

THE TREE OF LIFE – THE FOREST OF LIFE

Stories about how we can develop new and preferential stories about our lives, by using the tree as a metaphor.

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ROBUST is a small foundation which directs its services towards schoolchildren, young people and their families struggling with conflicts or various kinds of problems. The foundation is run by the Church City Mission and most of its funds come from the city council of Oslo. There are five members of staff, all of whom are family therapists. Services are free of charge and referrals are not required. Problems addressed can vary from smaller concerns and conflicts to more serious circumstances involving violence, drug and alcohol related problems, depression, eating disorders, etc.

“Naming troubles with too many words can make them worse!” On occasions I get a feeling of such discomfort when meeting people. It’s so easy to go along with stories of traumatic experiences being told and re-told, without us learning from these stories what competence, sense of belonging, hopes and desires the storyteller might have invested along the way. But in what way should we talk about painful experiences? And for what period of time? Is there a way of speaking together which enables children, young people and parents to find the hope, courage and energy they need to move on?

I found an answer. Just over a year ago I heard Ncazelo Ncube-Mlilo tell about her experience from Masye Camp in Zimbabwe. Ncazelo and her colleagues wanted to help children and young people whose lives were being closely affected by the hiv/aids epidemic. The children were put into groups, together with others of about the same age, and there they drew their own tree of life. Each part of the tree represented different parts of the children’s lives, describing what they appreciated (friends, personal skills and abilities etc.) and what they found painful or difficult (e.g.

loss of people who had been close to them, poverty, sickness, fear etc.). These children's drawings acted as a gateway to conversation. It became possible for children to talk about parents who had died, and about loss, together with (some of the) problems that follow with loss. At the same time, the children were encouraged to tell about their dreams, their personal skills and about other important people in their lives. Ncazelo had hoped that this would give them the courage and the strength to address the challenges they were facing. Yet this did not happen. She found that the children's stories about sorrow and loss overruled.

Ncazelo's story moved me. Why didn't things work out for her the way she had hoped? Why don't things work out for me the way I hope for when I'm talking together with others in therapy? Is there a code that needs to be cracked? I don't know if that is what Ncazelo had in mind when she contacted David Denborough and Cheryl White, who then travelled to Zimbabwe in order to participate in developing the Tree of Life concept as we know it today. Although changes made (to the concept) were not so big, they proved to be decisive with regard to giving the children the hope and courage they needed in order to move on. It also proved that the order of sequence with regard to what themes are being raised or what questions are being asked has significance. It is important to start by creating a foundation of safety and security for the children. The latter seems to develop best when the children get help to talk about everything that has *not* been lost in their lives. And they become more confident when they stand side by side drawing their trees. It is just as if the children are being intertwined, like trees standing together in a forest. Only after this safe platform has been established is it the time right to ask questions about what dangers children might encounter. Follow-up questions could be about what initiative children could take in order to protect themselves, or questions about how they could "stand tall" through these dangers.

THE STRUCTURE

PART ONE: The children draw and present their tree

The children are given the task of thinking of their life as a tree. As an introduction to this theme, it might help to start by talking a little about trees in general (different trees in different countries, different names, different appearances, different properties etc).

Now the children should draw their tree. We explain how properties a tree has can

The roots

Where do you come from?

Who has taught you important things in life?

Do you have a favourite place at home?

Is there a song, or a dance or music that means a lot to you?

Does your name have special significance?

The ground

How are things round you nowadays?

Who is present in your life? How do you spend your time? What are your days like?

The tree trunk

What skills and abilities do you have?

Which ones do you use every day, or often?

What can a good friend say about you?

The branches

What are your dreams for the future?

What direction do you want your life to take?

What do you hope might happen?

The leaves

The leaves symbolize important people in your life. These could be people who are still alive, or they might have died. Regardless of that, they are just as important.

The fruits

The fruits are gifts you have received – material gifts or things people did for you, such as giving care or support or love.

While the children are drawing, it is useful for supervisors to ask appropriate questions about roots, skills and abilities and so on. This seems to help them get going.

When everyone has finished, the trees should be hung up alongside one another in the room. The children get asked to take turns in presenting their trees to one another. While they are telling their story we might ask them questions which help them to elaborate on what they are saying. For instance, we might ask: “How did you manage to do that? Who taught you that? How long have you nurtured that hope and those dreams? What helped you – despite all your adversities – to hold onto those dreams?”

We might invite the other children to write a sentence or two more on the tree trunk describing what *they* think is that child’s skills and abilities. Perhaps they could elaborate on this with a little story?

