seen her for a long time.

"What happened?" I asked. She stood up, got a glass of water, drank it and said:

"I do not know if I should tell you, if I tell you, promise me not to tell anyone."

I nodded and my curiosity grew. She sat down facing me and laughed. I could not figure this out and smiled in lack of a better expression. She took my hands in hers looked me in the eyes, smiled and said:

"I saw an elf "

I saw it in her eyes she was telling the truth.

She stood up again and told me what had happened.

"We had been in the wood for nearly half an hour and were following our usual path. The kids had stopped to investigate something and I stopped too and looked at them, and then I turned around. I was not thinking of anything special, just waiting for them to finish their business. Then I saw something strange. A few meters away in my eyes height the air started to vibrate, like waves in water. I have never seen anything like that before. A moment later something came flying through the vibrations, without sound came this beautiful little creature flying towards me. I saw him clearly when he passed me only half a meter from my head, but he seemed to be unaware of me.

I followed him with my eyes until he disappeared without sound. He just vanished in the air. I looked at the kids to see if they had seen anything, but they had their heads buried in the ground, studying some insect."

I sat in the kitchen with my mouth open and tried to collect my thoughts.

"What did he look like? How tall was he? Are you sure it was a male ? You are sure the sun did not disturb you in some way ?
"

Those were some of my questions and she answered them all. He was about 30 cm long, lean with long wings on the back. She had seen the face clearly because he almost flew into her and it reminded her of pictures of old Egyptian paintings. His outfit and the wings had all been some variations of brown or golden-brown. She had seen his face clearly, and there had been no vibrations in the air when he disappeared. There was no sun this day and she had not been thinking of anything special, when it happened.

" He was so beautiful,"
she said after answering all my questions. Then she asked.
"You think I am crazy?"

"No, not at all, this is fantastic " I answered.

She continued:

"I have seen a lot of strange things in my life, but I have never thought of this possibility.

This moment was so strange, the sensation and peacefulness was something I will never forget. Now I believe that Soffia saw something two years ago when she told us about the little person she had seen."

I sat in our kitchen and felt happy.

"You know something" I said, this has given me something I can't describe, but I am full of some joyful hope, if you see what I mean."

Mjöll laughed and said:

"It is not a bad description, but promise me not to tell anyone, people will think I am crazy if they get to know that I have seen an elf."

"Can I tell Hannes?" She looked at me for a while, laughed and said:

"You can tell Hannes."

Result of dialogue:

One of my rules is to trust people, it is easier for me to live with that. It does not matter how distrustful I am, I will be cheated anyway, now and then, . When I listen to a patient in denial, I listen to what is his/her truth at the moment, and it does not matter if my truth is different.

I do not have to press my truth upon anyone, and who says I am right ? We discussed the importance of having the patient's trust. At the beginning when they are very ambivalent it often does more damage to tell them the facts we see.

Listen, and when their guilt feeling diminishes they will see things differently. It is much better to let the other patients help them see facts by sharing with them their experiences and concentrate our discussion to find different ways to help them do that.

Everybody / Nobody

Gunnar Örn was irritated.

"They want to control us children, they interfere in everything,"

he said one day when he came home from his Preschool. This was not the first time he complained about the women who worked there. He thought the rules were too many and he could not stand all those discussions about obvious things. It was ok. to explain once if you did something against the rules, but to sit down and discuss it and hear something he already had understood, repeated five times was too much for him.

"Are they all like that, or just some?" I asked

"Maybe not all but the red one talks and talks, she does not listen," he explained.

When he was upset about something in the Preschool, he did not use their names, but the colour of their hair, it was the red, the black and the blond.

"I think he is fed up having only woman around him," Mjöll said

"Maybe they have not understood yet that it does not change anything for GÖ if you are a grown up or not. If you are wrong you are wrong. He does not buy anything, just because an adult says it." I said

"I know, I have been around him for some time," Mjöll said smiling.

Little by little it came out what mostly irritated him. He loves playing "bandy" and has his own club and outfit, but he does not like competitions and the rivalry that follows, he just like to play. Now the teachers had started a tournament between different groups in the preschool and Gunnar had said that he did not want to play in that tournament. Both the red one and the blond one had urged him to participate, but he did no give in.

