

2. THE SIMPLICITY AND COMPLEXITY OF LEARNING

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In some way or another we are all teachers. All interaction between humans includes elements of learning. We are educated by seeing how others are doing things, by doing things together, repeating each other, listening, seeing, smelling, touching, feeling and doing. It is simply no way of interacting with each other and our surroundings without influencing our skills and knowledge. In a way that is how complex and simple the process of learning is. Humans are simply always in a process of learning and gaining knowledge and skills. What we are gaining in knowledge and skills will always have to be related to our changing surroundings and bodily functions. The fingers of a three year old can do things a grown up will have difficulty in achieving, not to mention an old person with arthritis. Life is challenging and different ages and circumstances give us different challenges.

We are also taught by relating to our surroundings, to tools and to nature and all of what that nature will include. We are taught by relating and watching cats, dogs, mosquitoes, weather, wind, snow, ice and waves. A carpenter planer can not interact with us in any other way than responding to our use. Mostly we are taught by interacting with others, looking at what they are doing and to some extent by reading instructions and listening to someone who can. Still, most of all we learn by doing.

There are many types of knowledge. Part of knowledge is of the kind that relates to the abstract, to what we have inside our heads and are able to express as theories. Other parts of knowledge are of the kind that we are taught by doing, by being in situations and by living life itself. In order to be able to communicate about the latter knowledge I will start with a story. The story is about humans who love each other, a sick old lady, an old man and a young pregnant female, one female who is about to die and another about to give birth to her first child. It is a story about a pig, a cat, sheep and a life inn good and bad. On one level it is a history about the complexity and simplicity of learning.

Karoline had been sick for a long time. The doctor, Jan Erik, had decided that she should be transferred to the hospital. The transport was going to be done by car, boat and then a car yet again. It was going to be a long trip and her husband Krestian would accompany her the whole way to the hospital. He was going to sit beside her bed, fetch coffee if she wanted a cup, wipe her forehead of sweat if needed and hold her hand. Both Karoline and Krestian knew that she just had a short time to live. It was quite likely that she would never again see the island, the house and the flowers she was so proud of and so afraid that Krestian would give too much water. The last years he had watered her flowers, but then she had instructed him two times a week. The process had been repeated again and again – Krestian had listened – served her coffee – helped her – again and again – got instructions again and again about how to make food, each day – again and again. He had been sitting hours and hours beside her bed, read loud from the newspaper, told stories he had heard in the post office and shop and he had fixed a long cord in order to make it possible for her to use the telephone from her bed.

Krestian had been a fisherman his whole life. Karoline had worked at the fishdelivery. She had filleted and salted fish. He had fished and hung fish to dry on the drying racks. Karoline had tended the cows – they had had two cows. They had also had five to six sheep. Never more than six winter fed sheep. Karoline remembered the year each of the ewes had two lambs. Twelve lambs and six ewes were grazing that year on the summer pastures. It was

quite a herd – a vast richness. One year they had even had a pig – “however, the pig tasted like a herring”. Both Krestian and Karoline laughed when they thought about that pig. The pig had been fed with herring and the meat tasted and smelled like herring. Krestian told the story in his way, and Karoline laughed so it hurt. Karoline told the story in her way and Krestian laughs so he shook. When Krestian was laughing both he and the house itself vibrated. Once he had been laughing so much that Karolines coffee cup fell on the floor and broke into thousand pieces. It did not really matter because Karoline had six cups in her cupboard. It was her cupboard, her flowers and her cat. However, the cat was mostly its own master. The boat and the sea house was Krestians, but they shared the house. There were things he decided about, and there were things she decided about. That was how it has always been and that is how it always was going to be.

Karoline and Krestian had a lot of things together. The animals had mostly been Karolines, but the hay and food for the animals had mostly been Krestians work to get into the barn. He had harvested grass on small islands and hidden inlets, found branches with leaves both here and there. The grass had been dried to hay and the branches collected in bundles and dried with the leaves. In winter when it was to little feed he had harvested seaweed to feed the animals. When it was a little extra money – and Karoline always managed to save some – he had bought flour to the cows.

