This section is a tribute to Steve de Shazer who passed away on September 11 in Vienna, Austria. Steve co-developed the Solution-Focused Brief Therapy approach, co-founded and was the senior research associate at the Brief Therapy Center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and authored four groundbreaking books on therapy: His fifth book, More than Miracles: the State of the Art of Solution-Focused Therapy, will be published posthumously by The Haworth Press. In this tribute his co-developer, co-founder, and spouse, Insoo Kim Berg, is interviewed and colleagues who worked with Steve over the course of his career share brief remembrances. The remembrances are highly personal stories and extend beyond his list of professional accomplishments and his ideas; perhaps they are a way for a community to grieve.

It seems especially fitting that we devote pages to honor Steve in the Journal of Systemic Therapies. As you will see from these remembrances, Steve was instrumental in the beginnings of this journal, served as an Editor on the first Review Board of the journal, and authored an article in the very first issue. In the early years of his career he published regularly in the journal, and many of his ideas were the seeds for others who have published in JST since. In fact, in this issue there are two articles (planned for this issue before Steve’s untimely death) by creative clinicians who are using ideas from Solution-Focused Brief Therapy in their daily work.

After reading the remembrances, we hope you will have a sense of the man as well as his ideas. We hope you will get a glimpse of his relationships with his many collaborators as well as his friendly rivals, and finish with an appreciation for the personal sacrifices he made so we all could understand the process of change a little better.
INFLUENTIAL IN THE FOUNDING OF THE JOURNAL

DON EFRON, M.S.W.

I had come back from an extern program at the Mental Research Institute (MRI) with the idea of forming a local journal for Ontario. The good folks at MRI suggested I talk with Steve. It was with great trepidation that I, an unknown social worker from a small Canadian city, approached Steve with a request that he be an Editor for this purported journal. I assumed his *Underground Railroad* was the first step in Steve himself starting up a journal. I was truly amazed when he agreed to be an Editor, then suggested many other therapists to contact with the permission to use his name, and then encouraged me to think bigger. Why just a journal for Ontario? Steve said to aim higher—a journal that would offer a place for systemic and strategic therapists to develop their models and show off their stuff. What a message! I went home, contacted the people he suggested and within a year this journal was born.

My experience with Steve was far from unique. Steve inspired and encouraged generations of therapists. I think he lived his own model—he built on his successes. He found solutions when others would have only found problems. The model fit the man and the man fit the times.

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ORDINARY MAN, EXTRAORDINARY CRITICAL THINKER: AN INTERVIEW WITH INSOO KIM BERG

JIM DUVALL, M.E.D.

Jim: Insoo, you were first introduced to Steve de Shazer by John Weakland while you were studying at the Mental Research Institute (MRI) in Palo Alto, California. Can you tell me about the circumstances that contributed to how you first met Steve?

Insoo: It was in the mid-70s and I came across their (MRI) writings that got me so excited. I became very curious about going to MRI, so I convinced my boss
to send me out there. However, the seminars only went until 2:00 in the afternoon, so the rest of the day and evening I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to learn more, but everyone was always gone after 2:00. So, I complained about this to John Weakland and asked him if he had any ideas about what I could do to make better use of my time. He said there’s this guy across town who’s doing some strange things, why don’t you go see what he does. I was desperate to learn more, so I went to the agency where Steve was working. He was there seeing cases all alone. So, I spent a lot of hours behind the mirror every day watching him see cases. Actually, that’s how we met. Then he invited me over to his house for dinner.

Jim: Insoo, how long did you know Steve?

Insoo: I knew Steve for 31 or 32 years. We were married for 28 years. I’m sure that we bought one wing of an airplane between the two of us during the three years of flying back and forth between Palo Alto and Milwaukee. We finally decided that Steve would move to Milwaukee. He had grown up in Milwaukee.

Jim: Would you say, that what Steve was doing stood a bit on the outside edge of mainstream psychotherapy culture?

Insoo: Literally. That’s why we had to get out on our own. He had difficulty working in agencies and clashed a lot with his bosses because he had very strong opinions and ideas about things. So, after working in an agency for a while in Milwaukee, in 1978 we decided to leave and started seeing clients in our home. We didn’t have any money. We were seeing people in our living room and our dining room became our office. I thought this was terrible, so finally we rented space in a psychiatry office for two days a week. That’s how we got started.

