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## Problems and Values

by Allan Holmgren

### Abstract

*This article highlights coaching from a narrative and poststructuralist perspective. The article argues that problems are the starting point for any concept and every story – that each term starts with a problem. Issues and events must be named and inserted into a story to make meaning before they can be handled. The article argues that in coaching and leadership conversation about hopes, dreams and visions out of the blue sky without a foundation in the living experiences of life and in the problems and their effects one wishes to fight or to handle is meaningless and “hot air”.*

*Problems are something that the protagonist in a narrative meets on his way and bumps with. Problems arise when something unexpected or unforeseen happens. When a problem arises, a breach will occur. This is fundamental in narrative theory. But whenever there is a problem there is also a value, something preferred. In narrative coaching, the protagonist comes closer to his values and skills through stories of preferred experiences.*

*The person's joy and empowerment are strengthened by sealing the contact with preferred experiences, values and skills. This minimizes the power of the problem over the person.*

*It is the coach's task in cooperation with the coached to let the preferred experiences and values guide the coaching. It does not make sense to talk about “solutions” in narrative coaching before “thicker” stories about the preferred life are told. The concept and the metaphor of solution itself is problematic as it relates to mathematics and correct answers. Planning and “solutions” require a very high degree of conceptualization and sophisticated narrative. There are no solutions - only experiments when we are dealing with social relations. It makes sense to talk about solutions in the production, in the technical world, not in the never finished social world, where every action initiates a new beginning. The article contains some anonymous examples and vignettes that illustrate some of the theoretical and methodological points.*

**Keywords** *Problems, Conceptualization, Confirmation, Affirmation, Consciousness, Outsider Witness, Poetry, Movement, Conflictual Languages, Modern Power, Intensity, and Narrative.*

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Coaching, supervision and guidance should always take point of departure in a problem. Concept formation always takes point of departure in a problem, the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze writes (2006; Deleuze & Guattari, 1996). Life is filled with difficulties but only a few of them turn into problems. I define a problem as a difficulty which has been mis-treated or mis-handled. This implies that a difficulty where the actions which have been taken to overcome this difficulty did not work or help. They have in a sense missed the target, the difficulty, the goal or the challenge, the plan did not work out as we had thought or hoped – and then we have a problem, so to speak. The action or the actions taken did not get rid of the difficulty – and then we were faced with a problem. The route taken did not take you to where you had hoped for. The difficulty has become a problem and is still alive as such.

The first thing to do is to give the experienced events and the problem that has come out of it a name. When the problem is baptized with a name it gets an identity. Problems become fenced in through the process of the naming of them. The word “name” comes from the ancient Greek word “nomos”, which can mean “something you assign to”, but it can also mean district or law. Naming and concept formation are alpha and omega in the specification of the nature and character of a problem – it can be “bad consciousness”, “sadness”, “stress”, “confusion”, “anger” “doubt” etc. The secret of a problem seems to be the name we give to it. The name must be an experience-near name – not a generalized name like stress, for instance. We must know what kind of stress we are talking about. Most often problems are related to what might be called negative feelings, irritation, unease, feelings of resentment, you don’t know what to do, you have experienced this or something similar before or it might be a new experience. Often you do not have the full overview of the landscape and the forces operating in the event or the situation, or what kind of game you suddenly become a part of and you might feel you lose yourself in the situation and gets speechless. And if you do not know the play or the norms and expectations involved, you do not know your role and you cannot be quite sure of what to do in this unknown “game”. If there is no story, no narrative explaining the events and the rules of the events you don’t know what to say or what to do to continue the story and the game,

which most often is a power struggle. If you have been thrown into a situation and are in the middle of it, you do not have the best and full overview of the events and the problem or the unease it has produced.

The last 15-20 years there have been a wave of self-help-literature and coaching especially inspired by tendencies in the USA. Private and public institutions offer a whole range of education- and training programs within a humanistic, systemic, solution focused or appreciative inquiry tradition, where it seems to be “no go” to talk about problems (Dalsgaard et al., 2002, Gergen 2011). In these new traditions it seems that you are only allowed to “look at the positive and say yes to life”. Within these “positive” trends you should only talk about hopes and dreams and “what works” (Espedal et al., 2008). Problems are neglected and placed under the carpet. The idea in social constructionism is for instance that what you talk about seems to grow and get bigger through the attention it gets. Another metaphor in appreciative inquiry is that all living creatures seems to be drawn towards lights – yes this is through to some extent, but look at a bee in a bottle, it dies because of its attraction towards the light whereas a fly finds its way out of the bottle through experimenting with flying in many directions.

When there is a rejection of talking about problems and when you are only allowed to talk about hopes and dreams and solutions, this can be rooted in the fact that these trends do not have a concept and a theory about problems – and about power and intentionality. They become a kind of new romantic regime, a romantic totalization where problem-talk is prohibited. Unfortunately there seems to be a “theory-poverty” in these lines of thought and schools. As in religions these schools seem to have an idea of salvation in the hopes and dreams or through the hopes and dreams in some better world beyond and not in the worldly life filled with problems. Through this idea and the practice related to the idea of only looking at hopes and dreams people implies not looking at what we are in the middle of. People seeking this kind of coaching are encouraged to dream about some other place: “Things will get better in the future.” I will not hesitate to call this tendency for a kind of new religion, if you *believe* in it. Even the well-known idea of formulating values and strategies seems in this light as a poor way of dealing with

actual problems when you do not understand the power, norms and the culture you are dealing with and a part of. As Peter Drucker once should have said: *Culture eats up strategies for breakfast*. This approach to leadership, coaching and consultancy create even more confusion for people than they had before this new discursive regime of “thinking positive, in hopes, dreams, destinies and solutions”. As the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze writes about the philosopher from the 17th century, Baruch Spinoza, who was one of the first real radical philosophers who dared to denounce God, theology and the religious illusions and who fought for a real liberal democracy with freedom for thinking and speaking: “Spinoza did not believe in hope, not even in courage; he only believed in joy, and in vision” (Deleuze, 1988, p. 14). Where religion and smart consultants wants people to look away from their real problems and have them to look into the hereafter and come up with smart recipes, schemes and “solutions” to everything, ordinary people experience real problems on their journey in life and the landscapes where they live, that blocks their freedom. This aspect shows itself everywhere in the literature – both in the serious and in the more colored.

