Remembering Insoo Kim Berg: Living by “Wow!”

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Abstract

Tenth of January 2017, ten years have elapsed since Insoo Kim Berg, the family therapist so closely associated with the Solution Focused Therapy Model passed away. In this article, I pay homage to her legacy, not by presenting her model again, but by drawing attention to some features of her work that I see as characteristic, that is her way of recognizing peoples’ hidden strength, her commitment to overcoming distance, and her perseverance in facilitating collaboration. The meaning of this is illustrated by experiences from two ‘mini-projects’, one in Nepal, the other in Tanzania.

Sometimes we experience something that triggers something inside us. Almost like a chemical reaction. Afterwards, when we look into ourselves, we discover that the scale we live by has moved a notch up and the world around us has opened up. I have personally experienced it. It happens only rarely, but it happens. As with love. (Murakami, 2007, p. 465)

IT WAS AT THE IFTA WORLD CONGRESS in Reykjavik, in October 2006, when I last met Insoo Kim Berg, the Korean lady so intimately associated with the Solution Focused Therapy Model. Here, everybody wanted a share of “The Zen-Lady“, as she was often called. However, at some point, we managed to sneak away and have a chat about our latest developments. I had just made a presentation on what I called “Solution-Focused Aid”, to which I will shortly return. She now seemed to be less concerned about family therapy schools. More than ever her thoughts were revolving around outreach efforts, how to improve social work and possibilities for reforming child guidance practice – perhaps through minimal adaptations of the Solution Focused Model. Behind, I could sense her mourning the loss of her husband, Steve the Shazer, who had passed away the previous year.
This was the last time I experienced her “Wow!” – this spontaneous, infectious uttering with which she enchanted and encouraged everyone who came under her influence; an exclamation so soft and congruent that it more than once found its way to the mind’s most remote recesses, and so full of excitement and interest that it could do nothing less than prompt thrill and wonder. Of course, an idiomatic exclamation like that was to be mimicked and imitated, teased and by some even ridiculed. However, her “Wow!” was not simply any “Gosh!” When the uttering fell from her lips, it was as if she pointed at something – not necessarily a pleasure, certainly not an extraordinary success. In retrospect pondering about what her “Wow!” meant to me, I suspect that at in moments like this, she more or less intuitively sensed something that I myself tended to be unaware of, something like a quiet unwavering inner drive, a kind of life force that could even be my raison d’être, my purpose in life. Through her “Wow!” I felt stronger. I became conscious of what I was heading for, and gradually I came to understand it, deepen it and subsequently give voice to it. In other words, I learnt to trust my own standards and criteria. This does not imply that other people’s values and opinions mean nothing to me any longer, or that I ignore the social systems in which I take part. The difference is that I now can select my influences more freely, thus adding resonance to my voice, which is no longer (somewhat paradoxically paraphrasing Erich Fromm) “the internalized voice of an authority whom I am eager to please and afraid of displeasing. It is my own voice, a voice I believe to be present in every human being, independent of external sanctions and rewards”. Staying with this voice, I not only feel stronger, but more able to endure rejection, pain and frustrations, and perhaps more apt to accept everything that might happen to me. Although “the Zen-lady’s” voice still goes with me, this meeting was the last reverberation of a long friendship. Her sudden death the tenth of January 2007 was a shock to many of us.

My first meeting with “The Zen-Lady” was at a seminar in Tampere in Finland (1992) where she presented “Working WITH the Problem Drinker” (Berg & Miller, 1992). Highly impressed, I invited her to give some seminars in Norway. Since then, there were many opportunities for talk and exchange. Already from the beginning, she was extremely helpful, sometimes to the extent that I cannot help feeling a bit guilty. In hindsight, one incident acquired significance as a striking example of her generosity. Hopefully not too self-centered, I will share it here. When I once proudly mentioned to her that my abstract for a presentation on Milton Ericson’s AFA (ambiguous function assignment) had been accepted at
a world congress on hypnosis, she urged me to send my preliminary manuscript to her. Some days later, I got it back, rewritten from beginning to end. It must have taken her quite some time and energy to do this work. Most remarkably, she had suggested a new title: “Creating a common understanding” was replaced by “Creative use of misunderstandings”. As I sat down, reading this new text, I was baffled. In her simple although fluent language – in which I constantly recognized my own words and expressions – I not only felt closer to what I, myself, had written. I felt that what I wanted to say was worthwhile, something of significance. Moreover, I was inspired to improve my English, and by her efforts, I was encouraged and far more confident about my upcoming ordeal.

