

Introduction to the:

Study of Contentment in the moment

The nature is like a fairytale, I didn't think there was anything so beautiful. I have bruises all over my legs due to falling all the time. The eyes sort of get stuck on the mountains and the fjord and then I stumble :) Now I know why they have dark time up here, the eyes need a break from all the amazing.

Mail home to loved ones, February 2010

In autumn 2009 I began to get tired of my life and it was time for an adventure. I sent out job applications to most northern Norwegian municipalities and, in order to let chance decide where I would end up, I decided to take the first job I was offered. I ended up as a social worker in Vesterålen. On 68 degree of latitude, just north of the Arctic Circle, lies the island group Vesterålen. Amidst this group of islands is a fjord with a few minor intertwined villages placed at the end of the fjord and that became my home. I choose to call the villages with the common name Polarfjorden.

I knew no one there, had never been that far north, I received the address to my apartment one week before I left and I had not seen any photos of the area. I remember the long train journey, 2000 kilometers north, and then the five hour drive westward. When I finally arrived it was pitch dark and I went to bed without having a clue what it looked like. So it was with great curiosity that I angled the blinds and looked out upon my first morning in Polarfjorden. *Oy!* My head started spinning, *where am I?* My new home was located 50 meters from a winter sparkling fjord with magnificent snow-covered mountains on the other side. I had just moved up to beautiful Vesterålen. It would become an adventure of a lifetime.

The bargain I had made with myself was to stay at least 6 months regardless of what happens, but I would try to stay a full year in order to experience all four seasons. I had decided to do everything the Norwegians did and to give their life a genuine chance. Already during my first week I got invited to various events such as skiing and the iceswimming club's weekly swim. I enjoyed the scenery and the cheerful Norwegians who invited me to one thing after another.

Three years later I was still living in the village. Still I experienced the adventure of my life, and I now decided to seriously try to understand what it was about the village that made me feel so good. Was it the shared nature and the variety in climate? Or was it the historically harsh conditions with so many accidents that created a special spirit? Or did all this together create a shared narrative of reality, a kind of invisible communion?



Still full of thoughts surrounding the pre-world war II period and what it then looked like, I am now, more than four years after my first winterswim in the fjord, walking up the hill towards a meeting with a 97 years old man, who for the second time is going to tell me about his life. As I almost reach the top of the hill I turn around and, as so many times before, I quietly gasp. The view grabs a hold of me, keeps me standing, looking, the mountains are still

covered with snow, the fjord is perfectly still, bathing in sun. The mountains are reflected in the fjord and far out there I see a fishing boat. Although it was already mid-May and the sun is shining I wear a quilted jacket. *Up here one never puts it away*, I think, smiling. I cast a last glance over the fjord before I walk up to the big nice white house, knock on the door, take my shoes off and walk in calling out,

- Hey, anyone home?

Rolf comes towards me, a tall and handsome man.

- Hello, hello, welcome, please welcome.

I remember how I in the beginning had a hard time adjusting to the open doors, how embarrassing I thought it was to just help myself in to peoples' homes. But now I do it without the blink of an eye. There are a lot of things I do without reflecting, that were unthinkable when I was new to the village. I smile a little embarrassed, thinking of the language. How annoyed I was at their jargon and more than anything the fishermen's horsedicking to each other. I also remember when I used the word myself for the first time, an SMS to a good friend "*Hey Havard you horsedick, where are you. I'm sitting here with Reidar and Peder and we're wondering where you are*"? I got the answer "*I'm at sea, nice to hear you're thinking of me*".

- Isn't it beautiful!

Rolf pulls me away from my thoughts and I look out the window,

- Yes, amazing, I say it with a big smile on my face.

