

"Existential pain"

It was a rainy night. Drops, like tears, were running down the windshield of my car. I had been driving slowly around town for a while. Both literally and existentially I was coming from a place I didn't want to stay. Heading for a place I didn't want to go. Unable to keep the possible and the impossible separated and in place in my life. I was in existential pain.

Experiencing the intolerable burdens of hopelessness with its feelings of entrapment, impossibility, and helplessness.

If there had been a future to which I could have looked forward, I could have endured all things in hope. But I was overcome by hopelessness at that moment. Hopelessness with its characteristic lack of the energy for either imagining or wishing.

Hopelessness with its only fundamental wish being the wish to give up.

I was really helpless, unable, that is, to help myself. Torn apart inside. I was operating within my own closed system of fantasy and feeling, unable, as a result, even to see or imagine what was on the outside. I felt lost.

My situation offered no solutions that I could imagine, which were not making me become an other person than the person I wanted to be. I didn't know my way about in my own life. Saw no way out of my predicament.

When I finally stopped to call a friend of mine, it turned out to be at the exact same spot where some years ago a 17 years old girl had left her tracks in the snow leading to the edge of the quay (kai), where she had jumped into death

During her grieving process her mother gave me her daughter's diary. A unique story fully in accordance with Ricoeur's statement that "we tell stories because human lives need and merit being narrated. This remark takes on its full force when we refer to the necessity to save the history of the defeated and the lost," as I felt was exactly what this diary was about: - A lost and defeated young woman. Her story, as does "the whole history of suffering," to phrase it in Ricoeur's words, "cries out for vengeance and calls for narrative." (Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, I, 1984, 75).

And you could see, as you read it, that this diary was not only the story about her life; - it was also a story about *how* the narrating *I*, and the *I* constructed through social- and dialogical interactions, were reflective. Her diary shows that she - the narrator - in the process of narrating, is becoming. (Anderson, 1998, 230).

Throughout her diary the *first-person narratives* filled as they were with

self-description or self-stories showed how her life-narrative, as it evolved, also became her life.

In developing her self-narrative she tries to establish coherent connections among her life events. Using Keneth Gergen's formulations freely, we could say that rather than seeing her life as simply "one damned thing after another," she formulates a story, in which life events are systematically related, rendered intelligible by their place in a sequence or "unfolding process." Her present identity at anytime, is thus not a sudden and mysterious event but a sensible result of her life story. "As Bettelheim (The uses of enchantment, 1976) has argued, such creations of narrative order may be essential in giving life a sense of meaning and direction." (Gergen, Realities and Relationships, 1997, 187). In her diary she gives meaning to her life and relationships by *storying* her experience. (to use White and Epston's phrasing. (Narrative means to therapeutic ends, 1990, 139)

The entries in her diary tell about how she both appears as a reader and the writer of her own life. Her story continues to be refigured by all the truthful or fictive stories she tells about herself. And it is easy to see how this refiguration makes her "life itself a cloth woven of stories told," to use Ricouer's language. The diary showed how she was "entangled in stories," as we all are. These stories not only shape her past and present but also impose real constraints on how she constructs or envisages her future. (cf. Boscolo, The Times of Time, 1993, 79).

"We live our narratives and our narratives become our living; our realities become our stories, and our stories become our realities" as Harlene Anderson phrases this. (1997, 216).

The young woman's story exemplifies this linguistic relational view of self, which emphasizes that our narratives of identity become a matter of forming and performing the *I* that we are always telling ourselves and others that we are, have been, and will be. The *self becomes* the person, or the persons, our stories demand.

This young woman's diary shows a person not able to tell herself a meaningful enough story to keep her alive. So she becomes the executer of death. She becomes the person her sad story demanded for it to reach its logical end.

Her story.
Her life.

At the same time as this story is uniquely her's, also, in many ways, a story about the predicament of being a human being.

It's a story about, existential pain: About how difficult life in fact is without love and adequate care. How difficult it is to live when life's structure and meaning are dissolved or just missing; and emotionality and sexuality have no natural lifespace. It is a story about a daughter constantly fighting with her mother; about a struggling mother and a father; and about a dear brother. It's a story about her girlish struggle with her identity as a budding young woman without any context to live meaningfully

within. A story of a past overshadowing the future in such a way that she had no hope left. No faith in a future that would be different than her painful past experiences in life.

