

Life Staging® - a supervision and group format from an artistic and narrative metaphor

About writing a book

When I, six or seven years ago, signed up for a course in oil painting it was for me to learn to paint. I do indeed, but mostly I learn to *see*, to *wake up* and realize my many prejudices, and have understood that seeing and awakening is a lifelong process. I also realized that it is the *process*, not the end product (the painting) that is most important. . You can only become an artist after years of extensive training, studies in art history and by the ability and courage to do the work personally. Thus too late to become an artist, but something more important happened. Through the painting course and by learning more about the art of painting, I realized the similarities with my professional topic. I got the words, concepts and insights that were previously both invisible and unspoken to my topic. I began to think that *artistry* could well apply to all professions, not just those we traditionally describe as artistic. In the same way that the artist makes countless color blends, practice grayscales, trains still life's, tosses, challenges, revises and study the old masters, and eventually, when the technology is incorporated, got to his personal style, I would say that the skillful therapist/social worker etc. undergoes the same development in their area. These insights, metaphors, vocabulary and philosophy of *artistic creation*, own continued painting, and the study of art has led me to gradually discover the differences between ignorant, knowledgeable but impersonal, and knowledgeable and personable artists and led to the formulation of ideas and craftsmanship and artistry in my own profession. But not only on the content, more important, I have found a language I can express myself in, where I feel at home and comfortable. A language in which I can articulate my thoughts, my practice and my approach as a therapist and supervisor, and also as a person. That's how this and other books began to emerge. This particular book is about supervision/counseling.

About the author Elisabet Wollsen

I'm a licensed psychologist and psychotherapist in family therapy.

I have forty years of experience as a clinician, including thirty-five years in supervision, coaching, education and professional development in my own company. Influenced by systemic ideas and expressive art formats since the early eighties I met with Michael White in Adelaide 1988 and have participated in several events on narrative since then. I was also Michael White's "warm-up-band" at his two days workshop in Sweden 2007. I devoted myself to narrative research in the mid nineties and have pursued art throughout my life. In addition to my regular work, I am now writing on professional books, do oil painting, developing Life Staging® and cooperate with a massai women's project in Tanzania."

Excerpts from the upcoming book, freely translated!

LIFE STAGING® an alternative format in supervision and work with groups

Life Staging® is a format that gives attention to information beyond words and also count on personal experience. The format offers a challenge to common ways of thinking about self, others and information. Life Staging® is a dance, a system in movement, both as a movement in itself and a movement away from the dominant ideas and already confirmed knowledge in a way that moves the participants physically, mentally and emotionally.

The format focuses on improvisation skills, resonance, courage and trust in the belief that these professional qualities are important for good meetings and in helping people to deal with their dilemmas. The format helps to orchestrate and explore personal and professional life, questions and dilemmas and challenge dominant cultural and professional norms and truths. In Life Staging® everyone should get something crucial out of the session, either by participating or observing the process.

In Life Staging® no prior information about the dilemma is given to the group or the supervisor, only the supervisee know what it's all about. Since there are no words initially and no external information team members needs to seek in themselves, trust their own feelings and bodily sensations and find clues in the context. Surprisingly everybody always knows what to do and the insights that come are rich, personally embodied and often unexpected. The format is about *knowledge-in-the-making (awareness)*. It can't be repeated or generalized. It can only "be" here-and-now. There is no control, no way to be either right or wrong and is not at all scary. Since supervision is a work-oriented activity, it is essential that the format feels safe, tolerant and free of performance.

About Supervision

Supervision described in this book is supervision with an internal or external supervisor voluntarily engaged in a group of professionals to support and contribute to the development of the professional work. Trainee supervision, and the like, where an experienced professional within the same profession has to support the supervisee in the job-specific skills are not discussed in this book.

Supervision is seen as a *separate topic*. Not as an expertise in the field or in the method the supervisees work in/with. Seen as its own topic, knowledge and experience in *the art of supervision*, is thus in focus in this book.

Development of professional skills

If I want to contribute to professional development, I need to be clear about what I think *is* professional development, what I "have in my head" as a supervisor/professional. So there is an isomorphism between these ideas, my thoughts on what supervision shall contribute to and the supervision format.

