

Worry as compass

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Thoughts by Kerstin Hopstadius after a workshop in Brno with Jaakko Seikkula and Tom Erik Arnkil in May 2015: Don't put your best means of control to work.

Brno in the Czech Republic, three hours by train from Prague. It's the middle of May and abundant foliage outside the train window. I am on my second visit with *Narativ*, a network of some ten people described on their web page as *A social and relational platform spreading collaborative and dialogical practices in Czech Republic and Slovakia*. Last winter I went there to take the opportunity of meeting the collaborative therapist Harlene Anderson, and I arrived at a symposium titled: *Who is the expert here?* People's expertise on their own lives was given significant expressions. One of the speakers represented the Hearing Voices Network (an international network for people who hear voices) and another lecture was performed by three homeless women and a social worker from a project on homelessness. Such a thoroughly pursued relational perspective made me both warm and impressed. I was determined to take the next chance to make another visit there.

Now the opportunity had come; a workshop with two perspectives on dialogical work, *Open Dialogue* and *Anticipation Dialogue*. To be given two different, although related, approaches in the same seminar gave me a roomy feeling. The shared heading is *Fostering dialogical space in relational practices*. This means to establish a dialogical space within a wide range of trades. A bit further into the workshop another distinction emerges: The challenge for dialogicity is to generate and foster space for being heard and responded to *even in worrying situations*. Oh yes, I ponder, we've got so many neat and clever programs that we are supposed to pursue in our work places. However, in situations of worry, woe, and fear, we often see our ambitions dwindle. What I listen to here are ways of working that have been shaped *through* the difficulties and been colored by the worry that needed a response right then, right there.

In writing this paper I will try to capture how the workshop gave me new thoughts about "worry".

[The quotes below come from my own notes. For that reason, I use dashes and not quotation marks. If a reader wants to deepen the perspectives of these ideas, there is the book *Open Dialogues and Anticipations: Respecting Otherness in the Present Moment* by Jaakko Seikkula and Tom Erik Arnkil (Seikkula, J. & Arnkil, T.E., 2014).]

The practicalities around the workshop are arranged by the *Narativ* members. All equipment must be brought to the museum where the workshop will take place. I go there together with Katka, Kateřina Novotná, a good friend of mine since my first visit. She is responsible for providing snacks and coffee utensils for a hundred people, and that needs to be done between her therapy clients and nursing her little daughter. The museum is situated in the historic part of Brno, where at this time all roads are closed due to archeological excavations of medieval tunnels. Katka defies one stop sign after the other and we arrive at the last minute. I am

given the task of guarding the unlawfully parked car. I stand there a bit nervous until I realize that if some guard or police comes, they will rebuke me in a language I don't understand a word of. When Katka is back and I comment how much work the group is accomplishing to get the thing going, I get the concise response "we arrange conferences three times a year so you know what you are to do."

On the day before the workshop, the two Finnish professors, Jaakko Seikkula and Tom Arnkil hold a supervision day in the educational program *Collaborative-Dialogic Practices*. Tom talks about *anticipation dialogue* and Jaakko about *open dialogue*. (More about similarities and differences further along in this text.)

A couple of participants, working in a project for families where there has been violence, want to share a case. They tell about their disappointment as the work in their team has got stuck. Tom responds with warmth.

- What do you do? Your idea is good but the response is not good.
- To tolerate the disappointment, to listen and listen.
- If you place the expectation of change in other people, the result they receive is criticism. The expectation of change needs to be placed in *relationships*.

Yes, I think, what matters is to experience and endure your own disappointment and still remain just as curious about the process. The disappointment takes place in a process I take part in *together with other people*. The tricky thing is that I feel it within *myself*, and that I get tempted to stay there, and maybe end up in accusations, instead of listening and sharing in what is happening to *us, now*.

Because I know less about Arnkil's work than Seikkula's, I am quite busy keeping up with his pace as he mentions all kinds of networks and institutions within the same sentence. Luckily I am able to catch my breath every now and then when a question is aimed at Jaakko. He waits a while before he responds, being totally present with the person in the room who has turned to him. Jaakko speaks about *polyphony*, many voices, in dialogical conversations.

- The alternative small stories often surface in single words, here like "disappointed". I am more and more preoccupied by something before feelings; "sensing"; to grasp the feelings before they are turned into words, to make space for that moment. Also the sensing, the bodily responses, within the professionals.
- Plans happen on a rational level: "How do I act next time?"
- By focusing on how we feel in psychiatry, it becomes more democratic.
- To grasp the feelings before they are turned into word, to make space for that moment.

An interesting idea; as soon as you open up for all different voices, including those that only are diffuse perceptions somewhere in your own body, the conversational situation turns more democratic. The professional has to talk in a way that not only the colleagues will understand, but other people as well. When the professional voice becomes one voice among many, the conversational situation turns more democratic, there is no longer room for an automatic privilege of interpretation.



