

Voices of Reconciliation: Elsbeth McAdam and Peter Lang

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Witnessed by: Benedicte Schilling

Elsbeth: It's a great privilege for us to be here and to be presenting at this conference today. We would like to thank you and to say we are aware that we are speaking with multiple voices. We are speaking with the voices of the people we have worked with as clients. We are speaking with the voices of the communities we have worked with and the many people (a lot of you who are here) who we have worked with as professionals: all of you, who have taught us a huge amount over the years, we would like to thank and to remember all of those with whom we have worked. We speak with our multiple voices who have taught us so much. What Peter and I want to talk about today is how we think about:

How we deal with and how we manage situations of violence and abuse?
How do we manage both the so-called victim and the so-called perpetrator?
How do we manage them and the wider context with dignity?

As we talk about families we have worked with, situations we have worked with, we ask you to appreciate not only confidentiality but also to respect the morality and the dignity of the people we have been working with.

Dignity and neutrality

Peter: For Elsbeth and me it is a great privilege to be asked to present today. What we want to highlight as a central concept within all our working is this word "**dignity**". The theme of this conference is Reconciliation. One of the things that we have been discovering again and again is:

How do you give dignity to everybody who is part of a situation?

Neutrality is experienced when everybody involved within the conversation has an experience of dignity. So dignity becomes a very important word for us. Not only how to give dignity to the people who have been the recipients of violent or abusive situations but also the perpetrators of these situations.

How do we get and give dignity?
How do we give dignity to the violated ?
How can we give dignity to the people who are perpetrators?
How are we giving dignity to ourselves when we hear them so that we don't become people who enjoy hearing about it, voyeurs?

We will start with a very brief piece of poetry. Poetry has given us lots of inspiration. The poetic metaphors can take us further than anything we can imagine. We suddenly remembered a phrase from world war poetry. In one of his war poems Wilfrid Owen creates a wonderful moment, beautifully set to music by Benjamin Britten in his War Requiem. There is a fantastic moment in which two servicemen meet from each side of the war where one says to the other: "You are the enemy I killed, my friend!" It is a most extraordinary sentence; my friend, one time my enemy. "Here is no cause to war". Why? Because there is a *meeting* taking place. And at *this meeting* a different future is being created, now we are friends. Using this poetry as a metaphor we are beginning to look at :

What future is being created and how are we creating this future when working with people in situations of abuse and violence?

Today, we will be talking about our work in different situations of violence, sexual abuse situations and small community situations. What we would like to offer you through our discussion is to hear these situations as metaphors for ways of working, not literal translations.

In our work we have found the value of giving enormous attention to the context in which we work and how each context is different. A way of working only works when it fits the context. So we will give you an opportunity to explore how we are using the metaphor of context.

Elspeth: I want to tell you a story that demonstrates some of this and hopefully will allow you to get the idea of how we work. This is a story of a young girl aged 14 who were referred to our clinic with symptoms of dermatitis artifacta. She had been burning her skin and her face very badly with acid. She obviously felt it was a real dermatitis.

What became apparent when we talked about the consequences of having these terrible burns on her face and her arms was that she didn't have to go to school. Staying at home, she was able to look after and protect her mother. Why did she have to look after her mother? Because of absolutely horrendous violence within the household. For some reason her two brothers didn't show this violence when she, their baby sister, was in the house. They had frequently beaten up their mother. So not surprisingly the girl felt she had to stay at home to protect her.

The story that emerged was that the father had died 14 years ago while she was still in-utero. He had left the three children a fair amount of money in trust. The younger son, who was 16 years old had recently inherited a lot of money. In the 3 months since the inheritance the two boys had spent a substantial amount on alcohol and drugs. Consequently there was an escalation in the amount of violence.

This girl's behaviour, not going to school, to protect her mother was coherent with the context she was living in. She arrived one morning at the clinic telling us that two nights previously, one of the boys had punched the mother's right eye out, blinding her and fracturing her skull. We were now extremely worried about this 14-year-old girl. After talking to social services and the police, I rang and talked to the mother and the boys, saying I really wanted them all to come to the clinic that afternoon. The older boy (who was the person who had done it) said: "You better be careful! I know your car. You won't recognise it when I am finished. And I also will punch YOUR eyes out if you try to break up our family. We are a family and don't you dare do anything to it." I was getting a little anxious: How was I going to manage this situation?

Peter: Listen to what Elspeth says: "A little anxious!"

Elspeth: Anyway, what happened was that this 18 years old boy who had threatened me, didn't come to the session, in which we felt we had no option but to take this girl into foster care, because we couldn't leave her in the home. Mother would not take any action against her son. It was a very, very traumatic session with the mother crying and saying: "I can't let this happen. I can never press charges against my son. My family is my life."

At the end of this session, I decided to ring the 18-year-old boy and thank him for **not** coming to this session. I decided to tell him how extremely responsible he had been for not coming, because I *would* press charges if he did anything. And he *knew* how much pain it would cause his mother if he was taken to prison. He *knew* how much pain it would cause his sister. And also, he might even have thought about how much pain it would cause me. So, I was honestly grateful for the way he took responsibility by staying away from the session.

