

VIRGINIA SATIR: AN INTEGRATED, HUMANISTIC APPROACH*

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ABSTRACT: This article traces professional and personal influences that helped Virginia Satir to shape her worldview. She was an integrative humanist who included body, mind, emotional, and spiritual processes to transform systems ranging from the molecular to the cosmic. Her theories and techniques offered a wellspring of hope and possibility to individuals as well as large assemblies. The presentation of a case with young, abused children demonstrates her use of self (through physical touch) by sensitively reframing the cycle of violence as an opportunity for safe, cooperative contact.

KEY WORDS: Virginia Satir; humanism; family therapy; individual therapy; spirituality; systems transformation.

Virginia Satir's model of family therapy begins with the utmost value and respect for the uniqueness and miracle of each individual. She often commented that although we have many similar parts, there are no two people exactly alike. Each fingerprint, iris, and voice tone is unique. She often began her workshops or community meetings with a meditation to "center" each individual through appreciation of distinct experiences and attributes (Banmen & Banmen, 1991). Satir's belief was that the elevation of internal and external consciousness is a necessary ingredient for developing healthy individuals, families, and communities. Knowing contact with our internal self facilitates "I-Thou" connections with one another. Satir demonstrated through her life and

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work that contact with the self and the other was a sacred, spiritual event. In this vein, the following meditation will poetically portray this goal in her clinical and training approach to the field of family therapy.

Connectedness with Self and Others

Allow yourself to become
Intimately connected
With all your parts.
So free, to have options
And to use those options
Freely and creatively.
To know that whatever
Was in the past,
Was the best that we could do,
Because it represented the best we knew.
It represented the best in our consciousness.
As we move toward knowing more,
Being more conscious,
We also then become
More connected with ourselves.
And in connecting with ourselves,
We can form connections with others (Satir, Banmen,
Gomori, & Gerber, 1991, p. 300).

Virginia Satir created a magical atmosphere in her training groups. Her celebration of the individual fostered a feeling of empowerment and intimacy. For instance, all of her training experiences in the Soviet Union began with a simple, but powerful demonstration of how she made contact. A volunteer from the audience would stand beside her holding hands. Satir then spoke of centering herself “by leaving previous thoughts and concerns on a shelf, bringing [her] full attention to this moment, and aligning herself with energy from the heavens, the earth, and life on this plane.” Next, she spoke of her attitude toward the person she was about to meet. She spoke of him or her as unique in all the world . . . She spoke of a sense of awe about their being, commenting with humor, ‘I am speaking of the person’s essence, not necessarily about their behavior!’ Then she turned toward the person and looked into his or her eyes. With eminence and warmth in her voice, Virginia offered a simple greeting: ‘Hello, Natasha’ (or whomever)” (Dodson, 2000, pp. 108–109).

Laura Dodson reported that this simple demonstration of making contact always resulted in an intense round of applause, often a standing ovation. What happened that made for such a magical moment?

Since the former Soviet Union repressed individual rights in favor of the social order, there was a hunger for the appreciation of one's uniqueness. However, the culture of capitalism reinforces productivity and material gain at the expense of relational intimacy. Satir's demonstration acknowledged and accentuated universal yearnings neglected in the cultures of socialism and capitalism. Throughout her career, her work bridged the dialect of universality and individuality.

The cosmology that guided Satir's theory of family therapy became clearer toward the end of her life. In her unfinished manuscript, *The Third Birth: Becoming Your Own Decision-Maker*, Satir simply defines births of consciousness: the first birth described as the connection of the sperm and egg, the second birth as when the child emerges from the womb, and the third birth as the evolution to becoming a decision-maker. "This is the time when we recognize that we are the center of our own universe, and accept all the responsibility, privilege, and risk that goes with it" (Satir, undated, p. 20). She said that the third birth opens up the possibility for a relationship between two wholes rather than two holes. A connection of two congruent selves where each enjoys the inalienable Five Freedoms:

The freedom to see and hear what is here,
Instead of what should be, was, or will be
The freedom to say what you feel and think,
Instead of what you should
The freedom to feel what you feel,
Instead of what you ought
The freedom to ask for what you want,
Instead of always waiting for permission
The freedom to take risks on your own behalf,
Instead of choosing to be only "secure" and not rocking the
boat (Satir, Banmen, Gerber, & Gomori, 1991, p. 62).

