Contemp Fam Ther (2011) 33:71–84
DOI 10.1007/s10591-010-9140-4

ORIGINAL PAPER

Virginia Satir's Family Camp Experiment: An Intentional Growth Community Still in Process

Russell Haber

Published online: 11 January 2011

Abstract In 1976, Virginia Satir began Satir Family Camp (SFC) with therapists and their personal families. Initially, it was a context for the family to experience Satir's concepts and techniques so that the family system would change along with the therapist. The training of therapists is no longer a significant part of camp; relationships with self, family, friends, and the community is now the main focal point. The process and governance of the camp is presented along with a lengthy anecdote of an experiential family session. These two features—community function and personal/familial growth—inextricably work together to provide a validating environment that supports desired changes.

Keywords Virginia Satir · Experiential family therapy · Intentional growth communities · Self of the therapist · Integration of Satir therapy · Psychomotor Therapy

Introduction

Virginia Satir's inclination to develop intentional growth communities most likely strengthened during her tenure as Director of Training at Esalen Institute during 1964 and 1965. In this role Satir worked with many of the leading minds in the human potential movement, especially Fritz Perls, who was the Director of Esalen. While there, she refined and developed many of her well known experiential techniques such as family sculptures, parts party, and family reconstruction. Virginia's (Satir is widely known and referred to only by her first name) experiential approach to family therapy complemented her communication and systems work at the Mental Research Institute (Satir 1967).

Virginia's unabashed use of "touchy-feely" techniques and her application of family therapy theory and approach appealed to public audiences. Her popular appeal was verified by her highly successful book, *Peoplemaking* (1972), which was translated into 12

R. Haber (✉)
South Carolina Institute for Systemic/Experiential Therapy,
1816 Bull Street, Columbia, SC 29201, USA
e-mail: russdeuce@bellsouth.net

languages and sold more than a million copies. Several leaders in the field considered Virginia to be more of a "Guru" than a family therapist (Brothers 2000). Her personal and experiential approach to training family therapists differed from that of most of the other pioneers, who did not trespass into the personal issues of trainees (with the notable exception of Murray Bowen.) In addition, Virginia was the sole female pioneer in the family therapy movement during the 1950s and 1960s. She comfortably integrated a feminine style into her therapeutic approach, including the use of touch, emotion, personal disclosure, collaboration, intuition, spirituality, and the promotion of protection, safety, respect, and nurturance. Despite the efforts of several male counterparts to marginalize her position in the family therapy movement (Framo 1996), Virginia continued to present her ideas at large conferences all around the world to professionals and to those interested in personal and interpersonal growth. She was on the road so frequently that she did not possess a house or car during one four year period (Brothers 2000).

Virginia's desire to raise the consciousness of each individual regarding personal esteem and world peace on our planet became the driving force in her life. Her goal was to promote both individual and systemic self-actualization. Virginia never left the field of systems therapy; she just kept expanding her perspective of what constituted a system. Although she believed profoundly in the power of systems to influence behavior and perception, Virginia steadfastly felt that the decision about how to "be" in the world remained with each individual. She assumed that a higher level of consciousness, where each individual strived to become more fully human, could engender a peaceful planet.

Her political work on the California Task Force to Promote Self-esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility demonstrated her ability to intervene in political contexts to promote her desire to elevate the rights, respectability, and responsibility of all sectors of society (Vasconcellos 2000). Indeed, Virginia's impact in all of her professional endeavors gained her an invitation to be a member of the Council of Elders, a select group of world citizens who met with the Nobel Laureates for the purpose of creating world peace (Suarez 1999). Thus, in the last five years of her life Virginia began to be recognized as providing a credible roadmap for the development of a transformational cosmology.

Virginia has been referred to as the "Columbus" of family therapy (Duhl 1989). I suggest that she was more like the Neil Armstrong of systems therapy because she did much more than discover that the world is round; she saw the world from a meta-perspective that understood and supported the spiritual implication that all living things on the planet are inextricably linked together: "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 1995, p. 25). The communities that she created manifest this belief.

Satir Communities

Virginia was a product of her culture, one that included the creative, humanistic psychology movement of the sixties and the seventies. She believed in the inherent goodness of people and viewed their dysfunctional behavior as a manifestation of unfortunate learning developed early in life that resulted in problematic coping mechanisms. Her goal was to provide a healing context that could update one's learning in order to change one's coping mechanisms. Virginia believed that communities, as well as families, could provide a safe container to facilitate the transformational process. Albeit in different forms, these growth communities still exist and continue to thrive four decades later. Her philosophy of

promoting self-esteem, congruence, growth, and deep respect for the context has proven to be a timeless phenomenon for living a life with meaning.