Initially when I started thanking him, he said: "What are you talking about?" And I repeated again: "It was tremendously responsible of you *not* to have come today. By doing this you have shown how much you understand and care for your mother knowing how difficult it is for her having to give up one of her children. You *know* how difficult for her it would be to give up either of you and decide who it is going to be. But she knows that she has to give up one of you, because those are the rules that society lives by. We cannot leave your sister in the house when you're in the house. And I'm really grateful and really impressed at how responsibly you have acted." This appeared to connect to him emotionally as he answered immediately, "You're right! I will leave the house

now, I cannot let my sister go to care or cause my mother so much distress.” I responded: “That’s fantastic, see how responsible you are. Where are you going to go?” He said: “Well, can you help me with housing?” We got him to come into the clinic and social services organised housing for him.

By naming his responsibility, love and care in this family, we created the opportunity for him to change his position from being someone who was behaving in a very violent, aggressive, angry and unempathic way, to somebody who could show responsibility and act empathetically. By being appreciated and valued in a neutral dignified manner this lad was able to begin to live a new and untold identity, he moved from home to an apartment of his own, helped by the social services. This choice of acting responsibly brought forth new affordances for the family, so that the girl returned to school and the boys decided to spend the rest of the money on a short cruise for all the family. A new future story began to be told within sessions with the family and the older son.

What we want to talk about are some of the issues that came up within this sort of work situation.

Peter: One of the things that Elspeth and I are working from is precisely what she is describing:

How do you connect to what that young man was doing?
How do you connect with what is dignity and dignifying his actions?

Think about it for a moment. He is sitting at home, probably recovering from drinking a huge amount of alcohol a few hours before, and suddenly this psychiatrist phones and says: “I want to thank you for showing how responsible you are as a young man.” What a shock to the system! But where does that come from? What are the phases Elspeth and I use?

Emotions as expressions of moral judgement

We are looking at the notion of all emotions as expressions of moral judgement. Therefore, in this situation, the young man is showing his morality in the expression of violence and threats of violence towards his mother and the psychiatrist. So the question is, How do we connect with **his** morality rather than with the external showing of violence? What is the morality within this situation? And how do we connect with that?

It is not that we create morality out of nothing. Morality is there as part of what can be seen. One of the things Wittgenstein says is: When you are hearing a story or when you are listening to somebody, you become **bewitched** by the way the story is told. And as you are becoming bewitched you get more and more caught up in that story. What Wittgenstein then says is: If you want to create something, simply look in the places where you wouldn’t normally look. Look around. Get **outside** the story. What else is there? So what Elspeth is highlighting by telling this story is that we begin to look at places where you wouldn’t normally look.

We begin to create a coherent story to make sense of the morality and the intentionality. In doing this we create dignity.

It is our experience that when people come to see us, to work with us in therapeutic conversations, all they are doing is asking us to work with them to find another way to go on. They can’t see how to go on with the stories that they have. So what they are asking is: “Help us to find a way to go on”. So very simple:

How do we work with them?
What is it that they want to go on to do?
How do we work with them in order for them to be able to go on?

Growing in selfhood

Elspeth: Part of the dignity *storying* is about how people grow so that they can not feel the shame and blame that very often comes out of these situations. It is the ideas of

How do you grow in selfhood?
How do you grow as a person?

John Dewey (Tiles 1998) talks about how do you stand in somebody else's shoes? How do you begin to understand how it feels to be that other person? How do you begin to take responsibility for the consequences of your actions?

Through the above story, this young man becomes able to see the effect his actions would have on his mother. And through that, his own ability to grow in selfhood gives him a sense of dignity and a sense of future possibilities. So what we are always focussing on is:

How to create responsibility and awareness of the effect your actions have on others?

Peter: What is interesting about the effect of your actions on others is that people, in our experience, find it very difficult to grow if they are accused and put into the experience of shame and blame. If you are blamed, you are more likely to justify your actions and live your moral order by doing what you are doing more and more secretly as a way of protecting your integrity. People can grow most easily when they are dignified.

When Elspeth talks about that young man, she essentially talks about: "I can see that you are a person, who really loves your family, who really cares for your mother and your sister." That is not to say that we were denying what he has been doing. However to create a future requires affirmation connected with what we can look at in terms of growth and development. We try to bring out certain abilities. One of the things Elspeth and I are really interested in is:

How is reconciliation created and maintained?

Reconciliation requires certain actions. Those actions are supported by certain abilities. So we work with creating or **naming** those abilities and developing them in the therapeutic conversation so that reconciliation can grow in the future.

Future orientation in language: Problems as frustrated dreams and hopes

Elspeth: Language is future orientated. Therefore, we are attentive to this future orientation. It is often stories of the future that are more influential in creating present action than stories of the past. These past stories are mainly relevant because they frustrate us in finding our way into the future.

Thus, we could say, every problem is a frustrated dream.

So how do we work with the dream rather than with the problem?

So confronted with any problem, small or large, we often find it useful to ask

What is the frustrated dream that you have, that is creating this as a problem? Tell me about this dream. Lets describe it in detail and live it as if it had already happened. We make the future the present as if the dream has already come true. We can then talk about how we reached it, working from the as-if-lived-in-future back to the present-as-the-past

Peter: Every hurt is a frustrated hope.

How do we interview for hope?

How do we expand the opportunities within hope?

How do we ask about past experiences of realised hopes?

What are the abilities evident in realising these hopes?

So we are always trying to move in that direction. The moment you begin to talk about hope, people become hopeful. The moment you begin to talk about dreams, people begin processing pieces of living their dream.

