



CONVERSING WITH THOSE UNABLE TO SPEAK

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Introduction

Midgard is an institution with 92 severely disabled children, teenagers and adults. There is a school and there are work-orientated classes and workshops. For 15 years experiences have been gained with ways of working which enable the residents to work on their own and together in a meaningful way.

During my time of civilian service, which I served after an interrupted technical training, I came across people with learning difficulties in a sheltered workshop. I was deeply impressed. I wanted to have something to do with these people and this decision has influenced my (professional) life up to this day. In 1978 I began to work as a group leader at Scorlewald, and there took the in-service training in Curative Education and Social Therapy. After a further year of training in Switzerland I went to the Raphael House in Bergen in 1986. The new challenge of working with severely disabled people appealed

to me. I began work in the bakery there in 1987. In 1988 I moved, together with the group of people from Raphael House, to the newly-built Midgard. For the last eight years I have worked in the bakery together with nine Midgard residents.

It is often only in the course of months or years that the development of the residents becomes visible. It is, therefore, quite an art, and demands personal input to retain one's enthusiasm in the daily work and not to lose one's motivation.

I think that a primary condition for being able to cope with the work is reflecting on and regularly exchanging one's experiences.

This will be an account of the path, which I went together with the residents. Any comments on this report are welcome and I hope that it will stimulate a further exchange of experiences.

How it began

The bakery, complete with nine bakers, was already in existence when I took over its management. My predecessor used to begin the working day with a discussion, followed by the various activities. At the end of the day, in another discussion, they would look at what had happened and what was going to happen the next day. I took over the bakery in this format. I did not myself have a set plan of how I wanted to go about it. I was not very skilled in the profession as such. What kept me occupied was the question of whether or not the set task for the bakery (i.e. producing the daily bread for the entire institution), was manageable, and the question whether this task could be experienced by the residents as being meaningful.

'One of my first experiences in the bakery was that the morning discussion lasted terribly long. This had not been the case with my predecessor. It must have been my influence, which had this effect on the length of time. As used to be the case with my predecessor, we would conclude the morning discussion with a beautiful verse, 'The Washing of the Feet' by Christian Morgenstern. It struck me that after the morning gathering, which now was longer, there was little patience left to listen to the whole verse. A restlessness would come about among the bakers and one or the other would already go to his place of work. The growing chaos was becoming very obvious and a change was called for. My interpretation of this restlessness was that in the course of the discussion the bakers had found out what they were supposed to do, were looking forward to making a start, and felt that the duration of the verse was too great a test for their will to work. This interpretation was confirmed when I took a shorter verse. The restlessness disappeared.

I also began to get to grips with the other possible interpretation, i.e. that the discussion itself was too long. I began to keep the discussions brief and to the point. I announced the most important things. This was successful a couple of times, but it was as if it did not do justice to the attempts of the residents to tell something themselves. I was surprised that these severely disabled people had anything to tell. Out of the nine residents only two were somehow able to express themselves via the spoken word. Two others were able, with very much effort, to utter a single word, the meaning of which would even then not be immediately clear. Many of them had little control over their physical functions. Yet they displayed various uncontrolled movements and a range of various primal sounds.

I tried something new: Once, when, after much difficulty and repeatedly explaining what my intentions were, a circle had gathered around the table, I opened the discussion with this question: 'Who knows what day it is today?' It became very quiet in the circle. The next question: 'Who knows what we are going to do today?' did not bring any change to the silence. On the contrary, I experienced the silence even more intensely, for all the residents were now concentrating hard and nine pairs of eyes were looking at me full of expectation.

When the silence was beginning to become awkward, Louis said: 'Apple pie'. He meant it as a joke, but it did not have this effect. Through the misfired joke the silence

had become very unpleasant. I realised that it was possible to prevent such silences by reading out a list of announcements, the way I used to do it. But I also detected in these silences that the residents had an enormous interest and a will to communicate and at the same time I realised how high the threshold was to an actual conversation. I had the feeling that a way out of this would be to find a range of subjects for conversation. I made a list of activities, which would enable each baker at some point in time to gain an insight into his own bakery.

The conversation itself still had to be helped on its way. All the bakers were essentially keen to communicate. I noticed that many of them would give up trying to make themselves understood after only one or two attempts. They probably thought: 'He does not understand anyway!' An attempt to speak with Ella Koning was especially dramatic. Only when the tension would become very great would she make an attempt to express herself. Then she would get into a kind of cramp. She would pant through her mouth without formulating any sounds. She would look quite wide-eyed and her head would move along to the rhythm of her breathing. I tried to influence this cramp via various inner attitudes but without any visible result. I would also say: 'Speak freely Ella', or try to divert her attention by saying: 'Just tell me later'. This would help. Ella's cramp would subside, but afterwards she would be very sad. I interpreted this as a sign that she felt that she was not being taken seriously. When a third person would try and interfere during a cramp he would call up Ella's anger: 'He should stay out of it!' Whenever she would try to get back to the same subject she would usually end up in a cramp again. I decided to take Ella seriously and look at all other circumstances as secondary. For the time being it remained hardly possible to influence the cramps. The only change was that from then on Ella no longer became sad. Sometimes she would put one or two hands on my shoulders when a cramp would block everything within her. In these moments I experienced Ella as very pure in her inability. She moved me deeply. In one such moment I tried, as a kind of guess, to bring into words what I thought was going on inside her. I spoke it out aloud and hoped to see from her reaction whether I was right or wrong. This became an exercise, which up to today has remained a great hobby of mine. In the bakery this hobby turned out to be a source of fun. Ella loved it when I would guess wrong and would then say: 'Wrong'. And you may be assured that in the beginning, especially with those whom I did not know very well, my guess was very often wrong. In Ella's case the fun would ease the cramp.