Satir's work consistently juxtaposed the interactions of self, other, and context. Her early work espoused the virtues of self-esteem and congruent communication. She encouraged individuals "to become more fully human" by accepting and taking responsibility for all of their parts. She felt that integrated individuals would have greater self-esteem and a keener ability to communicate congruently in a systemic context. Thus, each element within a person was a cornerstone for her consideration of increasingly larger systems including families, communities, countries, and the ecology of our universe. Her work evolved to include a fourth birth, spirituality, which intrinsically linked

the internal and external in the humanistic inclination for growth and harmony.

The “I” acknowledges ownership of the self, taking full responsibility for that self in all its parts, and comes clearly to the realization that this includes the “you.” “Every action has an impact and a feedback. The fourth birth comes when one recognizes that all life is one—then one comes to the state where one joins all consciousness” (Satir, undated, p. 25).

VIRGINIA SATIR’S PATH TO BRIDGING DICHOTOMIES

How does a family therapy pioneer develop a worldview and theoretical perspective that spans the molecular to the cosmos? To answer this question, one must consider personal as well as professional challenges that result in creative responses. For instance, Virginia suffered from profound hearing loss between ages four and six. She said that she quickly developed an ability to read lips. In addition, her hearing loss required her to refine her astute abilities to notice and decipher nonverbal communication. Perhaps her physical limitation paved the way for her legendary ability to sculpt behavioral sequences. Virginia suffered other dramatic challenges in her personal life (Brothers, 2000), including handling her father’s alcoholism and her mother’s depression, but learned to transform adversity into learning opportunities. It is no wonder that she intuitively grasped the ability to positively reframe even the most disparaging circumstances. Her approach to life emphasized hope and learning rather than despair and surrender.

Her professional life also demonstrated an ability to transform intransigence into curiosity and experimentation. In her first professional job as an elementary school teacher, Virginia visited students’ homes and families in order to enlist their support for improved performance. Home visits introduced her to a multiplicity of problems. Her desire to work directly with such problems induced her to enroll in a social work program. Her first social work position was at an orphanage. She realized that psychoanalysis was ineffective in working with the early wounds of these children. Thus, she began her infamous work with preverbal, attachment problems by attending to unresolved issues in their bodies. She found that holding was much more effective than endless hours of talk therapy.

Even her first family interview in 1951 exhibited her ability to

find a silver lining in a challenging event. A client's mother threatened to sue Satir for her daughter's alienation of affection (after recovering from major depression). Satir heard this threat as the mother's desire for help as well as a need to address other problems in the family. Success with this case convinced her of the efficacy of family therapy. Her desire to increase her learning about family therapy brought her to the Mental Research Institute (MRI) in 1959, which was headed by Gregory Bateson and Don Jackson.

At MRI, Satir was the sole woman in a group of male researchers. Since she was the most active in clinical and training work, she became director of training. Although she shared her colleagues' enthusiasm for a communication-based model for understanding and interrupting family dysfunction, Satir always felt that the internal level of self-esteem was a key ingredient to congruent versus incongruent communication. Her work at MRI culminated with the publication of *Conjoint Family Therapy* in 1964. This book, in its third edition, still reigns as one of the classic texts in the field of family therapy. The book laid a foundation for her integration of self, communication, and family rules as a rubric for understanding and intervening in a family.

Since Satir was a life-long learner, she always looked for new territory to explore. Her path brought her to Esalen, the famous growth center in Big Sur, California, in 1963. As director of training at Esalen, she encountered most of the leaders of the human potential movement such as Fritz Perls, Ida Rolf, Eric Berne, Alexander Lowen, and many others. Although her work at Esalen was a pivotal experience in her professional life, her synthesis of conjoint family therapy with humanistic therapy remains largely unexplained. Even years after her death, *Conjoint Family Therapy* imprinted her model as a communications approach to family therapy. Unfortunately, this lasting description is clearly a misnomer. At Esalen, Satir amplified her knowledge of a cognitive, communications approach to include affective, mind-body, and spiritual domains.

