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The Life Story of Helge Fossmo, Former Pastor of Knutby Filadelfia, as Told in Prison: A Narrative Analysis Approach

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Knutby Filadelfia, a small religious community with Pentecostal roots, is situated in the Swedish village of Knutby, just outside Uppsala. Currently, it has just under 100 members. It gained a sudden notoriety on the night of January 10th, 2004, when two acts of violence occurred. The young wife of one of its pastors, Helge Fossmo, was killed by gunshot, and the Fossmo's next door neighbor, Daniel, a young man of 30, was shot and seriously wounded.

The murder trial that ensued became a focus of extraordinary media attention. The drama had taken place in the social context of a Pentecostal congregation, and it combined themes of sexual passion, adultery, homicide, apocalyptic expectation, and undue influence or "brainwashing". One of the pastors in the congregation, Helge Fossmo, became the main villain in the drama, but as the story unfolded, media attention was soon focused on the congregation's charismatic head pastor, Åsa Waldau, whose esoteric identity, as the "Bride of Christ", was brazenly touted in the media. Waldau is also the sister of the murder victim.

As a result of the police investigation, it was discovered that the neighbor who had been shot was the husband of Helge Fossmo's secret mistress at the time. Thus, the prosecution argued that Fossmo's motive behind the shootings was to rid himself of his wife and his mistress' husband, so that he and his lover would be free to marry. Helge Fossmo had lived in Knutby since 1997 and had served as pastor until 2004, when he was arrested and found guilty of incitement or conspiracy to the murder¹ and sentenced to life in prison.²

The actual perpetrator of the 2004 shootings, however, was not Fossmo but Sara Svensson, a member of the congregation who had lived at Fossmo's house for some time. Svensson and Fossmo had previously been involved in a two-year extramarital love affair. When she was

¹ The Swedish term is "anstiftan till mord", which means that someone persuades or forces another person to kill (incitement to murder). The closest equivalent in the English legal system is "conspiracy to murder".

² Fossmo's young wife, Alexandra, who was killed in 2004 was Fossmo's second wife. His first wife, Helene, had died in 1999 under enigmatic circumstances. Fossmo was investigated in 2004 for possible murder of his first wife, but the evidence was not sufficiently compelling to ensure a conviction. After he went to prison Fossmo married for a third time. In 2014 the district court got his time of punishment determined to 24 years. This means that he would have been released in 2020, following the normal procedure of Swedish law of releasing prisoners after two thirds of their term had been served. However, in 2015 the court of appeals overruled this decision and Fossmo remains in jail as a life prisoner.

arrested and questioned, Svensson claimed that God had ordered her to perform the violent acts. When the case went to trial in 2004, the court decided that Svensson had performed the crimes under the influence of Fossmo, who had been sending cryptic anonymous text messages to her cellphone, messages which she believed came directly from God. In the course of the trial, Svensson received the unusual diagnosis of “unspecified psychological disorder with religiously-colored convictions of psychotic value” and was committed to a psychiatric ward.³

After this violent drama, Knutby Filadelfia was ostracized by the Pentecostal community, on the grounds that their beliefs were unorthodox.

Prior to 1992, Knutby Filadelfia might be described as a fairly conventional Pentecostal congregation, but radical changes occurred after Åsa Waldau, a beautiful and charismatic pastor, joined the community in 1992 and became its head pastor. Under Waldau’s leadership, the membership doubled to over 100 within a few years. The congregation consisted mostly of young couples, many of them second or third generation members in the Pentecostal movement in Sweden. Charismatic leadership is a common feature of the Pentecostal movement, but it became even more pronounced in Knutby Filadelfia. There were several other pastors under the leadership of Åsa Waldau who exhibited charismatic qualities, one of them being Helge Fossmo. But the charisma of Åsa Waldau outshone them all, and her charismatic persona was escalated during her pastorship at Knutby, until it reached messianic proportions, when she was recognized as the Bride of Christ.

During the late 1990s there was a growing millenarian expectation in Knutby Filadelfia concerning the imminent return of Christ in the last days. It was believed that the community at Knutby would play a key role in ushering in the New Millennium. As a result, Knutby Filadelfia became increasingly alienated from other Pentecostal congregations, and developed a specific collective identity with certain theological innovations. An unofficial teaching spread among the core group; that it was not the church community that would be the Bride of Christ, as prophesied in Revelation 19:7-9 – but rather it would be Åsa Waldau herself whom Jesus would claim for His Bride.

Despite the copious media attention and a decisive verdict in the trial, the Knutby story remains a mystery, and many questions remain unanswered. As sociologists in the field of

³ Svensson, who was released from psychiatric care in 2011, leads a quiet life and does not accept interviews.

new religious studies, the authors were interested in the possibility of investigating the psychological, social and ideological forces that may have contributed to violence in the Knutby case. But after visiting the Knutby Filadelfia community and speaking to some of its pastors and members, we decided to start by approaching the former pastor Helge Fossmo and request an interview. In order to understand the drama, we felt that both insider and outsider perspectives on the Knutby Filadelfia community were necessary, and we thought that Fossmo's personal story and his interpretations of the events, might offer some important clues.

1. Ethical concerns

As the individuals involved in the Knutby drama are official persons in Sweden by now, we have chosen to use their real names, as most of the media coverage has done. There is no point in trying to preserve anonymity. The whole drama, with its different versions and allegations, is of course a very sensitive field. By approaching the story of Helge Fossmo as a narrative, however, and by using neutral, value-free language in our analysis, we have tried to avoid harm to a prisoner convicted on murder-related charges, as well as any harm to the members of the whole congregation of Knutby Filadelfia, people who were innocent and unwitting of the crimes, but have been deeply affected by them.