Based on my thoughts on important skills for professionals I think development of these skills can come about by extensive training in courage and creativity. Focus and opportunities to train these qualities shall therefore be offered in supervision. How carefully we ever may plan and try to control a meeting or our lives, we are always dependent on others and affected by circumstances beyond our control. A genuine meeting cannot be planned, but can be well prepared. There are always moments of non-control. Just as it can disturb us, it can also provide new knowledge.

Given the opportunity to try alternative actions and thinking, dare to let go of control and improvise in a safe environment the supervisees can get richer and gain more confidence in themselves and others. Life Staging® is thereby a co-creative *process* similar with the one between clients and professionals. Problems get solved when they occur, which involves an ability to improvise, learn from each other and cooperate. Theories, explanations and "hard facts" can be obtained in any other way, while practical skills are best taught in live sessions.

Supervision and counseling often come in formats that reflect dominant truths grounded on preferred theories and prejudices in the actual work place and a certain profession, thereby confirming the already taken-for granted. By becoming aware of our own prejudices and dominant truths we can contribute to professional development.

The *richer* we become as professionals, in the sense of see, hear and meet different people and problems, the better we will be able to improvise and adapt our approach to each unique context.

Philosophical positions

The overall purpose of Life Staging® is to let go of psychological parlance and theoretical explanations, dominant knowledge and thin inscriptions and get to a more emotional and playful atmosphere where metaphors and poetry can arise to revitalize and heal.

Life Staging® aims at developing professional skills, liberate and revitalize the supervised (professional), the supervisor and the group. This can come about when you move yourself and your ideas in a safe environment, in relation to a specific context. All in the purpose of activating dormant skills, knowledge, feelings and thoughts of the participants and excite the courage to express themselves even more as a person.

The format is about *connection*, that of the idea that *connection is solution*¹. If we do not feel connected, we will find it difficult to live a good life and succeed in meeting the dilemmas that arises in life. The format helps the participants to connect with their inner

¹ *Connection is solution*® (Elisabet Wollsen 2011)

voices, their bodies, emotions and thoughts, and the others in the group. As participants are encouraged to look for experiences by listening to their inner voices and values they may thus also get a chance to "attune their instruments" ongoing. The personal expressions, derived from the inner voices, experiences, knowledge's and skills, merges with the other voices, experiences and skills in ways we all can relate to as human beings. Through these *connection activities* we can gain deeper insights, increase our trust and learn from one another because learning is facilitated by feelings (and play). A good way to learn is therefore to start without words to put feelings into focus. The shared activity and shared feelings also add to the group, through the connection itself. Life Staging® is in that way also a place for good meetings with colleagues, a place which gives an opportunity to look at each other in new ways. Often participants are surprised and impressed by the skills and traits of the colleagues that they haven't discovered before. Almost always a sense of humor comes along with the difficulties that offers a relaxation and shared laughs.

A performance and a piece of art

Life Staging® can thus better be described as a *performance* being a production of narratives created together by the activities and experiences we share. Therefore this supervision format can be seen as *a work of art*. The dramatic dimension is there, with the often-unexpected events, improvisation, sharing and expression of feelings and everyone's participation in the group. With the help of the scene, we can delimit the dilemma and make it more visible in a rich format that can be viewed from both inside and outside. The metaphor of a performance makes it easier for us to keep us in an artistic language and artistic metaphors, rather than in a language and metaphors of technology, methodology and problem solving.

It's all about language, but not just the verbal. 10, 30, 60 is the distribution of what percentage matters in meetings between people. Where 10 is what is said verbally, 30 is the voice and 60 the rest. The rest is thus about my appearance; how I move, my expressions, my posture, my handshakes, the look in my eye etc. It's about physical environment; the location, how it is designed and more. It's about aesthetic; like color, form, harmony, sensation and fragrance. Timing of the season, weather and time. Connected to my past, present and future. The same applies to those we meet. Which, together, will determine if and how we will relate and connect with what we are experiencing and to each other. Life Staging® wants to develop the linguistic and artistic abilities that we all have, but may not use as often in work as in our private lives. To meet and connect is ultimately about love. About being equal. Our need for love, care, our dreams, our desires and our fears are basically the same, although the expressions vary. When we give voice to these feelings, sensations and thoughts the room is filled with aspects that has to do with human life, which we all have experienced to some degree, things we can relate to. When we laugh together, we recognize us in it. We are not the people we represent in the scene but by experiencing what it is like to feel these feelings and dilemmas we can reach a deeper understanding and so we change, both professionally and privately. Curiosity, desire and energy are often livelihoods and drivers that come out of these experiences.