PART TWO: The trees become a forest

First we re-tell the children's stories in general terms as we understand them: "You all have strong roots. Each of you is part of a group of many people who have taught you important things in life. They continue to take care of you and support you in different ways. Some of these people are no longer alive, but they can still support you." We might say more about the children's hopes and dreams by reading aloud words the children have written on the branches, or mentioning gifts that they have drawn as fruits, etc.

After talking about what the *trees* have in common, we direct the same questions towards the children. "What do all of *us* in this group have in common? How can *we* support one another just as trees in the forest support one another?"

PART THREE: When the storms come

By now we have prepared the grounds for talking about challenges and difficulties which both trees and people might have to face. We start with trees and ask "What might be difficult for trees?" Thereafter: "What might be difficult for children? Just like trees – can we be exposed to dangers? What effect might that have on children? What do we do when different kinds of problems enter our lives? Is there something we *can* do? What can we *not* do?" We ask the children to think about how they can hold tightly onto their dreams and hopes while storms are raging? Is there a time in the children's lives when there are no storms? What do we do when the storms have passed?

their hopes, dreams, skills and abilities. You might well mention the names of important persons in the child's life. You might even encourage the child to recognise that person's contribution by suggesting that they write them a letter.

Today the tree of Life concept has spread to several African continents via the organisation Reppsi. Reppsi has published an easy-to-read guide to the Tree of Life which can be downloaded free of charge: www.reppsi.org It is also possible to order a DVD from the Dulwich Centre where Ncazelo tells about the Tree of Life.

When Ncazelo talked about how the children were able to assign their parents a central position in their lives – even though these parents were no longer alive – I started thinking about parents I have come to know through "Foreldrestøtten". These are parents whose children have been forcibly taken into care. How would they position themselves in their children's lives? How would they position their children in their own lives? And what would their children write about their own roots, if they were given the chance to draw trees in years to come?

“Foreldrestøtten” started during the spring of 2006, as a result of initiative taken by Forus, the Church City Mission’s Centre for children and young people. Together with child care services, we invited parents whose children had been taken into care without parental consent, to an open meeting. We wanted to learn more from them what kind of support they felt they needed or wanted. Did they need a place to meet? What would be good for them to do together? The parents wanted to meet once a month, in an informal setting. Good food was important. They wanted help to invite outsiders to speak on all kinds of themes - anything from “What are my legal rights” to “Living with sorrow and loss”. These days several of them have wanted us to get together without any special program. One of the mothers summed up “Foreldrestøtten” like this: “Earlier on, I had to deal with my thoughts and questions on my own. But in this group we can laugh and cry *together* “.

As a group supervisor, I have learned that the most important thing I can do through “Foreldrestøtten” is to arrange for mothers and fathers with common grounds to get together in safe and friendly surroundings. About 20 parents come each time and most of them are mothers. These people face challenges every single day. Some have been ostracised after going public about their kids being placed in foster care. It seems unwise to tell the truth to your employer, to colleagues or a prospective date. One parent said “Then I would be putting my job or my potential love life on the line. It’s almost as though others believe I’m not capable of anything”.

I have come to learn that when parents get branded as “not good enough”, it tends to make it difficult to spot skills and abilities they have in other fields. Those around them find it difficult, and the parents themselves find it difficult. They find it hard to notice their own personal growth. They lose sight of their own diversity and multiplicity. Instead, their thoughts become swamped by unanswered questions and laborious feelings of guilt, shame or anger.

Inspired by Ncazelo’s story, I started thinking: What if we invited parents to draw trees together? Would that enrich the stories of their lives and give them more balance? Could new stories grow: stories which gradually toned down or erased parental ideas of not being good enough? What if we – through joint recollection – managed to unearth stories about competence and knowledges? Would that be enough

to challenge those stories of inadequacy? If drawing trees in this way could waken dreams to life or give birth to hope, what then might happen?

Six mothers got together in my first “Tree of Life” group to draw trees and talk about their lives. They felt it was important to get going straight away, albeit with a mixture of both eagerness and dread. Trees sprang up in different shapes and colours much faster than we had expected. Had they been thinking about trees for some time already? I was stunned by the imagination and variation being displayed. One of the trees had been drawn by printing the shape of a hand and an arm on paper. The arm represented the tree trunk. Five fingerprints represented the branches. Each parent drew their own special tree. Somewhere in the room a large and graceful cactus caught my eye. I wondered what thoughts had given rise to that cactus.

