

## **Talking for life.**

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Since the autumn of 2004 I am doing volunteer work one evening a week at a clinic, run by an organization in Gothenburg, called Rosengrenska Stiftelsen (RS). RS was started in 1998, first as a network of people in the medical professions to support hidden refugees to get medical care within the already existing medical system. Now it is also an independent clinic in Sweden, specializing in giving medical care to hidden refugees. There is a similar organization in Stockholm, run by "Médicins du Monde" and "Médicins Sans Frontières". In a couple of other Swedish towns new networks are beginning to form.

There are today approximately 10.000 hidden refugees in Sweden, or people without papers, hiding from the authorities. In this article, they will be called "hidden".

A group of MD:s and nurses come after their working hours to give treatment to the hidden. They often have difficulties getting it in the public medical care or are afraid to seek it there.

I offer psychotherapy or rather supportive counselling to the hidden. Psychotherapy in a traditional sense would not make sense for our clients. Their outer world is already in so much turmoil that it would be too much to expect from them to change also their inner world in a deeper way.

I do individual sessions most of the time. Occasionally I see the client together with a family member. Since our clients come from many different countries in the world, an interpreter is almost always present to help me do my work. RS now has a network of volunteer interpreters of a big variety of languages.

I see my job as helping my clients to endure their difficult lives, yet until hopefully their situation can improve, that is, asylum can be granted or amnesty is given to all the paperless refugees.

In this work I feel have good use of my psychodramatic experience as well as my experience of working and living in international centres. Under the surface, we all share the same human feelings and needs. In a crisis situation those deeper layers of human beings often come to the fore.

Persons who have had to go underground, have lost almost all their social and personal roles as well as all their means and belongings. At the same time, they often become a burden for a few people around them who have taken them in or are helping them. They are literally helpless and powerless like newborn babies. They are not wanted here and they cannot go back where they came from. They have left their homes, jobs, families and friends as well as their habits and cultural context and everything else that gives us human beings our identities.

In a sense they are like actors left alone on the dark stage after the play is over and most everybody has gone home. There is no one to interact with any more. If there is anybody at all still around, this person is often worn down. This is a state for developing hallucinations and delusions.

The first thing I can do in this job is to become another person; a co-actor or an audience. I listen, relate and interact. I become somebody who lets in glimpses of reality into the aban-

done theatre. Most often, the hidden ones say that they are frightened of going mad. The gratitude they also often show for my being there for them week after week can seem a bit exaggerated compared to what I feel I have actually done. In many cases, however, my listening presence has been the difference between life and death for the hidden ones. I have been a significant other.

As the weeks go by, recognition builds between us, and meeting again after a week's interval becomes a joyful moment. Perhaps that is the only time in a week that somebody greets them with happiness to see them. In other words, they get reassured that they are alive, remembered and matter to somebody in this world. At least, they get a smile and a hug a week.

When I listen to their stories, I receive and accept the great pain and sadness that most of them carry. So far they have had to carry this load alone. Then it could seem as though that load didn't exist. Only they feel so bad. In me they get a witness, some one who can restore their self respect and confidence. Their stories can be understood and therefore get a meaning.

Expressing stored-up pain takes away numbness and energy blocks. Spontaneity can come forth again. In a situation filled with endless problems, the hidden refugees need creative energy more than most other people. I am often impressed with how they manage to survive and create some sort of life for themselves. And they haven't even read "Who Shall Survive"!

When a hidden has found a good solution to a problem (and most of the time the problems are overwhelmingly big), I praise him or her and do my best to reinforce their self confidence.

The invisibility in which the hidden live, creates a hard strain in the relationships within their families when they have one. It is also a part of my job to strengthen the relationships and encourage positive feelings and love between the spouses, not the least for the sake of their children.

In the situation of role deprivation, I look for positive roles that the hidden has had or wants to have. There I can do a small vignette à deux about this positive role to bring it back to life or to lay out the ground for it to come.

Often, the refugee carries feelings of guilt, self blame, inferiority because he or she chose to or had to fly from their country. When the hidden tells his or her story, I look for facets of it that he or she might have overlooked, facets that might alter the total picture for the better when lifted to the foreground and enhanced. Careful humour can be a good tool to achieve this as well as a non-judgemental overview over the whole situation.

In those cases when the refugee has indeed been drawn into and involved in terrible actions when coming from a country in war, and is suffering from guilt and self hatred, I have found it helpful to take a role as a double for him or her and talk about how it feels inside when one discovers that one has committed awful and immoral acts.

Many refugees suffer from the fear that they are becoming crazy. They are in fact often suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSS). It has then been useful to explain in detail what happens in the brain and in the rest of the body when a person has experienced a heavy trauma. When they understand that what they are experiencing is a normal reaction to an abnormal situation, they feel relieved.

Another part of my job is to be an informer and a reality tester for the hidden. He or she is suddenly inside a society that they know little about and where they often are treated badly and feel powerless. Then it is easy to develop a paranoid attitude or a view of being subjected to a conspiracy. Such ideas don't make the life of the hidden any easier. Information about the political and cultural facts of our society can then be helpful.

As a part of suffering from PTSS, the hidden ones are often very tense and complain about pain in their bodies or difficulty to sleep. It can be a good thing to teach some basic relaxation techniques which the hidden can practice wherever he or she will end up in the world.

Since I started to work at RS, we have begun to build a group of therapists, counsellors, masseurs and physiotherapists. We can ask each other for support and advice and we meet as a group once a month to get supervision by an experienced therapist who has earlier worked with traumatized refugees.

### *References.*

For a more thorough explanation of role theory, please see my article "*War and Peace: On Psychodramatic Role Theory and the Life Situation of the Refugee.*" Journal of the British Psychodrama Association, 5/90.