Still believing in the power of the customary solution-focused questions, now I realize that experiences like these – her genuine interest in people as persons, her helpful attitude, and, not least, her enduring perseverance in keeping things simple and fluent – actually might have had as great and lasting impact on my own solution-focused approach as scales and miracles. Recognition and commitment. Easy to understand, hard to translate into practice.

In this article, I will point towards some “micro-projects” that have furthered my understanding of the power of recognition and commitment within a systemic framework. What follows is a brief recount of the previously mentioned presentation on “Solution-Focused Aid” I gave in Reykjavik, however, now with some new insights added – insights made possible as time has passed, new events occurred, and, not least, because a distance in time has allowed a more disengaged look at what happened. Inspired by Heidegger’s The Origin of the Work of Art (Heidegger, 1935/2000), in each case, I start with a brief description of the situation in which the project took place. Then follows how the “micro-project” was organized, that is its form, and a description of its material input. Finally, some words about what happened during and after the project period, its function. At the end, I discuss some lessons learnt from these small initiatives.

**The Dodoma Urban Problem**

In 2003, for people in Dodoma rural,¹ HIV was a great concern. About 30% of patients in hospitals were infected, and in many families, both parents were dead because of aids-associated diseases. Uncles or grandparents felt responsi-
bility to take care of the orphans, but most of them were very poor. Already struggling with the costs of purchasing shoes, school uniforms and books for their own children, providing these required requisites for newcomers in the household was beyond their reach. Thus, most orphans were deprived of the possibility of education. Afraid of being too much of a burden for their families, they made their way to town, where many ended up on the streets as prostitutes or criminals.

WOWAP (an acronym for “Women, Wake Up!”) is an NGO working to promote health and abolish harmful traditional practices in Dodoma and surrounding areas. I met the leader of this organization, Fatma, at a conference in Dar-es-Salaam, where she invited me to visit her hometown and become acquainted with her organization’s work. Then, over a dinner, sharing some concerns about the situation for the young orphans, and discussing what would be a slightly better situation for them, we agreed on a ‘mini-project’: Poor families who took responsibility for orphans and who promised to provide them with what they needed in order to continue their education, should be entrusted with a she-goat. Then, when the goat had kids, the first-born she-goat should be given away to another needy family. Our hope was that a project like this would enable families to take care of the orphans, to support them in their social and economic demands and create an alternative to their flight to urban areas. Providing WOWAP with money for 10 goats, the organization was left with the responsibility to create a viable project organization, according to local needs and standards.

One year later, returning to Dodoma and WOWAP, I was taken to Chamvino, a village some miles outside the city, largely inhabited by members of the Gogo tribe. We were received at the village chair’s office by the chair himself, together with the selected chairperson of the project, its secretary, the district vet, two representatives from the Women’s party, and the village’s counsellor for women. All had been assigned a role in the project. Moreover, they could tell that a “Board of governance” had been appointed, consisting of the village chair, who monitored the project, 25 representatives from the village and chairpersons of the different village suburbs. This board had selected ten recipients of goats, priority given to the poorest of those taking care of orphans. Consulting with the WOWAP representatives, they had decided not to buy goats of the local breed, but “high quality goats”; that is, goats that produced more milk. These goats, however, had trouble with the warm and dry climate in Dodoma, and therefore a new precondition for receiving a goat had been introduced:
After instructions from the vet, the guardians of goats had to build a fully ventilated cage that could give the goats some shade. The vet also voluntarily had offered a free, four-week training in animal health and husbandry for the people involved in the project. Feeding and milking goats then became the orphans’ responsibility.