By the time we had finished drawing the trees and were ready to write on them, several in the group had said they were feeling drained. Starting up work on the roots (“Where do I come from?”) and the tree trunk (“What do I do well?”) proved to be most challenging to begin with. Then it was good to ask for help, for the mothers were unsure about so many things: “What if my roots did not benefit me? Should I mention my parents, even though they failed me?” I felt there was no clear cut answer. But I did think it would be helpful if skills and abilities could be written all over the tree trunk. Or if the branches could be covered with hopes and dreams for the future. Ncazelo suggests searching for stories about roots by asking about the history of specific skills and abilities, or by asking for details about dreams. When I asked Lea what significant person in her life would consider her to be kind and helpful, she remembered her grandmother. “She was a good natured person and she didn’t criticize. She will always be with me”, Lea said. I continued by asking who had taught her teamwork in sports? Or encouraged her in art? Or passed on her interest for music? All these pursuits had been cultivated with the help of important people working at community homes where Lea grew up. By the time we were finished, Lea had written 40 people’s names as her roots. What wealth she experienced, having so many ties to so many different people! So many had been there to teach her skills!

I noticed mothers completing their trees with increasing eagerness, as they discovered connections in their lives. Moving from one tree part to another as they went along

proved to be helpful, since that gave rise to new stories. Marit started by writing JUSTICE in large block letters on her tree trunk. That spurred my curiosity. Was the practice of justice a kind of attitude or skill surpassing other skills in importance for Marit? What other skills did she have? And could she explain the significance of the idea that skills should be governed by justice? What position did justice have in her life? When did she get recruited to the practice of justice? Why had *she* been selected? All these questions came to mind, for later use. Marit's tree didn't have many roots, so perhaps her answers would lead to the telling of thicker stories about roots.

Tina needed help to find out what skills and abilities she could put into writing on her tree trunk, and she had not drawn any roots. Yet she wrote on the trunk: "I am a responsible person, I don't give up, I know how to love, I am loyal and I have a good sense of humour". This led to thoughts on my part about how these skills reflect what Tina values in her life. I started thinking about questions that might tempt Tina to search for the stories behind such competence. It would probably be easier for her if I started in the present time, and only moved back to the past if she herself expressed the wish to do so. I had registered the fact that Tina was able to set limits, with regard to what she was willing to say about herself and her background. I wanted to record that as a skill on her tree trunk. But first I asked her if she agreed and what words I should use.

I could see that Ingrid's leaves were heart-shaped, each representing significant persons in her life. Seeing so many hearts on her tree drew my attention to how many people Ingrid valued. She had written on the ground: "often alone". What feelings did that reflect? Did being alone feel good, or was this a destructive kind of loneliness? If being alone impoverished her life, or prevented her from achieving things she wanted out of life, then I could ask many questions about the "heart-people" on her tree. I wanted to try and strengthen her connections to one or more of them. What could she have meant to them? As I knew Ingrid, she could easily forget or fail to notice what she meant to others.

Cathy was the first one to present her tree to all of us. I was surprised. I had come to know Cathy as a shy woman, who was usually the last in the group to speak. Was this

about having the courage to do something unusual? We stood around her in a semi-circle and I believe we silently cheered her on. She told us where she came from (roots) and accounted for important persons in her life, before and now (leaves). She had drawn her children on the tree both as fruits (gifts) and leaves. Their names were written on one of the branches, illustrating that her most significant hope was to be reunited with her children. Still other branches had been filled out with a range of expressed hopes and wishes Cathy had for the future: “I want to be a professional social educator, because I love working with mentally handicapped people. Another dream is to become a snowboard instructor and get my motorbike licence, because I love speed and I don’t get afraid. Later on I’m going to buy myself a flat, and of course find a decent boyfriend”. Right at the end of all this, Cathy told us what she was good at. She was skilled at doing tae-kwan-do and she was a considerate person. Some of the mothers in the group protested, saying she had many more skills. In this way it became a group conversation, where everyone contributed what they knew about Cathy’s skills. One of the women who knew her well wrote “A loyal, high-spirited friend” on Cathy’s tree trunk. As I recall, Cathy summed up her skills by writing “I am a fighter” on her trunk. So I asked her who would *not* be surprised to hear that she was a fighter? And what stories could that person tell which illustrated Cathy’s qualities as a fighter? Here was a unique opportunity to use stories to connect Cathy more closely to someone who was important in her life. A conversation about what that person has meant to Cathy and what Cathy has contributed to that person’s life could also have strengthened her further.

In afterthought, I was not sure what effect these two evenings had on the mothers. Had our time spent together been helpful? If so, in what way? Had it helped to draw their trees within the safety and support of the group? Was it the task of presenting their tree to others that had challenged them in a positive way? Did the tree provide a useful concept as a portrayal of life for people? Or was it something quite different? We had wanted to ask the mothers, but there was no time.