"They said that everybody loved to be in the tournament and I was the only one who did not want to participate," he said and crossed his arms.

"Does he reminds you of someone?" Mjöll said with a little irony in her voice.

"You are not going to participate?" I asked

"No"

"Good I agree, if you do not want to play they have to accept that," I said

"They said that nobody should be allowed to skip the tournament," he said.

"They can't force you to participate in the tournament," Mjöll said.

When I had told him to do what he felt was right he went upstairs to play.

Mjöll wanted to discuss this further with him, but I told her he had already got the message, he knew we backed him up and that was it.

"He is a male you know, now he needs to do something different." I said.

When he came home the day after he was very satisfied and pleased with himself. He told us that there had been gathering of all the children at the Preschool and he had used the opportunity to ask the children.

"I stood up when they were all there and said:

"Will all those who like to participate in the tournament raise their hand." and you know what, nobody raised a hand."

We looked at each other and laughed in surprise.

"What did the teachers say?" Mjöll asked

"Nothing," he answered and after awhile came his conclusion.

"You see they were not telling the truth, because not one of the children wants to participate it was only the teachers who wanted this tournament.

Maybe they think it is fun," he concluded, pleased with himself.

"Are they going to have a tournament?" I asked

"I don't know, I will not be there," he said and went to his room.

"I have to say I am full of admiration for what he did," I said to Mjöll.

She laughed and gave me a hug.

Two days later I heard her tell the story to a friend of hers in Iceland. When she hung up the phone, I asked about her friend's reaction.

"She told me about a research that had been going on for three years about children and competitions in various athletics and it confirmed what I have known for a long time. The results that were published last week gave a clear result. Children under age of ten should not participate in any contest, it does more damage than good," she said.

"Maybe I should listen more to what Gunnar Örn has to say," I said and wondered in silence if this was a genetic thing or not.

Result of dialogue:

We discussed the empowerment of the patients and if we ourselves used too much Power Over to make the work more comfortable for us. We decided to change the name "rules" of the house to "patient responsibility" and talked about listening more to the wishes of changes that came from the patients, instead of stature them as a defence and a focus away from the program or whatever rationalisation we used to deny their wishes. If we trusted them to help each other why should not they see possibilities in improving the treatment, that we could not see as we had grown used to work as we did?

The secret

It was late in the afternoon, I sat in the kitchen with my wife and my mother enjoying a story my mother was telling us about a strange couple from my hometown in Iceland, when Gunnar Örn came running.

"Soffía is crying, upstairs" he said and pulled his mothers sleeve.

"What is the matter, did she hurt herself?" Mjöll asked as she stood up to follow him.

"No, she has a secret, " he said very serious and dragged Mjöll out of the kitchen. She looked surprised at me to see if I knew something, but I knew nothing. She came back half an hour later and extinguished our curiosity.

"Remember the secret club Soffía told us about two days ago?" she asked as she sat down.

I remembered, Soffía had told us she was in a secret club with two other girls in her class and they had a secret. We did not think so much about this as we thought it was an innocent thing thing, some kind of a game they had invented. Mjöll continued:

"When I came up she couldn't talk because of her sobbing and it took some time for me to find out what it was about. She said she could not tell me as it was a secret and they had promised each other not to tell anyone."

In short, Soffía decided not to bear this secret any longer and told her mother that they had written mean things about the fourth girl who had been in the group earlier. They had written it in a book they named, "The secret book " and now Soffia had discovered that she had forgotten it at the school.

"Those things we wrote are incorrect and I knew all the time it was wrong and now the teacher has found it and now she know what I have done and she will never trust me again," she bawled.

"Oh, my poor little queen," my mother said

"What did you do to comfort her?" I asked.

"I told her about similar thing that I had done when I was at her age," she said and continued when she saw we waited for her story.

"I was probably seven when this happened, we were a group of four girls who lived near each other. Usually we were allowed to play outside for one hour after dinner, except one girl. Her parents did not allow her to come out and play after dinner and we thought they were so strange and strict. Somehow we came to the conclusion that they did this to punish her and us and we were also sure that it was her father that was the guilty one. We discussed how we could tech him a lesson and decided to write him a letter.

We wrote on a piece of paper all the bad nicknames we could think of, that fitted him.

