

# From fear of isolation to belonging

A diaconal approach to children's stories of domestic violence and hope

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This article is an analysis of three children's stories about experiencing domestic violence from caregivers and parents.<sup>1</sup> The following four psychological perspectives are the analytical starting points: attachment theory, affective theory, self-development and theory of the fragmented self. In addition to accounting for the different, yet coherent perspectives, I also reflect upon the psychology of religion, pointing out some thoughts about how human experience can be disturbed and shaken in relation to "a potential image of god."<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, this short reflection inspires a discussion on how experience with domestic violence are challenging for the diaconal church and the procurement of faith.

**Keywords:** domestic violence, children stories, relatedness, attachment, fear, image of god, neglect, parent-child relationship, life-expanding and life-narrowing narratives, emotional development, safety, diaconal approach

## Introduction

For many children, domestic violence is a part of their daily life. Research has also shown "a connection between domestic violence and various forms of maltreatment."<sup>3</sup> However, while it is important to underline the impact domestic violence and abuse have on children, it is also of significance to emphasize that some children also have recourses to help them cope with these experiences, also called resilience.<sup>4</sup> A strong relationship with a caring and positive adult is the most important resource.<sup>5</sup> The stories in this article reveal that the children to varying degrees can live with the existential questions of life and death, hope and hopelessness.

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- 1 In this article I let the summaries of these stories show what the children experience as harmful rather than giving a definition of the term "domestic violence."
  - 2 I chose to phrase it like this because of the stories used in this article. The three children say nothing about their thoughts or feelings regarding faith. Therefore, my reflections are based upon general knowledge drawn from the stories regarding the potential challenges this could create for children confronting the church.
  - 3 Edleson, 1999; Lee et al., 2004; McGuigan and Pratt, 2001; Sox, 2004; Straus et al., 1980 in Carolina Øverlien, Children Exposed to Domestic Violence. Conclusions from the Literature and Challenges Ahead. *Journal of Social Work* 10(1), (2010), 87.
  - 4 Carolina Øverlien, Children Exposed to Domestic Violence. Conclusions from the Literature and Challenges Ahead. *Journal of Social Work* 10(1), (2010).
  - 5 Osofsky (2003): 38 i Carolina Øverlien, Children Exposed to Domestic Violence. Conclusions from the Literature and Challenges Ahead. *Journal of Social Work* 10(1), (2010), 85.

In church, we rarely know which children have (had) experiences with domestic violence. My suggestion is that a diaconal approach that emphasizes children's experiences in both religious and human relationships is of great importance because it has the potential to take children's basic needs of belonging seriously. "Belonging is being somewhere where you want to be, and they want you. Belonging is being accepted for you. I get to be me if I belong."<sup>6</sup> To sense and experience belonging can, under this definition, almost create a specific place for children to create and re-create their self. A diaconal question for the challenges of domestic violence is: How can the church contribute to facilitating nurturing relational experiences for children exposed to domestic violence?<sup>7</sup>

This article presents a short theoretical background emphasizing both psychology and the psychology of religion. The aim is to present some of the effects of domestic violence towards children. Following these presentations, summaries of three longer stories gathered by the Norwegian Save the Children illustrate how children describe their experiences with domestic violence and hope. Two types of narrative models are presented and used in the process of analyzing these stories. These models help to structure the kind of experiences that can facilitate or prevent children from being themselves. This article closes with a discussion on how domestic violence can affect children's "potential god-image" and some creative ideas on how to talk with children about god, regardless their background and life experiences.

## 1. Theoretical background

### Attachment theory

With John Bowlby the theory of attachment attained a significant place in psychology, showing that the importance of early bonding between caregiver and child is about so much more than just providing food and clothing. Rather, the bond is primarily about emotional connection and the caregiver's tuning in on the child's needs and feelings. Needing space to explore the world, children additionally require a safe place to retreat when threatening incidents occur. Parents who hurt their children physically, psychologically or in other ways such as through neglect, teach children that home

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6 Brene Brown. *Daring Greatly. How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead* (London: Portfolia Penguin, 2013),232.

