

Celebration of Newness: An Essay on Professional Surprises

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To allow for a new situation, I have to step back from my knowing position. Jonathan, a five year old with a cerebral handicap, was coming back to school after the summer vacation. His teacher had prepared a lot of material she thought he would like and that would possibly help him to start to speak, which he hitherto had not been able to do. When he arrived, she heard him talking—and talking a lot! She shed tears of joy, exclaiming, “I have prepared all these things, and I’ll throw all of it in the waste basket!” How Jonathan had figured out how to talk we don’t know, but it’s quite likely that the caring and encouraging people around him had played a big part. Through the years his parent had heard from several experts that not much could be expected from Jonathan, due to his brain damage. Speech was among the things that they should not expect. But right now, that forewarning mattered little in the joy they shared with the teacher.

I recently heard about Jonathan from a friend of his family. I started to think about the way that we as professionals know—or, think or pretend we know—things about life and the living. Parents with a handicapped child live in a delicate balance between hope and despair. Professional people who get involved with the family might worry about giving parents false hope. With less assertive parents than Jonathan’s, that information might have led the parents to feel a feeling of no hope at all for their relationship with their child. Why is the professional knowledge that is much needed in a difficult situation so often misleading or misinterpreted?

The unexpected does not always arrive as clearly as it did to Jonathan’s teacher. Nor are we always as immediately ready as she to rearrange work and expectations to fit a new situation. Hearing this, I asked myself: Am I ready to throw parts of my professional positions and suggestions in the waste basket if I find myself facing a situation that calls for something completely different? This essay is about some of the surprises I have encountered in responding to that question.

Too often, the pre-understanding of a problematic situation is formed by the knowledge of some deficit and the demand for action to relieve that burden. As professionals, we have heavy expectations from others—and from ourselves—to stay on track and not ignore the complexities of the presented dilemma or the demands for a reliable practice.



But to take a step back, rather than immediately start sorting out my uncertainty, might be a door to new learning. At times, that means allowing room for doubt, confusion, and silence. To start from a “not knowing” position, to appreciate the newness of the moment, is not always comfortable. But to me, it has become more and more vital as I meet changes and unknown situations.

An Unexpected Look into a Microscope

Does this readiness to change mean that we have to do away with long term preparations and accumulated knowledge? I don't think so. We need research and thorough thinking to increase our repertoire of possibilities. A Swedish family therapist, Monica Hedenbro, gave me her PhD thesis, *The Family Triad – the interaction between the child, its mother and father from birth to the age of four years old* (2006). I found it a most fascinating reading.

Hedenbro's thesis describes interaction in a moment-to-moment perspective between child, mother, and father in a play situation in order to study the development of the interaction with the growth of the child. The study was part of an international collaboration with parallel studies in Switzerland, the United States, and Sweden. The interaction from infancy to the age of four years was studied in a laboratory setting with professional recording equipment and was also supplemented by home visits. In a *Family Process* article, “Play with Me at My speed,” the coding procedure was described in detail (Hedenbro et al., 2006). The coding system is tailored to help the researcher to capture things like the child's contributions in the play, co-parenting in infancy, and early assessment of difficulties in parent-child communication.

As a dialogically oriented practitioner, I felt some hesitation toward the description of family interaction under the microscope of the researcher. However after a while, the meticulous list of parameters of observation and coding captured my attention. The theme seemed to be the “micro moments of now” that the psychoanalytic theorist and infant development psychiatrist Daniel Stern has elaborated in his book, *The Present Moment* (2004). The detailed descriptions of interaction vividly captured a range of dilemmas of human interchange: How do we let a third person into a relationship? How do we stand at the side without interrupting what is going on between two others? How do we make the transition from one conversation partner to the other? Hedenbro explains:

The capacity for triadic relationships could be said to be the capacity of the father, the mother and the child to anticipate their family relationship without excluding either themselves or their partners from the relationship. That two can be talking without being interrupted, and the third plays a supportive role; that one individual can be listened to and all three actively share is important for family life. (Hedenbro, 2006, p. 46)

The forming of a family, which was the target of Hedenbro's research, seems to reflect basic conditions for human understanding and wellbeing. What mindset will enhance *both* my spontaneous responding *and* my reflected consideration? How do we increase our sensitivity to the parameters in forming and sustaining relationships? As professionals we meet individuals with experiences of having been excluded as well as individuals who have been excluding others. How do we go about respectfully including them as human beings with their diverse experiences? How do we enable creative and trusting relationships? The meticulously carved categories for me had, unexpectedly, become triggers to attention and reminders of the complexity of human interaction.