Hope is the bridge bringing us as human beings from one moment in time to the next, and to our neighbor. Her diary shows she had no such bridge."Hope is energized by belief in the possibility of getting somewhere, in the possibility of reaching goals; "the somewhere", the goals, can be as many as the wishes and things we propose to ourselves. She had no such proposals.

We move into the future to the degree that we have hope."(Lynch, Images of Hope, 1974). That this is to be taken literally, is shown by the young woman who cut herself off from her own future because she had no hope.

We live by hope. And we die when there is no hope left. Existential pain exists where hope is fading and hopelessness is threatening.

The young woman found no way out of her predicament. Her relationship with herself and with others had lost their meaning or taken on ambiguous meanings creating dilemmas in her relationships: She couldn't really decide on what her position in the world was; nor her position in her family, nor together with others at school and at work. She did never find out if her mother hated her or not. And she felt cut off from people her own age. As she kept struggling with these dilemmas, it felt as if time had stopped, and her ability to evolve was markedly reduced. She found no solutions to her painful dilemmas. No escape from loneliness. No escape from herself as the hopeless and retarded person whom she had become, -- as she herself saw it. She explained to herself, in her diary, that there where no change possible for her. She felt her story repeating itself, becoming a strait-jacket in which she lost her freedom., - the freedom of seeing and acting in new ways, and the freedom to possibly move on into a different life: -- a life worth living. The story she told in her diary, made suicide the only logical way out.

This is in accordance with Wittgenstein's statement about the bewitchment of our reason (Philosophical Investigations 1953, §115): "A picture held this young woman captive (W:us). And she (W: we) could not get outside it, for it lay in her (W:our) language and language seemed to repeat it to her (W:us) inexorably."

Fighting existential pain, I agree with Wittgenstein, is therefore a fight against the bewitchment of our reason by help of the tools our language offers us (1953, §109). This is why Wittgenstein can state that "the limits of language mean the limits of my world." (Anderson, 1997, 201). (Or as paraphrased by Henry Staten: "Language is what bewitches but language is what we must remain within in order to cure the bewitchment." (Wittgenstein and Derrida, 1984, 91))

Language is something given to me. I am born into it. And with it comes an understanding of myself and the world, of life and death, of God and humans. A linguistic and dialogic point of view, emphasizes the social nature of the self - as emerging in and embodied in relationships - as is also the human capacity to create

meaning through conversation. Inherent in this view is that since we are constituted in dialogue, we are ever-changing, as long as we participate in dialogues.

Unfortunately there were no one in this young woman's to challenge her narrating, to participate in co-authoring, co-creating her story into another story. No one were there for her to explore her ideas, meanings, and emotions together with, in dialogue, in such a way that the change of her life's premises could have been possible, leading to the co-creation of new stories and new liveable realities. (Boscolo, 1993, 106).

Meeting an other face to face, and letting ourselves being drawn into the other's experience through being moved by his or her story, we may have a deceiving effect upon that person.

Given the privilege to ask questions rather than supplying answers, our presence through dialogue may have the effect, in time, of transmitting to the other a way of connecting things and persons, events, and meanings differently so that it enables that person to free him- or herself from a story that has become rigid, repititious, and induces suffering, and thus becoming able to enter into a new story, with greater freedom and autonomy

Alleviation of existential pain is possible if the one experiencing it, is met by an other in the sense that Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy beautifully describes this. But it all depends on that the one suffering is opening up towards the other. Only then a relationship can develop where a common language and a meaningful new reality, can be co-created.

In letting ourselves be disturbed by the other's presence in such a way that we take on a responsibility for the other's well being, searching to understand the other, letting ourselves being drawn into the other's experience through dialogue, only then exists the possibility of transcending the present moment, transcending our own limitations and experiencing the possibility of creating new meanings that eventually makes a different life possible in the future. This all is made possible because the Other is always representing a different reality, a different way of being, always unpredictable and different from my own ideas about him or her. The other is always challenging the picture of self and world that captivates us.

Through meeting the other in the way Levinas describes this, I may both experience a form of transcendence, of getting beyond, in the sense of transcending my own limitations or difficulties; - as well as encountering in the other's presence the transcendence, the Mystery - what in my language is called the presence of God.

