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Creative Strategies: The Most Embarrassing – And The Small Things How To Get More Out Of Your Characters

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AXEL HELLSTENIUS I started off by thinking about inspiration and what it is and what inspires me. I was you just a half year ago, which means I was a participant of a Sources workshop with one of my film scripts, so I was sitting where you are now. When I was asked to give a talk, I was thinking if I would want a person like me to start off by saying I was a person like you.

So I tried to put together something that is about my thoughts on inspiration and what happens when I meet someone who inspires me or makes me find my own inspiration. Like you, I'm not really interested in anything except myself and my project. I'm not so interested in the people sitting around me, or the person who sits where I'm sitting now. I'm interested only in what I can get out of it and how I can put that into my script as soon as possible. If you are a little bit like me, then maybe you'll get something out of this.

I've read all of your storylines because I wanted to find words or sentences that went through all of your stories. I think I found something. As a former participant myself, I know that most of what you're doing here this week is giving something of yourself to the others. The more you give and the better you give, the more everybody gets out of it. That's the beauty of this kind of workshop. And it's hard also. How can you find things to give? Of course, you have to read the script and start a discussion but I want to find a way to go a little bit deeper. If you're going to make something really, really good such as a film, it has to be magic. It's very difficult to just turn on the magic button and find the magic. But the magic comes. Sometimes it comes easily; sometimes it comes very slowly and it's very hard work to find it. Sometimes it comes by coincidence. Many times, in my experience, it comes by being inspired by somebody else who gives something from his or her own life, because it is from our own lives that the magic comes. It's not from watching other films. It's not from reading books. It's from our lives. That's my experience.

What I'm going to do now is work with life – your lives. That's why I can call this the most embarrassing and small things. I think between the embarrassing and really, really small things, there's the magic. Maybe we can find it here. I will give you some assignments. The rule is when I give you the assignment, you start writing until I say stop. Maybe I will ask you to read it out loud or maybe not. We'll find out. [laughter] The only rule is that you are not allowed to say 'no'; that's rule number one. Just say 'yes'; that's rule number one in creativity, of course.

What inspired me to do this? I was 15 years old in 1975 and I saw this beautiful film, a very inspiring, very good film. It was called *Chinatown*. How many of you have seen *Chinatown* and how many have not? Okay, then you will probably see it afterwards. There's a scene in the film, a scene I really can't recall very well, but Jack Nicholson is in the house of Faye Dunaway. They are to kiss or they are getting ready to kiss; I can't recall. He takes a step back and looks into Faye Dunaway's eyes and says, "Hey, you have a golden spark in your eyes. Did you know that?" I don't remember her answer. There's no close-up on her eyes. That small piece of dialogue just went straight into me. I don't know why but it went straight into me. Twenty-five years or so later, I was listening to Robert Towne. He was talking about this film and was asked about this piece of dialogue, about

this golden spark in the eye of Faye Dunaway. He said that when he was writing that scene, he was thinking about his first girlfriend. She had this very strange golden spark in her eye. So he just put that into his script. For me, that's magic. You take something small like that that might have been happening in your room at fifteen or eighteen years old. You had this girlfriend and you put this into your script and it becomes alive. It's something that moved me.

What we're going to do is an assignment. You will write something down and we'll see if this can connect to your projects later on. The first thing I want you to write down on the top of a piece of paper is: "I remember." I will say one word and you will write what comes into your head as quickly as possible. The word you should write down is: 'mother'. [The group writes / types for several minutes.]

Okay, stop. Who wants to read something about mother, something that came up that you hadn't thought of for a while? That's what I'm most interested in – an image, a scene, a piece of dialogue that is 'real' mother. Somebody want to read?

AUDIENCE I just have a string of words: color, pain, lost, stairs, kitchen, stranger, garden ... I can't even read my own writing. Shack, breast, father, summer, friend, phone on a string, sugar peas, sister, blonde, smile, pain, school, road, shop, lentils of chocolate, born, grey coat, wooden house, brown paint, shoe disappearing, darkness, small kids, mole, black and white TV, ice beer, rug, table tennis, divorce, bench outside house in the sun, big glasses, nude in the shower, voices listen through the night air.

HELLSTENIUS Thank you very much. What's interesting here is that behind all these words is probably a film, at least a scene or many, many, many scenes in these words. Let's see if you take the bench outside in the sun. What does it look like?

AUDIENCE I think it's wooden, rather narrow, a bench someone would have made to sit on outside their house, in order to be able to sit on the sunny side of the house.

HELLSTENIUS And where's mother?

AUDIENCE Absent.

HELLSTENIUS She's not on the bench.

AUDIENCE No. This is my aunt's house.

HELLSTENIUS Okay, so she has never been on the bench.

AUDIENCE She might have, but my memory might be confused with an actual photo. The bench I remember is not in the photo. I'm not sure my mother is in the photo.

HELLSTENIUS If I force you to put your mother on that bench, what would I see?

AUDIENCE She would be young and quite happy looking.

HELLSTENIUS Good. And is she with someone?

AUDIENCE With the mother of a friend of mine, a childhood friend, and probably my childhood friend's little brother.

HELLSTENIUS And what will have happened? What kind of dialogue would they have?

AUDIENCE They would be smiling towards a camera and they would somehow be full of hope.

HELLSTENIUS Perfect, good, okay. So now if you need a mother scene in your script [*laughter*], then maybe you can steal this from him. Or you can actually go to your own bench and find your own bench, find your own mother on that bench. When you're really going to find the good things, the small things, we have to search for this. And if we can really find it in our own emotions, then we can paint it out in our scripts, and of course, if it's in the script and really well painted out, it will become beautiful when we film it and stage it and put good actors in it. If it's not like that, if we don't have that emotion and put that into the screenplay, it will not come out as good. I'm one hundred percent sure of that. It is much stronger if there really is a strong emotion behind it like that. If I can be honest with you, it's no coincidence that I asked Christophe a little bit about this because I know 'pain' is the key word to this and he gave me this. I also know that it's many, many, many layers and that is something. You have also used it in your screenplay and that was why I thought about this. So who else? Who's next? Who wants to read out their mother exercise? Please.

