

THE TECHNIQUE OF FAMILY THERAPY

Carl Whitaker, M.D.**

I am glad to have a chance to talk about family therapy. I have a sense that each time I talk about it, it changes me a little. First, by way of introduction, I would like to take the position that knowing is important but sometimes unknowing is more important. I had a very exciting experience in Texas 2 or 3 years ago. I was ushered into a family interview, and the family turned out to be the identified patient, her boyfriend, and the boyfriend's sister. I had the feeling that I had been "took"-in this strange territory with no real friends and no real sense of warmth, and I get this kind of distorted family. I started fooling around with it and after about 10 minutes I decided "Oh hell! It's a dud, I have had it and maybe this time it's a flop and maybe next time it will work." It was as though the admission of defeat to myself threw me into a state of being alive, and all of the sudden the interview became real, human and moving. I discovered ever since that, that whenever I can get to that step of facing my own defeat, it seems to make a new point of departure, a new sense of belonging with and going along with what is happening and so is the value of unknowing.

It is a rather unique and touching thing for me to be giving the Ackerman lecture. I was not quite sure about the wisdom of the community, whether I was given the opportunity because I am a non-psychoanalytic layman type therapist or because I am turned on by kids, whether because in my old age I am another dirty old man like Nat or whether because I am closer to death, I should know more about it. Actually, I was only professionally acquainted with Nat. There are so many people who have been intimates of his, family therapy children and grandchildren as it were, who know him so much better and I feel so much more humble in trying to say something about Nat and his fantastic contribution to this field. He was certainly one of the seminal minds if not the actual grandfather. When I was taking my second year of Latin, one of the examiners asked about Virgil, and I said he was the father of all Roman poets which turned the teacher on. So I think that Nat was that. I also wondered if it was a way of honoring my Jewish inner self. I discovered some 6 or 8 years ago that I am a disenfranchised Jew. Being brought up in the Adirondack Mountains as a good Methodist, it was 13 years that I lived in the Old Testament. My fairy stories and murder mysteries and sex education all came out of the Old Testament. I was a good Jew and all of the sudden when I became 13, someone said that "I'm sorry about this but you don't belong to them. You're out of that, you belong in the New Testament." All of the sudden it turned out that I was not a Jew after all, and I was disenfranchised (I still grieve with all that). Maybe this is a chance where I can wiggle my way back in by being one of Nate's children.

I would like to say something special about Nate because he was a very special person. The things that have occurred to me I will list for you.

Nathan Ackerman Memorial Address - Annual Meeting of the Family Institute of Philadelphia. October, 1973

** Professor of Psychiatry, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.

I think he was a specialist in a multi-disciplinary approach. In a strange kind of way, Nate by himself was a group. He was a grandfather one minute, a grandmother the next, a boyfriend, a husband, a flirtatious lover; he could flip from one role to the next so fast that it would make me dizzy watching him from the distance. I never was quite sure about his homosexual boyfriend competence, I think of that as one of my assets, but I never did date Nate so I'm not sure how much his competence extended in that area. I think of it, by the way, as a very important area. In fact, it's one of the rules I have from one of my residents. "If you don't seduce the father in the first interview, you've had it." The other is that family therapy is like chess, you had better not move the queen until you have your game well into mid-phase. The residents come back time after time saying, "Hey, look, I've just lost a family", and I ask what they did to the mother and they say, "Well, mother and I did have a fight", and I say, "Too bad about that. Talk to your analyst about it".

Nate had a way of what I have thought of as guerilla invasion of the family. He sneaked into the family by all kinds of manipulative modes and gyrations that were so subtle, that before you knew it, he belonged more to the family than the members themselves, which by the way is not infrequent. I saw a family recently in which the older son had come back from the West Coast to straighten out mom. Papa had died and mom had taken to drinking. In the course of the first few interviews, I asked him how much he belonged in the family since he had been living away for so many years, was married and has several kids. He said that he did not feel that he belonged to the family at all anymore-of course he stopped his job and came all the way back to stay for several months. I said, "How long have you been out of the family", and he said that he never had belonged in the family. So then taking his cue, I went around the group, and there were several of them there, and there was not a single one who felt he belonged in the family. So one of the secrets that I think Nat was an expert at was a conviction that the family was a whole, that it had a sense of unity and that is one of the biggest things to get underway when you first begin seeing the family. If you don't discover it is a unit, they may not discover it and they may have been living in it for many years and having no sense of belonging to it. They just happened to be around.