Then we put it through the mailbox on their front door and ran away." Here Mjöll started laughing, as she sometimes does, before the funny part comes. I made circles with my hand as a sign that I would like to hear what she was laughing at as I do sometimes when inpatient. It helps sometimes.

"I still remember how surprised I was when I came home and my father confronted me with what I had done, I could not understand how they figured out that we did this. I remember I thought in my bewilderment, "we did not write our names!". My father was really angry and he took me over to my friend's house to apologise to her father. The other girls were there too with one of their parents and we apologised all of us to our friend's father. I remember I wished I could disappear and thought my father had betrayed me, forcing me to do a thing like that."

Mjöll became silent and I asked:

"Did you meet her parents again?"

"Of course, this was forgotten in no time because we had apologised and learned what we had done wrong," she answered.

"Did your story calm her down?" I asked

"She stopped crying, but she dread to go to the school tomorrow and this explain why she has been so strange both yesterday and today, it is hard for her to go against her consciousness," Mjöll said.

My mother had been listening and I noticed she was far away in her thoughts, then she smiled and said:

"I have not told anyone about this, but when I was at Soffia's age I had a teacher I despised, he never smiled and was terrible strict, and I was so afraid of him. He taught me writing among other things, and he used to give us big assignments for homework. One afternoon when I had finished my homework I was upset about the unfairness in giving us so big assignments, that I wrote on a piece of paper all the names we called him when adults did not hear and added some of my own. I was busy writing when someone came to tell me that dinner was ready and in the stress that someone might see what I had written I put it in the assignment book. By some reason I forgot about the paper and discovered first the day after when I came home from school that I had delivered the paper with the book. I still remember my thoughts and my fear, I was terrified and I did not sleep a wink that night. When this teacher delivered the assignment books he used to stand in the middle of the classroom and throw them to each pupil. That morning he did as he always did, he threw them around, except mine. He came over to my table and handed me the book and stared at me for a long time without saying anything and then he continued as usual."

"He never said anything about this?" I asked.

"No and I told no one, but it was a nightmare for me to be in his class and I had him for two long years, I dreaded every class of his. I could never see him on the street, without feeling bad.

It disappeared first when he died and then I was a grown-up. As a matter of fact I was relieved when I heard he was dead."

I could not stand the temptation and said:

"It seems that creating and keeping secrets is a typical female flaw."

They did not agree and we had a wonderful discussion.

When I put Soffía to bed later in the evening, she told me that she did not feel well and she was sure she was getting sick and could not to go to school the day after.

I explained to her that everybody make mistakes and she had done right by telling her mother about her mistake, so she could make it right again.

I woke up in the middle of the night when Soffía was squeezing herself between us, she had had nightmare and needed our nearness.

The morning after Soffía announced that she had quitted the school, she asked us to move her to another school. It took some time to assure her that the right thing was to face what she had done.

I called from my work one hour later to hear the outcome.

"On the way to the school she urged me to talk to the teacher, but I told her I would go with her inside and see what happened, if she needed help I would be there to help her, but she had to do it herself first."

"So, how did this drama end?" I asked

"When we came inside, she ran to the classroom and came back with the book. The teacher had not found it, and then she told the other two girls she did not want to be any longer in the secret club and tore down the book and threw it away. I could see that the others were also relieved when this was over."

"Everything is back to normal then ?" I asked.

She looked happy when I left, and she asked me if the girl they wrote about could come to our house after school and play," she laughed.

"Beautiful," I said, and I found that this "growing up lesson" my little daughter had gone through, had disturbed me more than I wanted to admit.

That will be my little secret.

Result of dialogue:

The necessity of helping the patients to understand that secrets costs to much. That the energy it costs among many consequences, is not worth it. We cannot expect the patients to open up and tell their secrets, but we can help them not to create new ones when they have started the recovery process. We also discussed different traps one can fall into as a counsellor when patient will only trust you for something he/she has done and without knowing what happened one is sitting with a secret. If one think about this, the fact is that the person who asks you to keep a secret, is asking you to do something that he cannot do himself.