One of the things that we are highlighting and we have been looking at very closely is:

What do we create as professionals with the language that we use?

We are aware that the things we choose to ask questions about create the lives people live. If we ask questions about the hurt and questions about the problems, they reconstitute the living of that as a way of being. If we ask about their hopes and dreams then we are really working with the future and where people are wanting to go. We take the position that everything is future-oriented. That notion is something that we keep as central in all our work.

Elsbeth: Through language we create and *live-in* the worlds we create. As a result we carry a moral responsibility actively to co-create worlds that people want to live in. So if we create negative worlds, we live in negative worlds. If we create a world of future and hopes and dreams, we can begin to live those worlds.

Peter: So how do we put all this into practice? Lets look at, for example, situations of sexual abuse and violence. In the process of talking about this, we will ask you to see these as metaphors for our ways of working. So we will ask you to take away those metaphors and then see how you can use them in your context.

Listening to the voice of the child Creating safety, protection and a future to look forward to

Let's begin to say something about, what got us on this track. First and foremost it was hearing the voices of young women, young adolescents, who told us things that we never expected to hear in relation to sexual abuse work.

Elsbeth: They were young people who told us about the ambivalence, about the love and the hate. They were the people with anorectic symptoms who talked through their bodies. They were the children who were suffering from "hysterical paralysis" who couldn't talk verbally but were talking with their bodies. They were the children who overdosed. They all were children who would *tell* you something. As soon as you tried to take social action they withdrew what they had said and thus became trapped, and would go back to the prior situation where they were no longer protected. These sorts of situations were the ones that started us reconsidering how to manage the complexity in these cases:

How do we listen to the voice of the child?
How do we protect the children but still keep them in the context in which a lot of them still feel very loved, very cared for?
How do we bring forth parental competence?.
How can we allow a safe and protected family lifestyle to blossom?
How can we nurture the emerging new family relationships?
How do we co create a future to look forward to?

Peter: One of the things that was very important to us, was the way in which these children talked about the person who did it. Let's just talk about daughters and fathers as a metaphor. Saying things like: "I want it to stop but I don't want to break up my family. I want to be part of this family. He is my father and I love him but I hate what he did."

How do we connect with those sorts of ambivalence?
And how do we find a way of creating a dignifying relationship with the person who did it, for the future?

The above suspicion/beyond risk interview

Elsbeth: As a way forward we created an interview which we called the **above suspicion/beyond risk interview**. This interview is very attentive to:

Looking at what is the total context in which the child lives, so that we can make sure the child is safe everywhere?

How do we create a context of protection for the child ideally within familiar relationships?

How do we make sure the child is heard and believed by the non abusing parent?

How do we encourage the emergence of a competent, protective mother?

How do we support her to cope with the complexity and confusion she may feel?

How do we create a situation where the person who did the violence/the abuse or whatever is above suspicion for all future actions?

How could he in the future help create a context of safety and protection for the child and other youngsters?

In any situation, we call together all the people that have been concerned about how to create a context of safety for the child. For example if we take, as an example, a child who maybe has done explicit drawings at school or has shown behaviour in school that has been worrying, and then we will draw together the teacher, the parents and others. Anybody within the child's context who might be relevant, including social workers if they are involved. Social workers might be part of our team. Together we all talk about safety.

When we telephone the parents, we start with calling forth the identity of *good* parents, of *caring* parents, of *loving* parents:

There is a concern about your child. We *know* that, as good parents, you want to come and discuss this with us. We *know* that as a caring father you will not miss this meeting (if he says he is too busy or can't come). We know how important your child is to you.

So we call forth that identity. We also bring the professionals and possibly even the neighbours to this meeting. At the meeting we talk about

How can we create a context of safety and a context of protection for everybody?

Saying: "Even if there is a one percent chance your child is being abused, I'm sure that as caring parents and as caring professionals you do not want this to happen again. So how can we make sure that the child is safe?" Another idea we are attentive to is that when there is abuse suspected, the professional, societal and research discourses tend to place men, particularly fathers and step fathers under suspicion. That is not an easy position to live in.

Therefore we talk with the men in the situation exploring these dimensions. We say that we need to try and create a context in which you can behave in a way in the future that is totally above suspicion, that protects you and your daughter, that protects the teachers, protects the neighbours. We need to find a way to protect everyone in this context from being under suspicion.

What we have found in these interviews is that it is very important that the conversation remains at the protection level, very specific and detailed.

How are you going to make sure your daughter is safe every moment of the day? Lets explore your day in detail. Who wakes the children in the morning? Who baths them, dresses them, who takes them to school, who collects them? Where will your child be when you, mother are in the kitchen cooking dinner? Where are you father going to be? When you father are watching TV where will you be seated, and where will your child be? As society's protectors of children we would be unhappy if you sat on the same chair or sofa. What's going to happen when you, mum, go to the toilet? What's going to happen when you shower? Where is

your daughter going to be so that she can feel utterly safe and your partner can be above suspicion?

We do the same sort of detailed interviewing with school and with the neighbourhood and inquire about baby sitting.

What's going to happen in the neighbourhood? How are we going to let her play?

During this interview few questions are asked of the child, but their non verbal communication is very closely attended to. We have often noticed that if and when the child feels utterly protected she is observed to be relaxed. With any "unsafe" talk she tenses again. The adults are given a way of behaving in the future that is protective. They create a new way of behaving that can give them a sense that they can actually **become** someone different.