We sit down to start the interview. Rolf, like several of the other older people in the village, describes the decades before World War II as tough years. Infant mortality was high, widespread poverty and diseases such as tuberculosis took many lives. Rolf also talks about games and adolescence, about celebrations and joy. He tells me how he as a child helped in the farming, how they chased the cows every day. It was hard work where everyone had their assignment. The children were considered children until confirmation when they were admitted into adult life (approx 13 years old), a tradition that persisted well into the second half of the 20th century. Rolf opens an old book showing the people living in the village when he was a child. He points at photos of people who survived to adulthood and at those who died in childhood. I look at photos of large families with smiling children, but where only half of them survived. He shows me the picture of his own family and points at his brother, telling me he died of jaundice on the long way to the hospital.



Since the 1700s, most households in Vesterålen have lived off of both farming and fishing. The men set off on winter fishing to Lofoten while the women took care of the farm and children. In those households the men were called Fish Farmers (Bottolfsen 1995). There are several books written about life in Polarfjorden.

Lauritzen, a local fisherman, talks in his book about how Polarfjorden was known for its fat herring that came in the fall, it had fishermen coming from all possible directions and the population increased significantly during the

1800s. There were certain years with extra herring and then the fjord got filled with boats, all the houses were filled up and there were up to approximately a thousand boats in the fjord (Lauritzen 2005). Polarfjorden had its heyday 1860-1900 and as a secondary effect of the richness of the fish came tradesmen, circus, prison, shops and cafes. Together they created a living fjord. During the early 1900s the fish migration changed and the fat herring no longer

came into the fjord. With the herring disappearing so did the fishermen and merchants, the heydays of Polarfjorden came to an end (Hansen et al 2001 and Lauritzen 2005).

Rolf takes a bite of the sugary bun and I ask him if there was helpfulness in the past. He looks at me like a questionmark. So it has been in all my interviews, the people in Polarfjorden have difficulty seeing their own helpfulness as something observable. I concretize the question "When someone was ill, what did you do then? Or if someone's house blew apart in the storms"? I get the same obvious answer by Rolf that the younger generations have given me "we just went there and helped out, that's just how it was". He further describes how the fishermen helped taking sick people in their boats to the hospital, and how difficult it was during wintertime when most fishermen were gone fishing in Lofoten. He explains how people came together to help those who were in need.

Rolf's stories make me think of my first encounter with the helpfulness in Vesterålen. It started when I was in the nearby town shopping, the car refused to start and I had forgotten my cell phone at home.

- Oops, what do I do now?

I walk into a store and smile timidly toward the clerk, explaining that the car doesn't start, that I had forgotten my mobile phone and therefore didn't have any phone numbers. She calls her husband who with a happy mood comes driving to my rescue. A young couple who walks by also stops and look at the car. We test jumper cables but it won't start. Together we call a mechanic who comes right away. He finds the fault, it's in the gas tank. The car must be towed to the garage. My insurance doesn't cover any towing but the mechanic offers to pull the car to the workshop for free, later in the evening when traffic has declined.



The next day I get the car at the garage on my way to work. When I finish up at 10 pm it doesn't start. Totally dead. But this time it starts with jumper cables and I drive home. Shortly after half past ten I stop the car on my driveway, turn off the engine and try to start again. Stone dead. And the next morning I start work at 8am. I walk out of the car thinking:

- Oy, what do I do now?

As I stand there I hear someone shout "Hello, hello". I look up the hill towards the neighboring house 50 meters away and see a man standing and waving "Do you

want to come for coffee"? Tired I drag myself up the hill, thinking that he might be able to help me start the car tomorrow morning. I take a cup of coffee while my neighbor and a friend of his drink grogs. I tell them about my car issues and ask if he can help me start the car the next morning. Quietly he looks at me, seems to think for a while, smiles and then replies "No". Before I have time to sigh, he continues, "that I will be way too tired for, but you can take my car". A little embarrassed I take his key, one of those modern things that doesn't look like a key. We walk outside and he shows me his car. A large Mercedes with lots of different special stuff installed. As we walk in the house again his friend looks at me, laughing. "How do you like the car"? The friend tells me that it's purchased the day before. Nervously I pick up my phone to enter the neighbor's number and it occurs to me that I don't even know his name. Two cups of coffee later, I drive slowly down to my place, my head is spinning with

thoughts of gratitude and fear, "*Good God, let it go well with the car tomorrow*". The trip to and from work goes well and in the afternoon I call the mechanic that even though it's Saturday responds. He's on his way to a family outing but he drives by my home on the way and fixes my car, with his wife waiting in his car. With a working gas tank, new battery and a cozy feeling of social safety, I again drove around in my old SAAB.

