

In Memoriam Insoo Kim Berg

Insoo Kim Berg, co-founder of the solution-focused brief approach, died unexpectedly and peacefully on January 10th 2007 at the age of 72 in Milwaukee.

Insoo was born in Seoul in 1934. As a young woman she immigrated to the USA. She used to tell the story that as a young therapy student she terribly "failed" keeping clients for 6 continuous sessions (the first six sessions were supposed to be dedicated to completing the psycho-social assessment and coming up with a treatment plan). However, she began to notice that the very same clients referred their best friends to her, which left her wondering what could have possibly helped these clients so much before the "treatment" ever started.

She met her second husband Steve de Shazer at the Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto and together in 1978 they founded the Brief Family Therapy Center in Milwaukee. In the early years of the training and research institute they met the clients in the living room of their home while the observing team sat on the stairs to the upper floor. The research focused on finding what would be most helpful for clients to get back on track and live their desired future. Very early on their findings showed that there were always helpful exceptions to the problem which resourcefully pointed towards realistic solutions.

In her appreciative and spontaneous presence Insoo was a very creative person. One day around 1984 a client in total desperation told her how difficult things were for her and that probably no-one could help her since it would rather take a miracle to make things better. In her affirmative curiosity Insoo asked: "So, suppose this miracle does happen, how would that make a difference to your life?" Thus the miracle question was born, and with it maybe also the idea that one did not need to understand the problem in order to create a realistic and worthwhile future.

Insoo has published over 10 books which were translated into more than 10 languages and which covered a wide range of topics from protective child care to drug abuse treatment and finally to coaching in workplace situations. She held numerous workshops in North America, Europe and Asia and introduced a totally new and surprising understanding of being helpful to many professionals all over the world. Lately she did an increasing amount of work in large organizations mostly in the US, thus bringing the paradigm change from problem solving to solution building as a powerful tool to corporations.

After Steve's death in September 2005 she continued working, travelling and starting new projects with all her enthusiasm and curiosity. She kept herself in good shape with long daily walks and regular exercise. She kept everybody else amazed with her good health, high level of heart-warming energy and endless creativity until the very last minute. She even managed to miraculously "go in style", lying down in the steam room for a short rest after her workout at the gym, and then softly slipping into her eternal rest.

Thinking back I am highly grateful and deeply impressed: still and always impressed by her extraordinary way of being with clients in total respect and appreciation,

grateful that she asked me to write the coaching book with her, impressed by how she was a role model in teaching, which for her meant “learning twice”. Gratefully I’d like to share an example of her trusting generosity and sense of humour, received in an e-mail from her:

“I do not need to see the workshop proposal for the conference. I trust you to do it right and I can go along with whatever you propose for me to do, except maybe a nude table dancing or something like that.”

Looking to the future something Insoo said at the Vienna conference in 2006 comes to my mind:

“We have learned so much about the recipes for solution-focused work in the past years – like things you write down in a cook book. I think it is now time for us become more like an artistic cook, creatively working with what is there.”

I guess that is up to us now – with pleasure!
Thank you so much, dear Insoo

Peter Szabó, Basel, Switzerland