On the whole the start of a 'conversation' remained a very difficult affair, in which I would usually welcome a bit of humour. When the conversation was about 'that stupid Johannes', whenever I would make a mistake, they were all very keen to join in even if some of them did not have much of an idea what it was all about.

Honesty demands to mention that the bakers would usually find it hard if there was too much excitement and they would 'get out of themselves'. This would also cause criticism from my colleagues. But to me it showed that at least some form of conversation was happening. With the help of humour a playful approach would come about.

In very small steps some changes became noticeable. In the course of the year some bakers, of whom one would at first really not have expected anything, were making attempts to express themselves. Ella's blockage occurred less and less, and after six months it had almost disappeared. It only cropped up occasionally when she met unexpected situations or new people. I noticed that my guesses were improving and that I was developing an antenna for the bakers. I began to deal more freely with the possibility of making a mistake. I could, for instance, influence the course of a conversation by purposely saying something wrong. Also the contents of the conversation changed in the course of time. The bakers had obviously discovered that they were able to bring up whatever was important for them and that they were being listened to. Ella, for instance, once said rather forcefully: 'Bake bread' and meant: 'Don't you think that we should stop nattering and begin to bake bread?' She was not only the one who did the talking, but through her words she showed that she was responsible for the entire situation. She began to express this responsibility more often and on the basis of these conversations I gave her the task of 'boss'.

A usual way of dealing with each other is to ask the other one a question and then to wait for a reaction. You enable the other to react verbally (for instance in agreement or disagreement). It is typical for a severely disabled person, on the other hand, not to react verbally. Most residents do not master the spoken word, therefore such an answer may not be expected. But also the non-verbal communication may be a source of misunderstanding, especially in a first encounter. Experience has shown that the threshold to a clear personal utterance or action is often much too high. This is why there are plenty of reasons to doubt whether a message has actually reached the resident. Strong reactions, aggression and failure may add to this doubt and increase the chaos. Through this the feeling may arise, that something needs to be done. It is a feeling which in me became existential and did not leave me. Finally a solution, or the beginning of a solution, began to dawn on me.

Conversation, even with people who cannot speak, is a condition for my way of working with others.

The way of conversing has in the course of the years developed in a humorous and playful way. I hope that it will become clear from the above example how important the spoken word is, also for these severely handicapped human beings.

The co-operation began with the fact that at a certain moment the work master would speak for the bakers.

This was not easy, but I gradually got to know the bakers. I learnt to distinguish between important and often disturbing, unimportant utterances. The confidence between us began to grow, enabling the bakers to express themselves more easily and encouraging a much greater effort to bring something up. It was confidence in the fact that they were being listened to and were being taken seriously. And it was also the capacity of the co-worker to really be able to listen to what the resident was trying to say.

Baking bread was gradually being experienced as a meaningful activity.

In the conversations, which I had with them, several bakers repeatedly told me that 'tomorrow's bread' or 'this evening's bread' should be baked. This was then put into practice. It had become the task of the bakery.

In the course of the years the approach was confirmed by the practical achievements. All residents grew in independence and confidence. Instead of 'knowing it all' or finding it boring they showed that they wanted to do useful work.

While writing this I was surprised how little I had planned these steps within the work consciously. In the beginning I gave an outline of all the doubts and questions which the bakers had. In the conversation which thus came about I gained experience. For myself and for the bakers more and more became definable. In the conversation I would define a policy and test it as well.

Having worked in the bakery for four years, and after the death of one of the bakers, I discovered the fairy tale of the 'Crystal Ball' by the brothers Grimm. One theme appealed to me very strongly:

The princess of the golden castle is in a hopeless situation. Outwardly she has become unrecognisable and because of an enchantment she is not able to do anything. Twenty-three vain attempts have been made to save her. One other person is allowed to try, otherwise she will be delivered finally into the magician's power. The young man in the fairy tale, who himself had escaped from miraculous circumstances, is not to be deterred. Even when, out of compassion, she tries to stop him he insists that he wants to rescue her. Then she appears to be able to explain exactly what he should do and what will be the risks and prospects of her rescue. So the young man gets to know from the princess what he is supposed to do to execute his intentions.

In this fairy tale I seemed to recognise the element of the determination not to stray from one's intentions. I also recognised my attempts to listen and find out how the bakers thought the workshop should be run. The more it became possible to develop 'ears' for the bakers and to understand them the more it became possible for the workshop to be organised in the way they would have done it themselves had they been able to.