Nate was also an expert in the use of power. With him it was so natural, he had so much of it that it wasn't much of a problem. But I suggest to the rest of you that you think of it as a very important part of family therapy, because uniquely different from individual therapy, family therapy is a political process. It's really a naughty word nowadays and I am really sorry to have to use it but I couldn't think of another word (so you try to Watergate the family). You do have to develop a sense of power that the family has and if you can't find your own way for taking over, you probably are not going to be of much use. Let me see if I can suggest a way of talking about it for a moment. Think of 5 or 6 people who have been living together through thick and thin, and there is a lot of thick in any family; you know, divorces and death, fights with neighbors and attacks by the Rabbi, financial trouble and financial luck which is almost as bad, you name it, and they have gone through it. Along comes this character who thinks that by a few extra words he is going to change their way of living, and that is pretty wierd. The whole process of assuming that any individual is going to walk into a group of 5 or 6 and take over is wierd. If you don't think so, ask any athletic coach what it takes to handle a team to make it operate effectively or to take over from a previous man who had it operating affectively. It's a major move, it's a massive political group process and you need to get started with some sense of how important it is

for you to carry some kind of power, some kind of political knowhow. There are many ways of doing this. One of the most important and simplest ways is to do something in the beginning that makes it clear that you are going to set the rules. Everyone shows up except papa-thereupon you agree to charge them and not see them and send them back. They are indignant and refuse to come, etc. So you lose a case. You get a conviction in yourself that there is such a thing as an important father. It's really very difficult. Margaret Mead was really right when she said the father is a social accident. He just happens to be around. But in the family structure, he is a very important individual and if you lose him, you are probably going to lose the family. That is the advantage of being homosexual or better, homosocial. If you can work out that process of becoming a significant person in the beginning, you have a way to start. Bobby Fisher did well when he was getting ready for that match in Iceland. It is like that but it does not have to be quite that devious or stress inducing but I think a lot of that quality is important and Nate was a master at it.

One of the other things I think is an important component and is partly an extrapolation of Haley's notation that the expert therapist uses indirection. That really is a further extrapolation from Eselin's notation; that one of the important things about the Theatre of the Absurd is that it deals by indirection; that the covert message is the one that produces change and the overt message quaintly enough produces recognition and nothing else. I had a very interesting experience when I took chemistry. I had a great faculty man, the old prof himself was doing the initial lectures in organic chemistry. He moved from inorganic chemistry through the beginning of organic chemistry. I sat with my mouth open just fascinated and for 6 weeks I sat there drooling and then we had an examination and I got a 36. I caught on to the fact that recognition was not enough, somehow I had to learn that stuff. I think many times we have a sense that direct information is all that is needed to produce change. I would like to warn you ahead of time that it's usually something they have heard 30 times before and there are very few new things except things that will confuse them. If you can get something that confuses them, that may help. Nate was an expert in the put-on. Help the family get confused, and I frequently help them sense the fact that this is what they are there for, and I'm not trying to get them anyplace, I am trying to confuse them so they won't go on the way they have been going. We had a bunch of non-professionals who were running an alcoholic rehabilitation center in Atlanta, and they finally got around to inviting the professionals in and they were trying to tell us what they were doing for a few years and doing very well. What they ended up saying was "we are just trying to screw it up so they can't enjoy their drinking anymore". I sometimes have the opinion that that's one of the important things to learn about family therapy. If you can screw it up so they can't enjoy the way it is going anymore, they'll work out ways of making a more adequate and effective methodology for living which will give them more enjoyment. There is another way of looking at this put-on, this induced confusion. I have come to call it "forced transference." It's really surprising what happens when the family comes in for the first interview and you say "Hello, sorry there is someone missing, can you get them on the phone?" and they can't and then you say, "Well, we'll have to charge you for the interview, if you can get the family together call me and we'll make another appointment." "Well, aren't you going to see us?" "No." "Why not?" "The family is not here." "Well, we are all here but Joe." "Sorry about that. No family without Joe." "Well, can't you see the rest of us? Why not?" "I won't feel right about it." "Well, how about next week Tuesday?" "Sorry about that, I don't think we should make another appointment." "Why not?" "Well, I'm not sure that you can get the family together, you didn't do it today." "Well, we'll get him here next time." "Why don't you see if you can get him and then

give me a ring." In a strange kind of way, it does both things of making sure you have a "legal" contract that is going to be binding on both sides but it also means there is going to be a whole new sense on their part of how important the missing member is. One of the things that this "forced transference" is- can I be Christian for a minute- I think that is what we are talking about in the Christian end of this world when we talked about the Holy Spirit. It is the sense of wholeness. A sense that we are an entity.