Having inspected some of the goats, some of them already with kids, some still pregnant, we were invited to attend a village assembly. All the village’s 120 orphans were present. After an unforgettable drum show, some recipients of goats came forward and talked about their experiences with the project. First, they made it clear that without the goats, they would not have been able to attend school. Second, they felt less a burden on their families, because the new income had relieved some of the family’s worries. Surprisingly, one of the orphans, a teenage boy, repeatedly mentioned “the long journey from Norway”, and made clear that my presence in their village for them was a sign of compassion as well as a “kick off”. “Your concern comes from your heart and (therefore) we will do whatever we can in order to show that we are able to carry on the project”, he said.

Still, the most profound changes seem to have come from the authorities. In order to select recipients, the village leaders had to look out for the poor and needy. Subsequently, when meeting orphans on the streets or in fields, they no longer turned away ashamed, feeling powerless and unable to help. On the contrary, they now greeted the orphans, smiled to them, and showed interest in how they were doing. This new attention made even the poorest orphans feel included in the community, confident and hopeful.

Now, before we proceed, we must consider the role of WOWAP, the local organization, in the project. Actually, the person to whom the organization had assigned responsibility for establishing the project, Mohammed, put in lots and lots of time and energy to get things moving: First, he had, together with the WOWAP board, carefully selected an aids-stricken village, Chamvino, contacted its leaders, and ensured their collaboration. Together they agreed on the necessary details. Then, he travelled to a market far away in order to buy the best goats, and because the high quality goats were more expensive than the budget allowed, he convinced his organization to make up the difference. In the village, he ensured that the list of needy families was made, and that the selection of recipients was properly done. Then, when the goats gave birth, he went back to the village and checked that the kid was handed over to another family in accordance with the rules laid down for the project. Obviously, without
WOWAP’s enthusiastic engagement, their checking, educating and monitoring, a project like this would not be possible.

A project in Sundarial village, Nepal

In the late ‘90s, on the invitation of its grounder, Chandika, I got an opportunity to visit a school in Sundarial, a village a few miles outside Kathmandu. Sundarial was Chandika’s home village, where she grew up. After having secured her brother’s education by money earned working in a restaurant in Kathmandu, in the early 70s she married a Norwegian man and migrated to Norway. Here, benefitting from the Norwegian education services, she had moved from illiteracy to becoming an assistant nurse in an institution for elderly people. Thus herself realizing the power of education, and inspired by the egalitarian principles she encountered here, Chandika started to collect money for a new school in her home village, “a school for everybody”, for boys and girls, for rich and poor, for high caste and low caste.

In Sundarial, most villagers lived in extreme poverty, and their understanding of hygiene was nil. Most of them did not have access to toilets and therefore defecated in the fields, in groves of trees, or even on the roads. Suicide rates among women, usually linked to marriage practices, had reached alarming heights. As in most villages, for girls to attend school was highly uncommon, and when established, the new school became a source of harrowing conflicts. In particular, the elderly women were against it. They could not understand why girls should spend time on “useless things” like education rather than helping them in the fields, where they had to work from early morning until late in the evening.

At a family gathering in Chandika’s house, as response to an expressed concern about the rising suicide rates, we discussed possibilities for a slightly better life for the villagers. The idea of making a woman’s group emerged and was enthusiastically received by all present. Nevertheless, everybody was puzzled by the question, “Who can create such a group and run group meetings?” Trust among the different families in the village was lacking. Moreover, to organize meetings would need permission from the authorities, and this would be difficult to get. However, at the end, an acquaintance, an informal village leader with some influence volunteered to negotiate the permissions needed for forming a woman’s group. Then, carefully complying with cultural norms and respecting existing hierarchies, a girl who had just passed her exams at Chandika’s school, went from house to house and asked the oldest and most influen-
tial women for advice on the young girls’ situation. When on speaking terms, she invited them to attend the group for further discussions. Subsequently, ten women met ten times to discuss one preformed question: “What will be a slightly better situation for our village?” In order to attend the meetings, the women had to leave their duties in the fields. Therefore, each of them were compensated with one dollar per meeting.

In the group, the discussions were neither calm nor orderly. However, the young girl, whose traditional upbringing forbade her to raise her voice or even to know anything in front of elderly women, seems to have worked from a “natural not-knowing position”, just asking questions. Thus, she not only managed to keep the group together and further the discussions. She was highly praised for her nice manners, which she could tell she had learnt at school.