ACTION

The action took place in small steps. We who worked on Ventura had tried various methods on ourselves and had several discussions before we started and we all agreed on what goal we had. Empowering the patients and making the treatment more purposeful and joyful in order to make the treatment better and more successful, was the main intention of the changes.

1) We started with splitting the main group into small groups of three or four when we felt it would be more fruitful for the patients to talk to each other, without a counsellor. We asked them to tell each other about special topics or situations they had been in, most often they would get an assignment talking about both negative and positive things they had experienced in certain situations. We also asked them to do the same thing with different feelings. Several times we split them up after lecture and let them discuss in small groups. Most often we do not want to know what they talked about. It depended on the topic how we grouped them together, sometimes randomly, sometimes by gender or any other way we saw fit. Like when we put those who seldom said anything together and those talkative together.

2) We had decided to lift out more the different stages in the recovery process and use the "Processes of Change" with the DMR model we had used, as a background. We learned the different stages of recovery from "Process of Change" and decided to test the theories on the patients. Those stages are:

Precontemplation - Contemplation - Preparation - Action - Maintenance.

For each stage we made several different assignments, but the main focus was on understanding where each patient was in the recovery process and create assignments fit to what he/she was capable of working with.

3) One of the ideas we wanted to try out, was to give the patients assignments they had to work on outside the Treatment Centre. We decided to do it once a week when we felt it would be good for the group.

I made a contract with a little cafe at the harbour. They could go there as a part of the assignment and discuss various things, before they came back to Ventura.

We started with a trip to an exhibition in the centre. They had the assignment to choose two pictures they associated mostly with. After a stop in the cafe where they talked about the exhibition, they returned and discussed in smaller groups, questions like:

" What feelings did you experience, when you got this assignment?"

" What did you think about when you walked with the other patients through the town ?"

" What is your opinion on the exhibition ?" and so on.

The next week we sent them for a walk, without a counsellor to the highest point in the town. Their assignment was to discover new things they had never noticed before. Architecture, gardens, different colours and what memories came up.

They had their discussion at the cafe before they came back.

The following week we combined a lecture about grief and the following exercise with a new outside experience. Before the lecture they went to the nearest graveyard and walked about there in silence for fifteen minutes. When they came back they discussed in small groups, their thoughts and feelings this assignment had started. In the following lecture they participated by giving examples of what they had thought about and the feelings that came out.

The following week we asked them to prepare a picnic, with coffee, soda and cookies and recommended a beautiful path through the nearest wood. They went alone and without any specific assignment. When they came back we continued the program without asking anything about the picnic.

The outdoor assignment every week is becoming more spontaneous, depending on the mood in the patient group. The last trip we did was to the Library and there they split up in smaller groups and sat by the computers and those who knew how to get information from the Internet. Taught the others how to do it. The assignment was to find material about alcoholism and print it out.

4) We tried various ways to increase the participation and responsibility of the patients.

a) Every patient works on a treatment goal in the second week. He/she does this with a help from a senior patient. They find out four things the patient wants to change in his/her life and focus on them, things that trouble him/her in the daily life.

They work out a short term and a long term treatment goal. The patient presents this worksheet when he/she starts in the Problem Solving Group (PSG), which is usually a week or ten days after their arrival.

b) We encouraged the patients in the PSG, to find assignments for patients who have been working in the group. The patient decides then if he/she will take that assignment or not.

c) We wanted to move the responsibility of the reception of new patients from the counsellors to the patients. We asked one of the senior patients who had been in treatment twice before, if he could be responsible for the reception of patients when they came into treatment. When he agreed, we asked him to write down suggestions about how this could be done in a proper way.

We agreed on his recommendation and he carried the plan out. The plan was that he would introduce the patient to the others, show him the surroundings in Ventura and explain how the daily program was run. After that he would sit down with one senior patient he had chosen to be the sponsor for the new patient the next three weeks, and explain to the new patient how he/she could get help from the sponsor and what responsibilities the sponsor had.

d) The alcoholism has buried many talents and most of the patients believe they are not good at anything, but every person is good at something and by highlighting the person's speciality we help boosting their self-esteem.

