

DOING ALCOHOLISM TREATMENT IN NORWAY: A PERSONAL REMINISCENCE

This article provides an insider's view of work in a Norwegian alcoholism treatment center, not at a typical center in Norway, but at one modeled loosely (very loosely) on the American 12 Step approach. Because there was a lack of regulation externally and of professionalism internally, this American's experience was fraught with challenges of a most disturbing sort. Although social workers generally will be unable to preserve their ethical integrity in a system dominated by profit and interpersonal conflict, the rewards of speaking out and exposing ethical violations can make even the most unsavory of experiences ultimately seem worthwhile.

By Katherine van Wormer

Katherine van Wormer, MSSW, Ph.D., is Associate Professor, Department of Social Work, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, Iowa

Last night I dreamed I was back at Gjovikseter (a fictitious name). The dream was one of those where you are a trespasser on forbidden territory and just about to get caught. Here I was an intruder, and there was no escape; feelings of guilt and shame were overwhelming as I found myself face to face with my former boss, the director. What am I doing here? How can I explain? I beg his understanding and forgiveness, but am ordered away. Even long after the particular images have faded in the light of day, the feelings of disquiet and trepidation continue to hang over me like a cloud.

THE HONEYMOON PERIOD

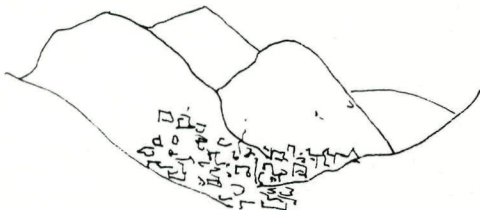
Perhaps I should start at the beginning. In 1987 I spotted a job ad that seemed too good to be true. "Alcoholism counselors wanted to bring the Minnesota Model to Norway." Being in Minnesota, I was at the right place at the right time. My family was more excited than I was as I went to Minneapolis for what turned out to be a delightful interview. Alcoholism counseling was my field, and though I did

not know what the Minnesota Model was, much less how to teach it, my expertise was taken for granted. (This model was AA's Twelve Step program, I later learned.)

From 1988 to 1990 I spent two very exciting and fulfilling years as the treatment director of an alcoholism center. The center was located at a former ski resort on the top of a mountain with a view of the town below that was breathtaking. My role as the "professional in residence" entailed lecturing to clients (including family members) and modeling counseling skills for counselors-in-training—trainees. Trainees doubled as translators and therapists, translating for me and my fellow American colleague, Ed*, as we participated in group and family therapy.

Ed, an AA hard liner, tough on the outside but with a heart of gold, practically ran the place. Ed's charisma and hilarious first-hand stories of his drinking days and reluctant recovery made my contributions seem pale in contrast. What could have been a competitive situation—me with the academic credentials, Ed with

* All names are fictitious



the know-how—grew into a relationship of incredible sharing and kidding around and team play. Everything I was to learn about Norwegian culture—the school system, the mistranslation of words, the work norms—I was to learn from this man. I also got to witness some amazing treatment techniques.

A motherly figure, the assistant director, Inger, was everyone's caretaker. Her fluency in English, humorous insights, and utter efficiency in managing personal and administrative crises eased my transition into a foreign culture and very strange work atmosphere. "Katherine, this a crazy house," was Inger's constant comment. Much of Inger's frenetic energy, it later became apparent, was consumed with covering up the mistakes of her boss, Kai (pronounced to rhyme with high). A man of great charm, Kai dressed in a sailor jacket and flirted with any woman who trusted him enough to smile. Seeing himself in the role of perpetual victim, Kai was given to describe his feuds with people, men who falsely accused him of owing them money or women who cried out "sex-press" (sexual harassment). Inger's fierce loyalty to the director and to the mission of the treatment center stemmed from her very, very recent experience as a client there. In fact, except for the chef, every member of staff, from the cleaning crew to the director himself, was a recovering alcoholic, some with as little as two months sobriety.

