

INTERVIEW WITH INSOO KIM BERG & STEVE DE SHAZER

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Plamen: And so...

Insoo: We should have peanuts here, and vodka...

P: Vodka is over there, and peanuts are over there...

Steve: We can pretend they're here.

P: I think it would be interesting for my colleagues to know who you are, where you come from, something about your parents, your past...

S: This is Insoo Kim Berg; she's from a place called Seoul, from a place called Korea, which is on the back of the Earth if we're in the front here.

I: Yes. I came here to study in 1957, to get an education, and I've been living in Milwaukee ever since, so I feel like a local in Milwaukee. How about you?

S: Me? Who am I?

P and I: Who are you?

S: Oh, I'm too tired to say for sure. I used to know... Steve, someone... De Shazer, now I remember! I suppose I was born here, grew up here, lived some time in Manhattan, then on the West Coast, Victoria in Canada, San Francisco. But most of my life has been in Milwaukee - this is my official address...

P: I have a question for both of you. Insoo, what is the most important thing about Steve that people should know, and Steve, what is the most important thing about Insoo?

I: Oh, a difficult question.

S: Insoo is a very good person and a master therapist. Professionally speaking, if you want to watch a master therapist, you should watch her work and try to understand how she and her clients do it. That's how I spent the last few years; that was my job.

P: Do you know by now, or still...

S: No, it's still not clear to me. The more I watch her, the more unclear it becomes. It's challenging because... She and her clients somehow do it... I'm

trained in a rather rigid version of sociology, where everything is expected to be counted and correctly defined. And in therapy, it's not like that. But it's clear that she is a master at it and very creative. A creative listener. Overall, she's a good person.

I: ... and hardworking, you should have said...

S: He asked what the most important thing is, not the worst. That may be important, but... I put it in a slightly different category.

I: I think that's a good quality; don't you think so?

S: I also think it's a good quality, but... There's a limit that separates too much work from... something else.

I: Fanaticism. I'm a fanatically hardworking person.

S: Yes, that's you.

I: Maybe it's my turn to say something about Steve. I think our relationship has been very good because we are very different. Very different, as you've noticed this month.

S: Yes, you see she's shorter than me.

P: But in a sense, you are similar. In the sense that each of you is different and doesn't try to be like the other.

I: We were mature enough and had the sense of how to use, combine, blend our differences. And somehow how to unite them. Steve has very clear thinking. I've always been impressed by the clarity of his thinking. I don't know if it's from his Jesuit education, but he has this incredible ability. And he writes clearly, simply, and understandably. I think our relationship, both in work and personally, is good, and we find ways to accommodate our differences. So for us, it was very natural to meet couples who argue about various things.

S: The classic example is toilet paper. There are couples who argue about which way the toilet paper should roll. And people really argue about it.

I: Only in America...

P: Or toothpaste - squeezed from the end or the middle.

S: As a result of our coexistence, I have understood - that's life. It's not a problem; that's how things go. My more or less Germanic culture is completely

different from her Korean culture. Nothing is the same. You can't expect them to be similar. You can't expect things to be the same. Differences are something normal.

P: So I wonder how you manage with toilet paper in your home.

I: I decide.

S: It depends on who puts it there.

I: And I think...

S: We have separate toothpaste.

I: The fact that we come from different cultures has helped us a lot. People think it's problematic, but it has helped us. Because we had the opportunity to see the strength of both cultures and find a way to combine them and use them and turn them into an advantage.

P: For me, this is a real example of how the same thing can be a problem or a resource.

I: Yes, or an opportunity and wealth.

P: You tell us a lot about your work, but what do you like to do outside of work?

I: I wish we had more time for this - we love long walks in the woods together in the afternoon. Long walks and talk about the beauty of flowers...

S: And the endless variety of mushrooms.

I: Mushrooms... things like that. We enjoy such things. Now we are learning about birds. We have a lot of birds in Wisconsin.

S: We have many different birds in our yard too.

P: I heard about the orange one...

S: The cardinal.

I: It sings wonderfully, it's unique...

S: It's not an American bird. Beautiful orange color, like a cardinal, like the clothes of a Roman cardinal. The same goes for the cities we've been to. We

love walks in the cities too, without a map. In Kyoto, for example - although it's easy, it's like a grid...

