Conducting interviews is an art that can be compared with understanding poetry. It’s about deciphering a person’s thoughts and statements, and working out what he or she is really saying... or not saying.

Bengt Bok, award-winning radio journalist, documentary filmmaker and professor at the Stockholm Academy of Dramatic Arts, gives us his approach to interviews. It is a blend of curiosity, intuition, stubbornness and patience. To get as close as possible, and in certain magical moments, reach into an individual’s ‘unknown territory’.

“Encounter with the Other doesn’t offer prescriptive techniques nor answers. It’s about the space between interviewer and interviewee, exploring the dynamics of an encounter that happens in all interviewing situations, analysing those tiny human decisions we make because we are ultimately... human. Encounter with the Other is based on Bengt Bok’s own experiences and in it he shares important insights: by becoming aware of what happens in an encounter with the other, we can learn to wield our personality traits and natural flaws as tools within the medium.” — RIKKE HOUD, Documentary Maker, Denmark

“My overwhelming feeling while reading “Encounter with the Other” was the desire to share it. With students of radio and film documentary. With their instructors. With all makers of news and documentary programs, really. But perhaps especially to all of the hardened pros out there who, after years of budget cuts, crushing deadlines and bad bosses, have lost their sense of the real magic that can take place between two people if we are truly present.” — LU OLKOWSKI, Independent Producer, New York, USA

“Encounter with the Other – some reflections on interviewing

Bengt Bok
Translated by Katherine Stuart

“Bengt Bok’s fine book can be read not only by someone like me, a journalistic colleague, but by everyone sharing interest in other people, in good stories and also literature. The book has literary value. I hereby recommend it strongly. Interviewing people is meeting people. And documentaries are meetings.” — ANNA ELISABETH JESSEN, Film and Radio Documentary Maker, Denmark

“Bengt Bok takes the art of interviewing to an intensely personal and rewarding level – a practical insight into the development of empathy, honesty and sheer persistence as tools to unlocking the hearts of strangers – and what’s more to the point – getting them to open them up on tape.” — TIM HINMAN, Radio Features Editor, Third Ear, Denmark

“What compelled me to read Bok’s ‘Encounters with the Other’ in one sitting was the brave invitation to inhabit the space between interviewer and interviewee, to allow the apparent silence there to resonate and find expression. I passed it straight on to my wife, a psychotherapist, as this book offers a distillation of the best of real human encounters.” — ALAN HALL, Radio Producer, UK

“I like none other, Bengt Bok can truly get under the skin of the subjects of his documentaries, in both film and radio. Here, he talks about some unforgettable encounters with various types of people. The book also gives you some insider tips on what you can do to create a detailed portrait or up-close interview of your own.” — PEÅ HOLMQVIST, Documentary Filmmaker, Professor, Documentary Film, Sweden

Like none other, Bengt Bok can truly get under the skin of the subjects of his documentaries, in both film and radio. Here, he talks about some unforgettable encounters with various types of people. The book also gives you some insider tips on what you can do to create a detailed portrait or up-close interview of your own.” — PEÅ HOLMQVIST, Documentary Filmmaker, Professor, Documentary Film, Sweden
Encounter with the Other

SOME REFLECTIONS ON INTERVIEWING

Bengt Bok
Translated by Katherine Stuart
Encounter with the Other
Some reflections on interviewing
by Bengt Bok

Translated by Katherine Stuart

KU-projekt

Stockholms dramatiska högskola
Stockholm Academy of Dramatic Arts

Graphic Design: Fräulein Design
Proof-reading: Changeling Translations AB

Print: Elanders Sverige AB
Paper: Cover; Invercoate G, 240 g, Inlay; MultiDesign, 115 g

© The Author and Stockholms dramatiska högskola
ISBN: 978-91-981163-3-5
The interview is an art form. Two people meet to talk to each other. They meet to talk about something important, or to talk about the life of the person being interviewed. Reaching deep down inside a person is a process. Being part of this process can make you dizzy, giddy.

Interviewing is a job where listening and inquiry often give us someone's life story. It's about deciphering a person's thoughts and testimonies; what he or she says or does not say. The interview is an art form that can be likened to understanding poetry... it's about interpreting, cracking codes, working things out.

An interview must not turn into a polite conversation or discussion, but should be a form of concentrated and honest communication. The interviewer must not be out to please or impress, but should be relatively confident in him/herself without being some kind of emotional superman (übermensch). On the contrary, perhaps the interviewer's own weaknesses and faults often result in a sensitivity and a capacity to be able to hone in on what is really important in the encounter that is 'the interview'.

The interviewer must be equipped with a certain capacity for empathy with "the Other". To be able to identify with
the Other’s experiences and at the same time remain strong enough to understand that these experiences are not one’s own, but those of the Other. It’s important to learn how to step into an interview with full concentration and presence, then step back and regard and analyse what is happening, and then step back in again. This allows for what is generally a necessary (and healthy) distancing of oneself, as well as some pause for reflection and repose in order to then recharge for the next ‘entry’.

If it so happens that I, as the interviewer, have a capacity for empathy and a sensitivity, it’s important that I don’t lose myself in the Other’s situation, but maintain a professional attitude in the interview – a brotherly, professional, attitude.

I have had this sensitivity myself since childhood, and in many instances, it has been a curse. However, in recent years I have understood and consoled myself with the fact that it has also been the foundation of my work and my way of approaching people. Without it, I might not have the ‘radar’ that has assisted me in my quest for the Other’s inner self. A journey that I never cease to be fascinated by, as my curiosity is continuously piqued anew.

During a walk with a colleague and similarly sensitive soul, it became apparent that we both held a common belief that we had done our best interviews when we were heavily hung over. This was when our senses were at their most open and our own defences completely crushed.
There exists a freedom in this parlous state – a freedom in which feelings and intuition have free rein. Where we can detect very subtle signals and undertones from interviewees. Any question can be asked – prestige and our own inner fears do not exist in this state.

That said, to subject oneself to a heavy hangover as a working method is a highly unhealthy and just plain crazy idea! For this reason, we must try to achieve this same sense of freedom by other means.

And that is what this book deals with. It is based on the encounters I have had and what occurred in these encounters. How can I make use of this experience to achieve... honesty? (not the truth)... and some meaning with it all... How can I prepare myself?
On the shooting range, he has a natural flow when talking about his guns. He polishes them with a soft rag and shows them off with pride.

“It was one like this that Olof Palme was shot with,” he says. “A .357 Smith & Wesson. Anyone who owned one was checked out by the police. It’s like a cannon, blows away anything in its path.”

I can’t quite read his facial expression – there’s both pride and consternation there. The revolver weighs heavily in my hand and I can’t escape feeling its power. With this thing here, I can’t be weak or vulnerable – no one would dare to think ill of me.

It’s hot, the sun is blazing and I eye off his Stetson hat. It matches very well the leather holster on his hip. What is inside him? He is a bit over 30 but looks like a boy. Where I come from, people would laugh at him and his cowboy hat. They would laugh until they saw his pride and joy – a .44 Magnum with its longer barrel... that would shut them up.

There is something incredibly fragile about him, but on the shooting range, he is in full control. He is very comfortable
in that situation; he is as one with his .44 Magnum. The cardboard target figures pop and splatter into the sand rampart behind them. I have no idea where my bullets end up. There is a tremendously loud bang, and then nothing. There is no trace anywhere – not in the hot sand, not in the target figures. Is he smiling at me?

Why the cowboy hat and the leather holster? Why a Magnum revolver?

He lives with his mother and father, in a small country village. They live in a white-rendered stone cottage and all the lawns in the area are freshly mown. I greet his parents politely and say something about the roses in their garden. Men’s magazines lie in piles in his bedroom. It feels like the room of a teenage boy. A large safe dominates the room, filled with ammunition and firearms.

“Where should we sit,” he asks me.

Where should we sit, where am I going to interview him? The sofa, the armchair, the floor? Without thinking, I suggest the floor.

“Of course, sure,” he answers, relieved in some way.

(I usually sit on the floor when I interview children.)

I close the window before we both sit cross-legged on the floor. I want to shut out his other life. Now it’s just him and me.
Far from the security of the shooting range, he begins to hesitate, claims he has nothing to say. He is silent for long periods. During the first fumbling half-hour, he mentions his older brother at least four times in passing, without actually talking about him.

His father opens the door slightly and asks how it’s going. It feels as if time has almost stood still in this family. It goes slowly, very slowly. Patience, I think to myself. I have time.

I think I’m looking for something about love.

“Can you see yourself as a father?” I ask.
“I’ve never been able to see myself as a father,” he answers after a long pause. “Never… not now and not before either.”

It is quite still in the room.

We can hear his parents moving about quietly, very quietly on the floor below.
I try to wait him out.

“I have never seen myself as a father,” he repeats. Long pause. I am silent.
“I don’t know why actually, just see myself as alone,” he continues.
He fidgets and squirms, looks at the ceiling and then at me. I nod ingratiatingly.
“Feel uncomfortable… with myself. Except on the shooting range. There are people there, but no girls of course...”
He hesitates. I wait.
“I don’t even know if I want to have a family,” he continues.
“Maybe it feels best to live alone... not like my brother. Everyone liked him.”

His brother again. Was that the fifth time?

“Tell me about your brother,” I say.

Silence.

“Would you tell me about your brother,” I try again.
“I can’t,” he answers.
“Why not?”
“He’s dead.”

Try to keep it all together, I think to myself... Don’t let go... Straight to the point... (Not too much emotion, professional, but not cold.)

“How did he die? Was it a long time ago?” Idiot! Two questions at once.

“How did he die?” I try to correct myself.
“Stop the tape recorder. I don’t want to talk about it,” he whispers.

I switch it off.

“Why don’t you want to,” I ask as evenly as possible.
“I just don’t want to.” He looks me in the eye.
“What not,” I persist.
“I’ve never talked to anyone about it, I can’t.”
“Try.”

Silence.

It feels good, sitting on the floor, close to each other. It’s stuffy in the room. Utterly silent in the house. Not a peep from his parents. What is he thinking about? He stretches, as if he is preparing himself for something.

“May I turn on the tape recorder again?” I ask.

He answers with a nod. Cautiously, I turn the tape recorder on.

(How do you turn a tape recorder on cautiously?)

I must be concrete, I think to myself… Concrete!

“What did your brother look like?”

Something happens with his face, it relaxes a bit.

“He was good looking, really handsome. Could have any girl he wanted. He used to box.”

Pause. I wait.

“He had everything... I had nothing.”
The notion of confluence

OR THE CAPACITY TO GET CLOSE

The notion of confluence, it might be termed. To get as close as possible and in a few magical moments, access people’s ‘unexplored rooms’. It’s about being yourself, believing in yourself in the situation, not trying to be someone else. It’s where you find curiosity, intuition, persistence and patience.

An interview should be guided and controlled, but flexibly, and with all the presence, being in the moment, you can muster. Being one hundred per cent present allows you to perceive undertones and barely detectable signals and signs in the answers given by the interviewee.

I have to more or less infuse myself with courage in order to be fearless enough to pursue these signs and signals. There are, very likely, many personal barriers to get past: fear of authority, fear of losing control and making a fool of oneself. Perhaps the problems of the Other aren’t so different from my own. (Is that why I am so curious?) So it is about one’s curiosity and interest winning out over one’s fears.

These signs are often signals from the innermost depths of the Other. They are often unconscious, and can be the keys to entering the psyche of the Other. These signals
indicate to us what the Other wants to tell us, and that it’s OK to ask about it. It’s as if the person has ‘flagged’ something of significance. Unconsciously, he or she shows or implies what they really want to talk about.
That the subconscious wants to tell something is not the same as the conscious mind wanting to do so.
Situations arise where, as the interviewer, I must pursue a subject that has been flagged by the person I am interviewing. The person may baulk at my questions and cannot (doesn’t want to) enter that ‘room’ by way of my questions. I can’t simply keep repeating the same question, but must think of another approach.