“Great stories are invitations to find problems, not a teaching in problem-solving,” as the grand old man of American psychology Jerome Bruner (2004, p. 28) writes. Because “life is problematic and cannot be linked into conventional genres (ibid, p. 91). We therefore necessarily must relate to the stories people tell about the problems they have met and meet on their way in life – especially in coaching and guidance. We must take point of departure in these stories and the problems they reveal – just as we do when the read about *Ulysses*, *Pelle the Conquerer*, *Moby Dick*, *War and Peace*, *Punishment and Crime*, *the Icelandic Sagas* or other great literature. If you do not take the language, stories and experiences of ordinary people serious, you contribute to that these problems will get even more power over the persons who experience these problems. You contribute to the opposite of empowering the persons who experience problems if you do not have a framework, a theory and a method for talking about problems and through this kind of conversation get to the important values and principles of life of the persons you are trying to help. In this way you might contribute to disempowering. The more you speak about hopes and

dreams, the more frustration and despair you risk creating for these persons because they might get even more far away from the life they are situated in. And the “recipe” might be even more coaching or consultancy – like in the Freudian tradition where therapy never ends (because of the Freudian paradox of the unconscious – you can never get in touch with it or get to know it; you are always one down, and the analysis have to continue as a never ending story). I am hereby not saying that there is anything wrong with talking about hopes and dreams and visions. On the contrary. But I put my finger at the problem of getting too fast to talk about future actions and what to do before a careful examination of the present and the past and the stories about which values which might be harassed in the events leading up to the problems. You must practice *double listening*. This is the key concept. Whenever people talk about a problem there is a value at stake, something precious. I have talked to many people who have talked to coaches who too quick turned to talk about hopes and the future and what to do, and these persons have through this practice felt even more frustrated than before the coaching took place.

When people fall into a river, you try to do your best to take them onto the river bank. You try to create a safe or secure place from which they can tell about what has happened. This safe and secure place can be virtual in the sense that it is the spirit with which you meet people that creates this river bank of feeling secure. You must listen with sympathy to the person. You do not ask them about how it felt to be in the river. This would be to ask like an idiot. You asked them about what happened. And you must not in any way ask critical or condemnatory questions or in any way possess a critical tone. You try to help people to get in touch with their sense of self. Only when people have become in touch with their sense of self (Meares, 2000) they are capable or moving forward in the journey in life sufficiently empowered. The sense of self is sensed when a person is able to have a kind inner conversational play, as Meares phrases it, and the feeling of inner peace and at ease is related to this sense of self. Then they can do what feels right for them to do when they are able to act in harmony with their own values and not what the coach feels might be good for them. As the Danish philosopher, Ole Fogh Kirkeby writes: “The most important thing is to be in deep contact with your values and to

be able to act in full integrity with them” (Kirkeby 2009, p. 136). I am arguing for a decentered approach. The coach must always take a decentered position and keep the client in a centered position. Both the coach and the leader must start with a listening attitude. The Danish leadership philosopher Kirkeby (1998, p. 251) writes: “To lead is nothing less than to listen.” Kirkeby stresses that both the coach and leader both must listen to the voices of the others - and to the voices of herself. And this can be a hard balance to maintain. Kirkeby is of the opinion that in the core of the self there is a will “to go through a “no” beyond all costs” (ibid.). You got to have the will, the power and “the courage to maintain the break; to resist the demand of reconciliation. You have to reject the strategic temptation of the grand healing” (ibid. p. 252). You only get this strength when you come to think of and really get in touch with in a spontaneous and immediate sense (to speak in Kierkegaard’s terms) what is worth living and dying for.

The task of the coach is therefore to make people think. Not about all the norms and the “oughts”, but about what is important in life. People must know their values. We live for such a short while and we are dead for so long. But we have no direct access to our values. They are in a sense taken for given because they are such a close part of our life – they are the glasses through which we watch and evaluate the world, they are our toes which we use to keep our balance, and when someone step on your toes you do not experience your toes, but the pain. Values are therefore most often recognized by the pain we experience. So the main task of the coach is therefore to help people think about and name their values in the midst of the experienced problems:

*“Only the thinker has a potent life, free for guilt and hatred; and only life explains the thinker,”* Deleuze writes about the philosophy of Spinoza (Deleuze 1988, p. 14) ... *The true city offers its citizens love to freedom in stead of the hope for rewards or even the security of owing things”* (ibid. p. 26)

Think about the city as the organization and the citizens as the employees. Deleuze quotes Spinoza for saying that “it is slaves, not free men, you give rewards for virtues” (Ibid.).