Virginia's first organizational community began in 1970 with the development of a group called "One Hundred Beautiful People." Since she met so many people on her travels, Virginia's dream was that some of these unique, congruent people could get together and contribute to one another's growth and development. She began by giving personal invitations to attend a meeting of like-minded, creative souls in order to explore how these people could jointly learn and grow in a community. Most of these meetings were in beautiful natural settings where there was a heavy emphasis on the provision of experiential workshops. This dream continues today with a sustaining organization now called the International Human Learning Resources Network (IHLRN, pronounced "I Learn").

Virginia's communities consisted of more than a collection of beautiful people from the west coast. She worked for several years in the 1980s with the Lakota Sioux Native Americans in South Dakota. Their concept of a *Tiyospaye* acknowledged the importance of "families" that lived communally as a social network, which perfectly fit into Virginia's concept that communities can consist of both blood and chosen members, The Lakota Sioux so profoundly appreciated Virginia's spirit and work with their tribe that they made her an honorary member.

Virginia's two-day workshops differed from typical workshops in that she created an interactive community of people rather than maintaining the predictable roles of presenter and professional audience. However, time was still a constraining factor in the development of a community. Thus, in the early 1970s, Virginia began training family therapists in month-long residential workshops. Virginia coherently taught her egalitarian, human validation model in a community that supported this process.

Virginia felt that it was essential to pay attention to the growing edges of the person of the therapist. She used these month-long meetings as contexts in which to experience congruent communication, learn about how to cope in family triads, and work through rigid beliefs learned through trauma or other negative interactions in families of origin. She wanted her students to experience how they felt about themselves and related to others so that this self-knowledge could be applied in settings outside of the workshop context.

The month-long training workshops evolved into more intentional Process Communities that Virginia and a triad of trainers from the Avanta Network facilitated until her death in 1988. The Avanta Network was formed in the 1970s because Virginia could no longer meet all of the requests for workshop presentations. Avanta also has continued to function and recently has changed its name to "The Virginia Satir Global Satir Network" in order to continue Virginia's goal of working towards inner and environmental peace with professionals and communities all over the world.

The month-long training workshop presented an odd paradox: The process of learning about creating change in families with Virginia actually became hazardous to the integrity of many of the trainees' families because the process of change was not integrated into the families of the therapists. When I asked her about that phenomenon, she told me that she was very concerned about the other, non-attending family members. She always held them in her field of vision and tried to help workshop participants plan for reentering their families. She then described family camp as a context where therapists can participate with their families so that all family members can be seen and heard. Virginia believed in experiential learning and advocated Family Camp as a superb learning context for the professional and personal growth of the family therapist and his or her family. Although she had birthed many communities, Virginia seemed particularly proud of her experimental

family camp community where therapists and their families lived in an intentional growth community in a remote, natural setting in California.

Satir Family Camp

In 1976, Satir Family Camp began with over a hundred people from a wide range of family constellations that included same sex partners and families, three-generational families, individuals, divorced parents with children, and more traditional heterosexual marriages, partnerships, and single parent families. Virginia's goal was to observe families over time. That certainly turned out to be true because 33 years later, this dream of families living in an intentional growth community is still alive and flourishing. The size of the community, typically between 105 and 125 members, fosters sufficient diversity of individual and family constellations. Yet the camp quickly develops an environment of intimacy where everyone becomes known. It is a place where it is safe to be seen by the community. In that sense it functions like a one-week commune or kibbutz.

As the title of this article suggests, Satir Family Camp (SFC) is a community in process. The camp is currently fully subscribed; its governing process is dedicated to embracing Virginia's egalitarian, consensual approach to community decision-making (Satir et al. 1991). The way it functions now is significantly different from how it functioned in the past, and the future of the camp will no doubt be different than the camp's current structure. At present, the governance is mostly performed by a governing committee that is composed of self-selected campers who have attended the last two consecutive camps. The executive board includes a President, Vice-President, and Registrar, who are selected by the governing committee. In addition, there is a paid staff that includes a cook, life guard, and six facilitators. The camp is funded by an extremely modest registration fee and significant contributions by many of the more affluent campers. There is a small turnover of campers most years and some new campers, who are referred by current campers, will be invited after they have adequately completed the registration process.

In the early years of camp (1978–1984), Virginia guided the process during the community temperature reading (a place and time where everyone could be heard) and facilitated therapeutic groups throughout the day and often into the evening. She had an uncanny knack for finding an opportunity for growth, whether in the bathroom, on the trail, at temperature reading, or in the "work" sessions. Virginia's boundless energy was the motor that initially drove the excitement and energy of the camp.