The daily routine of the bakery

Every morning all the residents, carers, teachers and work masters would come together in the hall. This 'Morning song' was at the same time the beginning of the working day. Afterwards all the adults would go to work. On arrival in the bakery the coats would be hung up, aprons and bakers' hats put on. This was the time when there is a great need to tell or ask something: 'What are you doing here?' and 'We have to have a discussion in the circle'. Then also events from the previous day and future events would be brought up. I would do my utmost to do justice to every utterance. At a certain moment someone would ask: 'What are we going to do today?' It would not be necessary for this question to only be answered in words, because the evening before the chef would already have prepared the ingredients for the next day. While concrete items would be pointed at the conversation would continue: 'Today we will bake bread'. 'Today we will stir the yeast', 'Whose job is that?' etc. When all the activities and special things would have been discussed the enthusiasm for work would have grown considerably. I would still try and hold back the urge for deeds by saying a verse. Then we would wish each other a good working day and everyone would get to work.

The 'boss' would weigh out a quantity of yeast, I would measure a litre of warm water and another baker would stir and dissolve the yeast. He would pour the solution into the kneading machine. The 'boss' and I would add all the other ingredients. I would switch on the kneading machine and the 'boss' would make sure that everything was alright.

Any bakers who had no specific task would grind flour after the work discussion. I would also do this as often as I could manage it. The idea of grinding one's own flour with hand mills is based on the idea of making the work process visible within one working space in a way which is as complete as possible, i.e. from the grain of corn to the baked bread. In practice it showed that a large number of bakers loved to grind flour regularly. I purchased more mills so that each baker could have one. There was also a 'two-person' mill. I found a way to give this grinding of flour a meaningful place within the weekly timetable, to prevent it from becoming a form of occupational therapy. At this point in time it would have been much too much work to grind all the flour ourselves. The wheat meal which was used as a basis and which would constitute 90% of the quantity of flour used, would be bought in. We were able to grind the remaining 10% in the bakery. The oatmeal, which was ground on Mondays and Thursdays, would be added to the basic dough on Tuesdays and Fridays. And for instance the rye, which would be added to the basic dough on Wednesdays, would be ground on Tuesdays.

While grinding someone would often ask: 'Shall we sing a song?', or: 'Should we not be practising songs for Carnival?' or someone else would spontaneously start a song. Through the grinding and the singing a playful yet concentrated mood would come about.

The 'boss' was able to stop the machine and test the dough independently. As soon as she would be content about its quality she would call on me to put a lump of

dough on the table. Then she would weigh out portions of 11 ounces each. She would then divide these around the table. Everyone, except for a person in a wheelchair, was now supposed to wash his or her hands and stand around the table. To those who were unable to wash their hands by themselves I would offer to do it together with them.

As soon as everyone started to knead a lump of dough which was on the table very soon a spontaneous singing would begin. During the chorus of the second verse the dough would be handed on to the neighbour on the left. After having kneaded and passed on the dough ten times each lump would have gone full circle and thus have been kneaded well. As the next step the 'boss' would say: 'Make a ball' and round balls would be formed. Two of the people were able to do this independently. To those who needed help I would offer to do it together with them. The shaped out balls would then be arranged on to boards and it would be someone's job to put the boards into the rising cupboard.

The time it would take for the bread to rise (about half an hour) could then be used to grind some more flour. Another option could be to have a coffee break during that time, if a break was needed during that part of the day. According to the circumstances and in consultation with the chef I would often choose the second possibility.

After the dough had risen the second phase of the process would follow. Someone would fetch the board out of the rising cupboard and the chef would share out the dough. Now the dough would be beaten with the palm of the hand. Songs with a different rhythm than for the previous activities were needed for this kind of work. Finally a loaf would be shaped out of such a square piece of dough, which had come about in this way. One of the residents was able to do this independently. I would again work together with the others.

The boss would put the shaped loaves into the tins. Someone else would put the tins into the cupboard to rise. A third person would shut the cupboard and turn on the heating. I would make sure that the oven had been pre-heated on time and as soon as the bread would have risen sufficiently, which I would judge together with the boss, it could go into the oven. The chef would take one tin after the other out of the rising-cupboard and hand them to me. I would arrange the tins in the oven. When the bread was done I would take all the tins out of the oven and put them on to boards. First the boss and I tested the bread. She would take the loaves out of the tins one by one and put them on to a rack to cool. Later someone would put the loaves needed for use in the institution into the bread cupboard. Then the boss would ask me about the number of bread orders. She would pack the right number of loaves into bags and I would put a sticker onto each bag. The boss would put the ordered loaves on top of the storage cupboard.

Towards the end of a part of the day I would ask for a consultation with the boss. 'Let's think', we would call this. We would then see what had been done up to then and what was still to be done according to what we had decided in the morning meeting. Getting the flour, washing up and cleaning would be some of the jobs which I would then share out. The boss's or my task would be the preparation of the work. This meant weighing and setting out the dry ingredients for the next baking procedure.

In the course of the years I noticed that the boss and also others would stop what they were doing whenever they would get confused. Moments of 'thinking about it' could help such a person to pick up the thread again. One of my tasks was to learn to see when such moments of consciousness would be needed for an individual or for more people at the same time.

At the end of a day we would have a concluding discussion: 'What did we plan to do this morning?' and 'What did we actually manage to do?'

