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17<sup>th</sup> Consultation for the European Network of Health Care Chaplaincy

**Connecting Heart to Heart – Being a Chaplain&Being with Others**

**Who are you?**

## 1. Introduction

My name is Lars Björklund and I am a writer and I now – although retired – work as a hospital chaplain at The University Hospital in Uppsala. I previously worked as a chaplain at The Sigtuna Foundation – and before that I worked as a hospital chaplain with a special focus on children and parents the Children's Hospital in Uppsala.

My name is Kerstin Dillmar and I previously worked as a hospital chaplain and section director at the same University Hospital of Uppsala – Akademiska sjukhuset - for eighteen years – and when Lars retired I was chosen to become the new chaplain at The Sigtuna Foundation in combination with working as a reverend canon at The Uppsala Cathedral.

It is a great honor for us to be here today.

Some years ago, we started to work together, and we have - so far - written four books about pastoral care based on the experience of our work as hospital chaplains within the Swedish context – and the books are in Swedish – sorry about that.

The lecture that we are going to have here today has been named "Being with Others – Who are you?"

We have got a number of PowerPoint slides with some keywords. We will also take some examples from meetings with patients and relatives to exemplify a way of speaking - or not speaking, to do or not to do - in these meetings. These examples have of course been somewhat changed, but they are based on real situations. And at the end there will be some time if there are any questions.

-So, shall we start?

## 2. Cubism

I'm at an exhibition of Pablo Picasso and his work at the Tate Modern in London. My favorite art museum – well I haven't seen them all – but I still think it's my favorite. There are a lot of paintings and small sculptures. And I am looking at a painting

called *Woman with green hat*, from 1941, when a man comes up to me and says – This is the ugliest thing I’ve ever seen.

-Look! How can anyone earn so much money making this sort of art? Art? The nose aside of the head, and he didn’t even manage to get the eyes in the right place. Look, the lines are not connected at all! It’s disgusting! I could have done it much better myself!

When Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque had the first cubistic exhibition in Paris – it was 1907. An art reviewer from a newspaper called it cubism because he too thought it was quite ugly - too many geometric figures, too many lines that didn’t connect, colors disturbing each other – and that simplified - out of order – painting – hard to recognize what it really was meant to be – something totally new – and not that good at all.

So why – why does someone who can make a drawings so realistic – like a black and white photography – why paint like this?

Both Picasso and Braque had been experimenting with perspective. And with their new paintings they wanted – in slightly different ways – but they wanted to show all perspectives at the same time. As if you would be looking straight forward, from the side, from behind, as if you would be climbing up a ladder and looking down, and from beneath – all at the same time.

And there, standing at the Tate Modern, looking at *Woman with green hat* – for the first time I started to think that me listening to people in pastoral care telling me the stories of their lives - is like looking at a cubistic painting. All perspectives present - at the same time. Lines that do not connect. Colors that don’t fit together. Someone’s saying – This is ugly, it shouldn’t look like this, it doesn’t fit together – I don’t like what I see. Why did it end up like this?

### 3. Existential loneliness

It seems to me that we all, no matter where we come from, what color our eyes are or what we believe in – or not believe in – that we all – from time to time – could have an experience of existential loneliness.

It is as if we have an existential solitude within. A place or a room next to our hearts. And in this room we have the most beautiful things that we have ever experienced.

What matters most to us. Our greatest love. But we also have the most difficult situations we ever experienced in here. What we are ashamed of. What hurts us.

We can feel this when we are going through something difficult and we try to explain it to someone else and we suddenly get the feeling that the other person cannot fully understand what we are going through. We can also feel this when we are together with someone we like very much and who is having a hard time. That we would like to share, help or bear the burden, but that it’s not fully possible. I believe God can be with us in the room or the place within of existential loneliness, but it does not seem

like any other person could fully be there with us.

When all is well, we can – from time to time – we can slightly feel the existential loneliness - but it doesn't bother us very much. But when something difficult happens to us, it is as if our experience of existential loneliness start to expand or grow. That the experience can be so overwhelming that it becomes larger than we can handle or deal with. That our despair, our grief or sadness goes beyond the border of our bodies. And we can become almost desperate, and we can feel that we are totally abandoned.

#### 4. Existential pain

If we try to explain existential pain - it could be when we can identify that someone feels powerless, abandoned and mute.