Peter: One of the things we have learned from doing these interviews is to talk about: "How can you be above suspicion?" Say, it is the man: One of the things we have found essential to our way of working is to focus on care taking. In this the first interview, it is not our primary focus to know what has happened. It might be later on when we begin to sort things out. But our first concern is

How do we create protection for everyone, the child safe and the others in the family and network being totally above suspicion?

Some of the men decide, during the course of the interview, to move out of the home. Essentially, we watch and monitor the child. A lot of children tell us that when we really stuck to what we were trying to explore in detail, they felt safe. They felt their voices were being heard. It is our experience that as soon as we get a little bit too lax, the children show anxiety. They feel unprotected and unbelievably again. So one of the things we have really learned from these children is going into that level of detail. This is important to them so that they feel safe and protected and the feeling that somebody is hearing their voices.

Discussing the issue of abuse in this way, we have become aware that when the child feels the protection, it sanctions the possibility to go on living in this world. This has been the case not only for the children but also a number of men who have told us that the interviewing has helped them to find new strong ways to go on. They say, what you gave us is a way to be able to *act* so that we could stop and go on as a dignified responsible parent. So it's

How do you live the new identity?

The examples that Elspeth has been giving are highlighting talking about actions that **live** the new identity. These questions are again asked in detail. "So if you move out, where are you going to go?" If they say they are going to stay at a hotel, we would ask: "Is that really safe from being above suspicion, as that is where affairs happen!?" "Well, I can go and stay with my mum." "If you go and stay with her, what story do you want tell her about why you are staying?" We work very determinedly so that the story is totally open: "This is what has happened. There is some suspicion about what has happened to my daughter." So, when working we are not only asking the father to take moral responsibility but to build a circle of vigilance with the family and round each person. The more that people are being watchful the safer everyone becomes. So building a circle of vigilance is one of the things that ensures safety. In addition we ask questions about possible but undesirable futures: "Your daughter might miss you and she might want to come and see you without anyone being aware: How will you manage that?" So the aim of this interview is to empower people to live a life that is above suspicion.

Elsbeth: The effects of these interviews have been very powerful. Often you have very little evidence of abuse. Recently, we have had a few children who have been diagnosed as having hysterical paralysis. I remember one interview where the girl had been in a wheel chair for two years and all the professionals were frustrated as to what else they could do. The family came very reluctantly to child psychiatry, out of loyalty to the physician and said they would only come once. We did an above suspicion interview. The brother just sat rigidly in the chair, looking

terrified. He and the father were invited to behave in a way of being above suspicion. At the end of this interview, I just said to the mother, as she was really worrying about the paralysis: "Why don't you go and see an acupuncturist?" That was on the Tuesday and she rang me up at Thursday and said: "I don't know if it's your acupuncturist or whether it is your interview, but my daughter is walking for the first time in two years!" So, we could wonder that the effect of the interview when the girl heard us persist with details of her future safety, enabled her to give up her symptoms. Individual and joint sessions with her and her brother revealed nothing. A year later mother rang me again saying her daughter was back in the wheel chair, and the paediatricians were reluctant to see her. I was leaving the country that day and offered an appointment in two weeks, insisting both father and brother attended as well as mother and the girl. On my return mother rang to cancel the appointment as the girl was walking again! Our hypothesis was that, perhaps, the vigilance around the girl had stopped and she was again at risk. The possibility of another interview reminded the family of how to be above suspicion.

We often see people who are described as anorectics and other symptomatic children getting better very, very fast, once they feel safe, protected within the circle of vigilance, and once they feel their voices of ambivalence and contradiction are heard: the unwanted abuse and their loyalty and wish to protect the family and their desire to be part of it.

Peter: Sometimes the mother needs some time alone with the therapist as part of the "above suspicion" interview. And as Elspeth describes, what they often find useful is getting into details of: Exactly how are you going to spend this evening? What are you going to do? What will you have for supper? When you are in the kitchen where will your daughter be? What will you talk to her about? Who else are you going to talk to that might be a support to you? We call this whole process "**visualising the details**". The more you visualise it, the more you have actually **done** it and you will get on with it.

This particular technique we find useful when working with mothers or working with others. Often as Elspeth said, the mothers describe how their identities have totally collapsed. Getting into these interviews round themes of how to be good mothers (or fathers) they say: "Everything I thought about myself has disappeared: Was I a good mother? Can I protect my child? Can I be trusted? Who am I now? I thought I was a good wife.... but now I do not know who I am."

So we think a lot about how we help these mothers to be able to connect with the abilities of being good mothers, to be able to go on as mothers in the future?

The process of linguagraming

To facilitate this process we use something we call a **linguagram**. This is a useful way of being able to bring forth abilities and allowing them to grow through new actions. We developed this technique, using another idea from Wittgenstein. We paraphrase it as: There is an ocean of meaning in a drop of grammar. A word is just a drop of grammar. So it carries with it meaning, emotions, morality, actions, intentionality and consequences.

What is the ocean of meaning in the drop of grammar?

The process of linguagraming is a way to enter these mothers' drop of grammar using, for example, the word "mother" or "mothering". We enter into their ocean of meaning, so that their abilities and skills emerge in a way that they can see they already have many of the skills to enable them to act as good mothers. We put the drop-of-grammar-word on paper and then explore all the other words that are associated with it – so here we would put "**Good mothering**" in the centre.