When the Norwegian Family Therapy Association invited members to send prospective workshop titles to their annual general meeting at Vetre, we still did not know how participating in a The Tree of Life group had influenced these mothers. Could we get the answer at Vetre? We believe that workshops arranged as a process provide a good opportunity to exercise family therapy in practice, together with other

family therapists. What if we arranged an interview of two of the mothers about their “Tree of Life” experiences, using “definitional ceremony” as our method? We hoped that this would inspire family therapists to try out different ways of practising narrative therapy.

In Robust, we have relatively often shown our collaborating partners where conversations can lead us when we talk to young people or parents. We usually encourage people in the audience to challenge themselves and either be interviewed, or join the group of outside witnesses as part of a definitional ceremony. The feedback on these occasions has generally been good. Now, however, we felt less sure. We didn’t know how many would attend the workshop, or who they were. Would we manage to engage those who came? Would anyone be willing to join the group of outside witnesses? In sum, would we – together with unknown outside witnesses – be able to arrange the kind of definitional ceremony that acknowledged these mothers in ways they found helpful?

I was apprehensive when I asked Lea and Cathy if they would be willing to collaborate with us when we arranged a workshop at Vetre. My request was to interview them about what significance the Tree of Life had in their lives, so that other family therapists could take part in their experiences. Perhaps people in the audience would find a use for the Tree of Life in their own work? I knew that Lea and Cathy had a lot to contribute, with regard to opinions and experiences. What I feared was that an interview in front of an audience at Vetre would be too frightening and therefore too big a challenge for them.

Both women decided to take the chance. However on the way to Vetre I understood that they had both started to feel more and more uncertain. Lea had not slept at all that night, and she had some bad luck with her car. Although Cathy had found rest at a friend’s house, she came with a raging temperature. Both were feeling very insecure about how this would work out. Yet neither considered backing out. Problems, accidents, too little sleep: none of these things seemed to be stopping them from carrying through as they had planned.

There we sat in front of the audience, with trees hung up on each side of us. I opened by asking them about all the “yes-things”. “The initial invitation to become part of a group and start drawing trees; - you could have said no. And then you said yes to telling about your tree to all of us in the group; you might have wanted to wait with that. Finally you said yes to coming here today, when you could have said no. Will you tell us more about that?” Cathy replied that brooding on things before she made a decision, didn’t work for her:

C: “If I hesitate, then pretty soon I start dreading the whole affair and end up saying no.”

B: “So, what does that say about you?”

C: “I suppose it means I am brave – at least I am beginning to be.”

B: “What do you feel about that?”

C: “Proud of myself. It’s quite scary too.”

B: “What’s the good thing about being brave and proud? How can you achieve by having qualities like that – if you look at the tree and your wishes for the future?”

There are many paths to choose with regard to asking new questions which might lead to new stories. I could have asked: “Why are you proud of yourself?” A question like that could lead us to a conversation about personal values and what is important for her.

Lea said she had joined us at Vetre because she really wanted to tell other people about her tree and inspire people to draw their own trees. She told us that she had arranged for several people in her own family to draw their trees. She thought it was a pity that there wasn’t enough time for everyone to draw their trees at the workshop. “You have to do it yourself in order to understand how good it is” she said. “Before I started drawing I didn’t know that I had so many caring people in my life. We shouldn’t get hung up in the idea that our parents are our roots. It could be neighbours or relatives – and those people can still be alive today. We can also prune away roots that don’t give sustenance, can’t we?”

I can credit Lea for the fact that I later on drew my tree together with colleagues in Robust. And Lea’s sense of freedom with regard to roots has led to the use of words such as “exploring our roots”, “negotiating with our roots”, “finding the roots we

ourselves prefer”. Nor do roots need to stay the same. I became increasingly aware of the fact that working with the tree concept can help us to get a grip on our lives.

Interviewing the women was the first part of the definitional ceremony. Just before the interview, two men had volunteered to be “outside witnesses”. They were quietly waiting to be interviewed by my colleague Marianne. In this second part of the ceremony the interview of the women gets re-told. The re-telling takes shape with the help of four categories of questions:

1. What especially caught your attention in Lea’s and Cathy’s stories? What did they say – what words and expressions did they use that you especially noticed?
2. What might the things you have heard be an expression of? What is important for these women? What do they really value? Did hearing this interview help you to conjure up some images about how these women are as people?
3. Why did exactly *that* catch your attention? What reference does that have to your own life and person?
4. Where has that led you? New thoughts? New openings in your own life?

