

The Solution Focused Gallery

Story told by Chris Iveson for SOLworld, June 8, 2023

"I don't want you to come!" said Charlotte, my daughter, referring to her end of school art exhibition. "What? Of course, I'm going to come!" I replied.

"No, you're not – you'll just be embarrassing with all your stupid jokes!" And not a shred of humour in her tone.

In the end I did go, but on pain of death if anything "Daddish" left my lips.

Charlotte was right. I had been less than sympathetic to the 'conceptual' nature of the art taught at her school.

"Did a five-year-old draw this?"

"Did the builders leave some rubbish behind?"

and many more equally cheap Dad-jokes.

I needed to find a different way to approach this challenge. It wasn't that I hadn't tried: I'd seen piles of bricks, stacks of boxes, twists of wire and an unmade bed, but still the dad-jokes lingered. Now I had to try harder.

It was the night before the exhibition that an answer came to me: Don't judge, just ask. Look, and instead of needing to 'know' what it is, instead of being 'diagnostic', *ask yourself questions* and, if you are lucky, ask the artist, too. This thought alone created a new excitement, and with that came another clue: "Look forward to the experience, expect to be challenged and to discover something new."

In the event I proved to be the star parent!

Around twenty final-year students stood by their stalls. Many of them I had known since they were toddlers and at each stall I stopped, looked, let the experience wash through me and then asked. Joanna's neat piles of sackcloth, Laura's array of empty frames, Joe's concrete and pipework, Izzy's sheets and many more. By the end I felt a great sense of appreciation and looked back on Charlotte's work with an entirely new lens.

A few weeks later I was driving to Bristol to run one of our courses. The entire south of England was caught in a raging storm and the roads were turning into rivers. Poor visibility and intense concentration on the business of staying alive made me miss the signs marking my journey until, for a brief moment, this sign appeared out of the spray: "Birmingham 10 miles". Birmingham! It was a few seconds before I realised that I was on the wrong road, the M40 instead of the M4.

A nerve-wracking hour later I was on the right road with the possibility, albeit remote, that I might reach Bristol in time. But what state would I be in when I arrived? Time for my self-supervision.

"Let's imagine" I began to myself, "That this proves to be one of the best courses you have ever run; what will you notice about yourself in the two or three seconds before you open your mouth to begin?"

A few minutes into this internal dialogue came the question, "How will you know that this is one of your best courses?"

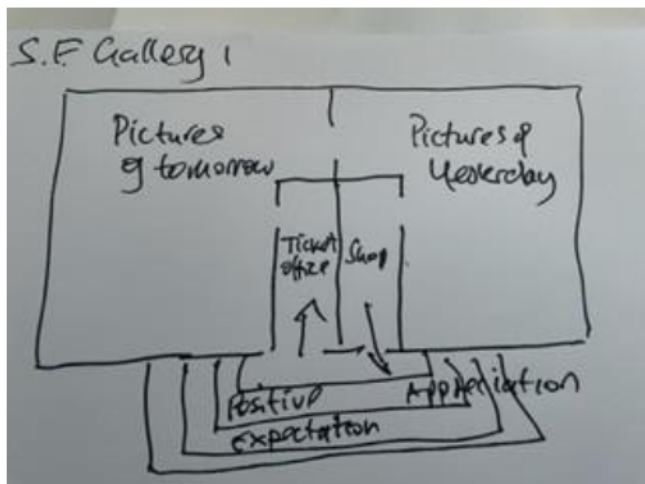
"Because I will have a new idea" was my response.

“What might that be?” I asked.

“You’ll have to wait and see!” I replied.

Towards the end of the course, I was summarising the approach, and out of the blue the “Gallery” image appeared on the flipchart.

At first came the Art Gallery. I had in mind the gallery that can be found in many northern English towns; it has the façade of a small, smoke-blackened Greek temple representing 19th Century



industrial opulence but behind this façade is another story: why spend money on art?

My Gallery only has two rooms, each with a corner taken off at a later time to house the ticket office and the ubiquitous shop.

Like Greek temples Northern galleries have steps leading up to the entrance and I saw these as representing the state of positive anticipation I discovered for myself when approaching Charlotte’s exhibition.

