LIKE LAYING A PUZZLE

A Reassessment,
Ten Years After the Discotheque Fire
in Gothenburg

Ann Hanbert
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Tryggare och Mänskligare Göteborg
(A Safer and More Humane Gothenburg)
City of Gothenburg

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Preface – To Be Read Before and/or After

For me, the relevance of the text you are holding in your hand lies at the very heart of social work. I am thinking of a body of work that is alive, challenged and developed in the interface between the great/the small, society/the individual and, in this particular case, between disaster/day-to-day normality. This working process is rooted in the meeting of past/present and here especially between dark tragedy/brightening hope, a process rooted in the essential meeting point of professional work between the one who gives support/the one who is supported.

It is a text about a working process in which quick-fix solutions do not have any place whatsoever, a process requiring patient, long-term and, in a deep sense, careful work. It is also a text about a working process to which no methods set out in manuals can be applied, a task where a continuous and thoughtful developmental approach is a necessity on both sides. In this, clinical knowledge is largely irrelevant, whereas innovative approaches based on experience have become productive and meaningful directional pointers.

"It's like laying a puzzle" – the metaphor for the work at hand had already been recognised by the authors in the initial support work organised after the fire – as documented with a wealth of questions and perspectives in the practical, intellectually stimulating publication "Att möta det man möter" [To Meet What You Meet, published 2001, FoU i Väst, ed. Lars Rönnmark]. I would like to add here that it is rather like laying a very special kind of puzzle. It is in fact a puzzle that has never been laid before, a puzzle without any specific predecessors, a puzzle laid both collectively and individually by each and everyone, a puzzle where the whole emerges as and when the pieces are added by the participants in new and unforeseeable ways, a puzzle where the whole and the pieces exist in a constant process of change, a puzzle that reflects a continuous state of being without any completion, this completion or healing being something that each and everyone is a part of, and which touches upon all.

But it is not only about laying a special kind of puzzle – it must also be done in a very special way. I refer here to the other title mentioned above – "To Meet What You Meet". In this meeting it is above all the person one meets who is central, not as an objectified task for the support worker but as a co-creative subject. In order for me as a professional helper to be able to help you, you have to also support me. Here, what the actual text conveys to me may be seen as exemplary. The Other is recognised in his uniqueness as a human being with a range of needs to which the professional advisor must position himself. In whatever respect the working team – encompassing a range of diverse experiences, skills and knowledge – sees a need to broaden itself and add further resources, this must be done in full cognizance of "Other" support needs. One of the diverse possibilities, continually inspired by a collective participation in the project, is the ability to create different environmental and activity-based scenarios in order to reflect the differences one must take into account as a support worker, to facilitate the healing and development of each and everyone – including that of the support workers themselves.

The importance of relationships runs like a red thread through the entire undertaking. Creating good, respectful and load-bearing relationships based on trust among all who participate in the project and are to be supported, is the very foundation of collective creativity. All contribute with their own stories, in various ways giving words and meaning to the life they have lived, are living and will live. It does not seem coincidental in this context that the word "relate" comes from Latin and means precisely "a story". We lay our puzzles together.

It is my hope that this text will find many readers and be of particular use to those who, in their professional duties, come into contact with traumatised people.

Gothenburg, 19th April, 2011

Bosse Forsén
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Introduction

We are grateful for the support of The Crime Victim Compensation and Support Authority[1] which has made it possible for us to carry out this retrospective analysis of our working process with a group of seriously traumatised victims of crime.

We have earlier spoken of how our narrative working method with these young men enabled them to puzzle together remembered images, feelings and thoughts into a cohesive story about the fire. In so doing, survivors were helped to create meaning in the event, thereby acquiring more control over the trauma. We are now able to say that we are also gradually laying a puzzle, from which a picture is emerging of a support process that we have not previously seen. This picture demonstrates the ways in which support can be given to traumatised survivors, the channels that may be used and the things that make a difference to the recipient. The picture has emerged by connecting with a group of survivors whom we have worked with since the time of the fire. As the writers of this report, all three of us have experienced a strong and productive learning process. We refer to this process as 'holding the talking stick'. This collaboration is exciting to describe, also to continue to think about.

It is a matter of frustration to us that this report can only present a small part of our interview material and with less editorial input than we had originally planned. It has been a time-consuming process. It is not only the thinking part that has taken time; we have also adapted the pace of it to the rhythm of the participants in the study. Throughout the whole process we have referred various parts of the interview material to the participants, and we now feel that this whole study has been produced as a collective endeavour. While working on this report we have felt that the survivors have been our helpers, they have been a part of a study group with us. Relationships with support workers have been re-negotiated and become increasingly egalitarian. More and more we have come to realise the depth of significance of relationships on the recovery of traumatised people. However, we have not in this report developed our conclusions and experiences of this participatory working method.

We are happy to have had the opportunity of documenting the working process with this group of survivors. We have been permitted entry into their experiences of the chaos and destruction of trauma, and the gradual motion of recovery. We have audited the survivors' observations of the support they have been given, and we have also passed on some of their advice to professionals and young people finding themselves in the same position. "Accept help as early as possible. You can't manage a thing like this on your own."

For now we would like to thank the participants of the study: David, John, Neo, Paulo, Simon and Elia. We are tying up this sack with a loose knot, as we may have good reason to re-open it later.

Gothenburg, 31st January, 2011

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CHAPTER 1

The Magic Meeting

How can one best give support to seriously traumatised young people who have been the victims of crime? Along with my colleague LarsÅke Lundberg I was given the opportunity to investigate the question and put it into practice, initially as co-workers at the Support Centre after the fire and then by way of continuation with a group of survivors who had been badly injured in the disaster. The purpose of this report is to account for these young people's experience of trauma and recovery, as well as describing the working methods developed in collaboration with the young people at Support Centre Hisingen in Gothenborg.

On the ten-year anniversary of the discotheque fire, when 63 youths attending a party lost their lives on the night of the 29th October, 1998, a march was held, a torchlight procession setting off from Gustav Adolfs torg. A large number of people had come together. I took part with a colleague. Thousands of us holding burning torches stretched back like a huge glow worm across the entire span of the bridge over Göta älv. It was solemn and beautiful.

More people joined the march in Backaplan. There was remembrance and mourning. There were many familiar faces, nods of recognition, smiles and embraces. We met young people whose lives had been struck down, as well as parents or other people like ourselves who had taken part in the support work after the fire. We also met three of the survivors who were a part of the group with which we had been working for several years. At the

end of a residential workshop in the spring of 2001, each participant wrote a letter addressed to himself about how he thought his life would look in five years time. The idea was to reconvene in five years, open the letters together and, if one wanted to, share the contents.

We had made a few attempts earlier to get the group together, but there were postponements when for various reasons not everyone could participate. As we approached the ten-year anniversary we agreed that the reunion could not wait any longer.

We set up some dates and contacted everyone. We reached six out of seven people. All wanted to come. One had moved overseas and could not be contacted.

We met for the first time on a Saturday evening, early in 2009, almost eight years after the writing of the letters. The meeting was attended by the fireman, Håkan Carlsson. Håkan had already taken part in two camps with the group and he had also written a long letter.

The atmosphere was warm and marked by a sense of affectionate reunion, as well as seriousness and high expectations. Not until this point did we understand how significant it was for the participants to see each other again, and that they had waited a long time for us to contact them. There was a sense of disappointment that we had not kept to our agreement. Several of them had wondered whether we had forgotten. It also emerged that a number of them had mentioned the agreement in conversations with each other. We were ashamed of not having informed them about our reasons for delaying the reunion.

LarsÅke had kept the letters in safe storage and they were now going to be opened. One of the participants ceremoniously took on the role of coordinator during our meeting in the conference room at Ann's office. He stood up and read out his letter. After that, we all read out our letters in turn. The atmosphere grew dense as we shared our experiences. There was pain here but also hope, how things were at the time of writing and what sort of expectations there were for the future. One participant described a sort of waiting at a crossroads without knowing in which direction he should go. Another participant had the sense of going in the right direction. We, the support staff, also read out our letters. Everyone had expressed themselves in a raw, self-revealing way.

There was a sense that the feeling of trust was still intact within the group, although some of the participants no longer had regular contact. Suddenly we had gone back in t ime and were once again talking about the disaster. This time, however, it was a meeting between grown-up people capable of reflecting in a different way on what they had gone through and how it had affected and continued to affect their lives. New questions came up over the course of the evening, and several of them were possible to answer within the group. The process of bringing order into their stories was thus continuing. We realised that several of them were still struggling with the severity of the traumatic event.

One of the participants grew agitated as he described a memory from the fire. He told us that he had struggled to get friends out of the burning building by carrying them out via some stairs. These stairs had been lined with rescue personnel, who, he said, "did nothing", in fact they had been passive and even got in the way of the work of trying to save people. Håkan Carlsson asked what sort of clothes they were wearing, and when he got the answer he was able to confirm that "the passive ones on the stairs" had been trainees from a sixth form college. They had accompanied the call as if it were a normal fire. No one could have predicted in advance the scale of the fire or its consequences. The trainees who found themselves in this chaos were themselves young people aged about twenty, without experience or training. Ten years after the event, this participant was finally given an explanation and reconciliation for a memorised image that had tormented and gnawed at him. Others in the group confirmed that they had also been tormented by this remembered image. Some of them, it emerged, had had the situation explained to them before.

Another described how he had recently seen a television programme in which a young woman described her great sorrow at the death of her dog. At first he had reacted with contempt for what he felt was an unreasonable response to a dead animal, and he ridiculed her behaviour. Later he felt that possibly her reaction was fairly normal, and he realised that it was his own experiences from the night of the fire, going beyond anything to which a young person should be subjected, that had made him respond in this way. If anything it was the events and repercussions of the fire that went beyond normality.

After three and a half hours we called it a night. Me and my colleague were amazed at the "great" thing we had been allowed to share with these young men over the course of the evening – it was a feeling of magic. The following Monday morning we received an email from one of the participants:

> "Thoughts on the Backa group reunion with the Support Centre people, 10/1-2009.
>
> Hi Ann, LarsÅke and Håkan!
>
> Thanks for a good evening. There was both a lot of laughter and emotions as usual. I appreciate your decision to organise a reunion, just like all the other support we had before from the Support Centre.
>
> We all feel this way in the Backa group.
>
> Having the chance to meet everyone again and talk made the room feel like a time machine. The letters written 7 years back catapulted us back in time and we could see that past from a bird's-eye view. Events, impressions and emotions were replayed.
>
> We were children then and did not have the ability to handle the chaos we were thrown into. But now when we came together again we were able to/ had the courage to go deeper into it. The difference was that we could now embrace it/ reason, interpret and work it through as adults. There were so many emotions, we all had to hold back the tears. It was so good to have many questions answered, frustrations and uncertainties that many had been carrying within them could be released and answered. Even though ten years have passed there was and still is much to work through. This kind of open, sincere and heartfelt communication has come about because we feel safe with you and you have gained our respect, trust and love. Our thanks for this go out to the Support Centre and those of you who worked with us.
>
> Conducting social work or other support work with people who are themselves social workers is difficult to measure. But our reunion showed how much your work has meant to us all.
>
> It gives me even more confirmation in my working life, an extra "push" to carry on believing in what I am doing.
>
> Thanks
>
> P.S. the text below is an SMS from David, and I want to share it with you.
>
> 'It was good to see you all yesterday. I felt so bloody good with you. I mean there were mixed feelings, but it was worth it. I'm alive again:) I have to fix up another meeting with you guys so we can see each other again. Tell Ann, LarsÅke and the fireman that it was an important meeting and I got a completely new perspective on the whole thing and felt I was not alone in my thoughts about the fire.
>
> Regards, David'."

After the magical atmosphere created in the meeting with the survivors and the strong sense of reconnection we had achieved together, our thoughts were further energised in terms of following up the work we had done with the group. The e-mail from Paulo and the SMS from David strengthened our belief that the group would want to take part in an assessment exercise to share their experiences of the support they had received and their healing process as survivors of the crime: the discotheque fire.

We had earlier collaborated with Lars Rönnmark, researcher at the Department of Social Work at Gothenburg, and we decided to draw up a project description and apply for a grant from the Crime Victim Fund – and then make a reassessment together.

So, now let's begin …

Chronology

The fire	29th October, 1998
Support Centre	January 1999
Fieldwork, Backa	Autumn 1999
Trial, City Court	May 2000
Camp 1 – the idea is born	June 2000
The idea takes shape	Autumn 2000
Camp 2 – the offer	November 2000
The writing process with the young men	Spring 2001
Camp 3 – the letter	Mars 2001
Concluding meeting	May 2001
Reunion not possible after 5 years	Autumn 2006
10-year anniversary	Autumn 2008
Reunion with opening of letters	10th January 2009
Application to The Crime Victim Compensation and Support Authority	March 2009
Information meeting	October 2009
Individual interviews	Oktober–November 2009
Thematic arrangement of materials	December 2009–January 2010
Focus group x 3	January–April 2010
Work on the interviews	May–June 2010
Barbecue and closure	July 2010
The writing process and report	Autumn 2010

The Assignment and Organisation of the Support Work

In this chapter we want to describe the work we did with the group of young people who in a variety of ways had been severely affected by the discotheque fire in Gothenburg in 1998. We account for how we acquired knowledge of the young men's predicaments, how we first made contact and how the idea of writing stories about the fire came to us and was later validated by research into the area. We also describe how we conducted the part of the working process – supported by the Crime Victim Fund – focused on assessing the support work with the young people. After the initial "magic meeting" we were inspired to learn from the experience we had been through. We asked the young people to take part in a retrospective study. For our own part we were especially interested to hear how the Support Centre had contributed to their recovery. Fortunately the young men were prepared to put themselves forward and have shared their experiences with great readiness.

The Event and the Local Authority Support Organisation

The fire in Backaplan was the worst Swedish disaster in modern times. Almost 400 youths were estimated to have been inside the building when the fire broke out (Source: "Kamedorapport 75"). According to the report, 260 people managed to get out of the building before the arrival of rescue

services on the scene. 150 of these were taken to hospital to be treated for smoke inhalation or other injuries. Of 120 people left inside the building, smoke-helmeted fire personnel were able to save 60, of which ten later died.

In total some 63 youths died and 213 were taken to hospital. 50 firemen and 19 police patrols with a total of 42 police officers were on the scene of the fire during the first hours (Source: "Kamedorapport 75").

Terrible scenes took place inside the building and on the asphalt forecourt. Many witnessed how youths jumped from a window six metres above ground level or were pushed out by friends also trying to save themselves by heaving themselves onto the window ledge some 2.2 metres off the floor in an area of the building known as 'the wardrobe'. Many people had learned what was happening via their mobile telephones. Friends and family members were on the scene. Several hundred people witnessed what they could not in the wildest dreams have imagined might happen on a normal night in Gothenburg. Not least the security personnel and police were exposed to horrendous sights. A number of those witnessing the event or searching for dependents at the scene of the fire were damaged by traumatic experiences.

The pressure on Accident and Emergency wards in Gothenburg was obviously very significant. Hospitals are of course prepared for disasters, although not on the scale of the discotheque fire. 74 people required continued acute care for smoke inhalation and burns at the city's three hospitals.

To cope with the pressure on the A & E wards, resources were diverted in areas such as surgery. One important measure was to move 13 people into intensive care at specialised burns units at other hospitals in Sweden and Norway.

Between 4000 and 5000 family members and friends visited the injured at the hospitals in Gothenburg in the first few days (Hagström & Sundelius, 2001). Tuija Nieminen Kristoffersson (2002) describes in a time/motion study the movements of a large number of relatives and survivors between hospitals, the fire scene, their homes and counselling groups. There was a great deal of chaos, despair, anger and frustration before sorrow managed to take stock of the losses and before any reasonable explanations for what had happened saw the light of day.

The Head of the Municipal Council quickly made some unconventional decisions. The Municipal Council would be offering free taxi rides to those

wishing to visit the injured at hospital. All families that had lost a son or daughter were awarded 20 000 Swedish crowns by the council, as a contribution to unplanned costs arising as a consequence of their losses.

Rescue services, the health service and police are organisations that typically have the necessary routines in place to be able to mobilise resources during large-scale rescue efforts. Also the Municipal Council was able to quickly mobilise resources to provide support for the victims. Already on the night of the fire a crisis group of the municipal leadership assembled at Gårda fire station.

> "On the evening of the 29th October, 1998, the municipal leadership in Gothenburg are preparing for a major disaster exercise. Bengt Staaf at the Gothenburg Police came home that same evening from a disaster exercise with the rescue services and some Norwegian colleagues, amongst others. The exercise had concerned a fictitious air disaster with 62 dead. Three hours later he was called in to the fire in Backaplan."
>
> Police, rescue services and the health service in Gothenburg have worked together for many years on disaster preparedness. Also civil servants centrally and politicians are trained in managing disaster situations.
>
> – The people of Gothenburg would never forgive us if we were not prepared, says the Head of the Municipal Council, Göran Johansson.
>
> Göran Johansson had just gone to bed when the City Director Roger Bodin telephoned to say that he had been called in to Gårda fire station because there had been an accident with many dead. Roger Bodin said that he did not know if this were a case of a pre-planned exercise or if a fire had actually broken out. But it seemed to be serious, and he urged Göran Johansson to get ready to leave.
>
> When the next call came through, Göran Johansson was ready and able to take a taxi at once to Gårda, where the rescue services were based.
>
> The Municipal Council mobilised itself quickly, but not only as a result of the existing disaster plan, but also because people came in at once to help. The fact that many had mobile telephones made it easier both to contact people and keep them informed.
>
> Bengt Staaf reports that all the police officers came in voluntarily and the units were fully manned by 01.00. A few hours later most areas of the city had set up crisis receptions and telephone hotlines.

> Crisis coordination at the City Administrative Office was manned soon after the alarm first went out about the fire, and remained in full operation, twenty-four hours per day, for a week after the fire" (Magnusson, 2005, p. 18–19).

Municipal disaster planning is based on the city's regular organisational body also taking charge of catastrophic situations. At the time of the fire, each of the city's 21 district councils and every municipal company had their own planning for catastrophic situations.

The underlying idea is to mobilise resources from the existing organisation.

Gothenburg Municipal Council, with approximately 40 000 employees, has a significant capacity which can be focused on crisis management. Additionally, resources in schools were mobilised. The social services were tasked with making contact with affected parties and offering them appropriate support.

The morning after the fire most of the district city councils set crisis measures in motion to meet the needs of those affected. Many churches and congregations engaged themselves strongly from the first moment. Within two days, 109 crisis receptions and hotlines were open 24 hours per day (White Paper: "The Efforts of the City of Gothenburg, 1998"; Nieminen Kristoffersson, 2001).

One week after the fire, the City Executive Board approved a strategy document in which the municipal response was set out along the lines of a two-year perspective. By international standards, the two-year perspective provided a uniquely long-term approach to the ensuing support efforts. In the strategy document – *PM 5/11 1998 Decision on Strategy in Continued Work Regarding the Fire Disaster* – it was emphasised that "City district councils are responsible for the population and are thereby responsible for residents affected in their respective districts". To ensure a long-term approach in their work, a decision was made to set up a special organisation over a two-year period, with five support centres in the City as well as a "project manager with specialised skills". Lars Lilled was appointed as this project manager. In fact, rather than a project manager, his position was soon more accurately described as "Municipal Coordinator After the Fire".

The Support Centre began to be manned from January 1999 and was gradually wound down in the autumn of 2001. During its phasing out, support

staff were offered the opportunity of writing about their experiences of two years of intensive psycho-social support work (see Rönnmark, ed., 2001). The coordinator for the City Centre Support Centre, Britt Berggren (2001, p. 33) describes a strong political support for the organisation, including allocation of resources – and a very clear brief for the work of the Support Centre:

> "Our task was to actively seek out all people who had been affected and to ask them in what areas they needed help. A working method of actively seeking people in this manner had not been a normal feature of our prior working environments. There, the obvious thing had been for us to engage only with those who came to us, and be satisfied with that. We have seen for ourselves that a clear mandate is a significant factor in achieving success with a project. I believe that we have had both a clear definition of our task and a clear mandate… The assignment document was formulated centrally and implemented in the districts. It has been crystal clear from the very start:
>
> Everyone affected by the disaster should be offered help!
>
> We shall build up existing organisations!
>
> Long-term thinking!"

The Support Centre in Hisingen

Because of local divergences, the five Support Centres set up in Gothenburg took on fairly distinct characteristics. On Hisingen the fixed part of the organisation was fairly small. It consisted of only two people, LarsÅke Lundberg and Ann Hanbert. At various periods working arrangements were established with practitioners offering specialised skills. These practitioners included members of the emergency services, a masseuse, psychologists, people with their own experiences of trauma, lawyers, etc.