## A little about the story of coaching psychology

The interest in coaching and the coaching-wave in general seems to come along with the emergence of business psychology instead of organizational psychology as it was called until about 20 years ago. Especially psychologist who wants to get into the business world and earn much money from this field has used this as an identity. They have taken up the metaphor of the coach used primarily in the sports world in stead of the name supervision which are mostly used in the helping professions. Coaching seems to be more related to goals, fighting, strategy and victory than the notion supervision is (see Holmgren 2006). For years there has been a tradition at the universities for work- and organizational psychology. There has not yet come an institute for business psychology – at least to my knowledge – although there are societies for business psychology. The term business psychology has a touch of neoliberalism over it and a smell of business, money and profit. It implies that “business” is something different than “organization”. Perhaps “business psychologist” feels more related to economy, to create profit and to the employers than to the employees. There is nothing wrong with focusing on money and profit – but this should not be the focus for coaches nor for psychologists. The focus should be on freedom and values for whoever you are coaching. The focus should be on actions, on relationships, not on production – in Arendt’s terms (1998). This is the normative approach argued for in this paper. Every action in our human world is normative and has ethical implications. Coaching has to be in favor of the coexisting multiplicities of the many different narratives (Deleuze and Parnett 2006, p. 11).

Some of the coaching mentioned both in the literature and in the media, preaches that you should focus on tools, goals and the future. There seems to be a hysteric demand for solutions (Espedal et al., 2008; Willert og Stegeager, 2012). As if life was an equation with a beautiful result. It rarely has. Life always starts with new beginnings, as the philosopher Hannah Arendt (1998) says, it is never finish. It has no end. It is not easy to say what life is about, but perhaps we should use the wisdom of the philosophers Nietzsche and Foucault and think of life as a struggle of will, of volition, of power. Or a game of who should decide, dramas, discords, ac-

cidents, disappointments and power fields which have to be overcome. And all of it has to be conventionalized by stories as Bruner says (2004) so that all can make some kind of sense for us: "Oh, it is just because he..." and then life can go on, because we have a story, a and a theme, a genre which can encapsulate the (scary) events. If you follow the thoughts of the French philosopher Deleuze we can use the metaphors nomad, deserts, landscapes, waves, winds and rhizomes as concepts for the complexity of life. Life as journeys, as movements with passages and dangers en route - like the story *Lord of The Ring*. If you with Deleuze think of life as a multiplicity of coexisting diversities (2006, p. 11), you can also think of life as many folds folded in one another, and the task for coach is therefore the never-ending unfolding of the folds. There are so many folds in our lives, so many events, trajectories, experiences and stories to unfold in our language and in our narratives. Kirkeby says (1998, 2009) that we might be led by illusions of autonomy. But we are always part of something, of relationships with power although the independent individual seems to be an ideal in our neoliberalist world and its focus on *The Economic Man* (May 2012).

There is no culture which has not identified itself through stories, myths, rites, illusions and rituals. You cannot imagine human life without stories - the old Greeks myths, the Nordic stories about Odin, Thor, Valhalla etc. There are the different Christian myths and stories. There are the more modern stories about coaching and leadership and all the promises connected to them related to salvation and happiness. But I regard them as dangerous illusions. Their function seems to be to create a kind of sense and stability.

It is through stories that we define ourselves and each other. But stories are not innocent. They are always normative. They are like an axe we use to cut through the events on our journeys. They are like punctuations in a line of words. They are always conjunctive and gives us a hint about how to live and what a good life means. And the strange thing is that the stories guide the teller of them more than the teller drives the implications of the stories. You are seldom aware of the implications of the story that guides you and that you believe in. We are always home-blind. Language, words, concepts, norms and moral exists as threads woven into the carpet we produce with our stories and

are central elements in this carpet. Or as Kirkeby writes: "Man is subordinated his own communication because he is subordinated language" (1998, p. 199). And language is *always* ruled by language games, as the Austrian-English philosopher Wittgenstein has coined the term, and it is his metaphor for how language works. Michel Foucault uses this metaphor too when he describes the way the discourses and the language work. But the actual task of the language is to create meaning and coordination. As the Chilean biologist and philosopher Humberto Maturana said: Language is actions of coordination of actions. Kirkeby continues:

*"The language game we play presupposes meaning which implies that we are played by this game ... The subject itself is the creation of these games. Our autonomy and presumable powerfulness concerning thinking, reflection, reasoning and decision-making is an illusion"* (Ibid., p. 193-194).

Human beings might perhaps at best be described through their stories about affects, will, passions and actions - both about their inner invisible phenomenological world, as William James highlights, and about their outer visible world. Deleuze writes that there seems to be a reversed relationship between force of action and the receptiveness for other feelings (1998, p. 27), and that there is a big variation in this. Joy, he writes, is the most important affect strengthening the force of action: "Ethical joy relates to the thoughtful affirmation" (Ibid., p. 29). The phrase "ethical joy" might be of central importance and in coaching practice. Ethical joy is about not letting your life be infected by hatred, sorrow, competition, envy, shame, guilt, bad consciousness, pity, self-criticism, viciousness, indignation, regrets - "the emotions of slaves" (Ibid., p. 26). The radical understanding of the importance of language and stories that both Kirkeby, Bruner, Wittgenstein, Foucault and Deleuze share, must be shockingly for persons and theories, which subscribe to a rational and modernistic theory about life with their focus on goals, strategies, solutions and the ideas about "the inner true human" - Foucault calls this the naturalistic and humanistic illusion. Life cannot be controlled and regulated, as Arendt (1998) writes. With every action there is a possible new beginning.

## Organizational games

In the Danish municipality of Aarhus, the second largest city in Denmark, there are seven levels of management on the area of children's welfare before you reach the political level. And at each level they only talk about economy, structure and strategy, the leaders I have talked to from this municipality have told me. The language game and the stories told in such organizations can only be centered around the struggle for money – and about power: who is in charge? Who can decide? And there might develop a competition, a power struggle about finances and funding, between the different levels and departments involved. The strong power-games and strategic narratives in such organizations are dominating become the dominating language games and discourses. But these discourses are seldom spoken openly, they are hidden in discourses with key words as trust, respect and loyalty.