AUDIENCE I went to Paris to be an *au pair* and I drove up there from Amsterdam with my mother. The next day when she had to drive back, I didn't want her to leave. She had to drive back to teach the next day, but stayed with me longer and longer and longer. Years later she told me when she drove back, it was the worst drive she ever had. It was so late and so dark and there was a huge mist and she couldn't stop to sleep in a hotel so she put matches in between her eyes so as not to fall asleep.

HELLSTENIUS Perfect image. Could she use that? Have you done it, put matches next to your eyes?

AUDIENCE It didn't work, by the way.

HELLSTENIUS It's a beautiful image. We can see a person sitting in the car, to just start there, sitting in the car and breaking out some matches and putting them close to the eyes and starting to drive. That is a very, very good image. Have you seen that on film before? I've never seen it.

AUDIENCE I've seen it in a cartoon. (*laughter*)

HELLSTENIUS So you can use that. That's not a cliché. It's something original and of course it says something about that person being very, very tired and very interested in getting to her destination. Maybe she's got a boyfriend and she comes home with bloodshot eyes and he asks her what she's been doing. This is a visual you can use a lot I think. Then you have a really good idea as well as all the emotional stuff. As screenwriters, we have to look for the image and for the action, something the characters can do and you've found that.

So how many of you have mothers in your screenplays?

AUDIENCE Our own mothers, or mothers generally?

HELLSTENIUS A mother as a character. There are very few, very few screenplays or stories here without mothers. There were quite a lot of distant mothers, some with absent mothers, cruel mothers and quite a lot of characters with a bad childhood that involved bad mothers. So you all have mothers in your screenplays, one way or another. Maybe you should look a little bit into going into your own mothers, or steal something from the group, things you can put into the screenplay to create an even better mother than you have there. I remember from some of the story lines—I think

it was your character, Sarah Stern—where she left her own mother. She had a stepmother. But what happened? Why? What did the mother do? Maybe it's not going to be in the screenplay, but as a writer you have to know. If you can't take it from yourselves or your own mother, then you have to steal it from somebody else. If you steal it from somebody who has a real original and true story about a mother, then it becomes stronger, I think. So who's next? More mothers, please.

AUDIENCE When I was little, my mother took me outside with her to hang out the wet laundry, and after a while she went inside but I wanted to stay outside. We lived in an apartment house that had three entrances with stairways. A bit later, I wanted to go home, as well. While I knew where the apartment was within the stairway, I didn't know which entrance was the right one. So this was the first time I was lost although I was standing right outside my own home.

HELLSTENIUS And what did your mother do?

AUDIENCE She had a friend come and call me, a neighbor. I was crying and she took me inside. She knew which door was the right one.

HELLSTENIUS Why is this a sensation about your mother?

AUDIENCE I think it's the first time I consciously remember my mother. I was something like two years old.

HELLSTENIUS And she was not where she was supposed to be.

AUDIENCE Yeah, she was with me at first and then she thought it was safe to leave me outside since I was just outside my own house. It was a small apartment house, maybe three stories with different entrances. She probably saw me from the window. I was a shy child so I wouldn't ask a stranger where to go.

HELLSTENIUS Good. It's very rare that people can remember something from when they were two years old. But some do and have clear memories from one and a half to two years and, of course, that's very interesting for a writer. You really can recall from that age and put that into your writing. That's a problem for me. It's very hard, I think. The first thing I can remember is from four or five years, and it's a memory of my grandmother and a car and a train ride. That's also something you can bring up. You can train yourselves if you use this 'I remember.' How many of you are using this as a technique? Have you done it? Yeah. Good. So you use it frequently?

AUDIENCE Yeah.

HELLSTENIUS By yourself or do you use it with others?

AUDIENCE With others.

HELLSTENIUS Good, perfect. So then you can tell us a little bit how you do it. I can also offer some tips on how you can use this technique to get deeper into your own memories. Anyone? Please.

AUDIENCE I remember that my mother would get up from the dinner table to get salt when my father said he was missing it, without him asking her to get it please. I remember that I always felt stronger than her in our battles when I was getting nasty as a teenager. I was hesitant to share intimate details with her today. As the perfect couple and family she and my father represent, it's a heavy weight on me in terms of unarticulated expectations.

HELLSTENIUS Very good. This salt scene is a very good scene. Of course, if you repeat that three times, then the first time you won't understand it; second time, it's hm; and, the third time, you'd say, "Wow, what's going on? Why?" This kind of scene, I think, can be used three times. For the audience, it becomes more and more clear what is actually going on here. The first time, it's just sort of a mystery or a secret. Could be a coincidence. No, it's not a coincidence.

Okay, are you ready for a new assignment or does someone else want to read out? Mother is usually a pretty good key word. I've very rarely experienced a group who didn't take the opportunity to write at least two pages about their mothers. Of course, it can be so strong that somebody might say, "No, I can't do that." I can understand that. Mothers can be like that. So you can say no. We can say no.

AUDIENCE I remember nothing about my mother. Are we allowed to say that?

HELLSTENIUS Yeah, and then I'll say, I'm not a shrink, but . . . *[laughter]* Maybe you should see one. Okay, let's go to the worst one. Write down the most embarrassing thing that you've ever experienced. Start. *[The group writes]*

[After several minutes] Stop. Okay, I'm a nice person so I won't tell you right away to read out loud, but I can tell you one of mine. First of all, I will give you some comments on why I gave you this assignment. It's because I think it's interesting to work on these embarrassing things. Somebody said that there are so many and that's where it starts. Somebody else can list them in order: number one, number two, number three, number four. Usually if you're forced to tell someone the most embarrassing thing, you will never have told *the* most embarrassing thing, but maybe number five or number six. Also, in writing, probably you haven't written down *the* most embarrassing thing. It can be difficult to find out what's the most embarrassing one because usually it's something we hide very deeply within ourselves. It's interesting because we're writers, and in order to imbue our characters with what we want, they have to be open, as open as possible, and we have to be open.