Jim: Insoo, when you look back through all those years of working with Steve, what stands out as the exciting times, those times that you really appreciated?

Insoo: I think about the days when we worked six days a week, from 8:30 in the morning till 10:00 o’clock at night. We would come home absolutely exhausted but we would start all over again the next day. I think about all the sacrifices we made and the things we gave up in order to do the things we wanted to do. We had no personal life. Every time Steve’s papers got published in a journal we got so excited we used to drive out to Chicago for dinner. It was a vacation —like a treat. After awhile, we got so busy that we couldn’t even do that. Then it got to the point that one of his books would come out and we would just say; “Well that’s nice.” Then we would go back to work. We went through years of being poor, not having money. We were just working and thinking about ideas. That is all we did.

Jim: What was it about his ideas that stood out for you during that time?

Insoo: Steve’s talent and ability to “think out of the box” was shocking, exciting, appalling, and thrilling. He saw things differently than most people. He saw a larger picture of patterns and wasn’t distracted by the details of techniques. This was part of him in all aspects of his life. Here is an example of how Steve saw a larger picture of patterns. When we went to the ballet we would
always get the cheapest seats at the very top row. You know, many people like
to sit in the front. Even later on, when we could afford better seats, he loved
sitting at the top so that he could see the patterns of the dancers, rather than
their individual special techniques. He wasn’t particularly interested in tech-
nique, he was really interested in larger patterns.

Jim: How do you see that as being connected to Steve’s work? How did his abil-
ity to see patterns evolve into Solution-Focused Brief Therapy?

Insoo: He always saw things in patterns. That’s what I learned from him and that’s
the genius of it. Steve was able to pay attention to the larger patterns of people’s
lives and began paying attention to what people did between problems, the
exceptions to the problems. This discovery became the window to solution-
focused thinking. This evolution was occurring in the late 1970s and early
1980s.

Jim: So, he was a unique, critical thinker.

Insoo: I have to tell you that when I first met him I knew that he was like an un-
polished gem and my job was to polish this gem. I remember thinking that very
clearly. I just knew that there was this huge important diamond.

Jim: How do you think Steve would like to be remembered?

Insoo: He would tell you not to make him into a saint. I think he would want
people to know that he was a man with a lot of flaws—I can agree with that—
but at the same time a very brilliant man. This is my editorial comment. He
would say he was just an ordinary man with a passion for how things worked.
That is how he would describe himself. He was so concerned about people
making a big to do about him. He didn’t want that, so I’m trying not to.

Jim: Insoo, We felt that it was important to honor the significant contribution
that Steve de Shazer made to the field of psychotherapy within a relevant
timeframe. I really want to offer our heartfelt thanks to you for your generos-
ity in participating in this interview and helping us pay tribute to him during
such difficult times. Is there anything else that you think we need to know?

Insoo: I am establishing a Steve De Shazer fund. I want this to be a special way
that we can continue to encourage further research and development.

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The author would like to thank Pat Shelenko for her hard work and assistance in produc-
ing this interview.
REMEMBERING STEVE DE SHAZER:  
THE EARLY TEAM

JIM DERKS, M.S., MARILYN LA COURT, M.A.,  
EVE LIPCHIK M.S.W., AND ELAM NUNNALLY, Ph.D.

In the early 80’s, the core team at the Brief Family Therapy Center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, consisted of Steve deShazer, Insoo Kim Berg, and the four people who have shared their memories below. We met on a daily basis to observe cases (occasionally with guests interested in our work) and had long conversations about how to translate what we were experiencing into the theory and practice of brief therapy. We remember these times fondly because of the creative energy they produced and because of Steve’s wise facilitation.

JIM DERKS

In 1977, Insoo and I went to Palo Alto for a workshop with John Weakland and Paul Watzlawick. Arrangements were made for us to spend time with Steve de Shazer. Steve and I hit it off right away as I had a copy of catastrophe theory in my pocket, and he was into balance theory at the time. When we left, Steve gave me a copy of Gamesmanship—The Art Of Winning Games Without Actually Cheating* by Stephen Potter. Steve and I did not share Potter with the rest of the group, nor did Potter ever make an appearance in Steve’s writing, but for many years we reminded each other of Potter’s various concepts when ever we needed to take a strategic position on some issue. Several years ago, I ran into Steve at the airport. He was headed some where to conduct a workshop and was wearing a black cape and fedora. He looked more like Zorro than the Steve de Shazer I remembered. (No disrespect intended! Steve did emulate Sherlock Holmes, but he still looked like Zorro!) I asked if the outfit enhanced his workshop presentation in any way. He simply said in his usual off handed manner, “As the old Gamesman used to say: If you can’t volley, wear velvet socks”. I was amazed that he remembered one of our old lines and had the quick wit to repeat it.