The two outside witnesses were clearly moved by the women’s stories. One of them thanked them for being willing to come to Vetre despite the fact that they had dreaded doing so. He said he felt privileged to be among those who had heard their stories. He saw them as two women who had not allowed their selves to be crushed by adversity, neither now nor earlier on in life. Could this be an expression of courage or vitality? Hearing them tell about what they hoped and dreamed about achieving in their lives, had led him to start thinking about what hopes and dreams he had for his own life. The second outside witness also felt moved by the women’s innate sense of joy and by the good wishes they had for their lives. He had many thoughts about how their stories could help him in his work as a family therapist, especially when he met people who had experienced hardship in life. His own thoughts about hardship had both been supplemented and challenged.

The third and last part of the definitional ceremony was a new interview of the women. The starting point for this interview is a second re-telling of the original story. Now the women were asked what the outside witnesses had said that especially

caught their attention, and whether that had given rise to any new images they might have of their selves. I think the audience became absolutely quiet, and some tears were shed when Cathy put her revised image into words: “I felt like a grey mouse when I came, but now I’m sitting on a horseback”.

When we finally turned towards the audience and open for questions and discussion, we thought that the definitional ceremony was over. To our surprise, the women were met with a new “outside-witness” response. Nearly everyone who was there wanted to say something in acknowledgement of the women. Some said they were grateful for having taken part in this process and thanked the women for having given so generously of their experiences. Many wanted to draw trees at work, in their families or alone. Only now as I am writing do I realize that every person who attended that workshop was a part of the definitional ceremony.

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Everything described above I experienced together with my colleague, Sidsel. Now both of us were really keen to do this again. Almost as if on order, we received an invitation from the Association for African women, Bibi Amka. What follows here is penned by Sidsel.

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“How to succeed at being yourself in Norway. Welcome to an identity seminar.”

This was the exciting title on the invitation we received from Bibi Amka’s group for young people. Bibi Amka – which means “Women Wake Up” in Swahili – is an association for African women who are working to strengthen the rights and opportunities for women and their children both in Norway and Africa.

Some months earlier their founder and leader Honoratte Muhanzi Kashale had gotten in touch with Robust in order to discuss different challenges which she and the association were facing. As a result of this contact Honoratte came to hear about the African Tree of Life model and we were invited to a seminar with six teenage girls aged 17 – 20, full of expectations.

Seventeen year old Merveille had taken the initiative to arrange the seminar. She told us that many African teenagers in Norway felt they were being pulled in two opposing directions. It was hard for them to differentiate between values sourced in African culture as apposed to Norwegian culture. “Can you help us to perceive these differences as a wealth which is helping us to achieve our goals?”

This was the only information we had about the group. We didn’t know what their main concerns and interests were. Nor did we know whether they might have experienced serious difficulties or great losses in their lives. Our hope and idea was to increase our experience of working with the Tree of Life concept and we thought that this was likely to be a good match.

To arrange the seminar the association had borrowed facilities with a friendly atmosphere situated in the centre of Oslo. There was a garden, a kitchen, a large common room and a not-too-big lounge which could be closed off by sliding doors. Behind these sliding doors we and the teenage girls were to spread our wings in the course of hours to follow. Since the national day of the Congo was to be celebrated the following day in the same facilities, we were told that some preparations for food and celebrations would be taking place there later in the day. We also learned that there were quite a number of other people who used the facility on a daily basis. This setting had no resemblance to our sheltered locations at Robust. Would we and the teenage girls manage to hold focus on what we were here to do? How could privacy be possible when adults were constantly dropping in to fetch things or even sitting down to listen because they were interested in what was happening? The girls seemed the least to be affected by this pulsating life. I thought: If they can, can’t we? After waiting a little for latecomers we pushed furniture aside, removed wall decorations, hung big sheets of paper up on the walls and got our felt pens ready. Six girls accepted the challenge of drawing their lives with the help of tree metaphors. We gave them a short introduction. The roots – where do you come from? The ground – what are your circumstances these days? The tree trunk – what are you good at doing? The branches – what are your hopes and dreams for the future? The leaves – important people in your life? The fruits – gifts you have received?

Everyone was apprehensive. Where would the trees take us? The girls found it safest to stand beside one another while they were drawing and they wanted to ask each

other questions and give mutual help as they went along. Because of the way we were standing lined up in the same room, the trees became a forest right from the start. A couple of younger siblings were included in the fellowship by being given felt pens and paper, while some of the parents prepared a hot lunch in the kitchen. For if we were to keep our focus on trees and life stories for seven hours, we would need to be fed!

The girls quickly understood the metaphor where different parts of the tree represented different aspects of life. “Shall I draw that my roots are both in Africa and Norway, is that possible?” one of the girls asks. “Hmm... Often you can’t see a tree’s roots so easily, but isn’t it the case that the longer they are and the more tendrils they have, the sturdier the tree?” is my tentative reply. “Yes, maybe it’s an advantage to have roots both in Norway, Jamaica and the Congo, as I have” she concludes.