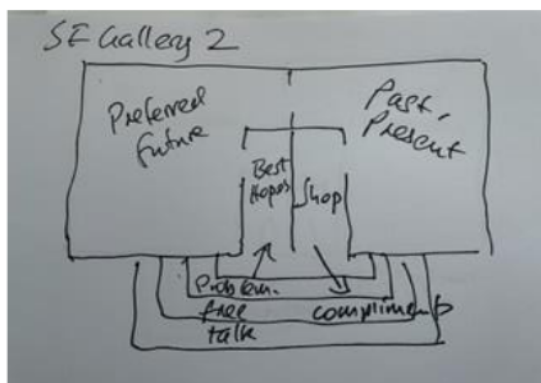
The ticket office buys us legitimacy and gives us permission to explore what lies beyond. Often a simple interaction but not always. My wife and I once spent so long dithering in the ticket hall about which exhibition to choose at London’s National Gallery that it became too late to see either.

The first room in my gallery is devoted to “Tomorrow’s Art?” and offers a collection of post-modern paintings, sculptures and videos. It presents a challenge to the visitor but careful attention, particularly to our response to each work makes for an emotional and thoughtful experience.

The second room houses yesterday’s art: the standing collection of “Past Masters” featuring mainly artists from the previous century. At first the difference between the two rooms seems unbridgeable until the realisation dawns that the first room could not exist without the second – yesterday’s art contains the history of tomorrow’s and now everything looks different.

The shop has the usual souvenirs, cards, and catalogues and from here we might pick up something to remind us of the experience to take forward into our life.

As we descend the steps we have a powerful sense of appreciation of our time in the gallery and what it gave us.



The Art Gallery then provides a metaphor for a solution focused session.

The ticket office is where we work out the purpose of the session: What are your best hopes from this conversation? Once we have an answer that we and the client can work towards we move into the first room to elicit a description of the client’s hoped-

for future, often beginning with the “Miracle Question”.

There is no “right” amount of time to stay in this room – it could be the whole session or just a brief visit before moving into the room containing the history of the sought-after outcome.

This is where the Scale is most useful: We use the scale to look back and trace the journey so far. What have you done to reach this point? Even when the client has not even stepped onto the first rung, we can be interested in everything they have done (and are doing) to keep alive their hope for a better future.

Then comes the shop, which, like the gallery shop, can be full of false promise.

The shop is where we might ask for the next small signs of progress (one point higher on the scale). It can be tempting to see this as the most important part of the gallery and even skip the preamble of examining the pictures. The mistake is to think that the answer to this question, what the client may do next, will lead to the “solution”.

Like experienced gallery-goers, many solution-focused brief therapists will no longer stop at the shop and trust that enough has been done in the conversation, the walk through the two rooms. However, some therapists will choose, as did de Shazer, to take a more cursory look around the first room and use “one point up the scale” to elicit more detail about the client’s hoped-for future. With this approach the shop is vital.

Finally, we have to leave the gallery and descend the steps. Traditionally, this represents the affirmative feedback or “compliments” to the client. More recently some have replaced this with a brief summary of the session. Alternatively, the steps might represent a silent appreciation of the client, so that the conversation’s final words are their own.

The value of this metaphor has been its simplicity. In a Solution Focused conversation there are not many places to go. Once we have our ticket (sometimes the most challenging part of the process) we have only two questions:

- What will your hoped-for future look like?
- How much of it is already happening?

There are infinite ways of asking these questions, but they remain only two.

At any point in our work we can take stock: How much do we know of what the client wants and how much do they already have.

If we find ourselves lost, we just have to remember our last question, ask which room it was from, and regain our bearings. If we are still lost, it is likely that we have the wrong ticket, in which case we go back to the ticket office and check with another “best hopes” question.

Lastly, just as you don’t need to be an art expert or even an art lover to visit a gallery, you do not have to be an ‘expert’ therapist or even a believer in clients’ strengths and resources to be an effective solution-focused brief therapist.

As de Shazer was fond of saying, believing in the client is a pragmatic decision, not an act of faith.

Behave respectfully in the gallery and you will be welcome. Behave respectfully towards your clients and you will be as successful as any other therapist. The requirement (beyond the techniques themselves) is to be sufficiently respectful of the client that they answer the question we ask – the “therapy” is to be found in their answers.

That’s one story – out of the blue.