In the municipality of Elsinore and in almost any municipality in Denmark each school has lost its own principal and a bunch of schools have now the same principal or director. The distance between employees and their leader has become bigger. Even if there is a majority against such decisions and even if there is neither convincing economic calculations nor pedagogic reasons for doing this, a majority at the political level decides this based on a rhetoric saying, “we want to secure the flexibility for the future because of decreasing number of children.” Wittgenstein was the first one to say that language bewitches. If you work in such an organization, you are “out” if you go against this kind of discourse – because “no one can be against the future”. But, as Christie (2012) writes, we seem to produce a society with more and more distance between its members.

We need a total new concept for welfare leadership that does not transform discourses from production lines working with cars and electrical components to the democracy and the good life where concepts like solidarity, kindness, caring, education, equality and the good life is central. Kirkeby (2011) writes in line the ideas presented here about the necessity “that welfare leadership becomes normative, experimenting and innovative” (p. 237). He refers to professor Niels Aakerstrøm Andersen, CBS Copenhagen, and his colleague's groundbreaking research. The tendency to centralizing and big units are harming as a general

principle creating despair, insolence and alienation from one's own values. As an alternative, Kirkeby writes: “The state must ensure that the new decentralized entities have optimal opportunities to be independent of the classic forms of financing” (ibid., P. 246). Such practice could enable self-esteem: “Committing to the values of his life is a source of self-respect” and “to work with love, especially without expectations of retribution, is the way to the good” (ibid., p.156).

Narrative coaching wants people to get closer to what is important to them, their values. I think there is a need for completely different, more radical, simple methods than problem solving, hopes and dreams. There is a need for the ordinary listening of what the people involved have to tell about the common problems of ordinary life which get in the way of solving their professional tasks so that they can be confirmed in their experiences. The important and central concept and practice that it implies are just confirmation, affirmation - not recognition (see, for example, Kirkeby 2008, p. 27). The basic concept of all life is *confirmation*, writes Nietzsche and with him Deleuze (1996, 2006).

The major problem in most organizations is that the managers do not listen. This has catastrophic consequences. And if they listen, they only do so because of strategic reasons because “one should listen”. While everything is planned in advance. They think they must inform, so they speak. Information is usually nothing more than camouflaged power. But it is only the speaker who becomes wiser. You cannot rely on “informing”, one can basically only invite to opinion formation. The creation of meaning and opinion usually occurs afterwards when the employees talk in the corners, away from the management.

We are all subject to the narratives and cultural categories that lie embedded in the power of culture narratives. A story is not a neutral story. It always has a morale and a built-in expectation of how life should be. Stories are at the same time interpretations and evaluations. Stories are thus the most powerful tools of culture and are filled with injunctions and expectations hidden in the truisms of alleged naturalness. This modern discursive power that Foucault (see, for example, Heede, 2004, especially chapters 1, 4 and 9, and Jensen, 2005) has written so carefully about has no center and cannot be specifically identified. It is everywhere as expectations and morals - just look at the

literature about coaching and all its recipes. Just see the wave of self-help literature. You can only see the effects of power on humans and on what they suffer from; the norms and truisms flow through us in relation to how life should be lived, in relation to what you are allowed to. You can see the influence of modern power on the number of mental disorders and the amount of people, between 20 and 39 years taking antidepressant medicine in 2010 compared to 1995 in Denmark. There are over 100,000 more people in this age group fifteen years later – in 2010. People, I think, have become tired of living and therefore the depression appears as the modern mental disorder, as the French sociologist Alain Ehrenberg has documented (2010). Mental disorders change from culture to culture and from one historical period to the next. Even the psychiatrists' diagnosis manuals change from edition to edition, according to what a group of American psychiatrists can agree on - read, for example the informative article on the history and interchangeability of psychiatric diagnoses in *Weekendavisen* Friday, September 17, 2011.

The concept of translocutionality, a neologism formed by Kirkeby (1998) shows that meaning is formed through the act of telling. Meaning is not hidden somewhere in the brain but is established through the cultural concepts we use like tools when we tell stories about what has happened. Narratives are so important in human life, because the world, so to speak, comes to light, makes sense and lives through tales. Kirkeby writes that “the concept of translocutionarity motivated narrativity as the only possible valid relationship between theory and empiricism, based on terms of our use of the language and for the relationship between language and thought” (1998, p. 205). Translocutionarity is Kirkeby's ingenious concept of how meaning arises. “Trans” means through and “locutio” is the Latin expression of the act of speaking. The term translocutionarity implies that the sentence is produced through the act of speaking or writing, that is, by formulating with the words through which the narrative unfolds. The meaning is not existing in advance, before the words and language have conceived it. There is only sensation and sense before the creation of meaning. In a sense, consciousness is always an effect, an effect that you cannot be conscious about. Translocutionarity is basically based on a plain and simple thought: the words are the building blocks with

which the house of meaning is raised. As Heidegger says, language is the house we live in. But not only the speech contains meaning - the act itself contains meaning. For example, the child can point to the milk before it can say the word milk and ask for it. Or as Kirkeby wrote somewhere else: The Egyptians could build the pyramids long before they had a theory of geometry, a story and a conceptualization of the geometry needed to build the pyramids.

Our theories, meaning and understanding emerge as a conceptualization of practice. We do not understand anything out there - we understand our own understanding because it establishes meaning for us. Understanding is a practical matter and must always be based on the action, on the understanding that something happens, and something is done. It is through the formation of concepts, through the naming of the practice, of the thing that is to be named that meaning is created. The word creates what it mentions, as the old Danish psalm writer Grundtvig says in one of his hymns. When we make sense through the naming and through the story, we bring the actions and events into part of a plot. It is the plot in a narrative, the necessity and likelihood of the actions taking place, that drives the story forward. The theme in the plot does not become obvious until the end of a story. The theme is like the motive and takes place at the landscape of consciousness, but the plot takes place on the landscape of actions (Bruner 1986). When what happens becomes too unlikely, too incomprehensible, the formation of meaning stops. A good coaching should be able to put light on the themes involved in a plot.

