

Keeping Families Rolling

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Dr. Carl A. Whitaker, a widely respected family therapist who will be speaking locally, likes to think of a family as a wagon wheel.

The hub is the mother, the spokes are the children and the rim is the father. If one part loosens, falls out or breaks from stress, the wheel won't roll.

To extend the metaphor, Whitaker and his colleagues in the world of family therapy help get broken wheels rolling again. He will share his methods and thoughts - gathered during his 80 years - at a workshop Friday and Saturday at the Desmond Americana Hotel, 660 Albany Shaker Road in Colonie.

"The metaphorical implications (of the wagon wheel) are very intriguing," Whitaker writes in his 1989 book, "Midnight Musings of a Family Therapist" (Norton).

He explains: "The support, the intimacy, the closeness of the mother and the children - the mother's connection to the extended family via emotional bonds, physical biology, and psychological intimacy - are in a relational position very different from the protective rim (the father) that connects the family to the reality of the Earth, the outside world."

Whitaker gained renown for developing the "experiential" approach to family therapy - one of several approaches developed during recent decades.

Whitaker believes therapists should address family dynamics that become apparent during therapy sessions, as opposed to what happened among family members in the past, said Helen Matocha, a family therapist with Clinical Services and Consultation in Latham, which is sponsoring Whitaker's workshop.

Whitaker's therapy style is difficult to teach because it relies on the therapist's intuition and deeply personal involvement, wrote Augustus Y. Napier in his 1978 book, "The Family Crucible" (HarperCollins), which was co-authored by Whitaker.

Susan Stern, an assistant professor in the school of social welfare at the State University of New York at Albany, agrees with that assessment, adding that a therapist-to-be would have to apprentice under Whitaker to replicate his style.

"I think he's a very skilled clinician and an artist," Stern said of Whitaker. "He's very creative in how he thinks about and interacts with families." She added, however, that his approach might not be right for every family. A more concrete approach that focuses on solving problems and building skills would work better for many families, Stern said.

In explaining "experiential" therapy, Napier, who studied under Whitaker, writes: "This approach assumes that insight is not enough. The client must have an emotionally meaningful experience in therapy, one that touches the deepest levels of his person. Therapy is seen as a deliberate regression, one in which the therapist participates, though not as profoundly as the client."

He writes that Whitaker's therapy goal is to achieve "a caring, person- to-person relationship among all parties at the end of therapy."

Stern said Whitaker's philosophical view is that the therapist "reveals oneself as a real person and uses that self in interacting with families." She added that family members experience growth through the "immediate shared experience" of the therapy session.

During a recent interview from his lakeside home in Nashatah,

Wis., near Milwaukee, Whitaker said alcohol abuse, drug abuse, physical abuse and post-traumatic stress disorders are common problems that prompt people to seek family therapy. He said he would like to see the stigma of therapy disappear.

As he and co-author Napier explain: "We hope to see a world where the average family will find no stigma in seeking consultation to improve their creativity, to increase their communication or the level of their intimacy, or to cope with the expected crises of family life. This can happen only when we know just how human we all are, and how alike. Perhaps the commonality of our family experience can teach us this lesson."

During the interview, Whitaker said he also believes that people receiving therapy should wean themselves from treatment over time. Family members, rather than the therapist, he explained, are the most important part of helping to solve family problems.

"Therapists only help the family do the work," he said.

Whitaker grew up on a dairy farm in Raymondville, St. Lawrence County, and received a medical degree from Syracuse University in 1936. Included among his many positions over the years were director of psychiatry at Oak Ridge Hospital in Tennessee, professor and chairman of the psychiatry department at Emory University in Atlanta, and professor of psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. He left the Madison campus in 1982 when he reached the university's mandatory retirement age of 70, and has been leading workshops and informally teaching ever since.

Whitaker has a widespread following. A woman who lives in the Madison, Wis., area and has a telephone directory listing of "C. Whitaker," often gets misdirected calls from people wishing to speak with Carl Whitaker . She said these repeated inquiries over the years - which have come from as far away as Israel - prompted her to buy all of Whitaker's books and become one of the many admirers.

Whitaker is just one of many gurus in the field of family therapy. Other popular therapy methods range from the traditional (a psychoanalytically oriented style that relies on past experience to

get insight into a person's problem) to the somewhat ridiculous (a "family sculpting" style where someone can position their family members in postures that express the way they experience the family).

One aspect of Whitaker's approach is that the whole family agrees to participate in therapy, because if one member refuses that person can become defensive and suspicious. "It is worth waiting and struggling to assemble this group at the first meeting," Napier writes in "The Family Crucible."

Whitaker sees the nuclear family as the primary client - not necessarily the traditional mother, father and children, but rather anyone living under the same roof. He differentiates between the nuclear family and the extended family.

Therapy attempts to "create a sense of the individual in the family by freeing the individuals from their crippling entanglements with one another," according to "The Family Crucible."

Length of therapy can vary depending on the seriousness of the problems, the degree of courage and ambition the family brings to the sessions, the amount of distress pushing them to change, the quality of previous therapy, the degree to which the therapist can identify with the problems and the length of time that has elapsed since the problems first arose, the therapists write.

Whitaker has a lot of family experience from which to draw. He and his wife, Muriel, have six children - Nancy, Elaine, Bruce, Anita, Lynn and Holly - and 15 grandchildren.

"He's so human and so real," said Matocha, an organizer of the Whitaker's conference, which is open to professional therapists and lay people. "I have a tremendous respect for him as a person and as a therapist," she said. "It's a real honor that he is coming here. This is a rare, rare opportunity."

To register, contact Clinical Services and Consultation at 783-5381. The conference, which costs \$110 per person, is expected to draw about 200 people.

The sessions both days will run from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. As a highlight of the conference, Whitaker will offer therapy to one or two families in a private room. The discussions will be videotaped and transmitted via television into the conference room so the audience can witness Whitaker's therapy methods firsthand.