We draw roots and write over them. Whether she who is titled “mother” is in fact mother, aunt, sister, cousin or friend is not so important. What we are searching for are the people who have significance in our lives, before and now. The root is buzzing with questions and comments, such as: “Can my dad represent something important for me, even though he is no longer alive? It seems strange, but maybe he stands for some values which are still meaningful to me today. Maybe I learned one or two of my skills from him.” “Can’t an important adult just as well be a neighbour, my teacher or maybe my friend’s mother?” “ You tell us that it was your grandfather who decided that your name should be “she who spreads joy”. What does that say about your grandfather and his hopes for your life? And what does it say about you?”

Already there is a lot to think about and we have only just started. None of us know quite where this will lead us. There are many ways to find your roots. For example, you might start by thinking about a song which has meant a lot to you, places where you feel comfortable, smells and tastes you enjoy, feelings you find pleasant and so on. Several of the girls write that one of the places in their homes where they feel the most comfortable is the toilet. How could that be? Of course, because that’s where they can find peace and quiet! When we enquire more closely, this seems to correlate with numbers of family members, especially younger siblings. This gives rise to a lot of giggling and laughter, though followed by thoughtfulness and gravity.

I have had two earlier experiences with the Tree of Life, these being the evenings we spent with the six mothers in Foreldrestøtten and one day I spent drawing my own tree together with my closest colleagues. What I especially liked – and I experienced it again this time – is the fact that the Tree provides us with ample opportunities to talk about our lives in more playful and explorative ways than we are accustomed to. It's like embarking on an explorer's expedition within your own life, or maybe even going on a treasure hunt. We can anticipate the main features of what might happen, but we can also be surprised by what we find. By reflecting, drawing and telling in the past, present and future tense, together with others, we adopt different positions and because of that our focus changes. I observe myself while I tell my story. By doing so, I might come up with some new thoughts about what significance this could have had for me. Questions and suggestions from the others can also create new associations and meanings. That gives us the freedom to grasp the fact that there can be many different stories and many different ways of seeing ourselves and our lives. Events you have not dwelled on earlier take on a new meaning. What possibilities does that clear the way for in the future? How should life be lived today?

Describing your trunk (naming your own competence) offers big challenges to many, at least to begin with. What am I good at? What skills do I often put to use? You don't think about those kinds of things in your daily life. Even more seldom do you express them in words. It's not considered to be good etiquette to boast of oneself. It might be easier to answer questions such as: What do you think a good friend would want to say about you? Or tell me what you like doing? There is often a connection between what you do well and what you like doing often. As newcomers to the group who were not acquainted with the girls we needed to have our wits about us right from the start: "We notice that you look after your little brother and make sure he's alright even when you're at the seminar with us. What does that say about you?" Or: "I heard you singing so beautifully earlier on today. Isn't that a skill you can register here?"

The branches represent dreams, hopes and wishes for the future. After a little thought, the girls were able to put their dreams into words very swiftly. Some wanted to travel or live in foreign countries. They were keen to meet new cultures and acquire good friends. Some hoped to finish school and then study psychology, or maybe law,

languages or social work. Others again wanted to learn the art of good cooking and dreamed of finding a partner in love. Many of them wanted to dedicate a greater part of their lives to music, song and dance. They all wanted to live according to principles of sustainable development, and they hoped to be able to help people. Moreover, getting a good education and becoming economically independent seemed to be so important for all the girls that it almost appeared to be a prerequisite for realizing all their other hopes and dreams for the future.

It strikes me that many of these hopes and dreams are similar to those nurtured by other teenagers in Norway. Yet there seemed to be something different or something more. Are these teenagers “special” or “gifted” in some way? Or does the Tree of Life metaphor enable people to see themselves as part of the bigger picture, discovering dreams beyond their own persons? Could the poverty in Africa be creating a kind of backcloth to their wishes – whether they have been there themselves or are bearing in mind family friends and relatives living there? Wanting an education seemed to be more than an individual project. Most of the girls wanted their skills and learning to benefit Africa in some way.