Gradually, the women changed their opinions about girls’ education, and in the last meetings, they decided that they, themselves, should resurface two kilometers of road to the school, thus allowing the bus to drive all the way to the school buildings. When the job was done, and as they by their work had now acquired some kind of ownership to the road, they kept on, announcing, “Nobody shit on our road!” Moreover, having formed a belief that girls’ education will bring about a better life for everybody, they engaged in many activities at school. During intervals, they took turns securing peace in the schoolyard; they served food; and they were eagerly taking care of matters regarding hygiene. Most notably, they started to talk nicely about the school and the teachers’ efforts to educate their children. After two years, at official exams this school repeatedly turned out to be one of the best in Nepal.

By respecting the elder women’s knowledge and experience, the young girl’s efforts had brought about collaborative support. This facilitated the teachers’ work and the school prospered. When in 2006 the Maoist uprising reached the valley, much of the village was demolished. Fear and frustration prevailed. However, the school was left untouched, probably because it gave free education to the poorest. Then, due to bad weather and flooding, the road was damaged. It was soon rebuilt. After some time, the road was damaged again, and rebuilt yet again – a continuous struggle. Some years later, internal conflicts regarding spending and other economic issues surfaced, threatening to ruin the whole enterprise. Finally, the earthquake in 2015, which left most of the village in ruins, also destroyed parts of the school building. Most likely, such overwhelming circumstances would flood people’s consciousness, and they would forget about a 100-dollar “micro-project” that took place 20 years back. How-
ever, apparently they do not. According to Chandika, the positive attitude towards girls’ education carries on, likewise efforts to improve hygienic standards, and, not least, to make the village a nice place to live. Although still struggling with the road and suffering from a palpable fear of new earthquakes, the villagers have already rebuilt the school.

Obviously, these efforts and successes cannot be ascribed to the project, but rather to the Nepali people’s unquenchable endurance in the face of hardship, and, not least, to their belief in hard work. Nevertheless, the small project, with its attention to and respect for cultural norms and attitudes, seems to have capitalized on this innate propensity. In other words, when the women’s knowledge, skills and capacities were recognized and acknowledged, the emerging vision of a better life prompted them collaboratively to use their amazing physical strength in a different way. The small amounts of money did make a difference, as it allowed the women to spend time off the fields and reflect on their situation. However, what seems to have sparked off the whole thing was the young girl’s good manners and her willingness to listen to and acknowledge others’ experience. Still, it is my belief that this would not have come to much without Chandika’s dedication, commitment and perseverance, while over decades encouraging, following up and monitoring the project and its spin offs.

Lessons learnt
Like any story, these small recounts invite a host of interpretations and deliberations and there is lots to learn. I will render just a few points, which I feel are of importance, and which, I believe, can throw some more light on Insoo Kim Berg’s legacy.

Defining the system
Obviously, we are dealing with social systems. These systems includes families, and some of these families are suffering. From the outset, family therapy concentrated on the “nuclear family”, conceptualized as “a self-contained, invariable unit existing in a social and cultural vacuum” (Bell, 1962). However, within our field, there is also a tradition for relating to a group of people descending from common ancestors, which, in order to understand our own and others’ cultural identity, might create a need for looking at conceptualizations like “cultural genograms” (Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995). There are conceptualizations around “people who live under the same roof”, which might include strangers as well as “the grandmother who raised the children and lives upstairs” (Berg,
1994). Then there is “the extended family”, that is, parents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, all living nearby or in the same household (Bell 1962), a family system which often also serves as a social “safety net” (Foster, 2000). Some include “other systems”, like court, school, a visiting nurse, the public health service or other treatment personnel, for example in multi-systems therapy of adolescents with behavior problems (Liddle, 1995), and in the more educative approach, “multi-family psychoeducation groups” (Fristad et al., 2003). Although all have bearings on our cases, none fit well.

