

Conference on the Issue of Timing, Sankelmark Academy, 6 January 2012

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Good morning!

I am very honoured to be invited to this conference and to have the opportunity to tell you about a very special case of the timing of God, my own history. It is a story I have told more times than I can count during the last decade. And I still get many requests to come to churches in different parts of Sweden. When I ask what they want me to talk about I might get different suggestions. But nearly always they say: “And of course we want to hear about how you met God. You must talk about that while you are here. We will ask people to invite their friends who seldom go to church to come and listen. “ To me it is clear that these kind of stories are considered interesting – not only by people who define themselves as Christians and who regularly take part in activities in their churches but also by non-church-goers, seekers, agnostics and even atheists. One might wonder why. Maybe we can discuss that later on.

I will not tell you anything about myself at this point of time. When I have finished you will know more about me than you knew that you were interested in since this is the story of my life. However, it is important to me to emphasize that I am a journalist, not a theologian, nor a pastor, a psychologist or anything of that kind. So this is a story told in a journalistic way – for better or for worse.

If someone had told me 13 years ago, in January 1999, that I would stand here in front of you and talk about my personal relation to God I would have laughed and said: OK, bring on the fairy tales, tell me about Father Christmas as well. That was at that time absolutely unthinkable.

In 1999 I was a fairly successful business journalist, working since the 1970s at one of the big newspapers in Stockholm, Svenska Dagbladet. I had been head of the business desk for a few years before going back to writing. I was in charge of several important areas, quite an expert when it came to among others the pharmaceutical industry and sometimes asked to

appear on television or in radio to give my comments if something important was happening. I travelled a lot in Sweden and abroad. And I was very satisfied with my professional life.

When it came to religion in general and specifically the Christian faith I was utterly without any interest at all. My attitude could be summarized as “I couldn’t care less”.

I was not brought up as an atheist. I was born in Luleå in the very north of Sweden in 1951. Now you know my age if you are able to count. But so no one will have to use their fingers I can tell you that I turned 60 last summer.

We were a rather typical middle class family. My father was an engineer, my mother a housewife when I and my younger brother were small. When we grew up she started to work in the small consulting company that my father had started.

In my family God was not denied – but not worshipped either. We did not read the Bible, we never prayed, not at meals or before going to sleep or at any other time, we never talked about God or Jesus at home. But as most Swedish families in the 50s and 60s we went to church now and then, at Christmas time and maybe once or twice more during the year. For me, as a child, the church never became more than a place where you went very seldom, there were candles, music and singing and someone talking rather boringly and incomprehensibly. And then you went home. That was all.

On the other hand – and that is also rather typical of people of my age – among the older generation, my grandparents and so on, there were many people with a lively Christian faith that was both very sincere and very natural. That goes for both my mother’s and my father’s side of the family. I spent quite a lot of time with my father’s relatives in a small village in the north of Sweden. They all belonged to EFS, Evangeliska fosterlandstiftelsen, a revivalist part of the church of Sweden. If I visited them on a Sunday I was invited to come to the Sunday school in the small chapel that had been built by my great-grandfather and his friends in the beginning of the 20th century. And if it was a Tuesday I was allowed to accompany my father’s aunts to the women’s meeting, where I listened to the women’s talk, heard the pastor read from an edifying book and tried my hands at some kind of needlework that

never got finished, only a little bit more soiled every time. And you felt that you were very adult and quite important.

So I had quite a lot of contact with Christians and the Christian faith when I grow up – but it never reached my heart. It was like a murmur in the background, it did not really mean anything important.

There is an exception. For one and a half years, when I was 9-10, we lived in another small village in the north of Sweden close to one of the rivers where there was a power station. My father had become the director for that one so we lived in the largest house and were considered persons of rank and importance in the village.

I went to the village school, where grade 3 and 4 were tutored in the same class room by a teacher who we were supposed to call Aunt Olga. Aunt Olga was an old-fashioned teacher. She was strict but fair. We had lots of respect for her. And I thought she was as old as Methuselah. Now I know that she was born in 1906. That means that she was seven years younger than I am now at that time...