After drawing for a couple of hours, we get to savour the delights of Honoratte’s and her sister-in-law’s cooking. Twenty of us sit down to eat together. Baby brother has fallen asleep, while the seven-year-old is still going strong. The girls are then ready for new challenges; we are going to start presenting the trees. Although it’s a little scary to begin with, shyness is gradually succeeded by eager voices and proud glances as one after the other with their respective trees becomes the focus of attention. Once more I am stunned by the innate power in these stories, both for those who are listening and those who are in focus. Here is Merveille’s story in her own words:

“Roots - My name is Merveille and that means “Marvellous”! I am 17 years old and I have my roots in The Congo (where my relatives come from) and in Norway (where I am living now) and in Kenya (where I have also lived). It’s mainly my mother and father who have taught me the important things in my life. My favourite place at home is the toilet, because there I can be on my own. I also like the quietness of the forest. One song that is really important to me is Michael Jackson’s; “They don’t care about us”. You should listen to that!

The ground - The people surrounding me in my daily life are my parents, my brothers and sisters and my friends. Going to school takes a lot of my time. I love music, and dancing.

The tree trunk - Well, it's difficult to say what my skills are, but perhaps I am quite a good dancer?"

We encourage the other girls in the group to make suggestions or even tell small stories about other skills Merveille has, and then write about them on the trunk of her tree.

- "She is happy and fun to be with, she makes us laugh".

- "She is a good friend; I can talk to her about everything".

- "I can always trust her".

- "She knows a lot about religion and culture, so it's helpful to ask her advice".

- "She is brave. She is the leader of our group and the one who took the initiative to arrange this seminar".

Merveille acknowledges that hearing the others say so many nice things about her feels a bit strange, but also good. She continues to tell about her branches, which represent her hopes and dreams.

"Branches - My plan is to do well at school so that I can study psychology and social anthropology. I just want to live an independent life, without economical problems. My big dream is to travel to the Congo and share my knowledge with people there. Growing up in Norway has given me so much, so it's really important to me to be able to give something back. I wish everyone could be given a chance in life. When I visited The Congo, I got really interested in the situation for children there. I'm especially interested in communication and I think that grown-ups and children should communicate better. They should listen to one another, and tell one another what they feel. In this way grown-ups can help children make sense of their lives. This applies to Norway too, where many teenagers struggle with the divide between two cultures. My mother is definitely the one who would be least surprised to hear what I'm saying here. We share many of the same ideas. I hope I can help to continue the work my mother has started in the Bibi Amka association, both here and in Africa.

Leaves - As I said, the people that matter in my life are my mother and father, my brothers and sisters, and my relatives and friends. My mother has given me a lot. I have always been able to talk to her about important things, but I can see that is not the case in every family.

Fruits - Gifts life has bestowed on me are knowledge, education and friendship”.

I find that it's difficult to know while people are in the course of making their presentations whether to stop them and ask questions or let them talk freely. Sometimes it's a good idea to be concrete and ask for examples – as I probably should have done here to an even greater degree – so that new stories and new meanings can get a tighter hold. On other occasions it's important not to break the spell when perhaps that person is in the process of gaining new understanding. You need to balance different considerations, such as amount of time available, needs for thoroughness and the risk of a certain exhaustion occurring in the group. Time is limited when – as in our case – six persons are to present their tree. On the other hand, if we don't linger and allow stories to develop, the process loses some of its meaning and effect. That too can lead to exhaustion. Being witness to important stories and events in people's lives can be demanding and is a factor which should be taken into consideration when deciding whether to set aside one or several days to this activity. I think the best of all was seeing the girls gradually becoming more active, helping one another along by asking questions and giving examples. I also saw some parallels in the process unfolding in the room. Trees find protection and safety in standing close together. Girls feel safer in the intimate atmosphere they create together. They find reflections of their own selves and their own situation in other's trees. They support one another and get involved in common themes that are important to them all.

Merveille's voicing of her dreams, hopes and wishes for the future seems to release a flood of thoughts and ideas. All the other girls seem to be relating to this theme and many of them want to relate some experience or express some thoughts they have on the matter. So we follow up on this after the break. We know that in parts of Africa where the Tree of Life concept was first developed, children and young people are under great strain, due to war, poverty, hiv/aids and so on. Now we are wondering what kind of storms our girl's trees are going to have to withstand in their forest? “What are the challenges that young people from Africa have in common when they grow up in Norway?” “It's not so easy adjusting simultaneously to two cultures that differ with respect to rules and customs” replies one of the girls. “We try to respect our family's values. But

at the same time we also have to find our own” another girl says. “Many parents have strong opinions about how their children should live, what they should study or what trade they should pick. They are not so good at taking into consideration what we ourselves want” says a third girl, in affirmation. One girl tells us that her father wants her to be a journalist, while she herself wants to be social worker. We wonder whether it is possible to combine such different wishes and expectations. “We have to be extra clever and we must work extra hard” she answers. She will start by schooling herself for the career she wants herself, but she might also try to combine this with journalism later on. There are comments such as “We should be making compromises. It should be a question of give and take, not just adjusting”. The girls agree that they would prefer to enlist their parent’s guidance and support, rather than have parents make decisions over their heads. We ask them how that might come about? And we continue: “Just as trees in the forest support and help one another while storms are raging about them, so do we human beings find support in one another when we stand together. What can you do together as a group? What skills and abilities do you share? What dreams and values do you have in common that you can put to use in order to meet these challenges?”