When we see things on the screen or on the stage or read books, we really like it when characters are doing bad things, embarrassing things because it's interesting to see how they get away with it. What are the reactions from the people around them, and how can they get out of this? That tells us a lot about the character. You throw a character into a really horrible situation and see how she or he gets out of it. That tells the audience everything about the character. In order to figure that out, we have to take it from ourselves. This embarrassing thing is interesting because for me it's difficult to tell the most embarrassing thing, but I love to see embarrassing things on screen. *[laughter]* I just love it; it's fantastic. I immediately understand what's going on and I can relate it to my own life because embarrassing things and secrets are very few. The secrets in film, the embarrassing things on film, and in real life, are exactly the same. Usually it has to do with sex or with shit or pissing or making body sounds, being naked, or saying something that you shouldn't say to someone who shouldn't hear it. I would say those are the four main categories. Am I right or am I right? *[laughter]* Does somebody have something embarrassing that is not in those categories? Yes?

AUDIENCE Shall I read it?

HELLSTENIUS Yes!

AUDIENCE Okay, I'll go first. This was at school when I was 13 or 14 years old. My best friend was asked to come to the blackboard for an oral test. She was completely unprepared and didn't know anything about geography at this moment. So I tried to silently give her some key words and to tell

her what to say. The teacher noticed, intervened and shouted at me and became red in his face, calling me by my family name only. "I will take you out in the schoolyard by your hair and throw cat shit on you." I was completely shocked.

HELLSTENIUS Good. But is this very embarrassing? For him, perhaps. I can understand it's a horrible scene. It's a teacher doing or saying something he shouldn't do.

AUDIENCE It was embarrassing for me.

HELLSTENIUS I can understand since it was in front of your peers, all the students. But you were doing the right thing in a way. You were helping somebody and that's a good thing. So when we see that on the screen, we think, "Wow, this and that character really remembered how horrible the teacher was." But . . .

AUDIENCE I was not brave enough to write an embarrassing story.

HELLSTENIUS That embarrassing thing can be many things. I can tell you that I was picked up by a girl once. I was not that young; I was in my early 20s. She took me to her office. I didn't really know what was going on. She sat me on the sofa and we started kissing. I was so excited that I suddenly came. So everything was wet and I was, you know walking like that [*laughter*] trying to hide that and that was, of course, impossible. I can tell you that was among the most embarrassing things.

AUDIENCE Is it in one of your screenplays now?

HELLSTENIUS Yes, I think it will come when I pull from these embarrassing things, when everything falls down.

AUDIENCE There's a scene like that from the TV series *Friends* between Rachel and Ross, but it was a juice box.

AUDIENCE Also from the film *American Pie*.

AUDIENCE What you're saying is that if she feels something embarrassing [referring to the woman yelled at by her teacher], it doesn't mean that the audience will feel the same.

HELLSTENIUS That's true. So this is embarrassing for you as a young student, of course. But when you see that scene, then it will be a mixture of emotions from the audience.

AUDIENCE Can I just add something because I'm very interested in that. I think there are some things that don't need any explanation. So what you just said, we would immediately understand the embarrassment of the character. In a story like that, you would have to build up the character beforehand so that we understand her embarrassment. We could feel equally embarrassed if the build-up is there.

HELLSTENIUS Of course. That's one hundred percent correct.

AUDIENCE That's also an interesting point about the writing, to make the audience understand what the character's feeling.

AUDIENCE This is something I want to tell. I'm at a birthday party and I'm the only boy. There are only girls, around 13 years of age. There are many grown-ups and they are mostly upper-class,

military parents. We are eating a lot of pieces of bread, small canapés. I ate 37 of them. *(laughter)* It's getting more and more quiet as I'm eating. I look up and everyone is laughing at me.

HELLSTENIUS Somebody counted them all, all 37?

AUDIENCE Yeah. So in my interpretation—and I understood it somehow—I was a working-class boy. That was social knowledge I figured out many years later. That was my first experience of being confronted with the upper class. Today, even to think about it, makes me embarrassed but I don't know if it would function in a film.

HELLSTENIUS I think it's a hundred percent like you said. If you set it up, we would see his background and how he behaves, then it's very easy to understand. I'm from a place in Norway called Bygdøy, which is a very upper-class place where rich people live but I'm not among them. There are normal people there also. But when I tell people where I'm from, people start talking back to me because there is a lot of prejudice.

One woman told me a very funny story. She had a boyfriend who lived in a very big house in Bygdøy, and he invited her over for dinner. Immediately, when she came into the house, she felt she had done something wrong. She didn't bring indoor shoes. She was walking in her socks and everybody else had indoor shoes. The mother said, "Well, usually when we have Sunday dinner, we meet here in the third living room by the big grand piano where we have a little drink." The mother and the father and the boy and maybe some aunts or whatever, brothers, sisters, took a bit of sherry from a silver tray. And the woman lifted her glass high and said, "Cheers!" And someone said, "Stop, stop, stop. No, no, no, no. Here, we do like that," and a glass was held up to the nose and then someone said, "Cheers." Okay, they tried one more time. That was the first and last dinner she had at that house.

So if you set that up, you can see where she comes from and it's wrong what she did. She was in her 50s when she told me this story, and this had happened when she was in her 20s. So thirty years had gone by and she still remembered everything about the scene, what the mother looked like, what she was wearing, where the piano stood, the taste of the drink. The emotion from that scene was still sitting inside her. When we put stuff like this in our screenplays, it's very, very strong and it comes out in the reading and also on the screen. So is there somebody else who would like to tell an embarrassing story?

AUDIENCE I have something that happened at a film festival that's maybe funny. They invited me to sing at this film festival for the awards ceremony in this big, big theatre. It had to be a song from a film, so in the end I chose the song from *Goldfinger*, you know from James Bond. It was also being televised, so all the people were lit for TV and they were all film people.