2. The Interview

The authors interviewed Helge Fossmo in Tidaholm prison in November 2012. The interview was conducted in English, but occasionally Fossmo would search for a word or phrase and lapse into Swedish, and Frisk would act as translator. Our questions focused on his experiences in the Knutby community and on the events that led up to the shootings. The methodological approach we chose was that of narrative analysis (see Wells 2011; Lieblich et al 1998). This nonjudgmental and neutral approach seemed to us the best way of ensuring Fossmo's cooperation, as well as a viable way to avoid any negative impact that might result from recording and analyzing a convicted prisoner's revelations. What this study offers, therefore, is a summary of Fossmo's narrative in which he "makes sense" of his experience at Knutby, and our subsequent narrative analysis of his life story.

Our interview with Fossmo was conducted over two days, and totaled six hours. We passed through elaborate security measures before we were permitted to visit him. These included

submitting a police record; proof we had no criminal record, after a fingerprint search, and screening through body searches and metal detectors at Tidaholm prison, which is a high security prison. The only materials we were permitted to bring in were notebooks, pencils and pens and a recording machine, for laptops, cellphones and cameras were forbidden. We were ushered into what appeared to be a daycare center, with Disney murals, stuffed toys and miniature plastic furniture, and this is where we met Helge Fossmo, who was a pleasant-looking middle aged man with brown eyes and hair and a neatly trimmed beard.

In accordance with the methodological procedures, it was our intention to afford him the opportunity to create his own material, without any prompting from us, or attempting to steer him in specific directions. We had composed an interview schedule, but we were flexible in responding to our subject's lead, and soon departed from the set order of questions. We used the method of "active listening"; of posing follow-up questions so as to invite him to deepen and to expand the story being told (Kvale 2013: 63-65).

The interview was recorded, but detailed handwritten notes were also taken during the interview. Afterwards, when we listened to the recording, some parts were transcribed, and the notes and transcriptions were reread several times in order to isolate patterns and themes in the narrative. Following the method of Lieblich *et al*, we examined the core pattern and structure in the narrative; its subplots, development and turning points (Lieblich et al 1998: 13).

Throughout the project we, the authors, tried to maintain a nonjudgmental approach to Fossmo himself, and a neutral stance towards this controversial material, and to refrain from commenting on the authenticity or factual "truth" of Fossmo's narrative. The reader should note, however, that in this article his story is treated as a "narrative" and not as objective "truth", or "untruth". It is clear that Fossmo's version of the events which led up to the fateful night of January 10th 2004 is quite different from the court's version, and also from the versions provided by different spokespersons from the Knutby Philadelphia community. Moreover, in 2006 Fossmo suddenly changed his narrative quite radically, by introducing new elements into his story. This development will be discussed below.

3. Methodology

The analytical method we have chosen to use in this study (narrative analysis) differs from content analysis in that content analysis deals with fragments classified into thematic

categories, while narrative analysis treats the story analytically as a unit (Riessman 2008: 12). Narrative analysis is appropriate when the aim is to investigate how and why a story is constructed in the way it is, what it accomplishes, and how it is tailored to an audience. Narrative analysis focuses on specific passages in the text, but interprets them within the context of what is said in other parts of the narrative (Lieblich et al 1998: 12). Narrative analysis might focus on content or on language structure. In this paper we have chosen to focus on the content.

Sociologist Peter Berger's theory, that "reality" is "socially constructed", has become widely accepted by social scientists since *The Sacred Canopy* was published in 1967. In a similar vein, Corinne Squire, a narrative researcher, proposes that individuals "make sense" of themselves and the world through their narratives (Squire 2011: 42-43). Personal life narratives⁴ are constructed so as to bring together disparate parts of an individual and his or her life into a purposeful and convincing whole (McAdams 1993: 12). Life stories are guided from within (by memory) and from without (by validation from others) and through the use of storytelling genres within a culture (Bruner 2004: 4). Narratives are co-constructed by an interviewer and a research participant (Mischler 1997: 223) or by a therapist and a client (Mattingly 1998: 2). They might also be influenced by the broader social discourses upon which narrators depend (Wells 2011: 6).

Stories are constructed around a core of historical facts or life events; and yet the narrator enjoys a considerable freedom in terms of creative interpretation, selection, and emphasis on the "remembered facts" that make up the narrative (Lieblich et al 1998: 8). Lieblich *et al* consider the life story as neither a fiction nor as an accurate representation of reality; but rather as a *product* affected by the conditions surrounding it and the cultural resources the storyteller draws upon (Lieblich et al 1998: 7, Wells 2011: 45). Thus, the life story is a "snapshot" of an evolving story that changes throughout the life course and serves to construct and transmit both individual and cultural meaning. According to Lieblich et al, people are "meaning-generating organisms"; they construct their identities and self-narratives from building blocks they find in their common culture. Through analyzing self-narratives, the researcher can access not only the narrator's identity and his/her systems of meaning, but

⁴ The concept of "personal myth", which is used by McAdams, is here avoided to prevent misunderstanding.

gain an understanding of the narrator's cultural background and social world (Lieblich et al 1998: 8-9).