The task of the Support Centre was to offer help and support to people affected in a variety of ways. The working process included actively searching for victims and even-handedly offering help. The goal was to try and reach those who, for a variety of reasons, either had not received assistance

or had declined help and healing. The organisation was also responsible for the coordination of all support activities in Hisingen.

The methods used were characterised by a large degree of flexibility and ingenuity. The Support Centre would not sit and wait for people to make contact on their own initiative; the idea was rather that the Support Centre staff would actually locate the victims. The goal was to have a presence wherever help was needed.

The Group

There was a group of friends consisting of ten young men aged between 17–21. Several of them had grown up together. Some had attended the same nursery and school and used to go out partying together. Most of them were inside the building when the fire broke out. A number of them sustained severe burns and other somatic damage. All were severely traumatised by what they had been through.

Some of them had taken part in the rescue effort and had exerted themselves to the utmost, carrying their friends out of the building. They had all lost a number of their closest friends and acquaintances. One described how after the event he had had to prioritise between funerals, to decide which of them he would attend. At the time he was seventeen years old.

Before the fire, the circle of friends had consisted of about 60 young people from Backa, Bergsjön and Angered who used to have parties together. Some 30 of them died in the fire. They were all part of a modern generation of youth, in every sense typical of its time. People came from different areas of the city, had diverse cultural and religious backgrounds and came from different social classes. At the party were young people with ethnic origins in 19 different countries. Initially this was a cause of concern and reflection by support workers in the municipal support initiative, who had some insecurity about what kind of approach would be most effective in their contacts with family members and disaster victims. In fact there was no need for the Support Centre to be concerned about this. The young people had all come to the party to dance and enjoy social interaction, and they were completely unaware of any such boundaries.

The disaster fragmented the circle of friends. Many died, several were

seriously injured, people lost siblings and close friends. In the first few months that followed, they cut themselves off in an apartment and spent more or less twenty-four hours per day together, sharing the chaos and heartache after the fire. Many withdrew from contact with adults. Most did not manage to continue their studies. Several had been offered support at an early stage after the fire, but had declined such support. A couple of them started taking alcohol and drugs to deal with their anguish and pain.

The Process of Actively Searching for Victims. Making Contact

The staff at the Support Centre in their capacity as social workers, were accustomed to seeking out young people in some type of risk zone. A proactive approach is suitable when dealing with people and groups who are not easily able to articulate their wishes and, for a number of reasons, will not seek help of their own accord. The work takes place in environments that cannot directly be controlled or manipulated by the social worker. When proactively approaching people it therefore needs to be emphasised that the response is voluntary, and it must be based on trust. The goal is to have contact and dialogue in order to establish together what the support need is. For this reason, the proactive approach is rarely a complete process in itself – rather a link to further development.

At the Support Centre there was also an awareness that traumatised people often show various symptoms all relating to feelings of abandonment. Many sufferers use various kinds of evasive behaviour as survival strategies. Therefore we knew that the support work by necessity had to be long-term in its focus and defined by a large measure of patience. The staff had extensive experience of working with people showing similar types of behaviour, having previously worked with treatments in situations such as youth institutions.

In autumn 1999 and spring 2000 the Support Centre conducted a systematic process of searching for people out in Backa district. Through contacts with other young people who had been affected by the fire, as well as various instructors at leisure facilities in the area, they were made aware of the exist-

ence of the aforementioned “gang” – this group of young people who had all been badly affected by the fire, yet had not accepted any help. The team was faced with the task of making contact with the young men in order to understand what kind of help they wanted and might be willing to accept.

The information source confided that members of this group sometimes came to the youth centre in the area, where some of the youth workers enjoyed their confidence. This became an important entry point for staff at the Support Centre who, after a period of intensive fieldwork, had the opportunity to get to know one of the young men in the group a little better. He had a central role in the group and confirmed what had been suggested by others on earlier occasions, namely that many of his friends were feeling terrible and he was seriously concerned about some of them. He offered to help us make contact with the rest of the group. In our continuing work with the group he became a pivotal figure. His positive attitude to the Support Centre and influence over the others in the group made it much easier for the others to contact us.

Kayak camp

This far into the working process with the group it was time to think about what the next step would be. The goal was to make it easier for the guys to reclaim better lives for themselves. Our hypothesis was that they all needed support from the others in the group, in a variety of ways. The role of the Support Centre was to try and make the group a “support group” once again.

Eventually we decided to offer the young men a three-day kayak camp with retired fireman Lasse Gustavsson and the emergency services group HÄFA [trans: Practically Based Preventive Work]. Lasse had himself experienced a gas explosion while on duty. He sustained serious burns and his colleague was killed. Our young people readily identified with him, particularly as a number of them had also had burns injuries. He had been through a terrible accident and spoke from experience. Lasse was able to tell them that he had decided to move on with his life and that he was now even setting up camps for other people who had been injured. He became a pivotal figure and inspiration source for the young men and he also gave expression to new hope about regaining control of their lives. The staff from

HÄFA were present because they had a great deal of knowledge about the events of the Backaplan disaster. One of them had taken part in the rescue work as a smoke-helmeted fireman.

After a whole day in the sun, suitably relaxed after new experiences of paddling kayaks and eating a good meal, everyone gathered in the evening round the campfire. There were clearly great expectations among the young people about being able to talk about the fire. The young people knew each other very well, but they only knew the adults by name. First, therefore, an introductory round was made.

Lasse Gustavsson took the word. He explained that he was holding a “talking stick” in his hand, and whoever had the stick also had the right to speak undisturbed until he had said what he wanted to say, deciding himself how personal to make it. The others had to listen. But one could also chose to stay quiet and only listen to the others. After saying what one had to say, one passed the “talking stick” to the person sitting beside one.

Lasse held the “talking stick” and started talking about his accident, when he suffered his burns injuries and his life changed in a moment. He described traumatic memories in a simple way and thus showed how one can attach words to the most difficult things one has ever been through. The young people around the camp fire understood this and they started sharing their own experiences.

They all told their own stories of the fire: where they were when the fire started spreading through the premises, how they got out, how they took part in the rescue efforts to get others out, their experience of the police and rescue services, etc.

The young men were very moved and surprised when they heard their friends sharing their own versions of what had happened. New images emerged that they had not been aware of although they were so close – for instance where inside the burning building they had been and how the event had affected them in different ways. After a while, one of them proposed that it was like laying a puzzle, with everyone adding a piece of their own to try and create a complete picture of what had happened. “Like laying a puzzle” became a metaphor uniting the support workers and victims, and laying down the foundations for a unique collaboration aimed at giving meaning and control to the trauma that had torn many lives to pieces.

Writing One's Own Story of the Fire

The kayak camp with the young people had been a great success; the Support Centre had now also had the opportunity of getting to know the whole group. For the young men, an atmosphere had been created in which they dared to talk about their experiences and give details that had not been mentioned before. They realised that there was an element of liberation in telling each other these things, which also gave them the opportunity to take charge of what had happened. It was shown that the group was tormented by memories of the fire, survival guilt and sorrow.

The support staff reflected on how to help these young people gain a better level of control over their memories. Traumatised people are often plagued by difficult images from memory which can arise entirely beyond their control, again and again. This is obviously heavily laden with anguish. Our experience at the Support Centre, from previous experience, was that victims by building up the courage to remember the course of events and talk about the whole thing, also began to be able to process what they had been through.

We now wanted to try offering the young people the opportunity of writing down their own stories of the event. The intention here was that this might be a way for them to sift through and take more control of what had occurred and the life situation in which they now found themselves after the fire. To tell the story and write it down could be a contributory factor in releasing tension, so that they were not always occupied with defending themselves against memories of the fire.

The support staff felt that there was a certain power in working with this idea as a group. Earlier experience of working with groups strengthened this conviction. It is invaluable to be able to listen to others, recognise oneself or understand contexts. Another advantage of the group approach is that not all participants have to take an active role all the time; it can be very productive to be able to listen to other people and their ways of putting words to things one has struggled with oneself. Participants in the group can exchange solutions which they have tried, create a sense of hope and help normalise certain thoughts they may have had. After the kayak camp, one of the participants said: "Outsiders can give you empathy, but they can never understand how it really feels."

In this period, all the staff at the Support Centre met regularly with Lars Rönnmark, whose role was to evaluate our working methods. Those of us who worked at the Support Centre in Hisingen were enthusiastic when we told him about the kayak camp and the new thinking that had been stirred among the young people. Ideas were "brainstormed" with Lars, who further backed up our enthusiasm and conviction that we had to keep working on these young people's personal stories. Lars told us about an American professor of psychology, James W. Pennebaker, who in a number of studies had pointed to the healing power of of writing and telling about traumatic experiences. The Support Centre thereby gained some references and examples from Lars's research, which seemed to indicate that writing things down can be used as a way of processing difficult experiences.

Camp with Iceland ponies

In November 2000, we invited our group of young people to come and take part in another camp. This time the activity on offer was horse riding, on Iceland ponies. The combination of getting out of the city and doing something enjoyable and exciting often helps people open themselves up to conversations. It is also good if an activity is slightly physically challenging. The purpose of the camp was to touch base with the young men, ask how things were for them now and offer each and every one of them the opportunity to write down his experience.

Marie-Louise Carlberg, a journalist and masseuse, also accompanied us on this outing. She had been approached and asked if she would help the young people write down their stories and she accepted almost straight away without a second thought.

Our four-legged shaggy friends were a great success. Patiently they allowed the inexperienced riders to bounce about on their round backs. The second day of horse riding was concluded with everyone trying to canter along a sandy beach by the sea. After the arduous day, Marie-Louise assuaged the sore, stiff bodies of the participants with a bit of massage. After a good dinner on nicely presented candlelit tables it was time to come together for the conversation. The exchange was largely about how things had been after the fire. The staff from the Support Centre felt that the atmosphere was more relaxed and open than it had been at the kayak camp.

The conversation stayed on the subject of finding the courage to face terrible memories and go through them one more time. Not so one could forget them, but so one could process them and start having more control of them. Someone in the group confirmed that he had had this experience. Everyone continued developing what had first come up at the first camp, when the idea of sharing their stories and laying puzzles had first emerged. There was even a suggestion that the discotheque fire might be an important event to document for coming generations, maybe even one's own children. Many people in the group spoke of how quickly the common recollection of a catastrophe might otherwise fade.

Marie-Louise Carlberg later wrote about this conversation in her book of essays, "To Meet Whatever You Meet":

> "It was almost a magic conversation. Devoid of surface, honest, painful. With a great deal of consideration and long, long, silent seconds. There was hesitation but also a thought-through conviction about the usefulness of telling all this. The grown-ups did not say so very much. The young people were the ones who spoke."

The young people said that they felt positive about the idea and the Support Centre promised to come back with an invitation and more details after Christmas.

Method and Implementation

In January 2001 a letter was written to the members of the group to inform them about the parameters of narrating and writing. This is what the letter said:

> "While we were at the camp we spoke about having the opportunity to tell our own stories of the fire. About 'laying a puzzle', putting things into words and moving on. We also talked about writing down everyone's story in order to save it for posterity – the importance of the next generation being able to partake of what you have been through. We also believe it would have a healing effect, not in order to forget but to gain more control and put things behind one.
>
> We now want to extend the offer of meeting with Marie-Louise to each and every one of you, so you can write down your stories.
>
> We propose to meet each of you on three occasions here at the Support Centre. We will sit for a maximum of two hours, obviously we will have coffee and cigarette breaks. Marie-Louise will do the writing and she will record what you have to say."

The Support Centre's way of thinking was that the young men would meet Marie-Louise together with other staff at our office. Two hours were set aside for each interview, including cigarette breaks. A decent cup of coffee was also on offer and Marie-Louise would tape the interview.

It was decided that someone from the Support Centre would accompany Marie-Louise at the first meeting. The young people were more familiar with the support staff, and we hoped that their presence would make them feel more secure. There was also a great deal of knowledge at the Support Centre about the events of the fire, as support staff had heard many people talking about it.

The staff from the Support Centre were also required to give support to Marie-Louise, who had been deeply moved by what the young men had told her at camp.

The interview would be based on a small number of standardised questions on every occasion. It was important to ensure that everyone's narratives would include the entire course of events, from the time of finding out that a party was being planned, the actual events of the fire and, finally, how it impacted on their lives afterwards. The questions were also formulated so that they would function supportively, by helping the young men arrange their experiences in some reasonably chronological order. The aim was for the questions to help bring out their "feelings" in recounting their stories, while at the same time avoiding any "steering" by asking too many questions. The ambition was to let them describe as freely as possible. The questions were subdivided into three time periods:

Before
How did you find out about the party?
What expectations did you have?
How was it when you arrived at the party?

The Disaster
Where in the building were you when the fire started?
When did you understand that it was serious?
What did you think at this point?
Alternatively; when and how did you find out what had happened?

Afterwards
How was the time after the fire?
When did you understand just how bad it had been?
How are things with you today?

Marie-Louise met the young people on three occasions all in all, the first time there were staff present from the Support Centre. The participants told their stories about the disaster from beginning to end. The conversations were recorded on tape.

Marie-Louise transcribed the conversations from the tape and called another meeting, at which each of the participants had the opportunity to sit down and calmly read through the text. They were able to react spontaneously to what had been written. Also these meetings took a significant amount of time, and each participant read his own text very carefully. There were opportunities to make changes: add or remove text. The tape recorder was also used on these occasions. Marie-Louise then reworked the text based on what was said at this meeting. Afterwards, she sent the new text to the participants. The idea here was that they could take as much time as they needed and read it through in stages. Finally, concluding adjustments were made with Marie-Louise, after which she wrote the final version of the text.

In her work with the texts, Maria-Louise tried to be as gentle as possible in converting the spoken language into legible text. However, she did her best to preserve their expressions, pace, repetitions and even confusions in the texts.

The final result was that seven young people had their stories of the fire transcribed and written down. There were seven very strong, personal stories, each between twenty and thirty pages in length. All were extremely naked and honest accounts. With enormous generosity and trust, the participants had shared their experiences. In their stories, the young people had shown what life is worth and how fragile and changeable it can be.

The Time Capsule. Writing Oneself a Letter in Five Year's Time.

Ski Trip, Spring 2001

At the end of March 2001, the Support Centre once again took the "gang" to another activity camp. Håkan from HÄFA also accompanied them on this occasion. The idea was to round things off in this way with the young men – and tie up the sack. While there was daylight, everyone put much enthusiasm into learning downhill skiing. Most had never tried it before. In the evenings good food was cooked, board games were played and there were interesting conversations all round. The young people generously shared their experiences. Many of them, with assistance from the Support Centre, had by this time started having counselling, and they had the confidence to inform the group of this.

The Letter

Getting to know these wonderful young men had been a fantastic, educational journey for the staff from the Support Centre and others from the emergency services. So much had been shared that everyone now felt a great sadness at having to be parted from them. The support staff had thought a great deal about how to conclude the working process in the best possible way. In the end there was agreement that a proposal should be made to all those on the ski trip, that they should write a letter addressed to themselves. The letter should be about how each of them thought their life would be in five year's time. The young men picked up on the suggestion and started writing right away.

The idea of writing the letter about the future was to encourage hope. Some of them hardly had any fixed sense of everyday reality. It was difficult to think about what one wanted or even if one would be alive in five year's time. Formulating thoughts about life actually going on – and that it might

even get better – was something absolutely new. We, the adults, also wrote our own letters and in this way we became a part of the group that would later reconvene at an appropriate time. The Support Centre would be responsible for storing the letters safely and calling everyone back for a re-union. This created a feeling of continuation in our relationship. It would not be terminated, it would only be paused.

Afterwards, one of the young people said: *"Yeah, we felt really happy when we heard that we'd be reading the letters in five years' time. We thought: Yes! You're still going to be there!"* One of the other participants at the activity camp said: *"It was nice thinking about how maybe you might be alive in five years' time. Until then I hadn't been able to think about life or look ahead. It was something new trying to figure out what I'd like to happen. It gave me hope."*

The Support Centre would be responsible for the safe storage of the letters both of the young people and the adults. Thus a new group constellation was created, consisting of those young people who had had their stories written down and the staff at the Support Centre. Effectively it was a prompt for a reunion when the time came.

Description of and Reflections on the Support Work

The Crime Victim Compensation and Support Authority

After the "magic evening" in January 2009, when the group reconvened to the read the letters, the idea was born to try and make an evaluation of the work the Support Centre had done with the group. It seemed highly relevant to try and draw some conclusions from our common experience. There were still a lot of questions that needed answering. The Support Centre wanted to evaluate the work that had been carried out with the group, in order to learn more about supporting people who had gone through traumatic events. Our conviction grew that this would also be useful to other victims and helpers. The idea was to pinpoint, with the help of the group, what had been healing and important in their recovery. What were the obstacles they had run into? What was their experience of working on their personal accounts? How had they used their stories, which they had been helped to write down? And so on.

Finally it would be of great interest to consult with the group about what sort of advice they would give other victims and helpers. Contact was resumed with Lars Rönnmark and an application worked up collaboratively and sent to the Crime Victim Fund in spring, 2009.

We had also kept in regular contact with a couple of our group members to hear what they thought of our idea. In turn, they consulted with the rest of the group. Their answer gave further impetus to our intention of pursuing the application.

In June 2009, to our great pleasure, further funds were allocated to our project by the Crime Victim Fund.

Participants in the Study

At the time of the last activity camp, the participants were between 18–20 years old. When we saw them again they were grown men of about 30, who had carried on with their studies and work. Partners and children had come into their lives. Some ten years after the fire a few people in the group still maintained regular, frequent contact. The difference now was that interaction tended to involve their whole families. Their meetings were often connected to some sort of activity for their children. Sporadic links were also kept up with others in the group. Possibly, the discotheque fire had even played a part in forging their friendships and creating the deep ties that existed between them.

By autumn 2009, most members of the group either had jobs or were seeking employment. Some had worked incredibly hard for shorter or longer periods. A couple of them were completing their studies. Four of them were married and had children.

A few of the them had served prison sentences and a couple of them had struggled with substance abuse after using drugs as a form of self-medication.

Working Method

The different phases of the study

Initially the men were invited to a meeting in October 2009 where they were all given the same information and a condensed description of the contents and purpose of the project. The goal was, with their help, to try

and assess the work of writing down their stories from the discotheque fire. It was also important to hear them describe their experiences of recovery and what had been most effective in the support and help they had received after the disaster, what they thought now of this support and what may have been a hindrance to them in their recovery.

We also had an idea of how to run the working process, which we presented to the group at the first meeting. Six of the seven individuals, who had produced the stories, came to the first meeting. The seventh man who had had his story written down had moved to London a few years back and could not be contacted. Conferring with the group, we considered a variety of ways of involving him in the study. This remained a part of our planning for quite a length of time, but in spring 2010 we were finally forced to abandon these thoughts, because of a shortage of time.

All who came to the initial meeting were positive about taking part in the study. They felt it would be exciting for them on a personal level, but they also believed that their experiences would be useful to others. One of the men put it as follows: *"What is the point of experience if it is not used to help others?"*.

Another reason for their willingness to take part was that they wanted to "do their bit" for us – now that we had a desire to evaluate the work we had done with the Support Centre. This was not directly explained, but it was nonetheless extremely clear.

In a project like this, participants are not clients of an official organisation, but participants in a study. They would go into the process with open eyes and would be kept fully informed about how the material would be used.

Phase 1. The interviews

The first step of the investigation was to conduct an in-depth interview with all the participants. In exactly the same way as when the stories were written down, the idea was to present a few questions and a shared chronology. At the same time it was important that the interview became an open conversation in which participants could be forthcoming about their personal experiences and knowledge. Factual background for some of the standard questions would have to be researched, but the interviews had to

be sufficiently open for the participants to offer their own experiences and knowledge also in areas not covered by these pre-defined questions. Margareta Hydén (2002, p. 141) writes:

> "The purpose of the interview is to make it possible for the interview subject to formulate him or herself in a story as fully and in as many-faceted a manner as possible. The researcher's ability to create a relationship with the interview subject is of central importance in determining whether or not this goal will be achieved."

The interviews were expected to last for about two hours, including a coffee break and stretching of legs. Whatever was said would be recorded and then transcribed. However, the anticipated time frame was immediately shattered in the first interview. The participants were enormously committed and had so much to share with us that time simply disappeared. In fact the interviews lasted between two and a half and four hours.

The chosen lead-in for the interviews focused on how people were living today, and then went back to events immediately after the fire by everyone having their story read out aloud. As their stories were read out, many of the participants thought they would want to make some corrections. But after listening to their own words about the fire, they all said that almost everything was correct. One of the young men said that he viewed his story as a kind of monument.