While I was happily adjusting to the carefree schedule of my job—engaging in public relations work, visiting treatment groups, and delivering lectures on group therapy to trainees—Ed was growing more and more frustrated. Standards were declining, he said. Kai was more interested in newspaper publicity (and attracting celebrities to treatment who would be written up in the tabloid press) than in recruiting a professional staff or maintaining professional standards. Especially worrisome to Ed was the lack of required sobriety for trainees who were doing the therapy and relapsing as frequently as the clients, not to mention the frequent violation of clients' confidentiality in the interests of newspaper publicity and the frequent sexual liaisons between clients and staff.

Still, delighted to be living in one of the

most beautiful and richest (no poverty in sight anywhere) countries in the world, gratified by the opportunity to help highly educated and well motivated clients, and intrigued by the daily soap opera of life at Gjovikseter, I managed to find a niche for myself. The only slight dampener to my spirits was the polluted physical environment—virtually every person at the treatment center smoked except for Ed and me. Staff meetings grew intolerable as we all got shut in as winter approached.

About this time Ed fell out of favor with the director. The latter took to reminding me that my loyalty must be to him and not to Ed. Meanwhile, Ed was growing increasingly wary as he watched his power base disintegrate slowly and surely. He confided in me, and only in me, of his misgivings. Staff meetings conducted mostly in English for the sake of "the Americans" grew increasingly hostile and belligerent. Kai, who earlier had ceded much of the decision making to Ed so that he could pursue an intense

love affair with a young, former client and ex-prostitute, now, spurned by his lover, moved to regain his power base. Abrupt lower level staff changes followed. Bringing on board his ex-bodyguard and confidant from a rough former life, Kai ordered the



SEPARATION

program director's translator and right-hand man to a branch center in Oslo. My American colleague now found much to complain about: first there was the ex-bodyguard's—Gunnar's—very recent drinking episode; then there was the director's public involvement with a string of much younger women. Meanwhile, Gunnar, in a pre-trainee status, secretly moved in with the more mature and motherly assistant director, Inger. In the midst of the chaos, my colleague returned to America for a Christmas vacation.

Upon his arrival in America, Ed had a stroke and died. He was 50 years old.

THE CULTURAL CONTEXT

A disclaimer at this point may be in order. Events that ensued at Gjøvikseter probably say more about the pitfalls of alcoholism treatment and the nature of addiction and addictive relationships than they do about Norway. In Norway, alcoholism treatment ordinarily was provided free of charge by the state. Psychologists led treatment groups; the focus was on individual responsibility and control. The disease model of alcoholism was relatively unknown in the late '80s. Transported from America, this model guided treatment at the several private, unregulated treatment centers such as the one which is the subject of this article. Because there was much hostility to privatization in this part of Scandinavia with its shining socialist tradition, the private center operated entirely independently. The director-owner—"the chief alcoholic" as he called himself—answered to no one. In a country in which even the sales of used cars are closely regulated, the operation of this center was a strange anomaly. For a comprehensive view of Norwegian cultural traditions, traditions stressing humanity, equality, and cooperation, see *Social Welfare: A World View* (van Wormer, 1997).

A State Of Inner Turmoil

Several months later, five trainee therapists decided to "blow the whistle" to the press concerning certain unethical practices. Their concern was with the sexual harassment to which they had been subjected, the "kidnapping" of clients into treatment (staff members would get reluctant clients very, very drunk, then drive them up to the treatment center), and the lack of pay for trainees, who were instructed to pretend they were not working so as to qualify for sick pay money from the state. These disgruntled workers, their picture on the front page of Norway's major newspaper, were simultaneously fired. Newspaper headlines chronicled unfolding events such as a near fist fight between Gunnar and the union leader.

Then one night, I was summoned to a late night meeting where Gunnar and tearful staff members were coerced into signing loyalty oaths.