Independence

By fulfilling a meaningful activity over many years the severely disabled person may gain a 'motoric picture' of the events in the workshop. As a next step I began to look for activities which anybody would be able to do independently.

You would sometimes hear certain co-workers say: 'In the workshop they do very good work, but 'my Johnny' would never be able to do it.' This opinion could be heard more often in the eighties, when large-scale workshops like we have now were not yet in existence. Not only parents would think about their child in this way, but also many carers, therapists and leaders of what was then Raphael House were convinced of it.

This opinion was confirmed by experiences in the weaving workshop. A weaving workshop had been started up because of the therapeutic value of the activities connected with it. This workshop remained in existence for about ten years and the daily routine was as follows:

The workshop had been well equipped with looms and spinning wheels. Every worker had his own place. Yet hardly anyone was able to work independently and the weaver considered it to be her task to weave together with somebody (i.e. guiding his or her hand). After some time she would finish with the one and go on to the next one. She did of course not want to deprive anyone and would make sure that during every part of the day she would have worked with each of her workers.

After ten years it proved that not many people had learned to weave or spin independently. Whenever the co-worker would move to the next person the resident whom she had been working with would stop working. The member of staff would manage to stay in the weavery for about three years and was then 'burnt out'. In this way three people actually broke down because of the weavery. Finally in 1987 the workshop was closed.

The bakery has now been in existence for about 13 years. Five bakers have been working there for 8 years now, two longer and two shorter. I can also understand and recognise the experiences of the weavery. If you would want to test the bakers for their independence, i.e. by giving them a lump of dough and then waiting whether they would begin to knead it, the result with many of them would be negative. But what conclusion should I draw from this? It is not possible for a severely handicapped person to come to an activity, a word understanding, a clear expression, just like that. The threshold is too high. But he does manage it with help.

Other experiences may show the contrary. Take the exam-

ple from the bakery, which was mentioned before: all the bakers were standing around the table with some dough in front of them. Even if every worker would handle the dough in his own way the fact that it was being passed around guaranteed that the work master would handle every piece of dough and would have been sufficiently able to test its quality. This way of working together makes it superfluous to have to correct anyone, while at the same time everyone is working simultaneously.

'A young man in a wheelchair had a so-called 'flaccid' body. He could do very little. Whenever during the kneading of the dough he would be in the circle and a piece of dough would be lying in front of him he would make an enormous effort. This would cause him to reach way past the dough. After a long time going backwards and forwards he would at last manage to put one hand on the dough. After some time also his piece would be passed on and as soon as the next portion would appear before him he would again make an enormous effort. Whenever a new piece of dough would lie in front of him he would be very keen to join in.'

Within this way of working together his contribution, however small, was nevertheless welcome. Through the form, the passing on, his contribution had become a meaningful one and this lowered the threshold of personal achievement. I did not have to say to him: 'You are doing it wrong, look how I do it'. This school-like way of learning was not necessary for getting the experience: 'We are working together'. In this way a more equal co-operation could begin to grow.

On the other hand it remained important for me to give a good example within the group. Whenever I would remove myself from the process of kneading in order to make a phone call, one after the other would stop kneading and come and stand next to me to discover to whom I was speaking.

What did not come about in the weavery, was gradually becoming somewhat visible in the bakery, i.e. moments in which more people were simultaneously active in a meaningful way. Within such a group process it is possible for an equal, adult way of working together to arise and the threshold to activity to be lowered. *What is not possible/for a single person, (i.e. executing a meaningful activity, becomes possible when the single one works together in a group setting.)*

My own work was to a certain degree needed as an example and it was not possible for me to be doing other things. So within this structure of working together there was a certain dependency.

Apart from the work in the group there were a number of activities, which I would do, because they were too difficult for the residents. These activities would of course draw attention. I would venture to say: 'Would you like to take over from me?' This often appeared to be the case. Yet such a person would not always be able to take on such a task. Whenever I would correct them many of the bakers would look very downcast. I was not content about my approach and looked for a solution. It became clear to me that adults grow according to the mistakes they are allowed to make independently. This is why I would try

to estimate the consequences of a failure.

'In this way Frank Thielen learnt to spill less and less while stirring. The risk of too much spilling was that there would be too little yeast in the dough. And Ella wished that 'putting salt in the dough', could be her job, with the risk that she would forget every now and then. The reactions from the institution ('disgusting bread!') would correct her. In both examples I deemed the risk to be justified and did not interfere when something went wrong.'

In the course of time I learnt to hold back more and more and to allow more room for risks. For hours I would stand at a mill thus making sure that the others could do their work. I noticed that the bakers would gradually dare to take more initiative. They became more and more prepared to feel responsible for a mistake and for failure. I gradually began to leave certain jobs to others and at the same time became less bound to the role of being a good example. Apart from the tendencies towards interdependence within the group, which I mentioned earlier, there are also tendencies, which encourage independence.