Thereafter, questions were asked about how the recovery had looked, what sort of support had been received, if people viewed themselves as having been hindered or damaged by the way they were treated.

In addition to giving their answers to the questions, participants were asked to make a self-assessment of their health on a scale of one to 10. First, they were asked to try and cast their minds back to their lives at the time when their stories were written down. The next evaluation was how they saw their situation now, at the time of the interview. Everyone estimated their health to be in a better state now than ten years ago. Some even said that they were quite pleased with the lives they were living.

One comment that has been made several times is that the significance of the stories, for the participants, changed a good deal in the time that had passed. When they were first written down, about one and half years

after the fire, the participants wanted to keep them confidential. Now ten years later the participants were aware that the stories might be useful to others. The participants were more altruistic now and fully prepared to share their stories with others. Maybe someone could be helped by their experiences.

Phase 2. Transcription of interviews

Helena Fernández, a qualified social worker and journalist, was engaged to do this work. Deeply involved in cultural questions and social work, Helena has been working for a number of years in journalism, as well as on a number of "creative writing" courses. Her main task was to write down the recorded conversations to make them into cohesive stories. Transcribing spoken communication into written language is no easy task. But Helena managed it very well. We ended up with six new powerful stories. On one occasion, Helena said that she felt that listening to the accounts of the participants was much like an artistic or aesthetic experience. Helena was greatly impressed by the ways in which the participants reflected on their lives.

Phase 3. Editing of the interviews

The next step was to try and make the interview material more readily useful in the study. It needed structuring and editing in order to become clearer. The goal was that every interview should create an event/repercussions narrative and a recovery/support narrative. Above all we wanted the message of the interview to be picked out and emphasised. It was quite clear that the material would benefit from a process of "boiling down". After many discussions a decision was made to use a speech rhythm transcription method developed by James Gee (1992). How the participants' stories are formed by this method is further elaborated in chapter 4.

Phase 4. Group meetings

In order to deepen the material that had been produced, three group meetings were held. At first the idea was that in these meetings we would rely on a "story/dialogue method" as described by Labonte & Feather (1996) and Labonte, Feather & Hills (1999). Initially we consulted carefully with the participants to hear their views on taking part in this "structured dialogue" – telling stories to one another, listening and asking questions to better understand what the storyteller wanted to say. Everyone agreed fully cooperate with this, and the meetings were characterised by a great degree of openness in the atmosphere of the conversations.

However, quite soon it grew clear that running the meetings in this way would take too much time. After some discussion we agreed on modifying the approach somewhat.

Important themes were picked out of the interviews, including key areas such as studies, "the lost years", work, advancing from youth into adulthood, becoming a father, and so on. Finally, quotations corresponding to these themes were taken from the various narratives of the participants.

In the meetings these quotations were read out in front of the whole group and the person who had been quoted had the possibility of modifying what he had said in the interview. If he wished to do so, he was then given the "talking stick" – exactly as during the kayak camp. The individual would then be given 5–10 minutes to elaborate and clarify what he had to say.

Thereafter, all involved were free to share some brief reflections and spontaneous comments. Next came a dialogue session, in which questions were asked of the person whose story had just been looked at. These questions were mostly concerned with details, fact-finding and the significance of what had happened to the person holding the "talking stick" and the interpretations that could be drawn from this.

After this, the "talking stick" was passed round the group so that everyone could comment and reflect on their own story sequences or those of others.

The conversations went back and forth and the subjects under scrutiny melded with each other. In this way the stories were further deepened. On a number of occasions the participants realised that even though they knew each other so well, new and unknown things kept surfacing – all because of this marking out of areas of the text and highlighting of particular themes.

Helena Fernández was present at the group meetings, and she kept extensive protocols.

There were some problems in getting the participants to attend the group meetings. Everyone was short of time. Either they had problems such

as children being ill or, occasionally, they were ill themselves, or similar problems. For this reason, the group was unfortunately never at full strength. At one of the meetings there were only two attendees, and at another, three.

Narrative method

The root of the word 'narrative' is 'telling' or 'story'. Clinical experience and research have shown that it is health-promoting to structure traumatic experiences and their aftermath in stories. Integrating the frightening experience with one's own stock of experiences is a way of gaining control over it, and telling the story thus becomes a way of enabling this integration.

The Support Centre conducted its work on the basis of this narrative perspective. The starting point was the idea that stories give form and structure to our lives. They create order and tidiness and summarise our daily experiences. Looked at in this way, it therefore follows that people are experts when it comes to their own lives, even when they are seeking help. Support staff took part by trying to delve into and broaden the stories that emerged over the course of the conversation.

The story is created together by the teller and the listener. Of course, it is important to handle sensitive subjects with care and respect. One has to be prepared to move forward slowly and not interrupt the narrator in his or her story. The whole thing is based on having the courage to trust.

This way of looking at the significance of the stories in the handling of trauma and during the recovery was always present in The Approach of the Support Centre, and it is also one of the continuing intentions of this report to try to make the experiences of this group of men accessible to others.

CHAPTER 3

Trauma and Recovery

Introduction

Many of those injured in the discotheque fire were taken to hospital with grave physical injuries, suffering from what is referred to in emergency care as 'acute trauma'. The experience of having one's biological survival hanging in the balance generally gives rise to psychological trauma. This was precisely what happened to some of the young people who were saved or saved themselves, but it was also noted among several witnesses to the terrible events at the scene of the fire. Most of these individuals never went to hospital, but they took their experiences with them when they went home that night or stayed over with friends. Traumatic experience focuses an overwhelmingly destructive force on the victim. In her research and clinical work, Judith Herman has shown how all-embracing such damage can be and how difficult to repair, not least because of the inherent tendency to deny and avoid what gave rise to the trauma in the first place. One of the survivors highlighted precisely this in an interview with us in the autumn of 2009:

> "No one told us that now you've been through a really horrifying thing like this, you won't quite be yourself for a few years. I don't remember anyone saying anything like that. You feel strange and cut off and you didn't recognise yourself when you compared how I was before the fire and how I became after the fire" (Paulo).

Not recognising oneself is a serious condition. One's sense of identity is threatened, which reflects the significance of the event – the extensive

inner devastation caused by the fire. It is highly likely that a great deal of suffering could have been avoided if survivors had been aware of the risk of "not being yourself for a few years".

But either no one did tell them, or the survivors and other victims were unable to listen and take in the significance of "you can't expect to be yourself for a few years".

The *first part* of this chapter is precisely about the violence and consequences of the traumatic event. The *second part* is about people's engagement with and recovery from injuries caused by a trauma. The same participant emphasises the importance of attaching words to the experiences and emotions one has gone through:

> "I have really seen the value of speaking out, not going round keeping things inside yourself. It eats you from the inside. It's worse when you don't have an answer to the questions. (…) Many people I've met think it's strange that, when eight nine ten years have gone by, they're still feeling bad. They start thinking more about the fire than ever before. 'Nothing wrong with me, no problem.' But then suddenly it's there. Maybe you start maturing as a person and then you start having the courage to look at your feelings. 'But it's ten years ago! You still feeling bad now?' They don't get the fact that people have gone around with 'pause' buttons in their brains. They press 'play' and it starts running" (Paulo).

What emerges from this statement is the denial and evasive attitude the survivor often has to his trauma. The 'pause' button is a metaphor for *inhibition* of emotions and thoughts that recall the trauma. The survivor tries to avoid this unpleasantness. Painfully enough it is made plain by the quotation that some people, ten years after the fire, are still tormented by memories and feelings attributable to the fire – and have not managed to take control of the event. The denial comes out in the statement: "Nothing wrong with me, no problem". The passage also shows how the trauma lives on the traumatised person, "eats you from the inside". One of the pioneers of trauma research, the neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–1893), described traumatic memories as "the parasites of the soul" (van der Kolk & McFarlane, 1996, p. 9).

Traumatic memories are both very invasive and at the same time evasive, in the sense that it is difficult to interpret their significance by connecting them with other knowledge or experience. The individual's frame of reference cannot manage to understand or associate the event to other life experiences. The memory remains dispersed or dissociated. This is an explanation as to why traumatic memories are free-floating and uncontrolled. Traumatic life events, states Mardi Horowitz (1986), "cannot be assimilated with the victim's 'inner schemata' of self in relation to the world" (Horowitz, quoted by Herman, 1997, p. 51).

There is often a high threshold before one finds enough courage to engage with and explore something as complex as traumatisation. James Pennebaker in various writings has used the term 'disclosure' (unmasking, uncovering) to denote an activity where the trauma is expressed, investigated and, bit by bit, controlled. This is also the interpretation we use in the active, confrontational term 'coping' – more or less handling or managing stressful events. A trauma is extremely stressful. The concept was developed in stress research and cognitive psychology: Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman (1984) saw 'coping' as a mediator of emotional reactions to stressful life events. They suggested a division of *problem-focused coping* for the purpose of reducing the pressure of the stressful situation or expanding the resources available for handling it, respectively *emotionally focused coping* to regulate the emotional response to a stressful situation. Victims can assume different attitudes in handling the event and situation that has arisen: An active, confrontational coping could be contrasted with an evasive, denying coping. The latter approach is an attempt to reduce anxiety by inhibiting memories and feelings awakened by the trauma, which implies a difficult and often long-term weight on the affected individual. In order to have the courage to meet the trauma head on and explore it, one needs commitment and a feeling of security. Throughout, the victim needs the support of those around him or her.

In the *third part* of the chapter we will describe the significance of verbalisation in the exploration of trauma. This can give both a theoretical and practical angle of approach to understanding the narrative methods which have been used consistently in the Support Centre's work with this group of survivors – also in the reassessment study outlined in this report.

A narrative study is more interested in "the significance of what happened" than registering "what happened". A narrative-based support effort is more focused on giving support and structure so the traumatised individual can outline and give meaning to the event, than to provide the objective measure of the event and its effects – for instance registering the effects on a test scale. Narrative-based methods seek to facilitate change. In the working process with this group of survivors, therefore, the emphasis is on supporting and helping the victims explore their relationship to the fire using their own words, and giving form to it in their own ways. The support work is thus focused on providing structure, clues and hope in the process of describing and talking about the indescribable trauma. Linguistic forms such as stories and other modes of expression are significant from the perspective of the social constructivist idea that we create our reality by means of linguistic activity (Hydén, 1997). Also for the researcher and the social worker, the creation of meaning comes to the fore in the use of narrative methods.

The consequences of trauma

In broad terms, 'trauma' is used to denote serious injuries to the body and 'psychological trauma' refers to injuries in the psychological structures of the inner world. At the time of writing, trauma is the most common cause of death in Sweden for persons under 45 (Trauma, 2010). Some 4 500 people die every year as a consequence of violence and accidents. About 22 500 people are affected by traumatic neurological injuries following violence to the head. Younger men, but also older people, feature disproportionately in this group. Damage to the brain is the commonest cause of death and disability among young adults in Sweden. The most frequent cause of traumatic brain injuries are traffic accidents, falls and assault.

Psychological trauma

Physical trauma – for instance, a serious brain injury, or burns – always has a psychological and also a social dimension. Life changes radically. Experiencing an accident or violence can give rise to a traumatic crisis, if the event "is of a nature and of a degree that is perceived by the individual as a serious threat to his or her physical existence, security and other life goals".

(Cullberg, 1999, p. 41). "A psychological state of crisis might be described as one that arises in a life situation where one's earlier experiences and proven or learned reactions are no longer enough to master the existing situation." (a.a.). The individual is no longer able to master his life situation, and hence it is also quite understandable that the psychological trauma engenders feelings of helplessness and powerlessness.

> "Psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force. When the force is that of nature, we speak of disasters. When the force is that of other human beings, we speak of atrocities. Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection and meaning" (Herman 1997, p. 33).

Here, Judith Herman is alerting us to the differences between trauma arising from a disaster or accident or an act of hostility by another human being. When another person is the cause of the trauma, a moral dimension is added. A legion of thoughts come to the fore on themes such as guilt, justice, responsibility, revenge and compensation. The traumatised person's concept of justice and context is shaken up when the perpetrator is guilty of violence against life and security. Such actions damage relations of trust. When nature directs its blind violence against people and animals, there is no intention to do harm. No individual can be held to account, although it is not unusual even with accidents and disasters to look for human scapegoats.

In the case of the discotheque fire, once the police had determined the cause of the fire there was a shift in the perception of the event – instead of being a catastrophic accident, it became a heinous act, not an accident but a case of arson. With the successful prosecution of the four perpetrators, the survivors and parents who had lost children also became victims of a crime.

Dissociation

"The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma" (Herman, 1997, p.1). This dialectic between opposites can be expressed by what, since the days of Pierre Janet, has been known as *dissociation*, in other words

"eruptions of thoughts, actions and feelings from intentional consciousness and premeditated control". We can understand the phenomenon by considering its antithesis – association. The latter is suggestive of the idea of bringing things together, connecting, understanding. This eruption is a mark of traumatised memory: memories that without prior warning rise up, causing horrendous thoughts and emotional responses and making the body prepare itself for a fight for survival.

"Traumatic memories have a number of unusual qualities. They are not encoded like the ordinary memories of adults in a verbal, linear narrative that is assimilated into an ongoing life story" (Herman, 1997, p.37). In other words, traumatic memory is not narrative in form.

Psychological trauma afflicts the inner structures of the survivor. Her capacity for creating meaning and control is significantly impaired or stops functioning altogether. Even relations of trust and perceptions of justice run the risk of becoming unworkable, particularly if the trauma has been caused by a human being. Because traumatic memories are alive and active in the survivor's body, she is also afflicted somatically. "Not giving expression to thoughts and feelings after a traumatic experience may bring about significant health risks not only in a psychological sense, but also physically. When we 'hold back', sympathetic activities also increase in the autonomous nerve system and thereby also stresses on the body", writes the memory psychologist Sven-Åke Christianson (1996, p. 315). The body is highly active when the individual re-lives the trauma, which is known as 'arousal' in literature on the subject.[2]

2 Christianson (1996, p. 315) explains the complicated processes in the endocrinal and neurological systems, set in motion during a traumatic reaction. The individual experiences significant stress. At such times "signals are sent from the cerebral cortex via the hypothalamus to the nuclei in the brain stem, which control the autonomous nervous system (ANS). The sympathetic parts of ANS help us prepare our bodies for an emergency reaction, while the parasympathetic part is activated during relaxation and rest. When a situation acts as an irritant to the sympathetic system, the stress hormones adrenalin and norepinephrine are secreted. These hormones reach the body's organs in the blood, causing an increase in cardio-vascular activity, breathing, temperature, sweat gland activity and as well as other involuntary physiological responses controlled by the ANS. Via the hypothalamus and pituitary gland the adrenal cortex is also stimulated to secrete cortisal, another stress hormone, which amongst other things affects the production of gastric acid. At the same time the liver releases glucose (blood sugar) which gives energy to cells and muscles."

Recovery

> "Even if the physical injuries are serious, nonetheless the long-term problem is the repair of the survivor's/traumatized individual's social world. By 'social world' I mean both the people that he [i.e. the traumatized person, our subject] has around him at this time and the representation of a host of images of good and evil, which he carries within himself; what we refer to as 'internal objects'" (Garland, 1996, p. 263).

The handling of traumatic experiences takes place in a specific sociocultural context. The culture provides the linguistic tools for investigation and interpretation of the event, and the framework of interpretation also indicate the limits of what may be understood and what lies beyond understanding. The attitudes and reactions of one's surroundings can be a burden but also an asset in the form of social support. The social context determines what resources can be accessed from social structures and what interpretations may be considered as legitimate (Summerfield, 1995, p. 17–30).

Five of the participants of this study were impacted by the somatic, psychological and social aspects of trauma, while the sixth participant experienced the fire from the outside of the building and therefore avoided somatic injuries. All are survivors in relation to close friends and acquaintances who died, and have been affected by feelings and thoughts relating to *survivor guilt*.

There is existing knowledge with the capacity to cast light on what it really means to be struck down with a psychological trauma, catch hold of thoughts and feelings that continue to torment and disturb, integrate the inexpressible and, on the basis of new possibilities, build a functioning daily life.

The Three Steps of Recovery

> "Recovery unfolds in three stages. The central task of the first stage is the establishment of safety. The central task of the second stage is remembrance and mourning. The central task of the third stage is reconnection with ordinary life" (Herman, 1997, p. 155).

Judith Herman (1997) has presented a wealth of research and clinical experience of recovery. We have found comprehensive and relevant passages that have helped us understand the nature of trauma and how it is possible to recover from it. Her writings are loaded with insight, which have helped us gain a better understanding of what we have encountered with the young men – the survivors – with whom we have been working. Herman's insights have cast light on our own practical work. Quite simply, we have come to understood our own working methods much better, also what has been most effective, after taking stock of Herman's findings. Below, we offer some outstanding examples of her ideas. We shall return in chapter 7 to some of her most significant concepts and show their relation to our own working practice. Judith Herman writes:

> "The core experience of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others. Recovery, therefore, is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections. Recovery can take place only within relationship; it cannot occur in isolation. In her renewed connections with other people, the survivor re-creates the psychological faculties that were damaged or deformed by the traumatic experience. These faculties include the basic capacities for trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy. Just as these capabilities are originally formed in relationship with other people, they must be formed in such relationship.
>
> The first principle of recovery is the empowerment of the survivor. She must be the author and arbiter of her own recovery. Others may offer advice, support, assistance, affection, and care, but not cure. Many benevolent and well-intentioned attempts to assist the survivor founder because this fundamental principle of empowerment is not observed.
>
> No intervention that takes power away from the survivor can possibly foster her recovery, no matter how much it appears to be in her immediate best interest" (Herman, 1997, p. 133).

> "However, in the course of a successful recovery, it should be possible to recognize a gradual shift from unpredictable danger to reliable safety, from dissociated trauma to acknowledge memory, and from stigmatized isolation to restored social connection" (Herman, 1997, p. 155).

Remembrance and Mourning

> "In the second stage of recovery, the survivor tells the story of the trauma. She tells it completely, in depth and in detail. This work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor's life story. Janet described normal memory as 'the action of telling a story'. (...) Traumatic memory, by contrast, is wordless and static. The survivor's initial account of the event may be repetitious, stereotyped, and emotionless. One observer describes the trauma story in its untransformed state as a 'prenarrative'. It does not develop or progress in time, and it does not reveal the storyteller's feelings or interpretation of the event. (...) The basic principle of empowerment continues to apply during the second stage of recovery. The choice to confront the horrors of the past rest with the survivor. The therapist plays the role of a witness and ally, in whose presence the survivor can speak of the unspeakable. (...) The completed narrative must include a full and vivid description of the traumatic imagery" (Herman, 1997, p. 175).

> "Helplessness and isolation are the core experiences of psychological trauma. Empowerment and reconnection are the core experiences of recovery. In the third stage of recovery, the traumatized person recognizes that she has been a victim and understands the effects of her victimization. Now she is ready to incorporate the lessons of her traumatic experience into her life" (Herman, 1997, p. 197).

Verbalisation and Narration

Joseph Breuer and Sigmund Freud were pioneers in using language as an agent of healing for physical ailments. The psychoanalytical treatment goes under the name of 'the talking cure'. In treating paralysis, anorexia, breathing difficulties, and so on, Freud relied on the telling of stories. Today psychotherapists in the psycho-dynamic and other traditions also primarily trust in

speech for the treatment of a large number of disruptions. Pennebaker and his colleagues propose that using speech for therapeutic treatment can be broadened to also include a 'writing cure' (Bucci, 1995). Here, one refers to two types of verbalisation. There is also a third type mentioned by Pennebaker: talking into a tape recorder. There are more. Every form has its own advantages and disadvantages. What they all have in common is that the sufferer makes symbols from and verbalises traumatic memories and describes how the event connects to the emotions.

In a number of studies, James Pennebaker and his colleagues have shown positive health effects resulting from the verbalisation of traumatic experiences, including, for instance: recently widowed women (Pennebaker & O'Heeron, 1984), survivors of the Holocaust (Pennebaker, Barger, & Tiebout, 1989) and victims of earthquakes (Harber & Pennebaker, 1992). In a sequence of studies, Pennebaker has explained the relationship between disclosure and ill health (Pennebaker, 1990/1997, *Opening up*; Pennebaker, 1995, *Emotion, Disclosure & Health*). In *Opening up* Pennebaker summarises the connections and explanations:

> "We don't need to talk to others to tell our untold stories. Nonetheless, our untold thoughts and feelings should, in some way, be verbalized. Whether we talk into a tape recorder or write on a magic pad, translating our thoughts into language is psychologically and physically beneficial. When people write about major upheavals, they begin to organize and understand them. Writing about the thoughts and feelings of traumas, then, forces individuals to bring together the many facets of overwhelmingly complicated events. Once people can distill complex experiences into more understandable package, they can begin to move beyond the trauma" (Pennebaker, 1997, p. 185).

