

Encounters with Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg. Inside Stories of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy

Edited by Manfred Vogt, Ferdinand Wolf, Peter Sundman and Heinrich N Dreesen

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Review by Anton Stellamans

This is a book to cherish. Vogt, Wolf, Sundman and Dreesen collected over 40 memories of Steve de Shazer (June 25, 1940, Milwaukee – September 11, 2005, Vienna) and Insoo Kim Berg (July 25, 1934, Korea – January 10, 2007, Milwaukee). They come from former BFTC team members, as well as friends, colleagues and students of these pioneers of Solution Focus (SF). Some look back on a long intimate history, some only met them once or twice. But the common denominator is that Steve and Insoo left a lasting trace in the hearts and minds of their *companions de route*.

The book allows us a peek inside their private and professional lives. There are trivia about Steve's love of driving around the Wisconsin countryside in his BMW convertible (Szabó & Macdonald), his frequent late night walks through the city of Bruges, where the police assumed he was a homeless person, (Isebaert & Macdonald) and of course his culinary talents (Dolan, Isebaert & Szabó). We learn that Insoo had a sister living next door (Ahlers), was a very resilient woman (Aambø & Ahlers), had a large and bountiful garden, and that she could sew anything she set her mind to without a pattern (Lipchik). Mark McKergow likes to remember Steve as a Jazz man, and I'm listening to Billy Strayhorn's arrangements of Ellington as I write this review. Isebaert on the other hand spent hours listening to Mahler and Shostakovitch with him.

And of course the book illustrates how hard they worked. Some link Steve de Shazer's discipline to his Jesuit education (Lipchik, Miller, Panayotov). Peter De Jong remembers calling Insoo on the first of January to wish her a happy new year. After telling her that he planned a day with the family and friends, Insoo replied, "Peter, I knew you were a lazy bum and not working today; me, I cancelled the holidays and am doing something useful (p. 87). Panayotov reveals one of the drives of Insoo: "I think the reason we spend so much time developing this model has much to do with wanting to show professional people *how to be respectful* of the people they work with. That is what I consider as very holy." (p. 131).

They didn't only work hard to develop SF, they also did not let a chance go by to spread the word. Insoo told Peter de Jong: "Never turn an invitation down to come and teach SFBT; if you do, they will not ask again and we may not ever get another chance to work with them." (p. 87). Their missionary zeal took them all over the world. No wonder that the memories in this book come from people living in Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Singapore, Sweden, South Africa, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the USA. They continued to spread SF around the globe. Even when Steve was already ill, staying at home was not an option.

Particularly interesting to people like me who are interested in the development of SF at BFTC are the memories of Wallace Gingerich, Eve Lipchik, Michele Wiener-Davis and Scott Miller. They walk us through the office building with its sixties furniture (Scott Miller), show us where the therapy rooms were, or invite us to sit with them behind the one-way-vision mirror. Scott Miller talks about Brother Joel and Father Tom, who worked with the downtrodden in the inner city, bringing in people right off the streets for therapy (p. 122). Wiener-Davis and Gingerich's contributions are illustrative of how they developed SF therapy, coding the exchanges between therapist and client as change talk or not. Using four different codes for change talk and discovering how "simple and unsophisticated" their way of working turned out to be. "I

guess we were still getting used to looking on the surface of things.” (p. 61). I’m struck by their open-mindedness. They were constantly on the lookout for “accidents”. Steve said: “You always need to be constantly aware of things that accidentally happen to you. And to take advantage of whatever accidentally happens. . . . The miracle question is an example. . . . If we hadn’t been prepared to look for accidents like this, we would have never learned to use the miracle question, it would have faded away. . . . The accidents may turn you away from what you think is your final goal, but you end up at another goal that is just as good, or better”. (p. 132). They also liked to discover a town accidentally, by tossing a coin to determine which direction they would walk, rather than to follow a guide (p. 14).

A question that inevitably comes up when reading a book like this is how the practice and development of SF had an influence on their lives . . . and vice versa. Thorana Nelson writes that they “seemed to embody a SF life” (p. 125), and John Wheeler says that “Insoo had SF in her bones.” (p. 181). Exceptions put aside (!) you could say that Steve was a clear, logical and radical thinker, with a low threshold for nonsensical questions, and Insoo a wonderfully engaged therapist. Harvey Ratner summarises: “While Steve preferred to philosophise about the therapy, Insoo was out there on the front line, taking solution focused practice out of the therapy room.” He also recalls a hilarious moment, when Insoo said that her latest interest was in child protection work, and that Steve’s latest interest was the verb “to be” (p. 136).

There is much more to be discovered in this book about these pioneers, about SF, about the love they shared and the way in which they made a difference in many people’s lives.

Encounters with Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg is neither a hagiography nor a critical biography. But this work will undoubtedly serve as a valuable resource for future biographers. Is there anyone writing a biography? To my knowledge this is the first book of its kind. A lot of voices are not heard (e.g. Matthias Varga von Kibéd, Louis Cauffman, etc.), and the many people who did share their memories

probably have many more interesting stories to share. Maybe in a next, extended edition?

I want to leave you with a funny anecdote. Insoo was asked what she would do if someone insulted their model. She replied, “That would depend on whether I was having a good day or a bad day. I am a very positive person, and so I rarely have bad days, but if I *was* having a bad day, I suppose I would tell them to go !#@! themselves!” (p. 42). Amen.