

## Tribute to Insoo Kim Berg

Insoo Kim Berg passed away suddenly and peacefully in Milwaukee, Wisconsin on January 10, 2007. She was 72 years old. A world renowned psychotherapist, lecturer, and author of 10 ground breaking psychotherapy books, she was, along with her husband, Steve de Shazer, a primary originator and subsequently the most consistent developer of the Solution-focused Brief Therapy approach. She was co-founder and Executive Director of the Milwaukee Brief Family Therapy Center (BFTC), and a primary founder of the Solution-Focused Brief Therapy Association (SFBTA) .

Insoo and Steve were my mentors, and among my closest friends. My relationship with Insoo spanned over 20 years and several continents. Like a lot of other people whose lives Insoo touched, meeting her changed mine. I first met Insoo in the mid-1980's when I visited the Milwaukee Brief Family Therapy Center (BFTC) that she co-founded with her husband, Steve de Shazer and colleagues. When I arrived at their BFTC outpatient clinic, I was ushered into a cavernous observation room where a large group of people sat in spell-bound fascination watching a tiny Korean woman with short dark hair, twinkling eyes and a gentle, caring manner conduct a therapy session with a disheveled multi-problem family behind a one way mirror. The woman was Insoo Kim Berg, and in addition to a warm, ready smile, she radiated undeniable respect, and unshakeable faith in each individual person's competence, resources, and self-knowledge.

Insoo remains, to this day, the best clinician I have ever seen, and one of the wisest. Her impressive intellect was balanced by an abiding compassion for others, and a modest, informal demeanor. After watching her work with clients at BFTC that first week, I remember thinking, "Even if it takes my whole life, I want to learn to do therapy the way she does." In retrospect, it turns out that perhaps I wasn't so far off with that time frame. Two decades later, when we (de Shazer, Berg, Korman, Trepper, McCollum, & Dolan) were all working together on the *More Than Miracles: the Current State of the Art of Solution-focused Brief Therapy* (in press) book in final year of his life, Steve de Shazer confided in a good humored way that he had spent most of his career trying to accurately identify and describe in writing everything that Insoo did when she did solution-focused therapy.. After 30 years he felt he was just now coming close to the point of finally getting it all down on paper in way that others could learn to replicate.

Over the years, Insoo and I often stayed at each other homes, and taught at conferences together in many countries. It was nearly impossible to get up earlier in the morning than Insoo. An extremely early riser even in mid-winter, she had usually taken a walk, made the coffee, prepared breakfast for everyone around her, and was ready to start working on some project by 7:30 am. As the years passed, Insoo never stopped taking her early morning walks, but she added other physical activities as well, daily yoga and stretching exercises, free weights, and whenever possible, long vigorous hikes in the mountains, forests and other serene places in nature. Once, shortly after her 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, when I marveled at the fact that she was in better shape

than many people half her age, she explained, “I have to stay in top shape so I can keep up with my schedule.”

And what a schedule it was! It seemed that every time we spoke or exchanged an email, Insoo was putting the finishing touches on a new journal article or working on yet another book. To my knowledge, she never missed a deadline. She also served on the editorial boards of the *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, *Family Psychology and Counseling Series*, *Families in Society*, and *Family Process*. In addition to being the Executive Director of the Brief Family Therapy Center, she was a Founder of the Solution-focused Brief Therapy Association, a Clinical member and Approved Supervisor for the American Association for Marriage & Family Therapy, and was also active in the Wisconsin Association for Marriage & Family Therapy, the National Association of Social Workers, and the European Brief Therapy Association. It was a schedule that would have wearied most mortals, but Insoo’s energy and enthusiasm never waned. I used to tease her that rather than having *joie de vivre*, she had *joie de travail* (joy of work), and she would laugh and say, “That’s right! I do!”

And of course at the same time Insoo was doing all this writing, editing, serving on boards and founding the SFBTA, she was also teaching seminars on Solution focused therapy all around the world, speaking at international conferences, and consulting throughout Europe, Asia and the Pacific Rim, and North America. I felt privileged to have the experience of traveling and teaching with Insoo in many countries over many years. Most of the time, we both donated our full fees to charity organizations. It may not have been the smartest thing for us to do from a financial standpoint, but Insoo and I were following our hearts and we sure had a lot of fun doing it.

For me, the most poignant international travel experience we shared was a teaching trip to Asia that began in Japan and culminated in Insoo’s former homeland, Seoul, Korea. Insoo had grown up in a prosperous, socially and educationally privileged family. Once while visiting a Buddhist temple on the outskirts of Seoul, Insoo confided that as a young girl, the experience of seeing her mother’s beautiful antique porcelain dishes, exquisite linens and fine furniture all destroyed in moments when the area was bombed during the Korean war had left a lasting impression. At a very young age she had already decided that “It is people, not things, that are important in life.”

While in Seoul with Insoo, I was on a mission to complete some unfinished family business. Long ago, as a young American army officer going off to fight in the Korean War, my father had promised to return with a string of pearls for my mother. He had died in the fighting, and one of my first childhood memories was of my mother crying at his military funeral. Now 40 years later, I wanted to bring that promised string of pearls home for my mother.

Insoo got some advice from family members who still lived in Seoul, and we set out together for an area of the city where jewelry stores were known to sell good pearls at fair prices. We went into several shops until we found what felt to us to be the right one. The salesman showed us row after row of strings of perfectly matched pearls and

my eyes began to blur. It was impossible to choose. The strings of pearls came in various sizes, and subtly different shades but basically to my untrained eyes they looked pretty much the same. The salesman stood on one foot and then the other, and finally he said he had something that might make it easier to choose. He opened a drawer, and pulled out a silk drawstring pouch. Inside was a carefully knotted string of very unique pearls. He explained that we could hold these “different” pearls up for comparison in order to best evaluate the other strings and thereby choose the ones that we thought were best for us.

Insoo and I were fascinated by this so-called “different” string in which every pearl had some small unique quality that prevented it from being exactly like any of the others. Some had a bit of a curve to their shape, others larger on one side than the other, a few had a slight indentations and so on. These differences delighted Insoo. As she explained, “each one is unique and for that reason has it’s own integrity and in fact they actually are very well matched because they all have that special difference in common.” We left the store with two necklaces. For my mother I chose the most evenly matched string of pearls I could afford, and Insoo talked the shop owner into selling her the string of “different” pearls. She wore them for many years.

These days whenever I encourage clients to describe the real life details of their own unique solutions, compliment them for some wonderfully quirky, ingeniously resourceful behavior, cognition or emotional response, invite young graduate students as well as experienced colleagues to be part of the next SFBTA conference, or have a demanding but satisfying conversation with someone who has a different view than mine, I think of Insoo’s string of “different” pearls. Insoo, you lived your belief that people are what is most important in life. Thank you for generously leaving us with so many pearls of wisdom within your books, articles and video tapes. Because your integrity was genuine, the value of your Solution-focused Therapy legacy will endure long into the future.

Yvonne Dolan, President of the Solution-focused Brief Therapy Association (SFBTA)

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