Pennebaker wants to show that it is all about how one handles complex tasks. There is no difference, in principle, between trying to understand different kinds of complicated tasks. Investigating the underlying factors that gave rise to the Russian revolution and starting a new job are both examples of complicated tasks. Understanding psychological trauma is also a complicated task. Solving a task of this order is made easier if the support staff keep daily notes of their findings and experiences. The fact that writing

can make it easier for the individual to organise and understand complex tasks is a universal insight for Pennebaker. Through writing things down one can solve a task in gradual steps:

> "Writing and telling is one of many ways to actively be confronted with the traumatic memories. Formulating one's experiences and life in narrative form helps people integrate events, which are otherwise difficult to confront, in a social context, a pattern, and thus add meaning to them. The use of the grammatical system of language offers an opportunity to channel the traumatic experience and make the individual feel more like an author than an object. The writer sees him or herself more as a problem-solver looking for exits than a victim afflicted by something terrible. The writing process also helps break down the totality of the trauma into constituent parts, which can be easier to analyse and work with" (Christianson, 1996, p. 317).

One of the signs of a traumatic happening is precisely that it is not narrative, says Judith Herman. The whole point of working on the investigation of the trauma and its effects is to give it verbal form. By recounting the traumatic memory one makes a connection between it and the world. Through telling, the trauma acquires meaning and context. It is associated, among other things, through linguistic rules and grammar, and at best can be integrated by the survivor as one experience among others. At this moment the traumatic memory has ceased to be traumatic and violent.

Any work on trauma always takes place in a specific socio-cultural context and in relation to people who have certain attitudes to and conceptions of what has happened to the traumatised person. People in the network of the trauma victim have varying capacities for understanding the victim. It is far from certain that people in the immediate community will give support, and further actions intended to be supportive may not be perceived as such by the traumatised person. An individual suffering from trauma is often extremely vulnerable and may, apparently without any possible explanation, reject offers of support. However there is no doubt that support facilitates recovery from trauma. Sidney Cobb (1976), the specialist in social medicine, showed that social support facilitates the ability to overcome crises and changes in life and is also preventive in relation to a range of pathological

conditions. Support reduces the need for medicines, speeds up the recovery of the individual and helps her engage with recommended treatments. Social support is referred to as having a so-called *buffering effect* (Sarafino, 1994, p. 197) as it protects the individual from negative stress. Social support takes five principal forms (Sarafino, 1994, p. 102–103), namely *emotional support* (empathy and care), *appreciation* (encouragement or the giving of recognition), *instrumental or practical support* (practical, tangible help), *information* (giving advice or feedback) and *network support* (making social links). Those who were injured in the fire and lived with significant stress obviously had need of all these forms of support. Possibly, those with the worst injuries had the greatest need of network support, so as not to end up in isolation and denial.

CHAPTER 4

Elia Looks Back at the Fire in his Rear-View Mirror

Introduction

The following chapter is about the thinking of one of the young men – we have named him Elia – when he looks back to the night of the fire, 12 years earlier. What were the repercussions for him of the fire, how did he handle his experiences of the event and how have the people and organisations around Elia impacted on his recovery?

Most of the material in the chapter is taken from a long, revealing and in-depth interview conducted in November 2009. The interview was transcribed using a technique of spoken language in lines, verses, stanzas and sections (Gee, 1992).

By way of a conclusion we discuss what we view as the main features of Elia's story of the fire and reflect on coping and recovery.

We have already described that as a stage in the working process devised by the Support Centre, our group of young men were given the opportunity of writing down their stories in the spring of 2001, two years after the fire. One of the features of the interviews conducted with the young men in autumn 2009 was that their stories, almost ten years old, were read out. Afterwards they were asked how they felt about them now. The big question was really whether their stories had changed

over time and, if so, how and why. There was also a desire to get feedback from the young men on the value of writing down their stories about a traumatic event.

The story which Elia had written was read out by his interviewer, LarsÅke. Elia listened. Before the reading, Elia had said there was probably a great deal he would like to change. He said that he regarded his story as a sort of monument. A condensed version of it, about a quarter of the full-length text, is given in the following section.

Elias Story About the Fire, Written in 2001

"It's so sad that all this terrible stuff happened, when the idea was just to meet our friends and have some fun. Abbas was about to have his birthday and Mikael had just had his. And that was the reason for the party. I was going. If this hadn't happened it would have been the best party for ages.

I found out about the party from one of the organisers, and someone had made flyers. There were lots of us who helped distribute them.

When I got there I first of all went into the premises to have a look how they had arranged things in there. Then I took off my jacket and hung it among some other things. I was in there for about ten minutes, or fifteen.

At first I didn't know if I was supposed to help out, then after a while so many people came that the others wanted me to stand there like a bouncer, just by the cash till. I stood there almost the whole night and met everyone who came in or left.

Then loads of people came and said: There's a fire! You have to let us out! That's when you realised something was wrong. So we let out the people who were there, but then loads more came and I though I had to go in and check out what had happened. There were a lot of people wanting to get out, so it was hard making your way in. It was like walking through a wall of people.

Then ... It got very hard after that moment. I just remember that crowd of people wanting to get out, out... until suddenly almost no one came any more. By then I had got to the bar and I saw the whole place was filled with smoke. Before that point I hadn't noticed any of it. I checked over the bar counter and clearly remember I saw Paulo and Roy, and Abbas, Mikael's brother, on the other side.

I didn't see any flames, but the smoke was pouring in. I had some idea it was coming from the loudspeaker on the right-hand side of the stage. Behind that was where the emergency exit was. Me and Zvonko ran back to the bar and I jumped over the bar counter and filled a bucket of water and was going to jump back with it. I handed him the bucket and squatted down behind the counter and noticed that Paulo and the others were sitting there. It was very crowded behind there.

We realised it wasn't going to work putting out the fire with so little water. You understood it had to be a lot more serious and extensive with that much smoke.

At that point there was a lot of shouting and noise and all sorts. I watched Paulo for a while and said to him: I'm getting out now! I didn't know what the others were waiting for.

Just as I was starting to run, squatting down, I looked up and saw a wall of people in front of me on their way to the exit. Suddenly everything turned black. You couldn't see anything. As I ran towards them I thought there was no point trying to stand up and push my way through. So I crawled between their legs and slithered along and in this way I almost got to the corner where the table with the till was. At that exact point there were a lot of people. I noticed many more were coming from behind and I couldn't get any further. People kept falling over you. By the time I had freed myself from one, another fell on top of me. In the end three or four people fell across my knee. I got stuck there under all the people and couldn't free myself.

In the end I ran out of energy. I could just feel that however hard I struggled it was too heavy getting free. There was no oxygen in the air. You felt that every time you took a breath. I tried to keep calm, but a feeling of panic was almost taking over all the time. In the beginning I could hear everyone shouting, but things quietened down more and more, although I could still hear cries and other sounds from people all around.

Then I heard a bang, that was just before I passed out, and suddenly loads of air came in, it was like a wave of oxygen, but after that there was even more smoke and it got even harder to breathe and get any oxygen.

I woke up again just by the stairs. Marco, a mate of mine, carried me down. At first I tried to stand up all the time, I was so unsteady and my legs would hardly carry me, but I kept wanting to stand up. The smoke made you really strange. My friends told me to lie down, but I didn't understand that I was hurt, I just said I could handle it. I couldn't feel that I had burned myself. It felt like I lay a long time outside in the parking area before I was let into the ambulance, at least that's how it seemed. Inside the ambulance I passed out and woke up in the hospital.

At first I came to Mölndal Hospital, then I was moved to the intensive ward at Sahlgrenska after two or three days. There I lay anaesthetised for ten days. When my lungs were a little better the burns started hurting.

It was a very long time before I found out that so many had died. It was my dad who started explaining, very slowly and calmly he tried to tell me, but it was still a shock for me. In the end they let me see a newspaper with all the names, and that's when you started understanding. One still could not get it into one's head, one was just shocked and trying to understand. There were so many names I recognised and didn't just recognise, these were people I actually knew very well. I remember I read certain names and thought: I know her and him and this one and that one. Even if we hadn't exactly been close friends we did know each other and we said hello to each other.

If one was to count... well, I don't know, I don't know how one could count, it's a bit difficult, but probably more than half of all those who died were people I knew, or at least had said hello to and talked to. And half of them were people I saw every day.

While I lay there passed out all the dead had been buried and I knew nothing about it. It felt terrible and unreal. I mean it was something one could never have thought would happen, and then suddenly it did happen. I was eighteen years old at that time and now I am twenty-one. At that age you never count on anything like this happening. You feel like you're immortal.

I stayed two months at Sahlgrenska. In the end everyone who had been there in the fire ended in the same ward, except those with the most serious injuries.

It's difficult to remember what happened while I was in intensive care, because I got so many painkillers and other medicines. It made one really strange and light-headed and I had hallucinations and saw really strange things. At first I couldn't talk either, because I had taken so much damage from the smoke inhalation.

I was allowed to leave the hospital much earlier than the doctors had expected. I think my parents meant a lot for my healing process, they were there all the time. The few times that I was completely alone it felt very

difficult. Even if it was just a short while when I was alone, a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes. Then it felt much harder than when they were there. You felt it in your whole body, but mostly psychologically. Your psychological state affects the body, so I felt it in both ways.

When I was still at the ward I felt I was really cut off from everything. Later when I came back home and was moving around freely and could go out and visit people, only then was I able to start thinking and getting closer to what had happened. I met almost everyone who had gone through the same thing, and we were all talking to each other and that was when one started dealing with what had actually happened. There were so many rumours about who had done it.

At the start it was mainly about getting rid of this feeling of unreality, to understand that it had really happened. That was one of the first steps you had to take. And how I thought, and when I though, or that: Yes, I've got it now, it still wasn't, there was something that was just caught inside. And then you slowly started working through what had happened, the whole extent of it and all the other stuff, slowly, slowly, how and why. I tried to go back to school afterwards, but after a few days I felt: No, no, this is not going to work. It was completely impossible.

What helped me move on after losing so many friends, was firstly my family and then my friends. Without my parents I don't know how it would have gone. I can't even imagine it. And not without my friends either.

Now it doesn't feel like I have to go back and remember. I don't remember a lot from the actual event, only what I experienced myself. What happened to me there feels more like a protection for me, not to have to know, not to have seen what happened to the others. Even if I had remembered, how it would help me understand things I can't really see."

Interview Story: Elia's Thoughts on the Fire and his Recovery, Twelve Years After

When the reading was over, Elia said he was surprised that the story was so accurate. "Because I haven't read it for so long I thought there'd be a lot of things that weren't right, but that's not how it seemed." In other words, the story accurately expressed his experiences.

The story shows very clearly the extreme level of exposure to which Elia was subjected when he was caught inside the burning building, and how grim his time must have been after the fire. And it is shown what an enormous weight was laid on his shoulders by the death and injury of so many friends and people he knew.

The interview went on to focus on the consequences of the event, recovery and support (see pages 32–34). In what follows we are presenting some of the most pivotal parts of the interview with Elia. We have chosen to show these in the stylised form based on James Gee's transcription technique derived from speech rhythm. What this means is that one writes the story in a sequence of lines broken up by short pauses by the speaker. Lines on the same subject form a stanza, and this stanza is given a title which describes what takes place in the lines of the stanza. Often a stanza is built up of four lines but not always. Several stanzas on different aspects of the same thing form a heading, expressing the central message of the following stanzas. Several headings together form a section with a section title signalling more or less the over-all area being addressed. In this way, more detailed parts of the text are sealed in its more general parts like a series of Russian dolls.

By following the stanza titles, headings and sections, one can form an overview as a reader of what the subject wants to convey in a long, complicated story such as this one. We have transcribed all of the interview material using this method.

We have tried to render Elia's thoughts and experiences as closely as possible to his own expression and figures of speech. This means that we have done without commentary in the text and we have also removed the interviewer's questions and interaction with Elia during the interview. Furthermore, we have cleaned the text from any kind of background noise, so

that the message emerges with clarity. We believe that by using this method of transcription, we establish a deeper level of contact with the experiences of the interview subject – also his thoughts and feelings – than if we had simply presented the full text from the audio tape. However, it may seem somewhat contradictory to create a cohesive story in this way from Elia's perspective, when the material presented here is the outcome of a collaboration between the interviewer and interview subject.

I didn't feel well in 2001

I didn't feel well

When I told the story in 2001 I still wasn't feeling well,
I can say that today.
Maybe it sounds like I was quite all right back then,
but that would be far from the truth.

2001 was a bad period

2001 was a really bad period in my life, actually.
Things went up and down so fast.
It was going fine at the start of 2001,
then things went really bad.
In 2002 I was arrested (for) the first time.
That's, that's how fast things went.

Things finished with my girlfriend and I took drugs

Things finished with my girlfriend.
Things finished with my girl in 2001.
I started using much heavier drugs.
I lost my driving licence, and then my car.

I wasn't feeling good

In 2001 I wasn't feeling good.
But of course,
I survived,
and that's better than nothing.

I was in denial

I was in denial

I was in such denial,
so (then) I thought it was cool,
I'll sort this out in a day kind of thing.
I really thought that.

I'm a completely different person today

The question is if I am in any sort of denial today.
No, I don't think so.
I mean, my life is completely different today.
I'm not the same person I used to be, neither when the fire happened
or when I told the story, in 2001.
The way I am now I'm a completely different human being, I feel.

I was lucky not to lose everything

My parents have always supported me

[Today] I work in my parents' shop and I am still living in my flat.
I have been lucky with all this.
My parents have always supported me,
so I still have my flat.

I almost lost everything

I was about to lose everything.
Luckily I just avoided it.
But if I carry on the way I did then there's no doubt about it.
Then I'll lose everything.

We have been together four years

The first time I met my girl was exactly four years ago.
In a week it'll be exactly four years ago.
It was on her birthday.
So we've been together since 2006.

We moved in together

We moved in together in 2006–2007 and she's very steady.
She has absolutely nothing to do with what I was doing.
Right now she's studying at the university.
We got engaged in 2007.

Physical and mental training

I'm trying to find my way back to my life before the fire

I'm trying to go back to where I felt I was
most satisfied with my life.
It was about a year before the fire.
That is what I am trying to find my way back to now.

I lived for my training

I lived a completely different life then.
The time things were at their best.
I lived for my training.
It was the most important thing for me.

Spirituality

The underlying philosophy of martial arts had meaning

Then it wasn't just this thing about combat sports,
punching and kicking and all that,
it was the actual basis of it,
the philosophy and spirituality behind it.
In the end it had nothing to do with combat sport.

It was a way of relating to life

Some people call it religious.
Some call it philosophical.
I think spirituality is a fitting word.
It was a way of relating to life.

I learned how to change oneself as a human being

It wasn't just like believe in this and everything will sort itself out.
That is not what I learned,
but that it had a lot to do with one's own thoughts and feelings
and how one can change oneself as a human being.
Work on oneself in that way.

We were doing exercises

There were a lot of other exercises we were doing.
Loads of meditation and concentration exercises,
Qigong, Tai chi exercises and all that.

Things happened inside me

It wasn't like a lot of fun things were happening around me then.
It wasn't a real adventure in that way,
but a lot happened inside me.
A lot of changes and all that.

I trained hard and made progress

I was very young then.
Our club had three groups in it.
One for beginners, one intermediate and one advanced.
I started with the beginners and trained there.
I trained so hard that after a few years I was in the advanced group.
So I made progress quite fast and I was the youngest in the group.

We were always together

Although there were ten of us, of that ten five of us were always together.
We were at training every day.
In one period I trained eight times per week.
I did two training passes on Saturdays.
And then I did physical training as well.
It was my life, more or less.

We trained with the monks in the Shaolin temple

In 1995 we went to China with the club,
to the Shaolin temple for two weeks.
We trained with the monks there.
It was an amazing experience, in fact.
I was just fifteen years old,
so now it's almost fifteen years ago.

I had a calm in me

Then I had a calm inside me.
I had goals that were not materialistic.
It was not chasing money or the best car and all that,
it was something quite different I was after in those days.

Life was different

All this makes life quite different.
It is very different for one who thinks like this and has goals like this for himself.

A few years before the fire I feel I was at my best

When I think about it, it was in this time that I was at my best, quite simply.
A year or so before the fire…

Popular in the circle of friends

My mates wanted me to come and do break dancing

I was young and started getting to know a few mates around.
These mates were always in town partying, sort of thing.
We were like thirty of us.

The phone was always ringing

The phone started ringing all the time.
They were doing break dance.
Because I was good at somersaults and a lot of that acrobatic stuff,
they always wanted me to come and dance with them.
That's how it ended up,
I was pulled in.

Then came the fire

A lot happened around those guys.
The ones I knew were decent guys.
A bit of time passed
and then came the fire.

The importance of martial arts for survival

Maybe I have different ideas now

Maybe I have different ideas now about some things.
Maybe it's because I spend a lot of time in my life on training and spirituality,
and I can see how much it has affected me as a person.
This thing I possessed inside when this happened.

I told myself to be calm

With training and the mental part as well.
Many very important things,
such as how I hunched down when I ran,
and there was a place where I told myself I would not
panic and I'd stay calm.

I wouldn't have thought like this without the martial arts training

I don't think I would have thought like this.
I wouldn't even have managed to stay calm
if it had not been for what I had been doing before.

I used what I had learnt

What I had learnt I could use in this situation.
To stay calm and feel what was right.
I knew that if you panic in there, you're done.
And that is what most people did.

I didn't want to hurt anyone

I tried to do something right.
At the same time I didn't want to hurt anyone when I ran up and started tugging at people
and pulling them to get through myself.
So I choose to crawl through their legs.

The importance of martial arts for my recovery

I recovered quickly

Then at the hospital I realise that this helped me a lot.
I know that a big part of my getting out earlier [than the doctors had thought],
was because of my training.
Not the physical part,
but every day I sat there and did certain things to help me get well.

My trainer visited me at the hospital

My trainer came to talk to me very many times.
He was even there at the intensive a few times.
He visited me there as well. Then I said to him:
"Damn, they let me out early!"
"Yes, but did you do the things I said?" he said.
"Yes", I said.
"No wonder, then", said my trainer.

I did everything to get my body together and take care of my feelings

There were those who were either injured the same as me or less,
who stayed at the hospital much longer.
I did everything to get my body together first and foremost,
later I'd take care of myself mentally, sort of thing, and my feelings.

The easy way was having a breakdown

The easiest thing I could do, would be to have a breakdown.
It wouldn't have done any good.
Sure, I broke down when my parents explained [to me what had happened].
I was in bits for several days, must have been.

It wouldn't have worked out without my parents' support

I think I repeated a few times too many in the story,
this thing about my parents,
that it wouldn't have worked out without them,
but that's how it was for me.

I concentrated on getting well

I concentrated only on getting well.

The experience of pain and pain alleviation

The pain was hell

I remember it as a real hell, more or less,
because there were so many things at once.
It was the pain.
What I remember vividly was when they changed the bandages.

They gave me morphine against the pain

If they gave you something they gave you morphine, it gave you a
good (long) time, without pain I mean.
The body got used to it.
So I thought when things were okay, everything was looking good,
that's when they'd cut out the morphine.
They said: "We have to reduce it in stages."
But I said: "No, no, just cut it."
So they reduced it in a single step
instead of many stages.

I got withdrawal symptoms

One day passed and then I felt sort of ill.
I got withdrawals.
It wasn't just the pain. Suddenly I became properly ill,
because I didn't have morphine in my body.

I didn't brood on what had happened

Everything went in phases all the time.
If I'd really started brooding on what had happened,
I wouldn't have been strong enough to come through all this as
quick as I did,
compared with the others.

The fire doesn't disturb me so much, but I think about it every day

Memories pop up all the time

It's not as if I'm sitting there thinking about it.
A single thought can reappear many, many times,
memories pop up all the time,
so I can't say I don't think about it every day.

The fire doesn't disturb me so much today

I don't really know what I think (about the fire today).

I know it may sound as if I've really worked the whole thing through
and understood the way it all is.
But I know there are more things I need to tackle.
Honestly it doesn't disturb me so much today.
It doesn't.

In cramped spaces I've thought about the fire

I've felt it when I'm in a cramped place and you have to get out
and there are many people getting out,
and people are shoving,
then I've had a feeling of…

I've heard others say they've had a problem with this.
Because they said it
I've thought about it,
and then I've started thinking about the fire.