7 World Council of Churches, Theological Perspectives on Diaconia in the Twenty-First Century (Colombo, Sri Lanka, 2–6 June 2012). <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/unity-mission-evangelism-and-spirituality/just-and-inclusive-communities/theological-perspectives-on-diakonia-in-21st-century.html?print=1%2522onfocus%253D> (retrieved on 18July 2012).

equals danger. When a child's home, a potential safe place, becomes a place of danger, the child may develop a disorganized attachment. As a defensive mechanism, children have an ambivalent way of reacting towards their parents as they are both drawn to them, and in need of distance from them, at the same time.<sup>8</sup>

For children growing up in this environment, relationships become synonymous with suffering.<sup>9</sup> The attachment-bond meant to provide safety instead leaves children trying to care for themselves. Mending wounds caused by domestic violence or abuse requires that children get to experience something different than they already have "learned" in past relationships. For instance, children need to know and feel that someone values them rather than being kicked or abandoned.<sup>10</sup> "Stories of love"<sup>11</sup> is an expression about both the good and the hurtful stories in human lives. Nurturing relationships tell the stories of tenderness, closeness and meaningful interaction resulting in feelings as joy, engagement and devotion. In addition, "stories of love" can be about neglect and rejection – the love children longed for but never got because of an abusive or absent parent resulting in feelings of shame, loss and guilt.<sup>12</sup> All humans depend on relationships, need someone to lean on, to learn relatedness – and how to love others as themselves. Some children, though, never get the opportunity to interact in meaningful relationships. These early experiences in children's lives tend to influence the adult life and a potential god-relationship.<sup>13</sup>

## Self-development

Developing a secure self requires a safe adult, often a parent, to mirror the feelings that arise. This person, be it a mother or a father, is necessary for the child to become a coherent self. Relational quality and the caregiver's ability to be accessible to the child's inner world and feelings, contributes to the child's creation process of becoming a self. Safe attachment is one of the key components to children's experience of their own ability to create mean-

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8 Tor Wennerberg, *Vi er våre relasjoner. Om tilknytning, traumer og dissosiasjon* (Oslo: Arneberg, 2011).

9 Maria Stensvold Ånonsen, "Diamant i frossent rom. Relasjonell trosformidling i møte med barn med desorganisert tilknytningsmønster." *Tidsskrift for sjelesorg* 32. årgang, no. 1 (2012a).

10 Trine Klette, (2007). *Tid for trøst: en undersøkelse av sammenhenger mellom trøst og trygghet over to generasjoner* (Dissertation, Norwegian Social Research (NOVA), Report 17/2007. Retrieved from [http://www.nova.no/asset/2721/1/2721\\_1.pdf](http://www.nova.no/asset/2721/1/2721_1.pdf)

11 Jan-Olav Henriksen, *På grensen til Den andre. Om teologi og postmodernitet* (Oslo: Ad notam Gyldendal, 1999).

12 Ibid.

13 Eystein Kaldestad, *Gjennom det menneskelige til det guddommelige: religionspsykologiske perspektiver* (Oslo: Tano Aschehoug, 1997).

ing and communicate – as well as distance and closeness to others.<sup>14</sup> Lack of emotional awareness, for instance, a mother’s “non-presence” emotionally, leaves the child disconnected both from themselves and others. Furthermore, relationships become something unpredictable. Children’s need of attention and compassionate caring collides when they have to protect themselves from potential rejection if the mother is not emotional and psychological present.<sup>15</sup>

Some children repeatedly sense a loss of belonging, “a significant other” or the frightening presence of a parent. This “lack” can open up for a child-god relationship. God then can become an attachment-figure that helps regulating hurtful feelings and attachment-related stress. For others a child-god relationship can seem threatening and becomes a reminder of what the child used to experience.<sup>16</sup> However, it is important to emphasize that it can go both ways. God can furthermore be seen as a safe and guarding person, but also become a reflection of the violator.<sup>17</sup>

## Affect theory

Feelings are a source of information. They tell us when we are sad, happy and scared. Feelings also alert us when we feel shame and want to hide, or when we have done something wrong and feel guilty. Different societies have their own way of showing and dealing with feelings. In some cultures, shame is oppressed or not “allowed.” However, to become a self, children depend on learning how to hold, bear and regulate feelings. “Forbidden” feelings can cause difficulties concerning the integration of a safe and secure self. When feelings are neither accepted nor welcomed, children “lose themselves” – they can develop self-shame and hatred, rather than acceptance and the ability to tolerate the hurtful feelings they harbor.<sup>18</sup>

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14 In collectivistic cultures, human beings are seen as dependent on the social network to – as the saying goes – become socialized. In these cultures, it becomes visible how “*Emotional meaning is then a social rather than an individual achievement – an emergent product of social life.*” Lutz, 1988, p. 5 i Markus og Shinobu Kitayama, Culture and the Self. Implications for Cognition, Emotion, and Motivation, *Psychological Review* Vol. 98, no. 2 (1991), 235. This said, children are both in need of caring parents and a caring society that knows that children become who they are because of their relatedness to others.

15 Anne-Lise Løvlie Schibbye, *Relasjoner: Et dialektisk perspektiv på eksistensiell og psykodynamisk psykoterapi* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2009).

16 Anders Broberg, Pia Risholm Mothander, Pehr Granqvist og Tord Ivarsson, *Anknytning i praktiken: tillämpningar av anknytningsteorin* (Stockholm: Natur och kultur, 2008).