Here is another . . . *Blue on Blue: a Love Story*

BLUE ON BLUE

A love story

Chris Iveson

Published in *Therapist Stories of Inspiration, Passion and Renewal: What's love got to do with it?* (edited by Michael Hoyt, 2012, Routledge)

“And I thought you were dead!”. I knew that it was the wrong thing to say but by then the words had left my brain and were on their way to my vocal chords. It was too late to call them back and in the slowly passing micro-seconds before they turned to sound I rewound the steps to this moment.

Six months earlier I had been asked to accompany a colleague on a home visit following a request for an emergency admission to residential care of an elderly woman suffering from Alzheimer's disease (see Iveson, 1990). Martha had been cared for by her husband, Ralph, who a few days prior to the call had suffered a massive stroke and was now in a coma from which he was not expected to recover. Martha's daughter, Rosa, was caring for her mother temporarily but lived many miles away and was not in a position to carry on in this way. It was Rosa who had asked her mother's doctor to make the referral for residential care.

Surprisingly, Martha had been expecting us even though Rosa had not yet arrived. She was an elegantly dressed, well-groomed woman in her late 70s and had a tea tray already laid out. We were seated in comfortable chairs in a large, airy and well-furnished St. John's Wood mansion flat with china cups and saucers in hand. For half-an-hour we talked about the paintings on Martha's walls and the books that lined her copious shelves. We had much in common with both: books we loved and art that remained a mystery. Ralph was himself an accomplished artist though the paintings were not his but gifts from his friends.

Martha spoke knowledgeably about literature and publishing which had been her field, while we waited for Rosa, held up in London traffic. She eventually arrived flustered and concerned that her mother would be upset by our visit as indeed she became as soon as Rosa joined us. “Who are these people? Who are these people?” Martha began to ask. “You're not going to let them take me away! Who are they?” These were distressing cries and did much to explain Rosa's worries. Nonetheless, Martha had clearly displayed an ability to care for herself sufficiently well to rule out compulsory admission to residential care. Rosa then became very distraught and angry that she was being left unsupported. My offer of counselling for her mother was spurned despite my belief that it was likely to help her cope. So we left behind an angry daughter and a confused mother and took with us a definite feeling of inadequacy.

The Story Continues...

Six months later I received a call from a very friendly sounding Rosa saying her mother had finally agreed to come for counselling. I am constantly surprised at my failure to read my client accurately. I could have sworn that Rosa had totally dismissed the very idea of counselling yet here she was, eager for it to happen. "Will you be coming, too?" I asked. "No, my father will come with her" she surprisingly replied. His recovery had been a minor medical miracle.

Two weeks later, as arranged, I walked into the clinic waiting room where Ralph and Martha were seated. Maybe it was something about Ralph, dressed in a large grey herringbone overcoat, brilliant white trainers and a white peaked hat, that hinted at mischief and as my greeting formed I hoped I had read him correctly, otherwise it was definitely going to be the wrong thing to say: "You must be Ralph" I said, holding out my hand, "And I thought you were dead!" Ralph gave a large laugh, jumped to his feet and performed a little jig saying, "But as you see I'm very much alive!" Martha looked on with resigned amusement.

It was the beginning of a short and influential relationship.

"I hear you are an artist?" I asked Ralph as we settled into our seats. "What kind of artist?"

"I'm what we call a minimalist, but it's a bit of a dirty word these days," he replied.

"Me, too" I responded. "And it's a bit of a dirty word in therapy as well!"

This was a genuine question. Despite many concerted efforts, reading books and going to galleries, I had never found a way to look at abstract art with anything other than incurious bewilderment. I was a Philistine and this was too good a chance to pass up. Here was a horse's mouth from which I might learn:

"So what does minimalism mean in art?" I asked.

"We were all trying to get behind and beneath, get to the true essence of colour and form, reducing things to their bare essentials," began Ralph, "then in the late 60s, early 70s we all, one by one, painted ourselves off the canvass with our whites on white and blacks on black. After that there was nowhere to go so many of us stopped painting. I didn't paint for sixteen years."

"But you're painting again now?"

"Yes, for a couple of years. In fact I was working on a canvass when the stroke hit me so I'm back to that now." Ralph went on to describe how he had painted a blue wash on a large canvass, then applied "layer upon layer upon layer of glaze," added a square of blue, more layers of glaze eventually leaving a number of squares set in a deep glaze "So when it's finished you should be able to take a walk inside." Having concluded, Ralph waving his hand in an elegant spiral. It was a mesmerising description.