A more promising conceptualization is Anderson and Goolishian’s (1988) “Human Systems as Linguistic systems”. Central to their thesis is the move from thinking of human systems as social systems defined by roles and structure to thinking of them as distinguished by linguistic and communicative markers. In their view, what makes up systems is people’s languaging about problems, and problems, as “alarmed objections”, are just a form of co-evolved meaning that exists (only) in ongoing dialogical communication. Put to its logical consequence, problems and systems exist only “in the shifting sands of language, meaning and narrative” (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988).

A thorough analysis of our cases in the light of “Human systems as Linguistic systems” would be another article. However, I will here point to some crucial deviations. First, whether we call it cultural norms, homeostasis, or coherence, in the two villages, peoples’ suffering took place within the context of a quest for social order, stability, and equilibrium. In Chamvino, social norms required that schoolchildren should wear uniform and shoes in order to attend classes. In Sundarial, there were not only ingrained expectations that girls should work in the fields, but restrictions about who could meet and who could talk with whom about what. Moreover, some were willing to enforce these norms to the extent that the norms were experienced as (reified) barriers to development. Second, their suffering was not something taking place in an “ongoing dialogical communication”, as the issues at stake were not likely to be talked about, at least not openly. Then, perhaps as a consequence of these small projects, new human systems started to grow, but not from problem descriptions. After some initial statements, there was no further inquiry about problems, but a deep engagement in questions like, “What will be a slightly better situation?” Then, the only thing to be discussed was who would have some influence and what could possibly be done to enhance collaboration and reach this new, desired state. Interestingly, some new social organization even took place, again, not due to languaging about problems, but due to ownership – of a road, of goats and cages.
Perhaps, in our cases, it is meaningful to talk about people who, in the field of tension between a personal need for change and the society’s quest for stability, share an interest in developing a “home”, a congenial environment for themselves and for others to whom they are connected – through love, duty, contracts, or, as in these cases, a need to survive. Clearly, we as family therapists need to reflect over how to understand the system we are dealing with, both because much research points towards well-functioning social relationships as promoters for individual health, and because we work in situations more and more flavored by influx of new people. Many come alone. Some come from broken or eradicated families. Moreover, many of those who do belong to each other arrive at different times, and thus find themselves at different stages in a pervasive change process, as they tentatively adjust to new social surroundings and a new society (Sveaass & Reichelt, 2011).

**Balancing autonomy and coherence**

These “mini-projects” among the poorest of the poor, rest on a systemic way of thinking in the sense that they deal with interaction, patterns and social organization that develop in the context of cultural norms and expectations. In Sundarial, in order to obtain a greater sense of freedom, collaboration and success, cultural norms regarding girls’ social role had to be challenged. Then, because the project capitalized on traditional values as well as the participants’ inherent strengths, the older women became able to take the lead in a process of social change. In contrast to the girls in Sundarial, the Dodoma orphans, who likewise were in a vulnerable position because of prevailing social norms, did not challenge these norms. Rather, the goat project made it possible for them to acquire the resources needed in order to comply with the norms, thereby allowing them to engage in education and strive for independence. Taken together, we probably can say that both projects strive for a better balance between the individual’s quest for autonomy and community’s need for order and coherence. Moreover, not less importantly, both projects seem to be followed by a growing concern for marginalized people that added to the community’s web of affect-laden relationships, thus constituting a higher level of responsiveness.

**Overcoming distance**

From the days of Aristotle, the concept of ‘distance’ has been subjected to philosophical deliberations (Ginzburg, 1998/2001; Dyan, 2007; Chouliaraki & Orgad, 2011), lately also psychological research (Petras et al., 2016; Gong et al.,
2012; Agerstrøm & Bjørklund, 2009). Again, it is beyond the scope of this article to summarize all the insights from these studies. Suffice it to say, that while too great distance gives rise to indifference; too great proximity may awaken compassion, but, in the worst case, also can produce murderous rivalry. Thus, a proper distance cannot be “no distance at all” (see Dyan, 2007). Rather, we should seek a distance that, although close, “dialectically preserves otherness as an object of our reflexive judgement” (Chouliaraki & Orgad, 2011). For us, as therapists, this might mean a distance that makes it possible meaningfully to engage in discussions around therapeutically relevant questions.