17 Ånonsen, 2012a.

18 Jon Monsen og Sigmund Karterud, *Selvpsykologi: utviklingen etter Kohut* (Oslo: Ad Notam Gyldendal, 1997).

Whether or not the child is accepted with his/her genuine feelings, the signals given by the surroundings provide the children with stories to tell themselves.<sup>19</sup> If someone says, “It is so good to see you, how are you feeling?” the child can carry core beliefs about belonging and togetherness – that someone cares and wants to be together with him/her. For children experiencing domestic violence or withdrawn parents, other core beliefs become more dominant, for instance: “Nobody cares about me, I will always be lonely, I long for someone to come close to me, I have no value.” It is essential to know what these children tell themselves.<sup>20</sup> They are in need of good love stories in their lives to help them construct new stories that can set them free from isolation and fear. The experience of relatedness – that someone loves them – can open up for other interpretations than isolation and loneliness do.

Talking about god with children, whether they have a safe home or not, can never be about talking in terms of demands, obedience or surrender. The core element should rather be “an ethic of relatedness” where the emphasis is on the child-god relationship, as in god loving unconditionally.<sup>21</sup> In other words, it is important to be aware of the language used when talking with children about the child-god relationship.

## The fragmented self

Children who over a long period of time live with different kinds of domestic violence or neglect tend to blame themselves for what is happening – thinking it is their fault. Lack of help to interpret difficult experiences can result in chaos, especially for children, who all are strongly dependent on others. Intimidating life events and experiences where the child is not given help to understand what is happening can cause dissociative symptoms. This means that relationships and “the hurtful event” collapses (...) into a gap, a trauma of dissociation or absence, a blotting out, a blank.”<sup>22</sup> First and foremost, what is happening is that children are trying to protect themselves from harm when no one else is there to prevent the hurtful incident taking place. Traumatizing events happening repeatedly can cause the alert-system to turn on a constant “red lamp.” The child’s stress response is highly activated causing fear, loss of affective functions or difficulties sensing emotions.<sup>23</sup>

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19 Cecilia Melder, *Vilsehhetens epidemiologi. En religionspsykologisk studie i existentiell folkhälsa* (Uppsala: Uppsala universitet, 2011).

20 Øivind Aschjem, 2011 i Ånonsen, 2012a.

21 James W. Jones, *Blood that cries out from the Earth: the psychology of religious terrorism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

22 Ann Belford Ulanov, *The unshuttered heart: opening to aliveness/deadness in the self* (Nashville, TN.: Abingdon Press, 2007), 13.

23 Kekuni Minton and Care Pain, *Trauma and the body: A sensorimotor approach to psychotherapy* (New York London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 34.

When children are unable to integrate thoughts, feelings and experiences, this can cause inner fragmentation. Being held back from being themselves, children constantly search for affirmation and recognition; they strive to adapt to the environment, causing an enormous amount of energy loss. Forced to hide their true self, they are caught between an impossible state of being and not being. This also causes a variety of challenges dealing with a potential child-god relationship. The child can find itself in a position of not knowing what he/she feels and what to expect from others, always adapting to the surroundings.<sup>24</sup>

## 2. The diaconal approach

In the Norwegian Church, Diakonia is defined as “the caring ministry of the Church. It is the Gospel in action and is expressed through loving your neighbour, creating inclusive communities, caring for creation and struggling for justice”.<sup>25</sup> From this definition I have articulated a diaconal approach to children’s experiences and defines this as an experience-oriented approach in church that both in gesture and engagement show and preach a caring relatedness in god and human relationships underlining the fact that all human beings are created and hardwired for belonging. In light of this approach, my suggestion is, that three perspectives become relevant talking about children exposed to domestic violence: (1) the experiences of children, (2) narrative knowledge and (3) a potential new and practice-related knowledge based on the children’s experiences.

The first perspective is a summary of three longer children stories and centers on the following question: How do children describe the effect of domestic violence on their identity, feelings and sense of coherence?<sup>26</sup> The need for the second perspective, the narrative knowledge, arises in the following question: What do we know about relational experiences as being nurturing or harmful for children? The third perspective relates to how the two other perspectives contribute to analyzing and discussing how life lived can give new perspectives to existing theory. In the following, I use these three perspectives, starting by introducing a short version of three children’s stories. Further, I establish and create two models of narrative knowledge. These models are perspectives used when analyzing how domestic violence affects these three children. Furthermore, the analysis emphasizes how their experiences can tell something about how relatedness can make possible de-

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24 Marie Farstad, *Skammens spor: Avtrykk i identitet og relasjoner* (Oslo: Conflux forlag, 2011).