But the monitor system was not working. I was wearing this white suit and from the moment it started, I realised I couldn't hear the brass quartet that would play the first notes. You could only start singing the right note if you hear the brass. I didn't hear the brass so I realised I started to sing the wrong notes while seeing all these faces of all these people. I wanted to evaporate, let's say. But I realised I still had to finish the whole song. And it was like ages. I had to find my way to the right note. I thought I would look back to the guitar player, but he was also so embarrassed. *(laughter)*

HELLSTENIUS Three minutes of horror. Yeah, that's good. That's brilliant. So it's not just canapés. It can be in the classroom, singing on stage. So good, perfect. Were some of you in my list of embarrassing things? Yes.

AUDIENCE I was 17 years old, and my boyfriend and I were invited to my father's house, my father and my stepmother's. It was to present my new boyfriend. My father had been cooking all day and the table was nicely laid and there was food and wine and everything, and he said in a very loud voice that he would present himself to my boyfriend. After that, he was silent and avoided us. My stepmother wasn't in the room. At the moment he got to the table, he was off-balance and I knew that he was pissed. He grabbed the table to save himself but he fell and the whole table fell over him before my boyfriend was even presented. Then my stepmother came into the room and I thought, "Please help me." But her reaction was as if this were totally normal.

AUDIENCE Could you ever get married?

AUDIENCE It took time. *[laughter]*

AUDIENCE Not to that boy.

HELLSTENIUS That's a good scene.

AUDIENCE I want to read one too. I don't remember all the details since it was told to me, but I remember the feeling. My father was a political prisoner for five years during the Shah's reign in Iran. He went to prison when I was one and a half. I only remembered him from the visits in prison. Then, when I was 6 ½ or 7, there was the Revolution and all the prisoners were released. I didn't know that this was the day he was released but everyone else knew that. I came home from school and everyone was in the street in front of the house preparing to clap as a sign of solidarity for him. There were about fifty or a hundred people standing in the street, and I came home and they started clapping for me and for the fact that my father was released. They were happy for me. There were also two little boys whose father was killed in the war. They were playmates of mine. We had something in common because our fathers were not there. I was so embarrassed that my father was now coming home and their father would never come that I ran away and hid behind the curtains. I remember this feeling and the street and the kids but . . .

HELLSTENIUS Can you tell us where the feeling comes from? Where is it in your body?

AUDIENCE Here, in the middle of my breast.

HELLSTENIUS Is it cold? Is it warm? What is the feeling?

AUDIENCE It's something that embarrassed me but also made me proud that I was having this feeling for these boys. It's an interesting feeling. Normally, when you're embarrassed, it's nothing very nice. You can laugh about it when you're older. It's something that embarrasses me and makes me sad at the same time but not in a bad way.

HELLSTENIUS I know it's hard but it's also interesting to go deeper to see where it is: Is it here? Is it here? Is it here? Is it hot? Is it cold? Is it numb? Are there flames? How is that feeling?

AUDIENCE While I was telling this, I became hotter and hotter.

HELLSTENIUS Showing emotions like that is impossible on film but you can actually put that into dialogue where you have a character that describes these feelings. You can camouflage it in a question, perhaps asking about this feeling of flames coming out of you, and then we understand. Then we can get that feeling, some of us. Maybe not everybody but some will immediately feel the same thing.

AUDIENCE If you feel angry when embarrassed, you can feel that anger [man with story of canapés]. You're trapped. In my situation, I felt trapped and angry. I ran away. Later I was confronted with the girls. They tried to put me down, saying I came from the lower class in front of all the people there.

HELLSTENIUS It's no problem to eat 37 of those things, but you trespassed this kind of etiquette.

AUDIENCE Speaking of food, I have another story. It's not what I wrote but it's a bit like sidestepped embarrassment or something. I was invited to a wedding in Indonesia and I was the only non-Indonesian. There was so much food because there are so many dishes brought out continuously. So you take some of each thing. I ate so much, I couldn't eat anymore but it kept coming. At the end, they came out with a pyramid of white rice and asked me to take some first. It was a bit of an isolated place so there weren't many foreigners. At that point, I couldn't eat anything else at all but I thought I had to force myself. So I asked for a very little bowl. Then it got very strange because I had embarrassed the entire family because the tradition is that they bring out all this food and then they bring out this white rice, which is not considered very good food, an enormous amount. You're supposed to say you don't want any because you had so much of the good food. [laughter] So if you take the 'cheap' stuff, it means that you didn't have enough of the good food so you have to have some of this nothing food to feel full. So believe it or not, they had to heat up and bring out all the dishes again. The family was totally embarrassed.

HELLSTENIUS And after that, you read all the handbooks about what's going on in that culture. [laughter] I remember many, many stories. I had a similar experience in Nepal. I was traveling and they had their Christmas, which is not Christmas. My wife-to-be and I were invited by a family to their home. I thought it was just for tea. So we had an enormous meal before we went there. I'm an eater. It's impossible for me to leave a plate of food before me without eating it all. I just can't do it. Even if I'm full and it's too much, I eat it all. So I was vomiting for a couple of hours. So who has a sex story here?

AUDIENCE I do.

HELLSTENIUS Perfect.

AUDIENCE I was 12 years old and was staying at my uncle's home. I was allowed to watch television until late at night because he didn't care. I was watching a concert. I heard my uncle and his wife having sex in the next room, and I turned down the television a little bit so I could hear. I was hearing squeaking. I didn't want to leave the dining room because I was watching the concert. I was watching the concert and listening to them and was having the best time of my life. I'm twelve and watching Madonna on television and in the background, I can hear my uncle and his wife. Great stuff. All of a sudden, they came out of their room completely naked and I was frozen. I knew they would know that I had heard them. They couldn't see me and the television was mute and I was sitting there. They went into the kitchen; they didn't notice me. I was watching them and thinking, "Don't notice me; don't notice me." They're walking around the kitchen, opening the fridge, drinking some wine. He's singing and they're continuing doing their stuff in the kitchen and I continue to sit there, "Don't notice me; don't notice me." They finished their stuff and drank some wine, ate some pickles and stuff like that. They went back to their room and she walks past me and doesn't notice me. But then my uncle walks by and sees me and gives me a look. And he says, "I don't fucking believe this. We'll talk about this later." He went to his room and I continued watching television. [laughter] Alone.