Barbara Betz said a long time ago, and I think it is still very pertinent, that the dynamics of therapy are in the person of the therapist, not in the techniques, not in the process and not in the understanding. I think Nate was uniquely adequate in this sense. As a person he conveyed a tremendous amount of power, wholeness and the willingness to accept and face confusion, to live in a state of uncertainty. One of the things I value in myself is my endless suspicion of myself. There is almost nothing I believe in. I keep reorganizing my theories and each time have the feeling that this time I made it. When I was doing child psychiatry in 1941, my first private patient was a 3 year old and I got through my fellowship and was allowed to take private patients. It was great. I said hello to mama at the door and sort of sneered at her under my breath. I took the 3 year old in and we had fun and I handed the 3 year old back to her at the end. I did this for 10 sessions and got a call from the father whom I had not seen or heard of and who was a physician. I did not know whether to charge him the \$3 every interview or not, and he said, "Hey, you know, that's great stuff." My daughter is much better and it has changed my wife and I think I'm different too!" I thought that I had found the secret of life! It has never happened to me since. So, my dynamic theories are up for suspicion.

Nate had this loving heartedness that I think was conveyed to the families and gave them the freedom to be loving which is a hell of a hard thing to get. I find pearls as I go along, and one of the pearls for me is a small child. You can cuddle a 3 year old, you can pommel a 5 year old, you can play sex talk games with little kids, which you can't possibly do with parents, and it's as though you were cuddling mother or daddy, as though you were talking directly to the parents when you are just talking to the kid. You say to a 9 year old, "Listen, did you ever think that the reason your mom is mad when dad comes home 2 hours late is because she thinks he is playing with his secretary after hours?" She said, "What do you mean?" "I don't know, I just had this crazy thought." "How's school going?" "Oh, pretty good." And you have, by indirection, left a pill in mother's and father's teeth that they can't deny and they can't not have heard and all sorts of funny things happen in the next 2 interviews, including the possibility they won't show up. Don't hope that they will show up. Leave that for them. It may be that the most important treatment you have is the treatment you don't give. For example, we have a family that came in from out in the country. Father was all upset because the teenage daughter was "about to become delinquent." He probably was afraid that he wasn't going to be in on the fun. About the 2nd interview, mother's passivity in front of father's panic and daughter's hostility about father's jealousy, erupted into a small time explosion. Next interview, dad said, "Hey, can we start any earlier, I'm losing work." I asked him why he came and he said, "I thought of not coming, the damn stuff is not helping anyway." I said, "You want to leave now, you will only lose a few hours." He said, "No, I think I'll stay to the end of the hour." "You know you don't have to. I'll charge you anyway." He said that since he came, he might as well stay. I said, "Mom, is it alright with you if we stop." She said, "We just got started." I said it was a shame for dad to lose all that work. She said, "I'm not going to put up with all the stuff I have been putting up with." I said, "I don't know, he may be different if you're that way."

To the daughter I said, "What is it to you?" "Hell, I didn't want to come from the beginning." "Well, are you willing to stay for the rest of the hour?" "Sure, if this is the last one." So they stopped and they stopped because it was not helping. In terms of my way of looking, it may have been the most important thing I did in those three interviews. To let them accept the failure and take the responsibility for really running their lives. It was as if the group agreed that they did not need a psychiatrist, that they were a family that would make their family work themselves and that may have been more important than a whole mass of understanding and communication training, etc. So, I am even suspicious of my therapeutic competence.

One of the other things I think Nate was a master at was the power of paradox. The power of the dialectic, the power of never being caught in the corner so they have to either accept what you say or fight you. If you can always leave the inferences up in the air so that when they decide to pull them down and insert them in their own heads, they do it on their own initiative or they can just let them float there. You're really not set with some conviction that they have to buy. In this way the family begins to gradually take the initiative for their own living process. I think that's a very crucial kind of process. I think part of this came out of the fact that Nate had graduated from the voyeurism games of psychiatry and he did not have to play peeping tom on the family and figure out all the things that were cooking with them. He was willing to have the dynamics emerge, change or stay the way they were. I think that's all right for me too. I think it's all right if the family takes the initiative for their life, and to live the way they want to live. Now, if mom wants to be a lesbian, and pop wants to be a homosexual, the kids want to relax and let the world go on, I think that's their right. I have some objections to suicide because I have a feeling that it lets the implicit murderer in the family get away with murder and I don't like that very much. Every once in a while, a gal says after the first interview, "Do you think I should divorce him?" I have developed a stock answer-one of the problems of old age is that you get stock answers. I say, "I'll tell you what, I've been married 36 years and 10 months. I think I'll probably stick with her. What do you want to do with yours?"