25 National Council. 2007. “Church of Norway Plan for diakonia.” Oslo: National Council.

26 Bente Gjørsum, Berit Grøholt og Hilchen Sommerschild (red.) *Mestring som mulighet i møte med barn, ungdom og foreldre* (Oslo: Tano Aschehoug, 1998), 52.

velopment or lead children into emotional stagnation. Finally, I discuss how the information gathered can give valuable insight as far as how to teach and talk about god and a potential child-god relationship to children in general.

## The children's stories

The Norwegian Save the Children organization has gathered different stories from children and youths with violent experiences in the book *Traces from Reality*.<sup>27</sup> This article contains a summary of three of these stories. Many children grow up with caring parents who give them love stories and core beliefs that tell them they are worthy of love and care, comfort and protection. For some children, however, this is far from their daily reality.<sup>28</sup> Children left alone in isolation with no one to help him or her cope with difficult feelings also exist. We can divide these stories into two types of narratives: life-expanding and life-narrowing narratives. These different types of narratives contribute to the stories that children tell themselves in times of fear. Love is both central as a lack and a loss. Because love is so decisive, "In the last resort we must begin to love in order not to fall ill; and we are bound to fall ill if, in consequence of frustration, we are unable to love."<sup>29</sup> Ole, Marianne and Per, which is what I've called the children in this article, describe how their lives are affected by harmful experiences. Before analyzing these stories by means of two narrative models, I want to give you a short insight into their lives.

### Ole: "Moving day"

Ole is a rather silent child. He says little about interests and hobbies. For a 12-year-old boy this is rather unusual. The emphasis in his story is on a relationship that seems to be highly meaningful and vital to him: his neighbor, Torunn, and her husband, who live next door. When playing in their house, he feels like himself; he feels safe. Torunn once told him that he was "her best boy and that she always would be there for him."<sup>30</sup> Ole remembers this statement. The story told by Ole concerns him and his parents moving. Ole describes this as follows: "I remember being scared about moving with Mum and Dad alone – and Torunn not being there."<sup>31</sup> When the moving day ar-

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<sup>27</sup> My translation.

<sup>28</sup> We have a long tradition that tells us about the importance of biological parents caring for their children. In Norway new research, however, is starting to emphasize the importance of attachment and psychological parenting as the most important factor. NOU 2012:5: "Better protection of children's development" (my translation). <http://www.regjeringen.no/pages/36931483/PDFS/NOU201220120005000DDDPDFS.pdf> (retrieved on 23 September 2012).

<sup>29</sup> Sigmund Freud, 1914, p. 85 in James W. Jones, 2002.

<sup>30</sup> Monica Borg Fure og Gry Stordahl, *Spor fra virkeligheten* (Oslo: Redd Barna, 2009), 11.

<sup>31</sup> My translation. *Ibid.*

rives, Ole cries and his mother becomes very, very angry with him. Sometime later, she tells him that Torunn no longer will come to visit because, as she says, “Torunn is no good for us and is interfering too much in how we live.”<sup>32</sup> When he hears this, Ole walks around all night, sad and in despair at losing his safe person. No one comes to look for him, and when he finally arrives home, his mother and father have already gone to bed. After an incident in the classroom, Ole wets his pants in front of other pupils. He becomes very angry and ashamed and shouts at another boy. The teacher asks him if everything is OK. He then tells her about Torunn, and together they call her as well as child protection services.

### Marianne: “Call the police!”

Marianne is a girl who repeatedly has watched her father’s violence against her mother and experiences physical abuse of her own. In the story, we hear about her father running after his wife with a knife, hitting her till she bleeds, and using physical violence against his daughter. Marianne has apparently been living with this for a while. She describes how she climbs into a cabinet with the telephone and a cup of cocoa the moment she hears her parents arguing, trying to hold on to good memories about camping with her father. It is obvious that she can sense the mood and stress before the situation escalates when her ambivalence is expressed: “If I call the police, my dad get’s angry because I tell someone, but if I don’t call, my mom could be killed.”<sup>33</sup> The dread of being hurt, Marianne’s constantly fear for her mother and the lack of a safe place becomes too much for her. She describes how her body *freezes*; she becomes stiff, unable to make neither a sound or to move. There is no possibility for escape or flight. She says: “I feel sick. I think I have to vomit. I can’t vomit, it makes such loud and ugly noise.”<sup>34</sup> When her father discovers her hiding place, he throws Marianne onto the wall. All the hot cocoa pours out on her. Marianne says: “I just lie still. I have to be silent, not make a noise, maybe he’ll walk away.”<sup>35</sup> She just lies there, afraid that something worse might happen if she moves. The only feeling she can manage to translate into words in this story is the guilt she feels when she calls the police to beg for help. She feels like she is letting her father down and is afraid that she is never going to see him again.