Because I found doing psychotherapy so much more exciting than talking about it, we parted company 23 years ago. Nonetheless, whenever I take the time to think about psychotherapy I still envision myself walking and talking with Steve. The guy did a lot of thinking and had a lot to say.

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Marilyn LaCourt

Steve wasn’t about to let the fact that we didn’t have an office or a one-way mirror, yet, stand in the way of his incredible drive to understand the process of change and utilize what he learned in the best interest of clients. Before there was a physical home for the Brief Family Therapy Center, we saw clients at his house. I ran the videotape recorder from behind an imaginary mirror. We took the usual and customary break toward the end of the session, left the clients sitting in his living room and developed our intervention message.

Always one to think outside the nine dots, Steve would frequently begin a staff meeting with a question like, “Is this a paradigm change or is it simply a new model of therapy?” Then, we’d be off and running. I will always remember those staff meetings fondly. Being part of the creative process is a high one never forgets. Steve was the catalyst for our participation in that high.

Marilyn LaCourt, E-mail: lacourt@wi.rr.com. www.lacourt-m.com.

Eve Lipchik

From the first time I glimpsed Steve across a conference table in 1978, I experienced him as a very shy man who is more comfortable talking with people about matters of the head than of the heart. As I got to know him better I came to understand that he was a man who both felt and thought deeply, and that he strove to say as much as possible as briefly as possible. I imagine he would probably appreciate it if my comments about him reflected his way of thinking.

Briefly stated then, Steve was a very creative man. While he is best known for his theoretical developments, he had many other talents. I never heard him play music, which he was reputed to do very well, but I did eat his wonderful Chinese cooking, drank his excellent homemade beer, and admired his paintings. For the eight years during which we worked together on a daily basis his intellect and inductive manner of approaching situations never ceased to surprise and enrich me. His mind opened up my mind in a way that has made a big difference in my personal and professional life. I am grateful that I had the opportunity to know Steve and work with him.

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Elam Nunnally

Steve strove to find ways of helping that truly make a difference—in Bateson’s words frequently used by Steve, “a difference that makes a difference.” He used
Remembrances of Steve De Shazer: A Tribute

his knowledge of western and eastern philosophy in his search for effective ways to help. Steve led us through stimulating and challenging times working with paradoxes, double and counter double binds, balance theory, strange/charmed loops, etc., in looking for interventions that best fit clients and their problems. These projects were always in tandem with process research, testing whether innovations in treatment appeared to have the effect predicted (e.g., testing the effects of the “standard first session task,” determining the incidence of pre-treatment change, and looking for those client behaviors in a session which best predicted the likelihood of client compliance with a task directive).

Steve’s creative genius led his colleagues “through the looking glass” to a new paradigm, into a professional practice realm in which the spotlight is on what works rather than on what’s amiss, on client strengths rather than on client deficits. And Steve was generous with his colleagues in sharing opportunities for writing and publishing! He wanted Solution-Focused Brief Therapy to be recognized as the work of a creative group of researcher/practitioners. Many of Steve’s colleagues had the privilege of co-authoring with him in journal articles and book chapters. I was one of those who had opportunity to practice therapy, write, conduct research, and occasionally hoist a beer with Steve, and I’m very, very thankful.

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TUESDAYS WITH STEVE

MICHELLE WEINER-DAVIS, M.S.W.

Bad news travels fast. The morning after Steve’s death, I must have received ten emails telling me that, after several years of poor health, Steve had passed away. I wasn’t sure which saddened me more, his death, or the fact that I had been out of touch with him for so long that I hadn’t even known he was ill. Now that he is gone, I will never have the opportunity to properly thank him for the profound ways in which he touched my life personally and professionally. Nor can I share with him how much I believe he has changed the therapy world... forever.