Virginia ended her leadership of the camp in 1984. She told the campers that she was quite confident that they had the ability to run the camp without her. As Satir's (Satir et al. 1991) model of change predicts, a foreign element (comings, goings, and other developmental challenges) thrusts a system into chaos, which activates a search for different ways to incorporate the foreign element. The camp experimented with different ways to run itself, moving from a compassionate oligarchy to a consensually-based approach. The camp previously had a long history of privileging Virginia's voice, as well as the voices of the owners of the land of the first campsite and certain key campers who were collectively referred as the "big ducks" of the community. The governing committee took the leadership transition as an opportunity to retain more authority in running the camp according to its humanistic principles focused on the welfare of each individual and the collective camp. This committee was clearer about its leadership role in running the camp while sharing some of the decision-making authority with the facilitators.

The partnership between facilitators and governing committee underwent a major crisis in 1991 when several campers confronted one of the members about unwanted sexual advances. This confrontation occurred on the next to last day of the camp. There was no time to process this breach of trust and the subsequent shame that followed. Hence, the camp was thrust into a crisis with victims, two alleged perpetrators, and many campers feeling that they were leaving an unsafe and polarized environment. The resultant anger and anxiety shook the camp to its very core. The governing committee was also very concerned that there were no mechanisms in place to handle the undercurrents that persisted about the sexual transgression.

The governing committee responded by assuming responsibility for the camp and demanded their right to provide informed consent regarding decisions initiated by the camp facilitators that impact the safety of the camp. Thus, the facilitators functioned as consultants to the governing committee as opposed to retaining unfettered authority to decide what was best for the camp and individual campers.

Although a consensually-based approach increased each community member's sense of safety by privileging each member's power to express his or her opinion, it sometimes resulted in an individual's or small group's ability to block the desire of the vast majority of the community, resulting in endless conversations and significant frustration. Sharpnack (2007) introduced a model of alignment, which represents an agreement of a group to move toward a unified goal that does not require exact agreement on all points, but generally represents the core values of the entire group. This shift in perspective helped move the community from an overreliance on unanimous consent to an improved way of handling differences. For a group that was somewhat allergic to taking a vote, the model of alignment presented another way of conducting the business of governance. For instance, the dedication to align on behalf of a statement that represented SFC resulted in the current operating Mission Statement:

> Satir Family Camp is a community in which every individual from infant to elder is known, appreciated, and respected for his or her unique contributions and inherent goodness. Camp is an evolving, multicultural community, where each person and families of all kinds are supported and encouraged to deepen their communication and connections with one another. With the support of fellow campers and the assistance of professional guidance in the Satir tradition, the opportunity for personal and family growth is always available. Everyone collaborates in the running of Camp to provide a safe and healthy environment for sharing, learning, playing, stillness and solitude. (Satir Family Camp Handbook 2009)

In addition, a "pulse" committee, composed of a teen, a young adult, an adult camper at large, executive board members, and facilitators, meet each morning to share their perspectives of the "pulse" of the camp, noting especially "undercurrents" occurring in the specific subsystems of camp. For example, in the 2010 camp there were many young families with children under the age of three. Many of them felt left out of camp activities and overwhelmed with caring for small children in the middle of the woods. One family even considered leaving mid-week due to physical and emotional exhaustion. Most of these families included parents who were once young children in camp. There was significant dissonance in their memories of camp as children and the current experience as harried parents.

The pulse committee considered this issue and decided that a session the next day would be devoted to addressing the plight of these young families. A fishbowl with young parents in the inner circle and the general community members in the outer circle provided a

structure where they could articulate their feelings about this issue. This resulted in a community consensus to hire and organize a daycare worker to provide childcare next year. In the meantime, the young families received sufficient support from community members who had the inclination and talent to assist them with childcare responsibilities. Thus, the pulse committee identified an issue brewing in the community and along with the facilitators devised an intervention to address this potential threat to the integrity of the community. Interestingly, the community had been perplexed for years about the inability of the young adults to become more fully involved in committee work. This intervention supported the voices and needs of the young parents, empowering them to take a more active role in the participation of camp.

The partnership between the governing committee and the facilitators works quite well due to the mutual respect and understanding of one another's responsibilities. The pulse committee mediates this partnership with the camp community. The pulse committee's charge is to handle routine matters, but report to the membership (in temperature reading) about any issues that are relevant for consideration by the total community while respecting the confidentiality and rights of all camp members. At the camp orientation, all campers are informed that a member of the governing committee functions as a mandated court reporter should there be such a need (to my knowledge this has not been required), and also reminds everyone that the camp operates under all of the laws of the state of California. Thus, the boundaries of camp are much clearer now than they were in the past.

Daily Life at Camp

The only requirement (other than a minimum number of rules, which are humorously referred to as guidelines) is that each eligible camper (over 10 and less than 80 years of age) do approximately four jobs for the week. These jobs range from wiping tables, facilitating arts and crafts at the children's program, kitchen prep and cleanup, monitoring the sound system during work sessions, pool duty, and latrine duties, among others. Thus, everyone pays back to the community with their labor. This practice promotes responsibility, community cohesiveness, and subsequently raises self-esteem.