Each part has its own pain but together it becomes a total pain.

I met a father whose 4-year-old daughter died in a traffic accident. When the accident happened, he was not there. He was at work. He was powerless to affect what had happened. He came to me for pastoral care. It was also a custody dispute regarding a divorce, so he experienced himself not being able to take part in the funeral preparations for the daughter. He felt abandoned.

At one point he showed me a picture of his daughter and said - One cannot keep on living when your child is dead. Your life is taken away from you. And the words are taken from you. You cannot speak. You can hardly breathe.

He was telling me about his existential pain. He felt powerless and abandoned and mute.

It is when I hear his existential pain that we really can see each other. Then he asks for a new meeting. For a second, I, as a chaplain, think that I actually could have had a choice. I could say

- There is no point for us to decide a new meeting for pastoral care, because you just said that you cannot stay alive. But that would have been very silly.

Instead, I say -We can meet on Thursday. And then he starts speaking, and he describes himself as powerless, despised and abandoned. I recognize the words from the story of Jesus. I tell him the story and he answer - Then I understand that I am in my Gethsemane now.

Our task is to help the person to diminish the powerlessness, to diminish the abandonment and to listen to the pain and know that it is for real.

## 5. Unbearable – bearable – a language for life

When a person is experiencing a situation which is felt to be unbearable it is characterized by anxiety and lack of words to describe the situation. Some situations are so difficult that they are perceived as unbearable. As if the person suffering from what happened was going to die.

Situations that become bearable contain words. The unbearable becomes bearable when you try to find words for what you are experiencing. At first it may seem like the feelings or emotions are getting worse when you try to talk about it.

Sometimes you can hear someone saying - it is better not to talk about difficult things. But it is always better to try to find some words for what is going on inside us because then you can get in touch with what happened. After a while you may notice that you can talk about it without dying. A few times I have seen that someone has said the first few words about what has happened and that these persons have been almost surprised. It was possible to say the worst things and survive. It is important to – in a deeper understanding – to find a language for life - only then there can be hope.

## 6. Fill the gaps

When you are listening to someone telling you about a difficult experience in life you can notice that this person in many ways has survived what happened – meaning the person does function what seems to be in a normal way. But at the same time, you may also notice that this person mostly is talking about the situation here and now. It is as if the future and the past does not connect. Or, in another way of speaking, there is no future thinkable because there is a gap in relation to the past. Like previous chapters torn out of a book. You can remember the story, but the previous chapters are not there anymore. The emotional contact with the past is affected. In pastoral care, one of the most important tasks is to listen and help people fill in the gaps.

I met a woman whose husband was dead. We met several times. She was talking about their life together. With many words. She was talking a lot about everyday life. She was talking about how it was before his death. And after. But every time she avoids the day when he died.

I ask her if she can tell me what happened that day.

She say she can't.

I then ask - Could you take a piece of paper and try to write down what happened that day?

The next time we meet, she has written everything down. And she reads it to me. And she says – This is the first time I can say anything about what happened that day. And I think something changed inside me when I wrote this down. And I cried. Do you think that I can keep on living now?

To find a language for life is to restore the parts or chapters that have been lost, try to put the parts of the story logically together - sort things out and finally try to be the author of one's own story.

It is important for us to stay humble before every person trying to find his or her language - it could be to painting, to do carpentry or to work in the garden. This woman is completing a chapter of her life story. It is so easy for us to come up with an idea of which language that would be the best. But there are many rooms in our Father's house and we must not decide that some rooms are better than others.

For children, there it is often the case that they go from the unbearable to finding a language more directly by playing. So it may be for some adults too by music or poems or the liturgy. It helps them get in touch with what has happened.

A young man came to my room for pastoral care and said that he wanted to make a confession. He said

- I don't believe in God and I'm not religious at all. But I wanted to see a priest. Then he told me about his father who had died of cancer. They had a very difficult relationship. He had often wanted his father to be dead and now he was dead. He felt guilty and at the same time not guilty at all. He says that he can't feel sorry for his father being dead but he feels guilty because he wanted him dead, earlier, then before he got ill. I listened to his story. I didn't say anything. Then he said -Thank you for listening. Thank you for hearing my story and not asking any questions.