Elspeth and I want to share with you this process of linguagraming. We will talk about some examples of how you can use it to create meaning, abilities, and moralities that will create ways to act in the future.

Elspeth: Often we see people again a couple of days after the first interview or whenever they feel they need to come. We may often use this technique at this second interview when people

are often very bewildered and wondering what they are going to continue to do. We then do a linguagram with them about

What does "good mothering," mean to you?
 How do good mothers act?
Caring
 So if I were to show caring, what would I be doing?
Be very aware of time, listening, giving, feeding, and clothing.
 What does "listening," mean?
Giving time
 What else might it mean?

We ask questions. We try to get ideas from the mother herself, trying to get her to bring forth things she is already doing. With each answer we write it up asking her where she would place it in the diagram.

I hear. I give attention, and take serious what my daughter is showing
 What else does "good mothering" mean?
Create safety
 So if you were to create safety, what does "safety" mean?
 And what would you have to do, to create safety?

In the same way we would explore the differences, actions and meanings of safety. We may bring in the experiences of other mothers – or the "constituency" of mothering. (A way of thinking and exploring that we have learnt from Nollaig Byrne.)

When you see other mothers meet their children at school, what do those other mothers do? How do they behave as good mothers?
What have you done at school today? Some of them will hug their children. Some will bend down to greet their children

When you take your child to school tomorrow, could you just observe what the other mothers do and consider what you value as good mothering.

We co create with them, expanding their grammar and the possible actions they could take to create a sense of security, care, love, safety, for the children. These possible actions become abilities that can be lived in the future.

Peter: Joining not only the particular mother's story, but also

What are all the stories in our culture about "good mothering"?

Sometimes, as individuals, we may have particular sets of stories. However what are the other stories in the culture? So Elspeth and I bring forth

What other things do good mothers do?

Our culture is full of rich resources of stories of being good mothers, and how to do good mothering. So what are those activities? How do we show them? By calling on the richness of our cultural stories, we co create people's identities by talking about what abilities they can live to show these stories in action.

Elspeth: Other perspectives emerge from the linguagraming
 You bring out **emotion**

What emotions get created by doing these new good mothering actions? How does it make you feel as a mother?

I feel good. I feel caring. I feel I'm doing something I really want to do.

You bring out the **moral orders**

As a good mother, what are you obliged to do?

What are you prohibited from doing?

I don't leave my child alone. That's not something that good mothers do.

So you bring forth moral orders that are there in any action. By moral orders, we refer to the things you feel obligated to do, things that you feel prohibited from doing, things that you feel morally possible to do, things that are uncertain as to how to act. Many of the difficulties when it comes to action are the obligations and the prohibitions.

How do you bring forth actions that create new moral orders?

Peter: We try and think about how we can create possibilities for progress? And how do identities develop? We are using an idea from John Dewey (Tiles 1998). He says: Don't think about identity as a thing. Think about identity as identifying the abilities of the self, and so the self grows. The self expands as the abilities within the stories and actions are identified. As the parents get to know how to act, they will know how to go on. So we often explore –

What actions, what abilities, what emotion and what morality create the self and identity?

Moving from deficit to affirmative language

We have been working with situations in which there has been sexual and racial harassment. In working with the group, you can say there are multiple stories around. We don't want to get into the right or not of these stories, but saying

How are you going to act in a way that everyone feels respected?

How are you going to act to get beyond those stories and into new ones?

An important issue is the way we use language. The language puts a grammar in the centre and stories can be visualised around the words. So, we will not talk about: How are you going to be a non-drinking person, or a non-harassing person? Instead, we would look for

What is it that you want to create?

We will try to find an affirmative, positive language so that we are talking about a person who is becoming something different by acting differently. For example a young girl who is making sure that her body is being taken care of. What we are trying to do is move people from deficit language into **affirmative language**. If you keep the negative words, the identity of "not-drinking" remains, you still have "drinking" in focus. Then you have to cross it out and you are unsure with what you are replacing it. There is no clear visualisation of a way to act.

The schools asked us to work with them around "non-violence", we said
What do you want to create?

They answered

A non-violent school

However the description "non-violent school" still gets you back to "some place violent". It is still the same school. Then we continue to ask questions as to how to cross it out?

What do you want to create? What sorts of school do you want to be in?

As we continued to work with them they said

Well, we want to create a safe school

A safe school?

Yes, safety in the playgrounds. Safety when going home from school. There is a particular corridor where pupils often go. Safety in that corridor

Once a picture of safety had emerged this picture was painted more fully by getting something like 600 children and 50 teachers together interviewing each other

What does "safety" look like? What are people doing?

What is happening in the play ground, the corridors?

Describe what it looks like?

What abilities and activities create safety in the school?

Elsbeth: So what becomes very important is the move from a deficit language and into the affirmative language because it creates life and energy and opens up new possibilities

We want a safe school. A school where we are all respected so that people can learn

What do you mean by "respect"?

It is a way to be with each other

What are the signs of respect?

When you felt respected, what was happening in that situation?

What were you doing? Others doing?

How do you show respect?

What are the stories of respect?

What are the abilities that are there when respect is shown?

So that you always go forward/beyond, by starting from the personal experience and by exploring the details, it creates ideas for future action with an appreciation that they already know how to act as they have already done it, but need to be more conscious of the details, and aware of their own already-possessed-abilities so they can use them more often.