Although rituals to begin the day are unique for each camper (mine include a hot shower, drinking a cappuccino around the fire pit, and a breakfast of hot oatmeal with an assortment of fruit), the community's ritual following breakfast is to begin the day with temperature reading. This ritual originated with Virginia as an effort to clarify the needs and the process of the camp. Virginia felt that the time spent resolving unfinished business and process issues would set the tone for the rest of the day at camp.

At the beginning of temperature reading there is usually a guided meditation (Satir and Gerber 1995) or centering activity that could include music, movement, or massage. Following meditation, the first category is appreciations, which usually reduce defensiveness and expand trust in the group. The second temperature reading category deals with puzzles, questions, or bugs. It is amazing to hear a bug one day turn into an appreciation the next day. "I do not like eating alone and I wish that someone would invite me tonight for dinner," could become an appreciation the next day: "I really appreciate Taylor for asking me to join her at dinner." Sometimes a puzzle could become a community issue and can involve a great deal of discussion. This might involve quite lengthy discussions about such topics as wanting permission to videotape, feelings of exclusion, or a desire to leave camp to go surfing during the week. Although sometimes tedious, these conversations highlight the freedom to comment, the responsibility to hear the yearning that is behind the

comment or wish, and the ability for each person to practice differentiation in an atmosphere of respect. Sometimes one or two of the facilitators may help sort out feelings that contribute to the impasse.

The next two categories of temperature reading, new information and hopes and wishes, inform the community about content (the pool is open for swimming this afternoon) and aspirations or desires. For instance, an 8 years old once said that her hope and wish was that the young children would be able to have a therapy group with their own facilitator just like the adults, young adults, and teens. A facilitator formed a group that day (about 8 years ago) and has been running it ever since.

After temperature reading, people go in different directions: some teens and young adults go back to bed, young children participate in their own program, like arts and crafts, and others go on hikes, play basketball, or volleyball. However, most of the adult campers attend the general session. Teens and young adults often come to these meetings when one of their peers or other people that they know well is scheduled to work in front of the group with his or her family. These sessions help to foster deeper connections with fellow campers by sharing important historical experiences and current developmental quandaries. Although the vulnerability, mutual learning, and personal sharing create intimacy in the camp, there is no pressure to attend these meetings.

The initial general session usually meets between 10:30 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. and then again in the afternoon from 2:30 to 5:30. Also scheduled during the day are children's, teen, and young adult groups. The lunches and dinners are fantastic: This year we had sirloin, salmon, great enchiladas, pecan pie a la mode, grilled cheese, guacamole, daily salads and soups, just to name a few favorites of the cuisine. Following dinner there are typically no scheduled activities, but many enjoy playing music, cards, basketball, volleyball, pitching horseshoes, and tetherball. A few nights have structured activities such as family bingo, an auction, party night, and a hilarious array of skits on Friday night. As a non-profit organization with a minimal registration fee, the auction is the mechanism for raising funds to run the camp and be able to offer scholarships to some of the campers.

The structure of camp includes a break in the middle of the week, called Free University Day, when the campers offer a diverse set of programs that have included yoga, tai chi, tantric yoga, organizational development, peaceful conflict resolution, and therapy with the Italian Gypsy community, among many other offerings. The day ends with a spirited night of dancing and partying by all family campers.

Dual Relationships

The six facilitators live amidst a sea of dual relationships at camp. It is common to strike up impromptu conversations prior to or following a shower in the bathrooms, during mealtimes, on walks, at the ping pong tables, around the fire pit at night, or before breakfast while sipping cappuccinos. All of the facilitators come to camp with some constellation of their own family. Thus, living in tents with our families brings our personal life into full view. This transparency can be quite effective provided that the facilitators' families have well-formulated boundaries. In my 17 years of camp, this has not been a problem, but rather our transparency has served as a useful way to join the families in the community and model ways to handle personal and familial interactions. The facilitators are hired by the community, but are still expected to be part of the community and to live by its rules. The compensation, responsibilities as facilitators, and abstention of performing camp jobs

(so that we can maintain energy for the facilitation of camp) are the chief differences between the roles of campers and facilitators.

The facilitators share non-confidential information with the Pulse committee each morning so that this group can handle identified problems as necessary. There is a respectful understanding that the executive board is in charge of the governance of the camp, whereas the facilitators maintain responsibility for personal growth work and process decisions about how to handle what occurs in the groups. The division of responsibilities mimics the therapeutic relationship in a private practice—the therapist is responsible for conducting the therapy, whereas the clients as consumers make decisions regarding the extent of participation or non-participation in therapy. Obviously, there are times when governance and facilitator decisions intersect, such as deciding upon the frequency and duration of the meetings. The committee is generally receptive to facilitator feedback, but retains the right to make decisions that they feel are in the best interests of the community.