Tom Erik Arnkil, the fantastic Czech interpreter, Ester Danelova, and Jaakko Seikkula. Photo: Narativ

The supervision day is over and the workshop starts. My thoughts wander twenty years back in time. In 1995 Dalarnas Familjeterapiförening (the family therapy association of the Dalarna region) had invited the late Tom Andersen and Jaakko Seikkula for a day of lectures. In my notes of the event I see that Jaakko talked about Urie Bronfenbrenner and his ecological systems theory. I made notes about mezzo systems; systems that emerge when different micro systems meet. Jaakko said something like: Earlier on we thought that the important things were those that happened on the ward, later that what is important is that which happens on the boundary, as that is where events gain their meaning.

This image of the boundary between the systems has stayed in my mind ever since I heard Jaakko in Falun. Over the years I have returned to it, with inner reflections like: Go to the border, have a look, there is more to see. I tried to do something, oops, I bounced into someone else, how come? I'll try something else instead.

The ideas of mezzo systems are present in what I hear now, twenty years later. However, vague impressions, bodily perceptions, are more emphasized by both presenters. One example is Jaakko's account of a current research project at University of Jyväskylä: *Relational mind in events of change in multi-actor therapeutic dialogues*. Couples who have come to the psychiatric clinic for therapy after violence in the home take part in the project. Both clients and therapists are provided with a number of measuring devices that register stress variables. Together with reflections of the participants there is new knowledge about in what way the strain during a conversation of difficult matters can vary, both with bodily measurements and verbal reports. On a videotape we see a clip where a husband tells about the violence he has subjected his wife to. He is in great anguish, she is still and silent. On the diagrams the largest stress reactions are found on the side of the wife.

Further into the workshop I make a reflection: Earlier on I have focused on the dialogue *per se* in *Open Dialogue*: how does it proceed, who is supposed to take part, how do you start, how do you end the conversation? Now I get more ideas about *Open*. I take notes on pauses, silence, breathing space, on possibilities for every participant to state presence.

- You follow the pace, the words and the answers of the person in open dialogue. It is a client-driven practice, rather than a therapist-driven practice.
- The question of the therapist is: how do we respond? It is about mobilizing the resources that the clients have in their relationships.
- The information that the team is handling is not hidden from the client/family, a guarantee that we have the same information, both team and client.
- We don't prepare, everything is happening here and now. Everything happens in the meeting. For the professionals it can be hard to talk about important things in a way that people can be part of.

Both Jaakko and Tom keep telling us about situations where dialogue between everybody concerned is the best, or even the only, possibility. These situations are characterized by serious discomfort, whether it can be expressed in words or not. They regard the feeling, or just the unclear perception, of worry and uneasiness as an opening for dialogue. Tom continues:

- Worry is an anticipation that something in the network of possibilities is wrong, a worry about yourself in the relationship. “If I take this up, things will get worse” “If I don't take this up, things will get worse.” You hope that someone else is taking up the worry, that way it will be their responsibility or their mandate.
- Intervene in your own worry immediately. Respect the uniqueness of relationships. It is never too early to start a dialogue.
- What I can see from this place is all I can see: A place in history, a place in relationships. That is the reason for dialogue.

The choice of theme for the whole workshop starts making sense to me: *Don't put your best means of control to work*. Well, often, probably much too often, in my work I have tried to wait until I have “an overview”, “have more facts”, anxious to do the right thing. Here we are urged not to wait. If I sense a worry, which is felt on the spot where I stand, in the actual network of relationships which is relevant, that is where I have a possibility to act. There and then I take part, not only with what I have carved out carefully beforehand, but with myself, in meeting with other selves.

Now, when I'm back home and reconnect with these ideas in my writing, I have a wish to get away from the framework of conferences and general statements. What does it really look like, to take responsibility for your worry and anguish in bothersome situations? I start thinking about a time a few years ago when I took part in the writing of a “village book” about the place where I live, a written document about Heden, a village in Leksand in the district of Dalarna, almost 300 kilometers northwest of Stockholm. I am thrilled by the language in old texts and oral traditions, a language with few abstract concepts, more direct. In the village book I look up a situation involving great worry.

I read the notes from a village meeting in the village of Heden, June 3 1895. At that time the village consisted of about thirty small farms, and a few houses for carpenters and people who made their living by walking to Stockholm, working there for months at a time. The village meeting was the forum for the village to make common decisions about economy and other important affairs. On this occasion, the community of Leksand had turned to the village meeting of Heden, to decide about poor relief for a farm in the village; two sisters with nine children in all. The villagers stand before a dilemma that we can recognize in our days: how might the

environment care for the wellbeing of the children, when the family seems to fall short in that respect?

At my first glance at these notes, I saw the text as an expression of stigmatization of single mothers in the local community. Furthermore, I had seen that both mothers earlier on had been sentenced for theft of a kind that indicated lack of means for survival. As I now return to the notes (with a slightly more dialogical perspective) I read them focused on the worry of the villagers for the welfare of the children.

§5 As said Karin and Brita ... both are fit for work, no poor relief should be admitted to these persons, however, concerning their 9 children, innocently suffering the big need that is present there, the men of the village were unanimous that some help must be provided for them, and hence Broms Olof Olsson made the statement that support on behalf of the children should be granted immediately and for the sake of parsimony, the means would be received by their mother and the family life, however distressing to see, should henceforth continue as afore.