- Want some more coffee?

Rolf fills my cup and continues his portrayal. He tells me how isolated they were. Whether they were going to a hospital or church, they had to row or sail. He also talks about the development that came when state-funded Nyjord, just before the war, bought up a large area of land between Polarfjorden and the nearest town Sortland. Rolf describes how many new farms emerged and a road between Sortland and Polarfjorden began to build in 1935. It was the first step towards modern society and the start of the dissolving of the fish farmer function, the men were given an option to the fishing profession while Polarfjorden gained ground contact with Sortland. Rolf tells his story with emphasis and an ability to simplicity and clear reflection. He shares the uncontrived way of thinking with many in Polarfjorden, young and old. They do not complicate things more than necessary.

In Polarfjorden, like in other places, there are problems with diseases, relationships, gossip, fights about money and abuse. But in the midst of this, I saw a joy, a practical down to earth setting, a unique ability to handle the shifts in life. At the same time, I was very unsure about my view, if it was my will to feel comfortable in my new home that made me see what I wanted to see. The joy of life that I thought I saw, along with my lack of understanding, even after three years in the village I still constantly was surprised by the inhabitants way of thinking and acting, made me look into Grounded Theory. A method and an attempt to search from the bottom up, without preconceptions or previous theories, trying to understand the villages' own mechanisms. To my help I had my years of observations as well as new interviews and observations. In accordance with classic Grounded Theory, I let the village and its inhabitants' stories take a center stage. From these stories I look for patterns, processes and mechanisms. I let categories, core category and different narratives' importance grow and emerge gradually during the work.

After having coded and categorized my notes from February 2010 to December 2012, I discovered a safety pattern. As a balance to a rough climate with unpredictable weather, accident-prone hobbies and long distances I found a culture of helpfulness and simplicity in everyday life, which together created a form of safety feelings. In order to get a historical perspective, I chose to do two unstructured group interviews; one with three elderly men and one with three elderly women. All were above 70 years old and they got to talk freely about their lives from birth to present time. The interviews revealed linguistic patterns that paved the way for a positive current moment and also an attitude to life which expressed a general satisfaction. Particularly noticeable was that their descriptions of difficulties, such as isolation, accidents and poverty, was combined with various positive patterns. Again as an act of balance, but now with a contentment in the center. My thought and my memos led to a notion that Polarfjorden's everyday culture has built-in mechanisms's which creates a natural contentment, individually, groupwise and in the village as a whole. That with its overwhelming nature, fishing profession, the uncertain weather conditions and their prewar history of poverty and isolation creates, and has historically created, a big portion of uncertainty and danger. And that as a balance to this it has emerged a natural simplicity and humor, an ability to well-being and a need to live in the moment. The dualism is clearly apparent in that they, for example, complain about the weather or their health, and at the same time expresses an understanding of the way it is, "*we know where we live.*" There is a

view on life, free from bitterness and lack of expectation that life is easy. "*If one chooses to live up here one has to take the weather as it is*" and "*one has to have fun while one can*" are other common sayings, which also expresses a kind of perceived control over life. "*Done with it*" means that there is no more to either say, do or think about a particular situation, it is an expression used as a conclusion to a situation, a way to take oneself back to the present.