My relationship with Steve began in 1982 when I became a trainee in the year-long once-a-week—Tuesdays—training at The Brief Family Therapy Center (BFTC). I had had several years of postgraduate work under my belt, enough to know I was lacking real skills to help people change. That year at BFTC was a transformational one for me on many different levels. Through immersing myself in lectures, observing Steve and other staff members work, and the behind-the-mirror-banter I
quickly abandoned my pathology and explanation-oriented beliefs and headed into
the world of solutions.

Steve’s lectures were always so fascinating. He was the master of seeing parallels
between obscure philosophic notions, the conundrums of everyday life and
how these esoteric theories can rise to pragmatic, creative solutions for the clients
with whom he worked.

Folks who didn’t know Steve often thought he was socially aloof. And despite
his long, pregnant silences during sessions, his habit of consistently avoiding eye
contact with clients while he rubbed his chin (his thinking position), his abrupt
redirecting of the conversations when he sensed they were headed down dead ends,
Steve was anything but disengaged. He was totally immersed in what he was doing
when he worked with people and they knew it. His unadulterated, boy-like enthu-
siasm when clients reported positive changes was something we all came to ex-
pect from him. His love for people was very apparent to those of us who knew
him well.

Steve was a minimalist. I recall my first mid-term evaluation session with him.
I nervously commented that he hadn’t given me much feedback during the first
semester and he replied, “If you were doing anything wrong, you would have heard
from me.”

Steve was also incredibly generous. I gradually realized that he had become
my mentor. He took me under his wing, encouraged me to write, publish, and
present at conferences. Through him, I met some of the most amazing and influ-
ential thinkers in our field.

But my fondest memories of this mentorship were the times when, during breaks,
he would signal for me to come into his office where he would read out loud to
me his most recent writing and request my feedback. I remember feeling honored
and excited to hear his thoughts, hot off the press. I also remember taking walks
with him during breaks, a ritual upon which he insisted regardless of the often
inclement weather in Milwaukee. He needed to clear his head. He grabbed his
hat—and he had many—and off he went.

My gratitude to Steve goes far beyond what he taught me. It has to do with the
ways in which he has changed the world of therapy. He once told me that he de-
veloped the Solution-Focused Brief Therapy model, not so much to help clients,
but as a method for changing therapists. He wanted clinicians to stop pathologizing,
quit diagnosing and discover the resilience in all people. He saw the Solution-
Focused Brief Therapy model as a therapist’s intervention. And as I look back at
the trainings I offered in the 80s and how few people had known about this won-
derful way of working with clients, compared to the ways in which this model
has become a gold standard and is cherished around the world today, I’d say, Steve
hit his mark. Thank you, Steve. I will miss you.

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rado 8030; E-mail: DBUSTING@aol.com.
I first came across Steve’s work in some obscure family therapy journal when I was pursuing my then-current obsession with the work of Milton Erickson. Steve, it turns out, had written the most articles about Erickson’s work prior to Erickson’s death (there has since been an explosion of articles on the subject).

I wrote Steve and we began a regular correspondence. I had just moved to the Omaha, Nebraska, area and had lots of time on my hands, so I wrote long letters. Steve answered with long letters of his own. We agreed on lots of things—that resistance was largely the outcome of therapists’ wrong moves and was an interactional rather than an internal phenomenon; that therapists were much too interested in pathologies and problems and gave short shrift to clients’ resources.

I became a subscriber to Steve’s newsletter—*The Underground Railroad*—“For therapists who work this way.”

Steve’s parents and brother and sister all lived in Omaha, so soon we met in person. I was initially put off by Steve’s personal presence—he spent much of our first breakfast telling me for several hours about how he and his brother had memorized British train time tables from the 1800s (he began reciting them). And he had a different laugh, and he barely made eye contact. One time, shortly after that, we met up at a conference and he pretended not to know me. I was confused and a bit hurt. He told a mutual friend later that he was just joking with me, but never acknowledged the joke to me. But after getting to know him over the years, that initial strangeness faded and Steve was just Steve.

We began a parallel path, writing books and giving workshops, developing this new approach called “Solution-Based Therapy.” I called my variation “Solution-Oriented” and he called his “Solution-Focused.” They had differences but were in the same ballpark.

Over time we developed a friendly rivalry. When asked in a workshop one day what I thought the difference between my approach and Steve’s, I replied, “I make eye contact,” and got a good laugh. I meant this in two ways. One is that, as I have mentioned, Steve wasn’t much for eye contact and the other thing is that I stressed the importance of relationship and acknowledgment in therapy and Steve didn’t seem to give those things much weight.