HELLSTENIUS Perfect scene. If you wrote that scene for a film it would be even better if you brought home a boy or you would have two twelve-year-olds sitting there so you have a sort of mirror on the relationship.

AUDIENCE I don't fucking believe it. Watching Madonna. *[laughter]*

AUDIENCE I told you Madonna is bad for you!

HELLSTENIUS We were also having some fun in the living room once when the kids were small. Suddenly my wife froze and said, "Sshhhh." Our four-year-old daughter was standing in the doorway. She had probably been there for a while. She was pointing at us and breathing hard and said, "I know what you're doing! But I don't remember what it's called!" That was a little oops.

AUDIENCE Did you tell her what it was called?

HELLSTENIUS Not at that time, no. That's a classic.

AUDIENCE My parents used to hide porn movies on videotapes behind books or the Bible so we kids couldn't find them. *[laughter]* I had friends over and we grabbed a videotape with a blank cover with no writing on it. My friend asked me what it was, and I told her it was probably some movie or something. So we decided to see what it was. We found this whole treasure box of my parents, all these hidden porn movies. Of course, we didn't put it back in the right place and everything was mixed up. I was in my bedroom and I heard my father ask my mother if she had watched one of those movies because something was strange. *[laughter]*

HELLSTENIUS Perfect. Yeah, we can just continue with this through the weekend. Does anyone want to have a last go?

AUDIENCE I have a very short story. I was with my girlfriend in a very old, very nice apartment. We smoked a small spliff and put on some music. There was a sound from the wall, a boom, boom, boom, very loud, somebody fucking on the other side of the wall. It was very inspiring. We decided to do the same. After we finished and calmed down we heard that they were still fucking in the other apartment. It lasted, I think, another half an hour, much longer than us.

HELLSTENIUS It was a little shaming and embarrassing from a very romantic and inspirational beginning. *[laughter]* Okay, are you ready for some new assignments? We'll do some short ones. So there is still "I remember" on top of the page. Clear your minds. The first thing you're going to write is, "my first scar". *[the group writes]*

Stop. Okay, I'm going to go straight on to another one without listening. "I remember this key." *[the group writes]*

Stop. And the last, "I remember my first sexual feeling." *[the group writes]*

Stop. Okay, I would like to hear from someone who hasn't spoken yet. You can decide what you want to tell us. You can start.

AUDIENCE I have nothing interesting, nothing. Maybe the most interesting of all is a memory of the key. I had a neighbor who had mental issues, was retarded, whatever. He had this fetish with keys. He collected them and would go around with a lot of keys in his hands. I gave him one of these keys.

HELLSTENIUS Isn't that interesting?

AUDIENCE I don't know. To me, it's not because I know him, but. . .

HELLSTENIUS For us, it's interesting.

AUDIENCE It's interesting because now I remember there was this short documentary about him and the key.

HELLSTENIUS So let's say you're writing a crime or police series or a crime film or something. And you have this guy who has a key fetish and he collects them. And there's a key missing. Then you have these 250 keys and you have to find the right key. You have a really big problem to solve, but you have the solution to solve the case. You can use it; it's a brilliant device to put into a script.

AUDIENCE My question is: What key did you give to him? If you were a kid and you gave him your house key, then he could get into your house.

AUDIENCE I don't remember.

AUDIENCE I remember my first real scar. When I was younger, our neighbors had a very big dog and they organized races with it. Sometimes I felt really brave when walking with the dog because then everybody was impressed that I could walk this big dog. For me, I really felt something. But I didn't know how to handle it. One day, the dog saw two small dogs like he would see at the races and wanted to play with them, so he started to run after them. I felt I had to hold the line. So for a kilometre I was pulled behind the dog. It was also my first time in hospital.

HELLSTENIUS So we're talking about big scars.

AUDIENCE Yes.

HELLSTENIUS: Do you still have them?

AUDIENCE Yes on my knee. It was sewed with twelve stitches.

HELLSTENIUS So you can still see it?

AUDIENCE Yes.

AUDIENCE I wrote about the key. Not very long ago, about ten or twelve years ago, my father lived in the Hague and I lived and worked in Amsterdam. I was at the office and I have the key to both my mother's and my father's houses. But I don't use the key to my father's house anymore. I ring the doorbell now. When I was smaller, I just entered the place. He was at work when he realized he'd left his own keys in his apartment. So he took the train to Amsterdam to my work to pick up my key. I asked him if he wanted a coffee and he said no. He said, "I will take the key back."

HELLSTENIUS That's a story with a huge subtext. Keys are usually very, very important things for us. We don't really think about it. I had this thing with a key once. I was with one of my first girlfriends. We were taking and giving back the key to my apartment. It was a sign if we were together or not. So she was leaving the key and then I could take the key, fifty times maybe. Fifty ways to leave your lover – with a key.

AUDIENCE I really wanted to have my own key. I was seventeen years old. But my parents wanted to open the door when I came from parties with my friends because they wanted to control things and to know I was in good shape. They wanted to open the door.

HELLSTENIUS You must have been a good girl since you didn't copy your own key.

AUDIENCE I had two keys in my bag. They were very big back then. One belonged to our old house from my grandparents in the countryside. My father was quite old and his key to their house had always been behind the mirror on the veranda in the corner, so everyone in the family knew where the key was. When I bought the house, my father always took the key from there. It was my house but he wanted to have the key. It was a very long time before I could take the key back and keep it with me in my suitcase. Now it's my house. He got very excited when he found it gone and asked me where it was, "Where is the key?!"

HELLSTENIUS How many years ago?

AUDIENCE Twenty years ago. I told him the key was in my suitcase but he wanted it behind the mirror like it always was. But it wasn't anymore. It was a very big sign.