The safety within the everyday life structure in combination with the habitants proximity to humor and laughter nurtured my basic experience of a natural contentment. After observing, coding and analyzing notes from additional six months of participant observation, I came to the main category: contentment. I then chose to code and analyze my material from a contentment perspective. In this work with the material, I kept coming back to a balancing act between safety and danger/worries. And that the uncertainty of tomorrow has created processes that



draw the people of Polarfjorden back to the present. Weather, isolation and poverty are three mechanisms which historically are basis for such as disasters, lack of control and worries. As a counterpoint to these, three distinct concepts crystallized: "*Doing safety*" "*Destiny readiness*" and "*Middle consciousness*". Concepts that are still relevant in today's society. In short one can say that the people of Polarfjorden are good at taking actions, to do safety. The village's culture of taking action can be observed on different levels, for example individually therapeutically by going hiking in the mountains and at a group level by the culture of helpfulness. In the ability to take action there is a living in the moment connection. There is no room for hoping that nothing bad will happen. In an environment where many people go motorcycling, kajaking, skiing and fishing accidents happen. By the fact that each one knows this, they create their own preparedness to terrible things happening, a *destiny readiness*. From readiness a safety feeling is created that enables a cognitive jump from concern about what might happen to a living in the present. Another way to manage and limit worries is through a so-called middle consciousness. Several older women testify how they knew that fishing was a dangerous occupation but still not worried about the men when they were out at sea. They placed them in a kind of "stand-by" mode. Similarly, today's people of Polarfjorden have the ability to embed eventual clouds of worry in a *middle consciousness*, ready to be shown in the form of commitment and appropriate actions when necessary. Together, the three concepts creates a protection against external conditions of life in the northern Norwegian coastal landscape. A balance where contentment and living in the moment is central.

Once again I am pulled back by Rolf's stories. I am fascinated by his way of telling them and the strength he radiates. The strength is combined with an obviousness in the storytelling. In the book of the village he shows a photo of a neighboring family:

- In this family all children died.

At the same time as he with great empathy talks about very tough years, he smiles a lot, he exudes a warmth and also present a positive feeling in all the barren. I get curious and ask him how it is that they could be positive in that environment, with everything that happened? He

thought for a while and said "*we were prepared, things happened, people died and we knew it. We accepted life as it was and were prepared for the worst*". I think of my own mild brain cancer and how people often have said to me "*too bad you have to face something so horrible to appreciate life*". I also think of my neighbors and friends in Polarfjorden, how I never heard them express anything like that, how natural it seems to be for them to appreciate life. I look at Rolf and think of all the experience he carries. The fact that so much indigenous knowledge, so many mechanisms and processes from previous generations' struggle for survival persists, has made the people of Polarfjorden develop a partially unconscious ability to appreciate *contentment in the moment*.



The purpose of this paper was to unconditionally get to know the everyday life of Polarfjorden. During the work, in accordance with grounded theory, a core category has emerged and the purpose was then changed into focus on this core category: To get knowledge of Polarfjorden's and the people of Polarfjorden's ability to find contentment in the moment.

The conversation with Rolf gives additional nurture to my thoughts on the importance of the present moment and the acceptance of life. He, like the others I have interviewed, describes and explains straight up and down without any theoretical expositions. As a person living in a university city it's easy to be mistaken, to believe that their straightness is due to less thinking and reflecting than city people. But after four years in the village I have learned that they think neither more nor less, but the needs are different. In rural areas, it is important to act, to be prepared, to seize the moment. In that environment contentment in the moment is a natural consequence of life's challenges. There is no interest nor need to overcomplicate things.

The simplicity makes me think of this years first kayak trip. We were four friends who paddled to a Fishermans' pub on an island. There were a lot of northern Norwegians who had competed in fishing during the day. I heard someone ask one of my friends what I did up here and he replied "*she's thinking*". The other man asked "*ok, is she good at it*"? He answered a bit thoughtful "*Yes, I think she is*" And then the discussion was over.

Classic Grounded Theory is a theory-generating scientific methodology. New data is collected and analyzed in stages until the new data collection does not provide any new information. At saturation the formulated theory gets tested and adjusted in light of the existing literature (Glaser 2010).

/Ulrika Sandén