'In the daily contact I discovered that Ella had a special gift. Without fail she would know what is good for somebody. For instance I noticed that with Frank, a stubborn, backward man, one could make certain practical jokes which he could understand himself. Whenever you would have hit upon a 'good' joke he would want to do it again and again. Ella would sense, when such a joke would begin to get out of hand and would then say: 'Stop now'. I learned that Ella could do something, which I could not do. If I ignored her warning and continued joking it would usually not take long until it would really turn out to be a disaster. It would then end in a nasty fall or some other injury.'

It was right for Ella to have the task of chef, for her sense of responsibility stemmed from her insights into the social life. I tried to glean a policy from her abilities. Whatever was manageable and meaningful to her (baking bread for the entire institution) became a task for the whole bakery. In this way the aims for the workshop came about. Her social capacities signified a kind of leadership. Then I put a name to this, this leadership became her appointed task and in the work discussions I would test its aptness.

In the fairy tale of the 'Crystal Ball', which was discussed earlier, the young man listens to the princess in order to hear what he is supposed to do and he subsequently goes out to rescue her. I listened to Ella and the others to find out what the bakery should look like. Yet I did not go about doing it all by myself. In listening I was as it were the prince. In putting into words what I had heard I had as it were become the princess. In this role I told the bakers what their task was. In as far as it became possible to awaken the young man within the bakers did they manage to begin to work..

'As a kind of test I once asked the chef: 'Could you please take over, I need the toilet'. The first time that I thus stayed away for five minutes was experienced as a

shock. Yet after the initial shock Ella did seem to enjoy it. We practised more often and I began to stay away a little longer every time. At a certain moment I was able to stay away for half an hour, for the chef (just like anyone else who has the 'burden' of a meaningful task) began to grow within her role. Not only during my absence, but also while I was there she became ever more confident. Her growing independence meant for me greater freedom. In the first year of our working together my presence during the kneading of the dough had been strictly necessary. We practised that Ella could take over and I would do something else. Step by step everyone began to gain independence and so also freedom within their task.

This did not all happen as a matter of course. Years ago the situation used to be reversed: at the least change or when tension was mounting Ella would very quickly become emotional and disappear to the toilet. Only hours later, at a specific moment in the day (i.e. coffee break or lunchtime) she would be able to come out and cope with life again. If things became too much for her she would withdraw from the situation.'

Ella grew into her role and had an increasingly heart warming influence on life in the bakery and in Midgard. I observed that the bakers began to do more meaningful activities. It seemed that they would act according to a certain insight into the situation. In the course of the years also less skilled bakers (of whom one had thought that they were not able to do very much) became carrying workers within their set task. Their disabilities would gradually begin to move into the background, would as it were disappear. From me this called for a constant holding back, which enabled me to keep an eye on all the activities and make sure they would be done in the right way.

This attitude was not always immediately understandable for outsiders. Whoever would come into the bakery would address me, assuming that I was in charge. I would repeatedly make attempts to draw Ella in and to introduce her as the boss. I would do this consistently and sometimes people would take it up. Yet sometimes this would not be the case and the visitor would then feel cheated.

Benjamin

In the course of time a much more steady way of working had come about. Only one person did not join in, and his passivity would show itself in various destructive ways.

When Benjamin came to live with us we got to know him as a young man who would either sit in a corner apathetically or work himself up into a kind of rage. He did not speak; his utterances were sounds were of a primal nature. He was a fearful and anxious being and would find himself a place from which he could keep an eye on everything. His aggressive outbursts were not primarily directed at others. Because of the growing tension around him at a certain moment everyone would be upset and he himself would become less and less approachable.

Benjamin was put into a workshop. After a year the work master expressed his experiences with Benjamin: 'He does little; as a group we have learnt to cope with his moods'.

Once he was in the bakery Benjamin did indeed seem to be a disastrous element. I decided to separate him before he could disturb the work of the others. By putting this decision into practice I learned to judge when a mood was going too far. Before the situation would get out of hand I would delegate the task of supervising to Ella and together with Benjamin I would leave the workshop. Once alone with Benjamin I would try and influence him in various ways. Ella and the others would define this: 'It is Johannes' job to talk with Benjamin'. This way of working was understood by them and they would gradually become less worried, for it was anyway Johannes' job.

I gradually learned to define Benjamin's utterances. When a temper would begin to simmer in Benjamin I would say to the group: 'Look, this is what anger looks like'.

Whoever was getting worried and wanted to calm the situation down, would understand from my words that this was anger and that it was all right. With this exercise we as a group learnt to deal with anger and the moments that Benjamin had to have a 'talk' with me could be prevented more often.

In my review I tried to make my experiences with the group and with Benjamin objective and I gradually got to understand Benjamin better. I noticed that in his moods Benjamin was not himself, that they would 'overcome' him. I learned to understand his anger as a deed of despair, a last attempt to find himself again. This inspired me in my further attempts. With us Benjamin was allowed to be himself. 'In the bakery things are not as all right as you might have thought. There is cause for grumbling and this is Benjamin's job', I would say from then on.

This approach changed the whole picture in the course of a year. Benjamin became less restless, had less temper tantrums and was reasonably accepted by the others as a member of the club with a special task. He became less anxious and once even cast an eye on a (female) colleague. I could now address him and he would use the hand mill, as long as I would give an example next to him. He was able to keep this up for five minutes.

