

Brief Encounters from the Taos Institute

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Ordinary Life Therapy: An Extraordinary Venture



By Mary Gergen

Earlier this month, Ken Gergen and I were invited to a conference on family therapy in Gothenburg, Sweden, to talk about social constructionist ideas and relational processes. We were delighted to be participants in the meetings, mostly because the hosts were so warm and welcoming and also because the work they do is very creative and humane. The Family Care Foundation, the dreamwork of Carina Håkansson, helps people who have been diagnosed with severe emotional and mental problems, such as schizophrenia, return to ordinary life. Usually they have been institutionalized, treated with drugs, and basically given up for lost. It is assumed that they might never lead normal lives again.

The people chosen by Carina's group are treated in an entirely different manner. When they come into their program, they are given a home with one of the families that work with the foundation. Usually these homes are located on farms nearby. Here there is space -- woods, lakes, fields and farm animals. There are chores to do, space to breathe in, and time to rest. There is healthy food and family fun. The families on the farms take the person into their lives, and treat them as though they are actual family members. Sometimes the "patient" has a child, who may also join the family. The newcomer is not expected to act in a normal fashion immediately. It may take a year for them to fit into ordinary life. Each week the "patient" has a therapeutic session, alone, or with significant others, and the family also has a counseling session to help them adjust to their new member. When people are ready to leave, they go away, but they never have to say "goodbye." They are free to call, to visit, and to continue the relationship as they wish. This possibility offers tremendous support to them as they enter their new lives and also the sense that the care they received is an authentic expression of affection and regard.

Many of the stories of how these people return to society, are able to work and live independently, with friends and family members, are told in *Ordinary Life Therapy: Experiences from a Collaborative Systemic Practice*, a book that we published in the Taos Tempo series last fall. Being together with the therapists and family home parents, as well as their friends and colleagues, we could feel the energy and love that gives them the strength to continue with their mission. The Family Care Foundation has rejected the diagnostic categories for mental illness that are the primary constructions of the psychiatric community in the United States. They focus on people's potentials to be well again after times when they struggle with difficult and demanding ways of living. In effect, their success depends on a more promising reconstruction of the person.