Aunt Olga was a Christian. She was unmarried and devoted all her time to her school children and to the church. She was very interested in missionary work and I have heard now, from people who knew her well, that her big dream was to be sent out as a missionary herself. But her English was too poor, so that was impossible. She had to settle for a career as teacher instead and as you didn't study English in the lower grades at that time it was not a problem.

They say about Aunt Olga that when there was one week left until pay day she had to ask for credit in the village store as she had given all she had as offerings in the church. And when she went to meetings for Christian teachers during the summer holidays she had to ask the other participants to help her with money for the travel home because when there was a collection for missionary work she had emptied her wallet.

That was Aunt Olga. You can laugh at her but she really deserves to be honoured. When we came to school in the morning we started with singing, reading the Bible and praying. And before we went home she gathered us in the same way. Six days a week, because at that time of course you also went to school on Saturdays. And on Sundays there was Sunday

school in the village. All the children went there, my brother and I among them. And of course Aunt Olga taught Sunday school as well - what did you expect?

So, seven days a week, I heard the same thing from my beloved teacher: "Children, don't forget to say your prayers before you go to sleep." And when Aunt Olga proclaimed that God is a reality and that you are supposed to talk to him every evening I obeyed. Every night after going to bed I clasped my hands and prayed. I did not tell anyone but it felt very natural and not weird at all. So in a way you could say that I got a small dose of simple and uncomplicated faith at the age of nine.

At the beginning of the 1960s we did the same thing as many other families in the north of Sweden, we moved south. We went to live in a suburb to Stockholm. At school we had some kind of gathering in the morning but there were no psalms and no Bible texts and no prayers. On Sundays I stayed home instead of going to Sunday school, it was as far as I remember not thought of as an option. And no one talked anymore about the Christian faith like Aunt Olga had done. So it all disappeared, the little start I had got from her. And I did not miss it. When I read my diaries from these years I can see that the only thing I missed in the Stockholm area was the opportunities to go skiing. Otherwise everything was much better in the capital compared to the countryside.

I was a rather premature young lady, very interested in the big issues – the poverty in the world, the emancipation of the blacks in the US, the fight for justice in South Africa, later on the war in Vietnam. I am what we in Sweden call a "sixty-eighter"; I have had my share of demonstrations and meetings and gathering names on lists like so many others in my generation. I read a lot and I loved to discuss different topics with my friends at school and with grown-ups.

When I was 12 our teacher gave the class a special assignment – to produce a newspaper. I would like to be able to say that my classmates unanimously asked me to be editor-in-chief but to tell you the truth I think I appointed myself to that position. And when this project was finished after a couple of weeks I knew that there was only one career I could think of for the future – to become a journalist. At once I took an evening class to learn typewriting because I understood that such knowledge would be important. And as I played the piano I had very strong little fingers so I learned to write very fast and became number one in the

group, where the others were what I considered old women – that is in their 20s. I still write so fast that sometimes my laptop locks itself when I gain enough speed. Some people say that I write faster than I think, which of course can be a problem.

Anyway, I was so eager to start working as a journalist that I started to consider going to school as a waste of time. I decided to try to skip the 9th year of the compulsory school and start the gymnasium (upper secondary school) one year in advance. And that meant that the summer after the 8th grade, when I should have been preparing for my confirmation, I was studying very hard to pass the tests in August. I succeeded and was allowed to start the gymnasium.

But the next summer it was time for confirmation. That was, in the 1960s, quite the normal thing for a girl or boy in a middle class family. 85 per cent of persons born in 1951 went through with their confirmation. Not to take part was considered strange. Times have changed since then. Now not more than 30–35 per cent of young people in Sweden have their confirmation. And in the Stockholm area the percentage is as low as around 25.

For my parents it was unthinkable that I should refrain from my confirmation. I myself was a little bit more doubtful but anyway I went away to the summer camp together with 50 or 60 other girls and boys. I was 16, they were 15 or 14. They had finished the 8th or 7th grade in the compulsory school, I had already had one year at the gymnasium. They came from the countryside or small towns, I came from Stockholm. Such things are important when you are young. I considered myself quite a bit superior.

The first thing we were asked to do was to answer some questions about ourselves. One of them was: Why have you decided to take part in this camp? When the answers were read out loud the others had written things like: “Because I want to learn more about Jesus” and I had written: “Because I must decide if I want to be a Christian or not.”

