

How we use the Tree of Life as a metaphor in couple courses in Scandinavia

I and my wife had a one week couple's course in Sweden last summer, where the tree was used as a general metaphor and method. To adapt the tree of life metaphor from a therapeutic context to a teaching context was both challenging and interesting. The setting was that 40 couples gathered for a five days course. During summer vacation there are family camps at different sites in Scandinavia. Families come for one week, and for two hours in the morning and in the evening there are separate sessions for kids in different ages (Football, painting, dance, film...) and separate ones for the parents. At the sessions for the parents I and my wife were teaching and sharing from our own life on different subjects aimed to build the relation between the spouses. The teaching is partly "educational" in the way that we are sharing knowledge from the podium, but the teaching stops and the couples talk and draw at their own tree of life in between each new theme. For example: We teach that our family background is carried with us in to our new family. I and my wife share some things from our backgrounds and hang up some signs at our display tree at the front, and then we have the couples to talk together about their background. They also write this on to their Tree of Life. The couples are also together in groups of 5 couples some of the days to discuss and share how or in what way the teaching/session touched them. The couples were not assigned due to some couple conflicts or trouble, but have applied out of their free will. We did not know if some or any of them had any especially hard times. They were not united in some traumatic experience or any things like that. They were just ordinary people (if there is any such thing as ordinary people). So the aim of the use of the tree of life was quite different from working with traumatized people. The aim was to use the metaphor of the tree to bind the themes of the course together in a way that it all made a narrative. All couples got a big sheet of rigid paper and some colored pencils and for each day they added things to their drawing. Every day of the course was related to a specific part of the tree. It all began at the roots and the soil went up to the top of the tree. They had one sheet of paper for each couple and at the right hand side of the tree the males wrote their things and at the left hand side women wrote their things. We decided to have one tree for each couple instead of having one tree each, this because we wanted their stories to be closely connected and also to make it easier to connect to each other's stories. For example: the husband could have a value for their family now that has the strongest roots from the roots of the wife. The metaphor was introduced by leading them all in to their relation to trees. Most people had positive and good experiences of trees from where they were young. A tree they liked to climb in or where their favorite swing was attached. By giving them some time to attach to the metaphor by remembering narratives about themselves in relation to a tree the course began.



At the roots the couples wrote and drew where they came from and what they brought with them from their origin. Values, memories, places, habits...

What kind of soil is your tree rooted in? Are you two spouses planted in the same soil? Meaning: are you informed of what your spouse are experiencing, what he/she fears, what challenges he/she meets right now, and so on. We did use a simple questionnaire to have them to find out how well they know each other.

It is when the tree was newly become a tree and was little where the story of the couple began. So at the bottom of the trunk they wrote what it was with the other that did attract them in the beginning. Things like: cute, sporty, fun and so on came on to the trees. We had them to sit and talk about what they did and thought of at the time of courting. This was to enliven the

stories about them as a couple, for some it was hard to remember the good times at the start, for some the start was very tricky and therefore it was tuff to bring up the memories. Picture: "our demonstrational tree"

A little bit higher, at each side of the trunk the couple filled in the values and functions that each of them did contribute in to their family life right now. It could be things from a wide range, like paying bills, creating security, care, or cut the lawn. The trunk was build up of themes that build and keep the tree big and strong. The themes of communication, sex and caring for children was in this part of the tree.

Further up the tree we find the branches, leaves and fruits. When we got there, the couples worked with the future and shared their visions and dreams for the family / couple. There was a mix of things that will last a long time and some that will only be a short time. It could be things like build the extension to the house, creating a secure economy, travel more, do a lot together, be an open family, help others, adopt a child, read a certain book ...

The couples could then add people who they think could recognize this in their life and further how these values and choices will affect people who are important to them.

If we had more time we could have challenged them to see if there was anything from the roots that stretched through the trunk and up into the branches and even in to some fruits. We had time to ask them to see if there were some branches that would have the tree to be too heavy at the top and needed to be cut off. Some found that some of their former dreams did not fit in to the tree anymore and therefore they cut them off.

At the end of the week all couples had their own tree of life, full of comments, colors, names and words. They had their story, their background, their contributions now and their hopes and dreams nicely together at one big sheet of paper. Much more could have been done to this, but this is how we did it with 40 Norwegian couples at a beautiful lake in Sweden at the summer of 2011.

19th of January 2012

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