After a time, I felt a bit guilty when I used the joke a few more times and the next time I saw Steve at some conference, I told him about it. In response, he looked at the ceiling and said, “Maybe that’s why I can see so many more solutions than you, Bill. I’m not distracted by looking at my clients.” Touché.
Another time I saw Steve at some conference, he gave me a copy of his newest book. He had signed it: *To Bill O’Hanlon, who knows this in the wrong a different way.* I understood he meant it both ways.

One of my favorite memories of Steve came during a conference at which we were both teaching, along with our colleagues John Weakland and Carol Lankton, in Santa Fe. It was a four-day conference in which we were all teaching each day, but at the end of each day, we were part of a panel organized around some topic. The first day’s panel had been a bit boring and, that night, we had gathered after dinner in John Weakland’s room. Steve and John were partaking of their usual nightly cognac and cigars. “What the hell are we going to do with the next panel,” asked John. We discussed it for some time, but ended up laughing so much, we forgot to make a plan. The next day, we assembled at the end of the day for our panel on “Youth at Risk.” Carol began with a long, complex metaphor. John’s turn came next and he played excerpts of a session with a teenager and his family. I was next and whatever I said is lost to memory. When Steve’s turn came, he pulled the microphone up near his mouth and leaned forward. But he didn’t speak for about three or four minutes. People were beginning to shift around in their seats and some whispering began in the group. Then Steve intoned, “Youth at risk!” Another three or four minute pause. Steve continued, “I didn’t know what this was, so I asked my team members. None of them had any idea what it meant, so I decided to look the words up in the dictionary, where I always go when I don’t know what something means. I looked up the word *youth.* That meant young people. That seemed perfectly clear. Then I looked up the word *risk.* That meant the danger that injury, damage or loss will occur. Hmmm. From what I can tell, then, we are all at risk from the time we are born until we die.” With that, he pushed the microphone away from him and sat back. The audience was stunned. I was laughing so hard, I almost fell off my chair. Steve, in his usual Zen brilliance, had culled through all the B.S. Why had I even bothered to try to speak to this subject? It was alien to the way Steve and I thought. He had no interest in pleasing people (a disease I am afraid I am afflicted by) and was so clear thinking. He refused to think in terms of problems and deficits. He was focused on solutions.

How I will miss that clarity and his strange wit. Bless you Steve. When I arrive in the afterlife, I expect to see you again and I am sure you will ask me if I ever finally came around to the correct version of solution-based work (and also, the Miracle Question, no doubt!).

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THE REAL DEAL:
REMEMBERING STEVE De SHAZER

J. SCOTT FRAZER, Ph.D.

It has been my privilege to know Steve de Shazer as a friend and colleague. It has been over 20 years since I first met Steve. John Weakland recommended that I get to know Steve. He said that I thought a lot like Steve, and that Steve was “the real deal,” and he was. From being a guest in his home with Insoo, to watching cases behind the mirror, drinking his homemade beer in his back yard, hanging out in hotel bars, talking into the morning at conferences, presenting on panels together, to writing reviews for his Underground Railroad newsletter, writing previews for several of his early books, he remained the “real deal.” Always down to earth, always genuine and inclusive, and yet always thinking and always on a cutting edge, it was a delight to watch his work evolve and enjoy his impact on the field.

There was a time when Steve suggested that I think of coming up to Milwaukee and help Insoo and him to run the Brief Family Therapy Center. I stayed where I was for family reasons, but I have always been flattered by the invitation. Although I shared a lot with Steve in the way we approached problems and their resolution, I often differed. The first case I watched him do 20 years ago, I disagreed with his lack of active reframing and directives. He said that John Weakland had said the same sort of thing just the week before. He then sent me videos of the case, which was wildly successful, written up in one of his early books, with a note that I was behind the mirror. He was open and respectful to our difference, and the simplicity of his success helped me to understand another way to intervene. This continued to be the genius of his work: high theory combined with down-to-earth simplicity and effectiveness.