Only a few of us refused to sign. My speech of opposition to the firings went untranslated. Without any training, Gunnar and Inger, now an obvious couple, ran the treatment program for alcoholics and their families. My role (I was now the program director) was secondary. Somehow, over time, thrown in continual contact, Gunnar, Inger, and I all became friends. It was then that Inger confided in me that Gunnar had physically threatened the late program director just before his departure from Norway. This happened at the airport; Ed had seemed to be in a state of confusion as he boarded the plane. Gunnar had been "under orders" from the director to frighten Ed so badly that he would never come back to Norway. Gunnar now blamed the director as well as himself and was no longer loyal to him. Overcome with guilt, he wanted me to know the whole story.

For guidance, I looked increasingly to professional ideology. Researching the social work code of ethics over and over, I pored over the part about one's professional responsibility to one's colleagues and to the community. Unable to eat (at work) or sleep, my mind began to race forward with possibilities and intrigues. Revenge plots occupied my mind to the point of utter obsession. I refused to sign the letter to the editor written by the remaining staff proclaiming our support for the director. I wrote glowing letters for fired staff members (these documents were later used in court proceedings in which the director was sued for illegal firings); I crashed into an executive conference with bankers and labor leaders to speak on behalf of the recently former staff. I stayed in touch with the fired workers. For the most part, however, although seething within, I acted loyally and friendly on the surface. And I continued to throw myself into addressing the needs of some very appealing and eager-to-learn clients and their families.

With the departure of Ed, use of the English language departed also. Effectively cut off from most communication, I became intellectually and socially isolated. New trainees, recruited from clients who stayed on at the halfway house, spoke only faltering English. Their sobriety was faltering also.

By now I had been in Norway six months.

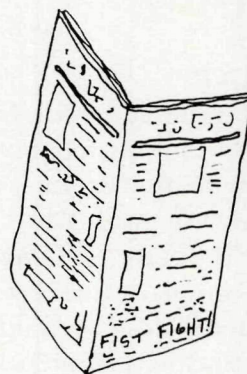
My children were thriving in school and my husband gloried in the delights of a caring community. My inability to speak the language wedded me to the job in what had now become in a literal sense "a crazy house." Inger and I alternated between being close and being caught up on opposite sides of the conflict between the top administration and the fired workers. Paranoia filled the air as the director and Inger sought out enemies of the center. Gjovikseter staff were instructed not to fraternize with former staff. Over a two-year period there were 50 former staff members scattered over Norway and Minnesota.

THE DECISION TO ACT

The dilemma — how to survive in a hostile work environment and how to maintain one's professional integrity while publicly representing an ethically corrupt outfit — was resolved early in the second year of my employment. Unable to simply "turn a deaf ear," I would become a spy. Gathering evidence, I would "come clean," I decided, by releasing this evidence to the public. Fortuitously, the editor of *Sosionomen*, the Norwegian social work journal, called to request an article. The issue was to be the need for regulation of alcoholism treatment centers. Forthcoming in May, the article would be professionally translated into Norwegian. Since I planned to return to the U.S. in June, the timing of the inevitable firing would be manageable.

One of my greatest fears concerning the pending article was my anticipation of utter rejection from Inger and her "sambor" (partner). As fate would have it, however, both of them were to break up their relationship, completely burn out, and depart well before the appearance of the article. "Kai is a psychopath," they declared. Still not trusting them, I said he wasn't that bad. However, their tales of Kai's earlier life were harrowing. Gunnar's return to his long-forgotten wife left Inger in a state of deep depression that was to persist for the better part of a year. Today, fully recovered, she is happily directing her own treatment center while her former partner has established a successful career as a family therapist in Sweden. Both have quit smoking.

In any case, when the article came out, the very people I dreaded facing were no longer there



and were now very supportive. My most immediate problem was to get the promised air fare for myself and my family (a total of \$4,000).

