

Memories of Steve and Insoo

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In the early 1990s, several local therapists were organizing workshops that brought leading therapists here to Vancouver Island. Two of the organizers were my graduate students, who thought it would be a great idea to add an extra “research day” at the University, where the visitors could learn about our team’s current projects. I cannot say that these meetings were usually a success. Most visitors did not see the relevance of presumably “positivist” lab research with undergraduate psychology students and appeared to be politely bored. Insoo and Steve were the dramatic exception. From their first visit in 1995, they understood completely and enthusiastically that research on dialogue was relevant to SFBT. Our affinity for each other’s work was immediate and only grew stronger. Insoo began to send us their videos as soon as these were published, and students such as Bruce Phillips (1998, 1999), Dan McGee (1999, 2005), and Christine Tomori (2004, 2007) quickly chose to analyze these, rather than experimental data, for their thesis projects. (See these and later publications at <http://web.uvic.ca/psyc/bavelas/CommunPsychother.php>.) And Steve and Insoo started inviting me to speak at SFBT meetings.

Although 1995 was our first formal meeting, Insoo, Steve, and I probably met earlier, at least in passing, at the Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto. (I worked with the Palo Alto Group from 1961 to 1970 and still visited the Brief Therapy Centre after I moved to Canada.) Certainly the time that Steve, Insoo, and I each spent there was formative, especially because of John Weakland, who was an important mentor to all three of us. Going back even further, I think that what attracted each of us to the Palo Alto Group in the first place, and especially to John, were some characteristics (or quirks!) that we had in common: (i) a profound interest in language and how it actually functions in conversations; (ii) an attraction to any good idea that is 180° from the currently unquestioned ideas; (iii) an ethical commitment to treating people

respectfully, both in person and in assumptions or theories about them; and (iv) a preference for collaboration rather than individual achievement. This unusual configuration of common passions and values easily spanned the distance between therapy and experimental psychology (cf. Bavelas, 2011).

My time with Insoo and Steve was shorter than most of those who write their memories here, and it was sporadic rather than continuous, necessarily fitted around my academic life. Sometimes the two worlds came together, such as when Steve was appointed the Dean's External Examiner (the person with the final word) for Dan McGee's 1999 doctoral oral. I'm sure Steve found that role ironic, given his own experience in (and opinion of) graduate school.

My last conversations with Steve were emails about the possibility of designing an experiment on the essentials of Miracle Questioning. As few other therapists do, he understood the necessity to translate abstractions into specific procedures with the hard thinking that is also the rewarding core of experimentation. After he died, I was very surprised when Insoo asked me to deliver the opening tribute to Steve at a 2006 conference in Amsterdam. I hesitated because I'm not a therapist, but agreed--with trepidation. After several unsatisfactory versions about therapy, I finally followed the advice often given to writers: Write what you know about. So I presented what I knew about, which is microanalysis research on the details of dialogue. The tribute became video excerpts of Steve's therapeutic brilliance as revealed in tiny, moment-by-moment details of his interviews, such as the eloquent variety of his *m-hm*'s. The reaction to this presentation showed me the legacy that Steve and Insoo's teaching had created—everyone got it! They recognized this research method as if they had known it all along, and they understood its relevance for SFBT, just as Steve and Insoo had done 10 years earlier.

The last time I saw Insoo in person was our informal conversation, together with Peter De Jong and Harry Korman, after the November 2006 SFBTA meeting in Denver. We were talking entirely about research, about the need to keep publicizing the evidence base but also to add new dimensions to it. Once again, Insoo said she wanted to learn about microanalysis. So I challenged her to finally make time to come to Victoria and learn it. Peter and Harry were also interested, and all of us committed to meet in Victoria the third week of August the following year. Being Insoo, she soon expanded it to more people and moved the plan to Milwaukee. Before we had time to work out the details, she died. But Jennifer Gerwing, Sara Healing, Christine Tomori, and I hosted 10 solution-focused colleagues in Victoria that week in August. It was our first microanalysis workshop and has generated almost 20 more, large and small, to this date. It also led to over a dozen completed or continuing research projects with SFBT colleagues. The merger of SFBT with a new kind of research and training is well underway, a continuing tribute to Steve and Insoo.

Post Script

During the 1996 Therapeutic Conversations 3 meeting that Insoo and Steve had arranged for me to speak at, Steve spontaneously asked me to sit in on his discussion panel. It was about therapy topics, so I hung back and let the others respond to the questions from the audience. However, there was one question about dealing with grief for a dead friend or relative, especially the continuing reminders of all the new things in one's life that this person will never know about or share with you.

Surprising myself, I spoke up and questioned whether we had to think of this sharing as absolutely lost. My position is not spiritual or supernatural; it's just part of the social beings that we are. Think of the living friends and relatives whom you know very well, including how they

would react in certain situations. So, even when you don't see them very often, it's possible to imagine how amused, annoyed, intrigued, etc., one of them would be at something you're doing or thinking. You may never even tell that person subsequently, but you have fully imagined sharing a moment with him or her. My point is that we carry these important people in our heads, as well as in our hearts. This connection doesn't disappear when they die, because they live on in our knowledge of them. We can still enjoy how they *would have* reacted.

Steve's panel discussion went on to other topics and was finally over. As we were leaving the platform, he leaned over and said with some pleasure, "Yeah. I still have great arguments with John."* I'm happy to say that I sometimes imagine Steve's or Insoo's reactions to things that would be interesting, annoying, or delightful to us. I hope that you who are reading this book have some of these shared moments as well.

* John Weakland, who had died in 1995.