### Case 1

A department manager in a coaching session where the audience were other leaders, could not understand why her staff, nurses at a hospice, could not say to a colleague when he or she had not performed the routines that had been agreed. She knew that in the daily work they could say everything to the dying and their relatives without getting red marks on their throat, so why could they not just transfer these skills and use them with their colleagues? She had talked to them, and they had been practicing through the situation with her, but little did it help. It was a riddle for her.

She was asked what she would call the thing (the conceptualization, the naming) that she her-

self could do and that she thought her employees should be able to do as well. She replied that she had always been able to do what had to be done. She was asked what the story was about this skill and about this morality, this truism. She was now talking about a math teacher, Pete Hansen, who had a great light in her 8-9th grade who taught mathematics, and she had always been easy at mathematics. He had even given her the task of teaching students in other classes who had problems in their lives. There had also been a manager, Steen, at a children's center where she had worked after the high school, who had told her that either working with the problems, that is, doing the best while working and giving the children a good experience, even if you know that the kids are having a hard time at home - or you find another job. These two experiences had really strengthened her, and had become a value, a guiding principle, she had been following ever since. She smiled when she told these stories because she suddenly could see that she believed the same principles also applied to her employees and that she centered herself and her own standards instead of listening to the complexity and the problems her employees experienced applying her principle.

It is a key element in narrative coaching that, as far as possible, there should be an aware audience, someone who listen to the conversation (see White 2008, chapter 4 on definitional ceremonies and Myerhoff 1986). The task of the witnesses is not to give applause, advice or evaluation, but to talk about their own experiences related to story they just have heard and witnessed. One of the witnesses of the above story told of his son, who did not spend much time with his friends at the moment, even though he was really good at social contact. She also talked about her own and the father's concern that the 14-year-old was playing too much computer and not seeing his friends as much as they thought he should. She also mentioned the metaphor about the intermediate situation in relation to her nurses, that some tennis players can beat the blows for training but cannot transfer and use the same kind of strokes in a real tennis match. After she had listened to the witness, the department manager suddenly thought of how difficult it was for her to help her own son with mathematics: "Are my standards in the way of his learning?" she asked. And she continued: "Am I not spacious enough in relation to my employees?

Do not I have an eye on how precious their relationships with their colleagues are, and that it is a completely different relationship than they have to patients and relatives?

When the coaching session was over, most of her own words were read to her - I have named this "poetizing" the practice of poetry - one makes the epic, the narrative, into poetry. You take a few of the words and sentences the coached has used. Here is an extract of this poetry, which was written and read out loud by one of the other witnesses:

*The nurses.*

*Constructive criticism.*

*Caring suffocate.*

*I am trying to understand the difficulty of saying it; why can you not be critical.*

*It's so hard to transfer a professional relationship to a collegial relationship.*

*Steen. He taught me to meet people. Either stop being sad - or stop being here.*

*I cannot understand that they can face patients and relatives, why not colleagues.*

*What's the worst thing that can happen?*

*Precious in another way.*

*It could be a way to understand it.*

*A lot at stake for them.*

*Their fears are filling them.*

*Fear of destroying their relationships with colleagues.*

*My son, mathematics.*

*I stand in the way of his learning.*

*I'm in the way: "They must be able to do it!"*

*Pull yourself together.*

*Some of the hard things I've met: "I'll have to do."*

*A school teacher, Pete could create a trustworthy relationship.*

*One should attend his classes and be skilled.*

*I was better able to talk to people than my brother.*

*Embrace them.*

*Maybe I do not meet them as I should.*

*Ask some other questions.*

*Serious questions.*

*It is always nice to be heard.*

*The feeling that I can be alone.*

*It means a lot that others feel the same way.*

*I may not simplify it too much.*

*Maybe they will feel more understood.*

*My leader.*



*We feel the same way.*

*An oppressive bothering judge: "Some banal nonsense."*

*"Shut up that voice!" I say to myself.*

The department manager, the person at the center of this definitional ceremony as it might be understood according to Myerhoff (1986), shed a tear, as the words, only some of her own words, was read out loud. Moved in the double meaning of the word. First, more pathos had come over her, more feeling, more sense of herself. Something usually happens when people talk about something that is precious to them – "I found myself, crying" as one of my English supervisors Murray Cox once quoted from one of his patients at a psychiatric hospital. On the other hand, through the new narrative, which contained a more complex understanding of nurses' relationships, she had moved to somewhere else from which she could see something else, something more. Bruner describes this so beautifully: "To bring the doubtful reassurance of the well-known to harmonize with the temptations of the possible" (2004, p. 21). Or as Ludwig Wittgenstein once has phrased this: Always take a flight to where there is a free view. It requires art, he writes.

### Coaching as jazz

The metaphor relevant to coaching might be improvisation and experimentation. It takes both courage and self-control to improvise and experiment; courage to leave the score or the already available manuscript when leaving the well-known doubtful reassurance. In jazz it is the task of improvising over a theme, a figure. You must agree on three things when playing jazz: what melody you play, the tone and the beat. But you cannot just start improvising; that is known by any jazz musician. When practicing improvisation, practice scales, you play the same scale over and over, again and again. One must be one with his instrument, treat it with humility and respect, really care for it. You can experiment with music and life, but first when you are able control and understand the rules, the game and the scales, otherwise you will behave like a fool in Blake's poem that breaks in to where the angels fear to tread. Coaching is (like life) a craft to be learned; It is a way of dealing with people and their problems, which are guided by some ethical principles learned through practice.

