

## Passing on the Legacy of Insoo Kim Berg

By Lorenn Walker



In 2003, my friend Gale Burford, a social work professor at the University of Vermont, told me about *solution-focused brief therapy*, and for the first time I heard the name Insoo Kim Berg.

I had called Gale to get his advice on a restorative justice project I was working on with a Honolulu court. I was telling him about a man who drank so much every night he passed out. The man lived with his wife and adult son. When the man got drunk he would often get argumentative and hostile with his son. I asked him, "Why do you drink so much?" thinking as we commonly do that if he understood his motivation, he might change his behavior. The man giggled and had no answer.

"You needed to ask him a solution-focused question, like 'How would it be for you if you did what your wife wants and you didn't drink so much?' or 'What are you hoping for when you drink so much?'" Gale also said that solution-focused brief therapy is a language skills approach to problem solving and that it was co-developed by Steve deShazer, Insoo Kim Berg and some other therapists from Milwaukee.

Rather than focusing on problems and discussing them in detail, trying to understand motivation for behavior, the solution-focused approach instead asks people to think about what they want in life, and to imagine how they might achieve their preferred future.

Solution-focused brief therapy is a proactive approach that finds strengths

in people instead of deficits. It is an optimistic and positive way to deal with problems. *Why?* Is rarely asked in solution-focused (SF) discussions.

After Gale told me about Insoo, whose name I carefully wrote down, I ordered one of her books, and within three weeks had finished three. I began implementing the SF approach as much as possible. As I applied it to my work, my relationships with my family, and most importantly to my own mind, I experienced positive results.

Using it in my work developing restorative justice processes, it helped people harmed by wrongdoing and social injustice find ways to create positive lives and feel optimistic in spite of their suffering. In my family, it helped me focus on what's right and what was going well in our relationships, especially with my teenage sons. For myself, I was suddenly being more patient than I had ever dreamed possible, by simply imagining how I would be if I were the person I hoped of being. I also noticed my strengths and what I had more often, and I began working harder even when things didn't go as I had wished.

After reading Insoo's books, and experiencing the positive results, I wrote her a thank you letter. She emailed back and quickly became my teacher and friend. She helped me design several restorative justice programs applying SF. She usually put "this and that" as her subject headings in emails, and she was always available no matter where she was in the world, which could be anywhere. "Dear Lorenn, I am in Mexico City," "I am in Korea," "I am in Sweden," and so on.

Insoo suggested that I take a six-month course on solution-focused brief therapy that she taught with Therese Steiner for the University of Wisconsin on line. About a year after that she came to Hawai'i and spent a weekend with my family on the North Shore of O'ahu.

It was Insoo's first time to visit Hawai'i. We walked on the beach, played with my granddaughter (that's her holding Francesca on the beach in the photo on the first page of this essay), and we spent an afternoon with another amazing woman.

Audrey Sutherland is a pioneer wilderness explorer who swam about 20 miles under the spectacular jagged cliffs of the north shore of Moloka'i. A feat not only amazing in its own right, but even more incredible because she did it all alone at the age of 40 in 1962. Her book *Paddling my Own Canoe*, first published in the 1978, describes her adventures swimming, and later paddling along Moloka'i's north shore. Audrey's book spurred people all over the world to explore remote wilderness areas in canoes and kayaks. Her book also inspired me to travel to Boston alone from Hawai'i in 1980 to attend law school. Since her

first trip exploring Moloka'i 40 years ago, Audrey has paddled over 15,000 miles alone in wilderness areas throughout the world. She is a legend.

It was a special gift to see Audrey and Insoo together. They are two of my biggest heroes. Audrey for her courage and competence to go into the wild alone, and Insoo for doing the same thing, only she ventured into people's heads and hearts.

Insoo sat in one of Audrey's canoes, on her wooden porch over looking a sparkling white sand beach covered with giant sea turtles that blend in with huge lava rocks. The two women chatted and laughed like old friends who hadn't seen each other in a while. They had instant rapport and respect for each other. The photos below are of Insoo on the beach looking at a turtle, and one of she and Audrey.

Besides helping me with my work, Insoo befriended me like she did many other people. I would write her when good things, as well as painful things happened. Her wisdom and compassion were especially important when I was having a hard time communicating with my teenage sons. One time when I completely questioned my parenting abilities and felt terribly low, Insoo emailed me a "cyber hug" that I felt so deeply it made me cry. My mother suffered from mental illness and couldn't show her love for me in ways that I had hoped for, but Insoo did.