We have done this in different ways, depending on the person. Some have held lectures for both patients and personnel about their interests, and they vary from lectures about engines to running marathon. Some have met outside Ventura and taught other patients how to run a computer, bake a special cake or something else.

e) All of us who worked with the patients had different ways of tackling bad habits among the patients. We decided to collect and write down, how each of us did this, while working with the patients. The list was great, I will take just a few examples. Patient who most frequently said: "You see," agreed on hitting himself with the palm of his hand on the forehead, every time he said it. In two days he had broken the habit. Another agreed on standing up in group, every time he swore. Another closed his eyes while working in group, and it helped reducing his defence, and so on.

5) More zest in the treatment was one of the things we had discussed. We who worked at Ventura started by looking at ourselves, if we could relax more and take ourselves less seriously. One of the changes we wanted to try out was to make the lecture more alive. We did this by shortening the time we talked and inviting the patients to participate in them, with examples, ideas and discussions during the lecture.

Then we decided to play with the patients at least once a week. Those games we have tried, are both those we used before with the purpose to increase the patient's trust for each other and new types where they touch each other more in a safe way and games where you can laugh at yourself and others without hurting anyone. We started with role play in the group of the codependant and use it in different situations that occur in the group work. This is not scheduled in the program. Instead of role play with the patients we tried various ways of disagreement groups. One would sit facing two others and argue for continued drinking, the other two would argue for total sobriety. Another version was two standing on both sides of a sitting patient, each had one hand on each shoulder of the patient. The one sitting listened to the others.

One argued that he would quit drinking and the other argued that he would keep on drinking but in a controlled way.

6) We allowed the codependant group to use Ventura's facilities to work on special themes we had given them. They got keys to the facilities and on settled times they could come there and have groups that worked on those themes, without counsellor.

REFLECTION AND RENEWED ACTION.

1) Splitting up the patients into smaller groups to discuss different topics, without a counsellor had a good influence on the patients and the treatment. The patients learned more about each other and and one could feel the bonds between them became stronger and their trust to each other increase.

In the codependant group this form was already a part of the treatment. They were becoming used to this form and used it frequently. While in the treatment of the addicts this form was used less after a while and had become more as an after lecture procedure. We also had our speculations about how we split the patients up into mini groups. When we had put together those who were shy and those who were talkative we could see that it had had a good effect. The shy had started talking and the talkative had started listening to each other. What we had heard from the patients about the mini groups, confirmed our observation, they felt secure in those groups, and talked often about things that they did not talk about in bigger groups.

We decided to continue with the small groups and increase the use of them in the treatment of the addicts as had been done in the codependant group. We also decided to be more exact of whom we put together in the groups and put more work into that by seeking advice from the other counsellors.

2) The work we had laid down in being more accurate about where each patient was in the recovery process, by integrating the "Process of Change" did not pay off. The special assignments had not been used at all, and the counsellors used DMR as they had done before, without thinking more about it. When we discussed the reason for this, it became clear that we had failed in our preparation. In other words, the change we were going to bring out was too badly prepared and too fast. We had jumped from contemplation into action. When we understood that we decided to try again as the "Process of Change" had proven its accuracy by our failure. We decided to take it easy and now follow the recipe.

3) To give the patients assignments outside Ventura gave most of the positive effects we had hoped for. They learned to know each other in a different way. They came out and focused on something that had nothing or little to do with alcoholism, they got new perspective on the town and saw new possibilities in compensating for their former lifestyle. Both the counsellors and the patients had experienced the same. We decided to continue the outside arrangements once a week and try to develop it further by giving them the possibility to have an assignment on weekends; that is, to meet someplace and do something together without counsellor.

When we discussed this with the patients, it turned out they had already started playing "rounder" and "Boyle." They met each Saturday and played for two hours and then some went to the cafe afterwards the others went home. They had done this for three weeks. As I say: " little and often make much."

4)

a) To require of the patients to find out early in the treatment what they consider as the most important changes they have to work on and how they wishes to work on them, has turned out to improve the treatment. We discovered in the beginning that they needed help to do that. Their denial was still too strong. The help they got from their sponsors was not sufficient either.

We sat down and made a list of 25 changes we know by experience are the most common in recovery and let the patient pick out four of them with the help of the sponsor. They worked further on the four changes and then the patients could represent them as a problem in the PS group, and ask for help with them.