Could the young man's story be like a confession?

Could my listening be like someone receiving his story without judging? The young man left the room. He seemed to be relieved or as if he had put down a heavy burden, free to walk away.

## 7. Our language

This is a way to try to describe how our language works. Our way of expressing ourselves. We have made this picture as an image of water - which can be steam, water that one can pour or cold ice.

When we are very happy, our way of expressing ourselves can be glittering and fragmentary as steam. We can think of how we talk to a newborn child or a kitten. It is quite different from the BBC News or Nachrichten auf Deutch.

Here are our conversations. Information. Our understanding of what the other person is telling us. And we can answer.

When the water becomes ice, it also becomes cold, sharp and heavy. When we find ourselves in depression, grief or existential pain or existential anger, we find it difficult

to express ourselves. The words do not work. We cannot express what we need to say. The words can also become cold, sharp or heavy like the ice.

When we talk to someone, we think is in the ice area, it is good for us to understand that our opportunities to express ourselves are completely different from the person we are talking to. It can help us think about how we express ourselves, but above all remind us that the person who is in the ice area will not be able to fully or not even halfway express him- or herself. That we need to listen very carefully to what is said. That we need to understand that there is always more than what is being told.

A late-night call from the children's hospital. It is about a very disabled girl, about nine years old. She usually gets cramps. She gets medication but this time it doesn't work. And the nurse says -I don't know if we can help her. She may die now. Her dad is here. He wants to talk to someone.

In our children's hospital the doors to the rooms are painted with figures from fairy tales. I open the door. I see the bed to the right and how some of the staff are trying to help the girl. She has her hair in a tiny ponytail. She is a little girl with arms and legs twisted.

In front of the window is a man. He looks straight into the dark night outside. The nurse approaches him and says  
- Now the hospital chaplain is here.

He turns around and I see that he is very angry.

His eyes are dark with anger. He crosses the room in four steps. He is much bigger than I am. He stands in front of me and screams into my face  
- For God's sake, for how long must she suffer like this?  
How long?  
I don't know.

They are all looking at me – as if I would have an answer. As if there was anything to say. Maybe something wise? But I don't know.

For how long? Five minutes? A very long life?

I twist my head a little and say

-I do not know...

And I think he will hit me now.

But then he puts his head against my shoulder and starts crying. Sobs. Crying loudly.

And I see in the corner of my eye that the situation seems to calm down. The medicine seems to work. We sit down. The girl is sleeping now. Someone comes with coffee and sandwiches. We are talking. He tells me about their everyday lives. About how they longed for her to be born. That they had a small red bike in the garage ready for her. That she was born disabled. Blind. That they are so tired. That nothing works.

He apologizes for screaming. -It became too much for me, he says. I just needed to share that with someone.

## 8. Triangel of life

Identity

Relations

Meaning

When we first started writing and we were thinking about grief, we soon found three parts that we decided to try to form as a triangle. Grief is – of course - a healthy answer or reaction to a loss. But grief always consists of several parts.

It's like driving a way that you have been driving many times before. You know that you know the way, every tree, every house you pass – but in loss it does not look the same. Like it was a heavy mist all over the landscape. You can't see properly. Everything looks different. Now and then – for a moment – you don't know even where you are. Than you may need a map.

What we thought was the first part is about our identity. The second part is about our relationships. The third part is about what we think about the meaning of life – everyday life – but also in a more philosophical or theological way.

The three parts interact and affect each other. It is not possible to talk about identity without our relationships and what we think about the meaning of life. Likewise, we cannot talk about relationships without meaning and our identity. Or meaning without identity and relationships. But we think that the three parts also clearly can be distinguished from each other. In our grief, we may need to identify which one of the walls that has been damaged. It can be different for different persons and in different situation. When I meet the parents who have just lost their newborn baby, all three walls have been damaged. They are not going to be parents to a child laughing, crying, running around, going to school, having birthdayparties. And they have lost a relationship with someone they were waiting and longing for. And the questions - why did this happen? -why did it happen to us and our child? - why is life so unfair? - how are we going to survive?

Later on we thought the triangle could be used as a method in our pastoral care. Not only for grief but for life itself. And we discovered that it was helpful for having a further understanding of losses. Someone would say - oh, now I see, I lost my identity when I retired from work. But I still have some idea about the meaning of life... but there were also a lot of relations connected to work... and I miss them.