Her famous sculptures of basic communication stances (blamer, placater, computer, distracter, leveler) are examples of how she used internal feelings to shape relationships with others and context. In order to sculpt a relational dynamic she might ask the following: "What is going on inside?" "What are you feeling?" "Could you breathe into that feeling?" "What does your body want to do?" "Could you exaggerate that movement and see what happens?" "If that knot inside your stomach was to say something, what would it say?" "Whom would it say it to?" "What do you think that knot needed at that time?" "From whom?"

Her goal with each of these questions was to review the internal and external dynamics of the historic scene in order to create a new context that would offer alternative, congruent choices that were inaccessible at the time of crisis.

Satir worked with the body and affect because she believed that these non-rational pathways were the most direct means for reaching core problems. When children or adults do not have personal responses to handle threatening circumstances, they regularly develop primitive survival mechanisms for handling crises. The fears aroused in such traumas are often so horrifying that they become repressed from conscious awareness. Once unconscious, these unresolved fears reflexively guide coping behaviors during stressful times. Satir followed subtle nuances of the body by giving breath, attention, movement, and voice to somatic events such as muscular contractions, facial expressions, posture, etc. Increased awareness of physical and emotional feelings helped to identify perceptions, expectations, and yearnings of the self. For example, if a woman who is a survivor of sexual abuse is having problems with sexual intimacy, a husband may only see rejecting behaviors. He would miss the “iceberg” (Satir, Banmen, Gerber, & Gomori, 1991, p. 167) underneath rejecting behaviors. Satir’s work with body and feelings would unearth the inner children and resultant wounds, needs, and resources of both partners.

Satir treated these survival mechanisms reverently because they were the survivor’s choice for coping with difficult problems. Since these coping responses represented the best way that the protagonist knew to cope with a threat, they often became generalized to similar perils. That is why Satir often said, “The problem is not the problem, coping is the problem.” Virginia revisited past events where survival, coping mechanisms were learned so that her clients could see the situation with new eyes. Her goal was to get clients to appreciate the “inner child’s” response to fear, and to update new possible responses to past, present, and future stressors. She did this through sculpture, psychodrama, bioenergetics, gestalt therapy, guided fantasy, metaphor, and many other experiential methods because she believed that a multi-sensory approach best facilitated reeducation. In a nutshell, Satir’s goals were to create contexts that promoted knowledge about how to become more fully human.

My approach to therapy is based on the premise that all we manifest at any point in time represents what we have learned, consciously, implicitly, cellularly. Our behavior reflects what

we have learned. Learning is the basis of behavior. To change behavior, we need to have new learning. (Satir, undated, p. 17)

Satir had an uncanny ability to promote learning new possibilities by dramatizing concepts three dimensionally. For instance, her Parts Party dramatized a method to integrate subpersonalities identified by Roberto Assagioli's model of psychosynthesis. This work acknowledges that all parts can be transformed into resources since the whole self is more substantial than the sum of its parts. Similarly, she created a powerful technique called Family Reconstruction that enacted a psychodrama journey through nodal, transgeneration moments. This process promoted differentiation by identifying limiting scripts emanating from familial and external stressors, increasing understanding and empathy for one's parents, and reworking negative experiences of the past in order to be able to live life more fully in the present. She also developed many techniques for developing "process communities," intentional communities dedicated to promoting congruence and responsibility. These and other approaches enabled her to present her concepts and techniques to mental health professionals. Her training, like her therapy, emphasized experiential growth because of her belief that the instrument of change is within each person, be it therapist or client. The next section will describe a clinical consultation in which she used her relationship, and specifically her use of touch, to promote the process of change.