Part of Nate's power tactics was a process of how to enter the family, that I spoke of before. There is a second component of what I think of as good family therapy that Peggy Pap and I were talking about last night and that is how to get out of the family. John Rosen was probably a master at this. I remember watching John talking to a schiz one day and he was talking about how her mother's milk had been poisoned and how his milk was pure gold and she could have him forever and he would always be there and it was really quite tender and all of a sudden he turned to the guy standing next to him and said, "Hey, Joe, let's go play golf," turned and walked out. The first time I saw that I could have slugged him, because I had a sense that it was not fair to treat a sick human being like this. Over the years, I have discovered it is a very important trick because if you walk in and become a Jewish mother who is symbiotically locked into the family or patient, it is no big deal. It is important to get there, but if you can't get out, you're just like the previous one and you don't help at all. How to get out is a very important process and one of the ways I get out is to become more convinced of how absurd I am. I decided recently in the middle of an interview while I was bored and trying to think of something interesting, that God must be getting very old and probably is going to retire and when he does if he asks me to take over, I am going to work out some plans. I have been working on that ever since. I have decided that we are going to switch sex every 10 years. Man is going to have the first baby and you can borrow time from those people who don't want it. We are going to have detachable penises where we

switch sex. I have been wanting to be a female for many years and have never made it. Maybe I can make that part of my initiation rites. Each family member is looking to individuate in a way to join without being locked in and to individuate without being outside and the therapists better know how to belong, be loving, be hurt with pain because of, cry with and at the same time be able to back out and be separate. He should know that his life and the patient's family life is different and separate. He should be in charge of when he makes those moves in and out and that becomes more and more difficult when you get past the first and second interview, when you become as vulnerable as the family. That's when the real ____ hits the fan. As long as you are in the first or second interview, you can be a technician. By the time you get to the third, fourth or fifth, you are probably a human being and you had better watch out because you are vulnerable and they can get you and they outnumber you and outgun you and for me, that means I should have a co-therapist.

Now, the things I don't know about Nate are about Nate as a person. I did not get the opportunity to be close to him. But I can guess about his joyfulness- and God protect me from a family therapist who is not having any fun; if I have to take him as seriously as he takes himself, I will never make it. Harold Searles is famous for a lot of things about schizophrenia but one of the things was that if the schizophrenic can get to laugh at himself, he is on his way out. And I have the feeling that the same thing is true of the family. If the family can get to the point of laughing at itself, then you have made it over the top and from then on it's coasting down. I think Nate had a joyfulness that made for real wholeness. Again, let me flip into my Christian upbringing. Someday, I am going to teach a course in schizophrenia with Christ as the continuous case study. Isaac Singer said there are 300 Christ's in Jewish history. He said that the Kingdom of Heaven is only available if you become a little child and Heaven of course is living in your own person, in your own unconscious. How do you become a child and how do you get the family to have the courage to become childlike? Part of it is playfulness. The freedom to be ridiculous, to be irresponsible. We had a couple we had been working with, both crazy as hoot owls, schizopreno-genic kind of family-the daughter went off for a year's track into Africa, came back and really did not need the family and went off to college, so we went on seeing the parents. They came in a few weeks ago and the mother said that she did not have anything to talk about. I said that we could go for a beer and the resident said, "Great, let's go." So we got up and went out. We got downstairs about 2 or 3 floors and daddy, who was a responsible physician type, said, "Shouldn't we have the interview?" and I said, "Mom, quick, goose him before he gets another thought like that." So we went over and had a beer and a hamburger and probably had the best interview we had in a long time. On the way back, dad says, "Well, we'll see you next Tuesday." And I said, "Not me you won't," and he asked if I would see him again, and I said, "Well, I guess you can if you are convinced that it is necessary, but this seemed to be such a good way of saying goodbye that I would hate to mess it up." That has been 3 weeks and we have not heard from him. The thought that they can get along without me is shattering, but several other people have. So this is the kind of playfulness, joy, silliness. One family came in for a first interview and the problem was that their teenage daughter had "poor ego boundaries." I put a big "x" in the middle of a paper and was going to put notes on and gave it to her in case she needed ego boundaries. It is a way of getting out, of separating yourself, a way of showing the family how to individuate. It's really an extrapolation of that famous book, "Where did you go, out, what did you do, nothing," which is a kid's way of telling his parents to get off his back, but doing it in such a nice Jewish double bind way that you don't know what to do with it, you don't know how to handle it. I think the therapist should learn