I bring things up myself when I think about the fire

So I don't know.
If they had not explained these things to me,
I don't think I would have had a problem with it.
I bring it up myself a bit.

I haven't had huge problems with memory

I don't know if I've been lucky or if it's to do with something else,
but I haven't had such big problems with this.
I know people who walk in and have a look [in a new place]
and the first things they looks for are the emergency exit,
fire extinguishers and
fire alarms and all that.
I haven't been like that.

Once I recognised the smell of plastics smoke

I can remember one time I felt that kind of plastics smoke.
I recognised it straight away from the fire.
It's probably the only thing that has taken me back there, right away.
I really recognised that it was exactly the same smell as during the fire.

It was unpleasant

So at that point I felt like that but...
not so deeply that I was back in the burning building and feeling everything and panicking and my pulse speeded up.
Not as strongly as all that.
But I found it a bit unpleasant.
And then, I don't know...
In a crowded place I find it a bit hard work.

I think about what I'll do if there's panic in a crowded building

If it's crowded somewhere and a lot of people are heading in the same direction it comes to mind.
Then I think: At least I know what I'm **not** doing today.
I try not to think: Damn, this is hard work! And get in a panic and all that.

My life was formed by the fire

My life was formed by the fire

My life has been formed by the happening of the fire.
Many of the mates I had passed away.
Suddenly there were other friends, who we had also socialised with,
although I wasn't as close to them, but then I did close to them because of the fire.

I stopped going to school

I tried to go back to school afterwards,
but after a few days I felt:
No, no, this won't work.
It was completely impossible.

I started seeing a girl

I started seeing a girl,
who I was seeing for a very long time.
She in particular affected my life a lot during a period.
It was more or less the fire and all that, which led to us being together.

The fire was my excuse for my behaviour

I kept excusing my behaviour for a very long time because of the fire,
and if it had never happened one might have thought:
no, what the hell, I have no reason to be doing what I'm doing.
So it's one of those things that happen that really make you change your course in life.

Substance abuse as an evasive strategy

I started using drugs after the fire

For my own part there were many factors at work.
One of them was probably my use of medication, I mean in the beginning after the fire.
It did not take very long before I started using drugs
after coming home from the hospital and feeling that my body was healed, more or less anyway.

The drugs dulled the mind and your feelings

And the medications,
it's the mind and the feelings and how to dull them.

People using avoidance around one

No one spoke openly about the sorrow

Everyone around me was walking round, carrying a very heavy sorrow,
but it wasn't like anyone was sitting there, talking openly about it.
Of course it happened, but not often.
It was a big process of denial, that's how it felt.

The ones that talked ended up on the outside

The ones that liked talking about it,
sometimes they almost grew distant from us a bit
and maybe they felt a bit left out
– or maybe we felt left out.
I don't know how it was.

I didn't like talking

I was probably one of those who didn't like talking about it very much.
It's hard (to remember), a long time has passed now.
For a while it was like I (wanted to push it away
because it was bloody hard work).
I know it went a bit in waves.

You get like your friends

That period in your life you get a lot like your friends.
Today I see it as an insecurity.
You look to see how your mates are thinking, and then you think:
Yes, yes. I can't be any different.
I have to think that way too.

Talking: working on it or dwelling on it?

I was with people who did not want to talk

I was with a lot of people who did not want to talk about it very much.
(Just) a couple of sentences or a few words
then they went quiet and wanted to talk about the weather.
You end up like them.

There was a resistance to talking about the fire

I remember at the hospital, when I heard about all this
(that had happened).
When you came out and you wanted to talk, you felt right away there was a resistance from the other side.
So you dropped it and started convincing yourself that:
No, I don't want to talk about this.

Dwelling on it and feeling sorry for yourself

(Gradually as time passes) it gets stranger and stranger talking about it.
I think that "talking about it" does not mean "dwelling on it".
Dwelling, that's digging a hole for yourself.
I have some friends who are still doing that today,
and who excuse a lot of things in their lives,
that "the fire did this",
and feeling sorry for yourself.

I am a person who struggles

I don't know how much (really) I know myself,
but I see myself as a strong person,
and someone who really struggles.
I don't think you're doing that in this situation.

Talk must have a goal

Maybe it's easy for me to say it, but I don't like dwelling on it.
Talking about it, sure, but have a goal if you're going to talk about it!
Get somewhere with it.
Otherwise it'll go on until you're 70,
and you're running through the same story again to people who really can't deal with hearing it any more.
And that's how reality is.

Working on it is changing it

There's a big difference between dwelling on it and working on it.
Working on it, I think, is changing it.

Telling the same old story over and over again is not working on it

When you're telling something over and over again,
and you can really see that nothing is happening
just you telling the same story,
then something's wrong.
You're not working on it.
You are not treating or rehabilitating yourself.

Working on it is transformation

A process of working on it for me is a transformation from something bad to something better.
That process is always bloody laborious.
Dwelling on it is when you talk about it,
without grabbing hold of it and doing something about it.

Few people know their own feelings

You have to be able to affirm them in yourself.
This whole thing with feelings is so complicated,
I have noticed that very few people really know what they feel.
When they think they feel this,
many times it ends up that they feel something completely different.
So they don't feel what they think they feel.

Consult professional expertise

I think it's good seeking help sometimes from those who do this as a profession.
I can't see anything wrong with it.
If you've reached the boundary where you're sitting about dwelling on it
and you catch yourself out and realise you're not going to let this go,
and ten fifteen bloody years have gone by,
then it's time to do something about it.

Guilt and shame prevent personal development

One should not have feelings of guilt because one tries to work on it.
Guilt and shame and all that, these are feelings that prevent one's personal development.

Many just want to forget

I know many who just say no, I don't want to work on it, I want to forget.
And all those who died?
I hardly think they want us to go round feeling terrible today.
I really don't.

Be honest with yourself!

For me, the first step has been about being honest with yourself,
and really see what needs to be done.
What do I feel?
I have seen it has also been like this for others who want to make a change in themselves, work on something.

I never dwelled on things

I never went around dwelling on things, sort of thing.
I have never been a person who feels sorry for myself.
I have other traits which aren't exactly good,
but I mean this is not a quality I have very much.

Learning how to mourn

I trained in how to cope with bereavement

I have done a training course in how to cope with bereavement.
It's mainly about working with people.
Then you become a qualified person at bereavement counselling.
You'd take care of helping people going through a certain sorrow.

I worked on my own sadness

I have started seeing sorrow in a different way since I did this training.
The thing was you could not do it if you had nothing to work on in yourself.
You had to read the course manual first and then you got it:
Hello! All people have something to work on.

You help people through a process

It's built up as a complete process.
You help people through a certain process.
And to be honest it's hard work in the beginning,
because you go back into it.

It was intensive

I was there a week.
It was from morning to evening.
It was intensive.
I crawled home in the evenings.

I took care of my own stuff first

The thing was when you got there it was not about helping others.
You had to take care of your own stuff.
That's how it is, then you know how it works.
So that was good.
It has helped me quite a lot, certain ways of thinking and all that.

Sorrow is feelings attached to loss

Sorrow is feelings

What I've learnt in this training is that sorrow, at a basic level, is feelings.
It's about feelings.
It's not thoughts and it's not reflection and all that.
Sure, it may come out that way, but it all comes from feelings.

Feelings are attached to people who have gone

Feelings are attached to the people who were there,
and you can take it on board and work on it, so...
It would take a long time if I was going to explain,
but if you handle it in a good way, it won't hurt in the same way.

Now it does not hurt me in the same way

(For me it does not hurt in the same way.)
I think it has a lot to do with what I did about it.
And maybe some things I know, others don't.

Helping others who have been struck down

The training helped me a lot

I didn't deal with the fire when I was there, we wouldn't have had time.
There was so much there.
What they helped me with a lot was how to look at sorrow and what it really is.
People don't really know what sorrow is.
They only know it's hard work and heavy and such like.
I mean I have also tried to deal with it myself.

My thinking was that I'd help people from the fire

My friend Paulo was going to do the training.
He tried to get this training via BOA[3], I think.
My thinking was also to do the training and then try to help people from the fire.
That was my thought, because it helped me,
and I saw how much it helped people there.
People felt good when they left.

Help people who had gone through the same thing

I have another job that might start next year.
In which case I'd become a support assistant, a motivator, something like that,
and if so it would be more or less about helping people going through things like I did.
It can be a support for them who can't quite manage to be at home
or don't have a flat at the moment.
Most are probably from some institution.

3 BOA is an abbreviation for Brandoffrens Anhörigförening [Association for Families of Victims of the Fire]. It was set up shortly after the fire and is still active in running support and information activities.

I know how I can help someone

People are different, but not so different.
Once you've worked on yourself, you know how...
I mean these are my own thoughts,
so I know how I can help someone who's willing to be helped.

You have to want it yourself

It's to do with many steps,
and it's not like someone just gets there and then they've arrived
and then go home after a month and everything's fine,
you have to have your own will.

Help is someone telling you how to help yourself

If you have the motivation you can get help,
and this help is someone telling you how to help yourself.
That's what's important.
To find it in oneself.

The experience and the person is unique

Unaware people often give well-intentioned, bad advice

One piece of advice I think many people should heed,
is that people who don't know much often offer very bad advice.
Maybe with good intentions, but very bad advice.
Sometimes in the form of proverbs and such like.

No one can know how I feel

If someone comes today and says to me:
"I know how you feel.
I was also in a fire."
To me that's a complete lie.
He doesn't know how I feel.
I am a completely separate person, I have a completely different...

The experience is unique

Even if you were sitting next to me in the hospital,
and beside me in the building while it was burning,
know all the people I know,
it would still not be the same thing.

My relationship to the people who died is unique

Because my relationship to all the people who died,
it's a quite different relationship from the one you had with them.

Thoughtless words can wound

Thoughtless words can make things worse

You can't compare sorrows.
A whole lot of things like that are said to people
One doesn't think.
That can lead to things getting worse for them.

Insensitive people can wound

In the time after the fire I thought sometimes:
"Damn, that's so insensitive! How the hell can anyone say something like that?"
But you can't go round being angry at that person who's said it either,
because I don't think anyone wants to hurt you in that situation.

People who help think they're doing a really good job

One thinks one is doing a bloody good job.

If one doesn't know how to handle sorrow, it's better to stay silent

When one is unsure about something like this,
when one is not quite sure how to handle sorrow,
I think it's better to stay silent.
If someone wants to talk, let them talk.
One can't say it does good to be silent.
And the person bearing a sadness should not be silent either.

How one has been taught to express oneself while growing up plays a part

If a person [...] has been brought up to think
that when you're sad, be sad by yourself,
don't cry in front of people, here and there.
This is something you take with you through life.
So if a person is not very much like this,
one usually wants to talk about it.

People find it difficult taking on board other people's sorrow

Exactly this thing of not showing sorrow...
The way it is in society, you're allowed to show your happiness,
there's no problem about that,
but people have a bloody hard time seeing other people in sorrow.
It's not accepted.

There's a hole in our culture

You can see how people get uncomfortable when you say:
This person who was close to me passed away.
People don't know how to handle it.
I think it's a hole in our society and culture.

Get acquainted with and derive help from your emotions

(It can get better if people) realise that happiness is a feeling,
sorrow is also a feeling.
They are just different. Feelings as feelings.
There's nothing wrong with feelings, I think.
If you have them there's nothing wrong.
But you can look at their causes and try to work on them.

Don't lock yourself in and think it's going to get better

Don't go and lock yourself into your room and think it's going to get better.
Because it's going to turn into a big lump,
And that lump grows over time.
It won't get better.

Take care of your life and your friends!

There's a difference between living and surviving

There's a difference between surviving something and really living.

Make sure you do something good with your life

You have one life and you're born and then you die.
Might as well do something good with it.
Why go round and carry it on your shoulders all your life?
I think this is completely right, that's how I think today.

It's not right to throw away your life

I want to say something to people who end up in a situation like mine:
just because a thing like this happens it is not right to throw away your life.

I blamed my bad behaviour on the fire

Many times I excused my behaviour, which was heading in the wrong direction, by saying:
"I went through a bad thing."
"I went through a trauma."
"Shit, leave me alone, let me do what I want!"
It seems completely irresponsible to me today.
What happened gave me no right to do what I did, to myself foremost.
Maybe it's understandable, but that's something else altogether.

You should take care of your life and your friends

Today I think one should be more careful about one's life
and really take care of those who prove to be real friends
and really love you.
Because in a situation like that, at the hospital, it really shows who loves you.
Take care of them and be there for them!

Only when I feel good myself can I help others feel good

You don't do that if you throw your life away,
if you do bad things to yourself.
If one takes care of oneself, I feel good,
so I can help others feel good.

Experiences of social support

Reading instructions: Elia's social support was investigated by giving him a network chart to fill in. Family, friends and acquaintances, school and work and finally professional support workers were marked in four fields. People who had made a contribution to coping and recovery were marked in red pen. People who had made a negative contribution, in Elia's view, were marked in blue pen. His mother/father and relatives were marked as "red" helpers in the field of family. Friends and acquaintances got one blue and one red marker. In the field of school, work and organisations, the trainer was marked as positive. In the field for professional support, Elia wrote "bereavement counselling".

Elia was asked to estimate his "well-being" in 2001 and now in 2009 on a scale of 0–10. 0 represented the lowest possible value on the scale and 10 the best possible. Elia marked is well-being in 2001 as 1,5, in other words at the time when he wrote his story. At the time of the interview in 2009 he marked his well-being with an arrow reaching from 7 to 8, with its head pointing towards 10. In other words, there have been dramatic changes in his assessment of his self-worth.

Support from family and relatives

My parents have helped me

[My parents] have helped me when it was about drug abuse and criminality and so on.
I am grateful that my parents did everything they did.
I mean then I can't carry on as I was.
It doesn't work.

I see the happiness in my mother's eyes

There's not a lot that can measure up to seeing the happiness in my mother's eyes,
when she sees me healthy and happy,
and that my life is going in the right direction.
That expression she has in her face when she sees it,
it can't be had for money.

My grandparents on both sides were important

And my maternal and paternal grandparents have been very important.
Really.

Support from friends and acquaintances

Friends and acquaintances were both bad and good

Friends and acquaintances have been both good and bad.
Some friends who weren't even in the fire have given support.
Not many.
They have tried.

Many thought they were helping me, but they weren't

Many have wanted (something) good and thought they were helping me, but they weren't.
Then there are many who have just wanted someone to come along and do stupidities with
and maybe their intentions have not been the best.
Many of those who maybe have done me damage have not really wanted that.
But those who are (left) here I can largely write only in red.

Many want the best but it goes wrong

There are many who perhaps mean well, but it doesn't work out that way in the end.
I can't say I've been any better,
because I have definitely done loads of things and thought I was helping someone,
but you do harm instead.
So it's nothing I hold against them.
It's hard to say how many.

In the beginning many wanted to help

In the beginning there were more who really wanted to help one,
from every possible direction.
Then time goes by
and you stay with the ones that are left.

Support from organisations, school and work

My trainer was a great help

My trainer counts as an organisation, right?
In the beginning after the fire he was a great help.
He came right away to the hospital.
He was one of the few allowed into intensive care.
He wanted to see me.
I couldn't talk, but I remember seeing him there.
So he's always tried to help me,
even when I started using drugs and all that, he tried to help me.

He helped more than twenty books

I tried to track him down for several weeks.
I even stood waiting outside our training premises.
I spoke to him for maybe one and a half hours Sunday last week.
I have read about twenty books on the same subject now these last months,
he helped me more than those books.
He helped me more in just that short bit of time.

I went to a psychologist

I went to a psychologist but I stopped going before we were finished.
He didn't help me because I refused…
I went there and lied, quite simply,
and then things stopped working, didn't they.

I lied about the essential stuff

Maybe they weren't huge lies,
but I lied about the essential.
And so it didn't work.
It crumbled away.

School was understanding

School was very understanding.
The fire was such a big thing, everything wanted your best.
My school tried to help me catch up when I came back,
and said it was cool and I could take the time I needed.

The hospital staff radiated warmth and really cared

It's something different for every individual (what you see as supportive).
I remember something I really thought was good.
At the hospital some of the staff radiated real warmth.
A humanity.
A good heart.
They did something that (made one feel they) really cared.
In that first period (at the hospital) one needed a bit of understanding and all that.
It makes a massive difference.

They were calm

It was enough just the way they spoke to you.
They were calm.
I found that really important.

If you work with people in crises you must have inner calm

If you work with people you must have inner calm.
I think so anyway.
If you are not calm you can't handle your own life:
In that case stop trying to handle other people's lives!
So first and foremost, have some calm.

The hospital staff did little things beyond the call of duty

(The staff did) little things that did not only have to do with their work.
They didn't just ask about your pulse,
they took a little extra time.
The little extra bit that's not mentioned in the manual.
It's difficult to put it in words.
Taking your time.
Being calm.
Showing a bit of empathy, perhaps, but not exaggerated.
Never be false.
If you don't feel empathy don't play it as if you do.

The Chief Physician cared about me

I remember a Chief Physician we had in intensive care.
He didn't do anything special,
but you really felt this person cares.

He sat down and really looked at me

He was the Chief Physician but he did little things you could have asked an auxiliary nurse to do for you.
He sat down and really looked at me
and tried to see what beyond the purely medical was bothering you.
It made a big difference.

Helping a person to feel what she feels

I always try to be honest

I've learnt to lead [people grieving] into starting to talk, if they want to.
First and foremost I always try to be honest,
so I don't say: I know how it feels,
but I do say: I'm sorry about your grief.
These are small things I am thinking of now.

I ask: How did you find out about it?

I've learnt this from the training as well.
I never properly understood this before.
Then you look at them and you ask:
How did you find out about it?
And then they start explaining.

Help the person feel what she really feels

When you start there: How did you find out about it?
That's when it begins.
It's there everything begins, when you find out about it.
Then people start letting go of it.
I mean I try to get them to stop thinking and instead feel what they really feel.

Honesty to yourself is most important

For me, today, honesty is basically the most important.
And I'm not talking about others,
but about being honest to myself.
I try to explain that when someone talks to me about grief today.

Don't escape from what you feel

One shouldn't escape from what one feels.
If you feel this way, that's what you feel.
It's nothing to hesitate about.
It's nothing to deny.

Denial is a form of self-delusion

Denial is a very great power which is destructive.
I mean denial is a sophisticated self-delusion.
And what's at the heart of the delusion?
Well, it's the lie.
And then we're talking about lying to oneself.
This is cool, sort of thing, it'll work out.
It feels heavy but it'll get better – all these types of (clichés).

The intellect is the wrong tool for working on grief

Our thoughts, our intellects, are an instrument really.
To try and fix grief, work on grief with the intellect,
that's the wrong instrument,
the wrong tool.

One uses the wrong tool

It's like saying:
"Here's a hammer; paint this room blue with it!"
It doesn't work, does it!
One uses the wrong thing for it.

We live in a world that emphasises rational thoughts

Then we live in a world where it is highly prized,
using the intellect and rational thinking and logic.
But feelings are something quite different.
One must first admit and understand what feelings are.

People lack words for feelings

Then people have sort of three words for feelings.
But many many more exist.
It's fine if you can't put words to them,
but only you know how it feels.

There's a need for a conclusion for people who have passed away

There's a need for a conclusion for every relation one has had to the
people who have passed away.
This is something that small children do automatically.
Then when they grow up they become like us.
I think it's good to know that children do this
and this means it is something natural for people.
And when we don't do this we're acting unnaturally,
which brings a lot of problems.

Discussion

What might have been the best party for a long time was changed in a few minutes into the worst thing that had ever happened to those who were at the party, also their families and friends. Elia lost about 15 friends and many acquaintances and also came very close to losing his own life. The contrast between the party and the catastrophe is dramatic.

The party-goers were completely unprepared. The violence that overtook the young people was sudden and unforeseeable. Many hundreds of young people, arriving next of kind, emergency services personnel and curious onlookers at the scene of the fire saw and experienced things this night which, for most, were extremely threatening, also unbelievable, indescribable, unreal. Happenings of this order are known as traumatic events. Quite apart from people's bodies being injured, their psychological make-up was damaged, as well as their sense of self, sense of the exterior world, identity, etc. The conception people have of their own invulnerability shifts to another conception: If something like this can happen, then anything can happen. Suddenly the world becomes supremely dangerous (Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

Elia was seriously injured by the violence of the fire. His body healed at record speed, under the active care and treatment of committed staff and frequent visits from friends and family. The hospital was a world in itself, screened off from what was waiting back in the home environment:

> "When I was still at the ward I really noticed that I was screened off from everything. Then when I came home and started moving freely and could go out and visit people, only then could I start thinking and I got closer to what had happened. I met almost everyone who had gone through the same thing, and we started talking to each other and one started dealing what had really happened. There were so many rumours about who had done it."