Facilitators are expected to facilitate group meetings, yet retain discretion about whether or how to conduct growth-oriented conversations outside of these meetings. Usually, the rule is that facilitators conduct short (around ½ h), goal directed meetings outside of session. If more time or additional community support is needed, then time can be scheduled during the general session, young adult, teen, men's or women's groups. The facilitators have nightly meetings in order to share information learned from observations, conversations, and group interactions. The facilitators share information without restrictions unless it is about one of the facilitators' children. These meetings have proven to be useful for providing different perspectives about camper issues, parallel processes that exist in other contexts, and greater clarity about the facilitators' internal reactions.

Due to the growth-oriented context of the work within the constraints of a yearly meeting, the campers have a clear understanding that growth-oriented work should not be seen as a substitute for therapy, which should occur as necessary in an ongoing relationship. The clarification between the roles of a facilitator and of a therapist occurs each year during the general introduction to camp. In addition, this distinction of a growth-oriented intervention versus an ongoing therapeutic relationship is described in the handbook of the Satir Family Camp. Growth-oriented work fits well into Virginia's philosophy of a non-pathological, developmental, experiential, resource-oriented, and egalitarian theory of change (Haber 2002; Satir et al. 1991). The role of the facilitator in the group is more of a guide than a hierarchical figure. Nonetheless, there is a fine line between therapy and growth, and each facilitator factors in the camper's ability to handle and integrate an intervention. However, it is not unusual for themes to be repeated by various campers over several years. Such problematic themes are seen as coping mechanisms, often learned during childhood. Virginia often said, "The problem is not the problem, the coping is the problem." Thus, changing coping patterns usually requires a second-order change that goes far beyond the symptom to the way that the individual learned to be organized in his or her family of origin. Virginia was prone to work with psychodrama, gestalt, and body-oriented techniques as evidenced by her highly popular, creative, and experiential work in her well-known applications of family reconstruction (Nerin and Satir 1986), Parts Party, and family sculpting.

Besides Satir concepts and techniques, the approach used in the following clinical anecdote includes a heavy influence of Pesso's (1973) Psychomotor Therapy along with Carl Whitaker's (Whitaker and Bumberry 1988) and Maurizio Andolfi's (Andolfi et al. 1989) useful additions to her body, right-brain, transgenerational, and resource–oriented approach. There are many paths to Rome, and each facilitator uses different methods to

create a collaborative and respectful process to promote problem resolution and developmental growth. In essence, the work provides an experience that yields greater potential for differentiation and growth in the system as opposed to the rigid, problematic sequences that result in a remarkable lack of options.

An Example of "Work" in the General Session

The general session is open to all campers; family and friends affirm their support of the working individual(s) with their attendance. Recently there has been an increase in the number of teens and young adults at the general session. The "audience" is free to come and go unless they have volunteered to participate in a role in the work.

Receiving time to work in the general session can occur through a request to do so at the general session or could begin through a dialogue with one of the facilitators. In the case that follows, the idea to reserve session time occurred during a facilitated thirty-min conversation between a single-mother, Rosa, and her son, Miguel. The names and ethnicity of the mother and son have been changed to protect their identities. They both granted permission to use the following anecdote, which they generously edited.

Feeling unheard by Miguel, Rosa approached two facilitators and proposed a brief meeting, the result of which, she hoped, would be a mutually satisfactory solution to a minor parent–child communication issue. Rosa had compiled a list of summer projects for Miguel—woodcutting, cabinet hanging, and filing. During the semester, twenty-one-years-old Miguel had expressed enthusiasm about these projects; however, upon his arrival home from college, Miguel met Rosa's requests for assistance with inexplicable resistance.

This resistance, it turned out, had little to do with an unwillingness to work: Miguel became painfully aware of their mutual reliance on each other. The conversation quickly turned from a "project" problem to a "fear-of-leaving-home" problem. The thought of this developmental milestone scared them to their foundations. Miguel intensely experienced feelings of fear and of being "lost" in the world; seeing this, Rosa became anxious, which only heightened Miguel's distress. Fear reinforced fear. Both of them deeply loved one another and at the same time knew that their days together soon would be limited to infrequent visits. The son was very worried that his absence would create a hardship for his mother in handling aloneness, meager resources, and substantial household tasks. Miguel also worried about his ability to handle life without his mother.

From the start, the relationship between Miguel and Rosa had been one of extreme mutual attachment. Rosa explained that Miguel was born prematurely with significant lung problems; it was thought that he would die within 2 weeks. Before Miguel was 3 weeks old, he had two spinal taps, two surgeries, and many other prods and pokes. Rosa bore her son's hardships alone as her family and friends lived in Mexico. Rosa's partner, Carlos, went back to Mexico upon learning that Rosa was pregnant. Rosa's parents didn't have the resources to come to California. Miguel was born with a tentative grip on life; Rosa, determined but powerless, was his only handhold.