And in the same way doing a consultation where there has been a lot of both sexual and racial harassment

What do you want?

We want a context, a work place where people are valuing/validating their differences. Where differences are celebrated.

Tell us a time when you really enjoyed a conversation or have done or are doing a bit of work with someone who you see as very different from yourself? Where the differences created interest, excitement, curiosity or dignity?

What came out of this was not just male-female or racial differences. The differences began through seeing and valuing people. It resulted in three men and three women who learnt to value the differences and see the differences as a resource and as something to be enjoyed .

What do you enjoy about differences?

What makes differences fun and enjoyable ?

Then going on from that

How are you going to continue behaving in a way that continues to create contexts that enjoy differences, celebrating the differences and using them as a resource?

Validating stories of the past

Peter: We haven't talked about how we are using the stories of the past and what we do with the past. That really is an important issue in working with reconciliation.

We notice and explore, when do people want to talk about those stories?
We ask ourselves the questions such as,
"How do we validate, treasure and honour what happened in their stories?"
How do we connect with those stories?

This has been a very important part of work in some situations. The more we work we have found it most useful to consider:

Having had these experiences, what are the futures you want to create?

I remember another particular person that we worked with in the early days when we started making this change. She came to a therapeutic session. We thought that what she needed was to go back and talk about what had happened between her and the father. Suddenly, she said: *"I'll talk about it if you really want me to. But really, something else is worrying me."* We need to pay attention to what is worrying her and what she wants us to talk about."

Elsbeth and I have been developing this notion that: People tell stories from the past when it is, as if, these particular stories stand in the way of living path-ways to the future. So you never know when those stories will be pro-active, interfering with future stories. You never know how those past events suddenly come back alive, standing in the way, so that you cannot get into the future. So, how do we work with that? We have found it is very helpful to talk about futures. Talk about those past stories when they come up because they seem to stand in the way. Also, we have developed something even more interesting. It is not that they stand in the way but that they come back as guardian angels to protect us in the future.

Moving from flash-backs to flash-forwards

Elsbeth: People who have been abused often re-live the abuse through flashbacks or dreams. In our work, we try and help by suggesting to people that instead of feeling frightened of flash-backs or nightmares, they should really use them. They are there to protect them from what *has* happened ever happening again. So when children are having flashbacks it's usually when they feel they need more safety or security; vigilance has lapsed. They are *in* a vulnerable position. So we think a lot about -

What do they have to do?
What conversations do they need to have with somebody in order to make sure there is safety there again?

To enable them to see the flashback as a guardian angel, help them to see it as something that is brought forth when there is a dangerous or potentially dangerous situation. This has been enlightening and empowering. So they say that it helps them by seeing that there is this guardian angel there, warning you to take alternative action, to be more careful.

Peter: Flashbacks become flash-forwards. They come up to help us to move into the future. They may help us to carry out some moral situation or a situation in which we might feel negative were we not to use the flash back as a flash forward. I remember a particular refugee family. The young man, the father of the family was hearing voices and had terrible headaches. The voices were saying: "You must go back." He also suffered terrible headaches that painkillers did not relieve. He and his whole family came to a session. We got into a conversation about what had happened, and then I said

Do you think you will stay in this country or go back?

He just looked at me and said:
Any person who asks that sort of question is so stupid. He understands nothing.

We began to explore the situation and I got fascinated about what it is we most needed to understand. One of the things we began to connect with was when he said

Those headaches remind me of what happened. They remind me that I have got to go back as soon as possible to continue to fight, to honour my dead friends because they were killed in the process.

So it became totally fascinating to see those headaches as a way of keeping alive his moral obligation: You must not settle too much in your new country. You must not become satisfied. Because what will happen then? How do you value, treasure and honour the memories of those people who have died? So we were able to say, when he asked

Can't western medicine help me?

Western medicine has never dealt with this situation before. So maybe the headaches are important, because they keep alive the memory and keep alive your honouring of what has happened.

What we are doing with these flashbacks, memories and stories from the past is looking at how they are part of the present and creating the future as guardian angels and keeping alive the moral commitments of the past. That has been an enormously useful to people and a great learning point for us. What we look at is:

How can we connect with these stories as important paths protecting us and connecting our future and our past?

Monuments to the future

Elsbeth: I think there are also ways of remembering the past: How do we create monuments that hold the stories of the past but also tell of the future? We think about society's institutions like the holocaust museums. They hold the stories of the past, keeping them remembered so that the horrors are not repeated. How could they create a different future? This is how we approach that.

How can we make sure that the stories of the former Yugoslavia, South Africa, Northern Ireland can be held by these sorts of institutions so that individuals, can let go of these stories, and society can take responsibility for them so that the individuals can begin to live the future and create the new society?

What monuments would one need to have to take people forward, respecting the past?

How do we create monuments to the future?

Monuments of what we *want* our society to be?

Monuments of what we want to create in the future?

Peter: You can change the stories and you can change the actions but every time you walk through your town there is a monument of the previous story. What happens? It brings back those other/old stories, keeping them alive and then you have to work hard to change them to the new story. So what we work with is:

What monuments do we need to create and to keep alive the future?