Searching For a Playful Language

As an editor and translator, I sometimes get challenging projects. My publisher once told me that the well-known Norwegian psychologist Martin Soltvedt wanted to see me. I had met him at a conference where he presented his way of working, called Child Oriented Family Therapy (the abbreviation of this approach in Norwegian and Swedish is BOF). The work is inspired by psychodynamic, behavioral, and systemic thinking and is centered on play. Play in this context means a shared action where all parties contribute. The professional task is to play with child and parents together—to create a shared action in a way that allows the child to take part in a playful way. Often small wooden dolls in a sand tray are used, but there are also numerous variations and applications and no manual or standard procedure.

This approach became very well received in Sweden, and Martin Soltvedt wanted to publish a book in Swedish (although all his manuscripts were written in Norwegian). Now, he wanted to make sure that I could do justice to the work. He was pleased to hear that I was interested in being a guest in the two-year BOF training program that Swedish psychologist Barbro Sjölin Nilsson provided. I was to work with a book that was going to be an original production, capturing a lifetime of experience and provided with ingenious drawings by psychologist and artist Berit Dahl Soltvedt. In the seminars of the training program, I listened for a practical language to describe this approach of meeting children and parents, which included so much more than verbal expressions. I snatched expressions that the trainees and their client families shared. Together with Martin and Barbro, we chose what words to use in the book.

Luckily, a central concept of the BOF work, *samhandling* [Eng. shared action], turned out to be very close to what John Shotter has described as *joint action* or *dialogical moments*. In the book *Cultural Politics of Everyday Life*, Shotter refers to Bakhtin's work on the dialogical nature of speech communication:

...when one has finished speaking and the other can respond, the bridging of the "gap" is an opportunity for an utterly unique, unrepeatable response, one that is

“crafted” or “tailored” to fit the unique circumstances of its utterance. (Shotter 1993 p. 135)

A few years later I took part in a BOF seminar in Martin Soltvedt’s home town, Lier. Barbro Sjölin and I were among the presenters and we documented the event in a paper for the Norwegian Family Therapy Newsletter *Metaforum* (2008). The presenters at the seminar shared experiences from child psychiatry, child protective services, work with traumatized refugees, and parent-child work at the child clinic and other arenas. We were impressed by seminar participants’ creativity and eagerness to overcome obstacles in all these various fields. We also noticed one thing that was repeated from one presenter to another: all of them said that at one point in time they had decided to do something beyond their ordinary work. For some, the change to this playful and unpredictable way of working had been costly, and they had not been able to connect their vision to that of their colleagues. For others, it vitalized a whole workplace for years to come. As I now look back and read our article, I am moved by all these people who went beyond the ordinary professional role in order to meet the demands of new situations.

In *Collaborative Therapy: Relationships and Conversations that make a Difference*, Harlene Anderson writes:

As our world shrinks, globalization and technology are catalyzing social, cultural, political, and economic transformation. With an associated, ever-increasing spotlight on democracy, social justice, and human rights, the importance of the people’s voice, singular or plural, becomes further relevant to how we respond to the unavoidable complexities inherent in these transformations and the effects on our individual and communal lives. The shifting circumstances and increasing complications of contemporary life challenge us to reassess the relevance of the traditions of our social and psychological theories and our practices for social and personal change, including how we conceptualize the people we work with, their problems, and our role with them. (Anderson, 2006, p.46)

The story about Jonathan led me to wonder if I would be willing to let go of comfortable ideas and secure positions in my professional communication. Hedenbro’s research pushes my thinking to make room for the complexity of human fellowship. The translation challenges of the BOF book opened possibilities to play and to find ways of being together in tough situations. In the summer of 2014 I—together with my daughter and fellow translator Cecilia Brodin—was planning to take part in the Taos Institute Conference in Drammen, Norway. I realized that Lier was close to Drammen. I wondered: Was Martin Soltvedt still around, and would he and Berit be interested in seeing us? And I found that the answer to both questions was yes.

A Cup of Tea in Southern Norway

On our first day in Drammen, we made a bus trip over the big orchards and through a wild thunderstorm. All of a sudden, Berit was standing there in a sun-drenched square among huge trees with shining leaves. She had just come back presenting her latest book—an environmental creed about the future of our world with the title *Vi må ta fatt NÅ* [Eng. *We must seize NOW*—at a literary seminar in Oslo. She and I talked about a book on BOF, *Kinderorienterte Familienterapie*, which was recently published in Germany (Reiners, 2013). Martin was pleased with it, but was also concerned that the text seemed more formal than his own writings. I shared that at first I had the same impression, but then learned a German friend of mine was surprised by the warm and easygoing language in that book. We also talked about my own stories from local history that Martin has taken a great interest in, and we dwelled on the fact that even the old language those people used is marked by the collaboration necessary for survival. I added that the “samhandling” in the BOF play approach is, for me, connected to the same mindset.

When we were about to leave, Martin leaned forward. There was a sudden strength and eagerness in his voice when he looked at me and said that all his work has been about “at se noe sammen og at gjøre noe med det”—that is, “to see something together, and to do something with it.” We went back to Drammen with a sense that we touched the core of collaborative presence.

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