Miguel said that he knew the story about his history very well, but he did not have any physical or emotional reaction to the story. In addition to this birth trauma, the family had to deal with myriad life difficulties, including an undependable and unsupportive alcoholic father, who eventually committed suicide; a grandmother with escalating Alzheimer's disease; a beloved grandfather who shot his wife and then himself after a two year battle with Lou Gehrig's disease; and economic difficulties. Miguel's only emotional support came from his mother and a small group of friends. Despite all of these calamities, he

repeated that he felt disengaged and "removed" from these historical events. Since the community offered a metaphorical and practical alternative to the isolation characterizing the family's history and current circumstance, Miguel was asked to consider whether he would want to work on these issues in front of the general session. After a night's reflection, he said that he was ready to work at the first possible moment. His mother concurred that this would be a very important experience for both of them. This family has been coming to camp for the 17 years that I have been there. According to Rosa, the men at SFC have provided male role-models, inspiration, and direction for Miguel, which has been a primary motivation for them to continue to come to camp. Personally, I have had many warm experiences with them through the years, not to mention a ferocious ping-pong competition with Miguel that just turned in his favor during this past year. The amount of facilitative interventions with Miguel has been minimal, however, the many years of SFC experience generated sufficient trust that the work would turn out to be a useful experience.

The work began with Rosa and Miguel sitting in front of the general session. Wireless microphones were attached so that the community could easily hear as they recapped the previous day's conversation. They had different, yet not contradictory agendas; Miguel wanted to feel able to move forward in his life and his mother felt that he needed to address the roots of his fears that compromised his ability to move forward without fear. First, I worked with Rosa to address her side of the birth trauma. I felt that she needed to begin by addressing her unfinished pieces with their painful history before focusing on Miguel. She seemed more readily available to enter into and learn from the residual pain of the tenuous and frightful moments that occurred shortly after Miguel's birth.

Rosa reiterated that Miguel was born prematurely with poor lung function and a fatal prognosis. When Rosa began to shake and cry uncontrollably, she was willing to enroll a support figure who would hold her and help her navigate the medical issues that she had had to face on her own in the past. She chose a friend who was a doctor from the community who would have the strength, knowledge, and conviction necessary to perform this role. She placed him beside her and physically leaned and relaxed into the support that this person gave her in this recall of her encounter at the hospital. She began to weep at the acknowledgement that this "support person" would willingly and ably have given this type of supportive companionship to her if he had been at the scene of Miguel's birth twenty-one years ago. The "as if" quality of reconstructing the original scene allowed Rosa's mind and body to experience history in a new way, which could enable a more creative approach to the present and future. Rosa's ideal support person said to Rosa: "If I would have been there back then, I would have supported you and made certain that the doctors would have listened to your wishes and answered your questions, and I would have explained the medical issues to you so that you would perfectly understand the situation."

Pesso (1973) believes that this new narrative creates a new, synthetic memory that can offer a novel way to experience the past. A new map of a reconstructed history thus replaces the old map, which can even establish a new and improved neurological connection to the reconstructed scene (Pesso and Wassenaar 1991).

Miguel enjoyed seeing his mother receive abundant support in this new scene, but still felt emotionally detached. This coping style was accepted and appreciated. Instead of asking Miguel to step into a new narrative, Miguel was asked to pick someone else to "double" (stand in) for him. Virginia often used such stand-ins to represent the "inner child" or "wounded child" because it would honor the coping strategy of the child who had to struggle with survival. In addition, this helped Miguel take the emotional distance he needed in order to more fully perceive the experience. However, Miguel also needed a

support person because he was slipping in and out of affective states of "watching" the work. He chose a very tall, strong, and supportive man to lean on. Virginia often said that there were no accidents in the choice of role players, which certainly bore true in this case. In a "mini-reconstruction" (the more formal reconstruction can easily last a full day), we visited several nodal events such as the hospital scene, the absence of his father, the suicide of his father, and the illnesses and catastrophic deaths of his grandmother and grandfather. The individual who doubled as the younger Miguel was very sensitive to the psychological and emotional reality that Miguel was going through in each of these scenes. The actual Miguel moved into and out of the reconstructed experience of his young self based on his comfort and preference. As his younger self, Miguel expressed deep appreciation for his grandfather and a great deal of sadness with and anger toward his father. His father had killed himself a week before a scheduled visit, leaving Miguel feeling not only abandoned, but also carelessly discarded. Miguel expressed that he wanted his father to have said good-bye to him. In all encounters, Miguel was accompanied by the tall support person, who quickly assumed the role of Ideal Father (Pesso 1973). In the work, Miguel said that his father was very tall, but he chose a support person who was larger and "had his back"—a man he could depend upon. These and other images were supported and kinesthetically anchored through the body (Satir et al. 1991).