Apart from this success I also continued my search for images which would express the process which we were going through together. Do I help someone by bringing into words something, which is typical for him, or do I

thereby fix him to a certain characteristic? This question had been occupying me for a long time. During my search I discovered the image of Christ's meeting with the madman from the Gospel of St. Luke.

In the eighth chapter of St. Luke there is a description of the madman of Gerasa. Luke calls that which took possession of the man an 'unclean spirit'. The Symptoms were very clear: the man could not bear to wear clothes or to live in a house. Although the madman shouted at Him Jesus spoke with the spirits and asked them for their name. In the course of the conversation they begged Him to let them go into a herd of swine. Because He gave His permission they left the madman and moved into the swine and they all ran off the cliff and drowned in the lake. Later on the man was seen sitting at Christ's feet, dressed and in his right mind. Christ is described as the Healer of madness.

In my way of dealing with Benjamin I do not pretend to recognise this process of healing, but rather the intention of the conversation. By going into a conversation Christ gets to know the names of the spirits and offers them an opportunity to speak for themselves. By allowing the spirits their own place the human being is able to come to himself. In my conversations with Benjamin I got the idea to call that which was not leaving him in peace, and not Benjamin himself, the 'grumbler'. I do not forbid him to grumble but tried to allow it to have an accepted role. The fact that Benjamin became more often approachable and prepared to work encouraged me to believe that the naming had been accepted. At this point in time (after having talked together for 5 years) Benjamin has not been healed. Yet the periods that he can be himself are longer. In those moments he is able to work and his span of concentration has increased. Just before Christmas and other special events he is very restless and not able to do very much. The example of Benjamin is not unique. It is somebody's job to 'contradict Johannes' and someone else 'always gets the blame', is a kind of scapegoat. This division of tasks would often be discussed and would provide the necessary humour. My question, whether with such a task it is possible to become more oneself or whether one is rather stereotyped into an unpleasant role, has so far not been answered. Apart from my own intentions, which I have described with the help of the archetypal image from the gospels, the main guidelines for my way of working have been the practical results. I think that I am on the right track if a task is accepted with humour by the person him or herself and by the others and if this acceptance in its turn gives a possibility for further development. I will stop if a joke is not understood or even causes further trouble. So far you could say that the practical life itself has given the answers.

This description touches the essence of my approach to Social Therapy: gleaning a concept for a bakery from the potential skills of the residents; naming possible disturbing factors and giving them a meaningful place within the whole. This means a constant reflecting on what I do as homework, in which the daily practical life is a strict taskmaster.

From Baker to workshop coordinator

Since the summer I am not any longer a baker, but have become workshop coordinator. This means that, apart from some organising work, I am available for all the workshop leaders. I try and be open to all their questions. At the moment I find it important that the practical insights and experience of 15 years of Raphael House and Midgard are developed further. It is obvious that Midgard would like to continue to develop reflective activity. This takes place whenever the co-worker passes on his experiences with the residents, if he can digest his personal experiences in such a way that the inherent skills become visible.

In the previous chapter I gave an example of what a bakery could look like. It would be beside the point to conclude that this is the only way to run a bakery. It is only one possibility among many. It would, on the other hand, be disastrous for the communication between colleagues if one would say: 'It is typical for Johannes to do this and that with so and so. I would do it differently and would not be able to do it his 'way'. There is of course a lot of truth in such a statement. You can only succeed if you as a person believe in it. Yet the above remark in this case has the connotation of: 'Do not listen to Johannes, for what he describes is impossible to achieve.' In other words, it is so personal that it cannot possibly be passed on. Such a statement has a paralysing effect on any further discussion.

From the example of the bakery, into the very way in which I organised it, may be seen that my aim is an equal approach. In the conversation with the residents new insights arise and these are put into practice. The resident recognises this searching attitude - he himself is also searching, he longs to create possibilities within all his limitations - and joins in with the search. Not joining in would mean not joining in with the conversation. This has a paralysing influence on the conversation and thus works as 'anti-conversation'.

Writing this is a search, an attempt to make it possible to pass on my personal experiences. I hope that my successor in the bakery in Midgard may see in my attempt a possibility and may take courage to go on a search of his own.

I am trying to give an example of what I would wish for every workshop leader: To search and to tell about this search. Only when you have to explain to someone else what you are doing do you find out whether or not you have managed to convey it. To pass on the skills, which a workshop leader has gained over the years is in my opinion untilled soil, which I would like to put my energy into. I see the need for this not only in the danger that otherwise eventually a piece of experience would disappear, but also in the fact that otherwise habits would become dogmas. Empty habits in dealing with people, without the spirit being present, would make many residents into troublesome creatures, who disturb the order. Such a work ethic would not enhance the health of the residents and one would eventually burn oneself out.

This is why I strive to come into conversation with the workers. In these conversations an important aim should be the advancement of professional skills.

My own input into such conversations is coloured by two

experiences. I can try and guess and put into words what I think is going on in the other one and judge by the reactions whether I am right or wrong. Or I can, although I can see what is going on, as much as possible refrain from judging whether something is right or wrong. Being allowed to make so-called 'mistakes' does not only give the resident, but in fact any learning and developing human being the chance to gain a wealth of personal experience. It is right that the workshop leader has a relatively great autonomy in the daily work. I see it as my task to encourage an exchange of experiences.