Shortly before John Weakland died, many of us who had been influenced by Weakland’s work presented workshops at a conference in his honor in New Orleans. I remember taking a risk at that time and presenting a workshop titled “Solution-Focused Therapy as a Problem.” I argued that all things can become a problem, even solution-focused therapy, if you don’t pay enough attention to the patterns of the problem to be changed. Steve was in the audience, and vocally objected during a hotly debated discussion session, yet we continued to dialogue that weekend and thereafter. A few years ago, I offered a small workshop at one of the Ericsonian Brief Therapy conferences. It was titled, “The Golden Thread: MRI’s Contributions to Treatments that Work.” Steve was again in the audience. He didn’t need to come to that small workshop, but he was supportive. Afterwards he said, “Sounds like you’ve got a book there. I like it.” That book is in press now. Later that weekend, he spent some alone time with my son, Chris, encouraging
his career as a brief therapist. Chris was touched by that. That’s the kind of guy Steve was. He influenced our field and he personally influenced those of us who knew him. Like John Weakland said, he was the real deal, a prince of a guy, who we are all better off to have had in our lives.

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CONVERSATIONS WITH FOOD FOR THOUGHT: ANOTHER *JST* EMERITUS EDITOR REMEMBERS

FRANK YOUNG, Ph.D.

Don, Steve, and I wrote articles for the first issue of this journal in 1981. My article would later have special meaning attached to it when I met with Steve and his colleagues a year later. In 1982 Don Efron and I were invited to Milwaukee as additional discussants when Cronin and Pearce were applying their communications model to the Solution-Focused Brief Therapy model, as practiced by Steve, Insoo Kim Berg, and their clinic associates. Karl Tomm was the primary discussant. It was a very interesting gathering of colleagues; one that I shall never forget.

As it happened, we arrived during the time of their clinic’s annual chili cook-off. It was a great party at Steve and Insoo’s house. One of the features I noticed from the outset is that the front door was locked, but the side and back doors were open and welcoming to friends and insiders. The formal front door only admitted strangers. We all noticed the irony, partly because my first article in this journal that Steve was so influential in starting was the metaphoric “Front-Door, Side-Door, and Back-Door Approaches to your Client’s Problem-Solution: Ethical and Pragmatic Considerations.” All of us were welcomed as friends. Steve was warm and humorous. The chili was great too.

As over the years we all continued to practice, teach, train, supervise, and write, my admiration for Steve continued to grow. Specifically, he and his associates vigorously attempted to refine their model in its simplest and most classic form, true to Steve’s Taoist philosophy. Still my favorite memory was their chili cook-off, and warm conversations with food for thought.

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STEVE DE SHAZER PUT DIFFERENCE TO WORK

LANCE TAYLOR, M.S.C.

Steve was different. He had some unusual mannerisms. He is often called eccentric. Difference of a whole other order is one of his many gifts to our field. He once said: “The therapist needs to find a point, some element of the client’s story, that allows for difference being put to work” (de Shazer, 1991, p. 156). In my opinion, this is one of the most succinct descriptions of the solution focused therapist’s job. In both what it includes and what it excludes, it goes a long way to distinguish solution focused practice from most others.

New students of the model become quickly alerted to exceptions to the problem, often intrigued, as though it was a delightful new discovery to them. It is also not uncommon for them to shortly thereafter have the experience of a kid with a new sack of marbles and a bandaged thumb. A participant in an advanced workshop recently said: “you know . . . I can get a bit of a goal . . . or some better times . . . and we’re going along okay . . . and then it just peters out . . . we get stuck.” This person was ready to learn more about ‘putting difference to work’ as reads the title of what I consider to be Steve’s best book to date.

Another question, almost guaranteed to arise in solution focused training is: “what if a person is . . . [borderline, suicidal, a victim of violence, schizophrenic, etc.] wouldn’t you switch to . . . [some other kind of therapy, medication, risk assessment, referring this person for a consultation, etc.]?” The answer is usually some version of “no”. Steve, as the master, and we who emulate his work would just continue to find differences and put them to work.

I am frequently tempted to use the word, discovery, when I talk about what Insoo Kim Berg and Steve have learned together and bundled into Solution-Focused Brief Therapy. For some reason, I resist the urge. I would like to break with that personal tradition. I am forever grateful to them for discovering, and then helping me learn, that useful differences are almost always lying around, all over the place. On rare occasions we may have to work a little harder to coax them into the open. Once differences appear, clients are generally glad to build them into solutions.