4. The narrative of Helge Fossmo: Core pattern, structure and themes

Helge Fossmo's narrative describes his life and career after he moved to Knutby. He relates his version of the events that led up to the violent deaths of his two wives, and to the attempted murder of his neighbor. Generally, he tends to focus on external events, and only occasionally – and then in not much detail - does he divulge his feelings regarding his personal relationships with his wives or lovers. Similarly, he does not delve into his inner life as a Pentecostal Christian or a pastor, nor does he divulge his religious experiences or his spiritual feelings in any detail.

Wells introduces the term, “core pattern”, meaning the general focus of the narrative or whole story (Wells 2011: 46). The core pattern running through the narrative of Helge Fossmo, variously expressed, is his claim of innocence (of the incitement or conspiracy to murder charges). Kohli (1981: 65) writes that, through constructing his life story, the individual represents the aspects of his or her past which are relevant today or for future-oriented purposes, and these influence the individual's current acts. Thus, one possible explanation of Fossmo's narrative might be that it is part of a legal strategy so that his case might be taken to the Swedish Supreme Court for a new trial.

While Fossmo does not propose a coherent “plot” or alternative scenario that would explain the double shootings of that fateful night in January 2004, he does point the finger at Åsa Waldau as the main actor and criminal mind behind the murder attempts: (“If Åsa asks one to do something, you do it”). In his narrative he crafts a portrait of Waldau as an enigmatic puppeteer, directing the “play” that was Knutby Filadelfia. He presents Waldau as a sort of stage director who periodically decided that certain people had to be whisked offstage to “go home” (meaning die and go to heaven). He claimed that Waldau had predicted the sudden death of his first wife, and that aside from her millenarian machinations, her underlying motive, as the criminal mind behind the shootings, was to keep him, Helge Fossmo, tied to Knutby, since he, as a pastor, was valuable to her, and also because he knew too many secrets. (Fossmo claims that he at the time was trying to persuade his mistress to elope with him and leave Knutby Filadelfia behind.)

Fossmo spreads the blame for the crimes on others. He hints at the possibility that a certain male member in the community may have had something to do with the January 2004 crimes, as well as with the death of Fossmo's first wife in 1999. He alleges that this person was mysteriously present on the scene of the violent deaths of both the wives, and that he might have been a "puppet" of Åsa Waldau.

Fossmo described his relationship with Sara Svensson, and how they functioned as a charismatic duo in the community by warding off demons through their collaborative prayers. He claims that their sexual relationship was condoned in the community⁵, since it was believed to strengthen their power of prayer. He presents this as evidence of cult-like behavior:

When Sara came along, we started to meet and pray for Åsa. I fell in love with her. It was encouraged by Åsa and other leaders.... No one thought that Sara and me was a sin. God could make exceptions. A spiritual alliance made us stronger in spiritual warfare. [My wife] Alexandra should take care of earthly matters for me, Sara of spiritual.... We were fighting demons for Åsa – intense attacks of demons on Åsa. People had to pray for her. If Åsa had a bad day – felt angry or depressed – she blamed other people who supposed to guard the gates. We should be a shield. The power multiplies when you are two. Sometimes two men praying together. Sara and my love made us strong. Love was the weapon.... From the beginning Sara and me [sic] were a good couple. We were on the same level. Everyone agreed that Sara and Helge should have each other. But it was a problem that we were married to other people.

Fossmo described Svensson's close friendship with Waldau, and her sudden, precipitous fall from grace:

When Sara and I started the relationship she was sparkling with life, always joyful. She had a high position in the congregation. She was closest woman to Åsa, held the highest authority among the women, next to Åsa. She heard the

⁵ This is denied by representatives of Knutby Filadelfia, who claim no knowledge of their relationship.

voice of God very clearly.... Even Tirsa⁶ obeyed what Sara said, as the only person she could trust. But sometime between the winter of 2001 and 2002, Åsa changed her mind about Sara. 'Sara is rebellious,' she said. 'She does not respect me'. Everyone thought Tirsa would sing at Sara's wedding. But Sara told Åsa, 'Jesus wants you to sit and do nothing on my wedding day'. And then Sara fell and became the lowest of all. Åsa found out that Sara had told people that she was forced by Åsa to marry [name]. So Sara fell and became one of the most sinful members in Knutby.

Fossmo shifts the blame from his own shoulders, as the cause of Sara Svensson's erratic and violent behavior, onto Waldau's shoulders, but he also blames himself for not having stood up for her as a close friend and lover. Instead, he passively observed how she was ostracized in the community and describes her descent into mental illness.

I was too much of a coward to defend Sara. Åsa asked me if Sara made progress, and I said yes, but Åsa said no change. By the end of 2002 Åsa decided all the congregation needed to know about Sara. Word of her sin⁷ spread in church. She had to be dealt with in strict way. Suddenly no one asked for her advice.... Sara became more and more despairing. She did not understand what she had done. But she was told she was wrong [evil]. It did not help that she repented, Åsa did not feel her change in spirit. Sara was crushed. Åsa questioned everyone how I treated Sara and I was told I was too kind. I could be myself only after bed time. I still loved her. This made it worse for her.

But he blames his passivity on Åsa Waldau's uncanny power of mind control:

Once I said to Åsa: But Sara was so close to God and you? How come you did not know she was evil? Were you deceived? Åsa became so angry. I never asked this question again. "Do you question me?" she asked. "Don't you love me more than that? Are you defending Sara against me?"

⁶ A Hebrew name from the Old Testament meaning "sweetness", that is claimed by defectors from Knutby Filadelfia as being the name used for Åsa Waldau. This is, however, denied by representatives of the congregation.

⁷ Being rebellious towards Waldau.

