

Review by Per Schultz Jørgensen

The Vibrant Family

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Most of us know this situation, or at least some similar: You unpack the groceries and then you get a slapping across your face: "-but Hans – this juice is made from concentrate". Coming home happy he now felt cornered in disappointment, shame and vexation – feelings that in a very profound way remind you of things from way back on time. The repetitive triumph of defeat, everything being just wrong. Furious and getting out of the door: I am never good enough. The story continues and new chapters are added to the narrative of disappointments and an attachment pattern that includes vulnerability. How is this pattern to be changed?

The book "The Vibrant Family" is to a great extent about just this. It is a detailed and intense description of how attachment can be improved – between parents themselves and between parents and their children. That is the couple relationship as well as the parenthood. The aim is to aid these interactions to not only be functioning well but to be more fertile and developmentally supportive. The key is mutual acknowledgment – and the primary concepts in the book is "acknowledging intimacy", the specific method being the "Dialogue of Acknowledgment".

We are dealing with a handbook, giving priority to communicating a psychological and therapeutic view on human development – as well as a practical guide to people attending a seminar. But the book is more than a basic introduction. It may be an eye opener for any reader to think and act in new ways in relationships. With its many cases it is easy to see yourself as if in a mirror with the aim of conveying an understanding of interplay in the every day life.

"The Vibrant Family" builds on the concept of acknowledgment. This is a modern and 'in' concept from kindergarten to Old age Services. It is a concept easy to understand but relatively difficult to put into actual use. Basically it is about shifting perspective, to move out of your 'I-house' over the bridge to the other. Not just with words but also with your feelings.

This shift is the prerequisite for any acknowledgment and implies willingness as well as openness. But why is this so difficult? Maybe because it so easily becomes an empty and therefore meaningless assurance of plain kindness: I do understand you. Rhetorically.

But acknowledgment is a mental ability – related to the concept of mentalizing – that reaches further than the self including something really fantastic. Feelings related to love.

The Dialogue of Acknowledgment

The first half of the book exposes the understanding of acknowledging intimacy in the couple, from the beginning and into parenthood. To live in a couple relationship is a challenge that all too often leads into rigid attitudes and power struggles maybe ending in loneliness in the relation – and the disguised, if not obvious divorce. The book introduces attachment theory, mirroring, and the difference between coping and survival. Excellent descriptions also conveying recent brain research.

The last part of the book is about acknowledgment in our everyday life and a practicable methodology is put forward – although the author's position is that this is more than just a

method of training. This makes sense because of the clear requirement of personal intimacy and involvement not just in a superficial way. It's a conscious way of being to phrase it somewhat solemnly. It is to move yourself into the world of the other without losing yourself. Or: To try to experience the same as the other –yet still being your self.

The scenography of the Dialogue of Acknowledgement is the couple sitting vis a vis each other and then the intense dialogical interplay commences. Here a procedure is followed allowing for sincerity and involvement to take over informing the contents of the process. Starting with the eye contact, giving place to the validation, choice of theme, mirroring, giving the essence, acknowledgment, empathy through to the ending of the process. A progressive process with the turn taking between the partners allowing for the unfolding of the acknowledgment for this to become the release it can be. The book puts forth cases that seem authentic and instructive.

Some paragraphs are dedicated the Dialogue of Acknowledgment with children as well as with grandparents – using the same, though modified basic processes.

Can authenticity be trained?

A handbook about such existential matters as empathy and intimacy might seem an anachronism. Is it possible to put love into a formulation? Is it possible to train being genuine? Of course not but at the same time there are aspects of human relationships that are entirely practical and concrete. Not much comes to us as a revelation or a gift suddenly dawning into your consciousness without an activity of some kind. Very often even the biggest understandings implies periods of hard work. Likewise with this kind of empathic dialogue that is called acknowledging. In this the book does full justice to the material. It is a wise book built on a psychological scientific base – presenting empirical material clearly feeding from the authors many therapeutic seminars and couple processes. This is what makes the book a little gold mine combining examples with an aura of everyday learning.

The list of reference gives lots of relevant and new literature. There are no references in the text, - also a good idea because the book is not a scientifically based textbook. It constitutes an aid to colleges of the therapeutic trade together with the many couple relationships trying to make it.

In this respect this book may be used as a self-help introduction into the mystery of acknowledgment, making it possible for each of us to learn something about our special patterns of attachment and modes of reacting via in the Dialogue of Attachment. So the repetitive reactive patterns may be broken – so Hans together with his wife calmly and relaxed may consider his choice of juice without his break-down. The choice of juice does not get more right by this – but Hans does in a way.

Per Schultz Jørgensen, Professor , dr.phil.

The book reviewed:

Seienfaden, K., Draiby, P., Christensen, S.S., Hejgaard, V. & Davidsen, M.-M. (2009): *Den Levende Familie. Hvordan nærvær gi'r selvværd*. København: Lindhardt & Ringhof. 239 sider.