So you can understand that the poor pastor was in for trouble. I was serious-minded and had lots of questions. And when you are a teenager you think that you have invented everything, from the wheel to the hardest questions. So when I asked the pastor: “How can there be so much evil in the world if God is both merciful and omnipotent?” that was my question that I and no one else had thought of.

The sad thing was that the more serious and important questions I asked, the more common was the answers from the pastor, who probably got more and more exhausted every day: “Well, Elisabeth,” he would say, “we human beings are not supposed to know everything.” That is of course true – but it is not the right answer to give an inquisitive teenager. It had been much better for example if he had answered the question about the evil: “That is something that people have been pondering throughout the history. And there is no definite answer. Some thinks like this, other like that. Here is a good book that deals with the subject.” That would have made the Christian faith interesting and intellectually challenging for me.

But as the situation was every day we came closer to an inevitable catastrophe. Three days before the confirmation I went to the pastor and said: “It has been an interesting time here at the camp. I have learned a lot. But it is impossible for me to take part in the confirmation.”

The pastor went pale and started to stutter: “This has never happened at any of my camps. Elisabeth is such a good student. You don’t have to be nervous of the examination in the church.”

And at that time there really was an examination. You had to know lots of things by heart.

“No,” I said, “it is not the examination. I know everything I need to know. But it is like this: I can’t recite the confession of faith, the Credo, and I can’t receive the bread and wine in the communion because I do not believe in God.”

The pastor looked relieved. “Oh, great. That is not a problem at all. When we all read the confession you only have to be silent when we come to the parts that you don’t believe in. Then nobody will notice that there is anything wrong.”

That was of course a very practical solution. But when you are 16 you are not very practically minded. Everything in life tends to be black or white. And for me this was black as the darkest night. Totally unthinkable. And what I had suspected became a reality: Christian faith is nothing; it is only something you do so that you will not differ from others. Not even the pastor who is paid to believe in God full time takes this faith thing seriously.

Well, three days before the confirmation service. The relatives are invited, the cakes are ordered, the gifts are bought. The social scandal is threatening. And there are arguments that work even on determined girls of 16. And it was not the gifts; I did not care about them. My mother must have been totally desperate when she as the last attempt to make me change my mind hinted that my father's aunt Tinni, a devoted Christian whom I loved and who had heart disease, maybe wouldn't survive a thing like this. You may laugh. I did not. I cannot go on with my live if I have to bear her life on my conscience, I thought.

Now, as an adult and a Christian I know that Tinni would have survived. She would have continued to pray for me as I am sure she did from the day she heard that my mother was expecting me until the day she went to her home in heaven. But at that time I did not have that insight.

I went through with the confirmation. I answered all the questions right during the examination. I was quiet through the whole confession of faith because I think that I had an inkling that Christian faith is not a smorgasbord where you pick what you fancy and leave the rest but that it is a whole, something to take or leave. And I received the bread and wine – for the first time in my life, because that was the rule in the Swedish church until 1979. You were not to take part of the communion until after your confirmation.

I was very, very convinced that it also was the last time of my life. It was the worst thing I had ever done, to betray my own ideals in this way. Such a thing is tough when you are an earnest-minded youngster. For several years I found it very hard to visit a church even as a tourist. Even if I went there to admire the architecture or a famous artistic work it all came back, all that was not good.

And I became a convinced atheist, with a hatred of Christians, the church and God himself. I had friends at school who had a Christian faith and they got a tough message when we met again when school started in August. I told them they were silly nitwits who had not been able to see through this great bluff, as I had done.

I became a journalist. I ran through school and university. In summertime I was able to find work at a local newspaper in my birth town. While I was studying I was a free-lancer at the suburban weeklies that at that time were published by Svenska Dagbladet. And when I had

finished my university studies and had my degree in the autumn of 1971 I was offered a job at these weeklies. Very soon I was able to move to the big newspaper itself and in the middle of the 70s got a temporary assignment at the business desk. It was supposed to last for three months but it became 25 years.

I met my husband at the university. He is nine years older than I am and had his confirmation in the 50s. The one and only reason that he went through with it was that he was promised to get a nice leather football as gift. And so he did.

