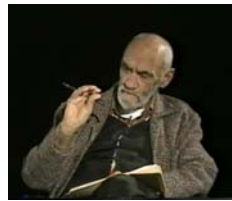


Seeing what is

A conversation with Steve de Shazer

By Arnoud Huibers

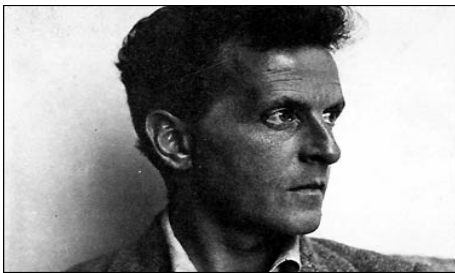


I casually stopped at a bookshop in _____ where I live, looking for something interesting to read on a long flight. I picked a thick book titled,

the Duty of a Genius,' a biography of Wittgenstein by _____, a British professor of philosophy. I started reading it on the long, 9-hours flight. To my surprise, I was so taken by the book that I couldn't put it down. Like many of us I knew Wittgenstein from philosophy classes at

, very difficult to read and abstract stuff, like eating a spoonful of oats without any milk. I remember our professor who told us that we were expected to write a paper of 20 pages in length – cracking jokes like, "You guys can write it in one or two page's, but it then has to be on a Wittgenstein level." I never expected that reading about his life would inspire me that much. Here was a young man who lived his life with such principles; unwilling to compromise with the social convention of his time; with courage, not afraid to be completely on his own with every step he took, remaining loyal to his own high standards and ideas.

When I asked Steve in September last year in Amsterdam, if he knew this book he said, "Oh yeah, that's a pretty good one." Steve seemed to know a great deal about Wittgenstein, not only about his life and philosophical ideas but also about the culture of his time, literature and music. While we were enjoying an Indian meal, he answered some questions I had about the book with great ease and precision. Wittgenstein was for instance very particular about many things, also about music. He would leave the concert hall immediately if the music played was not composed by one of his six favorite composers: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms (a friend of the family) or Labor. I always wondered why J.S. Bach wasn't on his list and Steve pointed out that Bach wasn't well known at all at this time. Of course!



Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951)

In the summer of 2005 we started a conversation on Wittgenstein and therapy through e-mails. This conversation remains unfinished because of his Steve's passing away on September 11th 2005, in Vienna, the town that happens to be Wittgenstein's birthplace.

Arnoud: Steve, could I ask you a couple of questions about Solutions Focused Brief Therapy and Ludwig Wittgenstein for our Newsletter?

Steve: OK, go ahead and ask questions and I will respond as best I can.

Arnoud: SFBT is often connected with _____. Could you explain the link?

Steve: As I see it, my job is to make useful descriptions of what Insoo and her clients do that works. Once I have those, then I can try them with my clients, then into research, and training etc. Sometimes I need help with this, particularly when trying to make these descriptions make sense to other people and often Wittgenstein helps.

Arnoud: Could you give an example of such a description and how Wittgenstein was helpful?

Steve: Early on I noticed that Insoo and here clients never spent any time on explaining things -- and neither did John Weakland -- and I also noticed that more traditional therapists spent a great deal of time with their clients attempting to develop explanations (which I never found convincing) and, as far as I could tell the clients seemed to hold onto the ones that they had brought along into therapy, so therapist were wasting their time.

But what does Insoo do instead?

Well, John spent the time helping the client DESCRIBE in detail each and every effort he had made to resolve his complaint while Insoo spent a similar amount of time helping her clients DESCRIBE in detail what it is they want from the therapy, etc.





Wittgenstein says somewhere that we need to eliminate all explanation and description alone must take its place. Further more, in the same place he talks about eliminating anything hypothetical. With both "hypothetical" stuff and "explanatory" stuff eliminated, theory too must be "set aside" which Wittgenstein says is difficult because it means that we have to accept that things are the way they are.

Arnoud: When did come across Wittgenstein and why did you become interested in his ideas?

Steve: (A Note: "Why" questions are impossible to answer other than "why not"). At some point in the mid-80's somebody remarked to me, while watching a session through the mirror, that "they are doing nothing but talking in there". This casual remark led me to realize that this "talk" or "language" is our actual data and, thus we need to take good hard look at "language in action", thus Wittgenstein. Of course I knew him from earlier reading in philosophy classes when I saw him as a philosopher of science, and therefore, I had to change my way of reading him.

Arnoud: This reminds me of a quote by the
"Misery is almost always the result of thinking". A (slight) change of the client's perception as a result of talking with the therapist, is that all that therapy is about?

Steve: Yes. As long as it leads the client to think, feel, behave, etc in some different way between sessions and after therapy is done.

Arnoud: Wittgenstein was critical of his older contemporary
, also from Vienna, critical of dominance of interpretation in psycho-analysis and the never ending free association. 'Discoveries' what Freud called, Wittgenstein even called persuasions. I have a question for you that needs some imagination. How do you think Ludwig Wittgenstein would evaluate Solution Focused Brief Therapy?

Steve: WOW! This is too difficult for me. I would need to think like Wittgenstein in a much more focused way – which I have never been able to do.

Arnoud: Could I give it another try? I guess that Wittgenstein would have liked the scaling question: measuring the clients perception with a number, in relationship to other numbers (goals, solutions and so on) on the scale?

Steve: Perhaps you are right.

Arnoud: Although Wittgenstein's last words were, "Tell them I've had a wonderful life", I assume he did not have an easy life because it was dominated by moral values and philosophical perfection. Did reading about his life in one way or another inspire you?

Steve: I guess he reinforced in me my tendency toward "minimalism" and the idea that it is perfectly OK to change your mind about stuff – which might mean "follow your data" and do not have a theory.

Arnoud: What is your main objection to having a theory?

Steve: Theory in addition to offering to explain everything, also tells us what must be and/or what should be, thus getting in the way of our seeing what is.

Arnoud: Thank you Steve, for being such a wonderful teacher.