> "At the start it was more this thing of getting the sense of unreality to go away, to understand that it was real. That was one of the first steps one had to take."

Only when Elia came home could he "start thinking", ascertain what had happened and begin to deal with it. In the quoted passage he writes that "everyone who had gone through the same thing … started talking to each other". Here we come to an important message in Elia's story.

Talking: Emptying Oneself or Engaging?

However, in the interview another picture emerges of him not having done very much talking about what had happened. Quite the opposite, in fact: he describes the years after the fire as a period of denial. This is not only true of himself but also other people in his surroundings. They were evasive and would rather talk about the weather than the event and feelings connected to the fire:

> "I was with a lot of people who did not want to talk about it very much. (Just) a couple of sentences or a few words then they went quiet and wanted to talk about the weather. You end up like them."

Friends' awkwardness when it comes to talking and handling difficult feelings, is something he associates with nurture, society and culture:

> "You can see how people get uncomfortable when you say: This person was close to me and passed away. People don't know how to handle it. I think it's like a hole in our society and culture."

In other words, the tendency and ability to talk about troubling experiences and feelings wavered a good deal in the circles in which Elia moved. This type of attitude to the experience one has gone through causes great difficulties for a traumatised person, according to Elia:

> "Denial is a very great power which is destructive. I mean denial is a sophisticated self-delusion. And what's at the heart of the delusion? Well, it's the lie. It's about lying to yourself."

To the extent that one talks about the event and feelings at all, it is by no means certain that this acts as a sort of engagement. The effect could rather be a form of "emptying oneself of feelings". It is a distinction that

Elia has become aware of in recent years. Most likely his training in bereavement counselling has played into this insight.

> "The difference between now and before is that maybe I have been lucky and then I've tried to work on this in all kinds of ways. Not by sitting around talking and talking, I don't see any way out in talking. Talk has to lead somewhere. Sure, it feels good for the moment and you empty yourself of your feelings and all that, but you have to have a conclusion. Certain factors have to be there so you can put it to one side. Not forget, because you never do."

With more knowledge and his training in grief counselling behind him, Elia points to the differences in the effect of talking. And when it comes to change, nothing can happen unless one begins with oneself, and in oneself:

> "I don't think these superficial changes have any effect in their own right, if one makes a change. In yourself. Know what it was that drove you to do certain things."

The Role of the Emotions

For Elia, the *handling of one's emotions* seems the key task for a person who has gone through a traumatic experience of this kind. His story of his handling of his feelings is contradictory. After leaving the hospital "I did everything to get my body together first and foremost. Then I could take care of myself mentally, sort of thing, and my feelings". But his feelings do not appear to have been well taken care of in the years after the fire – only much later. This period of denial leads to an escape into drugs and criminality. In the period he also serves two prison terms:

> "For my own part there were many factors at work. One of them was probably my use of medication, I mean in the beginning after the fire. It did not take very long before I started using drugs after coming home from the hospital and feeling that my body was healed, more or less anyway. And the medications, it's the mind and the feelings and how to dull them."

It can easily be seen how painkilling morphine is transferred into a continued self-administered use of drugs, in order to dull the emotions so that Elia does not have to take stock of his life. This clears a way to an evasive, retreating form of "coping". One might also reflect on what connection there is between this evasive "coping" and the dangerous situations to which Elia exposes himself in his intense life in the years after the fire. Elia had a certain degree of control over these dangers, unlike his helplessness on the night of the fire when he was enclosed inside the building. Might this self-inflicted exposure to danger be explained as a way of handling the inner pain and chaos – almost enacting the inner danger in exterior situations?

Different Phases in Coping

In the story, possibly six separate periods of coping can be distinguished in this ten-year period.

A *first period* coincides with the actual fire, where Elia describes how he has time to think and do quite a lot in the few minutes available to him before all the oxygen runs out and, acting in combination with the toxic fumes, renders him unconscious. He even tried to put out the fire and he was very active in trying to save himself. This activity probably compensated a good deal for the damage that arises as a consequence of powerlessness and helplessness, and through this, most likely, the destructive power of the event was lessened.

A *second period* corresponds to the weeks of being tended at the hospital. This is a rigorously structured environment, where healthcare personnel take care of him from morning to night. For the first ten days, in intensive care, he is kept anaesthetized. Thereafter he starts engaging himself in his recovery. "I only concentrated on getting well", he said. In spite of his role as a patient, he developed a number of ways to effect his own recovery. He used his knowledge and philosophy of martial arts and was able to make use of his trainer's advice and encouragement. Elia experienced himself as being in a sort of fight with his burns injuries. A change is ushered in: from a passively coping, anaesthetized state to an active, confrontational coping from the moment he regains consciousness and some small measure of energy.

When Elia is sent home, the *third period* begins. As we have already mentioned, Elia had two different voices to describe how his "coping" took place from this point. Probably the most feasible version would be that the period was characterised by evasion, with a few instances of committed and active coping. Here we include our own support activities with Elia and his friends to help them engage and start to process what has happened to them. But among friends, it seems that an evasive form of "coping" holds sway.

A *fourth period* coincides with the development of his criminal career and his use of increasingly heavy drugs:

> "It did not take very long before I started using drugs after coming home from the hospital and feeling that my body was healed, more or less anyway. And the medications, it's the mind and the feelings and how to dull them."

This period is also characterised by evasive coping and even flight. The question we asked earlier was if Elia did not in fact expose himself to dangerous situations as a way of externalising his inner, formless sense of pain? As we said before, there are two interruptions in this period with sentences served in penal institutions.

A *fifth period* begins to emerge in the form of a new insight. His uncle, father, mother and trainer seem to have played a big role in helping Elia re-engage and also handle the feelings and thoughts that are still tied to the events of the fire. A new evaluation of his life and friends takes place. Taking his feelings seriously and working on them becomes enormously important. Elia resumes his martial arts training. It is now a case of confronting what one feels and experiences.

A *sixth period* is being planned, involving Elia now in a position to help others who are going through similar challenges as those he has faced himself. This is a positive and committed way of managing one's own experience and paying something back for the help one has received oneself.

Elia involved himself in the recovery of his body. This is absolutely clear. But there was also, in spite of denial and evasion, a commitment to confront the trauma, "do something" about the inner damage and eventually try to arrange his social life in a constructive manner.

Recovery

At the time of Elia's interview, eleven years have gone by since the fire. Elia re-lives the event every day. He indicates that the memories are not of a horrific kind and it seems that Elia is in control of the trauma he has gone through. The memories and other emotions are not of a magnitude that puts Elia at the mercy of trauma.

A significant part of his story is about recovery and engagement. A functioning day to day life and social relations with valued people are signs of recovery after a traumatic event.

The life Elia describes today contains many significant aspects in a functioning social life. He describes an unwavering support from his family and, importantly, from his trainer at the club. Four years ago he met his girlfriend. Now they are engaged and live together in their own flat. He has a job and a driving licence. But things almost went to pieces. In the years after the fire it was as if his 'life compass' stopped working. There was a destructive and dangerous period of drugs and criminality. "I almost lost everything", he says, looking back.

The Consequences of the Fire – the Lost Years

In this chapter the participants explain how life changed after the fire and how eventually they began to recover. They indicate how healing and recovery take place in three areas: somatically, one must take care of one's damaged body, accustom oneself to pain, possibly endure change and regain full physical movement. Socially, it is important to break out of isolation. One needs to find one's way back to fellowship and supportive environments. Psychologically, it is all about regaining control of one's feelings and thoughts by exploring the trauma.

Psychological and Somatic Consequences

A number of the participants in this study sustained grave injuries in the form of burns, broken legs and damaged lungs after inhalation of poisonous smoke. The priority was obviously to first focus on the clear physical injuries:

> "I did everything to get my body together first and foremost, later I'd take care of myself mentally, sort of thing, and my feelings" (Elia).

> "To me, everything is completely blank for three or four years after the fire. Life was about medicines, dressing the wounds and putting on the 'diving suit' (a kind of tight-fitting bandage). That was the easy bit" (Paulo).

All the young men were afflicted with different post-traumatic problems. There were panic attacks and sleeping problems, nightmares, attention disorders, and so on. One of the young men describes his life after the catastrophe in the following terms:

> "I screwed down the hatches. I felt bad as hell. Oh God! Many times I ran in the streets, you know. At nights. I just ran and ran" (David).

He also describes how it was for him when he felt anguish:

> "When I had this panic after the fire. My girlfriend has had to call an ambulance a few times. It started in the heart and my hands sweated. Got soaked with sweat, started shivering, my heart pounds, run to the toilet, check my pupils, they're so big" (David).

Several talk of psychosomatic problems they developed and had to live with for a long time afterwards. Some of the participants are still troubled by them:

> "But one thing I know is directly affected. If I cough or in any way feel weird and it's connected to my throat. Then I can get the idea that my throat has started swelling up and I get into this kind of crazy panic. Then I think I'm going to suffocate. I was never that way before. Before the fire, never" (Paulo).

> "I didn't sleep at all at nights, I was tense the whole time. And it lodged in my shoulders, it was like ping-pong balls, like golf balls almost. But I was still going to work. It was like I wanted to flee and be there. (…) I dream I can see people without arms and legs and all that. I'm awake and it's like I can see even though I'm sleeping. And before then I usually feel panic, I start yelling and screaming for someone to wake me up, you know. So it still happens. I had it all the time for probably a period of three years. Every night. For three, four years maybe" (Neo).

The participants also say that after the discotheque fire they start avoiding various situations. Cramped and crowded places were stressful, and for this reason they avoided them:

> "In the beginning after the fire, if I was in an elevator, I thought: What if it gets stuck? What if it gets stuck? What do I do then? Yeah, you were always thinking what you'd do if something happened" (Simon).

A couple of the participants started using drugs after the fire. A few of them had been kept under sedation at the hospital because of the severity of their injuries, and later they had been given morphine as a painkiller. Once they were reasonably rehabilitated somatically, they started experimenting with various forms of self-medication:

> "You know that I was in the discotheque fire in October 1998. In 1999 I took my first tablet. Tranquiliser. Until I was 17, before the fire, I never even had a headache pill. After the fire I got caught up in the whole tranquilliser thing and started taking drugs. But at the same time I worked for many, many years and sort of escaped from reality" (John).

All of the young men in question have now put their drug abuse behind them. One of them describes how things were for him before he managed to get clear of the drugs:

> "I smoked small amounts and went to work and managed to do my work. First when you start you smoke to make yourself calm. But after a while once you've become dependent you smoke to get healthy. Just a few drags so you can function on a daily basis and do your stuff" (John).

Social Consequences

Isolation

As was mentioned earlier, the participants in the study were a part of a group of friends consisting of some 60–70 persons. They arranged parties and musical performances and had fun together, doing the sort of things that one typically associates with their age group. All this changed in one night. Some 30 people from the group died in the fire. Rather than the party, the fire became the connective link. Certain myths were cultivated,

such as for instance that only a survivor could ever understand what had happened on the night of the fire. This contributed to victims being less inclined to accept help from society.

Some chose to put a lid on things and run away from the traumatic memories. The earlier positive ties between the gang of friends were dissolved in this chaos and in the years that followed:

> "Before the fire, the Backa gang was, so to speak, very tight. Then, I felt safe with my friends. But after the fire, that's when all hell broke loose. People started using drugs and getting into criminality" (Simon).

Those who survived seemed to try to find various explanations for what had happened and what they had been through. It was not always a case of trying to understand what had happened, and the consequences of this – but rather a way of protecting oneself against painful memories and anguish:

> "There was a period when I really felt let down. Because I felt so isolated. God, we were such great friends. Many of our friends died, of those that were left a small number tried to keep calm, but many of the others chose a road that was not good" (David).

Contacts with people outside the group also changed. Many were afraid to get too close to other people. Such a large number of their friends had disappeared and they really could not understand what had happened:

> "Only my career seemed good to me. That was all I thought about when I went to work. I hardly spoke to my colleagues, I didn't open myself up. I only wanted to get away from reality. Because that way the thoughts didn't come, no, I was a different person then" (Neo).

The Lost Years

All the young men speak of the sense they have of the years immediately following the fire having slid past, disappeared. During one of the project's focus groups one of the participants described it as having had the 'pause button' pushed down for several years:

> "I was about seventeen or eighteen when the fire happened. It took so much time. Then it was hard to understand what had happened. It was like a black hole, those years. Suddenly one was twenty-two, twenty-three. How did it happen?" (David).

Many of them come back to the fact that they had lived good lives up until the time of the fire. They did fun things, planned to move out of their parental homes, wanted to get out and discover the world. All this changed. One moment life was at its peak, then suddenly it was a question of having one foot in survival and the other in death:

> "I have lost a lot of years. I mean that time when you're twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three. Then you should be like a king. You should do the fun things in life. You should travel about and party and have fun. But instead we had to sit there, licking our wounds. Try to figure out what had happened to our lives. And what was going on" (Paulo).

The participants say that when they started recovering it was like waking up and not quite knowing what had happened. When they spoke to people who had not lived through trauma, they could tell because the latter often had more connected lives:

> "Oh, it feels like there's an empty space somewhere. I can't remember what happened after the fire. I mean, a couple of years go by and suddenly you're twenty-two, twenty-three years old. I sometimes ask myself: What the hell happened when I was eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three?" (Neo).

One of the young men had the following view about having lived through a life-threatening disaster at a certain time of his life:

> "They're your most important years, you're formed as a human being. That's when you choose who you're going to be. Many of my friends feel the same way. They feel they've been robbed of that time of their lives" (David).

School/Studies

After more or less managing their somatic rehabilitation, all of the participants tried to resume their studies. A few of them had had some difficulties concentrating on their studies before the fire, but now there was an eagerness to move on and make something of their lives. Everyone felt that they had a lot of support from their schools when they went back. Nonetheless it was not a smooth process for most of them:

> "My concentration was at zero. I didn't know I was still in shock. I thought I'd start school again. But I couldn't concentrate, hardly dared sit in a classroom. What if the place caught fire!" (Neo).

> "It was really hard work coming back to school. You'd lost childhood friends and you'd been injured oneself. You came back and started thinking about maths, Swedish and just being back. I felt as if I was going to put all this behind me and focus on school. But it just didn't work, there were too many feelings. That's when I dropped out of year two. They did their best at school, I suppose, but I couldn't handle it any more. I didn't have the energy or the drive to go through with it, even if there was only a year left of the course. I just wanted to start life, somehow. Now you regret it, of course, now I don't have qualifications" (Simon).

> "I had some support from our school counsellor. Because I couldn't cope with going, she said I didn't need to take the last year at Angered. You'll do your last year at Volvo. Work experience. And then I did my work experience there. I finished the apprenticeship in half a year. And then I got my qualification, fully qualified as a car mechanic. So I never had to finish Angered school" (John).

> "School was very understanding. The fire was such a big thing, everything wanted your best. My school tried to help me catch up when I came back, and said it was cool and I could take the time I needed" (Elia).

A consistent theme in the stories of these young people was their difficulty in going back to their studies after the fire. Apart from the sense of chaos they were going through, they were tormented by difficult flashback memories and survivor guilt. A number of them also had physical injuries that took time to heal. It was difficult to concentrate, which affected the learning process. Nor was it possible to take sick leave, as adults can, and in this way have a break during the term. We heard many accounts of their attempts to go back to their studies. Their schools tried to adapt and come up with individual solutions: lowering their pass requirements and offering the possibility of re-taking the academic year. School, for many of these young men, became a place of security, creating a structure in their everyday lives after the fire. Here, there were friends and adults who tried to offer support. Many of the participants spent time on school premises without actually managing to take part in the classes. Most of the participants in our group did not complete their studies, or did not achieve pass rates in their sixth form education. Badly traumatised, they fled from education and found their studies meaningless in relation to what they had been through and lost. Finally they isolated themselves in a smaller group and thus lost the day-to-day structure offered by their school environments.

What Made a Positive Difference?

Family and friends

For the team in the Support Centre the importance of being able to access a strong and functioning network was never as clear to them as in their support efforts after the fire. All of the participants say that they have had invaluable support from parents, siblings, partners and friends:

> "There's not a lot that can measure up to seeing the happiness in my mother's eyes, when she sees me healthy and happy, and that my life is going in the right direction. That expression she has in her face when she sees it, it can't be had for money" (Elia).

> "Just having friends is a big help. Even if we don't sit there talking about the fire all the time. Just the feeling of having friends. And even if we don't

have as many friends as before, it's a kind of security knowing that you've got friends. And they're there for you if something comes up" (Paulo).

Four of the participants have by now become parents themselves:

"Life felt meaningless and in that period I could have stumbled into something even worse. But thanks to my daughter I was given hope. There's a feeling of hope about watching a child growing. I want to give her what I have had and what I have not had. I felt: I have to be strong, I have to be a fully functioning parent. But it wasn't so very easy" (David).

"Our first daughter came along in 2003. I don't think anyone has seen me cry, but that day… I mean I sank down on my knees. I just cried when I saw her. It might have been all the feelings that had built up, they released when I saw her… I do everything for my family. It doesn't matter what" (Simon).

"I thought, I have to try to be myself again, because now I have children. I thought I have to try and do something about my behaviour so the children have a good future ahead of them" (Neo).

Professional helpers

After the fire, Gothenburg's schools were allocated extra funding to be able to offer support in the best possible way to the students that had been affected in a variety of ways. Underlying this decision was the thought that the young people would prefer to be helped and supported by persons with whom they had existing relationships. Pupils were helped to resume their studies, as well as receiving psycho-social support at their schools. In the great majority of cases, the schools made a very good job of getting the young people back into school, where they also gained structure in their everyday lives:

"I mean you wanted to get a grip on school but the focus was completely gone. My hand was in plaster when I came to school and you use your hands so much in the kitchen, I mean. I struggled with it but it was hard. I got loads of support from the teachers there" (Simon).

Also the youth centres were intensely involved in support work for the young people affected by the fire. The youth centre staff already knew many of those who had gone to the party. Already the following morning after the fire, many of the centres opened as meeting places and crisis receptions. They offered the possibility of remembrance and mourning and just being there. Many youth workers provided invaluable help to a large number of young people after the fire:

"Kulturhuset in Backa were important as well, they have been there and do a lot especially right after the fire, I mean. You have to give them credit for that" (Simon).

The general mobilisation in Gothenburg's local authority also included the Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Unit [Barn- och ungdomspsykiatrin – BUP]:

"It was a big help to me, this whole thing of the panic attacks, when I met her at BUP. She told me how to handle it, what I had to think about instead. And breathe" (David).

Others were helped to access psychotherapy via the Support Centre:

"Since I started going to therapy I started waking up, I guess. It really felt like one was waking up from that fog and starting to understand what one had been through. The way I remember it we first tried to work on what was most pressing, what was closest to day to day life. And then somehow we tried to work our way backwards" (Paulo).

A few of the participants have read a lot of reference books and one of them has also completed a course in bereavement counselling, which has been very useful to him:

"I have taken a course in how to cope with sorrow. I did that training and the thing was when you got there it was nothing about helping others. First you have to take care of your own stuff. It has helped me quite a bit, certain mental approaches and so on" (Elia).

Work

Most of the participants have found it healing to work, because in the work environment one can rest in a functioning structure and meet people who have not been touched by the disaster:

> "Working has been important for me. You go into a cycle, work every day and don't have to think about things. Socialise with functioning people. Had to think about other things than the fire" (David).

> "Somehow, work is the foundation for being able to live, more or less. Have a home, have a bit of money, and without that you're nowhere. Then you've got nothing" (Paulo).

One of them worked enormous amounts of hours and thus used work as an escape route:

> "I worked all the time. I missed the contact with my family and I didn't meet my daughter very often. She hardly knew who I was, because I was working so much" (Neo).

In 2008, more or less around the time of the ten-year anniversary of the fire, he lost his job. The company had been forced to cut back on staff, because of the recession in that year:

> "Work was all that counted for me. And it was like that until the ten-year anniversary, in 2008. Then I had a depression. A real depression. I couldn't work any more. I had put so much energy and effort into work. Pushed away my history, you could say. I hadn't spoken to anyone about it, and then when the ten-year anniversary arrived, I was just like 'phhhh'… It was too much for me" (Neo).

In a certain sense, one could say that he was forced to re-engage with his recovery ten years after the fire. While he was unemployed he could spend a lot of time with his family and this made him feel good. On one occasion he said that even though the family had much less money, he felt much happier. However, since then he has started working again.