It is part of my task to step into any workshop as necessary. I like this very much, for in this way I can keep the opportunity to gain first hand experience and reflect upon it. I myself can renew the work again and again and hope thus to be able to prevent estrangement.

I described earlier how, as coordinator, I would like to tackle advancement of skills. Insight into one's own activities is not valued very highly in our culture. The words 'knowledge' and 'insight' are very quickly associated with reading a book and describing its contents in a cognitive way. The cognitive stream is overestimated. Building up one's own identity, one's own modest skills, is being put under pressure. I try and take my starting point from an authentic stream of knowledge, which may be gained from one's own recent experience. Recognising such knowledge is much less connected with intellectual skills, than with the ability to experience 'Whitsun' together.

On Whit Sunday, according to the Gospels, people gathered and spoke together each in his own mother tongue. Many onlookers were surprised, for they could understand each other in spite of the variety of languages and they saw flames on each other's heads. There is no mention of reactions like: 'Yes, this is typical for so and so, I don't understand that fellow anyway' or 'I really can't understand that foreign language'. I interpret seeing each other's little flame as: 'All human beings speak in their own professional language and yet they experience together:

'Ah, I see what it is all about. ' These people had obviously never been to courses in foreign languages (cognitive knowledge) and yet they were able to communicate with each other. There were also some, who were unable to do so. They did not understand anything of what was going on and accused the others of being drunk: 'They are full of sweet wine'.

The religion lesson

I am again and again amazed how much our residents actually understand. A common experience in my conversations with those unable to speak is: The less I make use of intellectual concepts and the more of examples out of their own daily life the easier it is for them to follow me. The religion lessons for the adult residents in Midgard have been a wonderful field of practice and experience. Once a week about 60 adults come to the hall in their spare time for the religion lesson. I read a bit from the Bible and afterwards residents often seem to want to tell something about it in their own way and out of their own experiences. Sometimes, what they have to say relates hardly or not at all to what has been read, and sometimes they show that they have understood it perfectly well. In the course of the years a real atmosphere of conversation has come about. Although for every religion lesson I come prepared with a story, the less I tend to follow my own trend of thought and allow room for contributions, the more rewarded I feel when I return from the session. Communication does, of course, not always come about and one or the other then feels totally misunderstood. Often a certain theme appears to be so fruitful that we spend two or three weeks on it. Recognition is again an incentive in these conversations. The vehicle for conversation is not a cognitive dissertation with a conclusion; many residents would hardly be able to make use of such a technique. Yet a resident is able to recognise a certain situation and then show that he has done so.

A few years ago we came to the Bible reading about Palm Sunday. In my preparation for it I hit upon the line: 'The one who was seated on the ass was radiant like the sun. When they saw this, the people became enthusiastic and called out: 'Hosianna'! Would it be possible to speak with the residents about this?

'In the hall I first read the text out aloud. It was unusually quiet. When I read about the palm branches and the coats being thrown on the ground, I heard lots of 'Ooh's and Ah's' as comments. When I asked: 'What did I read about?' the immediate reaction was: 'Throwing coats'. This comment gave me the inspiration to enact a complete play. I asked the residents whether I could borrow their coats. There was no reaction. Then I asked them personally if I could borrow their coats. Finally some one agreed and went out to fetch his coat from the coat hook. I was allowed to borrow the coat for a minute and I showed everyone in the hall that this was not just any old coat, but a very decent coat, beautifully made, no buttons missing etc. When they had all had a good look at the coat I reminded my audience of the people in Jerusalem and did as they did. I threw the coat on the floor. This was met with great approval from those present. Now I was allowed, in fact I was forced, to also borrow coats from others. One after the other the coats were inspected thoroughly and comments were given and then I would throw those beautiful coats on the floor. There was a tremendous din. I did not see this as a chaotic mess, but as lively involvement. Many residents showed that they were able to follow the event. This was what I was after, and I did not try to calm the situation down. I did however make an attempt to weave into my original theme of enthusiasm the

question: 'Why did the people in Jerusalem do this?' Again after this question had been put there was no clear reaction in the midst of the noise. One resident got up demonstratively and began to walk over the coats. I then understood that the story was not yet finished. I discussed the consequences. If your coat lies on the ground there is a chance that people will walk over it, the road might be dusty etc. Now the residents showed that they understood what was going on and wanted to join in with the conversation. In the meantime three quarters of an hour had passed and I tried to give a summary: 'Now everyone knows what really happened.' Many of them agreed and the hall became a bit quieter. I read the text once more as a conclusion. Many residents had experienced it as a good religion lesson. The week afterwards we picked up the thread, looked back and were able to take another step with the question: 'What makes people behave like this?'

In my review it became clear to me how the theme had changed through the input of the residents. We did not only speak about enthusiasm in general, in the way I had prepared it, but about 'out of enthusiasm giving away some of your best in order to make the other one shine all the more'.

Gratefully I made use of this extra dimension and in Holy Week we tried to see every day 'who has something to give away and who can benefit from this'. Many residents were familiar with the theme. It found its climax in the discussion on the Last Supper. The Christ gave himself up in order to heal mankind. Many residents could give examples of a sacrifice of their own, a service, from which another person could benefit.