Not be gripped by panic or be struck dumb. I must have some form of strategy. Must find another entry that will eventually lead in to the subject I want to reach.
Reformulate questions; look for places, objects, photos or other things that might be able to function as keys for the Other.
Have patience. Wait for a new opportunity. In a few seconds, a few minutes, hours, days.

Everything in its own good time...

What does one remember and what does one tell?
What are real memories and what are false, made-up memories?
How much do we forget and how much do we want to forget?
What are we not telling?
The unspoken – does it always need to be said? Does it in fact say more by remaining unspoken? Does silence – the pauses – tell more than the words? Does the decision not to say something in fact say more than what might actually be said?

Everything has its time. Even silence has its time.

In all probability, and for all eternity, we have all carried a deep sensitivity that enables us to read and interpret other people’s signals. But few attach any great importance to this.

The notion of confluence is about concentration; about putting yourself into a state of heightened awareness before an interview. About being both physically and mentally prepared. A glass cupola descends over the encounter. At that point in time, there is only us, the two of us. It’s about listening, asking follow-up questions, (gently) leading and waiting for responses or stories.

As an interviewer, I must be ruthless towards myself and the person I am interviewing. To go deeper, in some instances, I must ‘pay with myself’.

How can you create a genuine connection with another human being if you yourself remain remote, inaccessible?

Do I have the courage to cast myself out into the unforeseen? Do I have the courage to remain humble and
to ask unexpected questions on the basis of my intuition and curiosity? Do I have the courage to listen critically to the responses given... and to my own questions? Even if I am well prepared, the actual core of the interview process should be spontaneous and unpredictable. The interviewee can then feel that he or she is being taken seriously and is an active participant in the interview – which is something that we are doing together even though, as the interviewer, I am the responsible party.

This ruthlessness demands a framework of respect for the interviewee. In the preparations for the interview, in post-processing, and in the final production. A respect for the human being – not necessarily for his or her opinions and actions.

If I can honestly communicate this fundamental respect to the interviewee, the encounter itself can include plenty of irreverence. And that may be when the absolute confluence occurs. It’s about exposing myself and the interviewee, and it is this exposure that can lead into the ‘rooms’ where dreams, secrets, longings, fears and lies exist.
A petition has been circulated in a suburban residential area. The residents want to stop the construction, recently begun, of a home for the mentally retarded.

“Will you do it?” asks the assistant editor-in-chief. “How do we make something out of this?” I wonder as my answer.

“Knock on their doors and put them on the spot. Will you do it?”

“If I can find another way – otherwise no.” I answer. “There is no other way. No-one wants to be interviewed, they have to be taken by surprise... But sure, knock yourself out trying to find another way,” she concludes with a wry smile.

Three women are behind the petition. A few hours after the meeting with the assistant editor-in-chief, I have their phone numbers. The subsequent phone calls I make are long, and the idea of taking the arguments down to a deeper plane excites the women’s curiosity.

It’s not some black-and-white view I’m after. The subject feels too serious to simply end up in painting them as
devils and we others as angels.
There must be a way of going deeper. Of approaching the mechanisms that say no. To really want to know why people are saying no – not just observe that that is what they are doing... What lies behind it?

The entry turns out to be to get those who are saying no to become interested themselves in why they are saying no... to give them the opportunity to become interested.

Three women rise to the challenge and I spend several hours at the homes of each of them.
There I find fear and dejection... dejection at being one of those who are saying no... fear of those people in the new house and of being judged by others.

"I didn't think I was like this. I've always thought that people who say no are selfish and narrow-minded... and now I'm one of them.

Thoughts and feelings to identify oneself with, to measure oneself against... (What would I be doing in the same situation? Am I as good and decent as I think I am?)
This is also about the notion of confluence. To give the person I am interviewing the chance to go deeper into their own selves, an opportunity to show more sides of themselves. And thus, the opportunity for the listener and the viewer to measure themselves against the thoughts and feelings of the Other.
An interview can be a journey into the unknown, the obscure, the concealed. My curiosity and empathy, along with my research, are the basis for a good interview. As part of the notion of confluence, I move between empathy and distance; between being fully present in person in the moment, and detached analytical observation.
What’s important is to try to understand the person I am interviewing, not to arrive at some kind of common ground.

What is the interviewer’s most valuable tool?
... the interviewer himself or herself.
It is early summer, hot. I have my tape recorder in my backpack. I’m walking through a small patch of forest. My goal is the gravel pitch I can make out between the trees. I can also make out some figures by one of the park benches that line the gravel pitch.

It is no more than 10 minutes’ walk from the central shopping area of the suburb. This little patch of forest and the gravel pitch are frequented by junkies and alcoholics. It is like a sanctuary, a free zone.

What is it that has brought them here, what stories do they have to tell?

Here they laugh, shout, fight, get drunk, get high, smoke and pet their dogs.

People’s oppressions and fears, describe and seek the cause. (Someone has imprinted that on me, I don’t remember who.)

Anton Karis and I have been here and recorded for over a year, or is it two? Sometimes once a week, sometimes not at all. We try to both be here at the same time, feels safer that way.
There is a disquiet within me that has not been there before, there is something that’s not quite right. I feel alone there in the forest, but continue on along the path. It’s hot even though it is only the beginning of June.

There are three of them there by the park bench. The tape recorder is still in my backpack. This environment requires flexibility, need to always wait for the right moment, otherwise it can all go to hell.

I don’t really want to be here today, but at the same time I can’t turn around and go back. There can’t be many more recording opportunities left, it will soon be finished.

The idea of the odds has begun to spin around in my head, I think it’s that which is worrying me. We’ve been here so many times now. Most of them are vaguely friendly. Others think we are snooping and demonstrate their contempt through silence or by letting their dogs sniff our crotches in a threatening manner.

The odds that something unpleasant might occur increase the closer to the end we get. That’s probably why I’m feeling worried and anxious, but I would feel even worse if I turned around, I know that. I am driven past my fear and step out onto the gravel pitch. It seems peaceful.

There are two on the park bench. Weren’t there three just a moment ago? I recognise both of them. One of them has long dark hair and as usual is sitting with a beer can in his hand, Stefan is his name and he looks quite wasted. “Hi there,” he lights up.
Where is the third one? Don’t see anybody in the vicinity. The guy next to Stefan is blonde, maybe 25. It’s the neo-Nazi that likes my rings. “Nice rings,” he says, and looks at me naively. (There is something odd about those eyes.) “Check out my new mobile, it’s got a camera in it,” he continues. “Watch out, he’s after your phone,” slurs Stefan. “Him?” I ask and nod towards the blonde guy. “No, for Christ sake, his mate.”

The blonde guy smiles and looks away towards the other side of the pitch. He has the sun in his eyes but his pupils are fully dilated.

I follow his gaze and turn around. There’s someone standing over there at the edge of the forest, barely visible. The third, I think to myself. I remained standing there, I don’t know why, but I just stand there looking out at nothing. The figure there in the forest starts to shout something, I don’t catch what. He screeches even louder and starts waving his arms, he seems to be angry. “Who is he shouting at,” I ask and turn back to the others. They are silent and looking towards the forest. The blonde guy has stopped smiling. I turn back towards the forest again. A plane passes overhead. I have the sun in my eyes so I don’t see him properly. He continues to shout and carry on, even louder. I can’t hear what he is saying, because of the noise of the plane.
“Is he shouting at me?” I mutter to myself.

Now he starts coming towards us, the dry grass raising dust around his feet. He is waving his arms and shouting, something to do with pigs, I hear that much. It looks like he has a jacket on.

“Run,” I hear from behind me. It sounds imploring.

“Didn’t you hear what I said. Get out of here, scram.”

It sounds like Stefan. But I don’t move. I just wait. He comes closer.

I understand that what I really ought to do is turn around and run away from here, far, far away. He is after me, that’s entirely clear. I don’t know why, I just stand there, motionless.

His face is 20 cm from mine. He is just as handsome as the blonde guy, not a wrinkle on his face, clear-cut features.

“What the fuck are you staring at, you fucker,” he screams right into my face. There is something about his eyes. It is not possible to reach them. They are unreasoning, fanatical, like they are filled with ice-blue water.

“Are you thick or something you pig,” he continues to shout.
“I wasn’t staring. I was just looking, I didn’t mean to stare,” I manage to get out.

His eyes are sort of hazy or cloudy in some way. I comprehend that I am standing in front of a person without any limits at all. I’m standing here alone, I think to myself. He can kill me without feeling anything... nothing at all. The guys on the park bench know that. They are silent. It is ridiculous but I can hear the sparrows chattering in the bushes behind me.

“Of course you’re staring, you fucker! Don’t you get it that I can do whatever I want with you?!” he screams.

Yes I get it, I think to myself and manage to get out...

“If you thought I was staring at you, please accept my apology, that wasn’t my intention.”

“What the fuck are you saying you fucker!”

(You can be damned about that, you arsehole...)

It’s hot, extremely hot. I feel sticky all the way down my spine.

“Please accept my apology, that wasn’t my intention,” I repeat. I can’t think of anything else to say, I feel paralysed. Should I run?
When I was young, I worked with problem teenagers, where I learnt to never appear threatening in highly charged situations. I put my hands in my trouser pockets, so that I could exude a certain amount of authority and firmness without being provocative. Now I’m standing here on the gravel pitch, my hands in my trouser pockets, not feeling firm at all, but I believe it is helping me to not signal a threat but more “I don’t understand”. I’m afraid, but if I run now, I can never come back, I think to myself.

Watery eyes, dilated pupils. I just stand there. He works himself up even more, his whole body shaking. In the end I get a hard punch in the face. I sway from the blow but manage to keep my balance... powerless. I remember the feeling from when I was a child. The fear, just standing there taking a beating without being able to do anything about it. The fear and the bottomless rage... the humiliation.

I do nothing... time stands still... my head feels completely empty... he keeps on staring at me... I don’t know how much time has passed before the blonde guy gets up from the park bench and walks up to us. He looks at me and gives his mate a light play-punch on the arm and whispers to him.

“Forget about him, let’s go.”
Is he rescuing me? (the guy that likes my rings).

His friend appears to have calmed down, isn’t shouting any more.

“Got a mobile,” he asks suddenly. “I’ve gotta ring my girlfriend.”

Good God, a girl too, I think to myself.

“Nope,” I answer and close my hand around my mobile in my pocket. I’m not going to let him take my mobile.

“Your mate has a new one, with a camera,” I continue. I nod towards the blonde guy.

The guy in front of me looks me in the eye, ice blue. He can’t be more than 10 cm from my face.

“I don’t want to see you again,” he hisses at me and then walks with the blonde guy across the gravel pitch towards the forest on the other side.

I don’t dare watch them go but instead look at Stefan on the park bench. He follows them with his gaze.

“He keeps turning around all the time,” he says.

I stand still. Look at the sparrows kicking about in the bushes, totally unconcerned.
“It’s okay, don’t turn around,” he continues. Stand still. The sound of their footsteps in the gravel slowly becomes fainter, unnecessarily slowly. I still have my hands in my trouser pockets.

“Are they gone?” I ask.
“Soon, don’t move... stand still.”

It feels like I’ve known him all my life.

“Now, now they’ve gone... Shit... He’s a fuckin’ dangerous bugger.”

I sit down on the park bench next to Stefan. Should I still be here? He is going to kill me if he sees me again, I think to myself. Stefan looks at me with those glassy eyes.

“If he gets really mad he’ll come back with a shooter,” he continues.

I gaze towards the forest into which he disappeared, sit on the edge of the bench ready to get up but don’t actually manage to stand up and go. I try to stop my hands from shaking while I pick up the tape recorder.

“If he’d seen that there he would have killed you,” smiles Stefan, “he hates journalists.”