In this way of letting myself being encountered, seen and entered into a relationship with, by the other, the other becomes my hope. Becomes the provider of new perspectives and functions as an energizer in my life -- a vitalizer.

The classic image of hope, is the "overcoming of difficulty, liberating the self from darkness, escaping some kind of prison. The sense of hope is: there is a way out." (35). Existential pain is experienced to the same degree as one experiences hopelessness. The sense of hopelessness is that there is no way out, no exit. No meaningful life possible. "It is the sense of impossibility, checkmate, eternal repetition." (35). Our reason seems bewitched and functions self-destructive.

Existential pain is rooted in structures of thought, feeling and action that are rigid and inflexible. Existential pain is experienced when the relationship of a person with him- or herself (self-reflexivity) or with others, or with God, lose their meaning or take on obscure, ambiguous or even threatening meanings, as for instance after having received a terminal diagnosis. As Wittgenstein maintains, the problem "has the form: I am not able to find my way about." I'm completely disorientated in my life, as well as in the world.

One of the central quality of the hopeless is the feeling of entrapment, while a central quality of hope is freedom.

I have shared with you a young woman's story. Uniquely her's, and still, -- in so many ways also my own story: Because her story tells about the importance of having dreams and expectations. Having faith, and believing in a future worth living. -- And it is a story about what happens when faith, dreams, and expectations changes into illusions that burst, so that the future disappears as the meaning-supplying horizon that every-day's living depends on.

This young woman was not physically handicapped. Nor experiencing ill health, as many do. No, -- but she meant herself to be some kind of mentally retarded. Minor, for sure; -- and it was not a problem seen by anyone else. But *she* felt herself, withdrawing, socially isolated, and completely alone. -- Even though she went to school, worked side by side with others every day, and lived in a family.

In her loneliness she found herself to be different enough, in her own eyes, to find no place she could feel at home among *us*, -- among the living. I see in this a parallel to the growing number of aging, and sick persons demanding the right of euthanasia. They see no meaning in living, and find no quality of life, when serious or terminal illness impair their lives, or if they are being impaired by weakness through aging or lost in dementia.

If the life I am leading today, is exactly the life I always dreamed about, - then it's unbearably painful to let go of it. I may even hate you for telling me that my life as I see it is no more possible. The mother who lost her two teenagers in a car crash, told me how she hated the pastor who was asked by the police to seek her out, and to break the bad news to her. She couldn't stand seeing him for more than two years after that. "He killed my reality," she explained.

Breaking bad news is another example of how language provide the matrix from which human understanding derives, and of how social interaction and dialogue are processes in which the meaning of events is transformed through fusion of the horizons of the participants, and alternative ways of narrating events are developed, and new stances toward self and others evolve. It being the communication of a terminal diagnosis or of the death of a loved one.

This is why breaking bad news to a person strongly attached to what is no going to be lost, is such an important thing to do in a skillful and humble manner.

That we both give and take away realities through language and dialogue, is also obvious in marriages where "love's death is the product of love's life activities." I see this often, and I'll give you some samples:

"Suddenly you're standing there in front of me. As a bolt of lightning from out of the blue you say you'll leave me. We're through. You state that life with me is over. And I do not understand anything. It has come to an end. The End..!!? No more future together with you. 'But I love you...!!!' Doesn't help. You left. And you took my future with *you*, -- away from me. My sense of direction got lost. My understanding of myself disintegrated. Chaos. Despair. Grief. Bitterness." Acute existential pain: Who am I now, when this has happened to me? What is my position in the world? What meaning, if any at all, is there in living on after this?

Too late...

I never met you face to face. I didn't try to reach you. Too late now to open myself up to you. Too late now to acknowledge that of course you have the right to be you, the right that makes me give up the egoism that I wouldn't have relinquished, were it not exactly for this right you have to be you.

I thought you were as I thought you were. And so I thought I had control. Knew how to handle you. I felt like I had you. You were mine. Just like something I could handle. something...! I had made you into a "something". Something for me. But in possession the lust is put out. Your desire for a life with me was killed, extinguished, when you discovered that I took you for granted. You had become a given. A given to me. As an artificial limb. A "something" which made my being me possible, beyond what I could possibly be by myself. You were there in a way for me."