I: Something has impressed us over the years. Different cultures have different concepts of what is sacred. In Australia, for example, Aborigines believe that there is a spirit in the tree; they see the tree as sacred. American Indians have a similar relationship with nature. Because we have traveled a lot, we study this. Wherever we go, we are interested in temples, churches, trees, rocks, oceans. Each culture has a very different idea of what is holy, what is divine...

P: This makes me ask you what is sacred for both of you. What do you consider sacred?

S: You have to answer - you started with this topic.

I: I think... I didn't know I would get so excited about this. But... There is too much disrespect in this world between people, and it really worries me. The reason we invest so much time and effort in developing this model is to show professionals how to respect the people they work with. So I think that's something like sacred for me...

P: I think part of what you do here, teaching others, is to awaken this sense or idea of sanctity. Maybe the feeling, the idea of sanctity is the most sacred thing...

I: Yes. Yes.

I: And you?

S: What about me? This is a word I don't use.

I: Different people use different words.

S: It's not the same, but... Throughout history, as far as I've read and from our own experience, it can be seen - for much of the time, people make the equation differences are something bad. An example of this is Yugoslavia. Yes, "differences are bad." I think it's exactly the opposite - differences are good. Differences are necessary; if they aren't, everything will be the same, at least boring. I value differences; I'm interested in differences. That's why I'm involved with these different groups, like my commitments in the European Brief Therapy Association. This is a small attempt to make people, short-term therapists from all over Europe, respect the differences. Whether they come from Łódź, Poland, or Salamanca, Spain. They talk to each other instead of

fighting and appreciate the differences between them. I wouldn't use the word "sacred" for that, but...

P: ... but somehow it has something to do with it...

I: Yes, it has something to do with it.

P: Maybe a silly question...

S: Okay, I love silly questions!

P: What are you most proud of, each of you?

I: Oh, I don't think in those terms. I always think - how much work there is to be done...

P: So it really is a silly question.

S: Well, keep talking and... something might come to you...

I: Hmm, proud... Let's say that it's a bad question and move on.

S: I also don't think in those terms. But... I don't know exactly how to say it... None of us would have done something on our own from what we've done together. I think we can be proud of what we've done together as a team.

I: And longevity.

S: Yes, you are alive, and I can be proud of that. I'm alive, and you can be proud of that. I think that's it, although I also don't think in those terms.

P: I was hoping you would say that it's a bad question.

I & S: Yes, it was a bad question. That's okay.

P: Speaking of bad questions... What do you never do in therapy?

S: Never say "never."

I: Never say "never."

S: Yes, that's the answer.

I: I can teach people not to do something, but I also make the same mistakes that others make and that I teach them not to make.

P: You may try to avoid, but...

S: This, for example, could be the general rule - "Never yell and shout at the client" or insult them. I may want to say "never do that," but tomorrow a client will come, and I have to say, "You dirty damn Nazi, get off the chair!" as in that case with Milton Erickson. There are some general rules, but... You have to be very flexible and never say "never."

I: We've had such cases. I myself shouted at clients. The former Catholic priest, for example...

S: There was a family years ago - we were downstairs, and I yelled at them. For that family and that priest, it worked. It turned things around. This changed the course of things. So the general rule may be "Never yell at the client," but I have two such cases. Two - three cases where I shouted at them.

P: Maybe in those cases, shouting didn't mean shouting, but something else for them.

I & S: For them, yes, it was something else.

P: It can be said that there are things you try to avoid, but sometimes you have to do them... What do you like to do most instead of the things you avoid? I think every therapist likes or loves to do certain things. Do you have something like that?

I: I don't know if it's always possible, but I wish clients would laugh.

S: Yes, that's it. You know, John Weakland watched a session somewhere in 1970. The first thing he said was, "I want everyone to laugh." And I want people to laugh, or at least have a good smile. Like the client yesterday - he said there would be more laughter on the next step on the scale. Or at least a good smile.

P: There was no laughter, but at least the idea of laughter appeared.

I & S: Yes, at least the idea...

P: And as things go on, how do you see your work different from what you were doing ten years ago?

I: Oh, very different... Do you want to say how...?

P: Not in detail, of course, but maybe something important that is very different from then.

I: I didn't expect this, but the use of miracle question and scaling questions is something that has become very different from ten years ago. Now we use them much more.

S: Yes, we used them ten years ago; we've been using the miracle question for at least 12 years, but...

I: Now we use them in a much more disciplined way. Not as incidentally as before.