Who doesn’t, I think to myself.
We sit next to each other on the park bench, I switch on the tape recorder without even thinking about it, it is probably some form of reflex I guess.

“Do you know who Bitte is,” he asks after a moment. “Yes, I know who she is,” I answer.

“We almost drowned last night, talk about fuckin’ bad,” he continues.

“Tell me what happened,” I say half mechanically when I bring the microphone up towards his face. I still don’t know if I ought to just get lost or not.

“We got tipped out of a canoe right in the middle of the channel,” he begins. “We were so fuckin’ plastered and the canoe tipped, I thought we was gonna die... I had no feeling, couldn’t tread water... fuckin’ hell... That was a fuckin’ awful thing, I’m tellin’ you, I thought I was going to lose Bitte there.”

He looks over towards the birds in the bushes. I wipe the sweat from my forehead, it’s hot here in the sun. I surreptitiously check that the tape is rolling. I’ve got the little forest on the other side in view the whole time.

“I’m dying, she screamed,” he continues. “She was going to let go... Don’t let go of the canoe... Don’t let go of the canoe, I shouted the whole time... She would have died.
I was about to freeze to death. In the end we got help from the shore, people came out with boats when they heard us screaming. I could barely get my body up in the boat that came. I said to the guy... ‘I’m letting go... I’m letting go!’ ‘No, don’t let go, don’t let go!’ he shouted. I thought I was going to die, I couldn’t hang on any longer.”

There is a rustling noise in the bushes 15 m to the right of us. Stefan looks over there, I fly up from the park bench but then sit down again.

“There goes my baby! Hi darling!” shouts Stefan.

Out of the bushes emerges Bitte, she sort of gushes forth. Long blonde hair, stout. She smiles with her whole body as she drags half the bushes with her.

“Hey there my canoe guy!” she laughs in response. “Were you in the canoe,” I ask. “Yeah, that was me.”

“How did you feel when you were lying there,” I continue. “To hell if I was going to,” she half screeches. “To... I’ve got two kids to think about. So to hell with giving up... I don’t think I’ve ever given up in any situation. But that was probably the most traumatic situation I’ve ever been in. I’ve seen people cut up but that doesn’t bother me in the same way as being about to drown. Because it was a shock, see...”
“What, watching people get cut up,” I attempt before I suddenly start packing up the tape recorder and microphone.
“Quick for Christ’s sake,” whispers Stefan.

Bitte doesn’t know what’s going on. In the forest over there I catch a glimpse of him. A bit unsteadily, Stefan stands up to conceal me and I slip away into the forest behind us.
As a child I was too scared to ask questions but I observed everyone around me, looking for signs and signals. I think I was curious about how they lived (survived), perhaps I wanted to learn.

However, I got bolder and bolder. As an 11-year-old, I started a detective agency, and along with some friends, we picked up kids we suspected were being badly treated and interrogated them about their home situations. Some were filled with joy, others with terror.

I don’t remember what we asked, only that I very often thought badly of myself. We eavesdropped at doors and peered in through windows.

Our agency was shut down when a parent reported us and a policeman called me an idiot.
Alyosha Taikon

It’s hot in the room, 12 noon, and the Venetian blinds slice the strong light into thin wedges on the wall. Alyosha Taikon is sitting in his armchair. He lives alone, disowned by his family. Martina Iverus, cinematographer, is sitting a metre in front of him, I’m sitting beside her and listening to the whirr of the camera.

We have covered close to 50 hours of interview time. As a result of my dread that I might miss something, we attempt to document every moment.

“Girls come to me in the night,” he says. I nod in reply. “They have blonde hair and they are dressed in white,” he continues. I nod again. “They come in even if the door is locked.” “Wait a minute,” I find myself hissing oddly.

He stops talking and looks at me in surprise.

“We’ll take that later. “We’ll talk about that when we film next time. I do want to hear all about the white-clad
Does he believe me?

“It should be dark outside,” I say, more to myself than him.

A few days later as dusk falls, we are at his place again.

It takes a while before a sleepy Alyosha answers the door. He smiles and lets us into the darkened apartment.

He must not become too alert. I speak quietly and gently to him as he is sitting on the bed. When Martina is ready with the camera, we tuck him into bed, wait for calm to descend. Martina zooms in on his face in a close-up shot, I sit close by him on the edge of the bed and ask him to tell us about the girls in white that come to him during the night.

“They ask me if I would like some tea but I don’t want tea... I am sleeping you know, I say to them...”

He smiles at me as he is lying there, snuggled down in his blue pyjamas.

“Perhaps they’re angels...” he continues.
He sits in his armchair in the living room in the middle of the day and wants to talk about what happens to him during the night. Intuitively I don’t want to hear his story here in the living room in the lightest and brightest part of the day and when the sun is hottest. The time of day that I ask my questions must have some significance, and where I asked my questions must have some significance, in what environment. Perhaps this is as important as the question itself. Or could one say that it is part of the question, that it in some way belongs to the question’s ‘being’?

If possible, surely the story ought to lie as close to the experience as possible. If the experience is at night, then ought not the interview take place as close to the night as possible? He dreams about the girls in white: well then, shouldn’t he be lying in his bed during the interview?

If I don’t want his story there where he is sitting in his armchair in the middle of the day, I must have the courage to interrupt him. For then the story remains untold and I can get it later when I have hit upon the right time and place. Told for the first time. Alyosha must also be allowed to know why I interrupted
the interview. It’s a delicate situation and like all other interviewees, he is in a vulnerable position. His self-confidence could easily be demolished, he might even imagine that his words do not mean anything. That I, as the interviewer, am no longer interested. Then fear rolls in like fog and he loses his capacity to tell his story and quite likely also his trust in me. That’s why he needs to know.

It would have been easy and convenient for me to continue the interview, there in the living room, in the middle of the day. But perhaps it is also my task to make room for a story told with as much insight and presence as possible.

No question can claim to be original. All questions have already been asked, but not of the same person... nor at the same time... nor in the same place. So it might not be the question itself that is unique. But in what situation and context it is asked, and to whom it is addressed.

In his armchair, Alyosha Taikon shouted at me or lectured me, telling me what he thought I wanted to hear. About the plight of the Roma people throughout history, or the plight of the gypsies, as Alyosha put it, about their collective suffering. He made himself the spokesman for and representative of his people, but not the spokesman for himself.

Biding one’s time and allowing the Other to talk out his or
her nervousness without being interrupted is creditable advice. It often serves its purpose, patience does. Sometimes it takes 15 min, half an hour, an hour.

After a total of 10 hours of interviewing, I didn’t think it was going to work. I had never experienced anything like it. After 15 hours he was still shouting and I was about to give up, but he wasn’t. After 20 hours of interviewing, he goes quiet so suddenly, amazed he looks at me. “I’ve said everything. I have nothing more to say,” he sighs.

Finally we have ended up in the present.

I think it’s important to get him to understand what has happened. That he doesn’t need to be afraid of the silence, that this is what I want and that it starts now. In this situation that is new to him, he needs support and he needs corroboration.

It feels as if we are catching our breath, it is silent in the room. Martina shifts position and shrugs her shoulders, backwards and forwards, to get the circulation going. A minute passes, maybe more.

“What are you thinking about?” I ask Alyosha then. “That I’m alone,” he answers quietly. “Why is that?” “I have no family.” “What about your relatives?”
“I hate gypsies, no gypsies are allowed to come in here.”

This is where the story of Alyosha starts.
The external and internal story

Tina has a small shop in one of Stockholm’s suburbs. Out in the stock room sits Peter from a small southern town. They were not meant to meet before the evening at a restaurant, but Peter could not wait. So suddenly there he was in the shop, six hours early and with a bunch of red roses in his fist.

Lonely people find other lonely people… are they less lonely then?

The telephone answering machine crackles in my ear.

“Hi, and welcome to ‘TeleDate’… Sweden’s new place to meet! In just a few seconds you will join the conversation.”

Young men and women calling in and talking to each other for hours… every day.
After interminable telephone conversations, some of them might brave the safety of distance and actually meet.

It’s quiet in the shop and Tina pokes her head into the stock room where Peter is sitting on a red pallet. He laughs a bit nervously.
“What are you going to do tonight?” I ask.
“We’re going to go to a little Italian restaurant where I’ve booked a table and then we will probably end up talking all night,” replies Peter.
The telephone bills often reach SEK 7000 per month or more. I was allowed to record their meetings on the tele-dating service, with all the others. In the end I became one of them, although not really. So when Tina and Peter were going to meet for the first time, I was allowed to be present.

“It was absolutely perfect, the chemistry was there,” says Peter the morning after at Tina’s.
Now they have slept at Tina’s last night. “Did you talk about this beforehand or did it just turn out that way?” (Two questions at once.)
“We had joked about it, like now you’re going to get a night you will never forget... then it just turned out that way,” he replies.

“I’ve never had as much fun as this. There’s definitely something here, this can be something,” Tina beams.
“Is it something you want?” I ask.
“Yes, it is,” she answers seriously.
“Why did you use this tele-dating service?” I continue.
“I’ve called in on other chat lines but it turned out badly.”
“In what way?”
“I’ve been mistreated by people from ‘The Hotline’, but if I go out to, so to speak, pick up a guy at the pub, then I am very reserved.”
“Why is that?”
“I’ve always been like that… been shy when I meet people directly… but on the phone I have never been afraid. On the phone, I am a completely different person.”

(Why do I let drop ‘mistreated’? Consideration or cowardice? Or… maybe I don’t want to know… Can intuition say no…?)

Later in the afternoon Peter is to take the train home. They are standing face-to-face in the hall of Tina’s small apartment.

“Well, you take care then. I’ll call you,” says Peter and kisses Tina on the mouth.
“I’m going to miss you,” says Tina.
“That’s what you say,” continues Peter, giggles slightly, and goes out through the door.

“How does it feel?” I ask Tina when Peter has closed the outer door.
“It feels hard, I’m already missing him… I’ve fallen in love.”

I leave Tina and walk with the sun on my back through the suburb. It is still warm and I try time and time again to tread on my own shadow… but I can never reach it.

After their first (and only) night together, they pass the whole thing off as a joke the next day on the phone.
The others on the tele-dating line are part of this and listen happily and interested.

“What a night!” laughs Peter. “Now we are bloody good friends if you get my drift... but we are not really right for each other,” he continues.

“I had a great time! But I agree with Peter, we are probably a bit too different,” laughs Tina.

The external story.

Alone with me later, Tina describes how violated and empty she feels. She had really believed in and hoped that things would work out with Peter. She fell in love with him.

“I was so hopeful... I really hoped... I hoped...”

The internal story.

After having recently been filled with such self-assurance, she sinks down into painful doubt about herself.

“Why did it turn out this way?” she asks me. “How could I fool myself that we were on the same side.”

The external story (the external course of events) is what has happened in concrete terms. That they talk for many hours on the phone with each other, that they will meet,
that they do meet, and that they then say goodbye. The internal story (the internal course of events) is how they are affected by the external story.

If a rewarding and informative story is to emerge and move the audience, the external story is dependent on the internal one, that which happens in the hearts and minds of those interviewed.

It is inside the person that the loneliness exists... in the subtext, where thoughts and feelings tell the story. No-one has said the word, but it is about loneliness. It runs like a red thread through the interview.

The internal story always stands in relation to the external... and vice-versa. Parallel stories, dependent on each other.
It’s very likely that every interview is full of important information that I don’t apprehend in my quest for the interviewee’s story. I might need to increase my sensitivity and receptiveness to what is going on right now. How does the Other behave during the actual interview? How does he or she move, sit...? Can what is happening right here and now in front of my eyes tell me something? Can I make use of it in the interview situation?