Sara became less and less Sara and more of a shadow. And in this process I was very active.... I had lost my ability to think by myself.

One of the main obstacles to belief in Fossmo's innocence was the evidence contained in the text messages he had sent to Sara Svensson's cell phone. Recent changes in Swedish law and new technology had enabled the police to go into his private records. As Wayne Jansen notes in his 2008 study, "Overcoming Impediments to Cell Phone Forensics", digital evidence recovered from a cell phone can provide investigators a wealth of information about the user and his/her contacts, and new technical advances in capabilities offer greater opportunities for the recovery of additional information. Jansen points to two "high profile cases" as "illustrative examples where such recovered evidence was used successfully in an investigation". He notes that in the second example (of the pastor in Knutby) that "the strongest evidence against the pastor was the extensive communication through text messages and voice calls between him and [Sara Svensson] on the day of the murder and just before that. What they did not know was that their carefully deleted text messages were possible to recover" (Jansen 2008).

For several weeks before January 2004, Sara Svensson had been receiving anonymous text messages on her cellphone. These stated in cryptic terms that God wanted her to kill her two fellow members of the Knutby Filadelfia community. In 2004 Fossmo claimed no knowledge of these text messages. The police investigators, however, managed to trace the messages as originating from his cellphone.

In 2006 Fossmo suddenly changed his story so as to reconcile these two conflicting versions. He still claimed that he was not the *author* of the messages inciting Sara Svensson to kill, but he admitted to *forwarding* the text messages received on his cellphone, claiming that they had originated from Åsa Waldau's cellphone. Fossmo stated in our interview that he had *retyped* the messages received from Waldau on his old cellphone into his new cellphone, and then sent them on to Sara Svensson. Fossmo explains that initially he suppressed this information because Waldau had threatened that he would lose his daughter in the same way that he lost his first wife (through a sudden, violent death) if he ever told anyone that Åsa Waldau was the author of the text messages. Thus, he claims, it took him more than two years before he dared to speak out.

Although Fossmo blames himself for obeying Åsa Waldau, and admits to a degree of complicity in the deaths – insofar as he failed to realize what she was up to and did not try to

stop her - Fossmo insists he is innocent of the main charge of incitement or conspiracy to murder. Fossmo admits guilt to the extent that he supported Waldau in her actions, thereby enabling her (in his view) malevolent power over the community. For example:

When she prophesized something, it was my job to find some kind of support in the Bible for that. [...] So, you can find support for almost anything if you pick what you want from the Bible, and that was what we did in Knutby. Because I knew the Bible so well, every time Åsa said something I almost immediately could find some kind of support in the Bible. In that sense I have a big responsibility and guilt for what happened in Knutby, because I always confirmed everything with the Bible.

Fossmo also spoke of his first wife, Helene, who died under mysterious circumstance on December 18, 1999. She was found inside their bathroom with the door locked on the inside. She had apparently banged her head on the metal showerhead and fallen in the bathtub, and there was damage to her skull. The autopsy revealed a high concentration of the opiate dextropropoxyphene in her blood. Her death was ruled as an accident. But after Fossmo was arrested in 2004, an investigation was reopened into the cause of Helene's death. No evidence was found that could support a murder charge. However, in the course of our interview, Fossmo's description of the events in the autumn of 1999 implicated Waldau in her death:

Åsa was angry when I told her Helene and I had an argument.... She said, "If Helene does not repent, God will get rid of her". I could not believe my ears. She referred to the New Testament and people who fell down dead before God, such as Ananias and Sapphira in Apostlagärningarna [the Book of Acts]. A couple of weeks later, Åsa...told Helene... "You are rebellious. You should not question what Helge does, that he spends time with me. You should not question me, or God will kill you". Helene then did not question, she was loving and supportive. But two to three weeks later, I found her dead. This changed my and the whole congregation's opinion of God. God is obviously willing to take people away. The team knew about it. Åsa said, "I said this, and then it happened".

Today, Fossmo says he believes that Helene Fossmo either committed suicide because Åsa Waldau told her to, or that another person from the congregation killed her, on Waldau's orders.

I would want to know what really happened. I know that Åsa has tried to convince two people of suicide after Helene, saying it was will of God. If Helene was murdered...Åsa must be behind it.

Fossmo offered an explanation for the suspicious circumstance that the drug had been found in her blood. He claimed:

Helene took pain killers [...]. It was toxic amount in her blood: either it caused her accident or made it easier for someone to kill her.

He also explained why he had tampered with the death report before he sent it to his in-laws, blaming Waldau for his decision:

Åsa told me to eradicate the medicine in the death report as they would then think it was suicide and blame Åsa. I eradicated the medicine before I sent the papers to Helene's parents. I really regret this now. This made me look guilty.

He noted that his image of God had been affected by Åsa Waldau's prediction of Helene's death. He began to perceive God as cruel and vengeful. After Helene's death, he notes, it became a reality for him that God could take people away, by killing them. A pervasive fear, he claims, began to spread through the congregation in Knutby – the fear of being the next one to “go home”; to be “taken away” by God.

Fossmo suggests in his narrative that there was pressure to suppress natural human feelings, such as grief, in order to fit in with “God's plan” – as interpreted by Waldau:

My world fell apart, also my understanding of God changed. A cruel God. Åsa said that Helene did not go to hell because she had changed the weeks before the accident. But she would not be right for the time to come. When I was with Åsa a few days after the death, I said that I missed Helene. Åsa got furious and yelled and said I was selfish and ungrateful. I should be grateful for God had a plan for my life. I therefore had to pretend that everything was fine.