Insight and Engagement

One of the participants at a focus group made the following approximate statement about his life situation after the fire:

> "It was sort of like someone had put blindfolds on us and taken us from a well-known place and dropped us in the middle of Amazonas and told us that now we had to get out of there alive" (Paulo).

The catastrophe was earth-shattering and they were forced to make several new priorities in their lives:

> "When I experienced the discotheque fire, it changed me as a human being. I started taking life more seriously. I understood: I'm 16 and if this can happen, I could have died. And I haven't even started living my life" (Simon).

Gradually, each and every one of them had growing insights into what would be necessary for some kind of recovery:

> "You just went around feeling weird. Feeling cut-off and not recognising oneself. I suppose it was then I knew I had to seek help. When I compared who I was as a person before the fire and how I'd become after it. Then I knew there was something wrong with me" (Paulo).

> "When it's gone that far there aren't many alternatives. It's prison, or you get killed or you kill yourself in some way. And I've never seen myself as a person who'll end up like that. But superficial changes don't have any effect if you don't make a change in yourself. The way I look at it it's like if you have a fever you could deal with the symptom perhaps, but the cause of it has to be got rid of before you're well" (Neo).

Most of the participants now feel that, more or less after ten years, life is broadly speaking functioning reasonably well for them. Of course they have not forgotten about the fire and the events that followed it, but the memories are no longer as painful:

> "As the years passed we got a taste for life again. I try not to dwell on

things so much. It's like a scar on the body, it'll always be there. You have to live with it, that's all. It's a part of me. It's horrible, but it works" (David).

One of the participants explains that the survivor's power of understanding and orientation stops working in the traumatic situation. Only after distancing oneself a little from the event, can it be put into context so that one can start to understand the experience. Before that point one does not know what to engage with or how to mourn:

> "If someone takes me and puts me in front of the World Trade Centre, before it collapses, 30 centimetres away, and then takes off the blindfold. I wouldn't understand a thing, maybe I'd only see glass. And then I looked up and just saw something gigantic, endless, massive, large. Wouldn't get what it was. But if they let me walk backwards at my own pace, I would see after a while that it was a large building. It would still be gigantic, but if I went further and further back, maybe then I would see other buildings next to it. Then I'd see the differences between the quite big buildings compared with the big World Trade Centre in the middle. If I went back further and further, maybe I'd see the streets and the people in relation to the big building and all the other stuff, and maybe I'd see it's a city. And the further back I moved I saw this at the same time as the big building stopped being so dominant. That's more or less how it feels being in a crisis. Something in front of you is so gigantic that you can't understand it. And when time passes and you're backing away, at the same time as you see the totality, how it interacts with everything else, it somehow gets easier to handle. And then I get a totality. And that's when I think it got easier thinking and processing it" (Paulo).

Today, all the participants are living a relatively good life in society. But for some of them it took quite a long time to restore their lives.

After the fire a number of the young people lived hectic lives and tried, in a variety of ways, to run away from their trauma. They did not stop and take stock of what had happened to them. Instead they kept frantically busy and looked for strong experiences. Two of them lived very dangerous lives. We have reflected on the connection between trauma and this lifestyle. Possibly, by constantly being very busy and in motion, the participants could protect themselves from the inner workings of trauma. This escape is what one associates with the phrase "the lost years", which several of the participants have described as a "black hole" – in other words those years that are normally part of an adolescence leading into adulthood. The two participants mentioned above, after twelve years, have finally achieved functional daily lives. Today, no one in the group is criminal or relying on drugs to give meaning to life.

Different levels of vulnerability and perception of guilt have led to variations in the young men's capacity for recovery. Most do not seem to be suffering from invasive memories of the fire. Three of them say that they still think about the fire every day, yet without excessive agitation. They are not handicapped by it. One seems tormented by memories and flashbacks on a daily basis. Today he lives an apparently secure and normal life with family and work, but he continues to have difficulties with memory and guilt.

CHAPTER 6

The Participants' Views on Advice and Support

In the following chapter we summarise the participants' views and reflections on the Support Centre's working methods. Based on their own experiences, they give their own advice to other young people who are struggling with similar problems – as well as the support workers.

The Approach of the Support Centre

One of the questions we asked in our individual interviews was what the young men thought of the Support Centre's initiatives after the fire. One recurring theme was how significant it had been that we assembled all the young people in a group and took everyone to activity camps. Together we created common memories but also an understanding that no one had to feel alone in his memories – that it was quite normal to be feeling as these people were feeling:

> "What's been good is that I could feel I wasn't alone. Though I knew all the others were struck down with it, still all the things we did, riding horses and everything, that's when we got that happiness back, laughter, I remember, though we had sadness inside. (…) For me it felt so good being back in the gang again. I'd missed it. Well you could listen to how others were feeling, thinking and reasoning, and I didn't even know

their stories, or what I mean is you only knew that so-and-so had been at the fire. You heard a few snippets here and there, what Neo did, what Paulo did, what he did, where he was. But once you got into it, your picture clarified a bit more every time you met, every camp, when we had our smaller groups and got everything off your chest and built up a picture. The pieces of the puzzle started falling into place. And the biggest thing was that you didn't feel… this whole thing about feeling alone. I think it's been a big help to me. That I, that it isn't just… I'm not weird because I feel like this. The others feel the same way. Because we went through a terrible thing like that. So this thing's been a big help, I think, more than anything else for me. Because many times I thought: Shit, I have to be weird, how can you think like this, feel like this, for so long? I got some confirmation: You are not alone! It's not weird to feel like this" (David).

"… to get away from reality a bit and be in a group where everyone has been through the same thing, and enjoy yourselves and just get away from Backa. Just at that time. It was so nice. (…) It really mattered! We became just like any other people when we got away from Backa. Just to be in our group, to get out and do things. And then it created a few nice memories too. Good times with friends. It meant a lot to us" (Simon).

It was easier meeting in a group. It created security:

"You put us together in a group. Because it makes it easier to come… well, you feel more secure" (Neo).

"And also that we could be with you as a group. Because that way we still had the security between us in the group. So we didn't end up like: alone with Lars and Ann in a room. This was also how we used to meet up. It was really relaxed. We didn't feel there were loads of demands on us, that we had do things, it felt like we were meeting on our own terms. And exactly because we could be ourselves, and had our friends with us, it was also much easier letting go, in a sense (and to) talk. And then we also did a lot of fun stuff. And you were always positive. It was bloody good. Always upbeat and positive" (Paulo).

One of the guys describes the value of meeting a professional third party but also a "personal" support worker. Also a youth worker today, he reflects on our approach:

"It was so great just meeting you two because you didn't have any, I mean it felt like you weren't judging us. You were just you. You were always positive and always in a good mood. You were also people outside our lives. I mean you weren't related, you weren't like some friend's dad, or teachers. You were completely separate people, who came along and it was good talking to you. Because you could see our world from the outside. When I spoke to someone in my own world, then he saw me, but we were in the same world somehow. But you were on the outside. So when you listened we got feedback and you gave us, as far as I can remember, not very often answers to our questions but you helped us start bouncing ideas around. You always asked: How do you see that, how does it feel? Could it be like this? And just that gives you a lot" (Paulo).

"What you did, how you approached it – because obviously there was quite a bit of thinking behind your strategy, your way of meeting us and all that… there's an art to it as well. You met us as fellow human beings, really! And in the end when we were meeting Ann and LarsÅke we didn't feel like we were meeting Support Centre staff or welfare officers or field workers. We didn't think like that when we were seeing you. It was just like we were seeing LarsÅke and Ann. We almost forgot your work, when you were working. We saw you as individuals. (…) Plus you were pretty dogged about it. That's something one has to think about, that you've had a long-term approach. You haven't given up. If you'd come into our lives and been with us for maybe six months, a year, and met us three or four times and then disappeared, it would have been good and not much more. But you were more than that, we had a long contact, and we talked to each other and there was continuity. And nowadays, even though time has passed and we haven't been seeing as much of each other as we used to, we still think about you sometimes. In everyday life. Oh yeah… LarsÅke and Ann… it's been a while. What are they doing today? It turns into something you've built up" (Paulo).

Paulo describes how the Support Centre's dogged attempts to seek out the group finally yielded results. Eventually the survivors' suspicions were transformed into a long-term collaboration. We met these young people on their own terms. Paulo describes our approach to the group as even-handed. We were positive and did not put any pressure on them to perform. We offered group activities and activity camps as a way of building relationships. The required step for them was comparatively easy at a time when they could not yet formulate their support needs.

The activity camps gave the young people an opportunity to get away from the city, regain a sense of enjoyment and share some laughter again. The Support Centre created a sort of open forum and space for shared memories, and this provided some hope among the young men that could, and were allowed to, enjoy themselves in spite of the difficulties they had gone through and the guilt they were still feeling. During our conversations they also felt they were learning to find words for the difficult things, thus creating order in the story and reducing the traumatic effect. They no longer felt isolated in their own thoughts.

Paulo understands that, in our professional capacity, we had an underlying strategy with our approach, and sees the benefits of having us, as outsiders, looking into their worlds from a different perspective. They were also able to bounce some ideas off us. He describes us as fellow human beings who listened and asked questions rather than giving answers.

We have had a long-term relationship with the participants, which has been dormant for a number of years. When the Support Centre ceased operating after two and a half years, we wrote a letter to help them look forward and give them hope. It created a sort of *holding relationship* for the coming years, based on the suggestion that we would meet again. We never ended our connection, but remained in each others' minds and continued our collaboration. Healing takes time, and telling the world about it creates meaning. In this report, we are passing on the findings of those who actually possess the first-hand experience. Over the years, the relationship has become more equal. As professionals, we are now the ones being helped by those we once sought out to offer our support.

Advice to Young People, Who Go Through a Similar Experience

In retrospect, most of the participants wish they had accepted or looked for support at an earlier stage. It was difficult or impossible to process the event by themselves. They also emphasise that the moment when one is ready to accept support varies from one individual to another. It is important to receive support from friends, family and professionals:

> "But I think you need help right from the start (…) You need help right away when you've been through a thing like this. Maybe you don't get it at that point, but I get it now" (Neo).

> "Have the courage to seek help! Because a thing like that you'll never manage on your own. However strong you are, I'd say. You can't manage it yourself. (…) Well, you shouldn't bottle it up, you should let it out. You can talk to your parents. You can also seek help, in just the same way as we do among our friends or those who were there. In the beginning I wanted to flee from all that, not deal with them, but it's important, in fact, this thing of recognising yourself. (…) Look for help! Don't dwell too much on things! It only makes it worse" (John).

> "I think it's good seeking help sometimes from those who do this as a profession. I can't see anything wrong with it. If you've reached the edge where you're sitting about dwelling on it and you catch yourself out and realise you're not going to let this go, and ten fifteen bloody years have gone by, then it's time to do something about it. One should not have feelings of guilt because one tries to work on it. Guilt and shame and all that, these are feelings that prevent one's personal development" (Elia).

> "Family, school and friends are also very important, so you don't flip out. (…) Yeah, because things happen easily in a group of friends after a thing like this. It can split apart quite a bit… you have to sort of do a clear-out among your friends" (Simon).

Many of the young people withdrew and isolated themselves:

> "Don't go and lock yourself into your room and think it's going to get better. Because it's going to turn into a big lump, And that lump grows over time. It won't get better" (Elia).

By putting words to the event one soothes it, one shares one's experiences with others and does not feel alone or odd because of one's way of thinking:

> "Talking to mates was very good because we went through the same things, and we talked about it, those of us who were in the fire" (John).

> "The more you talk, the easier it feels. (…) It's as if you're training" (David).

> "First one has to look for help. One has to realise one can't fix everything on one's own. Above all, to talk. When I was younger I really didn't think it was true. Talk! It helps a lot. I've really seen the value of getting things off your chest. Not going round keeping everything inside. It eats you from the inside. (…) As long as you keep it inside yourself you'll be alone with your questions. The best thing is to talk and seek help" (Paulo).

> "Dwelling on things is when you bury yourself in them. (…) Just because you talk about something doesn't mean you're working on it, or have a goal with it" (Elia).

Most of the young people were at sixth form college at the time of the fire, and did not complete their studies. They had difficulties concentrating and found their studies to be meaningless, because of the chaotic life situations in which they found themselves:

> "Even though it's hard work one should try and finish school so it's behind you. That's what I think. I have a lot of regrets about school. Not finishing it so I didn't get my qualifications. It's something I really regret a lot" (Simon).

Working is a way of surviving and distracting one's thoughts. In the work-

place, one's thoughts can focus on work tasks, while one also gets a certain structure and an opportunity to meet other people:

> "Yeah, work was a life saver. You got away from a lot of shit, for instance drugs and depression. But the question anyway is if it was really a thought-through strategy or if it was just about survival" (Paulo).

The use of drugs makes the process of healing more difficult. Several individuals in the group tried drugs and saw their friends get pulled into drug abuse. They speak of a choice of roads, both in choosing their friends and also in realising that drugs only dull the senses for a moment, inhibit recovery and can lead to criminality and other problems:

> "Don't start using drugs and that whole thing. Because they don't help, they cancel themselves out and then reality catches up in any case" (Neo).

> "Not the way I handled it, I took drugs and all that, that was the worst thing I did, because they caught up with me in the end. And when it caught up with me I felt even worse and took even heavier drugs, and in the mean time I lost even more friends" (John).

> "People can't handle pain or feelings… one can't work on one's emotions and sadness by taking tablets. It doesn't help. Only in the moment. I stopped doing it and then I made a fresh start pretty fast. (…) I think more about life" (Simon).

Surviving means a new chance of making the most of one's life:

> "I think that if one has gone through something like this and come out alive, one has more responsibility than before it happened. One is responsible for the ones that died and for oneself, because one was given another chance. What's the point of having this chance and then throwing it away? (…) Forget about all the others. One has responsibility for oneself. The most important thing is to understand what leads to a good life" (Neo).

> “In fact it made me into a better person. I stopped doing a lot of stupid things. I don’t know, I matured in some way. (…) When it happened it was like a bell: Take care of your life now! You never know what’s going to happen” (Simon).

> “You shouldn’t die with the dead, the important thing is to go on with your life and think of your studies and all that” (Neo).

> “I know many who just say no, I don’t want to work on it, I want to forget. And all those who died? I hardly think they want us to go round feeling terrible today. I really don’t” (Elia).

It takes time to understand what one has gone through:

> “First of all one has to take the time one needs for oneself, to somehow understand what one has been through. I think it’s easier getting some help after one has started understanding” (Paulo).

> “Time is completely unimportant if you’re not doing something constructive in the mean while. Just waiting, that could mean waiting for anything” (Neo).

> “However hard it seems, you can live. I mean it can get better and better” (Paulo).

> “The problem is that in this time, just because you are standing still in your emotional reality doesn’t mean that the world is standing still” (Paulo).

The event becomes a part of you, but not your entire identity:

> “You can’t always control your feelings. They just come by themselves. Just remember there are brighter days, and better times will come. It’ll pass, eventually. Unfortunately the trauma is a part of you. But it is not the whole world. For me this whole fire thing has got better in spite of all, and it will for others too who were affected by it. (…) It’s quite okay to talk about the fire nowadays. It’s not hard work any more. I can describe it as if it’s a part of me. Not tell the story like opening a box, repeating it and closing the lid. It’s like a part of me. I’m whole, not divided in two. (…) I can also talk about the good life I am living. It feels good and I am content and amazed that I can say this. I couldn’t before, and I understand that things take time” (David) .

Having read the participants’ texts, the following message emerges of what this group has to say to other young people who have come face to face with a difficult experience.

Do not withdraw yourself, search for and accept help at an early stage, you won’t manage it on your own. It’s important to accept support from friends, family and professionals. It is difficult to recognise oneself in one’s way of functioning after a trauma. One needs confirmation that one’s reactions are normal.

Putting things into words eases the difficulty. It creates order in the story, and thus one gains greater control over one’s life through not being continuously overwhelmed by painful thoughts and memories that cannot be controlled. By sharing the experience with others, one no longer feels so alone with one’s thoughts and emotions. Do not imagine that you can handle it by yourself, it is impossible or very difficult to work through the experience on your own. It is good to seek professional help and thus start structuring the conversation.

It varies between one individual and another when one is ready to receive support. Some need more time than others to understand what they have been through, also to realise that they need help. It will take time for everyday life to function again. The event cannot disappear, it will stay with one for the rest of one’s life. But the event will become easier to handle the more one talks about it. Eventually the event will become a part of you, but it will not be your entire identity. With time, the memories will become less stressful.

Try to finish your studies even if school feels meaningless in that moment and you are having problems concentrating. One regrets not finishing one's studies and it is harder to catch up as an adult. Activity creates structure in one's daily life. As an alternative to school, a job or internship can be a way of taking one's mind off things and meeting other people.

The worst thing one can do is to take drugs and escape into abuse. Drugs only dull the senses for a moment, will make it more difficult for you to work on your problems and may even lead to criminality and other problems. You will lose friends and let your family down.

The fact that you survived means you got another chance in life. The dead do not want you to ruin your life and feel guilty. They do not want you to feel unhappy, they want you to take care of your life.

Advice for Support Workers

One thing many people have alluded to is the length of time required for recovery, and that it is highly individual when someone feels receptive to support. As a helper it is important to have a long-term perspective and be flexible and open in the meetings:

> "People can go round with a pause button in their brain for many years, then they press play. That's how it is for a lot of people I have met, who find it very strange that now suddenly they start to feel bad. They really start thinking about the fire. More than ever before. One has pushed it away and thought: 'There's nothing wrong with me. No problem.' But then suddenly: Bang! Maybe because you mature as a person and start to have the courage to feel. (…) That's the time you need help. To sort your thoughts and feelings and get things in order. Just because you've matured doesn't mean you know exactly how to handle everything that comes your way. (…) It'll take years before you're yourself again" (Paulo).

Most of the young men wish they had been offered support at an earlier stage, even if they were dismissive at that time. They wish that their reactions had been confirmed and normalised more quickly – that it had been

explained to them that it was common to feel like this as a result of the trauma, the unusual event, to which they had been exposed. They also mention the importance of the helper being persistent and offering support a number of times, following up the contact even if the young person earlier rejected it. It takes time to build up an understanding. For this group of traumatised people it was useful to offer group support activities. Being a part of a group gave the participants security and made it easier for them to accept help:

> "You just brood and think. It would have helped anyway, just knowing. You wanted to feel: I'm sitting in a boat. It's not leaking. I'll make it. That it's okay to be, to feel like that. I still think it's quite important, to know. And that you feel better because of that, that you know somewhere inside that it can be like this. (…) It would have been good knowing that there was a possibility of getting help, preferably the day after the fire. A presentation and information so one you knew you were there, completely optional. After a while I reckon one would have started moving towards you. I mean, it's important (early on) to be able to put a face on (the support staff) and know that they'll persevere. That they're there maybe once a week" (Paulo).

> "Yeah, one wants to be normal. I hid myself behind a façade for a time. Then as we started talking to you, I found courage to start talking about what had happened" (David).

It is also important to have individual support contacts and to meet a good listener. One of the young men picks up on the dangers of getting stuck and dwelling on things rather than actually starting to work on them, as Elia describes in his story. Personal warmth and sincerity are important attributes in a support worker, also an ability to be calm and take things slowly:

> "That little extra, which isn't mentioned in the handbook. It's difficult to put it in words, but it's about taking your time, showing a bit of empathy, but not too much. Never be false" (Elia).

As a support worker one can never know how it feels for someone else.

How one experiences events and sorrow is something very personal. This cannot be compared to anyone else and it might be seen as offensive to do so. Better to ask questions and express one's regrets about the other person's grief. If a support worker feels unsure, it is better not to give advice or say that one knows 'how it feels':

> "I don't say: I know how it feels, but I do say: I'm sorry about your grief" (Elia).

One's teenage years are a particularly vulnerable time to be struck down by a crisis, because one is already facing a lot of choices in life and at the same time does not have any experience to fall back on. As a young person one wants to put the lid on and forget all about it:

> "And if you're younger it could take even longer before you even realise what you've been through. (…) One has to think long-term about the working process afterwards. That it can take anything from two, three to seven, eight years before you can really see the bigger picture. That's when all the feelings come and you feel bad. (…) Or because you get older and you can start grabbing hold of what you've been through and start to understand how it's affected your life and maybe the choices you've made. Where you are today. And it creates and stirs up a lot of anguish and thoughts and feelings. And then there's no one to turn to, all you can do is go down the health centre and tell them you're not feeling so good" (Paulo).