What happens when I ‘expose’ the interviewee to their signals and body language? If I confront them with their (unconscious) reactions and impulses? Not just silently store them away for future reference, but openly make use of them in the moment? It may be that, at certain moments, my noticing what is happening with the interviewee while he or she is telling a story or when confronted with certain questions can be decisive for the interview.

“(You sound unaffected but) each time you talk about guilt you start to squirm and rock slightly back and forth on your chair. Do you have any idea why you do that?”
“Why does your throat constrict when you talk about your husband?”

“Do you find it uncomfortable when we talk about this?”
“No, why would you think that?”
“Because your leg started to shake…”

Can this be done with respect? To spontaneously read the Other in some way? Not in a way that is calculated, but coming from myself... right there, in the moment. It’s not possible to make this into a method: it would then be calculated and planned... and a violation? Or is it always a violation?
“Come on over here, don’t be scared... Rosita will tell your fortune in the caravan!”

Rosita is a fortune-teller, and her daughter Sabine circles their caravan, loudly trying to pull in customers. That was the first time I met them. Sabine was 12 years old and I met them at Sweden’s annual Kivik market.

Four years later, Sabine and Rosita are living in a small apartment just outside Lund in southern Sweden. We’re sitting in the living room and talking (recording), sunk deep down in their brown plush velvet sofas.

“Sabine wants to become an actress,” says Rosita and smiles. “But my grades aren’t good enough,” says Sabine and goes out into the kitchen. “Will you be disappointed if it doesn’t work out?” I call after her. “Yes, I will be,” she calls back.

While she is out there in the kitchen, Rosita whispers to me...

“If she gets married, she can’t become an actress. She’ll
have to be at home – otherwise her husband will be angry…”

“Is that right,” I reply.

“I want her to marry a Swede, she’ll have a better life then. I don’t want her to marry a gypsy.” She’s still whispering.

“Why not,” I ask.

“I want her to have a good life… but I’m not marrying off Sabine yet, that can wait.”

A day or two later I ask Rosita…

“Can you tell me about something that made you happy?”

“I’ve never been happy… never. The days I laugh and have fun are when I am with Sabine, then I have fun… otherwise never.”

“Why can’t you be happy?”

“I’m soon going to be 52 years old, why should I be happy?” It’s hard to start over again.

“If you were sixteen again, like Sabine, what would you dream about then?” I ask.

She laughs at me.

“If I were 16, I’d start all over again, go to school and become a defence lawyer. That’s what my dream would be.”

“Why?”

“I want to help people.”

“And if you’d got married then…?”
“I wouldn’t have bothered getting married... I’d sooner have a job and a life.”

A few weeks later I’m on the phone listening heartbroken to Sabine’s story. I cannot get a word in. I’ve been trying to get hold of her all week. Rosita said that she was with friends in Malmö. We had made an appointment for an interview, but she never came home. Worry begins to creep into my bones. Is she still up for the interview? When is she coming home? I’m desperate and have no patience. As afraid as ever and always of losing a story. Rosita finally gives me the phone number to Sabine’s friends in Malmö. She’s furious, and tells me that it’s the number of a new boyfriend and his family.

Sabine and I have an agreement: I can record all our telephone conversations and I have done so to date but today of all days I don’t have access to the necessary recording equipment. I should wait until tomorrow, I know I should, but I don’t. My thirst for an answer drives me and in fact all I actually want is confirmation.

The first thing that Sabine tells me is that she is pregnant and that is why she has to live with her boyfriend and his family. From now on, she can’t meet me alone. Someone from her ‘new’ family must be present too, at all times. That’s the gypsy tradition, she says. She feels lost. She expresses some form of joy at the prospect of the baby coming, but also sorrow that her
dreams for the future will now probably turn to dust. Her dreams of being an actress.
She’s stuck, and it wasn’t what she had in mind. I try to support her, but voices can be heard behind her and she is forced to end the call.

During our subsequent calls, she doesn’t want to talk about her pregnancy, or anything in fact. Behind her, the voices seem to be controlling her words. Finally, she says she doesn’t want to be part of this any longer...

Damn, damn, damn!!! It’s all over. I feel empty and physically ill for several days afterwards. Over her vulnerability – and over the fact that I missed out on recording it. I don’t know what I feel the most bad about.

Becoming too involved.
The Other’s story became mine.
I must change my attitude.
I’m taking this too much to heart.
(Keep my distance?)
Reality is more interesting than my ideas

Often I know what answers I want so that the story will move the audience. When I’m preparing the interview, I can sit and wish for certain answers. This is bad news, and will end up controlling me during the interview situation. I will end up putting words in the Other’s mouth. Even if I don’t do this literally, I do it indirectly and then end up at the same point anyway in the end. What I think about the Other easily becomes reality. I will often make sure – with questions and statements – that what I expect of the Other becomes reality. What I’m looking for, I find. Leading questions and preconceived ideas often tell more about me than about the Other. I must allow myself to be surprised, must be clear of such ideas so that I can receive what comes. (Simple, neutral questions.)

I’ve always been a good listener (my mother never stopped talking). Why then do I want to put words into other people’s mouths?

It’s not about having the answers. I am supposed to have the questions, not the answers. I am not supposed to have an opinion, I am supposed to ask.
(If I’m going to be stubborn about this, I can speculate about possible alternative responses to my questions, as some form of strategy. Then, on the basis of these alternative responses, I can prepare potential follow-up questions, but this is still going to control me.)

It is curiosity, intuition that leads an interview forward and in order to have the courage to use my curiosity and intuition, I must be present (the glass cupola). One hundred per cent in the here and now, then for a moment step back out of the situation and, with distance, look at where we are heading. Then back in again, one hundred per cent in the here and now.

My thoughts must not be anywhere else, feeling must not be anywhere else. Fear and anxiety before an interview must not block my curiosity and intuition. It is okay to be afraid, but only if I also have the courage to remain present. Then the fear can become a strength. Otherwise, it will be destructive.

Dare, dare, dare... to trust my curiosity... to trust my intuition.

Otherwise it is just the subject matter, the knowledge I have acquired through reading. The subject matter springs from experience, knowledge and facts but is not a question; the subject matter is not an issue in itself. The questions I ask spring from my curiosity (about the subject) and my intuition. How I ask my questions springs
from being present and my potential courage.

For every ‘Why’ question you pose to the interviewee, pose a why question to yourself. Why am I doing this interview? Why this subject? Why have I chosen this particular person? The place? What am I after?

I put a lot of time into research before an interview. So as not to then get lost in what is often an overflowing pile of material, before the interview I need to get back to the basic feeling or idea that first awakened my curiosity… Why am I actually doing this? A driving force… an energy… a will to know. A will that has its origins inside myself – not in the material I have read or in the notes I have made.

Activate the Other and work with the responses you get. ‘What do you mean by that?’ ‘Why so?’ ‘And what did you think at that point?’ It is the Other who is to tell the story. The questions should not get in the way of the story – they are to be part of it.

Focus on an overall question, a subject. Never ask two or more questions at the same time. This just serves to confuse, and in addition the Other can choose which question he/she wants to answer; generally the one that feels the most comfortable and innocuous.
Also, the second question is remarkably often an attempt to smooth over or play down the first question. Maybe because the first question was a direct, intuitive question. A question that came out of a personal reaction to what the Other just said.

Not uncommonly, the interviewer him/herself is surprised by this personal question that suddenly pops out of his/her mouth, and tries to smooth it over with something taken from the questionnaire. Both the question and the answer are then easily smothered. Perhaps the Other would have been triggered by a spontaneous question and started to tell something personal since someone appears to be interested.

Another all too common way of sinking a question is to give the interviewee one or more response options. To confuse matters even further, it can all also be followed up with a little comment of one’s own.

How did you feel then?… Were you scared?… Or sad?… Or maybe you got angry?… That’s what I would have been. (Who cares!)

The first question is probably good and relevant and gives the interviewee the opportunity to actually tell you how it felt, based on his/her own feelings. An opportunity that is then rubbed out by the response options given. A crisis of confidence easily occurs where I supply many response options and my own comments. The Other ceases to believe that I, as the interviewer, have
confidence in his or her capacity to tell the story. (Which I clearly do not.) The Other clams up and cannot or will not speak from the heart and instead you get superficial responses out of a sense of duty.

Ask a question and then keep your mouth shut.

The opening question of the interview should be straightforward and concrete, delimited... stripped bare in some way.
It is easy to muzzle the Other into silence if the opening question is too broad, too comprehensive... too big. (“Could you tell me about your life.”) In that case I would be loading all responsibility onto the Other... (a crisis of confidence).

I can never ‘own’ an interview: in that case I would probably cause the Other to clam up. But it is nonetheless I who has the initiative; it is I who must choose the subject, the questions and how the questions are to be posed. That’s why I need to be the one to give the Other a sense of security – not vice-versa.

It might be Friday or Saturday night, I don’t know. It’s the late-night live show with Luuk. The teenagers have clumped together in groups in front of the TV. Kristian Luuk is about to attempt again the balancing act of being a listening and accommodating interviewer and at the same time trying to always remain at the centre of things. Which is an impossible equation (almost always).
By the time Swedish rapper Petter comes into view, even the cat has joined the gang glued to the TV.

Several minutes into the interview, Luuk places a large white sheet of paper in front of Petter. The last several years are written along the top edge of the paper. Petter is supposed to draw black lines from year to year showing how things have gone in his career. It might have been under the heading 2002 that he drew a black line pointing straight down into a deep valley.

“I went through a really bad patch,” he says.
“How so?” asks Luuk.
“Well... it was a lot of... private stuff.”
“Did you cry?”
“Yes, many times.”

Luuk drops the subject and moves on. An entertainment interview where, for a few seconds things heat up, and that is enough to provide a deeper picture of the rapper. Luuk could have let drop the invitation ‘private stuff’ and gone back to his written questions but intuitively the question “Did you cry?” pops out of his mouth. A question he never would have been able to have prepared. He has a high level of self-confidence and imagination, which is why he is brave enough to pose this question.

The risk is also small that Petter would query Luuk’s question. Everyone wants to be on “Late night live with Luuk” to promote themselves and their products, but
then one must also accept playing second fiddle to the programme host. Something that of course runs deeply against the fundamentals of the interview, where the interviewer’s task is to put the focus on the Other. Being oneself as the interviewer is not about being seen or heard the most. It’s about guiding the interview with questions coloured by one’s own personal curiosity. Questions and how they are framed, filtered through one’s own self.
When we put Alyosha to bed (during the day), his voice always ended up at a different pitch than when he was in any kind of chair, armchair or when he was moving. A kind of inner peace descended over him, and he often started talking about his mother and his brothers. A feeling of safety and security and reflection arose there among the billowy quilts and big soft pillows. It was a feeling that in fact never arose anywhere else and it almost always took us into the realm of childhood and his dreams. I noted that I myself longed for that too.

It is at this point that he also starts to trust in his own story. It is no longer question – answer, but a story unfolding. The entry from my side is:

“Tell me about your mother.”

In fact it is not a question but a wish.

I can also make it into a question: “What was your mother like?” Or: “What did you think about your mother?” These questions are open-ended, but they still require an answer to a specific question. She was this way or that way, I thought this or that about her. In this situation, I’m looking
for a story... he needs to be as ‘blank’ as possible.

How then does Alyosha’s conscious self, or perhaps his subconscious self, reason when we tuck him into bed and ask him to talk to us? Probably that somebody cares, is interested and is curious.

It’s important not to labour the point, but simply be honest and again tell him why I am doing this.

Whether it is film, radio or TV doesn’t matter: in bed, his stories about his mother and his brothers emerged. The stories that were deepest within him, about those whom he missed the most in his loneliness.
Do I have the courage to surrender myself to whatever happens?

If the interview is an act, is then this act to open up oneself? Open up oneself to what? Open up oneself to a sensibility such that everything can mean something. A word, a gesture, a glance.

