

To the Memory of Iván Böszörményi-Nagy, M.D., One of the Founder of Family Therapy.

“Unlike Freud, who was interested in our inner self and the unconscious world, I was primarily interested in the relationships between human beings,” said Dr. Iván Böszörményi-Nagy, in an interview in 1991. Dr. Böszörményi-Nagy, a psychiatrist and pioneer of family therapy who believed that human health, evolution, and survival were dependant on human relationships and the strength and sincerity of those relationships, died January 28, at his home in Glenside (Philadelphia, USA).

According to Dr. Böszörményi-Nagy, starting with the mother-child relationship there is an invisible yet undeniable connection among family members that exists over generations and even expands over one’s lifetime. His famous book *Invisible Loyalties* (1973), written with Geraldine M. Spark, has influenced generations of family therapists around the world. His discovery that fairness and loyalty were the main ingredients that permitted the successful survival of the family over the course of generations. Thus, there is no escape from our web of connections, even if we traveled to the other side of the world. For Dr. Böszörményi-Nagy, the balance of our important connections depends on our ability to pass on and appreciate how people care about us. If we do not “return” this caring, or if we give too much of it, it will create an unjust relationship (entitlement) which could – even across generations – not only damage and poison our relationships, but also harm our health and potentially even threaten our existence.

This dimension of our existence, which Böszörményi-Nagy called the ethical dimension of relationship, is not based on Judeo-Christian principles or simply on the principle of basic social exchange of give and take. Rather, the ethical dimension of human relationships originates and is fundamentally connected to human existence. Dr. Böszörményi-Nagy’s master theory, the so-called contextual family therapy, was the foundation for his six books and some 80 articles, many of which have been widely read and translated into a number of languages.

Böszörményi-Nagy believed that his theory applied to all relationships: to couples and family relations, as well as to small communities and societies as a whole. As early as in the 1980s, Dr. Böszörményi-Nagy projected some of the unjust processes that would affect our planet. He expressed his deep concern that by polluting the earth, we exhaust our future, meaning that as human beings we are not being conscious of our responsibilities to future generations. It is from this unfair inner relationship that relationship conflicts are reproduced. So if we exhaust our energy reserves, and we do not take into consideration global warming and pursue killings based on principles of “eye for an eye,” Böszörményi-Nagy warned that we would negatively affect future generations and cause irreversible harm.

To bring relationships into balance again – aka achieve conflict resolution – which Böszörményi-Nagy called healing therapy process, there need to be honest dialoge

between family members and between generations. In general, this healing process requires the compromise of individual self-interest, the acknowledgement and respect of each other, and the re-establishment of deserved trust.

At the time Iván Böszörményi-Nagy left Hungary in 1948, he was a teaching assistant at the University of Budapest Neuroscience Clinic. He first settled in Salzburg, Austria, and worked for the United Nations International Refugee Organization. In 1950 he moved to Chicago, where he completed his medical residency and researched the biochemical origins of schizophrenia. In 1957, Dr. Böszörményi-Nagy took a position at the Eastern Pennsylvania Psychiatric Institute in Philadelphia, where he studied the connection between family relations and schizophrenia. The department served as a schizophrenia treatment facility, and for a while, in the 1960s, was the largest family therapy clinic in the U.S., treating hundreds of families and training large number of therapists coming from all over USA and from other parts of the Globe. He eventually ended up leading the family therapy department at the Institute for over 20 years.

Between 1974 and 1999, Dr. Böszörményi-Nagy served as chief professor of the family therapy department at Hahnemann University, now Drexel, and from his retirement in 1999 and on, he served as an emeritus professor. He was the founder of the university's graduate program in Marriage and Family Therapy. Dr. Böszörményi-Nagy was a founding member of the American Family Therapy Academy (the former American Family Therapy Association) and founded the Institute for Contextual Growth, a private family clinic in Ambler, Pa., now run by his wife, Catherine Ducommun-Nagy, M.D.

Dr. Boszormenyi-Nagy received numerous honors in the US and internationally. He received the Daniel Blain award and the Life Time Achievement Award granted by the Philadelphia Psychiatric Association. He also received the American Family Therapy Association award for Distinguished Achievements in Family Therapy and the Distinguished Professional Contribution to Family Therapy Award from the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy. He received the Award for Outstanding Contribution to the Field of Family Therapy from the European Family Therapy Association of which he was an honorary member, he got this award during the EFTA Budapest Conference, in 2001.

Dr. Boszormenyi-Nagy was also an Honorary Doctor of the faculty of Medicine of the University of Bern Switzerland and received a Special Recognition Award from the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo for this contribution to family therapy.

Dr. Böszörményi-Nagy never broke off his connection with his motherland, Hungary. He helped and encouraged the development of Hungarian psychotherapy and family therapy. From 1978, he did workshops and talks in Hungary pro bono. Though he was given a number of major awards, his personal favorite was the Hungarian Republic Gold Medal, which he received in 2000 on his eightieth birthday from Dr. Árpád Göncz, the president of Hungary.

By the end of this memoir let me allow some personal remarks. When I met him first time in 1980 in Budapest, he was influenced and admire me as a young doctor to start studying family therapy, and later I became family therapist. He was not only one of my tutor, but during the years we became colleagues and friends, on the contrary of the age difference between us. We had several long telephone discussions about the current trends in family therapy, and about the important event going around the world. I never forget those conversations after September 11th, 2001 in which he tried to think about the possible mediation between cultures and religions, using the contextual philosophy. He suggested his approach for conflict resolution to UN. On the contrary of his Parkinson disease, his thinking was slow, but very clear and always future focused.

It was a great honour and experience to organise and to participate all his activities in Hungary in the last 27 years. He influenced a lot of Hungarian colleagues and trainees, including Mária Koltai, Gyula Kapusi, Gábor Kelemen, Béla Buda, János Fűredi, Ilona Székely, András Stark, Miklós Kovács (just mentioned a few) who are the leaders of the field in our country.

Our loyalty for him to continue the work on of his extraordinary discoveries. We can do it in an international collaboration only. I would like to join to his widow, Catherine Ducommun-Nagy, M.D. who works very hard to get together the contextual therapists around the world. One of the upcoming events will be the next EFTA Conference in Glasgow, in 2007, where we plan to organise a workshop for contextual therapists and colleagues who are interested in the future of this approach.

Tamás Kurimay