Many describe the years following the fire as if they have been robbed of a part of their lives – like a black hole. For many it has been important to meet someone who can give them hope, such as for instance retired fireman Lasse Gustavsson, who was himself severely burned. On a number of occasions he met adolescents who had been injured, and he took part in the organisation of the activity camps. Lasse communicated to the young people that life was not over: it was possible to carry on living and have a good life, even after a severe trauma:

> "One time I met him at BOA[4], I mean when you look at Lasse. He's been through so much and you see the clear signs of it on his body. Then I felt: How does one have the energy for this, how does he have the energy?" (David).

One has to meet the one receiving support where he or she actually is. In conversation contact or therapy one's approach should be based on what is actually current:

> "We started talking about the things that were actually making me feel bad at that time. What was affecting me right then, and then I started realising that many of the things were related to what I had been through" (Paulo).

All the participants wished they had been offered help at an early stage, even if they had rejected it at that point. As a young person one tends to want to put a lid on things and forget, that is the nature of trauma. The teenage years are a particularly vulnerable time, when one does not have so much experience to fall back on. Simultaneously, time does not stand still and one has to make many choices that may prove decisive for one's future. It is important to corroborate and normalise reactions and explain that it is quite normal to react in this way after a trauma. Many have said that they believe it would have helped them, had they been given this information at an early stage, also to be told that it would take time for them to go back to their old selves. Often the afflicted person feels alone in his or her feelings, and does not recognise him or herself.

4 BOA is an abbreviation for Brandoffrens Anhörigförening [Association for Families of Victims of the Fire]. It was set up shortly after the fire and is still active in running support and information activities.

Young people are not always receptive to help, and it is important to persevere and keep offering support. Even if the response is dismissive, one should follow up on the contact. For this group of traumatised people it was useful to be able to offer group support activities. It takes time to build trust. Openness and flexibility are required in the meeting.

The group emphasises personal warmth, empathy and sincerity as important attributes. Also that, as a support worker, one takes time to listen. For these adolescents it was a security to be able to meet us from within their own circle of friends. Not only in order to find the courage to take the step and accept help, but also because members of the group provided mutual support. Some of the participants also asked for one-to-one therapeutic support. In the conversation it is important to use as a starting point what is bothering the young person at that particular time.

A number of the participants emphasise that it can take a long time to recover and that it is important to have a long-term perspective in the support work after a traumatic event. As one matures or powerful experiences occur much later in life, emotions and thoughts can become overwhelming. By this time it may not be so obvious to associate this with the encapsulated trauma. It can take years after the event before one dares or even has the necessary conditions in place to be able to start working on the trauma. People in one's surroundings may then have difficulties connecting to an event far back in time. One participant told us that people who feel unwell and have not dealt earlier with the experience, are still approaching BOA today.

As a support worker it is important not to say that one knows 'how it feels'. This may be seen as offensive, because one sorrow is not comparable to another. How one perceives an event, and sorrow, is entirely personal. "Just express your condolences and ask questions instead", is the advice of one of the participants.

The immediate time following the fire and many years after, is described as a black hole. It is important to convey hope. It can be helpful to meet someone who has gone through a trauma and moved on with life. Life does not end there, and it is possible to have a good life even after a trauma.

CHAPTER 7

Approaches in Long-Term Support for Traumatised Victims of Crime

After our 10-year anniversary when we reflected on our working methods, we were most curious about what it had meant to the young men when they wrote down their stories with us. We wondered what benefits were offered by the narrative perspective in support work. In our continued discussions about working methods, we have seen that this challenging process is directly dependent on a range of other pre-conditions created with the participants. Here, one might include the seeking out of victims, establishing contact and a secure relationship, sharing memories, the developmental possibilities of open questions and dialogue, the investigation of traumatic memories, empowerment and long-term commitment. Certain support processes running tangentially to ours also belong here, but these have developed outside our principal connection to the group and the young men. We have seen for ourselves that the group at certain times has functioned as a support group, even a working group focused on the task of achieving full recovery. We can also see that, as support staff, we have worked with both individuals and the group, as a resource to be used in problem-solving and providing security.

The idea of this chapter is to identify and describe a number of the aspects of our working method and examine these in relation to tangible examples in our work.

All three authors have held a long and diverse conversation on how best to describe the support work we conducted with this group of survivors. Finally we gave a name to our working process of reflection: "Holding the

talking stick." We are unclear about how others may see our working process but, as we have said, we can distinguish certain basic characteristics. We are assembling these here, as a sketched outline of our working approach.

Disempowerment and Disconnection

What are the needs of a traumatised person? What precisely is injured and what needs repairing? Every human being is hurt in a different way and must find the appropriate cure. But, of course, there are common characteristics. Traumatised people lose power over their lives – instead, trauma takes them into its power and rules the traumatised individual:

> "The core experience of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others. Recovery, therefore, is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections" (Herman, 1997, s. 133).

In this succinct quotation Judith Herman points out two decisive attributes in trauma and recovery, namely disempowerment and disconnection. Trauma enforces this disconnection in various ways. It fragments daily life. We could see this clearly in the group. They stopped doing what they usually did. Everyday life stopped working as it used to. Trauma throws new light on earlier relationships; the new circumstances of life caused by the trauma need new relationships to be handled. Another disconnection in relation to the event also takes place, because the traumatic memories are no longer connected to the main memory – they are dissociated. These need to be connected to the victim's personal bank of experience.

We can see that empowerment and the creation of contacts and relationships belong somewhere at the foundation of our support work. Before we describe this, we need to point to an important complication in starting any support process with traumatised people. Psychological trauma has a difficult associate – in literature, this associate is referred to as 'avoidance'. Thus, the traumatised individual, in a variety of ways, tries to push away insistent memories, thoughts and emotions.

We have shown that evasion and denial in the immediate time after the fire was a clear aspect of the approach and attitude to the event among our survey participants. Instead of continuing with school, family, leisure and friends, they all started living in a different way, often in a very hectic manner. As far as we can tell, two of them lived more or less in mortal danger. They all busied themselves, more or less frenetically. Once we connected the hectic lifestyles with the trauma, we began to see causes and effects. The participants were literally trying to run away from the trauma, to avoid its unpleasantness. This behaviour, we felt, was a way of changing one's focus and gaining a few moments of peace by using intense experience to push back traumatic memory. We assume that this evasive approach to trauma is very much connected to what the participants have called "the lost years".

Lars Weiseath (1989) has demonstrated aspects of evasion in his investigation into the effects on the survivors of the fire on October 15, 1976 at Jotuns paint factory in Norway. He took particular note of those who did not answer the questionnaire he had sent out to those affected by the fire. By persisting, he managed to get their answers. He found that the most traumatised people of all, were found among those who had not sent back the questionnaire. This added to our understanding of evasion as one of the attributes of trauma: the more severe the trauma, the more evasive the survivor will be, and the less likely to seek or accept help.

Once this has been understood, it is easy to explain the importance of actively seeking out survivors and offering support. The need for long-term support when working with those most heavily affected, can also be better understood in the context of evasion and denial as the associates of trauma.

First goal must be the proactive seeking out of survivors. If no contact is made it makes little difference how excellent the methods or useful the available resources are. They cannot be communicated if there are no recipients. Receiving help is a consequence of a relationship between the support staff and the recipient, something which in our case was promoted by organising the activity camps.

Contact and Relationships

The general task for the staff at the Support Centre was to ensure there would be a long-term approach in our work. Initially, society as a whole in Gothenburg was involved in the support work, but gradually this crisis intervention wound down and people went back to their normal lives. At the Support Centre we focused on finding people we feared were traumatised, even though they had not turned to social services, child or adolescent psychiatric care or some other mainstream organisation.

A survivor told us that he was part of a group of friends who were tormented by severe personal losses, injuries and trauma. The group had retreated and now hardly socialised with anyone apart from those within its own circle. The survivor in question was concerned; he wondered what sort of help was available. Our task was to get in touch with this group, to find out how things stood with them and what we could do for these young men. We already had our contact in the group and so we began a slow process of dialogue, managed by our contact person. We also had indications from the youth centre that this group of young men had had a very difficult time as a result of their experiences of the fire. They had cut themselves off.

As explained in chapter 2, our method of actively approaching people was useful to us. One might say that we did "fieldwork" in order to make contact with this group and its members. We made initial contact with one of the members at a youth centre and, via him, approached the others in the circle of friends.

We offered the young men the opportunity of coming along for an activity camp. The first of these involved sleeping in an Indian teepee, paddling kayaks and talking about the events of the night of the fire. Subsequently there were two more activity camps involving leisure activities and conversations about trauma and recovery.

Without that initial contact and our opening conversations, the invitation to come along to an activity camp would probably not have been perceived as serious. Somehow – most likely because of a feeling of trust – the threshold was lowered and the whole group opted to come along. We have to remember that it takes great courage for an afflicted person to move towards the trauma and describe it. Our contact person did most of the motivational work. One could even say that he gave a personal guarantee that it would be good to take part in the activity camp. We believe that group cohesion played a part in the unanimous turn out and, at the same time, the commitment of these friends to each other. If there had been more suspicion and insecurity, everyone would most likely have declined the offer of the first kayak camp.

The camps created a context in which the participants were given the opportunity to make contact with people who had additional resources at their disposal, and also, above all, to make contact with themselves through simply being able to drop certain negative or evasive positions. The simple structure of the camp – breakfast, activity, lunch, activity, dinner, telling their stories, and so on – created a much appreciated predictability and feeling of security.

Even though the purpose of the activity camp was to create opportunities for remembrance and mourning, the other activities of the camp were also much appreciated. Many of the participants at the subsequent reunion and later, during the interviews and the writing of this report, told us about their pleasant memories of those activity camps. Repeatedly they said how much they liked going away together, with enjoyable activities on offer and fun. It seems that the camps and their clear schedule and activities programmes created a sense of security, joy and fellowship into which we, the support workers, were also integrated. We got to know each other quite well. In the process we gained some shared, positive memories with the participants.

However, there was no mistaking the expectation among these young men to talk about their traumatic memories. They were extremely geared up when the moment came to do so. We believe that the fireman, Lasse Gustavsson, showed the way. He became a positive role model in showing that one can talk about and describe traumatic memories. He conveyed a strong sense of hope about the possibility of enjoying a good life in spite of his injuries. He showed, using himself as an example, that one is responsible for coming back to oneself.

Initially the group participants were isolated. They socialised more or less exclusively with each other and to a certain extent with their families, but they had broken off from everyday life and found new, quite hectic and dangerous lifestyles. It has now emerged that they never dealt with their memories of the fire. Instead they expressed the horror of what they had

been through without any words. Through their contact with us they gained other relationships that would prove useful in the recovery process. As a consequence of the activity camps, the young men met a number of adults and resource people; through positive memory association, new contacts were thus made with people who lived normally and were not troubled by trauma.

Something important took place in the group once the participants began to engage with trauma. The fact that the participants told each other about it meant that the others also gained new pieces for the puzzle of their own stories. The young men learned from each other. They also learned how to handle a difficult, shared problem as a group. And in this way the group became a support group, in which they helped each other explore their trauma and find new ways of moving towards recovery. We took the view that there was great value in working with them as a group. It created a feeling of security. "You got us together in a group. Because it's easier that way. Because you feel more secure", said Neo. "And also that we as a group could be with you. Because that way we still had the security between us in the group. So we didn't end up alone with Lars and Ann in a room. This was also how we liked to meet up. It was really relaxed. We didn't feel there were loads of demands on us, that we had do things, it felt like we were meeting on our own terms", said Paulo.

We can see the value of working with the group and its dynamic. We can also see clearly how our activities guided the young men towards having the courage to look at their trauma and uncover it – what Pennebaker calls "disclosure".

Stories and Disclosure

The second step of recovery consists of two activities: remembering and mourning. Judith Herman explains that the task for the survivor is to tell the story of the trauma and tell it fully, in depth and detail. This work reshapes the traumatic memory, so that it is integrated into the survivor's life story:

> "Reconstruction of the trauma story begins with a review of the patient's life before the trauma and the circumstances that led up to the event. (…) The next step is to reconstruct the traumatic event as a recitation of fact. Out of the fragmented components of frozen imagery and sensation, patient and therapist slowly reassemble an organized, detailed, verbal account, oriented in time and historical context. The narrative includes not only the event itself but also the survivor's response to it and the responses of the important people in her life. (…) The completed narrative must include a full and vivid description of the traumatic imagery" (Herman, 1997, s. 177).

In the section entitled 'The Process of Actively Searching for Victims' we have described the importance of the fireman Lasse Gustavsson in kicking off the exploration of traumatic memories. He demonstrated, using himself as an example, how it worked. He held the "talking stick" at the camp fire and told his story from the gas fire, where he survived but his friend and colleague died.

We see verbalisation of traumatic memories and the emotions connected to these as central to our way of working. In James Pennebaker's words, we have shown the way from "inhibition" to "disclosure", a revealing examination of traumatic memories with thoughts and feelings arising in the process. By using language in various ways we have tried to help survivors take control and create meaning.

The fact is that one of the characteristics of a traumatic memory is that it is wordless and fixed. That the trauma is non-narrative is a characteristic of a traumatic experience, which means that it expresses itself fluidly and is difficult to rein in using language or hold in position by means of a story. The purpose of the story is to equip memories with contexts that link them to known circumstances. In this way, traumatic memories are given meaning. In the story-telling, trauma must answer what this meaning is. A trauma that has been explored to find its meaning is no longer a threat.

The story of trauma and its consequences was a constantly surfacing aspect of our camp activities and the participants were highly tuned in and attentive when these moments arose.

The step from telling to writing their memories was taken at the second camp, the horse riding camp. There, we asked the participants whether they would be interested in writing down their stories – supported by us.

We were assuming that this would contribute to the integration of traumatic memories, or at least their incorporation into a written story and maybe also their integration into a life story.

It became an important body of work. The journalist and masseuse Marie-Louise Carlberg functioned as a sort of facilitator who, with interviews, transcription and revisions, helped the young men formulate their stories. Marie-Louise also took part in the horse riding camp, was tried and tested and included in the fellowship. In spring 2001, seven young men wrote down their stories from the fire and the time in its wake. These were ceremoniously handed over, wrapped in handmade paper, tied with silk ribbon.

At the reunion ten years later we asked how the participants had used the stories. One of the participants had thrown his story away almost immediately, maybe as a way of liberating himself from the event. Now he missed it and felt ready to read it again. Others had read their stories from time to time, to remind themselves, and had then put them away. A few of them had allowed people who were close to them to read, in order to explain what they had been through in the fire.

Even the letters we wrote to ourselves were arguably a part of the narrative theme of our work, like all individual conversations we have had with participants over the years.

Empowerment

Disempowerment and helplessness are immediately associated with psychological trauma. For the traumatised person, empowerment is about gaining courage, energy and resources to regain control of his or her life. Social support, for the support worker, is about assisting the traumatised person to regain control. No person can do this for the trauma victim, it is the work of the latter that creates results:

> "No intervention that takes power away from the survivor can possibly foster her recovery, no matter how much it appears to be in her immediate best interest" (Herman, 1997, s. 133).

Empowerment has to do with a person's power over themselves, their control and legitimacy, as well as the mobilisation of resources to enable people to have power and control over their lives (Askheim & Starrin, 2007).

It is important to take the survivor's perspective and let him or her play the main part in the recovery, in contrast to support activities undertaken from above. One can see it as a process, with a changeable need for support and resources. One important realisation is that the focus person is capable of expressing his or her needs and find a way.

We also find this significance of the term in Herman. She states that the survivor's empowerment is the first principle of recovery: the survivor must be the author and judge of her own recovery. Other persons can offer advice, support, help, empathy and care, but not healing. Many laudable and well-intentioned attempts to help the survivor therefore fail because the founding principle of empowerment has been omitted (Herman, 1997, p.133).

One aspect of empowerment is that one must wait for the traumatised person. When the time is right, support can be accepted. This does not mean that one should hold back in offering help. In fact, offers of help should be repeated. But as a helper one must be able to handle rejection!

Empowerment, in the sense of regaining control of one's life, has been the guiding principle in our way of working with the participants. We want to illustrate how we see the significance of the question in an empowerment-based support process. We continuously maintained a dialogue, asked the young men about all the interventions and steps of our support process, and we always tried to give and receive feed-back on what we were doing together. One might say that we were using the question as a catalyst for development and our internal compass. We were careful not to bring ready-made solutions. The open question also had the function of squarely placing the recovery process with the survivor – it would be the survivor's answer to the question that would point to the direction and continuation of recovery and the steps this might involve. The question provided the map for the support work.

The question is also central in maintaining a long-term focus in the work. Traumatised people are sensitive. By asking and remaining open to the answer, one ensures that the survivor is standing at the helm. Support staff avoid the risk of making mistakes if they are guided by the dialogue

arising from questions and answers. This does not mean that the support worker does not have an agenda of his own, as well as a different way of perceiving trauma. The open question also encompasses an invitation to a collective "definition of the problem", in which the survivor can seek out a healing road and take on resources that may be beneficial and provide strength:

> "The basic principle of empowerment continues to apply during the second stage of recovery. The choice to confront the horrors of the past rests with the survivor. The therapist plays the role of a witness and ally, in whose presence the survivor can speak of the unspeakable. The reconstruction of trauma places great demands on the courage of both patient and therapist. It requires that both be clear in their purpose and secure in their alliance" (Herman, 1997, s. 175).

A Hole in Society and Culture

In our description of the working process we have time and time again come back to the role of language in recovery. Therefore we have also said that there is a cultural framework for the sorts of stories that can be told in society. There is a whole sequence of prerequisites for stories of recovery, built into the preconceptions, norms and values of society. In just the same way as when we earlier showed how the participants in the study initially avoided and fled from traumatic memories and situations, we find the same thing in our culture. Certain subjects cannot be brought up, some questions are taboo and kept quiet. The avoidance of individuals and society reflect one another. Violent and sudden death is a subject that our culture likes to hide and push out of view. Hence whoever is afflicted with trauma is often abandoned. We are going to conclude by referring back to a few words from Elia: "You can see how people get uncomfortable when you say: This person who was close to me passed away. People don't know how to handle it. I think it's a hole in our society and culture."

Tying Up the Sack with a Loose Knot

We managed to book one of the summer's finest days for our meeting at Ann's allotment on the outskirts of Gothenburg.

During the writing process we had discussed with the group whether the material could be used for something more than a report to the The Crime Victim Compensation and Support Authority. Throughout, we had emphasised that everyone had full control of their own interview; no quotations could be used without permission and the material should be anonymous, with pseudonyms.

Our very first idea had been that the participants should share their stories about the fire with each other, giving each other new pieces of the puzzle so that each of them could lay their own puzzle of the event. Ten years ago the stories had been too personal and painful to share even with their closest friends. Now, in the summer of 2010, almost twelve years after the fire, everyone wanted to open up and share. Now there was a desire that their stories and advice should be used in order to help others. The participants had something to tell and they wanted to do it.

Our writing process had taken time and the report was still not ready. The individual follow-up interviews had been completed and the theme group meetings had been held. Two versions of the individual interviews had been written out and would now be handed over to each and everyone. The work with the group was over. There was extensive material from the interviews and the group discussions, which the young men generously allowed us to share with them. Now the interviews lay packaged for all, in handmade files tied with decorative ribbons. This gave a slightly solemn conclusion to the pleasant evening barbecue, when the files were handed out and, as Neo commented: "This feels like an exam, like getting a diploma."

So here we are, sitting together by the allotment house on a Swedish summer's evening. The grill gives off a little smoke as we chat. We are enclosed in fellowship, in spite of our many differences. The participants have come far in their process of self-examination; they have trodden different paths; they all have very different personalities. The ties between them are strong. There is a deep friendship between the participants, and a high level of tolerance and humility. They have made a long journey together.

We have also made a long journey with the participants. Initially we met them as a sort of break-out group, trying to get away from their memories and thoughts of the fire. Once they started talking to each other they became a support group. Then something else happened to the group. They wanted to help us write a study so that their experiences could become useful to others. We, the support workers, now felt included as members of the group. Together we had become an investigative writing group.

At our last themed group meeting in May we spoke about how one concludes such a long collaboration. Paulo had a suggestion: "We'll tie up the sack with a loose knot, so one can open it if it's needed. These meetings have been a way of tying up the sack."

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LarsÅke Lundberg is a social worker with long experience of youth work in institutions, youth centres and more proactive forms of setting up contact. He was a part of the crisis group on the scene of the fire among shocked and grieving young people and parents, as well as a participating member of the general public in the weeks after the fire. LarsÅke was the coordinator of the Hisingen Support Centre. Today he is active in the Family Fostering Unit in Hisingen in the City of Gothenburg.

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