Trying to explore the relationship between the individual and the society in which he/she lives, how the individual creates his/her experiences... trying to portray a ‘social landscape’, without assumed patterns and preconceived ideas.

My aim is probably not to make ‘interesting’ programmes. Rather, my ambition is to give an account of life as it is around me. In some form of social and political inquiry.

Maybe there is also a longing to say something that sticks out and dares to be personal, that dares to go deeper in tone and presence... within what is happening at the time.

Do I then have the courage to surrender myself to whatever is happening, do I have the courage to let go? What is it then that guides me? Is it the course of events itself?
Surrendering myself to a course of events as it unfolds requires preparation. The only preparation I know of (besides the factual, around the subject matter) is a form of concentration where I attempt to make myself as receptive as possible to the impulses and reactions I encounter and which occur in myself.

And to later, based on a possible impulse or idea, find the precision required.
We all remember different things, and each of us remember in our own way. Finding one truth is impossible. A single truth does not exist, but there may be a number of versions of it.

After 20 years the family moved from a high-rise building in the suburb of Alby to a semi-detached house. A rented semi-detached house – they would never have been able to afford to buy one.

“Last Swede takes the flag!” laughs her husband.

She moves about slowly in the kitchen. I have followed the family before the move, during the move and now after the move. Her husband has talked to me, her children have talked to me – but not she herself. How do I reach her? What gives me the right?... I want to interview her... she does not want to be interviewed.

I fool myself into thinking that we have got to know each other by now and she feels essential for the story... but whose story is it?

We have set up a time three times before but each time she has called to cancel. On the way from the kitchen to
the living room, she repeats over and over that she doesn’t have anything to say.
Her husband is out in the tool shed at the front of the house and their children, Robban and Sussie, are at school.
I have been furious with her for a week now. We sit on the sofa, I switch on the tape recorder and fuss with the microphone cord.

“I have nothing to say, not a damned thing, don’t you get it, it’s actually true,” she tries again.
“Oh don’t worry, I believe you,” I answer in an irritated and nonchalant tone and continue...

“... Can you tell me what the biggest change was from living in Alby to living here... What was, so to speak, the first thing you thought of... or that you felt?” (Simple questions!)
“Oh but I can’t tell you that,” she answers pleadingly.
“Why not?” I continue.
“Well... of course it was nice to get away from Alby.”
“Why was that?”
“It was... well... but... no... turn it off.” She hisses the last bit.
“No, I’m not turning it off,” I respond.
“... but it’s good to live here, Alby is not a good place to live in, do you understand?” She continues.
“What was it that was not good about Alby?”
“There was no future for the children, the environment was difficult. Here it’s peaceful and nice.”
Outside is the house’s little garden. It faces onto the forest, it’s absolutely still and quiet. There is a large aquarium beside her where she is sitting on the leather sofa. The little fishes appear to be drawn to her movements.

I’m racking my brain, I must get her to where I want...

“Both Robban and Sussie have said that if they had stayed living in Alby they might perhaps have ended up in a gang. Were you worried about that possibility?” I continue.

“When we lived there? Yes I was.”

“Could you tell me that... that... ‘I felt worried’...”

She looks questioningly at me. I’m starting to dislike myself.

“That you tell the story. ‘When we lived there I felt worried...’”

She answers stiffly.

“Yes, when we lived there I was worried that the children would end up in a lot of gangs and criminality and all that stuff...”

She breaks off... looks at me and continues pleadingly...

“I have nothing to te...”

“Was that one of the reasons that your family moved?” I interrupt her.
“Yes because it was no future for the children growing up there... but I can’t say everything, you understand?”
“What is it that is so difficult? Are you afraid of saying things that could be interpreted...”
“Wrongly, yes... nope, I don’t want to say anything.”
“Is this about there being a lot of immigrants?”
“Mm... there were too many foreigners there.”
“What did that mean?” I ask.

She is silent and gazes towards the aquarium. Is she afraid?

“We know of course that there are many immigrants... there are even more today,” I continue ingratiatingly.

Silence...

“How did that affect the community?” Idiot! I think at the same time as I say this.

Silence... More concrete, I think to myself.

“How did that affect Alby?...”

She speaks in a very low voice.

“There were no Swedes there, the children had no Swedish children to play with. And they were bullied and weren’t allowed to be with the others and play...” Silence... “I have nothing to say... nothing,” she whispers then.
“What would things have been like today if you hadn’t moved?... If you had stayed put in Alby, what would things have been like then?”

I’m not trusting in myself any longer. I don’t listen to what she is saying.

“I don’t know,” she answers. (What else could she say.)

We look at each other. I feel blind and excruciatingly bad, faced with myself. I think she sees this...

Silence...

Unconsciously I began to peel back everything around us. I stopped thinking, feel no anger any longer...
It is absolutely quiet in the room. A kind of compactness occurs, a concentration despite the fact that I no longer know what I want...

... or, is it just that suddenly I only want to know something about her. Not just for her to say controversial things.

“How do you think you would have felt if you had gone on living in Alby?” I ask her after a moment.

She looks at me with some form of trust.

“I would probably have felt bad, really bad... Because I felt bad when we lived there... ugh!... darkness...”
This is about her. She makes herself comfortable and starts talking. It is no thanks to me, I am just there. Maybe it’s just how things turn out… I just sit there beside her on the sofa by the aquarium and listen.

Then the interview goes into its own shell and becomes in some way inviolable.

Don’t judge what is foreign, get to know it, describe it and try to understand it.

... 

_I keep six honest serving men,_  
_(They taught me all I know),_  
_Their names are What, Why and When,_  
_How, Where and Who._

**RUDYARD KIPLING**  
_“The Elephant’s Child”_
Alyosha doesn't respond to intellectual questions, he cannot associate from questions, no abstractions.

“What does love mean for you?”
No response.

“Tell me about loneliness.”
No response.

He must be exposed to something, something concrete that awakens his feelings. Alyosha can only tell things about himself on the basis of emotional responses. He is 100% feelings.

I’m stuck… don’t know exactly what I should do... the camera is rolling. Without any forethought, the question suddenly pops out of me... Intuitively?

“Do you dream at night?”
“Yes... Yes... I dream a lot.” He laughs.
“What do you dream about at night?”
“Yes... What did I dream about last night...” He continues to laugh...
“I dreamt...” His face freezes (he is remembering what he dreamt about)...
“I dreamt about my boys, they come to me in my dreams…
Why did they have to die!... Both of them!
They come to me in my dreams.”

He looks around in despair. I feel transparent.

Several days later, something similar happens...

There is something about the patterned pot-holder, it means something. I think he has mentioned previously that he made it himself.

We are in the kitchen, it is early in the morning and Alyosha is going to make us lunch. He is talking about the red Saab that took the family around Europe. Himself, his wife Gina, and their two boys.
The camera rolls (and keeps rolling all the time). He talks and talks but nothing happens. I’ve stopped thinking, listening with only one ear, waiting...
I see the pot-holder on the kitchen bench. Intuitively and without knowing why, I grab hold of it and push it discreetly towards him and look at it so that he will see it. He follows the direction of my gaze... looks at it, stops talking, picks it up... goes to the stove, opens the oven door, looks at the roast and then closes the oven door and comes towards us. He looks at the pot-holder again... feels it... strokes it.

“I made this,” he says.
“I crocheted it myself. I made it for my wife...”

Yet again he is stimulated by a feeling, the pot-holder helps him to associate, it awakens him.
It was that summer when the rain fell in buckets all over the small province. People walked day after day, miles and miles straight ahead to take themselves out of the rain, to see the sky, but to no avail.

On one of these days, I was trudging past a white wooden house. I slowed down. The rain had let up for the moment. There was rope stretched between different points around the house. From the letterbox to the door, from the back door to the woodshed, and from there to some outdoor furniture in the garden. My Wellington boots squelched as I slowly walked by.

A couple of days later, the significance of the rope was explained to me. A blind man lives in that white house. Blind for five years now and alone in the house. Before that, he worked at the wooden chair factory a couple of hundred metres from his house. He also sat on the municipal council, they said. He holds onto the rope when he goes from one place to another. From the outer door to the letterbox, from the back door to the woodshed and the hammock.

William sits in a rocking chair, rocking slowly backwards
and forwards. The raindrops trickle down the window pane behind him. He cannot go out in this weather. In the little community where he lives, there is no one who just visits him. Those who come get paid for it.

“It would be nice if people would just come and read for me. That would make the time pass more quickly, but people are too stressed, too much in a hurry.”

The floor creaks a little as he rocks in the chair. He looks up towards the ceiling even though he does not see anything. How does he make the time pass, I think to myself.

“Time goes slowly... I don’t sit very much, most of the time I lie down. It’s better for the body to lie down than to sit...”

It’s as if he is responding to my thoughts.

“But a lot of the time it’s lonely... one thinks in the morning when one gets up that now it’s going to be a long day... but then all of a sudden it’s evening.”

“What kind of pictures do you see in front of you when you sit, or when you lie in bed or sit in your rocking chair?”
(Simple questions!!!)

“Pictures?”
“Yes what kinds of pictures pass through your mind?”
(Better!!!)
“Just about anything can pass through my mind. I wake up in the night. And then I see in front of me on the wall the kind of tool board where you hang up pincers or tongs or a hammer. The kind of things they would sell, that’s what I see in front of me on the wall. I get really frightened… and the people are directly in front of me so that I can almost touch them with my hands, but I don’t offer any. Because there’s not a single one that I recognise, just strangers… but I don’t offer any my hand.”

He stretches out his hand in front of himself to demonstrate.

I don’t sleep well at night… Maybe it’s because I don’t get out very much… I can walk a bit here at home in the garden, here I can walk alone… But I can’t go out on the road alone… but here I can walk between the house and the outhouses, there I have the ropes… There I can walk back and forth and get a bit of exercise.

“Are you afraid of death?” I ask.
“Nay, no I’m not,” he answers as the wall clock chimes once. Then there is utter silence.

No-one is going to believe that clock chime, I think to myself.

“Have you ever been afraid of death,” I continue after having waited for the sound of the clock to die away.
“I think I have been before, but not since 1939. That’s when my brother died at the District Hospital... I sat by his deathbed and he was totally clear in his head. And the last thing he said, that I heard, he recited a song, he recited... ‘All things will come, all things shall come to those who love our Lord, as Jesus never can forget his own beloved bride...’
... then he said nothing more. He was so clear in his face. Then I thought, if it’s that easy to die one shouldn’t be afraid of it... It’s my belief that one comes to something better than this place.”

He sits in silence for a moment. I move a little so that he hears my presence. He turns his head towards me... smiles slightly.

“I find it difficult to eat out,” he says then... “at big tables, one eats so badly, you see, when one cannot see.”
“What do you mean?”
“One spills things, of course (laughter). “It’s not that easy to eat cheesecake on a side plate with a teaspoon, it just tips off the plate... It’s embarrassing. Now when you get cake on a coffee plate next time, close your eyes so you’ll see how it is trying to get it on the spoon.”
“Yes I will do that.”

(The wall clock chimes.)

“Now the clock is chiming six o’clock,” I continue.
“It chimes turns, so then I count them.”
“You count the chimes?”
“Yes, my son usually rings at eight o’clock...”

The rain has intensified again as I leave him, the drops of water falling from the rope and splashing gently in the puddles.
What are you thinking about?

There is something vitally essential in his artistry, but I am not able to access it.

The pictures are stories... fragments of reality. They lie spread out all over the place in his studio. On the floor, the desk and in boxes.

After a day's filming, I'm exhausted and disappointed in myself... We have been moving around inside the studio all day. He is amiable and charming and tells a good story, but nothing happens at a deeper level... He doesn't trust me, I think to myself.

I want to get to the authentic...

We grind to a halt, and silence descends. Does he understand that I want to know... Is he becoming interested in me? One moment is all it takes, then we might be able to get closer to each other.