Most of all they had had the children together. They had raised three children. One of them, Per, had drowned in the middle of the sixtees. He had just been a juvenile when he was lost. He died somewhere east of Greenland off with a fishing boat. They had a picture of him in the wall in the sitting room. Just underneath Karoline had he most beautiful flower plant. The two other children, Lise and Ole, had grown up and got children – the grandchildren of Karoline and Krestian, five of them. Ole lived in Oslo fare away in the south of the country; they did not see that much to him. Lise lived on the island; she was married to the postmaster who also had the local shop. They had three children, one was in the military, on them was going to school in Bergen a “university school”. One of them helped in the shop. That was Trine, the good girl of Karoline. She came to visit each day and always brought the newspaper. It was really no need for her to bring the paper, because Krestian walked to the posthouse to fetch the mail each day. However, it was nice to have her coming and then it was sort of good reason to bring the paper.

Karoline was the first to be told that Trine had a boyfriend and then later that she was pregnant. Trine had brought her boyfriend to visit them. Krestian had had the boyfriend out in his boat in order to show him the close by good fishing places. It was Trine and her boyfriend that should live in the house when Karoline and Krestian were gone. It was only Krestian that knew that that would happen as soon as Karoline was dead. He himself was of excellent health and had never been sick. He could live on forever and it was no reason to wait for him dying. It was best to do it like that. Trine was soon going to have a child. Trine could look after the flowers of Karoline. Himself he could move into the room of Trine. Lise had suggested that he should do so and he wanted to do just that.

It was Lise and her husband that drove them to the harbour. Lise sat beside Karoline who was on a stretcher in the back of the shops delivery van. Krestian. The men sat in the front seat. Krestian had wanted to be in the back of the car with her, but Karoline thought that was totally nonsense; “An old man sitting on the floor in the back – no the men folk should sit in front”. On the harbour Trine and her boyfriend was waiting. Karoline felt on her tummy she was seven month pregnant, only two months to go. Karoline joked with her about her possibly

coming to the hospital to the hospital while she was staying there. It was only Krestian that knew that Karoline wanted to be a grandgrandmother before she died. He knew that she knew and it was only that hope that kept her alive. The doctor boat, that was the one used for transportation to the hospital, was waiting when they arrived at the quay. It was many tears and hugs. Only Karoline was joking, she was pale, but her words were targeted and she knew how to turn the mood around.

Trine and her boyfriend should look after the house, the cat and the flowers while she was at the hospital. Home nurse, Marie, had made arrangements so that Krestian could stay in the hospital together with Karoline. Krestian had been much more to hospital than Karoline, but only for cuts and wounds. They had sown and cut a lot in his body. The big halibut hooks were difficult stuff to get in an arm, it is easy to be squeezed and cut while in rough sea. During the war he got some splinters from grenades into his body, but he had always healed well. His skin was full of scars and his hands had thick skin. His eyes were light blue and always looking at something far out in the horizon. That is the kind of eyes you get when you are used to stand at the helmet day after day, night after night, in good weather and bad weather always looking for waves to break and shallows. Karoline always thought of his eyes and gaze like violets, such flowers that grew on the field. She never got tired of his eyes.

It was a cabin for sick transported in the boat. Marie sat down with Karoline. Krestian stayed up in the steering house to follow the navigation of the boat. It was a lot of new modern navigational equipment in the doctor boat, and then he knew the crew and the old doctor Jan Erik. They all had great respect for Krestian. He had great knowledge of weather, wind, currents and shallows. He was able to read the sea and the weather like no one else. They asked about Karoline. "She was weak" he said no more. He could say no more and neither could the doctor.