We did not agree on everything when we met and we have not done so during the nearly 38 years we have been married. When we met my husband was a captain in the reserve and my father-in-law was a colonel. And I was, as I told you before, politically radical and engaged in many causes. Among other things, I was a supporting member in the organization for young men who refused to do military service. So we had lots of things to talk about at the kitchen table. But in one respect we totally agreed: questions about religion in general and especially about the Christian faith were of no interest for us. They were not even worth talking about.

However, the hatred I had felt towards the church as teenager decreased when I got older and was replaced by some sort of indifference. I could admit that the church had some nice things to offer – culture, history, traditions, music, art. The faith part of it could be ignored by me and left to those who needed God in their life.

My husband and I got married in the town hall not in the church but friends married in church and we were there. You sometimes have to go to funerals or baptisms. When our first daughter was born in 1979 and the family asked not if but when she would get baptized I said at first that was a no-no in our case but then I thought that it is always nice to have a party and if the pastor doesn't mind, why should I. So both Helena and her little sister Ulrika were baptized. I didn't care. It did not mean anything.

Helena sang in the children's choir in our local church during her first years at school. All the girls in her class did. And every time they took part in the service we were there, of course. So I have been to church quite a few times as an adult. But always as an onlooker - never as a participant. And to be an onlooker is really a role that I as a journalist frequently adopt. I am to listen and look and not get too carried away to be able to describe what has happened

for my readers. That is an attitude that you easily may take with you also in your personal life.

God never entered my thoughts during all these years. If I did think about him some rare time it would be in terms of: "God does not exist. And even if he does I don't have to care. At least not now."

And I went on with my hectic life, a demanding professional career and a demanding family life. For when our youngest daughter, Ulrika, was three we were informed by the doctors that what both they and we, her parents, had seen as a slight delay in development that would even out before she was old enough to start school in fact was something else, a serious lifelong handicap, a mental retardation. What the reason for her problem was they could not say at that time and we still don't know.

To have children always means both trouble and happiness. But with a child with special needs - as if we not all have special needs, from time to time at least - the troubles are worse. You have to make lot of decisions, you have to take a very active part in the child's life for many, many years, in fact all life long, and you worry a lot. About the future, about what will happen in the long run, about what went wrong. When Ulrika was a child I was fearing the day that I was sure would come when she would get sad and upset over her handicap, when she would be sorrow for all the things she would never be able to do as a teenager or young adult – drive a car, go abroad on her own, marrying, having children and so on. I used to think: My own sorrow I have learned to handle but how will I manage to cope with hers?

That day has not come and I don't think it will. Ulrika is a young woman who soon will turn 29. She can be angry and sad and tired but as a whole she is a happy and stable person, with an ability to appreciate all the things she can do instead of grieving for those that are out of reach. She has heard me talk many times about her and her handicap and she is proud that she plays an important part in my story.

And if there are more sorrows when you have a child with a handicap I think that the happiness may also be deeper. You get to feel happy about many things that ordinary families just take for granted!

But it is lots of work and together with my job at the newspaper I had my hands full and no time or place for contemplation. I was never a seeker; I was never interested in other religions or in New Age. It was all, like the Christian faith, superstition, nothing for me. And that was the way it was going to be all my life, I was sure.

But God had other plans. Of course, otherwise I would not be standing here today. When Ulrika was 16 it was time for her confirmation. Through the scout movement where both I and my daughters have been and still are engaged we heard about a summer camp where half of the young people would be handicapped and the other half not handicapped, on Gålö south of Stockholm. This could be the solution of the problem that occurred every summer: What to do with a teenager that can be alone only for a few minutes at a time during the long holiday that is not matched by equally long vacations for her parents? So Ulrika went to the church camp - not to meet God or learn about Christian faith but as a practical solution of an urgent problem. I had somewhere in my mind, however, a vague thought that maybe this God thing could be something for my daughter. She is quite big on the outside but on the inside she is small and rather helpless. Maybe her Christian faith could give her something to hold on to during her life, a crutch of a sort. Something that I, who am big, and strong and able to cope on my own have no need whatsoever for. I did not put words on this thought, I never mentioned it to my husband, but it existed, somewhere in my head.