Reflecting on Fossmo's narrative, three over-arching themes stand out: Åsa Waldau as the evil, controlling cult leader; Fossmo's identity as a passive actor; and Knutby Filadelfia as a “manipulative cult” which exerted a powerful and destructive influence over him and others. These three themes are closely interrelated and, at times, inseparable.

To sum up, Fossmo claims that for several years he was under the influence of a “manipulative cult” and its domineering and charismatic “cult leader”. Living in this destructive environment caused him to make many bad decisions. He explains that he was “psychologically paralyzed” after several years of living under Waldau’s hyper control in the Knutby Filadelfia environment:

I did what Åsa told me to do. All the way. I honestly do not mean that this takes away my responsibility. But that is how it works. [...] So many times I have gone to Åsa’s house with one opinion and I have left the house with a totally different opinion. And that is very difficult to explain how that is possible. [...] I had [...] lost my ability to think by myself.

Besides these three main themes, there are three important turning points that punctuate the narrative. These will be more closely examined below.

4.1. Characters in the narrative

In the field of narrative research, the characters that dominate life stories are called *imagoes*. *Imagoes* are not people but rather idealized role models or archetypes, like the Teacher, the Sage, or the Survivor. *Imagoes* may be positive or negative. McAdams writes that we come to understand ourselves better by studying the main characters who dominate our narratives (McAdams 1993: 13, 122-125). The way we construct our *imagoes* reveals something about how we conceive of our own identity.

The narrative of Helge Fossmo is clearly focused on one *imago*: Åsa Waldau. Her overwhelming presence dominates the story, and drives the trajectory of the plot (McAdams 1993: 123). Fossmo described how her charisma escalated from a pastor role to a messianic role as the Bride of Christ, prophesied in *Revelation* 19:7-10:

Åsa was special. God had a special purpose with her. Something special would happen in Knutby, we believed, because the End was near. This was around 1998. We just knew she was special. The idea that she was Bride of Christ came 1999. Until then it was “only” special calling. Already in Uppsala she had received letters from an old lady: prophecies that she was special for God, part of great plans. She said she would have a private jet plane and everyone would

listen.... But in 1999 it was revealed to us that Åsa was the bride of Christ and she got the name Tirsa. Helene (my wife) had a dream making it clear that Åsa was the bride. If God revealed this, we had to treat her like a queen and call her Tirsa.... The inner circle knew, and then more and more people came to know. They planted seeds in you: “You have to ask God what is special about Åsa,” or “the Bride could be human”. Some had dreams in which Åsa appeared dressed as a bride and Jesus came. So the idea became confirmed that way.

At times Waldau appears to be a personification of “Evil” - even though Fossmo specifies that he does not think Åsa Waldau *is* an evil person, but rather that she *does* evil. He says that Waldau is to Knutby what Jim Jones was to Jonestown:

She does evil. But I don’t feel comfortable in saying that she is an evil person, I think she is a sick person. [...] It is not difficult to guess that she has a narcissistic personality disorder. [...] My psychotherapist says that Åsa needs a social corset [...] that does not allow her to grow in her narcissism [...] to keep her in place. [...] The development in Knutby has only made her grow in narcissism. [...] It became like a role play where she actually was our queen. She did not need to do anything she did not want to do. We did everything for her [...] which made everything worse and worse and worse. She has caused a lot of evil. She does evil. [...] I don’t know. But I want to think that she was genuine in many things. [...] I think that somehow she actually believed that she was so special. I don’t think [...] that she made a plan: this is how I shall manipulate a lot of people to make me their queen [...] that is why I mean that she also in a way was a victim, because we around her made it possible, also.

Fossmo intermittently refers to his psychotherapist, Rigmor Robèrt, who was assigned to him after he was incarcerated in prison. It appears he adopted her vocabulary (for example, “narcissism”, “love bombing”, “mind control”, and “collective norm migration”). The role of the psychotherapist in his narrative might be characterized as an *imago* of “the good” and “the true”. On the other hand, the female psychotherapist does not take up nearly as much space as Åsa Waldau. Her role in the narrative is relatively minor. The major role is Åsa Waldau as the personification of Evil.

There are other less important characters present in the narrative. One character who is surprisingly inconspicuous in Fossmo’s narrative is his second wife, Alexandra, who was the

murder victim. Fossmo's only comment regarding her is that he did not love her as he should have done, and that it had been a mistake to marry her (a mistake he attributes to Åsa Waldau, whom he claims arranged the marriage).

4.2. Identity

Identity construction is an important aspect of the life narrative. Kohli describes how the subject chooses themes in order to construct his/her own biography, and through this process confirms or reconstitutes his/her own identity (Kohli 1981: 70). The individual, through a personal narrative, may construct his or her identity and develop a purpose and a place in the world. Identity construction is a dynamic and evolving process, according to Wells (2011: 50-51).

A distinctive pattern we find in Fossmo's narrative is a process whereby his weak and passive identity continues to deteriorate under the debilitating influence of Waldau's negative power and control. Fossmo describes how, on first meeting Åsa Waldau, he was "overwhelmed", and how his initial skepticism towards her gradually faded away. Even at their first meeting, he says "She chose me" (indicating his own passive role). Two striking examples of Fossmo's passivity occur quite late in his narrative.

The first occasion is when Sara Svensson called him in December 2003 to tell him that she just tried, unsuccessfully, to buy a gun. His response was, "I don't want to know anything about this."