I ask him to sit down in the armchair he has in the studio... tranquillity, I think to myself.
Instead of stopping for the day, in my desperation I decide to switch strategy... to try something different.
(I have to do something.)
I sit down on the floor a couple of metres from him…
almost opposite him. Nod to the cinematographer Bjarne Santesson to let the camera roll and cautiously nudge the microphone boom forward as close as possible.
… Wait for some kind of void. Both our minds should be empty… empty and still… Nothing of what we have talked about previously should remain there.

I lean against the wall, there is silence…
It feels as if a new relationship is commencing when I sit down and ‘just be there’, a new atmosphere, a new candour. I sit in front of him and wait. It’s just the two of us, and Bjarne.

Time passes, I look out through the window, the evening is approaching. I think that we both end up in the same state.

“What are you thinking about?” I ask after a minute or two.

He passes his hand over his face and hair. It takes a moment before he answers.

“I think actually that I always yearn to draw… There is always a yearning… You end up behind yourself in some way and it’s the drawing that is in control… It’s what I long for. But it just isn’t possible to be drawing all the time… I’d go nuts then…”
The light falls in from the side... Again he runs his fingers through his hair.

“It’s so bloody hard on you and it’s harder and harder the older I get... drawing is the ember, the passion... It’s where I yearn to be... all the time.”

Is it because of my position that he finds something in himself? I’m sitting there on the floor, innocuously, non-demanding but persistent and curious. There are no questions in fact, it is more of a relationship.

Some days later I hear him mention to an acquaintance something about nightmares. Nothing more is said about the matter.

After a late filming some weeks later, he has tucked himself up in his bed. The camera is still rolling and I ask him to tell me what he is thinking about now that he is soon going to sleep.

It’s dark outside and the light from his bedside lamp is reflected in the window glass. He looks at me... some days previously I have mentioned to him that I would like to talk about dreams. Maybe he remembers this. He arranges the pillows behind him and looks at me again...

“Almost every dream I dream is a nightmare, it has only ever been nightmares from beginning to end.”

I nod.
“Sometimes it’s been directly horrific things. It’s almost always just about different materials and I get so close that it licks my eyes. I fly over it in a kind of flying machine. It can start with my flying this close to just gravel and stones.”

He passes his hand over his face...

“Then suddenly it becomes some kind of fucking dried out clay bed. Then maybe it is just plastic, different colours of plastic. And quite suddenly it becomes blood... scabs... the kind you get on your knees (all the time he is moving his hands in front of his face)... There are pieces of the trouser fabric left... with dust and pus in them.
I have dreamed that I’m flying over old food scraps, that I’m flying over dried-up macaroni with tomato sauce, so terrifyingly close... the macaroni pieces are as big as churches.
... It’s almost electrically dry... If there is blood, it is dried blood.”

He laughs briefly, looks up at the ceiling, stretches his arm back towards the bedside lamp and switches it off.

I think I ask questions about dreams so that the Other will come into contact with a feeling of their own, to get an entry into themselves and thus maybe the beginning of a thought or a story.
Someone once said that stories only happen to people who have the capacity to tell them.

It’s spring and it’s warm outside. She is sitting by the open window of her studio, slightly in profile so that she can look out while at the same time turn to face us.

One of her large paintings is leaning against the wall beside her. It is not finished yet. In the painting, some young women are drinking coffee and smoking around a table. They regard us with large, pale blue eyes.

“They have spring in their eyes,” she says and looks at me.

During a previous interview, I thought I glimpsed something problematic in her relationship with her father. But it turns out that I was wrong, and she just laughs at me – a liberating, un-neurotic laugh. (I thought everyone had a difficult relationship with their father.)

Oh no! What am I going to do now, I ask myself.

“Stay sitting by the window,” I request of her without really knowing why.

Can one have a thought without actually thinking it, without being conscious of it... and if so, can you then say what you are thinking?

After a moment I seem to have collected myself. I don’t
know if I have thought something. Most likely it is some form of strategy that has popped into my head.

“Sit there by the window and just look out... If you think of something you want to tell me, do so. Anything at all,” I say.

(In some way, this is a variant of “What are you thinking about?” but the actual question is never posed.)

She sits there by the window, spying, the camera rolls and the atmosphere is very relaxed. Surely a minute goes, then she looks at me.

“There’s one thing that is quite strange when you sit and look out at people like this... You can follow some of them entirely when they move about under the window. They never look up, they only look down at the ground, only involved in themselves... It’s quite strange.”

I just nod, she looks out again and continues.

“I always look up... I would never miss that someone was sitting up here in the window like I’m doing now... Now there’s an old guy walking down there with a dog, he hasn’t looked up even once. He doesn’t know that I’m sitting here... It’s really weird... Being an observer is not difficult, no-one ever stops you, because people are so bloody tied up in themselves and only thinking about their grocery bags, the kids that need collecting from day care... and their sexual relationships...”
It just came to her in the moment and it says something about her, something I perhaps never would have found out if I had asked her questions. She is in a situation, she is sitting by the window and looking out. And it is based on this situation that her observations and story are shaped.

It’s completely open, I haven’t a thought in my head about what she might tell me, no expectations, not even any desires or wishes. We are both entirely ‘blank’ in the situation. I don’t know what’s going to happen and neither does she.

Does she have confidence in me? Does she feel that I trust in her ability to tell her story? Does she feel that I am curious about her? Does she feel comfortable and secure? Is that why she is not afraid to capture the thoughts stimulated inside her head and make a story out of them. Because I am honestly interested (and because I asked her to tell me what she is thinking).

... The authentic?
Time and place also have to do with setting the scene and in the telling there should be an attempt to set the scene.

Again, what happens when I get up from the sofa, subject the Other to alternative situations? Interview at the same time as he or she is doing something. This can give new entries and awaken new feelings and memories that otherwise might not come to the surface.

She is sitting on the sofa and telling me about how she sees her daily visits to the candy counter at the corner shop as the only thing worth living for. I passed the shop on the way to her, it is only 10 metres from her house.

The interview is getting bogged down and after a while I ask if maybe we could move about a bit in the house, look at photographs on the bookshelf or something similar. She says that would be okay. When I came in, I caught sight of a bowl of candy in the kitchen... I would really like to get her to go there... She begins to talk a little by the bookshelf in the living room, about how she burned herself out... About her company...
About being on sick leave... We look at a framed photograph of her parents.

“From Florida,” she comments. (Somewhat sourly.)

We move towards the kitchen and I do a double-take in front of a large oil painting. Somehow I had managed to miss this when I came into the house. The fields of colour pound themselves into me... that cost a lot, I think to myself.

And then we reach the kitchen and there stands the bowl... she begins to sort of circle it...

“What’s your favourite candy?” I ask.
“Raspberry jellies,” she answers.

Cautiously I nudge the bowl towards her.

“What do raspberry jellies mean to you?” I ask then.

She picks one up from the bowl and puts it in her mouth, tasting it...

Pause.

“Longing... I had a boyfriend once... We used to kiss with a raspberry jelly in our mouths, sending it back and forth between us, between our tongues. Every time I have a raspberry jelly in my mouth I remember the feeling of
being close to someone...
I really miss that... especially now...

There is a presence in her voice. A presence that was not there before... on the sofa.
She looks up at the ceiling then out through the window, a light summer breeze is blowing outside.

If I’m looking for more depth perhaps I should look for more situations. Situations that would then hopefully be able to show different sides of the Other.

Interviewing a male police officer in a police car with his colleague gives one picture of him. Interviewing him while he is changing his baby’s nappy gives another.
To potentially find other entries to the policeman, I could ask him to tell me about how he deals with violence when he is on duty – while he is changing his baby’s nappy. In order to later, in the police car with his colleague, ask him to talk about his child and what the child means for him.

Setting the scene can also be to interview the Other through another person. When my ‘interview person’ meets someone else, spontaneously or prearranged, I can ask that someone to put certain questions in a way that is in the right direction for me. If I’m lucky, this encounter can then develop a life of its own, an authenticity... and what then occurs, occurs in the here and now... there... just then, in the encounter. That’s how it can be, if I’m lucky. Then I can take a step back to just listen and record.
However, I must also listen as keenly for signals and subtext as if this were an ‘ordinary’ interview. So that, if needed, I can step into the event again and ‘steer it’ back on the track I was interested in and then take a step back again.

I can also choose not to steer or interfere at all, but ‘just’ be there. Following the encounter and how it unfolds without going in and influencing it… (more than just being there). Then there is a chance of authenticity from the first moment.

The mind is unpredictable… The deeper you go, the more there is. Being unafraid to expose oneself and the Other to a variety of different interview situations and environments can provoke the mind to open up hidden rooms. Completely new thoughts can also be born out of the here and now… in the situation.
Alyosha seems depressed. He sits on his bed surrounded by piles of washing. The sun is streaming in through the Venetian blinds, there are Fassbinder-like shadows, like the bars of a prison cell, on the wall behind him, a cooped-up feeling.

Martina operates the camera from the door, a low angle. I sit on the floor in front of him, leaning against the wall. We have been sitting like this for a while... waiting. He no longer feels bothered by situations like this. I wait too, wait for something to happen in his head... I look at the shadows behind him.

"Is there a particular place you long for?" I ask after a moment.

He looks around, thinking. Looks a little sly when he hits upon the answer.

"Kivik Market," he says, "that’s where I would like to be."

The prison bar shadows on the wall begin to fade.

Summer is moving into July, his expectations are raised and we drive to Kivik. It’s raining and he talks all the way...
down there, he eats hot dogs, washed down with whiskey and we listen to Bob Dylan. “Come in, she says, I’ll give you shelter from the storm,” he sings as the rain ceases.

Would we have been sitting here if I hadn’t asked what he was longing for, I think to myself. Evening comes and we catch a glimpse of the sea and the white hotel.

We both thought he would be the first down for breakfast, but he is not here. Over the yoghurt, I tell Martina that I recently read that a conversation consists of at least 25% pauses. Does this mean that in reality we are not afraid of silence, that in actual fact we are accustomed to it, that it is a natural part of our way of communicating.

“Interesting,” says Martina and fetches more coffee.

Don’t be afraid of waiting, I think to myself. It’s the interviewer who is afraid of silence… not the Other.

“How doesn’t he come down,” I hear Martina say.

Don’t be afraid of waiting out the responses… the stories. Don’t be afraid of being silent.

I saw an interview on TV last night before I fell asleep. It was a conversation between two deaf people. Both were talking, neither was listening. It was like two monologues surrounded by an empty space.

“I think we should go up now and see how things are
with Alyosha," says Martina.

We go into his room, the roller blind is pulled down. It is dark except for the light of the reading lamp above his head. The camera rolls. (It always rolls.) He has pulled the fluffy white quilt up to his chin. He is lying still, looking towards the window and the roller blind.

“How are you feeling Alyosha?” I ask.

He moves his head a little but I don’t hear his reply.

“Do you want to go to the market,” I continue.
“Na, I don’t want to,” he replies.
“Why not?”
“I’ve got a stomach ache... I can’t do it.”

Alyosha sleeps the whole day. At the market, I see a couple of caravans. Two men, two women and two teenage girls are hovering around them. I keep myself at a slight distance, wondering how we are going to get here with the car.

“Come on over here, don’t be scared,” one of the girls calls out trying to draw us in. “Rosita will tell you a fortune in the caravan here, 50 kroner and you find out your future from Rosita,” she goes on.

In a brightly coloured dress with a large floral pattern, Rosita stands outside the caravan with a pack of cards in
her hand. At the door of the caravan is an older woman, Levina. Is this where he wants to go, I think to myself.