As was Martha's. Asked to imagine a "tomorrow" in which she had all the memory physically available to her, Martha began: "Well, the first thing will be that I remember Rosa is coming to take me Christmas shopping." Ralph's jaw dropped as he whispered, "She is, too!" Martha went on to describe the shock, relief and pleasure that she would see on her daughter's face when she arrived to find her mother ready and waiting. The description continued. They were going to take the bus into town because parking would be a problem and their first stop would be Liberty's where they would take morning coffee. Martha hoped her daughter would not dawdle too long after that because she was keen to get to Selfridges by lunchtime ("The Selfridge Hotel does such a good lunch!"). They planned to end the day in Harrods where Rosa was going to order her Christmas turkey. Ralph looked on in sheer amazement at his wife's lucid and totally accurate description of tomorrow's plan.

I then asked Ralph to describe what he would see different on Martha's return if her memory was still with her. She would remember where she had been, she would know what she had bought and for whom and he would feel that he had his wife back. Almost as an afterthought he went on to say, "But the thing that would really clinch it for me would be if she knew what was in the freezer without

having to look!" It is not part of my usual practice to give advice or claim superior knowledge to my clients but before I could stop myself I cried, "Ralph! Nobody knows what's in the freezer without having to look!" Ralph was intrigued by this statement but accepting my expertise, waved his hand at the camera recording this meeting and called out, "Please strike my last statement from the record!"

Two weeks later Ralph and Martha came for their second appointment. Ralph jumped to attention as I came into the waiting room and declaring himself to be still alive. He went on to say that they had not come for more therapy but just to thank me which they wanted to do in person. I was touched and asked what were they thanking me for.

"We don't know" said Ralph. "We can't tell if she's regained her memory or if we've just stopped worrying about her losing it! Either way it's no longer a bother, so thank you!"

It was the last I saw of Ralph

A few weeks later I was teaching in Newcastle where the Laing Gallery had an exhibition of abstract art. For the first time in my life I went alone to an exhibition and for the first time enjoyed myself. Somehow I had found a way, not to understand but to look. There was a postcard of one of the paintings, a yellow on yellow and I sent it to Ralph with my thanks for his tuition and a joke I had been told about the minimalist musician, Philip Glass:

Knock, knock.

Who's there?

Knock, knock.

Who's there?

Knock, knock.

Who's there?

A few weeks later I received a card from Ralph with an equally obscure joke.

A year went by and I was reminded once again of Ralph while reading a very moving and minimalist account by Bruce Chatwin (1989) of his meeting in 1979 with Nadezhda Mandelstam, an impoverished, bed-ridden Russian, who he also described as "one of the most powerful women in the world." In two pages (pp. 83-85) he brought his whole afternoon in her cramped, stale-smelling room alive as she talked of literature and art. As he left she asked Chatwin to straighten the painting on the wall by her bed. "The painting was all white, white on white . . . 'Weisberg,' she said. 'He is our best painter. Perhaps that's all we can do today in Russia? Paint whiteness!'" I sent the story to Ralph and he sent me a quote from the French minimalist philosopher, Derrida.

Another year or so and I was thinking of Ralph again. I had just opened with Evan George and Harvey Ratner our first clinic — the Brief Therapy Practice, which later became 'BRIEF' — with its unadorned white walls and was thinking about contacting Ralph with a view to buying a painting from him. A few days later I had a call from Rosa. She had tracked me down to let me know Ralph had died. Apparently, according to his papers, our meeting and correspondence had been as important to Ralph as it was to me and she wanted me to know how her parents had enjoyed an Indian Summer in their last few years together. When I told Rosa of my hope to hang one of Ralph's paintings in the clinic, she said I was very welcome to choose one. In return, she asked for a copy of the videotape I had made of our meeting. This raised a confidentiality issue as Martha would need to give permission. Though she could not remember our meetings, we decided that if she watched the tape she could then give her consent, or not. She agreed to a joint viewing, and a few weeks later we all three met and watched the tape together. Whatever Martha and Ralph had been through together, and there were sufficient hints that their relationship had not been a bed of roses, in this video they were as close to the perfect couple as could be on this earth. All three of us wept

throughout the whole hour. Promising to make a copy of the tape, I arranged to visit Rosa to choose a painting. At the time, I could not bring myself to copy the tape; it seemed an original was the only fair exchange. And I knew which original I wanted. Visitors to BRIEF will see on the wall of our training room one of Ralph's last minimalist paintings: a blue on blue.