OF ROCKS AND FLOWERS

Satir was the female pioneer among her male counterparts. Her therapy was prototypically feminine in that her work emphasized nurturance, spirituality, emotionality, intuition, equal rights and responsibilities, and use of touch (Freeman, 1999). When she brought her work to the masses in large workshops and community groups, she was criticized for being a "guru" rather than a family therapist. This was unfortunate because it marginalized Virginia Satir's contributions to the field of family therapy. This case illustrates the value of her integrated, humanistic approach.

This session appeared to take place in the 1970s and was published by Golden Triad Films and titled "Of Rocks and Flowers" (Satir, 1986). This blended family, which wed a year prior to the interview, included a 36-year-old husband and his two sons, ages three and four, and a 27-year-old wife who was in her second trimester of pregnancy. The father

had custody of his children because the children's mother supposedly committed horrendous abuse of their two children, necessitating 13 hospitalizations for Aaron, the eldest son. The presenting problem for this interview was concern about the violence perpetuated by the two boys and their stepmother's fear for the safety of her unborn child. Reportedly, the boys had knocked down their large dog with a stick and had hit and choked young children. It is also relevant to note that the four-year-old had a severe speech defect and is barely audible on the film.

The following anecdote occurs after Satir engaged the children about what they wanted to happen in the family. Also, she specifically discussed their abuse and their need for protection. She also dealt with practical issues of safety in the couple and explored each one's "bottom line" of what they need to continue in the relationship. Satir also dealt with their previous learning, including lessons from their family of origin, which explicated the feelings beneath their bottom line. The wife demanded the safety of her future child and the husband required the new, blended family to include his two children. Thus, Satir's goal during this session was to look for opportunities to help this family blend together by breaking the cycle of violence.

Satir Tries to Get the Attention of a Very Distracted Four Year-Old, Characteristically Moving Toward Him Until They are Approximately Six Inches Apart, Eyeball-to-Eyeball

Virginia: Look at me now, I am asking you about you and Betty.

Aaron: My mom and Dad is real nice. (Aaron starts playing with Virginia's necklace and then spontaneously caresses her face).

Virginia: (She shows her pleasure of his caress by warmly touching his hands.) I like the way you touch my face. (She starts to shape his touch by guiding his hands as to how she wants to be touched. In essence their hands are joined in a loving dance.) Touch it really gently, that's right. Could you touch Betty's face gently like that?

Aaron: Uh-huh.

Virginia: (Obviously deciding that Aaron and his stepmother could use more modeling.) Look at me, and touch my face again please. Does that feel good to you? Let me touch your face gently, would that be okay?

Aaron: (Nods in agreement, then Virginia cups her hands around his face, showing complete appreciation of him. Aaron purses his lips and Virginia allows him to kiss her on the lips.)

Virginia: Now does that feel good? (Referring to her touch on his face?)

- Aaron: Uh-huh.
Virginia: Put your hands along Betty's face gently, and have her feel the good feeling of your hands, and you can feel her hands. Could you do that?
Aaron: Okay

The session continued with each child gently holding his stepmother's and father's face and being held by each of them. Satir then had each parent practice limiting contact on his or her arm. Similar to the aforementioned nurturing contact, Satir demonstrated, practiced, and gave feedback about how to appropriately provide physical limits to active children.

During the 1970s, the hands-on quality of this interview would make more sense than today's conversational approaches. Satir's position and values were impeccably clear in this session. She first addressed safety issues for the children (including the unborn child), and then attended to their unmet nurturing needs. Although the children were presented as perpetrators of uncontrollable violence, Satir saw them as inherently benign, albeit victims of violence. Not only did their physicality need to become reeducated, but also the relational expectations of the family had to make significant shifts. The father needed to become more active in establishing limits and consequences for his children and the stepmother needed to see and address their needs rather than relating by distance and control. Her goal was to provide an antidote for violence with nurturance and boundaries.

Satir was both a directive and responsive therapist. She led by following their words, nonverbals, and her own internal response in the therapeutic encounter. I imagine that she moved so close to Aaron in order to connect with his yearning for nurturing contact. She persisted with physical closeness even after he displayed numerous distractions. Her tenacity illustrated Satir's ability to meet him at his capacity for growth (in this case intimacy) by using herself as the primary therapeutic instrument (Satir, 1987).