Several of the girls emphasize the significance of the fellowship they experience through Bibi Amka. “We need to recruit more young people. There are some quarrels and disagreements among grown-ups there, and that is a problem for us. We don’t want that to happen to us, but we do get affected. For instance, there were several girls who were supposed to be here today, but their parents didn’t allow them to come. We must talk more to parents and get them to listen to us. Maybe we could arrange a seminar for parents – for instance using the Tree of Life? Then our parents would have to listen to us and we would all have to listen to one another. If we could all draw trees together then we would learn more about our parents and they would learn more about us. Do you think it would be possible to do the Tree of Life once more?”

Baby brother wakes up and it’s definitely time to close the day. Before we do so, we ask the girls to evaluate their experience of drawing trees. Comments which follow here more or less sum up what was said:

- “Seeing and doing things in this way has been useful and it has taught me a lot about myself”.

- “It’s also exciting listening to what others say about themselves”.
- “Earlier on, I never thought about this so much. I have learned more about myself”.
- “Being in the limelight in this way gave me pride and confidence”.
- “It’s fun drawing trees together with others”.

I don’t know whether participating in the day’s arrangement has helped the girls to “succeed in being more themselves in Norway” – as was written on their invitations to the seminar. I myself am not sure what it means to “succeed” in life. It would have been interesting to ask the girls more about that, but we didn’t get the chance that day. However, one thing I felt sure of as I biked home later that evening was that it is safer to be a tree in a forest, than to stand alone on a open plain – especially when storms are coming.....

*

In order to provide some form of closure for a Tree of Life group, we are encouraged to draw up an individual certificate for each of the participants (cf. Part Four). We are convinced that it is important to do that, since it helps to increase their awareness about good values, good wishes and good people they have in their lives. We didn’t get so far in our groups. It all became too much for us, together with the other tasks involved. Perhaps it would have been a good idea to delegate the task of drawing up certificates to one special person who could concentrate on that?

For us, arranging Tree of Life groups has provided rich and exciting experiences. Nevertheless, the whole value of the idea rests upon what *participants* found helpful. Do new things happen in their lives? Do new openings come to light? We decided to put those questions to Lea, Cathy and Merveille.

We met Lea and Cathy six months after holding our workshop at Vetre. Our questions had to wait, for they were sparkling with enthusiasm and had stories to tell us first! Lea had certainly allowed ideas and experiences she had when drawing her Tree of Life to develop further. On her own initiative she had worked out a kindergarten version of the Tree of Life. Since the children couldn’t write yet, and there were many words they didn’t understand, she had come upon the idea of using

pictures, such as photos or cuttings from magazines. She had used three days to prepare the kindergarten staff and parents to the children who would be involved. Most of them were foreigners and the smallest child had been two years old. It was with obvious pride that Lea related to us how satisfied the children and their parents had been. One mother had told her how her son had changed after telling the other children about his dad and gluing his dad's picture up on his tree. In the meantime, Cathy was also eagerly waiting to tell her story. She had made an oral presentation of some project work she had done recently and had been able to stand in front of the whole class without being afraid. She was convinced that her experience from the Tree of Life had been decisive both with regard to having the confidence beforehand and being able carry through with the presentation in a calm way.

Our interview with Merveille took place three months after she and the other African girls had drawn their trees together. One of their concerns at the time had been contact and communication between parents and teenagers in African families. It had been a big challenge for the girls. Once more we were filled with anticipation. Had anything happened? Merveille told us that spending the day together doing the Tree of Life had made the girls feel stronger, braver and more collected as a group. Bearing in mind their wish for greater openness and mutual respect between young people and parents, the girls had invited their parents to a meeting some weeks later. They had wanted to tell about what they thought was important in ways that signified acknowledgement of the parents. Merveille was disappointed, for despite the girl's careful planning and preparations before the meeting, only three parents had attended. However, on hearing that the women in Bibi Amka had asked us to organize a Tree of Life session during their seminar in October, she seemed to cheer up. This appeared to be a kind of victory. "I want to be there!" she said.

Merveille has many thoughts about what missing their native country and culture does to parents. Perhaps that is what so often prevents them from noticing what the Norwegian culture might offer as a supplement?

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