Big, strong, able to cope. The spring of 1999, when we were discussing if Ulrika would go to the church camp, was the first time in my life when I had a very uncomfortable feeling that this self-image was beginning to crack. I was starting to feel like a machine which had to fulfil other people's wishes and demands on me and that what was really me was diminishing step by step. And it proved more and more impossible to meet all the demands. If I worked late at the newspaper, which was more of a rule than an exception, I could not be with my family where I was needed. If I spent time at home I could not help my parents who were growing old and needing assistance with more and more practical things. My father was soon to be diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, even if I did not yet know that. And if I went to them when they called and asked me I missed that meeting with the scout board that I had promised to attend. And so it went, on and on, in a negative downward spiral.

Two things made me really worried. The first was that I could not see an end to it all. On the contrary I felt that this was only going to be worse and worse. And the second was that I had no one to go to, nobody to talk to. I had to manage on my own whatever it would take.

Summer came and Ulrika went to the camp. It was a wonderful experience for her and for the other young people, with or without handicap. We visited on Sundays and saw how fun they had and how our daughter actually grow as a person every week that went by.

After four weeks it was time for the confirmation itself. It was of course not an examination of the kind that was common when I was a teenager. The young people had written a short play about what they had learnt during the camp. Ulrika is good at communicating with sign language, symbols, the whole body but she is not able to speak more than perhaps seven words that others can understand. But she had her own line in the play. At the right moment she was to say: "Mummy" loud and clear. And she did and her face was beaming with happiness. And her mummy was crying for happiness. I am not a sentimental person but this was such a moving moment.

And then it was time for the communion. The youngsters got bread and wine first. The pastor said: Now is everyone welcome to step forward. And to me everyone in the little chapel stood up – except someone in our family. I realized that Ulrika was going to be unhappy. She and her friends were turning around, looking for their relatives.

This was nearly exactly 32 years after my own confirmation. And I assure you that I had never been even near the thought of ever taking part in the communion in a church during all these years. But now I rose. My husband got very agitated: "What are you doing," he whispered. "It is for the sake of Ulrika, to make her happy," I whispered back. "There are limits," he answered.

I waited in the aisle on my turn and I felt utterly stupid. All the bad feelings from my own confirmation so many years ago came back. The only thing I could do was to tell myself over and over again: This doesn't mean anything. It is just a piece of bread and a little wine. It is for the sake of Ulrika. It has nothing to do with me.

For every second I was feeling worse and worse. And at last it was my turn and my suffering would come to an end. And exactly then something else came to an end – the bread. The

pastor had to go back to the altar and get more. There was an interval, maybe 20 seconds long. And that is enough of course. For God is the master of everything and timing is, as you all know, one of his specialties. During these few second I knew beyond any doubt: This is not for the sake of your daughter – this is for the sake of yourself.

People sometimes ask me if I heard a voice. I did not. And it was not a writing of fire on the wooden walls of the chapel – that would have been exciting. It was just the total knowledge: this is for your sake.

And I was of course terrified. This was the last thing I wanted. I did not want a meeting with God, I was just trying to let my handicapped daughter be happy on her big day. But what do you do when you are standing in front of the pastor and his assistant with people behind you? I accepted the bread and the wine and went back to my seat. “Why did you do such a stupid thing?” asked my husband. “Never mind,” I said. “Ulrika is happy and that is all that matters.”

And I tried to reject the thought that something had happened. I was successful for a few hours, having relatives for dinner, opening the gifts, starting the washing machine. This was in the middle of the summer, July 11, but my husband had to go on a conference abroad and left during the evening. So I was alone in the bedroom when the night came and everything came back to me. First I tried to tell myself that: of course it wasn't God in the chapel. It was me, I was sentimental, moved, not myself, maybe it is some sort of a midlife crisis a couple of years too early. That didn't work very well. The next step was to admit to myself that it might have been God. But how would I have time for God in my hectic life? And what would people think if I, who had a reputation as a sharp analytical mind, suddenly started to read the Bible, pray and go to church. Impossible. Not now. But, I thought, I can save this as a beautiful memory and put it away to some time in the future, when I retire and have more time. But not now.