The format in praxis

The format is based on the supervisee's dilemma and what he/she wants out of supervision. It may be about a family the supervisee wants to explore further, an idea the supervisee wants to try for a specific meeting, dilemmas in the supervisees work context, ethical dilemmas, strong emotions or similar.

The supervisee does not provide any oral information to participants or to the supervisor about what it's all about. The supervisee then uses team members and set up a scenario about the dilemma. Here starts the (silent) formulation of the insights, thoughts, ideas, knowledge and information the supervisee has about the dilemma. The supervisee provides direction, expressions and gestures to the participants and then leaves the "scene" to observe. One of the participants also represents the supervisee in the "scene", not knowing that he/she is. Participants are asked to remain in their positions about ten seconds, then, for those who feel like it, they can move or do whatever they like, still without words. A motion occurs between participants and the supervisor breaks after a few minutes to make room for the participants' voices.

- What happened, what did they feel, what were they thinking of, what was their perception of their role, their actions, the others and the context? Why have they moved as they did? How do they explain their feelings?

Thereafter, the supervisee can pose questions to the participants. Alternatively, one or more scenes can be tested by the supervisee. To gain another perspective the supervisee can also request a specific participant to make the next scene based on how he/she wants to organize the system. After a couple of scene changes, along with the voices given at each scene, the supervisee tells what roles the participants had, perhaps interviews them again now on the basis they know who they are.

Here supervision continues in different ways depending on what happens. Usually the group gathers for reflections and rich story development activities.

Staging and Drawing

As Life Staging® is not only a format but a way of thinking and acting we also use *drawing on the whiteboard* as a way of staging and exploring dilemmas in a similar manner. The drawer creates an image and, without having any background information, the group members make "naïve" interpretations of what they see. Through it, we avoid the psychological parlance and enable a more emotional and playful atmosphere where an alternative language and new metaphors can emerge.

The supervisor

The supervisor's task is to keep the frames, sculpture language and improvise and control the process so it becomes safe for the participants and facilitates for rich story development. This is done by short sequences, the fact that the supervisee is not participating in the scene and in the creation of an empowering and creative atmosphere and language. The supervisor shall "push" the supervisees to transform themselves and be willing to be transformed too. Not in any preferred direction, as no one has any control over the process. Nothing is either right or wrong, all outcomes of

the session are respected, all voices are heard and all participants are involved in the way they want. From this team building processes will evolve as a side effect too.

The supervisor is responsible, together with the supervisee and the group to help the supervisees get something helpful that enable them to develop their professional skills. The same is true with professionals and their clients. The professionals' (and supervisors) key talent, as I see it, is whether to get to and maintain a good working relationship, a relationship of trust that gives hope that *we* together will come up with something good. Which requires sensitivity, improvisational ability and skills of basic knowledge in the profession.

Background

The supervision format Life Staging® was a time called "supervision in the dark". In the parable of when playing with "dark cards", unknown to the players. At that moment, there is a tension, an element of surprise and vitality, beyond control, but still within the limits of the game.

After working as a supervisor and clinician for many years I was looking for formats in which I could maintain my vitality and curiosity even more. After practicing psychodrama, expressive art and projective formats I also felt a little tired to return to the dominant verbal format. My belief was, and still is, that the *format* is by far more important than the content. And that the way you *set the table* will have a major impact on the meeting and its outcomes. Therefore I started to question the dominant supervision format "talking about a case".