Due to their multiple challenges and traumatic losses, the underlying theme of the mother-son relationship evolved into a "survival pact:" "We will keep each other alive." Rosa said that when Miguel was struggling for his life as an infant, she prayed in the hospital and promised Miguel that she would always be there for him if he could survive. As a completely dependent and premature infant, Miguel also needed to depend on his mother's life force. This bi-lateral "pact" grew stronger through each trauma that they had to endure. The power of this pact, though known consciously, operated pre-verbally and instinctively. Despite their commitment to healthfully move through Miguel's stage of leaving home, the sheer number of previous traumatic losses manifested into a visceral fear of the future. During the work they were able to make a new pact: "We will always be connected as family members, but we can survive on our own."

The last piece of the work included Miguel picking a "soul-mate." The work moved in this direction because he was ready to add something new in his life. After he picked someone to role-play his "soul-mate," he brought her to meet his mother, who very much approved of his choice. Mother and son further redefined their relationship from a tightly bound survival pact to a relationship that included other intimate relationships.

The work concluded with the role-players sharing the personal and intuitive insights that they experienced while playing their roles. For instance, the stand-in for Miguel said, "As you (Miguel), I became so aware that the only person that I could really count on was my mother…." These messages often can be very relevant, but sometimes can have more to do with the role-player's personal feelings than with intuitive insights gathered through playing the role. Miguel and Rosa were cautioned to accept only what fit for them. After all of the role-players were "de-roled," the community members who were participatory observers of this work were invited to share personal reflections, insights, or associations from their own lives without commenting on, making suggestions about, or questioning any aspect of the work. This boundary is necessary to protect those who did the work from dealing with unwanted comments or additional complications. However, the personal sharing proved useful because it let Miguel and Rosa know that they were not the only ones who suffered through such problems; it affirmed the help that their sharing had provided the community, and gave the community an opportunity to voice its appreciation. For instance, some individuals discussed what came up for them about suicide, absent parents,

and hospital procedures; some shared fears about post-graduation and the responsibility that they feel toward their parents; others identified with the difficulty of finding a "soul-mate."

The work at camp provides a safe space in that campers are very sensitive and respectful of those doing the work. Following the work, friends in the community provide support by providing space for reflection, lots of hugs, appreciations, companionship at the campfire, or in countless other ways. Rosa's and Miguel's risk to expose unprocessed feelings, and all the others that share pieces of themselves in the general session, help develop community intimacy. The community becomes a safe container that gives the focal people support while they assimilate important images and emotional information that they learned from their exploration. The work gives them a new "language" to think about their lives. This is true for the entire camp as many look to use the camp as a laboratory where they can learn and practice new ways of being that they can bring to their lives at home. Usually a closing exercise at the end of the week helps community members gain clarity as to how to apply desired changes upon reentry into their personal lives, families, and communities.

Although this session had therapeutic effects, the context of a single session in front of the community lends itself to a growth model of intervening with families. A growth model looks to update history through reconstructing trauma and other learning that interferes with living life in a more satisfying manner, so that new choices become readily apparent and reachable. These new choices can be supported by and practiced in the community. In the case of Miguel and Rosa, they were each supported in different contexts (Miguel in the young adult group and Rosa in the women's group). The act of delegating a defined time to work in front of this one-week community also provides a context that is geared for a family that has the strength to live within these limits, handle the process of assimilating new information, unprocessed emotions, and being exposed to a new map of possibilities. Thus, families that need an ongoing relationship for support and equilibrium are better handled by a more continuous therapeutic relationship. In order to promote a growth versus therapy orientation, new campers usually wait a year before they begin to "work" at camp. This gestation period allows them to experience the healing that happens in all phases of the community rather than to expect that it can only happen in a session in front of the community.

Epilogue to the Session

Later that week, I had a few conversations with Rosa and Miguel. Both expressed that they felt good about the session. Especially encouraging was Miguel's assimilation of the kinesthetic feeling of support on his back. And, he continued to soundly defeat me at the ping pong table.

Conclusion

In our society, it is rare for people to be known in their neighborhood or community. The Satir Family Camp, in one week each year, elegantly fills this void in our culture. In our wireless and cyber world, facebook and virtual realities serve the need for community. This is remarkably different than the SFC, where life is lived in a technology free, natural, and relational environment. The fact that the young adults (roughly those in college through

30 years old) are the largest demographic group at SFC is evidence in support of the future of the community. They have increasingly become a presence at the camp and no doubt will be instrumental in making shifts in the process of the community.

In this article I highlighted two anecdotes, one clinical and the other regarding community process, that contained similar themes about the challenge of redefining boundaries while still maintaining the need for support. Williamson (1991) defined this developmental challenge as an "intimacy paradox," where the young adult enters a process of becoming a peer with one's parents. As often evidenced in the community, difficult emotional issues in childhood make the process of differentiating from the family of origin infinitely more difficult.