HELLSTENIUS Also a very nice image. Suddenly there's no key there and the audience understands what that means, that everything has changed; there's a new phase. There will be pain, but it has to be. As screenwriters, we're looking for those kinds of images, to tell the story with an image, and of course also with a prop. We could do a whole other course on props, but that's also very interesting to try to find something. I always ask my students, "What is the main prop of your script? What is the main thing?" You have to find it. If it's not there, you have to find it and you have to put as much into it as possible. Keys, rings, this kind of stuff, things that can break, are all good props to use.

AUDIENCE This is also about a key. This was in the 90s when Estonia became independent and privatisation started. A lot of houses were returned to their previous owners, but also somehow through these scams some were able to buy houses. It happened to our house, as well. It was an apartment building and the whole house was sort of evicted. So we had to find a new place. We moved to a new apartment but the other one was the place where I grew up. We lived in this new place for maybe a week but you are on autopilot sometimes and you go back to where you lived all your life. I go upstairs. I don't even think about it and I put the key into the keyhole and it doesn't open the door. That's the moment when I realise that I don't live there anymore.

HELLSTENIUS Good. Now give us your first sexual feeling. *[laughter]*

AUDIENCE I can tell about the scar as well. I was very little and I was playing with a glass bottle. It was during the Soviet time and little Vitamin C pills were sold, little round yellow pills in a glass bottle. And I played with the empty bottle like a game, playing doctor or whatever. One of them broke and I started picking up the pieces and I basically split my thumb in half almost. I remember a lot of blood in the sink in the bathroom. We had a very large family. We had been planning for a long time to go to the countryside. It was the middle of the summer and it was nice so someone just bandaged it up. We didn't go to the doctor because we had had this big trip planned and it was a big thing to coordinate a large family; it kind of moves slowly. We went to the countryside. We were there for a day and only the next day was I taken to the hospital. I remember these two big guys holding me down on the table and stitching it up. There wasn't even local anesthesia. It was all open. That's where I have a scar.

HELLSTENIUS So go on with the sexual feeling. Do you remember?

AUDIENCE Yes, I do. I remember very keenly.

HELLSTENIUS In my experience, it's very strange how often ... I can ask the boys. How many boys had their first sexual feeling on the ropes, when you're climbing up the ropes in gymnastics?

AUDIENCE Almost the same. Yeah. It's Norwegian. *[laughter]*

HELLSTENIUS Ten boys said, "Yes! Wow, you too? Climbing up a rope? Yeah!"

AUDIENCE Isn't that why we have those ropes?

HELLSTENIUS It has also been gymnastics for the women. So, now we've finished with the keys.

AUDIENCE I remember my first sexual feeling. It was in kindergarten. There was this other boy that had a trick to make things feel good. He showed me how. We hung from our arms on the swings—not rope, but the swing—and moved our legs. We probably looked quite strange since we would just hang there and open and close our legs until we got some release. We could hang there for half an hour. *[laughter]*

HELLSTENIUS You haven't gone.

AUDIENCE My first scar? *[laughter]* I was at the playground and there was a barking dog. I was afraid that I would fall down from this plaything. That was my first scar. I'm still afraid of dogs, always when I see them. But there's no external scar at all.

HELLSTENIUS So it's an internal 'scar'. Hmm. How many here are afraid of dogs?

AUDIENCE It depends on the size.

HELLSTENIUS Is there anyone else who wants to go? Let's do a couple more. We're closing in.

AUDIENCE I have a sexual image I want to share because I think it's funny. I was always on the lookout for things in my home and my father and mother always hid whatever chocolate was in the house. My father found more and more ingenious places to hide chocolate – inside the grand piano, etc. I was always used to going around the house looking for strange things. I was six or seven years old. Behind this very intellectual literature on the bookshelves, I found a *Playboy*. It was the first encounter with sex I had in my life.

AUDIENCE So you have a sex and chocolate related thing?

HELLSTENIUS Of course this goes to *the* most important thing in a script, which is secrets. He's talking about the revealing of a secret. You have to have a secret in your script. Some of you have this, I know. Some of you have big, big secrets. That's good. But you must think clearly about what the secret is in your script. Who wants to reveal it and who wants to hide it? Even if it's not a crime story, it has to have a secret. Every story has to have a secret. As I said before, secrets in films are just like secrets in life. In film, you can make it a little bit bigger if you want to.

So, what I think we should do now is I'll give you the sentence I think goes through many of your stories as I read them. What I want you to write down now is the craziest thing you have ever done for love. So you're going to answer this question. [the group writes for a couple of minutes] Is it hard?

AUDIENCE Yes.

HELLSTENIUS I ask because usually you're writing a lot but some of you now ... Okay. Then stop. If you have it, then you know. Just take down some small notes or you don't need to write anything. I'll give you something else then of which I know you will have something. "What really makes me happy?" [the group writes]

Okay. And now, "What really makes me crazy?" You can define it yourself. [the group writes]

Okay, stop. Why did I say this about the crazy thing and about love? First of all, because I found it in one of the storylines and I think many of your stories have to do with doing crazy things for love. I was at a 10cc concert just a week ago. [He plays a few lines from the song "The Things We Do For Love" for the group:

*Too many broken hearts have fallen in the river
Too many lonely souls have drifted out to sea,
You lay your bets and then you pay the price
The things we do for love, the things we do for love.
Communication is the problem to the answer ...]*

Have you heard of 10cc? This is also one of my favorite songs. When I first heard it 25 years ago, and as it did just last week, that song went straight into my heart. The things we do for love. Who has it in their script or in the synopsis?

AUDIENCE Yes, I do, in my synopsis. It's a very good line.

HELLSTENIUS It's a very good line. And you really have to answer it. You can't just put it there. You have to see it and we have to feel it and how crazy it can be, the crazier, the better. You have crazy things in your script and you should go for it. Why? What do they do? Audiences react on this immediately. If the love is strong and the things they do are strong and crazy, that creates something. It's really worthwhile writing about, directing, seeing and watching. So that's why I thought it was a good sentence for you all to think about in your screenplays.