One of the ideas we are using is an idea from the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur.(Kearney 1997) He talks about: How can we honour people who repeat the stories from

the past again and again and again? People tell the stories of the past to keep alive what happened, so that it should not happen again. They tell their stories to make sure that it shouldn't happen again, again being future orientation. So, we work with:

What is it that must happen to make sure that the former happening never happens again?

Then, getting into the positive affirmative discussion

What must we create so that what happened never happens again?

We use this future oriented way of talking about it. Paul Ricoeur has a beautiful way of talking about it. He says: The past is the graveyard of broken promises and unfulfilled dreams. (Kearney 1997) So

How do we bring back the promises and dreams that were unfulfilled, to begin to create hope for the future?

So for example in our work with these families we ask

What are the hopes that were dashed by what happened?
What do we have to do to re-create those dreams to bring them alive and make them possible?

So once again we give the stories from the past a task, a meaning, a valued position in terms of going into the future.

Speaking with the voice of the other

Elsbeth: Another way of working that we found useful, we have adapted from Karl Tomm's "internalised other" We started by changing the language, calling it "**speaking with the voice of the other**". We have found this extremely useful in terms of helping us to think -

How do we create a sense of selfhood, of expanding emotions, of being able to stand in another person's shoes?

We do this by beginning to look at the consequences or the impact of our actions. I don't know how many of you are familiar with this technique. One starts by very simply saying to, let's say working with the perpetrators of abuse or violence

What I want you to do is speak with your child's voice. We all hear lots of voices coming from many different contexts. We can hear our parents, we can hear our teachers, we can hear people that we care about, we can hear our children calling us. Do you know what I mean? Can you hear these voices? OK So now we want you to talk with your child's voice.

Peter: Important to our way of working is that quite often we will have the child behind the one way screen, to be part of this process and to be able to offer her own questions into the conversation.

Elsbeth: Then we begin to talk to the man-speaking-with-the-child's-voice. Calling him by her name:

So, Maria, how old are you? Maria, how many brothers and sisters have you? Maria, which school do you go to? Maria how are you doing at school? Maria, how do you get on with your mum? Maria, how do you get on with your dad?

Eventually getting on to questions like

Maria, so when your dad did these things to you, how did you show him you didn't like what was happening?

Often for the first time, the father might well say, speaking with Maria's voice

I clenched my fists, I turned over, and I turned my head away.

So Maria, do you think your father knew that you didn't like what he was doing?

They will often say

No, I don't think he did.

But Maria, now that your father *might* know: How would you like him to act? What would you like him to do?

So we take these interviews of speaking with the child's voice in terms of getting the man to take responsibility for what he has done. For seeing the impact of pain, the hurt that he has caused but also leaving him with different and alternative ways of behaving. Understanding, through experiencing the emotions the impact of what he has done by talking with the child's voice.

So if your father were to behave differently, Maria, in the future, how would he be behaving, what would he be doing? Maria, how would he be behaving that would make you feel safe? That would make you feel valued? Maria, how do you like your father to greet you now that he knows that you don't like physical contact?

So again, using the same sorts of concepts we are always looking for future action, the details of the action being brought forth in the present conversation.

How do we go forward?

How do we create a different sort of father who has a different way of relating?

Peter: One of the things we have found very useful here again is inspired by Paul Ricoeur (Kearney, 1996). He has a lovely way of talking, saying: Our identities are created by the stories other people have about us. We exist in the worlds of others. We get to know ourselves through the detour of the other. In this interviewing of people speaking with the voice of the other that Elspeth has been describing, stories become future possibilities. Like when people who are about to come out from prison, questions are asked: Should they see the child and in what contexts? Social services wonder: Is the situation safe now? Could we allow him to see the child again?

What we do here is helping the father to begin to see and to create a new identity.

How can I be a father in the eyes of my child through speaking with my child's voice?

One of the things we have found very useful is this whole notion of "speaking with the voice of the other". When you speak with another's voice, you actually begin to experience the emotion, the physicality, really to feel, what it is like to be that other person. It takes you into a world of imagining something which you have never had opportunity to experience when speaking from your own position. It's the whole notion of creating multiple, new and colourful identities in the stories from the child's voice. The child and father begin existing in parallel worlds rather than existing in one world. It's how do you begin to see yourself through the eyes of the child in you.

The witnessing process

Elsbeth: Another thing that has come out of these interviews is the importance of the story being witnessed. It has been very powerful, for example, for a young girl sitting behind the one-way screen. Her story has been witnessed and validated not only by her but by her father and the therapists. Sometimes the children have said that the abuser is not telling the whole story and they want us to go in and ask their questions. The witnessing and the idea that the story is heard and witnessed by others are often important.

The other area that usually becomes important is this idea of attesting. Through the witnessing process the father becomes a different sort of father who is saying he will behave in a different sort of way. It becomes an agreement between all present: You have witnessed a change in identity, a bit like what one does when somebody gets married. Witnesses are there to see you move from being a single person to becoming a wife or a husband and a couple. In the same way through this interview, the children and father are witnessed. The father has witnesses to his statements of different behaviour, the idea of almost being taking under oath, being attested: In future, I will behave in this sort of way towards my daughter.

Peter: This whole witnessing process is very interesting because what we have found is that it is not enough just to hear and agree, I did it or I can see it had this effect. One of the things people are looking at is

What action do we need to take, continuously into the future for the person to feel that you genuinely were witness to what has happened to them?

It is a process of continuous action into the future. The statements of regret, acknowledgement in agreeing "I did it" and witnessing do not create safety. It's in

How do I live to create something else for the future?