My reflection was that I and the supervised easily, in that format, ended up in dominant narratives, often based on theories and preconceptions of choice in the workplace, the profession, or the local (theory) context within which counseling took place. With following explanatory models leading to similar reflections, confirming the already taken-for-granted and thus reproducing some truths. I had also noticed a seemingly tiring effect on the participants when listening to endless details (about cases) in their passive role as listeners. So I asked myself;

– If I could find another format that could revitalize and activate new knowledge and skills to supervised and thus contribute to professional development?

– Could there be a different format that would make us freer and more open in our thoughts and more emotionally involved?

– What happens if we listen to information other than traditional facts, attention languages other than the verbal, dare move more in the room, dropping psychological theories and explanations?

The last fifteen years I have devoted myself to find answers to these questions. This has led to the development of a unique style and a philosophy I now call Life Staging®.

Influence

Life Staging® is a philosophy and a format derived from art and aesthetics, narrative and social constructionist thinking. It's a melting pot of ideas, personal and professional experiences and studies of "the old masters", narrative research and a desire to inspire and influence professional development.

The influence of systems theory comes from the idea of co-creation and staging of the whole system set in motion, resulting in the circular and instantaneous actions. The idea of withholding participant's from customary information to prevent too rapid understanding and search for answers in the dominant explanatory models comes both from systemic and narrative ideas. Focus on resonance comes primarily from narrative theory. From family constellations come the idea of the supervisee position as an observer, the non-verbal elements and the healing idea of staging dilemmas. A mix of personal experience of psychodrama, own narrative research and arts education has contributed to the improvisational elements of the approach, art, metaphor and emphasis on everyday language.

About information

Life Staging® thinks of information simply as information, beyond interpretations and psychological theories. Everything that occurs is seen as *information* about the dilemma, the family, a professional encounter etc. Not that anything has to do with the participants. It might be the case, but that will not be focused on. All information can be used to find alternative and richer stories, here and now. This *knowledge-in-the-making* is what we are interested in. The supervisor has an important role and responsibility in sculpting and "force" the participant into an empowering, creative and non-prejudiced dialogue. Life Staging® emphasize on everyday language in order to more easily access emotions and personal experiences and to create an unpretentious atmosphere. In using everyday language we train our selves to stay in a more rich and personalized language than we are in the professional language. We can always rely on us together, that the co-creation process will get hold of something useful. It is not the supervisor's task to know the best (more than the format), nor the participants. It is about achieving something together. Michael White talks about relating leaning forward in terms of the format and laid-back in terms of interpretations. Life Staging® wants to reclaim the words, concepts and explanations from modern psychology and focus more on values, intentions, personal skills, knowledge, courage, genuine encounters and connection/collaboration.

About understanding

Life Staging® is not about making things fit together to form an understanding based on cause and effect, or trying to see what "fits/is right" with a (so-called) reality. Such understandings often imply the idea of "when you know why – then you know how". It also often reproduces the already taken for granted perspective. Life Staging® is about learning from the embodied and contextual experience arising in a way that is helpful to the supervisee and enriches the group. Through collaboration and *knowledge-in-the-*

making activities Life Staging® transforms the participants to be enabled to offer a richer repertoire of feelings and thoughts, more vitality, more confidence and less frustration in the face of dilemmas, clients, etc. Life Staging® looks at supervision as a way to become more professional in the sense of clarity and above all to meet their clients as genuine human beings. Therefore, all the experience and knowledge that we have with us as people are important in our profession and in the supervision context. There is a "professional ghost" who believes that personal or, even worse, private experiences are unprofessional. Life Staging® looks at all human experience as resources and do not think there is any difference between clients and us in terms of being human. In the meeting we just have different roles and different responsibilities. By being in our own experience, even understood what we learned in our work, and make use of everyday language, we can easily find a different understanding, a deeper sense of being a living being. The point is that we become "richer," more human by the format. Which will appear in our casual, but still active and vital approach, the twinkle in our eyes and in our relaxed posture. I think this will lead to other types of meetings.

Voices from participants

" It is co-creating"

" You get the voices, often the silent, as the children's voices."

" The body does not lie."

" Then there was never allowed to be condescending, language is important, how we talk about those we meet"

" It receives no direct solution, but you move on, in some magical and mysterious ways".

"The format helps one to see how things are always associated with a context, to understand that the solution lies there, not just with me, it is a security".