### Per: “Neighbors”

Per is 15 years old and lives alone with his stepfather, and 4-year-old sister. He agonizes when Mads and Tørbjørn, his two friends, ask him to come out

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32 Ibid.

33 Borg Fure og Stordahl: 2009, 11

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.



and play with them. His household tasks are extensive: babysitting, cleaning and dishwashing. His friends also often get a “no” to playing because he then has to bring his little sister along – or his stepfather will punish him. In Per’s story, however, he gets to go to Torbjørn’s house and visit his family one afternoon. They play together, and Torbjørn’s mother asks if they want to stay for dinner. This overwhelms Per: “Think of that – inviting other people’s children in for dinner. That would never happen in our home. My stepfather does not like strangers, but they are not strangers to me.”<sup>36</sup> When Torbjørn’s father asks his sister to watch children’s TV with them, Per is perturbed: They always have to be home before that. When they come home, Per sends his sister upstairs. He walks into their living room and kneels before his stepfather, apologizing, hoping to soften him. His stepfather kicks him in his face and says: “You are late.”<sup>37</sup> That night, Per decides that he will tell Torbjørn and Mads about what is going on at his home.

### 3. Method

Creating meaning in life is an existential task. Telling self-narratives contributes to the creation process: We become who we are by telling our lives with our own words.<sup>38</sup> When difficult things happen, we use information already known to us. However, for children exposed to domestic violence this is a difficult task. The tools necessary to understand, act and reflect on events are not always available to these children. Theoretical knowledge, including existential meaning, can be useful trying to understand the situation for these children. Existential meaning here is referred to as “the narratives about life’s meaning and the actions associated with the lived expression of these narratives in the stories of ordinary persons confronted with life’s choices, hopes dilemmas, and decisions.”<sup>39</sup> Working with this definition, I found it valuable to develop two models. These models examine how life-narrowing and life-expanding narratives can be understood in relation to how chaos or a form of meaning can be created – or be prevented from being created. I present these models followed by a brief analysis of the children’s stories.<sup>40</sup>

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36 Borg Fure og Stordahl: 2009, 19.

37 My translation. Ibid.

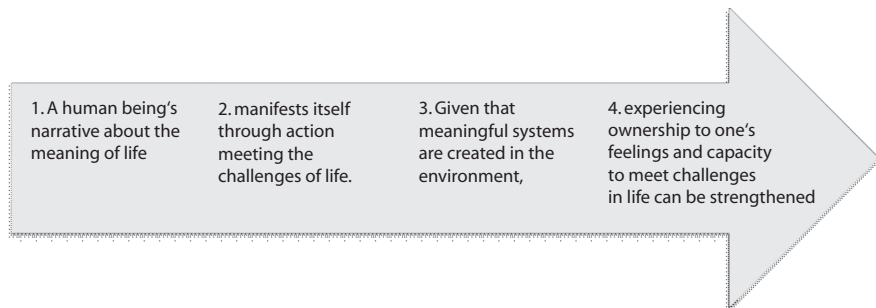
38 Jan-Olav Henriksen, *Relating God and the self: Dynamic interplay* (Ashgate, 2013).

39 DeMarinis, 2008, p. 64 in Melder: 2011, 88.

40 The models are given the names “life-expanding” and “life-narrowing” narratives rather than “good” or “bad” narratives because the term adequately describes what happens in the lives of Ole, Per and Marianne. Their lives and scope of action is expanded or narrowed by their experiences and the core-beliefs they develop from these narratives.

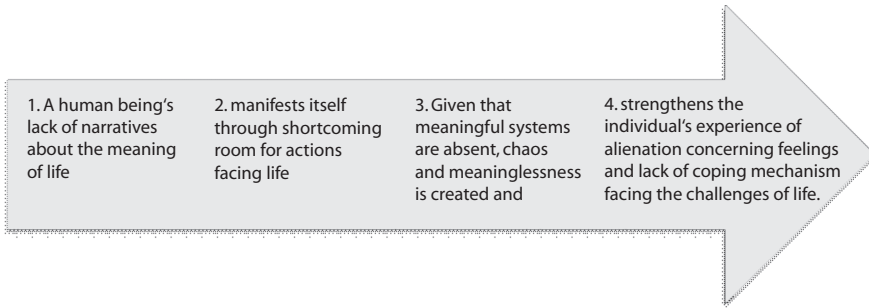
## Life-Expanding Narratives

Human beings are meaning-making individuals. We search for explanations, knowledge and systems, trying to interpret and understand the different experiences, which, summed up, become our lives. Children affect, and become affected by, the environment that surrounds them. Different narratives have an emotional impact on how they see themselves: other people's body language, accentuation and actions. Children who have parents who are generally tuned in to their children's needs are able to understand and regulate feelings. We can find similar value in the "stories" or core beliefs children create from these "nurturing events." Narratives that contribute to expanding life are the ones that tell the following stories: "You are not alone, I will be here for you, I will try to comfort you and even if I do not always manage to do so, I love you." These kinds of narratives create "core beliefs" that give children what they need to explore the universe outside of themselves. They get secure enough to move beyond their secure base, their parents, to see what lies beyond that known universe.