There are three conditions for creating a skilled practitioner: Being willing to talk about the problems you encounter in your life; that you have an appropriate critical theory and methods so that you can make sense of the field in question and as the third condition that you can connect the theory and your methods with the problems and your practice in general. Therefore, theory and methods are so important. The theory gives you the concepts to see with. Critical theory allows us to think everything differently.

### Externalization and Reflexive Distance

The task of coaching is first and foremost to ensure that the person who receives coaching can tell about the issues and considerations the person is dealing with in relation to the problems that have occurred in the protagonist's life. The task is to create reflexive distance to the stories, the powerful strings, the coachee as another Pinocchio, is tied up with and ruled by. The purpose of coaching, from the perspective of this author, is therefore through the naming to externalize the internalized narratives, for example, guilt or sadness so that the coachee can assess whether they will continue to let the problems and their effects and the associated stories be dominant in their lives, or whether they would prefer to let their lives turn and become led by the power and the perspectives of other narratives.

### Case 2

I feel so much guilt, a leader said. "What's the story?" I asked. The leader had grown up in a small interior environment, where the strict Pietist morality had ruled. But the leader could also tell the following story as response to the question if there any places where the pietist morality did not rule: He told a long story about how he had rebelled. "What inspired you to do this?" I asked. There had been a new school director who introduced completely different values to the young people in the village. There had also been a story when he grew up about a couple that had been divorced. It had been completely unthinkable in the village to become divorced, and it split the entire village into fractions. Through this story there was room for not only the story of guilt but also a tale of rebellion and standing on your ground, which spontaneously allowed the leader to tell a story from the previous week in which he had stood before a group of

employees. His life was now ruled not only by the narrative of a negative sad resentment filled with guilt, but also by stories of joy. Narrative coaching wishes to expand the number of available stories a person can tell about his life. It was the Russian psychologist Vygotsky who spoke of “internalization to describe how we take over and imitate established ways of speaking and telling stories and then making them our own” (Bruner, 2004, p. 114). We learn, without actually knowing or being conscious of “self-evident” ways of speaking and telling that make sense in the way we live: “We create our self-defining stories to respond to the situations, we will continue to live in. We become family members with family stories, “as Bruner writes (ibid., p. 115). Or with Kirkeby’s words: “We are tangled in to the world because we as a trader are always already wrapped up in the way the body and consciousness are already wrapped up in the way the body and consciousness collide with each other” (2008, p. 21) “In other words, we are already part of the event before, but also while we are aware of it.” (Ibid., P. 22) It may sound so simple when writing about problems and stories as Bruner and Kirkeby do; but it is not always easy in practice. You realize that nothing is so simple and straightforward in the practice of living the world as you think it might be. But it is always possible to tell more, as Deleuze often writes.

Where this reckoning leads Kirkeby to the exercises of protreptics, where, as a discipline, one should relate to concepts realizing their roots (often proto-indo-european) as in the Greek academy, where state leaders should relate to key concepts such as freedom, justice, etc., the *narrative* response to this acknowledgment is that one must firstly relate to the concrete practice and to the events and stories that unfold in this practice. You must necessarily go from what you know to what is possible known. You must always start with practice – to follow Vygotsky. One must scaffold the story, as Vygotsky called it (White 2008, chapter 6), ie. build concepts related to other concepts, values, principles and a dedication that creates a foundation for acting without or with a minimum fear.

### Case 3

Stories are like boats we sail around - a slight crack let in the water of life can mean that the boat begins to sink. Stories are fragile productions that have real effects. I was called by a desperate man, I felt,

who asked me for a coaching session because he felt his life was crumbling and dissolving: he was fifty years old and had a boy on five with his forty-five-year-old wife who “accidentally,” as he expressed it, had become pregnant. He had told her before this happened that he did not want more children. He had a daughter of fifteen years from a former marriage. He began to cry on the phone when he talked about his older daughter. The story seemed to contain a vein of trauma and pain. Should he now leave his wife and spend even less time with their five-year-old son, or should he stay with her and see his dreams and wishes, his hopes and expectations for his life crumble, he asked me. He said he imagined himself attend his not yet born child’s student party with a walker. And he did not want this to happen. Not only did he have problems related to his wife and her pregnancy. He said that his company had been bankrupt six months ago because of a financial crisis and that he was not member of the unemployment security system. He and the family lived by his wife’s salary.

What is a problem other than a particular way of dealing with the world? And when the world does not want what you want - yes, it’s unsettling. The task of the coach is to ask people to relate to their lives and to the “problems”, to the norms and the expectations that limit and control their lives. Life is right now and now, as the poet Jørgen Leth writes I one of his poems from 2011. Coaching is about making people think and getting rid of the often-foolish ideas and expectations from certain cultural norms that have taken on power over the protagonist’s life.

He spoke on the phone as if he had fallen into a river of events and tears and could not reach the shore by his own help. He had been hit in the solar plexus by several hard-hitting events, which he had no narrative parades to restrain. This man suddenly came too far from his favorite values and his tales about what the good life is about. He no longer seemed to have a narrative or an ethically pleasing reservoir of values or experiences to draw on which could help him to conventionalize the events he was a part of - that is, make them fending and manageable.

