

Experiencing Satir Systemic (Brief) Therapy Training

By: Lorrie Brubacher

I confess I flew to Vancouver with a twinge of ambivalence about going to the Satir Systemic (Brief) Therapy Training. By the end of the week, having immersed myself in personal and professional learning for nearly 14 hours per day, I was celebrating the Life Force energy which was continuing to flow and nourish this open systems model.

I now appreciated that Virginia wouldn't want me to be a "Satirist" but rather that I continue to work with the two components that John describes as central to Satir's Systemic (Brief) Therapy: first that it is experiential and secondly, transformational. It is *systemic*, both intrapsychically and relationally, *brief* in that it is both deep and short, and it is *therapy* in that it leads to change.

The highlights of my learning from the seven day training could perhaps be described under four headings: Brief Therapy; Congruence with the Self; Unmet Expectations; and Family Therapy Field.

Brief Therapy

John presented the *Iceberg* metaphor to us in a unique way. Rather than beginning at the top with coping strategies, he began at the bottom with the Life Force. I experienced this shift in presentation to be quite revolutionary. It heightened my awareness of how all of therapy is about releasing the blocks that keep the Life Force from flowing freely, with its innate healing capacity.

It becomes brief therapy by virtue of the

therapist knowing where to tap in the *iceberg* as metaphor for one's internal experience. By assessing where in the iceberg a client's life energy is stuck we can lead the person through the experiential, transformational process that has the capacity to release the life energy. When it is released, the healing energy takes over! (The spiritual nature of therapy is profoundly inescapable!)

The iceberg is not a technique to use, it is a metaphor for the internal experience. A therapist can use the iceberg metaphor as part of his/her internal frame of reference when exploring clients' dilemmas and goals for change. The therapist also metaphorically moves through the levels of the iceberg when anchoring

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transformational shifts. The iceberg is a metaphor for the differing levels of experience that a therapist continually moves through with a client. Similarly, John clarified how he "uses the stances," not as labels to teach the clients, but rather as an assessment tool for the therapist to work with.

Those of us who trained with John in Winnipeg in 1997 will remember how he taught us about entering the client's world "where they are at home": the placater in their feelings, the blamer in expectations, the super-reasonable in perceptions, and with the irrelevant, to recognize that they are not at home and to find some way to help them become grounded. Some ways may be through body work, through nonverbal methods such as art, through the use of humour, or other safe ways to bring them back to the moment. "Where the client lives is not necessarily where you do the healing," said John Banmen.

We explore with a client not the content of their story, but the *impact* (feelings, perceptions, expectations, yearnings and experience of Self) that the story, the event, or the trauma continues to have for them. Hence we are free to work with them toward what Banmen calls the four metagoals of therapy: self-esteem, congruence, choice making and responsibility. These goals are achieved as we help clients make shifts in the impact, so that a trauma, for example, is "moved into the memory box." Behavioural changes also follow from transformations in the impact.

Congruence with the Self:

During the training experience I was affirmed and challenged in my

goals to be increasingly congruent personally and professionally. My understanding of the concept of congruence has broadened theoretically and experientially. I used to think congruence essentially meant matching one's external communication with one's inside experience (feelings, thoughts, wants etc.). Now I recognize congruence is harmony between all one's internal parts, so that the flow of Life Energy is not blocked. Hence, congruence is more than a congruence with myself. It is congruence with the Universal Life Energy. (Sounds reminiscent of Buddhism, or the 16th century Christian mystical teaching of aligning one's will with the Divine Will.)

Unmet Expectations:

One issue that I continue to grapple with on a daily basis is a deeper understanding and increased effectiveness in working with unmet expectations. A premise of the Satir Model's change theory is that there is an innate drive in us that is moving toward something whole. The stuff that most frequently gets in the way of that drive toward growth is an unmet or unfulfilled expectation, i.e. we hold onto something that we would like, but haven't received.