This first night was sleepless and it was followed by two more terrible nights with many thoughts racing through my head, with questions and worries and tears. The fourth night I understood that there was only one thing to do – to give up. I did what I hadn't done since I was a child, I clasped my hands to pray. I had to practice a few times first because it felt very awkward indeed. And at last I started to pray and I said to God: “OK. I have been wrong. You

are right. You exist. Please forgive me.” And I thought: Now I am going to feel wonderful. It is supposed to be marvellous to be saved.

But instead everything got worse. Until now I had been sure that God didn't exist. Now I was sure that he did exist, that the Christian faith was true – but I was also absolutely sure that God could not forgive me. Not that I had committed any hideous crimes but that I had denied him all this years.

This led to the worst period in my life. Nothing had prepared me for the total darkness that you will encounter when you think that you are unable to be forgiven by God. My husband came back from his trip, I said nothing. We went on holiday. I said nothing. We came back and I started to work again. And running around to different churches in Stockholm to try to get some help. Not from people. I felt unable to talk to anyone about my problems. Not on Sundays, that would have betrayed me. But there are lots of churches in a big city and you can always find a morning prayer, a lunch time service, an afternoon meeting. As a journalist I could always tell my colleagues that I had to meet an important source somewhere in the City. And that was of course not a total lie even if it wasn't the kind of source my colleagues thought of.

It got worse and worse. I slept very little, I worried a lot. It was like carrying a mountain of sorrows and anguish on my chest that grew stone by stone for every day that passed.

After six weeks I felt that I had had enough. On a Sunday evening I wrote in my diary that I had started to have some documentation on this process however it would end. Now God, I give you until Friday. (My husband was on another trip and would be back at the end of the week.) If not something has happened that make me feel that I am on the right path and that I can tell my husband about what is going on I will give up. This project God will be put away, probably for ever.

And then I tried to find a church where I hadn't been before, where no one would recognize me, to which it would not be dangerous to go. The funny thing was that even though I had been to several different churches I had not made it to Sankta Clara church, which is weird since it is right in the middle of Stockholm and not to be missed. And at Clara there was a morning service at half past ten on Tuesday. I went there without having much hope. It was

just another church, where nobody knew me. But when I sat down I got the same sort of very strong feeling as on my daughter's confirmation. This is it. This is where you shall stay. Here you will get the help you need.

At least I understood that you have to take things like that seriously. So after the service, when everyone that wanted was invited to come forward and be prayed for, I felt that this was my chance. I was very nervous when a woman all dressed in white said: "Welcome. My name is Inga. I am a deacon in this church. Is there something special you want me to pray for?" And I answered breathlessly: "My name is Elisabeth. I think I believe in God. But I also think he can't forgive me. And I haven't been able to tell my husband yet."

Inga, who is a practical woman, answered: "Let's take God now and then we can talk about your husband when we have coffee afterwards."

And she asked me to kneel and started to pray. I remember her first words because I had never had that thought: God, Inga said, you who have been seeking Elisabeth much longer than she has been seeking you. Wow, I thought. I have been running after God and the truth is he has been searching for me.

But what Inga did when she prayed is that she made it totally clear for me what I had know all the time in my head but not at all in my heart – that I could stop calling to God about forgiveness, that forgiveness was already granted once and for all, even for me, when Jesus died on the cross. When that insight made what Luther calls the longest trip from the head to the heart, in that moment I became a Christian. And the mountain of worries that I had been carrying just melted away and disappeared. You could see it clearly. When we stood up Inga said: Now the angels in heaven are singing and dancing for your sake. That is something to remember throughout the rest of your life,

Well, the rest is history as they say. I told my husband that I had met God. He was not pleased then and he still isn't. He is not interested in taking any steps in this direction but I am sure that God has a way also for him. Please let it be an Autobahn I sometimes pray, because it is not always easy to live with an atheist, especially not one who is an historian and knows all the bad things Christians have done from the Crusaders onwards.