### The Self Happens in Events

The collapse and desperation of the man in Case 3, is associated with a collapse in the dominant story he has about his life. He does not have enough

“narrative resources,” as Bruner calls it, not enough historically-lived experiences that enable him to conventionalize the unexpected, his wife’s pregnancy, his unemployment that had occurred in his life. The events were not in the original manuscript of his life so to speak. There had in some way come too much distance in his life, between the events that took place in the landscape of the actions and in the landscape of consciousness (Bruner, 2004, p. 34), where his thoughts and feelings unfold. Life did not unfold as he wanted it to at the landscape of actions. The events had run ahead of him and challenged his landscape of consciousness, which is always at the intersection of past stories and expectations for the future. “The Self Happens,” as Kirkeby (2008) writes. “The Self moves through events whose meaning is not fixed but is itself dependent on the course of this process.” (P. 12) And “the movement of the self is bound inseparably into a dynamic surface area formed by a polyphonic texture that only in certain constellations produce harmonic effects.” (p. 12) We cannot expect harmony in our lives. There are no innocent places, as Foucault has expressed. We always live as part of events we necessarily do not have and will never get the full understanding of. Because the event of getting to understanding, is in itself an event. The Self is therefore always a process, always becoming. We are not beings, but *becomings*, as it sounds pompous and poetry-slam-like in English with a Deleuze plagiarized wording. “The event becomes the real subject. We happen because we are forgotten in the process of happening.” (Kirkeby, 2008, p. 26). The task of the narrative is this: Bruner teaches us to make the exotic, strange and unexpected homely: “Stories make the unexpected less surprising, less creepy: they domesticate the unexpectedly, give it a glow of the ordinary. Domestication is an important way of maintaining a culture’s context,” (Bruner, 1999, p. 104). It’s with people like cultures: Without stories that can create a “oh, it’s just that,” man remains directional and meaningful. Without a response that can make sense and without a response that can create confirmation, a life remains shaking and without coherence. Not getting feedback is the worst thing that can happen in a person’s life, writes Russian language theorist Bakhtin (1986, p. 127). Stories are the glue of meaning that hold us together. The meaning of the narrative is what literary theory calls the narrative’s plot. We can define a story as consisting of and es-

tablished through events over time, linked together, by a plot, meaning, which most often comes *after* the events have taken place. Something has happened in a life. Eg. in life of the man that called me in case number 3. But he has no story that can contain the events of his life. Kirkeby writes that “the narrative, the narrative figure, shows us that something is anticipated and that something is completed. The narrative indicates a presence everywhere by someone who still reveals this presence gradually, moment by moment.” (Kirkeby 1998, p. 201). When there is nothing to anticipate because there is no meaningful story, you are hanging in midair in a wonder of what is going on and therefore you cannot anticipate what to do. When there is no story like a compass to show the way, you walk around in the mist. What we need to do, and when we must do it, remains then mysterious, unclear and unpredictable: “The right moment does not belong to us, it belongs to the story we are engaged in and which we can never go beyond and overcome” (ibid, p. 202). If the story you are entangled in, woven in to, contains threads, power lines that pull in different directions, there will not be a right moment. Then you get lost, thrown out into the open sea without rudder and without control of your life. The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze quotes the pictures the philosopher Leibnitz to say, “You might think you are in a safe harbor, but then suddenly you discover that you have been thrown out in the open sea.” If one’s narrative resources, if the stories one has available, cannot embrace and domesticate the events that take place, life remains more or less meaningless and unresolved. “The experience is linguistic in its essence. As is often mentioned, the child first experiences the subject as known when it has its name, the name is the essence of the object, and it lives in it in the same way as it takes color and form” (ibid., P. 193). It is through the naming of the event that it gets its meaning. It is through the naming of the experience, through the concepts used about what has happened and happens that sense is created.

### Conceptualization and intensity

The central aspect of coaching is conceptualization. It is through the concepts used that the coaching process gets its intensity, pathos, and the feeling of what has happened. Through the process of conceptualization, through meaning making the protagonist who wants coaching is given a normative

grip on the world. It is through the actual naming that the meaning-producing process takes place so that which has not yet made sense but is a diffuse “it” or “something” can become part of a meaningful story structured through events over time. This happens through the wonder of the language: “The language has built in a secret. It implies both that the form of the said and the content of what is said hides from us. Therefore, there is no data, no solid information, because even the most precise quantitative detail is open to the infinity of meaning of the principle of translocutionality” (Kirkeby 1998, P. 203). Where the story is going to make the unexpected, the exotic, to something homely, the coaching must do the opposite. Coaching must exoticize the well-known, or as it is called by Bourdieu, in smoldering and beautiful English: To exoticize the domestic. (Quoted in White 2004, p. Vi).

We must never believe that we have fully understood what the protagonist says. A problem is only a problem because something is important. But the protagonist usually has no direct access to what is important in her life. Problems always cast a shadow over what’s important. They tend to blind you. And especially if the problem is referred to as an unnamed and foggy “IT” without a real identity. We might ask some of these simple externalizing question:

*What is the story of the problem?*

*What could be a significant experience-near name to the problem, a name that expresses how the problem is felt for you?*

*What are some of the effects of the problem – on yourself, your thoughts about yourself and about your relationships?*

*How has it got its influence over your life and relationships? What are some of the tactics of the problem?*

*Do you have areas in your life that is not dominated by the problem, and where you perhaps can live in a more sort of harmony with your values and what you appreciate in life?*

*Do you in all this have a sense of what matters and is of importance to you?*

*What is the story of what you appreciate and value in life? How and where have you been recruited into this club of values?*

*What does it mean to you to know that these are your values? Where does it take you to in your life?*

The concept at its best brings together the sensation, the feeling, the intensities of life. This is captured by the question: *What would you call the problem that is facing you, what has happened, with an experience-related word or concept?* The secret of any event lies in its name, as Kirkeby writes (1998). This question is the central narrative question that can start a story that creates a reflexive distance to the problem and its influence over the life of the person, it can start the journey of taking the person to another and more preferred place in life.