This has made the PS group more effective, as they can focus on current problems at once.

b) It is difficult for an alcoholic to bluff another alcoholic. When we required that the patients gave each other assignments in the PS group to work on at home, we were a little surprised how good and difficult assignments they came up with.

We agreed that the counsellor has to be on his/her guard when we ask the patients to give assignments and do not forget that they are not recovered.

We will continue with this experiment.

c) When we gave one patient the responsibility of the reception of new patients, we could see the result, both on the one we asked and the new patients. The one who got the assignment decided after he had made the plan, that he would take an earlier bus to be in good time in the morning and he would put on better clothes, to give the new one a better impression of the treatment. We have experienced that it has been easier for the new patients to become one of the group and they feel more secure having a sponsor they can use.

d) The result of those experiments we have done to help the patients find out what they are good at have been useful but we found out that this was easier said than done. We will continue to focus on openings for them but we have to be careful not to make it worse for those who still can't see anything special in their person or that they could be good at something.

e) The list we made of small assignments gets longer and the patients participate with interest. So far it has made the treatment more alive.

5) There was nothing negative in playing with the patients, they loved it and came closer in many ways. They also learned to go against their fear and work with their dread of many situations. The problem was with the counsellors. Some are better at playing than others and some of the counsellors had problem with this change in the treatment. We discussed ways to solve this, but it is not easy. So far we decided to let those counsellors who think this is fun take care of the game and then we have considered courses for those counsellors who have problem with this act. The role play in the codependant group was a success. It had opened the eyes of many about different dysfunctional behaviour and it was frequently used in the group, when it was fit, both after lectures and groups. We discussed how it had developed in the codependant group and if we could use it with the addicts. In the discussion it turned out that the counsellor who worked with the codependants had learned more about role playing than the rest of us. We decided to let her train us before we started with the other group, and then try it out. The discussion about games gave a lot of thoughts for the patients, and the discussions continued in the coffee breaks and often something came up later in the group session that had been triggered in the discussion. In many cases it has shown to be more effective to start them in the discussion and then the counsellors leave the room. We can hear them anyway, because those are not the most silent activities at Ventura.

6) There was a lot of interest in the beginning for the Theme-Groups, without a counsellor. Then came a period when everybody was busy with something else but the last weeks the interest for them have risen again and we have only heard positive remarks from the codependants. The main reason for this swinging was our own fault. It is necessary to follow up the changes in the beginning and let one's own interest be catching.

SUMMING UP THE SITUATION

What has happened in the treatment since the idea to Empower the patients on their way to recovery came alive ?

First of all, we are on our way. Many of the changes we have made to develop the treatment further are still in progress, some did not work out, others are now a permanent part of the treatment.

1) I can see a different kind of activity among the patients. They participate more in the groups and lectures and are less afraid to take up difficult problems that bother them.

2) The extra responsibility we put upon patients who have relapsed and started treatment again has proven effective. Their self-esteem has increased and they have learned that they have a lot to give to other patients.

3) To let them work in mini groups without counsellor, has both helped them to increase the fellowship among them and to learn to know each other in a different way

4) We hear more and more of activities outside the treatment. The patients have started to meet and do things together when they are not in treatment. Sometimes two or three go fishing, and sometimes they arrange activity with the whole group. Their social activity has improved.

It was a strange feeling I experienced one Sunday morning when I looked out my kitchen window and saw eight of my patients playing on a kids' playground across the street. I saw them seesawing, swinging, gliding and building in the sandboxes. " You think we are crazy ?" one asked when the day after I, wanted to know what they had been up to.

" No, I thought this was wonderful, " I answered, laughing. They had been waiting for a bus after a meeting they had been at in the centre and decided to play a little. I felt great.

5) Empowering the patient, without empowering the employees does not work out. My focus on the patients and the changes in the treatment had occupied my mind and it was only when I started looking back that I saw how much empowering had taken place among my employees. They were taking initiatives and trying out new things on a much bigger scale than before. The flexibility in arranging the work with the patients is much higher now and the work spirit has increased.

To think in solutions has taken over and when problems arise the counsellor takes up the problem with the others to get help to find solutions. The counsellors show time and again that they know that there is more than one truth, there is more than one solution to a problem. To ask for help and new ideas makes it easier to find the solution that is most likely to help the patient.