## Life-narrowing narratives

In contrast to the model above, the narrowing narratives contribute to children's feelings of isolation and insecurity. The presence of chaos and the absence of meaningful structures creates core beliefs containing mistrust, loneliness and fear. Trusting people to be there for them becomes difficult when no one has been present to create stability or, instead, has created fear and isolation. The core beliefs being told can be: "I do not have time for you; your feelings overwhelm me and make me angry. You have to manage on your own, I cannot care for you." To unfold, play and be creative becomes almost impossible because there is no "life space." I use these two models to analyze Ole, Marianne and Per's stories.



#### 4. Analyzing the stories

##### The good “cling”

The terms life-expanding and life-narrowing narratives seems meaningful in light of the three stories above. Ole’s life-expanding narratives tell us that he relates to people with whom he feels safe. These are the people who help him to create meaning in his everyday life and prevent chaos from taking over. Living next door to Torunn and her husband seems to give Ole what he needs to be himself. They offer him a place to be just Ole. He feels unconditionally loved and valued as a human being. At the same time, the story clearly shows how Ole turns his anger and sorrow of losing contact with Torunn inwards. The loss of contact with the one person he had developed an attachment to devastates him. At the same time it is no wonder he wants to hold on to these relationships and the feelings they create in him.

This “clinging” to what is good is a healthy and good thing that also helps him in the situation that occurs at school. It seems that the good thoughts Torunn has given him, her reassurance about her love, gives him a strategy to create meaning and act. Ole knows that he needs Torunn to have enough courage, help and support in his life. Living with his parents, life seems full of more life-narrowing narratives. This gives him a feeling of fear and disorientation. The life-expanding narratives give him enough courage to act upon his need for someone to love him and give him a feeling of security when the challenges arise. Despite all the fear he has been experiencing, there is still a longing preserved somewhere inside of him. In children who experience harmful things such as domestic violence or neglect, one person can make the difference between loneliness and belonging. For Ole, Torunn is this one person. She is present, caring and loving in a way that Ole understand and interpret as meaningful.

## The isolated girl

Marianne's story is primary about life-narrowing narratives. No one helps her to recognize, interpret and regulate her feelings. The lack of a comforting pair of arms, a safe haven to run to for care or a hug turns her into a lonely girl. This story is not just about the absence of good and proper care; it is, primarily, about the present danger. Reading this story, we see a girl left to her own comforting. She tries to think about the good times, about camping with her father, but the contrast to her father's present behavior is enormous. It is probably difficult to hold on to anything good when something so dangerous is close by. It seems like her attachment behavioral system is down. From the way she reacts, both when her father attacks her mother and herself, she is clearly afraid, but prevented from seeking security. There is no safe haven.

Human beings react the same way as animals do when it comes to fear. Marianne freezes and cannot move. Her body language slows down, she cannot run away or defend herself. Her capacity to be aware of and sense her own emotional reactions diminishes as she tries to avoid drawing further attention to herself. At first sight, Marianne does not show any feelings. Watching closely however, her body gives a variety of "words" and useful descriptions of how she experiences the whole situation when she says she cannot make a sound and has to lie very still. Reading this story reveals why it is not always the words we should pay attention to. The body has its own language and tells of legs that want to run away from a threatening situation, of hands that most of all want to push away a perpetrator, of a voice with an urge to scream. Marianne's story reminds us of these important, yet difficult signs. The feelings are present, but not in the way we usually see them. Using the model for life-narrowing narratives above, it becomes clear that Marianne is missing a scope of action because of the presence of too much chaos and lack of coherence in her life.

## The kneeling boy

Reading about Per, it becomes clear that at the center of this story is a boy in great fear and submission. To kneel in front of someone is a sign of humiliation. The child-parent relationship is an asymmetrical relationship where the child always is the one with least power. Per is a boy lacking real influence on his own life. He is constantly readjusting his one goal: to survive and to please his stepfather. In this story there is primarily inadequate attachment between Per and his stepfather. Per's life is "narrowed" by the "stories" his stepfather shows him through action. The feelings we can sense in this story are not obvious feelings to Per: neither anger nor sadness, maybe just a feeling of resignation. Clearly Per's relationship with his stepfather is

characterized by the opposite of life-giving relatedness. He is experiencing a double-edged trauma: first the physical and the psychological abuse, and then the draining secret that he has to keep to himself.<sup>41</sup> Even if Per is struggling, not all of the relationships are narrowing. He gets a taste of something completely different visiting Torbjørn and his family: A hint of something life-expanding. Per and his little sister are included, and they have a sense of belongingness in a way they don't feel at home. There is room for Per to be himself in this home – for a little while. This little breathing space seems to give Per enough space that he decides to act upon his feeling of belongingness. He wants to tell someone what it is like to live with his stepfather: He can bear the isolation no more. Both Per and Ole have enough latitude to act upon their need for togetherness and contact with more life-expanding experiences. Not only does it strengthen their ability to act, but getting in touch with something life-expanding also give them more contact with their own needs and their true self.