Very often we are "living in the feeling" of an unmet expectation. We live in a feeling of anger, a feeling of hurt, a feeling of disappointment, or a feeling of sadness and depression. Working with these expectations is where healing can take place.

The process of working with unmet expectations involves recognizing choice and owning responsibility. Having recognized the unmet expectation and the cost of holding onto it, the person

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has a choice: 1) to continue to hold onto the expectation and reduce the cost, the *impact*, of doing so; 2) to let go and grieve the loss and change that comes with accepting that s/he will no longer look for something that is clearly not available there; 3) or to find alternative ways to met the yearning (need) that the expectation represents. This final alternative is like going shopping in another store for this need/yearning and also discovering internally how to meet this need by connecting with the Self.

John demonstrated several times how healing comes, when the person is ready, in juxtaposing the pain with an experience of seeing or feeling something new. After acknowledging the pain - having an awareness and reaching the point of acceptance and ownership for holding that pain - the person is invited to appreciate something else.

The process of identifying a positive juxtaposition to the pain of the wound of the unmet expectation, makes it possible for the person to meet a basic human need or yearning. For example, the person who carries the pain of being verbally attacked, misunderstood and not taken seriously my juxtapose their willingness and courage in the present moment to be taking responsibility for continuing to resent and fear this sort of attack.

When they *experience* their own courage in the face of this fear, they can experience a positive appreciation of themselves at the same time as this fear and pain. Experiencing this positive appreciation of themselves can make it possible to meet the deep yearning (need) to be loved and accepted and taken seriously. The person is then in a position to experience their personal power and to heal this unmet need in the present, instead of attempting to go to the past to try and meet it, or to try and meet it with individuals in the present who remind them of those in the past who have let them down.

Healing this need in the present may involve getting this need met in current relationships that are able to do so, and ultimately to meet this need intrapsychically as well (loving, accepting and taking themselves seriously).

John made a significant distinction in the difference between wants and needs: yearnings are the basic human needs to be loved, accepted, validated etc. These are not simply wants, they are universal human needs. (How often I find it difficult for people to accept that longing for these things is a necessary part of being human!) The problem comes, however, when these needs become person or place specific: they become wants or expectations that a person believes must be met only in some specific way. Owning responsibility for seeking fulfillment of these needs from a person or place where they are not available opens the door for making change.

Family Therapy Field:

I am faced with the reality that in the broader field of family therapy, the Satir Model is frequently overlooked or minimized. At a recent professional development event in Winnipeg, the presenter gave an excellent historical overview of the models of family therapy. Satir was quickly brushed over as someone who believed in giving lots of hugs. I recognize that this attitude is not unique. A new family therapy textbook (Goldenberg & Goldenberg,) suggests

that Satir did lose credibility in the Family Therapy Field when she broke with Minuchin, promoting love as the basic ingredient for therapy. This same book suggests that there is an incompatibility between experiential therapies, such as the Satir and the constructivist approaches such as Narrative Therapy.

I would propose that this is a limited and outdated view that sees experiential therapies as exclusively promoting emotional experience over rational thought. Banmen's model of Satir's Systemic (Brief) Therapy integrates the emotional, rational, physical and spiritual in such a way that the experiential nature of therapy is not working with emotion at the exclusion or negation of any other parts. I believe this model deserves a higher profile and I intend to explore efforts to raise it!

The experience of the week long training has deepened my ability to work experientially, moving between the different levels of clients' internal experience and anchoring shifts at the different levels as well. Participating as a guide and peer I discovered new levels or competence and experiential self-esteem. Participating as a peer and client, with my set of unmet expectations, I discovered transformational shifts.

My deepest thanks and love goes to John and Kathlyne and all the participants from Canada, U.S., Taiwan and Singapore! I have made deep connections with new colleagues and friends and my effectiveness as a therapist, congruence as a person, and connection with the Life Force have been enhanced. Thank-you also to the Paul and Maria Gomori Scholarship Fund and to Avanta!

References:

Goldenberg, I. & Goldenberg, H., (2000). *Family therapy: an overview*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.