Nine months after that Tuesday in Clara church I applied for the position as head of staff at Kyrkans Tidning, the weekly newspaper published by the Church of Sweden. I was surprised when I was offered the job because I had such a short experience of life in the church, although a long one as a journalist. I worked at KT for six interesting and not always easy years. Then I was offered a job at the daily (OK, four days a week) newspaper Dagen, founded by Levi Pethrus but nowadays an ecumenical paper. Also to my big surprise I was asked to be editor-in-chief five years ago, a position I held until October 2010 when we were reorganized by our new owners. Now I am in charge of the editorial pages and of opinion building in other arenas.

I have written three books during the last eight years, two about faith and one about being a mother to an adult child with a handicap. A child for whom the Christian Faith is natural and self-evident in a way it may never become for me, I might add.

And I am still a member of the congregation in Sankta Clara, a very special part of the church of Sweden with an emphasis on work among the poor and outcast in central Stockholm. Everything that is done in our church is founded on voluntary work and being a part of that has learnt me a lot. God knew what he was doing when he led me there and told me to stay until further notice.

It sounds very smooth but the fact is that my Christian life has also been rather rough in periods. At this time a year ago I was just starting to see the light in the end of a very dark tunnel where God seemed to be far, far away. Several things happened in my life: my mother started to show signs of dementia and needed lots of care, I had to leave my job as editor-in-chief before I felt that I had accomplished what I wanted because of factors I could not do anything about, and my ideas of how the work in my church ought to be organized was rejected. Nothing of this was catastrophic in any way but taken together it was a little bit too much. And the biggest problem was that God felt very, very absent. I read the Bible and it did not speak to me. I prayed and nothing happened. I went to church and felt only emptiness. I never, never lost my faith but I understood that this was something I had to go through, a dark night of the soul, something that many Christians have experienced before me.

I first heard of this kind of experience when I was very new as Christian. And I remember that I thought first that this will never happen to me and second, which was a more intelligent thought, that if it happens God will make sure I am ready for it. Also when it comes to a dark and tough period like that you can talk about God's timing which is as perfect as He is.

And there is an end to every tunnel. Around Christmas 2010 I started to feel that something was moving and during the spring I was able to talk about what I was going through. In May I went on a retreat which became at the same time an end and a new beginning. And now, afterwards, I feel that my faith has matured, that the agony wasn't worthless. I have learnt to trust God in a new, deeper way and understood that my own feelings are less important than his everlasting love.

Surprised by God's timing – I guess I will be surprised by that also in the future. And when I look back I can also be surprised of that even if his acts seem to be sudden and are totally unexpected they are well prepared in advance.

My meeting with God in the little wooden chapel at Gålö in July 1999 was a total surprise to me. But now I can identify several things that in fact were God's method of making way for this incident. One funny example is that I was in New York in April that year to attend a pharmaceutical conference. I had to go there two days in advance to get a cheap ticket (Svenska Dagbladet) has always been a newspaper with too little money) and had nothing special to do on a nice spring Sunday. I was looking through the ads in the tourist magazine when my eyes fell on one of them offering a guided tour to Harlem including a visit in one of the churches. To go on this tour was not something that was in line with what I used to doing but I suddenly wanted to do that very much. And when the pastor in the church asked us strangers from what countries we came and prayed for us and blessed us it felt all right. And the gospel choir was fantastic. I have always, also during my years as atheist and indifferent, liked gospel music. There are other examples also.

Most evident in this respect of preparation is, however, the feeling I had the months before of being extinguished as a person, of being transformed from a human being to a machine.

That was a preparation for the meeting with God. I needed to have my image of myself revised, I needed to get the message loud and clear that there is a limit to what any human can manage by him or herself. God was looking for me, making me softer so that He could reach my heart.

My worries back then were, first, that my situation would be worse and worse and worse and, second, that I had to cope with it all by myself. In both respects my Christian faith has changed everything. I have at least as much to do now as I had then, probably more, but I am not afraid any longer of being extinguished. When I found God I also found my inner self, the things that no stress in the world can take away. And of course I have someone to go to. When Jesus tells us to come to him with all our burdens he means also the ones that are small and trivial. I have learned over the years that if you want to experience answers to your prayers you should pray a lot, also for things everyday things. And it is wonderful to work at a newspaper where you can hear a colleague praying before a difficult interview: Jesus, please help me with this call, and afterwards thanking God for his support.