In our cases, overcoming distance seems to play an important role. By overcoming distance, what the interlocutors considered impossible, became possible, nowhere coming to the fore more saliently then in the Chamvino case, where during the evaluation a young boy in his short speech repeatedly mentioned “the long journey from Norway” as a sign of compassion. It should, however, be mentioned that actually, this was a misunderstanding. My visit in Chamvino was simply a small detour from my main mission in Tanzania at the time. Nevertheless, who would take time and energy to correct the misunderstanding and by doing so perhaps ruin the villagers’ motivation for keeping up their good work? Thus, rather than “creating a common understanding”, we engaged in “creative use of misunderstandings”, as the Zen-lady had suggested. However, for me the idea of overcoming distance acquired new meaning.

Commitment
In our European context, facing extensive immigration and thus lots of ‘otherness’, distance again takes on a special meaning; that is, what is different, the unfamiliar, “the Other(s)”. In this situation, overcoming distance has become a quest and a challenge. However, it is my belief that any efforts we as therapists can engage in in order to overcome physical and psychological distance will be highly appreciated by our new neighbors and clients. Insoo Kim Berg seems to have committed herself to overcoming distance at all levels, physical, social, cultural and emotional. At the physical level, not only by her worldwide travels as teacher and counselor in solution-focused work, but even more so through her engagement in home visits and outreach efforts to the most poor and isolated families. At the social level, not by insisting on seeing the whole family in her office, but by inviting people from a variety of positions and professions to attend her seminars and to stimulate and facilitate collaboration and shared understanding. At the cultural level, not by agreeing with all expressions that
claim to be culturally anchored, but by respecting and adjusting to values and traditions (Berg & Miller, 1992; Berg & Jaya, 1993), and, most notably, by conversing in the client’s language, picking up words and phrases that she later on would use in her feedback message. At the emotional level, she neither reworked, nor tried to overcome resistance. Rather, she sought ways to normalize her client’s experiences, and by her questions create collaboration, subtly redirecting their attention. Her recorded sessions, like Irreconcilable differences, where wife and husband fight for their own, separate views, and where Berg seamlessly knit their highly diverging purposes into a shared miracle picture, are eloquent examples testifying her commitment to reducing emotional distance. Last, but not least, to overcome distance in time, not by actualizing her clients’ traumatic history, but by reflecting on what difference the client would observe tomorrow morning, if their “miracle” happened tonight. Together with her spontaneous recognition and acknowledgement of seemingly hidden resources, her enduring commitment and perseverance in creating something better are what I admire “The Zen-Lady” for most.

Now, moving back to the cases described previously, it is my belief that these initiatives would not have come to much without the efforts of those highly committed women and men with whom I collaborated, Chandika, Fatma and Mohammed, who followed up the projects through years – translating, interpreting, explaining, inspiring and facilitating. Thus, a more apt title of this article perhaps would be “Living by Vow!”, an age-old concept in Zen-Buddhism, an essential point in Buddhist teaching and practice – not as a static pledge, but as “a dynamic, day-to-day-expression of the most fundamental aspects of our true nature” (Okumura, 2012). Surely, although raised as a Korean Presbyterian, “The Zen-Lady” was thoroughly familiar with the vows of Buddhism. From “Living by Wow!” to “Living by Vow!” From W to V. A minimal change, but with deep implications. It does not imply that her “Wow!” means less. One does not exclude the other. Reflecting on what I might have learnt from her, the quote from Murakami (2007) gains significance:

> Sometimes we experience something that triggers something inside us. Almost like a chemical reaction. Afterwards, when we look into ourselves, we discover that the scale we live by has moved a notch up and the world around us has opened up. I have personally experienced it. It happens only rarely, but it happens. As with love. (Murakami, 2007, p. 465)
My suggestion is that we all, as modern therapists working in more and more result-oriented organizations, have lots and lots to learn from “the Zen-Lady’s” example. Moreover, in our multicultural context, we as family therapists can certainly do a lot, not by embracing a multitude of worlds, but by working hard to overcome physical and psychological distance while creating viable systems and social organizing around what our clients consider a slightly better way of life. Then, perhaps, we will discover that the scale we live by has moved up a notch.

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Literature


