



FROM "RECOLLECTIONS 1920-1937"

By Gösta Wennberg

THE WORRIES OF EXISTENCE

My schooling was harmonious, but I can sometimes wonder how harmonious I was myself. During my first year in school I was still a bed wetter and I was sucking my left forefinger still when I was 12. When I was to study in Lund many years later, in 1941, I had a speech defect, making me rush on long words. Mum realized that this defect wasn't good for a teacher-to-be, so she helped me find a speech trainer whom I visited during all my first year in Lund.

I think that my first deep fear of illnesses started when I was 10. We were about to go by car to visit people at a farm north of Kärda, near Värnamo. Dad was hunting a lot in this area. He told me that they had a daughter, likely about 20, who lay paralyzed in a bed. I have a quick memory of seeing her, pale and unmovable, in a narrow bed with edges.

Probably she had been sick from polio as a child; there was a severe epidemic going in 1911-1913. From that moment I couldn't get rid of the thought that one could be stricken with illness and death even as a child; I was stuck in the thought and the worries about this. - Summer of 1935 there was an epidemic going in the south of Sweden, and I remember clearly how I stood in the big room in our cottage, reading one of the Värnamo newspapers. Furthest up on a right page is a short notice about polio. The sun shines through the window towards the lake; it is a nice summer day. The notice says that the stiffness starts in the back of one's neck, continuing with difficulties in moving ones arms and legs.



The thought of this didn't leave me, it became an obsession. Still when I was in the age of upper secondary school, I started each day by testing if I could move the back of my neck as usual, if my arms and legs were as movable as before. One week later in the summer of 1935 I was invited to the Ahlburns' summer place Sätöfta by Ringsjön in Skåne. Gerd Ahlburn, a female friend, was a little younger than me and we often played together. That week was spoiled by the thought of getting polio, which kept going round and round in my head. My existence was in doubt; it was as my confidence was waning.

It had all started earlier though. When I was 11 I was depressed which was likely provoked by a throat infection. I wrote about this in the journal BARN (Children) and I will rely on that account since my recollections were very clear by then. ("Reality lost", BARN no. 3, 1960):

It begun at the age of 11, following a long and severe throat infection, but it was probably also caused by the changes during the onset of puberty.

He had vague feelings of worry, felt undefined and didn't know if he wanted to play or read. The uncertainty made him not wanting to do anything, just going around with the vague feelings. More than usual he stuck to his mother. The world seemed different since it had a new, worrying aspect, which he couldn't define. [...]

The fear was deep inside of him and new problems arose. He tried to capture them in his thoughts, tried to catch the never-ceasing stream of thoughts. He believed that if he could see the birth of his thoughts, he would also be able to grasp himself, the peculiar conception that was his "me". He was lost in a labyrinth where he tried to find himself.

He wasn't always having these thoughts. But they were coming quite frequently and fear was always behind them; elusive and throwing out its feelers.

This problem troubling him would also show in other ways. He could be on his way home from school and suddenly start to doubt: what if no one would recognize him when he rang the doorbell? What if he was living in a dream and his home, his parents and sisters only existed in his imagination, so that he could at any time wake up to something else. Or maybe he existed in a dream as well, not being real; maybe he would wake up to nothing, to an empty state of uncertainty. [...]

The child's direct-life in the world was over; the innocent contact with reality was broken forever. It was like a wall between him and the world. The wonderful directness of the summer meadow, the happiness of discovering things, everything was colored by this new insight. Reality wasn't undivided anymore, but elusive and manifold. [...]

Mom saw all this. She suffered from anguishes and depression herself during the years at Rosenlund when she was about 20. She felt very badly about seeing me this way. She took me to Dr Lundskog, who gave me "brom", a sedative medicine. She tried to make me play in the back yard; still she saw my standing in a corner of the yard, just looking out in space. But everything straightened out by the time. [...]

Probably all people have, early in childhood, been thinking about eternity and infinity - the fact that time and space cannot have an end. I remember that I often lay in my bed in the dark attic in our cottage, the room without a window, thinking about these things; I couldn't have been more than 8 or 9.

If space would, far away, have some end, then there must something beyond this end. It cannot just stop, since even an empty space is a space. It was the same problem with time; it couldn't have a beginning or an end. These were philosophical thoughts without any fear. I was born into a Christian believe and a non-reflective way to accept a God and the Christianity which school conveyed by the religious teaching and the morning prayers. I read my evening prayer and included all my family in it. But the thought of an eternity of time and ever more of space became incompatible with God being located in some heaven. Heaven wasn't a particular room, was it? My doubts were growing.

In the summer of 1935, when I was 15, my friends Kjell and Musse and I were to be confirmed, just as many others of our classmates. Dean Hjalmar Melin, who was a lively and powerful person, was our confirmation teacher. Later I have heard that he had plans of becoming an actor when he was young. He was a thrilling teacher [...]

Because of my scientific disposition, I became more and more doubtful about the dogmas of Christianity during Mr. Melin's lessons and his readings from the Bible. At the same time the dean was interesting, intensive and devoted himself, and built up an excitement at the prospect of the confirmation examination in church, and especially of the communion. I understood that the communion was going to give me some kind of mystical, moving revelation, although I didn't know how.

The confirmation and the examination went well. I also took the communion but nothing happened inside me. My doubts got the upper hand and the result of the confirmation was that I threw away all my faith in God and religion. Later, during the years in Lund, I became very interested in the religious problems; by then I understood the deep connection between man's existential situation and the idea of the sacrificing death of Christ. But I was never religious again, nor did I believe in God. [...]

SEXUAL AWAKENING

I remember very clearly when my body reacted sexually for the first time. I had been playing doctor with my friend Gerd Ahlburn when I was 9 or 10 - but this was something else. I was about 13 years old, sitting on the lavatory of the bathroom at Norra Vägen, and I saw a picture of a woman, maybe in her underwear. My body reacted in a new way and so did my consciousness. There was something appealing about it, it only came to me, and from that moment my calmness was over. Really over.

This was the start of the suffering of masturbation, the attraction of all the pictures, of having sexual dreams. To be tortured in my late teens by seeing breasts but never be allowed to touch them, to be shy and not know how to approach girls who showed no interest or initiative themselves.

What I know for sure is that I never had feelings of shame because of this. I kept it as a secret, but I wasn't ashamed, didn't believe in sins and didn't think that masturbation was harmful. No, I didn't feel ashamed because of my bodily reactions, but I was afraid that someone would find the exciting pictures that had I cut from papers that I bought in the kiosks, while in great agony. I was afraid of the views and judgment of others.

One early dream was frightening me, maybe because I didn't understand it and because my sexuality wasn't really clear to me. I was 13 years old and I dreamt that I was near a girl, naked, and touched her pudenda with my hand. That was all - but I had a mitten on my hand, and the atmosphere of the dream must have been peculiar, as dreams usually are. I couldn't stop thinking about this, it became an obsession. Finally I talked to my mom about it. I still remember clearly how she sat by the little round table between the windows at Norra Vägen, with the view towards the church, making me calm by telling me that all of this was normal.

I watched the girls in my class; their shapes, their bodies, and I was filled with longing. Still I didn't fall in love with them: they were still friends and the one thing did not have to do with the other. I didn't fall in love until the fall of 1936 [1937 would be the correct year] when my cousin Else came to us from US with her twin brother Chris. This passion were blocking me and filling me until the fall of 1939 when I was in the last grade of school, living at Talludden in Södertälje.

Until spring of 1940 I had never touched a girl, never kissed anyone. And then AnnStin came into my life!