Against this statement Malar A. Andersson spoke, not denying that the proposal of O. Olsson would be the least expensive, nevertheless this way of using the means would hereafter, just as before, not lead to the intended result, as the parents firsthand take the better part, which means that the children suffer and come hungry to the neighbors asking for help. If that would be all of it, but that is by no means the case, as the fornication and vice that the parents foster lead the children on the same road. The consequences thereof might soon be horrendous.

Explained A. Andersson that he no longer could stand responsible for the alleged mishandlings which rather increase than decrease... and to help in this, the only appropriate action would be, although it could be seen as much to ask and costly, but it is better to put up the shutters in the brook than in the river, that the children would be boarded out, partly to the children's home, partly to other people, as soon as possible, in order to receive a humane care and treatment. As this is no easy matter for the municipal authorities, the request is a temporary provision to be granted until the above mentioned boarding can take place.

After the submitted proposition the men of the village unanimously agreed to the proposal of A. Andersson, therefore O. Olsson put down his claim.

The discussion at the village meeting starts with a shared worry. The men of the village agree that something has to be done for these children to give them "a humane care and treatment". Two different proposals appear.

Broms Olof, on this photo wearing the traditional leather apron, is the one who, in the notes, doesn't want unnecessary spending of the village's common means. What was his situation in life at that point? He had recently seen three of his four sons leave home and country, two of them for America, and must have had heavy labor on his farm, this being long before tractors and milking machines.

Malar Anders, who tries to describe more of a long-term perspective, has a larger farm and has also started a small dairy of his own. Around the time of these notes, his name is found on many petitions advocating a public school to be started in the village.



Two “ordinary” farmers are in heated discussion, proposing different alternatives using elaborate wordings. Regrettably, the mutual dialogue that shines through in these notes does not concern the two sisters, the mothers of the children who are the cause of the worry. Their voices are not heard. The reason I still feel so warmly for these farmers is that I glimpse a process where the agony was strong and mutual, but opinions differed. And also, that it was regarded as important to describe the different opinions. All concerned lived less than one kilometer from each other, the children came hungry to their neighbors. Whichever decision was taken, the consequences would be evident to everyone in the village. (I don’t know what happened afterwards, e.g. for how long any of the children were placed in other homes, but from the research done by a great-grandchild it is evident that several of them did well later on in their lives.)

In my view, the text says something about the competence of the old local society, to handle complex situations, and serves as a reminder that dialogue is not a new thing. The neutral and abstract language of today can create an illusion of an objective outside position, at a distance from our constantly changing life. In my view, dialogical work carries the power to break the modernist illusion, not least the illusion of control.

I return to the heading for the workshop and note Tom Arnkils’ comment: Better understanding might arrive if you *don’t* apply your best means of control

- There are *normative goals* in professional life – of health, wellbeing, learning, child rearing, domestic relationships...
- Important as they are, they can also *distance the professional* from the here-and-now of listening and responding
- The hum of the professional pursuit may get louder in one’s ears than the voice of the client/child/family. One may be “there” instead of here-and-now, in the present moment (thinking of goals and how to guide the client there, rather than listening and responding carefully to what they present right now).

Anticipation Dialogue has evolved from situations where several persons or institutions have run into difficulties in their cooperation, despite having common goals. The actual procedure of such a meeting is outside the scope of this paper, but some of the points mentioned I take with me into my own life:

– What if we had only this meeting? We don’t have control over more.

Consequently, this way of working involves summoning everyone who needs to collaborate in the situation at hand, and lets the meeting take the time it needs, possibly with a follow-up.

– We wanted to make this a culture. It was successful, but after a while the municipalities turned to the next project. The only place of integration is the everyday life.

– The anticipation dialogue is about guiding people into having plausible hopes.

– To lead anticipation dialogue you have to be asking for help. Please help me to help.



The author of the article in a discussion during the workshop. Photo: Narativ

Open Dialogue has been developed within psychiatry, while *Anticipation Dialogue* has been developed within social work. The bottom line is an unconditional respect for other people. In the labyrinth of the open conversation, the compass needle can seem to spin at random, but sensings can be noticed and responded to. That which honestly worries someone, can take shape. In the multitude of responses, new possibilities arise for those who have brought their worry to the conversation, and also new possibilities for those who have the task of helping in the situation.

References:

Seikkula, J. & Arnkil, T.E. (2006). *Dialogical Meetings in Social Networks*. London, UK: Karnac.

Seikkula, J. & Arnkil, T.E. (2014). *Open Dialogues and Anticipations: Respecting Otherness in the Present Moment*. Helsinki: THL, Finnish National Institute for Health and Welfare.

Link to a presentation of the book *Open Dialogues and Anticipations*:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Ix08L5ea20.

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Author: Kerstin Hopstadius, lic. psychologist, lic. psychotherapist
www.kerstinhopstadius.se

kerstin@hopstadius.se

Translator: Cecilia Brodin