" What is he doing here ? I have seen him now and then, the last weeks."

I asked one of my employees when we were on our out to eat lunch. The reason for my question was simple.

I had seen one of our former patient, a young man come to Ventura quite often the last weeks. At first I thought he was having sessions with one of the Counsellors but nobody had mentioned anything about that and now I was not quite sure.

" Did not you know ? He comes here every day to learn. He did not have any place to go to after school and we decided that he could come here to learn."

I was pleased and thought this was marvellous. (Although they could have asked me!)

6) It became more clear to me we were on the right path, when a trainee who had started a week earlier came with a remark about how we worked with one of the patients.

" Why do you not confront him with what is wrong with him and tell him he has to change his behaviour ?" she asked with a little criticism in her voice. We who worked at Ventura sat in the coffee room for the personnel when this remark came.

I did not have to explain for her, the others did it.

" We do not work like that here" was the first remark.

" That is Power Over, we use Power With, it is much more effective" came from another. They explained to her how we would help the patient with aid from other patients, to see by himself what he had to change and why we believed that it would give a better result. She was good ! After some discussions, she said:

" I am not used to this way of thinking, where I have worked with patients, we confront them a lot. I guess this is a damage from that time. I want to learn your way of working with the patients."

"Welcome aboard," I said.

In a few words: The treatment has become more **firm** as we are more aware and understand better the limitations and possibilities the empowering of the patients has and much more **flexible**, for the same reason.

One more step

" You know the way to Heaven ?"

The question took me by surprise and I could not find a logical answer to it. Håkan, the one who had asked, walked by my side smiling at my struggle to meet this challenge.

This was our last week in the school. Next time we met we would graduate and the existence of this group, studying Human Services Management from Springfield College, was over as I had known it.

It was Wednesday and we had taken half of the day off to visit an old fisherman village on an island named Gullholmen. We had an hour on us before gathering for a dinner and Håkan, who was one of my classmates had asked me to take a walk with him.

I could not find any down-to-earth answer to his question, and asked:

" Do you ?"

" Yes; you want to see it ?"

" Thanks, that would be nice,"

I answered, with a little irony in my voice.

" Let us go up here, I think this is the right way,"

Håkan said, and started climbing a hill of solid rock. We came up and I started to get it. This was the highest point of the island and earlier a house or some other building had been there. All that was left of the building was four outdoor steps made of concrete. They just stood there without function, exactly on the highest point like they had been there forever. Håkan made a gesture with his right hand and said:

" Here you go ! As you see, you get a little help with the first steps and then you are on your own."

I walked up the four steps and felt the temptation to take one more step into the unknown just as to try if the ladder I could see in front of me would hold or not.

" It will not hold, I am too skeptical," I thought, turned around and sat down on the highest step.

Håkan sat down beside me and we savoured the fantastic view we had over the small islands the village the harbour and all the boats, while turning our back to the way to Heaven

" You see the isolated house on the island over there

?" Håkan asked and pointed at a small house on a tip of a cliff.

" It was Evert Taube's house, you know the famous Swedish troubadour. You have heard about him ?"

" Oh yes, indeed" I answered and looked, with renewed interest at the house.

I started thinking about how it would affect ones creativity to be isolated on a spot like this when Håkan started singing. It was a beautiful melody with an even more intelligent text.

He sang all the verses and I could see Taube, sitting by the window overlooking the ocean, creating this masterpiece and me at the same time as a teenager, sitting by another window listening to his melody.

" Taube created this one in the house. You have heard it before?"

Håkan asked some time after he had completed his performance. I had heard it years ago in my hometown, Akureyri in northern Iceland but as I told him this was the first time I had heard the whole text.

We started talking about the difference of being alone and loneliness, friendship and love. Then we talked for awhile about the ocean and then we became quiet. We sat there, side by side on the fourth step to heaven and for a minute everything felt right.

" I can ride a bicycle ! "

I was back in Ljungskile listening to my telephone answering machine. Gunnar Örn sounded excited.

" Drífa taught me how to ride a bike and now I can do it all by myself." Then I heard him talk to his mother.

" He is not there are you sure he will listen to this ? Don't tell him. I will do it when he calls back."

He added before he hung up.