"I refuse to believe that the two of us can't make this relationship work," I ofte hear one of a couple say in deapair or anger. While the other with a closed face and non-committal eyes, perhaps shrugging as an expression of indifference, states: "I'm sorry. If you had taken me seriously all the times I have tried to make you listen to me, it might have worked out. But what I felt for you is just dead. It is as if I'm living with whoever, or with a friend whom I'm running the Family Incorporated together with. And I can't take it any longer to live like this!"

"But can't you give me some more time!!!??"

"You know what? This conversation is meaningless. Because now it's happening again! Exactly what I'm trying to explain to you, and what makes me give up on you: You don't listen, do you?! You don't take what I'm saying seriously!"

Sure my stories or what I'm saying, is not always logical. But if you had listened, you might have understood what I appreciate, what I experience as good and what I can't stand, and what turns me off completely.

If you had taken your time and let yourself be carried away by what I told you, so that in a sense you got the hang of what I was telling you about. But instead you immediately got defensive, or you twisted what I said so it turned out as something completely different from what I meant. You just talked what I said to pieces. Or you made what I said into abstract ideas, or into banalities, or examples of what *you* meant, or you turned what I said into discussions of economy, or of norms and duties. How many times wasn't I left with the feeling that my experiences and my feelings were totally 'wrong'. You always knew best, didn't you? Whatever I tried to tell you, you came up with all your great arguments. So, finally I gave up. I didn't try to tell you anything anymore. I couldn't take it any longer the despair and loneliness that I felt each time you rephrased what I said, so that it fitted your reality. And the more you changed what I said into something I could not recognize being what I meant, the more I felt we were drifting apart emotionally. At the end I didn't want to share anything at all with you."

I agree with Zygmunt Bauman in that "it seems that love," and I will say life as such, "cannot survive the attempts to cure its aporia," its despair and perplexity resulting from not being able to hold on to its pleasure and moments of happiness. It seems that love "can last, as love, only together with its ambivalence. With love, as with life itself," as Bauman says: "only death is unambiguous, and escape from ambivalence is the temptation of Thanatos." (Postmodern Ethics, 1993, 109) (=instinctual desire for death – compare Eros).

The process of healing existential pain by making living with ambivalence possible, is an agonizing one. The sick want a simple answer and they cannot have it. The bereaved want a simple answer and they cannot have it. The lovers set their hearts on love, love pure and absolute, but ambivalence seems unavoidable. The path to acceptance of ambivalence is through hopelessness to hope. To give up an "absolute", for instance an absolute happiness or an absolute functioning body, to give up a "necessity", for instance someone I can't live without, to give up that with which one is absolutely identified, to give up what was a point of absolute security, to give up a black-and-white world – each of the surrenders is a trial by fire. Nothing creates more pain, or creates as much hopelessness as an ideal that is not human. To accept one's own humanness and limitations sets one free to live without the expectation that life should have been different or that I myself should have been different.

The person who cannot accept and contain life's ambiguity, -- life's often inexplicability, -- and the basic uncertainty of his or her own self-image, well that person will "hit the wall" so to speak, at some point or another, in his or her life. As love is insecurity incarnated, and "by nature restless: a constant urge to transgress and to transcend what has been reached," (98) love, and I will say as well as life, "has to," (and I quote Bauman here:) "draw ever new supplies of energy in order to stay alive. It has to restock itself and reassert every day anew: once accumulated, the capital is eaten up fast if not daily replenished." (98). This is why love, as well as life as such, is insecurity incarnate. What will tomorrow bring?

My current experience is the story happening to me before anyone tells it. So if you are my doctor, my pastor, my counselor, my lover, my friend or someone I am depending on in my life, -- please help me formulate a non-pathologizing hope-inducing and liveable story about my life. A story that lifts me up and lures me on. A story enabling me to look forward till tomorrow. Forward to the relationships with you and others making life worth living.

-- And if possible, please, help me see a life beyond not only today, but beyond death as well. If you could help me believe not only in you and in tomorrow, but also in some kind of transcendence, or in a relationship with God, then I might even be able to overcome the existential pain when dying, if faith even in death makes it possible for me to be part of a relationship through the trusting surrender into a relationship: "In your hands I commend my spirit."

We here today are the carrier of the potential hope that many of those we belong together with, may need to be able to live on, in their daily living and in their facing death. I wish us all luck in *being* someone, and in *having* someone, to talk with in an existential pain-allivating way, when needed.

Thank you for your attention.