When we questioned him concerning the plausibility of this reaction, Fossmo explained how, immediately after this conversation, he went to Åsa Waldau and asked her what her text messages to Sara Svensson had really meant. He asked her if she knew that Sara Svensson was trying to buy a gun. Åsa Waldau, he claimed, reacted by becoming angry (as in several other episodes that Fossmo recalls). She said, "Are you questioning me? Don't you love me more than that? Nothing happens in Knutby that is not God's will." Fossmo claims that he reacted in fear, thinking, "If I protest, I might get killed instead".

The second example of Fossmo's self-proclaimed passivity is found in his account of the night of the murder, when Sara Svensson called him and told him that she was, at that very moment, about to intrude on the neighbor's house (the person she was about to shoot).

Fossmo said that his only thought, in reacting to this information, was: “Oh, so it is Daniel who is going to die”.

When we asked him about his authority and place in the leadership, Fossmo says that he was in a kind of intermediate position, with Åsa Waldau above him and two other pastors at the same level as himself, while the other members of the congregation were below them in the hierarchy.

You are both active and passive. You have no own will because the one or the ones above you control everything in your life. At the same time you control a bunch of people underneath you and in that function you are very much active. So, of course I was active, and I was also using my power over people.

In his own narrative, however, Fossmo focuses on his relationship with Åsa Waldau which, he claims, gradually transformed him into an increasingly passive person.

It is perhaps significant that the current members of Knutby Filadelfia have expressed quite different perceptions of Helge Fossmo and his role in the fateful events that occurred in Knutby during the years he served as one of their pastors. In their narratives – which are strikingly similar to one another – Fossmo is seen as the evil actor. The core pattern which might be discerned in their narratives is how everyone in the group was for several years cheated by an “evil psychopath”. Because of their trust in Helge Fossmo, they were all deceived, including Åsa Waldau. They claim they were completely unaware of Fossmo’s love affair with, and manipulation of, Sara Svensson (interviews with different members in Knutby Filadelfia).

4.3. Knutby Filadelfia, the “manipulative cult”

Today, Helge Fossmo uses the language of anti-cult lore in a narrative absolving himself from most of the blame. He talks about Knutby Filadelfia is a “manipulative cult”, and that its messianic leader brainwashes the members of the congregation, depriving them of free will. He concedes that several members claim they have found a new and satisfying, life inside the group. This, however, he perceives as an illusion which will dissipate once they leave the “cult”:

Today I see her [Åsa] with so different eyes. Today, if I see her in TV [...] I get the creeps, because I think her way of looking at people is scary [...] it is condemning [...] Today I listen to her and I think she is so false. So I cannot understand how I could love that woman so much...because I really did. I loved her, I admired her, I adored her. I do not know why. As I said, she has a way of getting under the skin of a person very easily, and she makes you open to her so you talk to her about anything. You tell her your inner secrets [...] I know for sure that she has the ability to make a person feel very loved, confirmed, seen.[...] If you read about cults they talk about love-bombing, how you get love bombed in the beginning. And it is very much so. You do not get any corrections from the beginning, you only get confirmation, love and support [...] In the congregation most people feel that I am selected [...] So, after a while, I did not question anything about what she said. [...] Why is it not a crime [...] to control people's minds? Of course it is very hard to prove something like that. [...] Before I left Knutby I would have said no, of course, no one else controls me, I make my own decisions. But today I see that what we did there should not be allowed. [...] Why is it allowed to beat people up psychologically?

Fossmo describes how Knutby's Christian values were insidiously altered over time, a process he labels as "collective norm migration". Gradually, he claims, it became "normal" to expect someone to die, because it was said to be the will of God. This was called "going home" in the language of the congregation, and he claims there were dreams and revelations received by different members about "who would go next" after his first wife died in 1999. Fossmo also describes how it became "normal" for pastors to have extramarital relations in the group, with Åsa Waldau as the role model. He describes how he had the role of her "sexual servant", while she was waiting for Jesus, her lover, to return.⁸ According to Helge Fossmo, it also became "normal" to lie to people outside the group about the esoteric teachings concerning Waldau as the "Bride of Christ", since the members were aware this idea might evoke controversy.

⁸ This is denied by members of Knutby Filadelfia, who say that the only person who had secret extramarital relations was Helge Fossmo himself (interviews).

Suddenly you have no boundaries left. It is like a collective migration of norms. The norms change. [...] After a while anything could be normal and anything could be ok.

Fossmo adds that he had a lot of help from his psychotherapist in understanding his way in and out of Knutby.

4.4. Turning points

There are three turning points in Fossmo's narrative. The first major turning point was caused by the death of his first wife in 1999, who was his "first sweetheart".

We were a couple since 1989 and married in 1994. She was the love of my life and mother of my children. After her death I lost track of life. I broke inside. I made many wrong decisions after that.

Fossmo complains that he was not permitted by Waldau to grieve for his first wife:

I was not allowed to grief. I should be grateful because this was the will of God. And he had something better for me.

Fossmo complains that in Knutby he was never alone and that Waldau quickly arranged for him to marry her younger sister, Alexandra, within weeks of Helene's death.⁹ This explains why he began to make a series of wrong decisions, he claims, decisions which had negative consequences for other people.

A second turning point occurred on January 10, 2004, on the night of the shootings. Fossmo, after receiving a telephone call, goes to the neighbor's house and finds his neighbor, Daniel (the husband of his current mistress) shot, bleeding and in pain. At that point, Fossmo notes, "the fog disappeared". Suddenly, all the clichés about God deciding everything in Knutby vanished. The only important thing for him, at that moment, was that Daniel should survive (Fossmo says he did not yet know that his wife, Alexandra, had just been shot dead). For the

⁹ Again, Knutby Filadelfia members offer another version of this story.

first time in many years, Fossmo states, he was himself again and reacted like a real, compassionate human being.