Similarly at SFC, the current challenge is to eradicate impediments younger adults experience relative to becoming involved in more of the governance of camp. The community issue about the parents of young children not being able to attend sessions because of childcare responsibilities created an obvious double-bind. Community to young adult: "We want you to take over the direction of camp, but you cannot come to sessions because you have to be a good parent." The harried young parent could not adequately do either. The facilitator team is constantly looking for themes that connect and intersect so that we can work with the personal, familial, and community simultaneously. Thus, the work in session both responds to and generates themes in the stresses and strains of the plight of young adults. Therefore, the clinical anecdote showed that the emotional need for support and the ability to assert authority is not contradictory, but represents a compatible process. Thus, the facilitators' work in camp complements the efforts to build a community process.

Virginia was right: Therapists make themselves vulnerable and open to growth by living with their families in a very intimate community. Besides learning about family process with other family structures, SFC offers a context to practice living more congruently with one's own family. Virginia firmly believed that congruence was a salient factor in developing the responsibility and maturity to effectively use self in therapeutic relationships. SFC, therefore, provides an in-depth experience that offers an opportunity to learn about how a professional therapist operates in a community, with his or her family, and to become part of a process that embraces growth, development, and intimacy.

Virginia Satir provided the seeds to grow in ways to better handle unique personal, familial, and community developmental challenges. The Satir Family Camp community intentionally embraces the growth model to handle problematic coping behaviors. SFC members learn to face challenges with deep respect and concern for self, other, and context, thus living according to Virginia's motto, "Peace Within, Peace Between, and Peace Among." Through this commitment, there can be a new way to practice and live so that we all can become more fully human. SFC imperfectly strives to fulfill this dream through attention to process, process, and more process.

Acknowledgments I would like to acknowledge the congruent, supportive, and good-natured facilitators that I have had the pleasure to work with now, Laura Dodson, Maureen and Tom Graves, Malcolm Anderson & Rhea Merck and previously, Karen Cooper-Haber & Shirley Kirby. Their energy, ideas, and love for processing are throughout this manuscript. I have a special appreciation for the inspiration of Virginia Satir and the special group of warm and adventurous people who compose Satir Family Camp.

References

Andolfi, M., Angelo, C., & de Nichilo, M. (1989). *The myth of Atlas: Families and the therapeutic story*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

Brothers, B. (2000). Virginia Satir. In M. M. Suhd, L. Dodson, & M. Gomori (Eds.), *Virginia Satir: Her life and circle of influence* (pp. 1–101). Palo Alto, CA: Science and Behavior Books.

Duhl, B. S. (1989). Virginia Satir: In memoriam. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 15*(2), 109–110.

Framo, J. (1996). A personal retrospective of the family therapy field: Then and now. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 22*(3), 289–316.

Haber, R. (2002). Virginia Satir: An integrated, humanistic approach. *Contemporary Family Therapy, 24*(1), 22–34.

Nerin, W., & Satir, V. (1986). *Family reconstruction: Long day's journey into light*. New York: Norton.

Pesso, A. (1973). *Experience into action*. New York: New York University Press.

Pesso, A., & Wassenaar, H. (1991). The relationship between P/ST and a neurological model. In A. Pesso & J. Crandell (Eds.), *Moving psychotherapy: Theory and application of Pesso System/Psychomotor Therapy* (pp. 33–41). Boston: Brookline Publishers.

Satir, V. (1967). *Conjoint family therapy*. Palo Alto, CA: Science and Behavior Books.

Satir, V. (1972). *Peoplemaking*. Palo Alto, CA: Science and Behavioral Books.

Satir, V. (1995a). *The third birth*. Washington: Avanta Network.

Satir, V., & Gerber, J. (Photographer). (1995). *Meditations and inspirations*, Millbrae, CA: Behavior Books.

Satir, V., Banmen, J., Gerber, J., & Gomori, M. (1991). *The Satir model: Family therapy and beyond*. San Francisco, CA: Science and Behavior Books.

Satir Family Camp Handbook. (1984, 1986, 2005, 2009). Ventura, CA: Satir Family Camp, Inc.

Sharpnack, R. (2007). *Trade up*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Suarez, M. (1999). *A biography of Virginia Satir*. Burien, WA: Avanta, The Virginia Satir network.

Vasconcellos, J. (2000). Toward a politics of self-esteem. In M. Suhd, L. Dodson, & M. Gormori (Eds.), *Virginia Satir: Her life and circle of influence* (pp. 257–301). Palo Alto, CA: Science and Behavior Books.

Whitaker, C., & Bumberry, W. (1988). *Dancing with the family: A symbolic-experiential approach*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

Williamson, D. (1991). *The intimacy paradox. Personal authority in the family system*. New York: Guilford Press.