And the parents with the dead child may say - There is nothing left at all...

And then you need help to start restoring the walls.

And if you use the triangle as a help to identify what is missing – you can – at the same time notice – or see – what is still there. For it is always something still there.

## 9. Three levels of problems

problem with a solution - to give

problem where we can hope for a solution - to share

problems that lack solutions - to receive

In conversation with people, we can identify three levels of problems. The first level is that there is a solution but the person herself or himself cannot see it.

Then our task is to interact and help finding to the solution. Or give the solution. It can be like a broken leg. You make an X-ray and see that the bone pieces are right in relation to each other. The doctor puts on plaster and after eight weeks, the patient can walk again.

The second level of problem is that we can hope for a solution. Here we meet the cancer patients being treated. We do not yet know if it will work, but we can hope. And we can share our hope.

The third level is about a problem that has no solution.

A woman whose adult son died in an accident wakes up every night thinking that she wants to change what happened.

She tries to find a solution - if we just had gone off earlier, if we had not ordered the ticket - every night is an attempt to start all over again. But her son is dead and will remain dead.

## 10. Three ways of listening

The three levels of problems also include three different ways of listening.

interactive

dormant

absent



In active listening we interact and think together. And while we are talking we can identify what the problem is about and together try to find different ways to find solutions. Our conversation is active. We, as chaplains, may even suggest different solutions or ways to handle the situation.

In dormant listening we are more resting in our presence. We listen more than we speak ourselves. We listen and wait to see if the person him/herself can put words on ways to think about his/her situation. We are very careful not to come up with solutions. We listen and we wait and try to follow the story. Then we can share hope for the future.

When we meet a person who is in a situation that has no solution, our primary task is to receive the story. It is our job to be present and create a place where all thoughts and all feelings are allowed, a place, for a moment, where we can stay together. Nothing will really change, but at the same time something will change.

As being the listener, it can sometimes be very challenging to hear can happen that makes it a little easier for the person who is in what cannot be solved.

Sometimes what is said to be very difficult to receive. It can be so difficult that we cannot cope with what is said. We are present but at the same time absent in our listening.

#### Luke 22:39

“And they went the mount of Olives; and his disciples also followed him. And when he was at the place, he said unto them, Pray that you not enter into temptation. And he was withdrawn from them about a stone’s cast, and kneeled down, and prayed, saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done. And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him. And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground. And when he rose up from prayer, and was come to his disciples, he found them sleeping for sorrow, and said to them, Why are you sleeping? rise and pray, lest yourselves not in the temptation”.

When I was a child and heard the story, it was a story of that it was wrong that they fell asleep. They should have stayed awake to help Jesus. But when we are in total pain - powerless, abandoned and mute, we do not always have the ability to be present in a way that we would have wanted to.

Luke writes - that the disciples fell asleep because of grief. They didn't have the strength to stay awake.

We, as hospital chaplains, therapists and psychologists, can also end up in such a situation. What is told is too difficult for us to hear.

Was it still important that the disciples were there? Yes.

In these difficult situations it is our body that does the work. Our heart beats. The skin is warm. We are breathing - our chest raises and falls and is telling something about

life continuing straight into the difficult situation.  
And Jesus became frustrated and told the disciples.  
- You sleep ...!

And many relatives do know something about such anger from their loved ones being in pain.

When we meet existential pain face to face the only way to handle it is to receive. Receive the hopelessness, the grief, the disillusion, the existential pain. But we must ourselves find ways to give it away from us. To put it down. Put it aside. Otherwise, we will be too tired to be of any help.

So, we need to return to our prayers - over and over again – and – in a way of speaking – put all the stories on the altar. Bring it to God. Not take it on our own shoulders.

## 11. The process of reconciliation

### To see

If we continue the idea that a person's basic existential construction consists of what is our identity, our relationships and how we experience meaning in life - then we need to take our start in looking at the situation that exists. What happened? Or what happened earlier? How does the person we are talking to describe his/her life? Is it possible to get an idea of what is wrong? Is it possible to see what the reality looks like? The story that emerges may consist of different parts that together will give a picture of how things look. Probably like a cubistic painting. And the picture that emerges also tells us something about how the person him/herself perceives his/her reality. As a chaplain we can sometimes have a different idea of what the reality looks like. In the conversation, this person and the chaplain gently can start looking at this cubistic painting together. And we know that a bit of gently curiosity will help diminish feelings of shame or failure.