from that. One more step in this process, one of the other ways in finding the Kingdom of Heaven is to be crazy. About 30-40 years ago, and I am just guessing, art became crazy. Then about 5-10 years later, maybe drama and literature became crazy, then gradually music became crazy. Science got some crazy impulses there but it's kind of hard put really. I think we are now in a stage where it is all right in the world culture for people to be crazy. It is all right to break out of the linear crazy organizational structured life that we have made the law of reason or rationale and really be crazy. So, I advocate that you learn how to be crazy. To take those crazy parts of yourself and amplify them, that you follow your impulses, follow your irrationalities, that you share with the family and God knows the family is safe, if there is one thing true of the family, it has homeostasis like you don't have any knowledge of. There is no danger of you, the therapist, harming the family, says I from on high. The only question is if you make any dent at all. The question is whether you will be just one more flea that will happen to pass by. I don't think there is any danger of your doing any harm. So with that in mind, you should be able to share almost anything, I say almost because we used to teach our medical students back in Atlanta many years ago, and one day this lady showed up with her policeman brother. The student that had been seeing her was honest and said to the girl that he would love to go to bed with her. It was said very honestly and I hoped it was a symbolic statement but the policeman brother did not appreciate this at all. He did not think it was symbolic. He didn't think it was even therapeutic. A little bit of judgment you should use already.

There is another tremendous value in being crazy and that is that if you develop a symbiosis with a schiz identified patient, (I like schiz because I think it is a disease of abnormal integrity, they are really doing their thing and I say it with reverence and do not say this with any fecetious overtones). I think that that is what craziness is, abnormal integrity, a creativity that brooks no interference. Now the problem is that most of the people who end up in the state hospitals are also stupid. I make money out of being crazy, Picasso not only made money, he also had fun. Now that kind of craziness they should all have. All crazy people have the kind of opportunity Picasso has. If you become symbiotically involved with a patient then you have done that because you are like the mother. You lock in and double bind the patient and the patient double binds you and there you are, tied in a figure 8. The difference is that when you have been locked like this in contrast with mother who is terrified about going crazy, hopefully you want to learn about how to be crazy. When you make the move into craziness, the patient symbiotically has to move into the sane position and then you have the way for curing the schizophrenia. This is an extra pearl because as soon as this is reversable, then the patient has a new sense of his capacity to be sane and of course you learn about the freedom and opportunity of being crazy. So these two become flexible. When the patient becomes sane, he becomes scared so you have to stick around and teach him how to learn and then you move back and forth. Let me tell you a story. This 18 or 20 year old schiz, we had been working with the family for a year or a year and a half, and the daughter had really gotten the family on the ropes. She has been screwing around all over the place and has had VD several times and this very nice family is upset. She arranges to have herself kicked out of college several times and dad finally decided that he can't support her if she is not going to succeed in college. She gets herself kicked out of her apartment and comes home to live with family and then starts bringing men in which is all right with the family for dating purposes, but dad very carefully goes to bed saying to the boy that it is time for him to go and wakes up the next morning to find him still there. The mother then blows her stack at the daughter, says, "Out

of my house, my doors are locked, you can't live here anymore." Twenty-four hours later the mother calls me to tell me that she has to let the daughter back in so I say, "Tell her, don't tell me." So she calls up the daughter and says, "Look, I was wrong, I can't say goodbye to you, you are my daughter whatever and I'm stuck with it." Twenty-four hours later I get a call from the police. The policewoman says, "We have a girl down here who came in to report a murder. She said she's been murdered." It really did not do much for the policewoman. She really did not understand. "I called the mother and she said for me to call you." I said, "Well, you don't have to worry about her, we have been seeing her for a long time, and she is well able to take care of herself, thank her and send her along." She said, "Well, she wants to talk to you. Will you talk to her?" I said, "Sure," and so she puts her on the phone and she said, "Hey, Mr. Whitaker," which is what she has always called me, part of the integrity, as I'm no damn doctor to her and it is a very complimentary thing. I said, "I think it was awful nice of you to report the murder to the police and by the way, if you see any more murders, would you please report them too because the police should know about all of them." She burst into this gale of delighted laughter and said, "Thanks, very much," and hung up with a bang. What had happened was that the mother said I love you. To the schiz this means you are dead so she had been murdered. What I had said was congratulations for admitting the murder and if you find anymore, bring them in because you may run into 2 more before the morning, which was saying that I am crazier than you are, at which point she became sane and delightfully real and human. So learn how to be crazy but learn to be smart.

Thank you.