Two years later I was invited to a retrospective of Ralph's work, hosted brilliantly by Martha. Rosa laughed saying what a pleasure it was to see her mother happy and though she would not remember the event the next day she was living and enjoying her life to the full.

Evolving Minimalism

Ralph continues to influence my work and my life. Perhaps his most precious gift was to help me find a way to share my wife's enjoyment of art. London's Tate Modern is no longer a place of anxious boredom, though it remained so for my greatest mentor, Steve de Shazer. We ate at the seventh floor restaurant, overlooking the River Thames and St. Paul's Cathedral, on one of Steve's visits. Leaving late, the galleries were empty but still open. Steve marched through room after room of the world's best known modern art, eyes straight ahead. When challenged about his own minimalism, he said "It's not the same!" And it isn't.

Harvey Ratner, Evan George, my partners at BRIEF, and I, are not alone in owing a great debt to Steve de Shazer. Though we were able in later years to joke with him that if he did our Diploma course he would fail because we had messed so much with his original ideas, we have stayed true to his version of minimalism: the application of Ockham's Razor to everything we do. de Shazer's (1982, 1985, 1988) early writing and that of the team at the Brief Family Therapy Center in Milwaukee is particularly 'research' oriented. Almost every move was tested for its necessity: if not essential it was dropped. BRIEF have continued this tradition experimenting and over the years have 'dropped' many of solution-focused brief therapy's traditional components (see George, Iveson & Ratner, 1999, 2006; Shennan and Iveson, 2011). However, like Steve before us, we are not attempting Ralph's form of minimalism, we are not attempting to get to any underlying meaning or essential reality. Instead, we discover that each time we successfully remove what turned out to be an unnecessary component of our work a new realisation and new practice emerges. It is an evolving minimalism in which every removal brings into focus something hitherto hidden. And it means that after twenty-five years of working together Evan, Harvey and I can still argue about where on earth we are!

And back to the story

Ralph and Martha were leaving the clinic after their first visit. Seeing them to the door I was whipped by an icy wind as Ralph turned with a protective arm around Martha and pointing at her head with his other hand asked "Have you noticed anything odd about her?" I was not sure where Ralph was going with this and as solution focused brief therapists tend not to focus on oddness I gave a non-committal shrug. "She shakes her head all the time!" he cried, "Can you do anything about that?" It had been difficult not to notice Martha's violent head-shakes every two or three minutes. I once imitated her and gave myself a headache I shall not forget. Martha demurred, "Oh Darling, don't be silly, I've done this all my life!" "Can you?" insisted Ralph. By now I was beginning to shiver so I suggested to Ralph that we talk about it next time. A look of such disappointment crossed his eyes that I relented and asked Martha how she controlled her head-shaking. She said she couldn't, she never had been able to. "What about when you'd look a complete fool or end up bidding a million pounds for a picture?" "Oh well" she laughed, "I know exactly what you mean". "So what do you do then?" I persisted. "Sometimes deep breathing helps. Not all the time though!" "Okay, deep breathing can help – what else helps, even sometimes?" "Counting to ten is another one but that doesn't always work either". By now I was close to hypothermic so I quickly asked them both to look out for all the other ways Martha had been controlling her head-shakes possibly without even realising it.

As Ralph and Martha stepped out of the clinic for the last time two weeks later, Ralph put a protective arm around Martha and pointing at her head with his other hand asked "Have you

noticed anything different about her?" Not being skilled at noticing oddness I wasn't quite sure and gave Ralph a non-committal shrug.

"She hasn't shaken it since we saw you last so thank you for that, too!" "Yes, thank you" said Martha, "It's such a relief!" And as far as I can remember noticing Martha was still not shaking her head five years later.

As for Ralph's seminar on art appreciation, it turned out I already knew what to do but just hadn't realised it. It was a replica of solution-focused brief therapy. Don't go with a 'diagnostic' framework in which you try to understand and explain what is going on; instead go with a sense of curiosity and the belief that if you are prepared to look, if you are prepared to ask questions of yourself and prepared to wonder, you will have an experience: that is the enjoyment, the appreciation of art. And therapy.

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Postscript

20 years later I came across Rosa's phone number in some old papers and was able to send her the story. She was very touched by the memories.