A gang of boys in their early teens move cautiously towards the big tent 10 m from the caravans. You can’t make eye contact with them, they seem to just pour past me. In the tent opening, I spy a young woman in a cowboy hat. It’s cold today I think as I see that she is wearing only a pair of minimal knickers and high-heeled white boots. Topless waitresses and striptease, says a sign. Now I can see more bare-breasted young women inside. The boys are not allowed to go inside, but they remain standing in the tent opening. They are silent, following the smallest movements of the woman in the cowboy hat, never letting her out their sight. There is no contempt in their gazes.

A short man in a black vest keeps watch on the boys. He tells me proudly that he only has Swedish girls in his stall.

“Don’t they get cold?” I ask.

He leans in towards me, smiles and whispers.

“That’s what makes their nipples erect.” His breath has a slight whiff of sulphur.

On the morning of the third day, Alyosha sits up. He cannot walk on his own, we need to guide him down to the breakfast buffet and get a little yoghurt into him. Martina wants to take him from Kivik immediately after
breakfast. She is probably right but I’m driven by the idea of letting him meet those people with the caravans. I can’t let it go, we are so close. We can’t leave from here with nothing. Martina goes to pack.

“Do you want to go down to the market before we go home?” I ask Alyosha.
“Yes I want to,” he replies.
“Are you up to it?” I continue.
“Yes I am,” he replies firmly and looks me in the eye.

I don’t believe him but he needs to go down there, that much I understand. He does not either want to have not done it. My cynicism must be balanced against what is best for him and in this case it feels like it’s going in the same direction. I decide that he’ll be able to cope with it.

An hour later, we lift Alyosha into the car and drive towards the market. It’s warmer today and the sea is calm. He is not going to be able to leave the car, I think to myself. Everything that happens is going to have to happen in and around the car. (Closed rooms have always fascinated me.)

We wend our way into the area with the car… slowly, slowly. After a moment I see the caravans a bit in front of me. Martina takes the camera and disappears out of the car. I continue slowly forward, stop the car in front of one of the caravans, wind down the window beside Alyosha. Martina creeps into the front seat and lets the camera roll. I go up to the older woman, Levina, and introduce myself.
“There is a man in the car whom I think you might like to meet,” I say to her.

She takes her granddaughter Sabine with her and goes up to the wound-down window. Rosita, Sabine’s mother, looks into the car and then comes up to me.

“Is it Alyosha?” she asks.

I nod in reply.

“He hasn’t had an easy time of it,” she continues.
“Are they related?” I ask.
“I think their parents were cousins,” she answers and looks towards the car.

Levina opens the back door and takes a long look at Alyosha, Sabine standing behind her.

“God will help you... where are your relatives now?” she asks.
“My relatives... I don’t even have a brother.”
“I understand, it is difficult... God help you. You have not sinned against God or anyone else. You have helped many,” continues Levina.
“No I have done nothing bad.”

Sabine has now placed herself beside her grandmother and is looking at Alyosha with curiosity. I don’t think she has seen him before.
I go a little closer, Rosita follows me.

“May God grant you long life,” I hear Levina say. “No I don’t want that,” Alyosha starts to cry... “I don’t want a long life.”

Levina smiles, a bit indulgently. As if she understands. Seems to be a warm woman, I think to myself.

“Don’t say that, you’re not very old. We are not very old, God will help us,” she continues. “God is our only hope,” Alyosha fills in. “God help us,” consoles Levina.

Sabine turns around and looks at Rosita and me.

“She wants to be an actress,” Rosita whispers to me. “My Sabine wants to be an actress.”

Sabine nods at us as if she heard what Rosita said.

Just outside of Kivik on the way home, Alyosha falls asleep. He is exhausted. It’s raining. Martina drives and the windscreen wipers beat backwards and forwards in front of me. She is angry with me and thinks that I have crossed the line and used Alyosha when he is sick.

“You only think about the film, we should have gone home directly this morning,” she says.
The next day, Alyosha is admitted to the hospital.
The process interview – a quest

The quest for a story by means of the interview is like researching in the field of human beings. The story says something about the storyteller and his or her world, and gives us the opportunity to understand the Other (and ourselves).

At times, the process and the interview situation are reminiscent of a psychotherapy session. The person being interviewed is encouraged to reveal his or her innermost thoughts and feelings. The method involves probing for potential sore points and seeking out their causes. To regress back into the Other’s history and have the courage to travel with them. It’s then decisive for the progress of this process that I don’t place myself on the outer, but am there with the Other in his or her world.

My capacity to listen is fundamental to how the interview will turn out. I mustn’t force anything, mustn’t be ‘cocky’... or know best. I must ask questions that lead to the whole person – not just to the good or evil in him or her.

Getting interviewees to talk can be the entry into their stories. (Not just answering questions). By telling their story, the interviewee is activated, and can put their world
and experiences into their own words. The interviewee must be able to tell their story under conditions in which they feel safe and secure, and to someone who is listening. How the interview then develops has its origins in what comes out of the encounter between me as the interviewer and the interviewee. A relationship where neither of us knows the answers in advance.

I am fooling myself if I believe that I already understand how another person feels, or think that I know what the Other is trying to say. Often, it is more difficult than it at first appears to understand the world of the Other.

To care about the Other is perhaps the deepest form of understanding. To take the step from observing how a person appears to be, seen from the outside; to trying to see the world through his or her eyes, based on the person’s background and experience.

In psychology, there is the idea that as a human being, I am more interested in knowing that another human being wants to try to understand me than that he or she actually does understand me. The effort and will involved in trying to understand the thoughts and feelings of the person being interviewed are in all probability a sign of affirmation and recognition that opens the door for the person to tell their story. It is a process, a movement forward. On the other hand, if I already think that I understand the Other, there is a risk
that the whole process will grind to a halt. “I really understand you” provides no opening at all. There is no curiosity in this statement, no driving force, no energy.

There is always more to learn.

If I am to approach another person’s sore points, I must do so on the basis of a genuine curiosity and wanting to know and understand – not because I am seeking the sensational. The driving force must be curiosity, not speculation.

But what is genuine curiosity in me? (And what is manipulation?) Sometimes the desire to get a good story is greater than ethical considerations. And where, in this equation, are the Other’s wants and needs?

The structure and nature of the process interview is the repeated encounter. What happens in me and the Other during this process?

Analysis is the technique used in this process. The first interview is the foundation for the second interview, the second interview is the foundation for the third, etc. Before I move on to the next interview, I must analyse the previous one thoroughly and take these experiences with me into the next interview. Signals, flags, suspicions or lies that I didn’t quite apprehend during the previous interview, but which now become apparent in the analysis.
Or questions that I didn’t dare ask, but which, after the analysis, I realise I must ask. Or stories that I didn’t dare listen to, but which I now realise I must have the courage to listen to.

The process interview requires that you stubbornly, and sometimes with a certain amount of awkwardness, approach doors that have been left ajar... To seek out different layers of time, undertones, words... breaths... silences. To insist on vigilance, to ask questions instead of formulating answers.

The process interview requires faith that there is something more there...

... in a time perspective of stored experiences.

It can sometimes be necessary to probe a sore point in order to deepen the portrait. The sore point might constitute the person having cut themselves off inside of themselves, a tragedy in the person’s life, or a limitation of some kind. A limitation that makes it impossible for the person to develop and grow. Sometimes it can be problematic and difficult for the person interviewed to talk about a sore point and it may well also be difficult to pinpoint it. The responsibility then lies with me as the interviewer to interpret the answers and stories I get during the interview so that I can lead the person towards the sore point. I do this by being curious, listening and trusting my intuition. This then becomes
more like the analysis part of the process, but in the moment.

Could it be so that the most yielding thing we have, our intuition, is that which can detect the weakest signals from the Other?

If the Other shuts me out, closes down, I must first look for the cause in myself. It might be my fear that is putting a spanner in the works, not the Other’s. If I don’t have the courage to press on, there is a substantial risk that the Other will feel betrayed and abandoned, and that a crisis of confidence will arise (now that I am finally daring to speak, he doesn’t dare to listen...).

The person being interviewed must feel and comprehend that I have what it takes to receive his or her story. If he or she starts to tell me a story from their innermost depths, it means something. I must have the courage to go with them, listen and ask further questions.

If a trust and fundamental respect has been established between us, I make the ethical decisions during the editing process – not during the interview.

Touching on a sore point, opening up and telling one’s story can be liberating for the person being interviewed. He or she might never have told their story to anyone before, or even been conscious of it as the source of their actions and emotions. 

(In psychotherapy, the theory is that a trauma can only be
Psychotherapy is about change. Someone needs a new life story. You cannot relive your life, but you can give your life story a new meaning that makes it possible to live a better life from now on and into the future.

There are more similarities between the psychotherapy session in the process interview – and differences… The absolutely decisive difference is that therapy aims to give the patient insight into, and an understanding of, his or her own life, and in the long run to make changes in it.

The interview aims to give the viewer, the listener, insight into the life of the Other in order to tell the story of an injustice, a struggle, a creativity…

As the interviewer, it is not my aim to liberate the person being interviewed from his or her burdens…

... I cannot give the Other a better life.

Perhaps the most difficult moment in a process is staying there, at the sore point, at the core. It would be easy to be satisfied with having reached this point, but then not daring to stay there but simply hurrying away before the situation becomes too emotionally charged.

(Never stop an interview just when it has finally begun.) There is a whole world of thoughts beyond the sore point; a world I can only reach if I have the courage to stay with it.

A sort of hiatus sets in... don't expect anything to happen – just simply be there.
We are so used to there always being something happening, but if there isn’t… what do we think in that case… What then do we experience?

Have the courage to stay with it, there at the sore point… have the courage to probe deeper into it.

There is a 'but'… a rational objection to this: Sometimes it is more ‘efficient’ from the dramaturgy point of view to consciously circle around a sore point without actually touching on it… In this way, I show that something is hidden there… find fragments of it… move in its vicinity, but don’t go in… remain outside, deliberately… not out of fear. Something about life is then told via these fragments…

There are also turning points in a person’s life. In many instances, these are just as significant as their sore points. I might have lived a life filled with setbacks and humiliation, and then suddenly there is something positive there… an insight… a feeling… a desire….

Is there something there that the Other wants to talk about? The story of the turning point… life before the turning point… the actual moment… and life after…

If I want to be able to detect weak signals, I must not be too goal-oriented… If I am, I will likely (probably) be blind to the unexpected, the unpredictable, that which can only be sensed if my attention is only fixated on one track, one question.
To listen intuitively, unprejudiced, unbiased, makes it easier to shift my attention and free myself from a question, if so required. To return to later perhaps. To be absolutely in the moment, but at the same time in the past.

How do I recreate events, how do I get the Other to remember, to take us back in time...

... are there key words, places, people, events, things that can assist me?

Maybe the Other might be helped by remembering details.

“Do you remember anything in the room?” I ask her.
“I remember a mirror.” She replies.
“I saw myself in the mirror.” She says and looks me in the eye.
“What did you look like?” I wonder.
“I don’t know... I don’t remember.” She hesitates.
“Do you remember what you were wearing?” I try.

Pause

“... Yes, actually. I was wearing a red jumper... and I had my silver heart round my neck. I had got it for my confirmation... Now I remember... I was very pale I thought... I also had on my silver tiara...
I was scared...”
“Why was that?”
“Mummy had gone to the movies with some friends. But he was still in the house. It was the first time I’d been alone with him… He was Mummy’s new boyfriend. They had always been together before, you see.”

“What did it look like in the room?”

“It was quite dark… I think only my bedside lamp was on… Wait, now I remember… I was on my way to lock my bedroom door, but I didn’t get there in time…”

Nothing that happens to us is ever lost?

I try in some way to go back in time from the event that the Other doesn’t quite remember. “What were you doing beforehand?… and before that?”… To then go forward again and try again.

Every question sparks a new question; every memory sparks a new memory.

What happens if I ask the Other to tell the story in the present tense? Or if I ask questions in the present tense… will the Other then reply in the present tense?