Sometimes the reality may feel so miserable, sad or brutal that we would prefer to improve it a little or at least not see all difficulties. Here is a crucial point for pastoral care. We need to consider further aspects of empathy - our feelings or emotions needs to be combined with a more intellectual understanding of the situation and we must also think about the possible opportunities ahead.

It can become clear that simplifications of reality and inherited ways of adapting to bad situations can create great existential pain. A loss can also be more difficult by the fact that you only have access to a smaller part of the reality map.

### To sort out

The experience of grief or existential pain and that things – or your life - have been

taken away from you really hurts. You may long for everything to be different. You may mourn that what you have not at all are what you hoped for or dreamed of. You may feel that nothing remains or that everything is so mixed up that it is not possible to get further.

In the pastoral care conversation, it is possible to take a closer look at what is hurting, what feels painful or is a big loss. As a result, one can usually identify things that have been lost but also things that still remain both of one's identity, one's relationship with others and in our thoughts on the meaning of life.

## To bury

When the sorting is done, there are two piles left. One pile that contains things that can help you in the future. In the second pile are what needs to be buried. You can bury your loved one, but you can still take the love with you when you move on. Likewise, we also need to bury thoughts about ourselves, ways of seeing, confusion and loss, and bring with us knowledge, insights and experiences. There are circumstances that need to be buried in order to be transformed into something that can nurture the future - in a - so to speak- decay process. One can also say that you leave what is not possible at the grave, and when you leave - you leave taking with you what is possible for the future.

## To mourn

As we already said before - grief is a healthy reaction to a loss. When the sorting out -process tells us about a loss - maybe a long time ago - it is necessary to mourn. Losses are not just about relations that no longer exists because of death - but losses can also be part of the life and the relationships that are still going on. It is also important to understand that disappointments or a feeling of not living your life fully - also often bring grief. What you would like to have seems to be totally out of reach.

Reconciliation is that despite what has happened, and which still may hurt decide to open oneself for the future. To be reconciled - we think - includes that you can keep our protest. You don't have to accept what happened or to pretend that it no longer hurts you. But the reconciliation makes us start from what is here and now, in this moment. However, the reconciliation requires an action of will. You can choose to stay by the grave or you can decide to get up and move on

## 12. The future

### Reality

Reality. This was what happened. So, this is it now. And we must start here. Not try to make it look better than it is. Because if you are going to have some hope for the future you need a solid ground.

In meeting with children, we often tend to think that we would like to somewhat change the reality to make it a little better than it is. But then we refuse them a solid ground for hope. A lot of adults suffer from the realisation that their reality is different to what they had been lead to believe in childhood. There was no solid ground to build on. So their buildings are leaning in the wrong direction.

## Care

In a situation of existential pain the person we meet needs a safe space. This is also in the meaning of a mental space.

In a translated sense of meaning, it is about the basic needs of a human being - like the small child's need for protection, warmth and food.

## Trust

We need to assume that the person we meet has experiences, memories, knowledge and skills and are able to handle their lives.

Our contribution can be to gently awaken the persons insights about this.

We can also contribute with our knowledge of reactions and ways of thinking and acting. But the most important thing is that the person him/herself can feel that we believe that he/she has his/her own opportunities to really handle the situation. But of course, also the trust of faith that we have in God acting beyond our own possibilities.

## Permission

In a difficult situation, the person suffering from grief or existential pain needs to be allowed to have all the different feelings or emotions that can occur. And to remember that we cannot decide what feelings or emotions that we are going to have. Feelings and emotions can be seen as messages to us of what we need. And we also know that it all can change from time to time.

## Existential language

And as we said earlier - it is necessary for a person who is suffering from existential pain to try to find a language for life. Finding ways to express themselves in order to understand what the pain consists of. Religious or not religious we need space and rooms to write our stories from life. We need possibilities to think and process and finally to complete some chapters and maybe one day be the writer – or the author - of our own story. And we, as chaplains, are sent to be listeners and readers. So will all our different stories be a part of the bigger story - from death to life.