Drífa, my sister-in-law, had come to visit us just before I took off and she brought her newly born baby with her. It was a beautiful 5 months old boy and it was difficult to tell who was more happy, he or his mother. The baby had taken over the house and everything circled around him and his needs. I had left only two days after their arrival and I knew they had a great time, because the sisters are close and my children love Drífa. I had given it a thought to go into a little self-pity because I had to leave but decided to let go it do not pay off anymore.

I called and Mjöll told me Gunnar Örn was asleep, exhausted after riding his bike for two hours.

" You have to call him in the morning he is so proud," she said

Then she started talking about the baby and how the daily rhythm in the family had changed. Soffía and GÖ did not have time to play with anyone else, they spent all their time with Drífa and the child; even Össur spent a lot of his time with them and the daily life was about changing diapers, breast feeding, the baby's sleep, strolling around and taking it easy. I listened, and started to get a little nervous and asked:

" You want one more child?"

She laughed and said:

" No, but it is so strange to see my sister do exactly the same as we did for our children, how her concern for her boy comes number one and all her plans for the next years centre on how she can be as much as possible with him.

It has taken me back to the time when we got Össur and everything in our daily life changed. You remember ?" I remembered.

Afterwards I felt a little insecure I knew if my wife had decided to have one more child, I would not have a lot to say about that, it would go her way. I decided to let go and take things as they came. The important thing was to remember to call GÖ early next morning.

Two days after I came back, I and GÖ was on our way to do some shopping when he took me by surprise, by asking:

" If you had to choose, between losing your house or losing your friends, which would you choose ?"

I looked at him in the rear mirror and saw he was dead serious about this question and decided to stop at a cafe close by and discuss this with him.

When we had got what we needed of drinks and cookies I told him I would choose my friends.

" So would I,"

he answered and poured more Cola into his glass.

" Why would you do that ?"

I asked and waited, curious for an answer.

" You see, if I lost my house, I could start collecting for a new house, and little later he added:

" You do not lose your friends."

I sat back in my chair and wondered how he had come to that conclusion and what had triggered his mind to start thinking about this issue. Little by little I got the picture; the fact that my mother came and stayed with us for 3 weeks earlier this summer, and that Drífa had stayed for ten days, helped him understand that he had not lost his friends when he moved from Iceland, he could visit them and they could visit us. I asked him what was important for him to do if he wanted to keep his friends. He thought for a second and answered:

" Help them if they need help."

" How ?" I asked.

" If they need glasses, I would help them to get glasses," he answered, and then he told me he would like to move on.

I told Mjöll about our conversation when we came back, and asked her if she had been talking to him about those things.

" No, but have you not noticed that both he and Soffía are very satisfied and happy now ? There is never a struggle in the morning to get them to school and they have several kids to play with after school. They are in balance."

We talked about how important it was that they were satisfied with their school, and what good teachers they had.

" I want them to know somehow much we appreciate their way of being and working with our kids, because they really love to go to school,"

Mjöll said, referring to the teachers. We agreed on buying books to give them as a little thanks for their help and Mjöll decided to bring them the day after when she picked up Soffía and GÖ.

" What did they say about the books ?" I asked when she came home the next afternoon.

" They were both surprised and pleased," she said and then she told me about the conversation they had had about the school our children and the future. Then she stopped and asked:

" Do you know whom I met when I was buying the books ?"

" No, and please do not let me guess." I answered

" You remember Eva the one we had all the discussions with when we had problems with GÖ and wanted her to do something about it?"

" What did she say ?" I asked a little curious.

" She asked me about GÖ and Soffía and she was really pleased to hear how well they had adjusted to life in Söderhamn."

" Did she understand why we were so upset ?" I asked.

" We did not talk about that."

" Didn't you explain for her why it went wrong ?"

" No "

" What did you talk about then ?"

" We had a woman talk and I felt very satisfied afterwards."

Mjöll said smiling and went out of the kitchen. I understood, this was not for me and it was meaningless for me to try to figure out how they had come to conclusion, without touching the subject.

I stood up and looked out of the window at the children playing in garden, and I could feel the vibrations in my feet from the music Össur was playing in the basement.

"As a matter of fact," I thought " we took the fifth step and it did hold! "

Söderhamn 1998