## 5. Discussion

Engaging in the creation of narrative space is about giving voice to experiences of both suffering and the yearning to belong. Children's stories like those of Per, Marianne and Ole can give information about disconnection in relationships as well as about how sustainable hope can rise from human experience. In the stories of children like Ole, Marianne and Per, churches and faith communities are given opportunities to look at the way faith is communicated that is life-expanding rather than life-narrowing. The question to ask is: How do we talk with children about life and faith without causing further pain? The insight that comes from the stories of Ole, Marianne and Per is also a reminder of what it is to be a child in general, having a childhood: How we talk to, love and give affirmation to every child, in our families, neighborhood, school, church and in research? We never know when we will get the opportunity to make a difference that can be life lasting for a child.

### Creation of the self

Various theoretical approaches give different answers to the subject of becoming a self. Paul Ricoeur and Heinz Kohut, however, together provide us with a response to this challenge with the following quote: "The self emerges out of feeling (Kohut). The symbol gives rise to thought – and thought returns to the symbol (Ricoeur)."<sup>42</sup> Both narratives and feelings are essential

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41 Ingeborg Wiese, *Vold er farlig. Magasinet Voksne for barn*, no. 5 (2010): 21.

42 Henriksen: 2013, 8.

for understanding human development. Child-parent or other bonding relationships affect how human beings master the challenges of life. Good experiences and safe attachment can provide protection – and tools to deal with the challenges that happen to all human beings, to varying degrees. In that way, as we saw with Per and Ole above, narratives addressing children’s own needs and feelings also create potential tools for action. The circle described by Heinz and Ricoeur gives insight into an ongoing process, where feelings and narratives each genuinely affect one another – in a more nurturing, or a more narrowing, way.

Taking into consideration Heinz and Ricoeur, the question arise about how to talk about god in a way strengthening life-expanding narratives rather than creating more fear. To children with experiences of hurtful relationships, such as Marianne, an insecure base provides an unstable ground for this. It can leave children with a feeling of insecurity and mistrust in relation to other human beings. The language used to describe god becomes imperative in relation to all children struggling with core beliefs such as “I am all alone. No one loves me or care about me, I’m not important to anyone.” Describing god as hard or rigid, in need of children’s obedience, or surrendering from sin, is “power language”. What is actually communicated through this language reinforces and strengthens feelings of shame, guilt and fear.<sup>43</sup> Already having plenty of the core beliefs telling them they are not good enough, not worthy enough, these children are in need of love stories founded on more stable and safe ground. Children all have a need to be themselves, to reach out to people to verify their worth, giving them care and love. Moreover, “At its best, religious imagery of the self may help the self to experience itself in new ways, and therefore to be liberated from manipulative, restricting, delimiting or clearly oppressive modes of being in the world.”<sup>44</sup> The question is rather: Can children’s stories tell us something about what language that can facilitate the good movement?

## Belonging

Centering the core of life-expanding narratives, it becomes relevant to ask what can contribute to the life-giving process described above. To be con-

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43 Benjamin J. Abelow writes about how whether Christian theology justifies physical punishment and obedience, exemplifying the following sentence: “to turn the other cheek.” Taking this saying literally, we can expect children to accept punishment rather than resisting. However, at the same time Abelow emphasizes the lack of research on this. See Maria Stensvold Ånonsen, “*Hvorfor blir alle mine voksne borte?*” *Om vold mot barn og gudsrelasjonens potensielt livsgivende betydning*, Maria S. Anonsen, 2012b and Benjamin J. Abelow, Religious Behavior as a Reflection of Childhood Corporal Punishment in Jay R. Feierman (Ed.), *The Biology of Religious Behavior: The Evolutionary Origins of Faith and Religion* (Santa Barbara, Greenwood Publishing Group, 2009).