Setting the scene for the memory… to recreate the past… the past becoming the present?

“What do you see when you enter the room?” I begin.

“A woman is coming towards me.” He replies… in a whisper.


“She is wearing a police uniform and holding a paper in her
hand, she looks at the paper and then at me... ‘We have reason to suspect that you have violated your daughter,’ she says to me...” He looks at me.

“What do you do then?” (‘Keep to the present tense’ courses through my mind.)

“I don’t do anything, I’m completely silent... ‘You surely understand what I mean,’ she says then...”

“What happens with you?”

“I start to sweat and feel ill... The woman in front of me believes that I have violated my daughter... I can see in her eyes that she is disgusted by me... I can see that... no-one is going to believe me, I understand that... I feel empty... The ground starts to sway around me. I hate the woman... I want to kill her... but I am so afraid that my whole body starts shaking.”

“What’s happening now?” I continue after a moment’s silence.

“I can’t stand up any longer... I sort of drag myself to a chair... feel that I am starting to panic... no-one is going to believe me... I vomit on the floor... ‘Oh for Christ’s sake!’ she yells... ‘Is that your conscience knocking,’ I hear her close by my ear... I’m ashamed... I’m so ashamed that I break down.”

He is sitting still while he is telling his story, sometimes
with his head down. It’s cool in the room, almost cold, but he is sweating anyway.

(He was later cleared of all suspicions.)

I should in fact be critical of everything that the Other tells me. It can be tempting, in particular if the Other is someone that I have strong empathy with, someone I like or quite simply admire. An ‘ingratiating’ interview is generally a disservice to both the interviewer and the interviewee. Remaining critical doesn’t mean that I am suspicious of the Other; rather it means that I am interested in hearing ‘the truth’, and that which really means something to the Other… I am looking for clarity and depth.

How do I get access to the Other’s thoughts?

Even those with whom I don’t sympathise or whom I simply don’t like need support in telling their stories… genuine support. I am looking for something in them… I am looking for something that I honestly like or respect… a vulnerability, a driving force, courage, a smile. The more I dislike the person or what the person stands for, the more important it is for me to find in myself a feeling of goodwill towards them, however microscopic that might be… and to nurture that feeling during the interview, since it can be the key to the inside.
The smiling, round yellow face stared down at us from an otherwise empty wall. New Democracy (a former right-wing political party in Sweden for restricted immigration and economic reform) were going to move to bigger premises in Stockholm. It was during the period when that yellow face could be seen plastered up everywhere.

The district chairman stood beside me and smiled up at that well-known face.

“Except for your moustache, you are quite alike,” I say to him.

He looks at me, his hand goes tentatively to his little moustache, he looks at the face on the wall and then starts to laugh… I like that laugh… Maybe we have the same sense of humour. So as it turned out, we liked each other – there in that bare white room – even though in fact we didn’t. And the little guy on the wall got to hear the story of the district chairman’s hatred of Olof Palme, his disdain for drug addicts, and his economic criminality… and I still liked his laugh.

I am easy to see through. The Other can read me without any great difficulty. We know that we don’t like each other but if I am kindly disposed towards the Other, a trust can arise and the Other can open up. A kind of free zone is created in which we can meet each other.

Perhaps this is where I can make room for honest answers and go in deep?
... a kind of affinity... there in the moment... whoever I am meeting... democrat... non-democrat...

Listening only becomes meaningful if I do it sincerely, wholeheartedly. Sincerity means that I'm listening because I am really curious and care about what the Other has to say, not because it is assumed or expected of me that I should be.

A sympathetic attitude cannot be feigned, I cannot put it on. The Other must not look at me and see a lie. Because then no trust arises, no free zone, no getting to the heart of things... just hesitation, and a dead end.

Sometimes the Other can also find things in me that he or she can identify with, and which can provide unforeseen help.

A young neo-Nazi saw my silver rings. “Nice rings... they look old Scandinavian,” he says and looks at me with his pale blue eyes. Aha, I think to myself.

That became my entry into him. We had something in common, we both liked the rings. Through listening, I get access to the world of the Other.
An artist must trust in his or her intuition. It is intuition that creates the artist’s unique voice, personality. Without their own voice, springing from the heart and the private world, an artist can never tell a story, move or provoke. In my attempts to portray our society and people, the artist and the artist’s relationship to the intuitive is my model in the process. If I don’t have the courage to expose myself, my interviews will become stilted and I will only scratch the surface.

When my thoughts stand still, intuition should guide me. In my preparations and in the analysis I think, but not in the actual interview situation. The intuitive can only be given free rein when I listen and I am fully present; then I don’t need to think. (Concentration, good listening, and an unwavering curiosity... I want to know...)

The intellect generally comprehends the accessible, that which lies closest, that which is there on the surface. Feelings (intuition) capture that which is less tangible, barely discernible, the concealed.
Being fully present in the moment gives you powers of observation and the sensitivity to detect these fleeting signals and flags raised. Thoughts often get in the way, like a blurry filter, and obscure so that I cannot detect these signals. It requires courage to maintain this kind of presence, to dare to step in and reveal oneself.

At times, however, I am forced to break out of this state of being in the present in order to think. Something may have gone wrong, I might need to switch strategy, get tougher, kinder, become provocative, assert or stop asserting, etc. ... Then make a decision and step back in again. Or I might not need to start ‘thinking’ in order to switch strategy. If I am fully present in the moment, listening and having the courage to trust myself in a situation, it is likely that I will be able to switch strategy without thinking. I do so intuitively, with my feelings so to speak.

If I have read up on the subject, am curious and concentrated, if I am fully present in the moment, have the courage to reveal myself and the Other and trust in my intuition, I may then be able to see through ‘reality’ and understand what it means (not a truth). This might well be called the ‘art of interviewing’.

Elmer Diktonius wrote:

“Only tame birds yearn – the wild ones fly.”
How many times have I wished that I were a wild bird! But are wild birds curious?... Do they have a yearning that drives them?... Do they want to know something?

It is quite another thing, during an interview comprising a number of wondrous moments, to achieve a sense of neutrality, a courage in which any questions at all can be asked, and any responses at all can be given, quite unpredictably. That is how things can be when a tame bird’s yearning to know something becomes so strong and the Other, in some way, comprehends this.
Alyosha lies in his bed staring at the ceiling. I talk to him, but he doesn’t react. The Venetian blinds are half down, there are no shadows in the room. When the film was finished, I made a promise to myself to visit Alyosha as often as possible, perhaps once a month. But it is becoming more and more seldom.

I don’t know if it is loneliness that has made him stop talking. After all the time I spent with him I know the apartment, where the sun will be at particular times of the day and how the shadows move across the walls. The promise has not felt like a sacrifice, but nonetheless as an obligation after all that he has given. I am afraid that I am letting him down.

Why doesn’t he say anything, does he hear what I’m saying at all? His face has not aged since we filmed, his eyes are just as large but now the light in them is extinguished somehow… I understand that his face is concealing something… Something that I am not going to know…
A framed photograph hangs on the wall behind him. It is his mother (Maria). She is holding a slim cigar between her fingers. When Alyosha was a child, he asked why he was so dark, darker than all his brothers.

Because I saw a Negro when I had you in my tummy, she answered... And I thought he was beautiful. Then the colour can be transferred to the child in your tummy... That’s how it can be.

“That’s how it can be...” said Alyosha.

He lay on the bed he is lying in now, propped up with red cushions and blankets... he half lay on the bed as he recounted this story. The red take, we called it. There is a warmth in everything that is red.

Now everything is white.

I sit with him for half an hour or so. His face remains expressionless, he closes his eyes sometimes, opens them again when I talk to him, but says nothing.

I recognise all the smells around him.

I go out of the bedroom and into the living room. On the wall hangs a large framed poster from the film. The picture is of Alyosha and Gina, from their wedding. The title of the film gleams in red lettering.

I unhook it from the wall, take it under my arm and go back into the bedroom. He hasn’t moved. I go up to him, let the picture rest against his abdomen and angle it towards his face.

Alyosha’s eyes travel from the ceiling down towards the
framed picture. He looks, registers it, as it were. After a moment his face cracks into a wide smile... He just lies there and smiles.
I sit there with the picture in front of him until he closes his eyes and falls asleep. Then I hang the poster back up on the wall and go out.
A huge thank you to Lise Indahl, Peter Englund and Gudrun Zachrisson Ones for discussions about the text.

... thanks also to Susanne Björkman for her thoughts about the process interview... and to Bosse Lindqvist for innumerable discussions around this process...

Thanks to the artistic development board (KU-nämnd) of the Stockholm Academy of Dramatic Arts (formerly Dramatiska Institutet) for support and the requisite financial assistance...

... and thanks also to Rikke Houd, Tinna Joné and Fredrik Oldsjö for making this book possible.
We are standing facing each other, him with two broad-shouldered men in suits and dark glasses behind him.

Mr. Carter, what impact has hate on you? I ask. What are you? He responds.

What does he mean? Silence… Don’t know what I should say… Silence… Look at my microphone…

I’m a microphone, I blurt out after a moment’s hesitation.

He smiles – a broad Southern smile.

Well, I’ll answer all your questions. Thank you, Mr. Carter. You are welcome, Mr. Microphone.
Conducting interviews is an art that can be compared with understanding poetry. It’s about deciphering a person’s thoughts and statements, and working out what he or she is really saying... or not saying.

Bengt Bok, award-winning radio journalist, documentary filmmaker and professor at the Stockholm Academy of Dramatic Arts, gives us his approach to interviews. It is a blend of curiosity, intuition, stubbornness and patience. To get as close as possible, and in certain magical moments, reach into an individual’s ‘unknown territory’.

“Encounter with the Other doesn’t offer prescriptive techniques nor answers. It’s about the space between interviewer and interviewee, exploring the dynamics of an encounter that happens in all interviewing situations, analysing those tiny human decisions we make because we are ultimately... human. Encounter with the Other is based on Bengt Bok’s own experiences and in it he shares important insights; by becoming aware of what happens in an encounter with the other, we can learn to wield our personality traits and natural flaws as tools within the medium.” – RIKKE HOUD, Documentary Maker, Denmark

“My overwhelming feeling while reading “Encounter with the Other” was the desire to share it. With students of radio and film documentary. With their instructors. With all makers of news and documentary programs, really. But perhaps especially to all of the hardened pros out there who, after years of budget cuts, crushing deadlines and bad bosses, have lost their sense of the real magic that can take place between two people if we are truly present.” – LU OLKOWSKI, Independent Producer, New York, USA

“Bengt Bok takes the art of interviewing to an intensely personal and rewarding level – a practical insight into the development of empathy, honesty and sheer persistence as tools to unlocking the hearts of strangers – and what’s more to the point – getting them to open them up on tape.” – TIM HINMAN, Radio Features Editor, Third Ear. Denmark

“What compelled me to read Bok’s ‘Encounters with the Other’ in one sitting was the brave invitation to inhabit the space between interviewer and interviewee, to allow the apparent silence there to resonate and find expression. I passed it straight on to my wife, a psychotherapist, as this book offers a distillation of the best of real human encounters.” – ALAN HALL, Radio Producer, UK

“I like none other, Bengt Bok can truly get under the skin of the subjects of his documentaries, in both film and radio. Here, he talks about some unforgettable encounters with various types of people. The book also gives you some insider tips on what you can do to create a detailed portrait or up-close interview of your own.” – PÆ HOLMQVIST, Documentary Filmmaker, Professor, Documentary Film, Sweden

“Bengt Bok’s fine book can be read not only by someone like me, a journalistic colleague, but by everyone sharing interest in other people, in good stories and also literature. The book has literary value. I hereby recommend it strongly. Interviewing people is meeting people. And documentaries are meetings.” – ANNA ELISABETH JESSEN, Film and Radio Documentary Maker, Denmark