" The joy, lust and humor will always be in this format".

" Everything that happens in the scene will always have a place in my problem, I have always found a way to move on, every time, it always contributed, always tuned into".

" It's not about acting, I'm not an actor, I'm experiencing something".

"Everyone gets something for themselves, both personally and professionally".

" Staff group has got a different attitude, it has become a completely different atmosphere in the staff group. We have become bolder, it becomes not so much polarization, with different opinions in the group that you stand and contend with, but you get on."

" You come to counseling with a hypothetical scenario, and when you go from there you are not the same person as when you came".

"At first it was scary, it felt a little weird, but then I noticed that, it happens a lot between the words, it was magical and my colleagues took the essence of my worries, but I had not talked about it and I felt that was so liberating".

" Then, to use your body, to act with my colleagues in a completely different way, is actually liberating, to crawl on the floor together, laugh together, once a colleague became Superman and came and rescued us all, it happens weird things and you have to almost experience it to understand why it is liberating, its difficult to describe".

" You learn that it is not so difficult to make a fool of yourself, because you can not make a fool of yourself, and I'm really afraid of making a fool of myself, so it was a liberating exercise, discover it does not matter, it's not dangerous".

" If I am brave, that will give more strength and security to those I meet, yes it is contagious".

" It has developed us as a group, we have become more playful, even with our clients, more

free, more mobile in the room, with ourselves and in relation to our clients”.

“ Then we started to draw, too, on the whiteboard, without saying anything either, then the group may interpret what they see and it's become so incredibly fun and exciting”.

“ There will be more than, greater than, just go past intellect and head, thinking what's wrong, what's the problem, who should do what, it does not”.

“ I usually stand and annoys me, thinking -Oh now they misunderstood, now they got it wrong, but when I calm myself, I see that I get something, I get a better insight into the person I have trouble in”.

“ When I think of lifestaging, then I get excited and I want to laugh, for it is great fun and we laugh a lot and I think that's really important, that's the first thing I think, fun, fun and lots of laughter”.

“ But what has struck me, that is so interesting, is that when you make a scene, it is like real life in some way, -Oh how can they play into the roles, without knowing, it will be reality for me, so its like that, you become so incredibly fascinated”.

“ It strikes me now, it is perhaps that the context allows things to come, because in reality, there is always someone who brakes, or I am sitting there with a veil, I do not see or I can not see, but here, where it is allowed, it may arrive.

“ You see pieces not seen before, in relationships, human impact on each other, and it's very interesting, and so much fun!”

“ This thing with arrays is about to avoid the facts, avoid analyzing, for that with facts, are just ideas, that we think we know something, and the whole point is that we really do not know”.

“ It leaves you people totally free, a kind of resting wakefulness”.

“ It has affected me that often when I have a kind of feeling, I can trust it, that it carries, enough, to enter into the situation”.

“ It has meant that I'm free, I can approach the things that I thought were difficult before, in a different way, it makes me feel free, to be able to say to people, I have no idea, what to do, free of not need to know”.

“ It has brought great ideas, thoughts, and it may not really need has anything to do with the matter, really, could be about my experiences, but that is what is so awesome about working in this way, you do not get caught in the case”.

“ It is inevitable that we get closer, when you work so physically with each other, you get to know each other in a different way than if you just talk to each other”.

“ One need not be so quick to understand, this is just to feel in, listen and, a bit like modern dance, which I like, nice to look at, because it's just beautiful. One can sit in supervision and go with the flow, enjoy, so much is happen, sometimes not until after a few days or a few weeks”.

“ I think it's important to have challenges and I will not be challenged by talking matters, it's very easy sometimes, because then you do not use, do not put yourself in as therapists, then we can talk outside yourself”.

“ What really gave me something is that I dare to be more, I dare to try some more. It has helped me to be more responsive, quieter, maybe wait to talk some more, and feel the more”.

“ With regard to the group, it's a different atmosphere, that's the same there, as with the families, less prestige”.

“ When I go from the supervision, I might not think this should I take with me, but it's an experience, which is wordless, as I think I will take with me, without understanding, and I do not need to understand, or explain, its more like a fragrance”.

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