Virginia received notoriety by Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) researchers (Grinder, Bandler, & Satir, 1976) for her uncanny ability to reframe even the most dire circumstances. In this case, she drew upon her interaction with Aaron to reframe his hands from being a perpetrator of violence to a provider of warmth and good feelings. It is important to note that Aaron instigated the caressing touch while Satir gave it a therapeutic shape. She capitalized on his unsolicited touch of her face by making it a family intervention. Thus, she used herself as a bridge to the family rather than remain as the primary

receiver and provider of nurturance. She indirectly challenged the family to remedy the abuse of the biological mother by her comment about Aaron, "These hands need to be reeducated."

Bandler and Grinder also noted Satir's ability to anchor desired experiences. By consistently referring to the good feeling of the hands when they lovingly enveloped the face, she anchored a new way to make contact. By repetitiously inviting each parent-child dyad to practice this type of touch, she further anchored a new interpersonal possibility for each of them. Yet, Satir realized that their future required more skills than solely relying on nurturing contact. So, she carefully had the parents demonstrate on her arm how to firmly establish physical limits for their children. She gave clear feedback as to how to be firm without gripping too aggressively. For instance, she said to the stepmother, "That's a little too tight, now try doing it from the bottom, and putting your other hand on top." Then Satir had the parents practice these limiting skills with the children.

Satir was very practical with this family because they were dealing with such primitive issues as safety and nurturance. Nevertheless, along every step of the way, she carefully listened to, valued, and positively regarded each family member. It is easy to get caught up with her techniques because they are so enlightening, but Satir was very clear that her ultimate aim was to reach the essence of each individual. Since she was careful not to override the will of each individual, she was very clear that her experiential directives were invitations, not demands. Although she adamantly believed that process was more important than accomplishing a task, Satir freely integrated techniques from any approach that could facilitate creative possibilities within and between individuals. She described herself as a firm believer in the value of addition as opposed to subtraction. Nonetheless, she was suspicious of the way NLP used her techniques to create change without attention to its higher purpose: "What got me is that my work was taken, without heart and soul, and then it was used as a manipulation thing . . . Anything that's potent for change can be used negatively or positively" (Brothers, 1983, p. 54).

PEACE WITHIN, PEACE BETWEEN, PEACE AMONG

Satir left an array of techniques that still remains vital in our field. Most notably, her vision of system extended from the cellular to the planet. All of her techniques were dedicated to changing larger

systems while respecting the congruence of subsystems. She is the classic example of a pebble in a pond that created many ripples. Her circle of influence has made significant contributions to fields such as addictions, couples enrichment, family medicine, depth psychology, organizational development, and humanitarian politics. The vastness of her influence necessitated the publication of one volume with another in the planning stages (Suhd, Dodson, & Gomori, 2000). Her emphasis on the role of body, emotion, spirituality, psychoeducation, internal family system, gender politics, and holistic health still remain as cutting edge issues in the field of family therapy.

Although germane to family therapy, Satir's concept of context expanded her work and dreams to larger systems. Her work in the Eastern bloc (Russia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Czechoslovakia) continues through the Institute of International Connections. Satir Family Camp, already in its 23rd year, is filled to its capacity of 130 campers with ages that range from a few months through 89 years. The camp consciously lives in accordance with her commitment to growth and community. AVANTA, an organization of her trainers, continues to proliferate her work globally. Satir's long tradition of working with Native American communities still continues with the Sioux nation. The classic example of her commitment to expand healing to a large-scale level was her work on the California Task Force To Promote Self-Esteem, and Personal and Social Responsibility. The final report, "Toward a State of Self-Esteem," which was dedicated to Virginia Satir, identified self-esteem as a social vaccine that makes people less susceptible to social diseases. More than 50,000 copies of this report have been distributed around the world. This epitomized her work: raising each individual's self-esteem promotes healthier individuals, families, communities, countries, and world. Peace Within, Peace Between, Peace Among conclusively bridges the dichotomy of individual and system.

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