The process of reconciliation grows through the ways in which we act to affirm our change not in the acknowledgement of what happened but in the acknowledgement of what will be created in the future.

Elsbeth: We have found working this way very liberating. By changing the story, you call forth an identity of being a caring father. It implies changing the moral orders so that he now becomes obligated to be a good father. Good fathers do these sorts of things, and are prohibited from doing other sorts of things. One begins to go through the scenario of a linguagram centralising "good fathering" and calling forth good fathering actions and activities. This has been a very important area in ensuring new stories get rehearsed and are thus more likely to be lived in the future. This, we make sure is demonstrated appropriately before we feel happy that it will be safe for the father to go home or that the father and child can meet safely and respectfully.

The story of the skinheads

A number of people are requesting that we repeat a specific story. I believe a number of you present probably already have heard it. A long time ago we were asked to work with a group of skinheads who had raped a 70 years old lady. Looking at the whole process of

How do you work in situations where things were done, things that feel and are just awful?

How do you even visualise these sorts of things happening?

These things are happening all the time. In war situations, we hear so much about it, for instance, in Bosnia. I was asked to see this group of young people because they showed absolutely no remorse. They were still sort of saying: Two fingers to society, two fingers to everybody. It

appeared they couldn't care about what they had done. This was about a year after the trial. They were put in children homes in secure units. Very little movement had happened. They hadn't felt any kind of remorse.

I arrived to see these young people. Thinking I would try and be like them, joining their grammar, I was wearing old jeans, being very casual in style (I got it all wrong, they were very smart!). I sat on the floor with these 6 young people. We had put the care staff behind the one way screen. I think they felt they were there for my safety and protection, but it was also: What stories and futures were we going to be able to create and have witnessed? We felt it was important that we saw them as a group because the crime has been committed as a group and the group identity was going to be very important. So, after a fair amount of swearing, "We don't want to see a damn shrink (psychiatrist). We don't want to be here. What do you think you can do?" and I sort of retaliated back: "I don't particularly want to be here either" and saying "I'm paid to be here for 6 hours. What are we going to do? We can sit and swear at each other for the next 6 hours or we can do something else?"

Then we just started chattering and we got into

I'm curious: What do you call what happened? What name do you give it? They said:

We call it "violence"

Okay, let's call it "violence"

It was a one-way screen room with huge white board so I wrote up "Violence".

Okay, what does "violence" mean to you?

I just wrote up their answers.

Peter: Can you imagine, 6 people who have committed this terrible crime, beginning to explore the meaning of "violence". They began to say things like: "It was fun". "It was exciting". "We felt our voices heard". "We had an experience of solidarity." .

Elsbeth:

And what else do you get out of "solidarity"?

We get an identity. We get a sense of belonging. A sense of being part of something. We feel powerful.

And what was exciting and fun about it?

It was on the limits. We were together. We were alive. We felt in control, powerful.

I spend about an hour and a half going through this.

Where do you want me to put this? Does this go with "Voices being heard" or maybe "We felt good", ? What else is there about "having fun?" or "Being on the limit", "Do things you shouldn't do?" "Being dangerous"?

They began really to explore this. When I started looking at this, it almost wouldn't have mattered *what* they had done, whether they had kicked somebody, shoplifted, graffiti. Their idea was that it was a way of "having excitement," "having fun", they "were a group". Being a group was really important. They had "competition" that was also part of the "excitement."

Peter: So you can begin to see why there was no remorse. Remorse doesn't fit with this grammar.

Elsbeth: As Peter says: There is no remorse. The emotions they are looking for are "fun", "energy", enjoyment", "belonging", competition". The whole group really were beginning to get the idea of what we were doing. They were very active, engaged and alive. There also were moral orders that came out of the interview: "If one of us raped this women, we *all* had to do it. There was no way we couldn't". So the moral orders of action and the intentionality of action were implicit in this story.

Peter: How to begin to make some change in this? There are a number of things Elspeth did. In a significant moment, she began to move on with them: "Let's look at the meaning of these words for this old lady." If you can just imagine it. What we did was that we worked from this linguagram using all the things they have talked about. We were simply saying: "How do you think it was for this old lady?" We took those details and, just imagine, what began to happen.

Elspeth: We started up with asking questions like

Was the little old ladies voice heard?
She had no voice... Her voice was silenced.
Was she having fun? What did she feel like?
She was terrified.
Did she have dignity and a sense of group solidarity?
She was totally alone. She was humiliated.

This part took quite some time and the group was very much less energetic, very much more silently involved. They were very reflective and thoughtful. By doing that, we began giving them a different story about what had happened. In this story and grammar, they began to be able to show remorse, sadness, horror of what they had done. The change in the story for them was very dramatic.

I think if we were doing it today, we would do a very similar thing but then take it one step further, take it *in-to the* future. We would take it and create future possible action. We also did an interview of "speaking with the voice of the other" with one of the boys. This was extremely powerful. In fact that particular child got quite seriously depressed after this, which in some way I feel was appropriate. But I think we could have got into not creating depression by using a future orientated approach

How are you going to act in the future so that this never happens again?

Peter: Thank you so much for coming and encouraging us. Elspeth and I very much live with your encouragement, your knowledge, your smiles and all the things that you present to us. So we wish you all well and whatever is useful for your future!

References

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