Then the talk stopped. They had to navigate through the narrow inlet and concentrate upon that. They started to talk about the eiderducks that just had started to build their nests. Krestian had as always built "houses" small protected nesting places. And, yes he was going to collect eiderdown this year like all years, it was a kind of habit of his, and then he wanted to have eiderdown for a bedcover to his grandgrand child soon to be expected. They all expressed astonishment of him being so old that he was soon to become and grandgrandfather. And then Trine she was going to be a mum, the most beautiful girl on the island. "She looks exactly like Karoline when she was at that age" replied Krestian. He straightened himself; "the most beautiful lady on the island".

Ordinary people with life that include fairy tale like stories. They are humans that are born and dies, love each other, laughs and are in grief. Begonia flowers in a windowsill. Imagine yourself; one cup of coffee in an old worn hand; a male working hand full of scars on the fever hot forehead to a dying female, two lovers, close interwoven in the ecstasy of love; one old man watching the sea and looking into the horizon and an old female dreaming about new life to be born; grey weather and storm sometimes with hurricane force, white foamed sea and sometimes sun and mirror like sea. It is no easy thing to love another being and it is even less easy not to love. We hardly know the difference between tears and laughter. Life is life in good and evil. None of us would have liked not to have lived.

When I include such a scene from life it is because learning is about that kind of totality. The most important lessons of life come from life itself. The lessons of life comes from the interaction we have with each other, with nature, the weather and what ever we will face

through the course of our life. Naturally such learning is complex; however that does not mean that it will be meaningful to dissect the processes of learning. The important will always be the totality and that is just as hard or easy to understand as the totality of wind and weather itself.

Today Karoline is buried just underneath the big birch tree that is situated precisely where you can see the harbour. It is only just that spot that has a view; the rest of the cemetery is placed tightly between bare windblown rocks in order to be protected from the weather. The spot chosen for Karoline is where Krestian himself wanted to be buried, that spot or out at sea. It is the only spot where it is possible to see the sea like a mirror in sunshine and feel the salty air blow into your face when the storm whips up foamy white topped waves.

Krestian stayed in the hospital until Karoline died. It took three months. Trine gave birth before Karoline died. It was a little girl that was named after Karoline. No one can imagine how full of joy Karoline was when she could hold her grandgrandchild in her own arms; no one can imagine how happy she was when she was told the chosen name; and no one can imagine how happy she was when Krestian told her that the young ones could have the house and that he would move in with Lise; "The three of them needs a house, and then I would just water your plants in the wring way". That is also the way it all happened.

He is tough guy close to ninety years old. Krestian. He is still out fishing. Krestian has never wanted to have females in his boat, with the exception of small children. Karoline is always allowed to come with him. Today Karoline is nearly twelve years old and the most beautiful girl on the island. Krestian is betting that if he lives until he is a hundred years old he will be a grandgrandgranddad. "Silly bean" Karoline always replies and strokes the old man over his salty white hair. Then she always asks him to repeat "Say it once more". He always answers in the same way; "What that - part about the most beautiful girl?" Then Krestian laughs so the whole boat rocks and the cormorant birds stretch their necks; "Sillybean, the most beautiful silly girl on earth".

It is beautiful on the island; wild and beautiful. Summer as winter; sunny days and stormy days, storm and bad weather, bad days and good days. The seasons change and so do people. Last summer it was mostly sunshine and beautiful weather. The violets bloomed behind the barn of Trine. The children played in the meadow. There are two more children by now. One is named after Krestian and one after Marie.

Weather blown and hard it is out at sea.
The land is getting lower the further out
The mountains pale blue in the distance
Rough and tears, rocky times
Heavy swell and deep sea
The sound of stormy winds

(Translated and rewritten by the author from Ørjaseter 1985)

Last time I spoke with Krestian we sat by the tombstone of Karoline. It is bech there, Krestian has made and painted it himself. Krestian did not say much, but he told some stories from his life. He has short sentences and exact words, words of a man that had lived a life at sea and was used to starboard, port and straight ahead. Krestian laughed so the whole bench shook when he told about the only pig they had had, that was the one that tasted like a herring. I

laughed with him when he laughed. We had heard the story numerous times, but it was just as good each time; - “the pig that tasted like a herring”.

What is big and what is small?

What is most visible in memory?