AUDIENCE There was a Finnish film from last year called *The Things We Do For Love*. I was very disappointed because it wasn't crazy enough.

AUDIENCE Mine is not crazy, just different.

HELLSTENIUS It doesn't have to be crazy but it has to be strong.

AUDIENCE Well, this word 'crazy'. What is crazy? Everything can be thought of as crazy. That word can also have a bad connotation.

AUDIENCE There's also passion.

HELLSTENIUS Well, everything is up to you. Of course, there can be bad outcomes from craziness and passion. In summarizing all of this, of course, all of these assignments are special to you. We started out with someone reading aloud a string of words, and to my ears, all these words were stories or scenes – not scenes for me, but scenes for him and it can be written out. If somebody asks you about your first experience of intercourse, I can say, "Monica, pier", only two words. For me, that's everything. For you, you don't understand, but for me it's everything. This is for us to play with, to find the small words. You do this as writers. This is what you do. But you

should look at how you go into this and how you start to dig deeper into these words and your stories. You had some experience with this 'I Remember' assignment. How do you do it? How do you work with that? How do you play to get the stories you write?

AUDIENCE In Denmark we do these kinds of back and forth in creating. We might do interviews as we are doing here in this way, and then go home and work and use it in building scenes.

HELLSTENIUS If you have some more energy, what I'd like you to do now is to write down what you think I should have asked you about. What kinds of words should I have given you that I didn't? [the group writes] Do you have any questions for me before we close? You've been very, very good. You've worked hard and I know you're tired so if you have any questions at all, just feel free.

AUDIENCE When I think about it, one method for making scenes come alive in these exercises – separate from the scripts – is the question of what makes me very happy. And also the scariest things I've been through or associations about death. You think about these things and write the scene and re-write the scene. And if, for example, it was a child's memory, you can really benefit from thinking about these things, a method to work with the unconscious.

HELLSTENIUS For me, I've learned much more about you than I knew before. By answering these questions and prompts, you revealed a lot about yourselves. It can be scary. I don't think that's the right word, but we can use that as writers. I think we are obliged to give up a lot of ourselves. I also hope that when you start working this week you can, perhaps, go to one another about what you heard others say and get a little more from that and continue to work on these 'I Remember' things. Let's say you start with, "I remember a bicycle." What is the first thing you will say?

AUDIENCE The Tour de France? *[laughter]*

HELLSTENIUS I would say Den Beste – DBS, which is something Norwegians will know. It's a brand of bike.

AUDIENCE I would say "stolen". I'm from Amsterdam.

HELLSTENIUS I have stolen a bike. Then we can continue. If you say, my first bike was black, I would say, oh, my first bike was green and it had very small wheels. This game will tweak what you say and then I will answer differently. Within ten minutes, you can have an enormous amount of stories about a bicycle.

AUDIENCE I have a very nice story about a bicycle that got stolen. My sister and I were at a street market, and there was this bike shop and there was a contest to win a bike by answering the question: What is best for the environment – going by train, car or bike? It was so stupid; all of us wrote bike. When I was lying in bed in the evening at home, I felt I was going to win the bike. My sister said if she won the bike, I could have hers because she had a very nice bike. I won the bike. And her bike was stolen the next day.

HELLSTENIUS I was asked to write a television series a couple of years ago. I have a series of children's books, and I was asked to write a television series based on them. These were just stories from my childhood, things that had happened in my childhood to which I had given a little more drama, actually I dramatised them quite a lot. It was really hard to structure, to make a series of eight episodes or something like that. I had very big problems with where to start. So then I did this "I remember" with a colleague when we were at the Pygmalion Labs, a workshop like this, and we dialogued about what crazy things we did when we were children. He came up with something that I immediately stole and put into my screenplay. I'm going to show it to you now. In a way, he

just got to the core of it all. I had a big problem. I had four characters. How can I tell about four characters within two minutes? It would be a two and a half hour series and in the first two minutes, I must tell you about these four characters so you know who they are. This is based on his childhood memories and it looks like this. [He shows the episode.]

So, in my opinion, this was the best way to present these four guys. My colleague told me they used to shoot arrows at one another and see who could stand for the longest time, a brilliant little thing. Of course that's something boys can do. Girls could never do this. It's a very difficult boys thing and the series is also called *The Boys*. This is just to give you an example of when you steal with love.

AUDIENCE Why did they use bicycle helmets and not hockey helmets or something more covered?

HELLSTENIUS Because they get on a bicycle just two minutes later.

AUDIENCE Okay, because I thought that added to the danger because their faces are exposed.

HELLSTENIUS That's true. It's always very tricky to find the first image in your film and this is a method I use a lot to find that first image. When I discover it, I will just take it and say, "Thank you."

AUDIENCE This scene is a metaphor for everything you're telling us. Does this scene contain the totality of the series?

HELLSTENIUS Yes, in one way it does because there are four boys and they are all friends. There is a special relationship with the tough guy and the other one. They are the ones left standing and the other two run away. So you will see a series with these two boys at the center with the others around. If the going gets tough, those others will just run away. But these two guys will stay and that goes through the whole series.

Do you have any more questions for me? Can I ask you if you find this useful?

AUDIENCE Yes.

HELLSTENIUS Perfect, then I'm happy.

AUDIENCE When you're having problems, it's a good tool or method.

AUDIENCE Do you think it's best to use this when you're starting a project or when you're facing the wall?

HELLSTENIUS Whenever you need it. I have some friends with whom I chat on Facebook. We have this Facebook and email correspondence with 'I Remember'. Sometimes we do it all night long and then sometimes two or three months go by when we might just have four or five hours of going back and forth. I have this bank of ideas that I can use, or maybe not, but it's there. If there's a really good idea, then I'm going to use it.

AUDIENCE Can we join?

HELLSTENIUS Yeah, of course. It's very interesting to do it. I've seen a lot of you writing about girls if you're boys, or men writing about women and women writing about men and sometimes you

need to work with a person of the opposite sex to get something real. This is a very good tool to do that.