In 2006, I saw Insoo for the last time. It was in Milwaukee during the summer when I took a weeklong SF training course with she and Yvonne Dolan. Two days after the course ended, I competed in the Midwestern Xterra Triathlon Championships that happened to be in Milwaukee. The day before the race Insoo insisted on picking me up at my hotel and feeding me "a good dinner." She made a pot of steamed string beans, fresh corn on the cob, white fluffy rice, and Korean seasoned *nori*, the seaweed wrap used for sushi. I wrapped the green beans with the rice in the nori, and had soyu sauce on it. I ate like a horse compared to Insoo's tiny servings. She laughed. We had a nice evening talking about our families and work. After a couple hours, she drove me back to the hotel, and I kissed her goodbye before I got out of the car. I thought I might not see her again and said, "I love you." The next day there was a terrible rainstorm. The lighting was so bad the race director canceled the swim portion of the triathlon. Insoo emailed, "I thought about you in all that rain."

Five months later, in January 2007, two days before she died, Insoo reviewed several sample chapters of a book I was working on and sent me some thoughtful comments. She mentioned having a flu that was "a pain in the butt," when she had so much work to do.

Her sister CJ emailed me the day after she died. “Insoo died suddenly in the health club.” When I read it, I felt the bottom of my world fall out. It was an immediate loss and a bad blow. I would miss her terribly, and then in another nanosecond, I felt guilty for thinking about myself, and not of her.

When her daughter Sara told me about how she died, I think it was in a way that Insoo would have preferred.

She had been feeling ill, but went to the gym to work out anyway. She liked to do yoga and lift lightweights. She took a steam bath. They found her on a wooden bench lying on her back. “It looked like she was sleeping.” Nothing indicated she struggled or felt pain and anxiety. I have imaged what she might have felt. I think she probably would have thought whatever she was feeling was interesting because she was curious, always looking for what she could learn from most situations.

Insoo taught me a lot, but one of the best things was to accept criticism without getting defensive. Instead of getting angry and argumentative when someone criticizes me, Insoo helped me learn to accept the information and use it to improve myself. She helped me learn not to take things so personally, and to find ways to learn from everything.

Insoo’s approach reminds me of what the great Sufi poet Rumi talks about in the poem *The Guest House*:

*This being human is a guesthouse.  
Every morning a new arrival.*

*A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary  
awareness comes as an unexpected visitor.*

*Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows, who violently sweep your  
house empty of its furniture, still treat each guest  
honorably.  
He may be clearing you out for some new delight.*

*The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing, and invite them in.*

*Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.*

A critical thought by others, or ourselves, may be an “uninvited guest” with



a message that we can use to make our lives better. “We wouldn’t be any better than anyone else if same if we lived the same life they did,” Insoo said.

While she died much too young and her loss can be overwhelming at times, I know how fortunate I am that Insoo influenced me and countless others.

About a year before she died, I heard the quote: *What to you want to be remembered for?* and wrote in on a little pink post-it tab. When I went to stick it above my computer, I saw the photo of Insoo holding Francesca, and stuck the handwritten quote on it. Insoo reminds me to do meaningful work.

In a 2002 interview of her with San Francisco psychologist Victor Yalom, she discusses what she wanted to be remembered for <http://www.psychotherapy.net/products/interviews/detail.php?id=142#>.

**Berg:** What am I living for? What is the purpose of living on? What do I want to do with the time I have left? That kind of stuff. I'd like to be able to. I don't know whether I'll have the opportunity or not to say on my deathbed (this picture of one dying, surrounded by friends and family who knows? It may never happen that way). I'd like to be able to say I had a good life. And what's the definition of a good life? I made some difference. That's it. If I could just say that. I've made some difference because I've been here in this world. Life is a little bit better and I contributed to that. I think that would be a good life.

**Yalom:** You look a little bit emotional right now as you say that.

**Berg:** Yeah, I'm getting tearful about that because I think it's really important. I'd like to be able to say that to myself, and believe it, that I lived a good life. I don't know if I'm going to do that or not. We'll see.

Yalom also asked Insoo the scaling question and where she was from 1 to 10 on her accomplishing her goal to make the world a better place, but she declined to answer.

Insoo spent much of her life making a positive difference in the lives of many people. Her kindness and wisdom have touched us and her legacy moves us to also live a good life and work to make a difference for others.

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Insoo and Audrey Sutherland at Audrey's home on the North Shore of O'ahu