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A PRACTITIONER WITH A SPECIAL ABILITY
TO LINK ABSTRACT CONCEPTS
WITH CONCRETE THERAPY PRACTICES

GALE MILLER, Ph.D.
Marquette University

I first met Steve de Shazer in the winter of 1984. I went to the Brief Family Therapy Center (BFTC) where a group of us spent the afternoon watching videotapes of therapy sessions and talking about what we saw in them. Little did I know, at that time, that I would be involved (off and on) with Steve and many of the other therapists in the group for the next two decades. My involvement is that of a sociologist, not a therapist. I’ve spent most of my time over the years observing therapists interacting with each other and with their clients, taking notes on what I see, recording as many interactions as I can, and then writing about my observations.

My relationship with Steve was also probably a little bit different than for other people. My interest in therapy was practical, but in a different way than the practical concerns of therapists. I am interested in how therapists and other professionals use language to do their work. I rely upon a literature that is different than the literature in therapy. In some ways, this literature is more analytic and philosophical but, in other ways, it is even more focused on the details of social interaction than the literature read by most therapists. Steve’s educational background, which involved philosophical studies and familiarity with sociological theory and particularly the small-group research done in the Sociology Department at Stanford University, made it possible for us to talk about the sociological and philosophical implications of therapy in a language that we both understood. So it shouldn’t be surprising that much of our early relationship consisted of these sorts of conversations.

I won’t bore you with the details of those conversations; rather, I mention them because they help to define the context of what I remember seeing at BFTC in the mid 1980s when I spent a year observing the activities of the clinic’s staff, clients, and students. Steve was a member of a unique therapy community, one that took seriously its obligation to regularly reflect on members’ shared assumptions and practices. Some of the most important members of that community are contributing to this remembrance of Steve and his influence, but there were many other (new and experienced) therapists involved with the clinic. They were an intelligent and energetic group that was willing to question received wisdom.

A number of people have described Steve is an iconoclast, and he was. It is also important to notice, however, that his early work at the BFTC was done within an iconoclastic community. Steve was a leader within this group and he was also led by other members who were interested in observing and understanding how effective therapy works. As John Briggs recently mentioned to me in conversation, Steve met the full definition of a charismatic leader. He possessed qualities
that attracted others to follow him, while also recognizing that part of leadership is following in the footsteps of others. It should not be surprising that, in the ensuing years, several members of this group have emerged as leaders in the therapy world in their own right. Whether it was designed or evolved spontaneously, the environment at BFTC nurtured creative ideas and practices.

My relationship with Steve changed over the years, especially in the 1990s and after. This was the time when Solution-Focused Brief Therapy became internationally prominent. One consequence of this success was that Steve spent increasing amounts of time away from Milwaukee. While he continued to do therapy, it was less central to his professional life. Steve sometimes privately lamented this change, saying that he missed being a “simple” therapist in Milwaukee. On the other hand, my occasional travels with him showed that he had developed a new community of therapists committed to building on the solution-focused ideas initially developed at BFTC in Milwaukee.

This community is also filled with bright and energetic people, although they are widely dispersed around the world. I’m also impressed at how diverse the membership of this community is. They bring a variety of personal and cultural experiences to their understanding and use of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy. They include practitioners in Eastern Europe who use solution-focused ideas in doing therapy as well as in addressing social problems, business consultants who use similar ideas in addressing the human side of organizational life, and teachers who are using solution-focused ideas to reorganize educational practices.

On the surface, Steve’s role in this community was different. He was a teacher, consultant, role model and source of inspiration. Looked at another way, however, Steve’s participation in this community was similar to his earlier participation at BFTC. He was a leader and he was led by others who introduced him to new and distinctive contexts for applying solution-focused principles to human problems, including how they might be used to improve public health and to address the housing needs of refugees. Steve was proud of the creative successes of his colleagues in the global solution-focused community.

Steve leaves behind a community committed to the application and expansion of solution-focused ideas and practices. Community members will carry on and probably change the foundations built by the early members of BFTC, just as Steve carried on and changed the ideas taught to him by his mentors. But, I fear that the passing of Steve will mean that this practitioner community is left without a member who can speak as easily and effectively as Steve did to academic communities interested in the philosophical, theoretical and linguistic implications of solution-focused practices. It is, no doubt, my academic bias speaking when I say that solution-focused therapy was enhanced by Steve’s ability to link abstract concepts with concrete therapy practices.

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