S: Scaling questions have been around for a long time. The systematic use and the use of many and different scales are now more. Yes - that's definitely different from ten years ago. In a more general sense, now we listen to our clients better than we did ten years ago. And we use fewer interventions in the Ericksonian style, even fewer than 20 years ago, that I think is the main change.

P: I asked you about this because, as it seems, the idea emerged in me and in my colleagues here this month that it is necessary to repeat some steps, to follow the evolution, to take the steps you have taken. What do you think? Is it necessary?

S and I: No, it's not necessary, and it's not helpful.

S: If we do it, we are wasting time.

P: But it seems natural for many of us to think this way.

S: Yes. This traditionally comes from the idea of problem-solving. The old-fashioned idea is that if we fix the problem, the solution appears, there's some process. I think people need to start from where we are now and move forward. If they start repeating what we've done, we'll enter an endless cycle...

P: A waste of time...

S: ... a closed loop, no progress, and besides, it will be boring.

I: And we'll be standing in one place.

P: Since, in my opinion, solution-focused therapy requires a certain way of thinking, a way of looking at things, what is the difference between this way of thinking and common sense? I think the differences with other therapeutic models, such as analytical, are clear, but what is the difference from common sense?

I: I would say it's not much different. For me, it is common sense to work this way. I think when you want to work with patients, they want to work with you;

when you are attentive to them, they respond by being attentive to you; when you respect them, they respect you back. When you are good to them, they are good to you. That, for me, is common sense.

P: Can it be said that solution-focused thinking is to a greater extent common sense than common sense itself?

I: Yes, that's a good way to put it. Because when ordinary people with their ordinary minds get stuck, they come to us, and we try to teach them to be more ordinary than they are. What do you think?

S: I don't agree. I don't know what common sense is.

I: Conventional wisdom, socially established...

S: Then I have to disagree. For example, if we take a saying - "If at first, you don't succeed, try, try again."

I: Up to a point...

S: Yes, but it doesn't say that. The saying is "...try, try again." And if people try again and again, nothing happens as a result. I think the term common sense cannot be defined. If common sense said, "If you don't succeed once and something doesn't work, try something different!" I would agree with that. But I'm not sure it's like that in common sense. This term is difficult to define.

P: Is there something you want to say to my colleagues in Bulgaria in this situation when everything is starting anew, something I haven't asked you?

S: In the group, there was talk about your interesting plan, hope, dream, and it's good to remember and keep it in your mind, but I would suggest... as we say in America - move step by step. I would even say - more slowly - by half a step. And something we have learned here from our work over the years, but we haven't talked about yet: While taking these half steps forward, you must constantly be alert to things that happen to you accidentally... and try to use the accidents. The question about the miracle is such an example. The client said, "A miracle has to happen for me to solve the problem." Insoo heard this. This was an accident. And if we weren't prepared to pay attention to accidents like this, we would never have discovered the miracle question and used it; it would have passed by and that's it. So you always have to watch out for random things and think about how to use them. And accidents may deviate you from what you consider your main goal, but the end result can be just as good and satisfactory.

P: ...or better.

S: Or better. That's all I have to say.

I: Your last word? Do you promise?

S: Well... no! Just for now.

I: I haven't been to Bulgaria, but I've been to other post-communist Eastern European countries. Every time I go there, I am filled with great respect and admiration for how people overcome everything that has happened to them in these 40-50 years. This reminds me a lot... I grew up during the Korean War - 1952-53, we were refugees and suffered a lot, and what I see in Eastern Europe vividly reminds me of what we went through - my family and I. So, every time I think about how I personally experienced it - how to save my life, not to be killed, to be hungry for a very long time... All this makes me admire the human spirit, the strength of the human spirit. Korea is a very good example - it rose completely from the ashes. And so, I am very hopeful.

P: People somehow manage to perform miracles.

I: People somehow manage to overcome difficulties and build, and I am sure that Bulgarians will do the same. And the fact that you are here is a miracle to me. The fact that Jacek Lelonkievich is here is a miracle to me. So miracles really happen.

P: I want to thank both of you for everything you have done for me and for all of us...

I: And to the other people in the group as well...

P: ... You greatly contribute to making miracles happen. Thank you for introducing us to this work - making miracles. And I hope to see you soon, either in Bulgaria or here.

I: Or somewhere else...

S: Or somewhere else...