The third and final turning point in the narrative is when, after two or three weeks in jail, Fossmo was reading the Bible and found a verse warning that “you should not go beyond what is written, and that you should not follow a leader”. As Fossmo describes this event, it was as if he were in a dark room and someone suddenly turned on the light. This was an awakening, and it suddenly became clear what went wrong in Knutby. The Bible had been used in the wrong way. This meant that he, as a leader, had led other people on errant paths. This insight was at once a relief to him and a heavy burden. Fossmo says that he feels guilty because he participated in the wrong path, and this had serious consequences for many people. For several years he doubted that God’s mercy and forgiveness could include him. But today, he believes in a merciful God who has empathy for people in difficult situations.

Helge Fossmo concluded his story with these words:

I am not innocent. I should be sentenced for my part of what happened in 2004. But I am not guilty of conspiracy to murder. I did not want Sara to kill anyone, and I have not asked her to do it.... But in a way I am glad that I ended up here because it got my children out of Knutby. It is better for them to grow up and have the possibility to be free individuals, free to think what they want, believe what they want, feel what they want. To be free. Because no one in Knutby is free.

5. Discussion

A narrative is always a purposeful construction and directed towards a certain audience and told for a certain purpose. It is neither fiction, nor fact – or both, since it involves a process of selection. It offers a selection from various memories, different degrees of emphasis, and creative interpretations – as part of the effort to present a coherent story. There is also a social component, as narratives are constructed in cooperation with other people, and a narrative also often draws upon cultural building blocks or cultural stories. As Bruner remarks, a life story is guided from within (by memory), from without (by validation from others), and through the use of storytelling genres within a culture (Bruner 2004: 4). All these components

make up the narrative of the former pastor of Knutby Filadelfia - and it is a very different narrative than the one told by the representatives of the congregation.

Below we will discuss the narrative of Helge Fossmo within the framework of cultural resources, social resources, and as a product of cognitive patterns. Finally, we will add a self-reflexive analytical statement about our own roles in Fossmo's narrative.

5.1. Cultural resources

Narratives are culturally framed and draw on cultural resources, which are important elements in how stories are structured in order to be meaningful. In a religious group an important cultural resource is the "key story" of the group itself. Stories from members of a religious group may contain a key theme; of predestination, or of how prophecy guides their personal or collective histories.

Narrative matrices are cultural narratives, constituting patterns that individuals use to fashion their own narratives (Stone-Mediatore 2003: 34). In Fossmo's life story, one cultural resource he draws upon is the "anticult" matrix of apostates' stories about "manipulative cults" and "coming out of cults" (Shupe and Bromley 1994). Fossmo's narrative contains many uncritical references to "manipulative cults" - as if their existence were an established fact, and his current narrative of Knutby Filadelfia as a "manipulative group" runs through the whole story. This understanding of the congregation, as one of the main building blocks of the narrative, is employed by Fossmo to reinforce his claims to be innocent.

Several popular stereotypes regarding "cults" that are found in anticult literature and mass media stories about certain religious groups dominate Fossmo's narrative. One stereotype is that of the "evil cult leader", who in his narrative is represented by Åsa Waldau. The power-hungry authority, the terrifying reign, and the wicked religious beliefs like "sending people home", all reflect themes rooted in this genre.

5.2. Social resources

Narratives are seldom constructed in isolation. A typical situation in which narratives are socially constructed is in the therapist-client relationship. Mattingly argues that this mutual construction of a story (which she calls "therapeutic emplotment") is integral to the healing process in therapy (Mattingly 1998: 2). The British sociologist, Eileen Barker, writes that,

unlike academics who study new religions, the therapist's assignment is to help clients to construct a new reality so that they can reconcile themselves with the emotional upheaval and complex situations related to joining and leaving a new religion. Thus, the therapist's primary task in working with the client does not include the construction of an accurate and balanced account of a new religion (Barker 1995: 21-22).

The accuracy of the social constructions of reality resulting from the therapist-client relationship are called into question by an infamous murder case in Sweden. This is the case of Thomas Quick, an inmate in a closed psychiatric hospital who during the 1990s confessed to being the perpetrator of around thirty murders over the past three decades in Sweden, Norway and Finland, murders that were never solved. In close consultation with his psychiatric hospital therapists during the 1990s, Quick co-constructed various murder scenarios, and was convicted for eight of these crimes. However, he later retracted his confessions and, in 2013, was retried and deemed not guilty for any of the murders. Fossmo, in our interview, describes how he worked closely with his prison psychotherapist, Dr. Rigmor Robèrt, to whom he gives credit for helping him understand his role in Knutby Filadelfia, and why the violence occurred.

Rigmor Robert helped me to understand Knutby. I read about cults since I left the group. Why is it not a crime to control people's minds? Today I see that what happened in Knutby should not be allowed.

Robèrt has suggested in several of her popular articles that Åsa Waldaу was the real destructive force in Knutby Filadelfia, and that there is a kind of "systemic error" in the structure of the group that made the crimes possible (see for example Robèrt 2005). As we reflect on the similarities between the perspectives of Fossmo and his psychotherapist, the possibility of co-construction has to be taken into account. Dr. Robèrt, like Fossmo, writes that the "grandiose thinking" of Åsa Waldaу is typical of narcissistic personality disorder. And, like Fossmo, Robèrt compares life in Knutby to a play, or theatre, controlled by Waldaу (Robèrt 2005).

