

Solution Focused inspirations from a garden

At the back of our house we have a garden in which I grow vegetables and Marie grows flowers. The garden is a very special place for us. It is a place where we relax, a place where we learn a lot from nature, a place where we do a lot of thinking when we are doing routine tasks such as weeding or digging. The other day I was thinking about gardening metaphors that connect to the Solution Focused approach.

Many will be familiar with the saying “Water the flowers, not the weeds.” This saying reminds us that when people are struggling with challenges they are often preoccupied with what is going wrong, and that it can be more helpful to invite people to extend their noticing to the times when what they want happens. This saying also helps to illustrate differences between problem-solving and solution-building conversations. In problem-solving conversations both participants typically focus on the “weeds”, with the practitioner contributing expert ideas about how to get rid of them. In solution-building the practitioner is typically helping the client enjoy, and maybe grow, more of the “flowers” she or he wants.

Long before Steve deShazer, Insoo Kim Berg and others developed the Solution Focused approach, Carl Rogers drew on a childhood observation of nature to develop his thinking on what many now refer to as the “common factors”. Once, when Rogers was exploring the farm where he grew up, he noticed a potato in a cellar. The cellar had little in the way of nutrients or water, and only a tiny shaft of light. Despite this there was a plant growing out of the potato, a thin and struggling plant, but nonetheless a potato plant. My therapeutic training started with Systemic Practice, which taught me something important about the interaction between people. I then had the opportunity of training in Person-Centred counselling. This taught me the importance of listening very carefully to what people are saying, trusting people to be able to find their own ways forward and carrying hope that change can happen. Both approaches were of some help when I worked with parents who were struggling with concerns about their children and young people who needed to make changes in their lives, but there were still times when I wished I had more in my toolkit. When I came across SFBT in 1991, I felt as though I had finally found the essential ingredients for therapeutic practice I had been looking for. This prompted me to write “In search of key ingredients”¹. Remembering Rogers’ recollection from childhood I have often thought that if Rogers’ core conditions of empathy, positive regard and congruence are comparable to the light, water and nutrients that help plants grow, then maybe SFBT is in some sense comparable to compost (or for those familiar with the gardening product, “Miracle-Gro”), by helping people to grow the lives they want more quickly.

When my enthusiasm for SFBT took me into training others in 1993, Rogers’ memory of the potato plant inspired me to use pea seeds and a pea plant to invite participants to reflect on the assumptions they bring to their work with clients.



Placing some pea seeds in my hands, I used to say, “Isn’t it amazing. All the information that is necessary for these peas to become a pea plant is here, inside the peas. All they need are the right conditions for them to



¹ Wheeler, J. (1994) In search of key ingredients. Context: The News Magazine of the Association for Family Therapy No.21:13-14

I would then reflect that you could never tell which ones would grow well. Some were small and wrinkly and you might mistakenly think they had little potential. The only way you could find how well the seeds could grow was by providing them with the best chance to do so.

I recently discovered that one of the people I supervise, Roz, also has a garden, and also, like me, is prone to metaphorical connections to her work with clients when she's digging and weeding. Roz had returned to her vegetable plot to remove the weeds, but was too busy to do anything else. It suddenly struck her, that if she didn't make more time for gardening, she could spend the whole year only keeping the weeds down. She went on to realise that, if she wanted her garden to produce something, then sooner or later she would have to plant something, and that, even though she would be committed to more hard work for a while, once these plants had grown, they would eventually deprive the weeds of sunlight and there would be less weeds. Roz also realised how much of this connected to the lives of the people who came to her for help. Many seemed to be putting all their energy into "keeping the weeds down." Successful therapeutic work was often dependent on clients deciding what they wanted instead of weeds, making the effort to grow more of what they wanted, and finally enjoying the time when there was less need for weeding because what they wanted instead was overshadowing the "weeds."

Finally, the challenge of growing bamboo. I have never grown bamboo, but I understand that, if you do, you have to be very patient. Apparently, after you've planted the bamboo it can lie hidden in the ground for years, until it's ready to grow and then suddenly it shoots up. Patient perseverance has also been very important to me in my Solution focused work over the years. Helen (not her real name) came to our service for help with her son Peter when he was 5. Peter was very active, impulsive and determined to do what he wanted. Peter came to meetings for a while, but often felt bored and eventually refused to come. A colleague tried medication, but it didn't help. Over the course of 11 years I met with Helen, and she used the time to work out how best to manage Peter's behaviour and plan how to talk with Peter's teachers to ensure he wasn't excluded from school. I was amazed by Helen's success in helping Peter manage the transition from primary to senior school. I was even more amazed when Peter eventually gained an apprenticeship as a car mechanic. When Peter was 16 he was too old for our service and I thought that would be the end of my meetings with Helen. Helen, however, then asked for help with her younger son James, who was also presenting similar challenges, and I then met with Helen and James until James was 16 and I retired. On the day of my last meeting with Helen and James, Helen's phone rang. It was Peter, now an adult, with a successful reputation as a car mechanic. Helen explained that she was in a meeting with me. To my surprise Helen passed the phone to me saying, "Peter wants to have a word with you". "Hi there John", said Peter "Thank you for your help. Make sure you take it easy in your retirement, you've earned it." When I first realised how useful the SF approach could be, I thought it would soon be used everywhere by everyone. 24 years later I know it's not as simple as that. Patience and perseverance have also been very necessary at times when my efforts at promoting SF appear to have been without success. Just like bamboo, I've done the planting and nothing seems to be growing. Despite a substantial evidence base, new enthusiasts face similar challenges, frustrations and setbacks. So, I conclude with one more story. For many years I trained workers for a small service within a much larger organisation. Each year I was asked to train new recruits. Whilst the workers in the smaller service were clearly achieving good outcomes, they remained an isolated pocket of innovative work. Last year, unexpectedly, I

was asked to train up to 200 workers in the larger organisation. The training has now been extended for a further three years. The other day I was informed that the larger organisation is about to re-structure, drawing on funding from a successful Innovations Programme bid. This is funding made available by central government for promising work with children and families. One of the expectations of the re-structuring is that all the workers will use SF. So, if you sometimes wonder if it's worth persevering, remember the bamboo.

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