#### Case 4

“It was a breach of trust,” said an employee of a company that had been without a department manager for a while. Some of his colleagues had assembled behind closed doors, as he expressed it, and afterwards they had whispered something in the ear of the general manager. When in such a small narrative the term *breach of trust* is used, it must be because trust is important to this person. The concept of breach of trust therefore must have inherent in it, the concept of trust. I name this phenomenon “conflictuality” (Holmgren, 2006). The concept conflictuality expresses that each concept is related not to its opposite but to the other side of the coin, so to speak. Each concept exists only in relation to other concepts. There is therefore no dichotomy, no contrast, but an association; not a contradiction but a compassion: There cannot be a breach of trust in a narrative without a hidden narrative about the value of trust. The adjacent narrative question might therefore be:

*What is the story of you and the importance of trust? How has it become important in your life?*

The man in this case told about a twenty-year collaboration with artists in a squad of 4-5 people, each of which was based on trust and that one can always talk about what’s happening after the events, after the show. There had never been dis-

harmony in the group. The effect of bringing him closer to the experiences of his lived life and of talking about the history of trust as almost a truism for him, took him away from the well-known doubtful reassurance (Bruner) and closer to where he currently put his trust in his workplace. He could now tell him that he actually believes there is trust in several relationships at the workplace, and that it is only in relation to two colleagues where he do not find the trust that as he wishes. He had not thought of this before.

It is probably by now clear that my point in view presented in this paper is that the task of coaching to make people think in ways they had not thought of before related to their preferred experiences. It is probably one of the most important things to upgrade the experiences of people, as Christie (2013, p.56) says. There must be have been a blockage in the stream of consciousness in order for an event to occur as a problem. It is the old American psychologist William James who has compared the consciousness with a stream (see Meares, 2000). When we can think freely, when our thoughts are not going in circles, when we do not keep seeing the same images over and over, as you know from people who have experienced something traumatic - ranging from the little quarrel in the morning to violent traumatic events with violence, death and mutilation - in other words, when you have a good sense of what you can and should do in a given situation, the stream of consciousness flows freely. The task of the coach is to find cracks in the narrative, which can give access to other and more preferred stories of life that can open up to more preferred experiences and stories, so that the problematic story based on certain events is no longer blocked. Or as Michael White expressed it with a metaphor from Irving Goffman: Going from the thin conclusions about identity to the thicker stories about life (2008). Narrative coaching therefore maintains respect for the potentially unifying force of the escape routes and pathways that lie in any narrative about a problem. Or as Kirkeby puts it: "With Chairos, the right moment, the narrative becomes the key to the truthfulness between language and reality. For the story, the moment of speech, the occurrence of something can be said to relate to the occurrence of the event" (1998, p. 204). Or as he writes elsewhere, "we are co-creators of its "reality" "(2008, p. 32). The heartbreaking thing is to realize that what is difficult in life is only difficult

because it is told from a certain place and with a certain normativity. That is, we are all guided by voices in stories that speak, carries over, judges etc.

### Modern power

Coaching aware of what Foucault called modern power is about helping the people you coach out of the jail, out of the limitations, one given story's dominant voice, its "shoulds", contain. It is Foucault who has demonstrated the effects of the modern power, depicting people and what they are supposed to be. In every story there are culturally produced norms and expectations at stake. They can always be different. You can always go against them. Every action is a new beginning. If you do not have a good sense of what you want and can, you can swiftly be overwhelmed by the expectations of the event if you only have the conventions and dreams to draw on. Conventions are the main enemy, as Deleuze writes (2006). Where the traditional power is visible and can gather the masses, modern power is invisible and splits the masses off into individualization that accompanies neoliberalism - not with the liberal attitude. The modern power has no center but operates invisibly with eg, even the young children must take responsibility for their own learning, employees must take responsibility for their own development and learning, and employees and managers in general must do it all by themselves. This creates stress.

Stress is linked to the experience of loneliness, and with the modern power's promise that if you just cling on, do more of the same, yes, everything will be better. But where there is power there is freedom. Freedom is inherent in the concept of power. It is its conflictuality. Power (the moral expectations of how to live what one "should be") works only, as opposed to force, where the citizens themselves contribute to this power. "Freedom consists ... not in the ability to determine actions according to rules that everyone must rationally follow but rather refuse to adapt and accept the rules through which we understand and govern ourselves and others" (Heede, 2004, p. 142).

Modern power is a system of actions of discourses that influence actions, writes Foucault (1982, p. 220) in a small but important writing. The task of coaching is therefore always to focus on the cultural truisms that influences on human actions which actually make them slaves. Heede refers to Foucault who speaks of "reflexive power" that

opposes social power, which is to create the basis for an “existential creativity” (ibid., P. 137), where “freedom consists ... in our ability to change the techniques by which we form ourselves as moral subjects “(ibid., p. 142) so that we can “give new content to the undefined project of freedom” (Foucault in Heede, ibid., p. 143). It is important that “there are no universal models for true, beautiful lifestyles, because the self should be an extremely individual project” (ibid., P. 148). It may be a comfort to know that it takes a lifetime to learn to live, as the philosopher Derrida said in an interview in the newspaper Information three weeks before he died in 2004.

### Concluding remarks

I have in this paper argued that problems is primary in coaching practice. But the good and promising this is that problems are inextricably linked to something which is important in human life, with values that you don't often see clearly in your daily life. Not until you feel distressed or hurt. You first recognize your values when they have been stepped upon. It is crucial to have enough time for the protagonist in the coaching process to tell his story so that he can come into (bodily) contact with healing tales about his values. The preferred healing narratives work as ballast in the boat on the journey of life. If there is a problem on one side of the coin, there must be something else, namely the preferred values and their stories on the other to outweigh the weight and the influence of the problems.

It is very helpful that the coaching does not take place individually in the lumbar space of privacy and individualization, but that there are witnesses, an audience as an attentive and affirmative audience to witness the protagonist's tale so that he can get out of his loneliness. Loneliness is the biggest problem for man in our time. It is loneliness that creates stress; a loneliness that dictates that humans must cope with problems alone. Narrative coaching can act as a counterweight, as a response to modern power.

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