AUDIENCE I know you work with screenwriters, but do you work with actors to crack open their emotions or share common ground that's more intimate?

AUDIENCE I work in documentary and I was wondering if I could do that with characters or protagonists to also gain this common ground and understanding, to build another relationship besides the professional relationship of me asking questions or observing what they do?

HELLSTENIUS I'm a screenwriter and so I've never worked in documentary. So I was a bit nervous about you documentary people because I was wondering if this was useful in documentary. I hope so. I hope you can use this tool. But you have to find your own way of using it. How can you get deeper into it? Maybe it's just starting by asking about the most embarrassing thing he or she has ever done. Maybe something comes and that helps.

AUDIENCE There's someone called Michael Rabiger – maybe some of you know him – who has some interesting theories on what you can get from facing your own emotions. I'm a documentary maker and he's the teacher I learned the most from. He said you have to train yourself to face your own emotions in order to make other people tell you about their emotions. As a documentary filmmaker, of course you try to reach into people to get them to open up. He told us to write down the five most emotional experiences you can remember. And in these programs, the participants tell you about their own emotions. When you're filming a documentary, you expect others to tell you about their emotions, and so you have to learn to do it yourself. You have to dive into this to learn about yourself as you're telling us you do, actually, and dare to face these things in yourself.

AUDIENCE I think that fear is a root emotion and I think the question is: What do I fear? Anger, fear, sadness, grief. Anger and sadness, in particular, usually stem from some kind of fear. Behind them, there's usually fear. I think it's interesting to think of characters in terms of what they're afraid of. That will give you a key to what their inner conflicts might be. Inner conflicts are usually related to fear. It's interesting to ask that question and to face your fears. That doesn't mean overcoming them. Just know where they are and that leads you to your dark side.

AUDIENCE Hope is one of the strongest emotions in a film for the audience.

AUDIENCE We should tell about the character in terms of what is created for the audience.

HELLSTENIUS So the words you wrote down in your notebooks were probably the questions I should have asked about or the words I should have used.

AUDIENCE I don't think you *should* have done anything.

HELLSTENIUS Well, I'm thinking now of fear because it's obvious. It's also on my list and I should have used it because I totally agree with you. Fear is very important. The reason why I tried to get more sexual things out of you is that when you work with characters, they are sexual beings, whether you like it or not. They have their own sexuality and you have to decide what it is. You have to find out when they slept with someone the first time. Have they done it or not? Whatever you prefer. You have to know or else you can't write a true character.

AUDIENCE Then you can hope for something and then there's also fear of being rejected.

HELLSTENIUS Hope is kind of the flip side of fear, as you said. If you have hope for the protagonist, I think it's because you hope he'll overcome his danger and fears.

AUDIENCE Philosophically what I mean is, what is the purpose you create in your audience? I think the most exciting films are the films where the audiences have hope or fear. You can tell stories about hope and fear. It's what you create for your audience that's important. It drives my interest, and I can reflect my own fears and hopes and whatever, to put it very simply.

AUDIENCE You aim to create something in the audience in the flip side of what you create in the character. Often you won't create hope in the audience by creating hope with the character. But maybe creating fear and danger for the character might infer hope for that guy. Or maybe you have a character that has hope and that might make people fearful for him.

AUDIENCE In my opinion, you're able to communicate emotions by facing your own, your own secrets. I think so. You have to be very honest with yourself.

HELLSTENIUS It's a very good assignment to tell somebody the story that's hard for you to tell and that can be very embarrassing.

AUDIENCE If I was supposed to write about my biggest hope and my biggest fear, I don't think I could actually write it down because I don't have my plot. But I can write the most embarrassing thing I can remember because it's a bit smaller to grasp and I can write about it. I can't remember what my biggest hope is. It's too big. The smaller things put me in the emotions, too.

AUDIENCE When you were talking about embarrassment or shame, I thought of this thing in France where they try to do teen films. Everybody wants to do a teen film and I found this interesting. There have been a couple that are fine, but in general they don't work well. I think it's because the French don't really realise that the Hollywood teen comedy is really built on embarrassment. You often have sex scenes but it's not those scenes that make it work with audiences. It's the embarrassment around it, something like *American Pie*. You can immediately relate to it. I have a friend who did a film that. I think it's quite bad. In a way, it's very similar to *American Pie*, with strange sex scenes that are funny in a way. But where it doesn't work is that the character isn't embarrassed, so it doesn't embarrass people. In the American film, something like screwing a pie isn't what makes it work. It's because his parents come in and he's embarrassed that they see him doing that. The whole teen genre in America is really driven by embarrassment.

HELLSTENIUS The embarrassment is also how you get away with it, how you try to get away with it, and it's impossible. I remember, for example, the first time I bought a condom, and I was wanking with this condom on and I forgot to throw away the wrapper. My mother had seen it. It was called Durex. I took the condom wrapper away and put it by where we had foxes around the outside of the house, hoping she would think it was a fox that had used it. *[laughter]* This is how I tried to get away with this. It's interesting what you do and how your brain reacts and what your strategy is. It's interesting to see the strategy of the characters. What do they do?

AUDIENCE In documentary, it's very interesting for the research phase to ask different questions than the ones you might end up asking the protagonist. You might never ask him about a story from his childhood, his wounds, his scars. If you're close to him, you might ask about a sex scene or whatever. So you must maybe re-think things when you talk to your characters. Probably you have to tell them your own stories, too. Otherwise they would not trust you.

AUDIENCE If you cross some line, it's the difference between a professional relationship and a relationship that goes beyond that, and it should be up to them.

AUDIENCE All the questions don't have to be so personal. There is the key story or something. So you can come to your protagonist in some other way.

AUDIENCE It's inspiring to think about applying this to personal relationships in a film context.

AUDIENCE I think it's also a good way to access your own unconscious. You can get a lot of material out of that as soon as it starts manifesting itself.

HELLSTENIUS You must be tired. Thank you for sharing.

AUDIENCE Yes. [*laughter*] Thank you.

APPLAUSE