A similar representation of the drama, as presented by Rigmor Robèrt, has been published in the book by the controversial Swedish-Norwegian professor of sociology Eva Lundgren, who spent many hours interviewing Helge Fossmo in prison (Lundgren 2008). Her main ideas are almost identic to the ones presented by Rigmor Robèrt. Lundgren and Robèrt have also

engaged in public debates concerning the Knutby case together on several occasions, in the media and on television talk shows. Lundgren's interviews with Fossmo started in March 2005, and it appears likely that Lundgren may have been another co-constructor of the narrative that we heard in Tidaholm prison. Narratives become consolidated by repetition. It is remarkable, however, that Fossmo rarely referred to the Lundgren project during our two-day interview.

In two of Fossmo's turning points, he describes a kind of awakening from a false identity. This is very similar to what Robèrt, the psychotherapist, has written about "coming out of cults". In an e-mail to one of the authors of this article, she writes that in successful therapy there is always a moment of "conversion" (e-mail 2013-03-25). This fits with what Fossmo described in our interview. However, it seems that Fossmo was also influenced by the cultural narrative matrix reflected in anticult literature and apostate tales.

5.3. Continuity in cognitive patterns

Fossmo's narrative centers on Åsa Waldau and her impact on his religious worldview, and on his career and conduct as a pastor during those years in Knutby. His most recent interpretations appear to be colored by his psychotherapist's view of Knutby Filadelfia as a "manipulative cult". Both Waldau and Robèrt are strong women in positions of power, and each represents a simplified, "black and white" picture of reality. Thus, we find a certain continuity in Fossmo's cognitive orientation.

5.4. Self-reflexive analysis

As stated earlier, an important aspect of our mission in this project (to interview a controversial religious leader serving time in prison for conspiracy to murder) was to try to maintain a sympathetic, but value-free and objective stance towards our human subject, and a neutral, non-judgmental stance towards the controversial material he presented. As sociologists, we felt our role was quite different from that of a journalist, a judge or a jury, for as analysts of narrative, it was important to refrain from commenting on the authenticity or factual "truth" of Fossmo's narrative. In our two-day ongoing discussion, during the long walks between Tidaholm prison and our hotel, and over our evening suppers, we compared our personal reactions, which were quite different.

Part of the task of the interviewer is to seek to establish empathy with one's subject. Palmer's overall impression during the two-day interview was that it was difficult to believe that such

an intelligent, sensitive and seemingly decent man could have planned these murder attempts. It was also difficult to imagine this sober, self-contained Pentecostal pastor (who was not particularly handsome or “macho”) as a Casanova-type figure who, by his own admission, had indulged in a series of passionate extra-marital affairs. Palmer felt touched by Fossmo’s evident love for his children and his pain in being separated from them. She noted her internal angry reaction at the rude, rough manner of the prison guard, who cut short our goodbyes abruptly by shoving him back and bolting his door. She felt sorry for him that he had to live in such a dreary, socially deprived and boring environment for ten years. Initially, therefore, Palmer felt inclined to believe Fossmo’s version of events, a version that just so happened to exonerate him from blame and cast suspicion on others, and she hoped he would be successful in his appeal. After some reflection, however, and referring to R.D. Laing’s ideas in *The Divided Self*, she wondered if Fossmo had succeeded in compartmentalizing his reality, and truly believed in his own innocence.¹⁰

Frisk, in contrast, was more skeptical, and less likely to believe certain parts of Fossmo’s narrative. She focused on the facts in the case, and on the question of who would benefit from the deaths of the chosen victims. She reminded Palmer that after a police investigation, a jury had found him guilty. She pointed out discrepancies between his story and the stories of the members of Knutby whom we, the authors had previously interviewed. Nevertheless, Frisk confessed that she also was influenced by the charming personality of Fossmo, and had been impressed by his apparent sincerity and openness during the interview.

In retrospect, it is clear that the narrative constructed during the interview, was a narrative constructed for us as sociologists, and that we were, in part, co-constructors, although our intention was to refrain from influencing our subject. The narrative’s core theme, Fossmo’s innocence, came across very clearly. The narrator might well have thought that we, as sociologists and researcher could somehow be of use for him in a future appeal in the case.

In the end, we will refrain from commenting on the authenticity of his story. The fact that Helge Fossmo came across in the course of the interview, as a sympathetic character who inadvertently lost his way and caused harm to those close to him is a testament not only to his

¹⁰ See R.D. Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and The Divided Self Madness*. London: Tavistock, 1960.

personal and professional charm as a Pentecostal pastor, but also to the compelling power and magic of the narrative process.

6. Conclusion

Narratives or life stories are constructed through memories, interpretations, selections and exclusions, in social contexts and draw on different cultural resources. Narratives also reflect the narrator's purpose in telling the story. Thus, one finds the dramatic events of 2004 in Knutby Filadelfia are presented in completely different ways, depending on who the narrator is. The life story of Helge Fossmo might be seen in this light, as a narrative based on a particular perspective, potentially steered by a desire for an appeal in the case. Fossmo seems to have drawn upon the cultural resource of the "evil cult narrative", as well as the social resource of his therapist, whose perspective is strikingly similar to the one Fossmo shares with us. With Thomas Quick's case in mind, it is evident that the role of therapists in co-constructing their clients' narratives is an important new field of research.

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