Is times and moments

When one is completely there

and felt like being there

(Translated and rewritten by the author from Halldis Moren Vesaas 1995)

Some knowledge is easier and perhaps more important than other. Krestian had always taken great care in learning from instructions. He had handled lots of things it was not possible to discuss. During the war he had handled antisubmarine bombs, explosives and grenades. In peace time he had handled motors, machinery and various kinds of technology. At the same time he always knew that all this had to be tested in a world of reality. When he did carpentry and made the bench, when he had repair something in the sea house, when he repaired and mended fishing nets, when he placed those nets at sea and used his fishing equipment and when he navigated; in thousands of situations always changing he had needed skills and knowledge always adapted to changing circumstances.

Learning is about handicrafts, but also about how we relate to each other. It is not possible to learn how to love by reading a book. The only way to learn how to love is to live the life and be that very life faithful. That knowledge is communicated by being together in the span of time. Children, grandchildren and their children they will all learn by telling and doing, by using time together and living the life together. The young Karoline is in a good school. She is living with dedicated people loving each other, their nature and what they are doing. That knowledge is mostly communicated through interaction, doing things together and showing. She is taught to read sea and wind, by taken care of the eider ducks nesting and thousands of small things that put together represents good handicraft and judgement.

A lot of skills are of a kind that will become nearly part of the automatic repertoire. A good fisherman can “read” the sea, quite often at the same time as he is talking in radio, making himself a cup of coffee and navigates his boat. A good wood worker will read his materials in the same way. Naturally there are thought processes in that kind of reading, but a lot of it is in the way in the hands of craftsman or person. The intangible cultural heritage is communicated by doing things together and being in situations connected to our culture.

Very simply this can be illustrated by the process of learning how to walk. The first steps require thinking and trying. It is literally speaking a stumbling process. Later on it is not like that, we are hardly ever thinking about each step we are making except when we come into new challenging situations requiring waling in some kind of minefield. Dancing is just the same the first steps requires a conscious cognitive process, while later on it will, for a good dancer, become automatic. As we all know there are a number of people that never reach that level in dancing and the same will be true in numerous other practical fields. Told with the words of the sailor the difference is between being on autopilot or on doing the same navigating manually. We also do know that the human autopilot is the most sophisticated machinery that exist and that has a unique ability to relate to the whole field of intangible cultural heritage.

A lot of skills can only be taught by doing and being in situations. No one can read a book in order to understand how to read the sea, obtain the skill to use a level in carpentry, do wood cutting, help a sheep lambing, take care of eider ducks and clean the down, or comfort and take care of a dying person in a good way. What we can learn from reading is just for navigation, but the skills will come from practice.

Still words will be part of that process; they function like wedges into the reality so that we can understand it better and communicate about it. Good precise words and development of thinking gives a foundation for practice and understanding that practice. Words and communication with words through well told stories, like the one about the pig that tasted like a herring, also requires skills. Still, there are great differences in being a good story teller and communicator and just to talk. As the Norwegian poet and writer Halldis Moren Vesaas said inspired by Shakespeare in one of her last poems;

Collecting myself
hoping for a miracle
That words can be forged
in a way that maintain their illuminating rays
into our language.

The words is sounding been the silent room
And inside me as from a golden instrument of strings
If music be the food of love play on
(Translated and rewritten by the author from Halldis Moren Vesaas 1995)

The sea plays on, the nature plays on and we interact with that nature. A strange and beautiful play that Krestian and Karoline was so much part of. A nature that took one of their sons and that gave them a way of living. A lot of the knowledge gained from living such a life can only be taught by living that very life. I have tried to communicate part of that knowledge through telling the story of Karoline and Krestian. I could have chosen to dissect that knowledge about lessons of sea and weather, about navigation, love, having children and raising them. The reason for not doing that is very simple. Chopped, split firewood will heat a house, but not give knowledge of the tree growing in nature nor how that would could have been used as materials. Knowledge of bits and pieces might make us blind for the totality, neither will it necessary give knowledge of wood chopping and the use of that firewood.