A peep into my own process of research and writing

From the beginning on in the bakery I had been looking for people with whom I could share my experiences there. Not only the daily routine is a practice area, but also trying to find words, which adequately express my experiences is an exercise. This is why I gladly take up opportunities to do this. I teach in the in-service training and show visitors around in Midgard. At a certain moment the practical placement of a colleague from Tennetal and the exchange of ideas with him was described in a report which he wrote for the people who were left behind. I translated this story from the German and edited it. In this way the article: 'Ways of working for persons with a severe handicap' came about.

When in the summer of 1995 I asked Albert de Vries the question about 'research into one's own work' I let him read my article, with the assumption that I had finished with it. In Albert's opinion the article was quite empty and superficial in comparison to what I had told him. I had treated him to a juicy example and had shown him some of the workshops. Albert soon put his finger on the sore spot. I was well able to make something visible with the spoken word, but I found writing very difficult. Then I was of the opinion that I could not do it. Albert encouraged me to develop my own style of writing and I started all over again. This was not easy and in a second talk with Albert I realised that I should do it still differently. So I started again, and became quite confused. I sent the result to Albert and in a third meeting with him I thought that he definitely had the proof of my inability in front of him. I wanted to stop then. To my surprise Albert said this time that it was 'nearly' finished. Apart from dividing it into sections he also formulated 'my' theme: 'Conversing with those unable to speak'. Up to that moment I had not given my article a name. I recognised myself in it and realised to what degree the conversation with Albert had been a true working together. With renewed energy I set to work and finished the first two chapters. It now also became clear that my talent for writing had changed. I am now able to sit and write quite spontaneously, also for short spells of time in between other things. Before the 'crisis' writing, and especially getting started, had been torture. While writing I rediscovered my former motives, why I did some things and omitted others. While writing I gained insight it was quite a discovery. Yet the longer I occupied myself with it the more I began to doubt whether what I was doing was really relevant. In my introduction I stated that I wanted to encourage an exchange. Was I going to succeed in this or was I only wallowing in the (in themselves wonderful) memories of how the bakery used to be? Was there any interest in my deliberations or would my article be put on the (dusty) bookshelf as 'history'? I felt too young for the latter. I wanted to share my questions with others. Albert edited the existing chapters (draft, Midgard February 1996). Everyone I knew to be interested in research was given the article to read and invited to exchange ideas. One evening in March I once more explained what I had on my heart and asked for reactions.

There was constructive criticism, which pleased me very much. It was said of some descriptions that they were not

yet clear and concrete enough. I had changed the names of the persons in question, but I myself wrote in my real name. The whole meeting was inspiring for me. I read the article again and noticed that the reading in itself could get the character of a conversation. While reading I could see where something was lacking. I rearranged things and rewrote them. I submitted the draft to the residents and their parents and carers. In this way they were kept informed of my activities. At a certain moment someone made the comment that the pseudonyms, which I had used up to then, had an alienating effect. 'You yourself do not use a different name, do you?'. After receiving permission from the people concerned I decided to use their real names.

While writing it began to be clear that I should speak about my present circumstances. I had not planned this. So this chapter was inserted as we were going along.

I also began to realise that I was making a great demand on the secretary, who had been typing out all my 'written work. Then the plan arose to get a machine, which could process my texts straight away.

In the meeting the remark was made how much the draft (ordered and edited) was still 'my' work.. Albert's way of working had also struck me in the conversations: In working together things came into their own. I thought I could detect a certain spiritual kinship in his way of working and my input in the bakery. And this was cause for joy!

Conclusion and looking ahead

The person with a severe disability has a great need for care. Yet next to this my aim is to keep looking into the question of development and to gain a clear picture of this. I see the formulation of this individual question about development as a challenge. One or the other form of dialogue with the residents was to be a help to me in this. I put my skill in communicating and handling the spoken word into the service of the promotion of communication. The co-operation began when I would speak for the resident and put into words what he might mean. Outwardly there was not really a reason to speak. With the use of the spoken word I would take one step 'further up', I would pull the other one up and thus come into an equal conversation.

In my way of conversing I pay special attention to what is unexpected. A new idea, which comes about in the actual meeting, has an impulsive character. An action or expression, which has not previously been planned or happens out of routine, gives me a point of reference. The next step is to give the new impulse a name and to think it through.

The finding of authentic thoughts, as well as the actual conversation, are like a practice ground, 'practice' in the sense of keeping my working plans alive. My starting point, which is to allow the resident to develop, and to encourage him or her to want to express him or herself, can become a heavy burden if I want to get quick results. It is a challenge to hold back such expectations without allowing my enthusiasm to diminish.

The language of imagery from fairy tales, legends and the gospels has been a help in my striving to gain renewed impulses. Long before events can be named I can recognise in an image something which is characteristic and which gives a direction to my striving.

In spite of the orientation which I have here outlined it will, of course, still be a struggle and a searching to set up the kind of guidance for the workshops which up to now has been rather un-tilled soil. The exchange, which takes place in the work discussions is, for me, a helpful point of reference.

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The author

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