When my article "The Need for Regulation" (van Wormer, 1990) hit the press, I was in the

process of negotiating the return air fare for myself and my family. Characteristically, Kai had been stalling for weeks. Then all negotiations came to an abrupt end. "You will not get your air fare money now," he said. I had several hours to clear everything out of my desk and office. My salary and holiday money were confiscated. And what a shock when I got to read in the local paper that police charges would be filed for *underslag* — embezzlement!

With the permission of *Sosionomen*, I will cite the whistle blowing portion of that article. The local press highlighted my accusations. This portion chronicles the depth of my professional compromise:

Professionals who work for an organization which engages in questionable practices become necessarily implicated in the carrying out of those practices. Compromise becomes an essential form of survival in the unregulated, profit-oriented treatment institution. The social worker will try to work within the system to change the system and then one day, in anger and desperation, will turn to the outside . . .

I have survived at this treatment center because as a foreigner [unable to speak Norwegian] I have really had no option. Also, I thought I could have some influence. I have survived by uttering feeble protests, manipulating the situation where possible, but mainly by "turning a deaf ear." I have turned a deaf ear to some of the following practices in which I was directly or indirectly involved:

*Placing recent ex-clients on night watch duty; this entailed distribution of sedative medications.

*Training recent ex-clients to do therapy before they were ready, encouraging them to receive their money illegally from the government.

*The firing of the entire treatment staff (except for the director's ex-bodyguard) for disloyalty to the director.

*Pressing clients to proclaim their illnesses publicly to the press.

*Pulling clients out of treatment to perform duties "for the home."

*Getting clients drunk, then "kidnapping" them to treatment.

*Violation of health laws pertaining to rights of non-smokers.

*Turning former clients out of aftercare programs for disloyalty.

*Sexual harassment (sex press) of clients and staff.
van Wormer (1990)

The aftermath of the article—the confiscation of the money owed me and the false charges made the point better than the article itself regulation by the state was necessary to protect whistle blowers as well as the ordinary workers and clients. Writing the article, however, was therapeutic; it was catharsis in the form of revenge — revenge for Ed, the fired trainees, and the dozens of women who were sexually harassed. And now for a universal question: Can a social worker maintain his or her integrity in a treatment center run for the sole purpose of making money? In most cases, no. In a corrupt enterprise, in one way or another, all participants are corrupted.

CONCLUSION AND FINAL THOUGHTS

In the end, thanks to the formidable Norwegian Social Work Union, of which I had not even been a member, I won my case in court. The Norwegian social work organization was deeply shocked at the unprofessional practices going on at such private centers as the one in question. Just recently, Kai was found guilty in a civil case involving sexual harassment of a secretary and ordered to pay her a substantial sum. In his defense, the director was quoted in a newspaper article as saying, "I only touched her in the very best sense of the word," and in a TV interview as proclaiming, "I am impotent so how can I bother anyone?" Reportedly, Gjovikseter continues to thrive and clients continue on their tough road

to recovery.

Writing in *The Whistleblower*, a book which provides an in-depth analysis of individuals who speak out against their companies, Glazer and Glazer (1989) quote one of their subjects as follows:

As a whistleblower you will experience every emotion known to mankind . . . Be prepared for old friends to suddenly become distant. Be prepared to change your type of job and life style. Be prepared to wait years for blind justice to prevail. Glazer and Glazer(1989,p.237) .

I feel lucky that I arrived in Norway when I did and that I had the professional tools and connections to do what I did. The sadness that haunts me is that when I left, nobody waved good-bye. The joy is that now, several years later, all is forgiven (by my colleagues) and/or understood. Nothing in graduate school prepares us, nothing in the professional journals informs us of how tough it is to fight an organization. To be willing to blow the whistle, you have to be willing to be seen as a traitor. Still, support from a professional association can provide tremendous psychological as well as monetary support. Besides, helping to change the system, a corrupt and damaging system, is one of the most thrilling and meaningful things a social worker can do. But no matter how much self-congratulation there may be in the after years, there are always those haunting dreams....□

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