44 Henriksen: 2013, 221.

nected to other people, to experience belongingness seems to be of great importance. We need places where we know we can be ourselves. Religious imagery can create narratives about god, as a person who wants to belong and connect with human beings. The creativity has no end, other than our own imagination. Talking to children, asking them how they see, think about, and experience god, can be useful for starting dialogue rather than monologue. What imagery is close to children's everyday life? Do they imagine god as a safe grandmother with kind eyes, a strict mother or silent father, a waterfall, a warm light, or maybe as a big tree reaching upwards? The answers we receive do not leave us just with useful information; they also open up figurative doors into children's own world, helping us to get to know their core beliefs as much as their feelings about themselves and others. The next step, asking for deeper descriptions, is natural. How do they think god connects to human beings? In what way do they think god encounters them when they are sad, angry, feel guilty or happy? Getting in touch with these core beliefs makes it possible to know something about the challenges and the opportunities. Do these children need more narrative space to unfold and explore god and the images they have of him/her? Alternatively, do they need more assurance and dialogue concerning their own worth to enter the "god-space"?

The psychology of religion writes about how early experiences affect the god-human relationship.<sup>45</sup> For some, parent-child relationship mirrors the potential relationship with god. However, for others quite the opposite is true – having narratives of a loving god despite complicated human relationships.<sup>46</sup> These extremities reveal both possibilities – trust and mistrust. However, we never know how children think and feel about life, faith and god before we ask the questions. It can be a useful reminder that talking *to* children about god is not the same as talking *with* children. The first may have its starting point in theoretical knowledge and also in adult experience and faith. The second one has children's experience as the foundation. Ole is a boy with both good and harmful experiences. Even though his story doesn't say anything about faith, it gives us a good example of how adults can create space for a child's existential needs to be connected, loved and cherished. In this way, Torunn is nurturing Ole's inner drive to reach outside an environment where he feels disconnected. Therefore, children's narratives, their emotional and spiritual longings should be perceived as resources, both talking with children at home, at church and in the research field. These conversations and wonder-making moments can shed new light on children's way of making sense of chaos, and also re-create knowledge about their spiritual life and their need to belong rather than to be isolated.

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45 Kaldestad, 1997.

46 Broberg, 2008.

## 6. Conclusion

Initially, I asked how church could contribute to facilitating good relational experiences for children exposed to domestic violence. The diaconal approach used in this article is valuable, involving the children, letting them specify what is good relatedness for them. When children live in threatening situations at home, their bodies respond to danger when emotions become too painful to handle. Creating a “false self,” children put on a mask. Proper protection, like a parent to seek comfort with, does not exist, and children create core beliefs about themselves. Forcing the body to react instantly at danger, holding back feelings, and instead becoming stiff and cold is one of the consequences leading to instant reactions. On the other hand, bearing in mind the bodily response of “freezing” in a dangerous situation gives us valuable information. The question nevertheless is as follows: What is this “body language” communicating? It tells stories of frightened children unable to get away from threatening situations. Frightened bodies convey the opposite of presence of love, whereas movement and warmth calms the body. Taking into consideration these children’s experiences, a diaconal perspective is essential uncovering the necessity of having an interdisciplinary focus in becoming a church willingly to face experiences of both suffering and yearning. Per, Marianne and Ole may tell us a secret about how to live, teach, listen, talk and preach from a wholehearted perspective to *all* children – and adults – saying that human beings are “hardwired for connection – it’s what gives purpose and meaning to our lives. The absence of love, belonging and connection always lead to suffering.”<sup>47</sup>

Leaving children without love becomes a deadly solution to an impossible problem. Feeling the need to hide within themselves to survive, children experience their self more like death than life. How to look for and re-create a self “frozen” in fear leaves only one answer: “Only a loved life is a life that can be experienced as human, as every child knows. Only a loving life, a life accepted and affirmed in love, can be lived as human, as every adult knows.”<sup>48</sup> Being alive is possible only when living in a loved presence, experiencing love. Creating narratives opening up rather than isolating is all about making possible for children to unfold and play. Children like Marianne, Ole and Per are being treated like objects, not used to being seen and acknowledged. Giving them the opportunity to create another imagery of themselves can also create possibilities to re-create other relationships. Maybe the following description of god can be useful, thinking that he is “watching us with friendliness, allows us to play, and this play enables us to work out what it means

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47 Brown, 2013, 10–11.

48 Jürgen Moltmann, *God in creation: an ecological doctrine of creation* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 168.



to be God's creation in multiple ways."<sup>49</sup> This narrative can make it possible to explore what god is like for every child. The preceding description can only be of a god lovingly watching and wanting to participate in children's life. This is good news to tell children. And maybe one day a child, with or without harmful experiences, will be listening to you telling this story and sense a loving presence. He or she might discover something true inside: I am enough. I am loved as I am. Love or new experiences are not the whole answer for children like Ole, Marianne or Per. Mending wounds are not always possible. However, creating space for life-expanding experiences in church can set in motion a movement towards a caring relatedness and belonging rather than isolation.

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49 Henriksen: 2013, 232.

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