

Belonging: Chapter 2

Shortly after the wonderful Mrs. Dr. Minuchin (aka Pat) passed away, Salvador Minuchin started on a journey that he titled, simply, “Belonging”. If you haven’t seen the beautiful video tribute he completed with his daughter, Jeannie, I highly recommend it. It’s available through the archives he completed last year. He was grieving, and he was processing that grieving by continuing to assess his style of therapy.

Many of you may not be aware but I had the privilege of working with Dr. Minuchin for the past 8 years. And his lesson of belonging never resonated more than it does today. According to Dr. Minuchin, being and belonging have a Janis face – we are always seeing both sides of the coin – sometimes privileging one over the other. If we recognize our fundamental desire is to connect with ourselves as well as with those we love it opens so much more. It's deeper than simply communicating... It's belonging.

To me, Dr. Minuchin was a mentor as well as a paternal figure. We often talked about death since it was a reality for him but a small part of me believed him when he jokingly told me a few months ago that he had decided to live forever. His mind remained active and his desire to develop therapists was a passion to his last days.

I started working with Dr. Minuchin purely by happenstance. Of all things he appreciated my ability to transcribe videos into text. What started as a simple project of one video turned into 2, then 4, then he decided to write a book, and more. He slowly allowed me to be part of his tribe – affording me the opportunity to spend time - both as a student as well as a companion. He allowed me to belong.

When I first met Dr. Minuchin and his wife it was like I was given an honorary set of grandparents. Saturday lunches were a norm and we had opportunities to learn and laugh with each other.... One thing that stands out to me is that I taught them how to use their iphones and practiced using Skype. What a comical mistake! I started getting Skype and facetime calls on a regular basis at very inconvenient times as well as random text messages asking me if I was eating and taking care of myself! For anyone curious, Dr. Minuchin flat out REFUSED to even attempt to understand text messaging but I did eventually get him comfortable taking selfies!

For those who never had the experience of working with Dr. Minuchin he embraced experiential learning. He wanted to see videos, to see a therapist in action. His preferred method of instruction: metaphors, challenges, and coordination of family members shifting throughout the room... all used to enhance experiential learning – for both clients and clinicians. If asked a question there were two ways he would approach it: philosophically or with limited words so you would need to explore for more. It was on each person to figure out how his answer could be applied.

Supervision during my time with Dr. Minuchin held several different faces. What started as working with 12 students for a semester in the Master's program progressed to working with registered interns and finally to working with licensed therapists. Dr. Minuchin invited me as a participant in all of these stages. What started first as me sitting as a wallflower during sessions with other students transcended into me recommending interns and therapists for participation.

As a master's student Dr. Minuchin reminded me to embrace my biases. What will my Indian upbringing make me assume of my clients? As an intern, he challenged my timidity in the therapy room and pushed me to use my "American" side. As a therapist he pushed me to do more... I am still too polite.

When it came to language, Dr. Minuchin entrusted me to be his voice to the public. For those who believe they "know" what Minuchin would say in a certain situation we can debate.... I have been directly connected to most of the things he has written in the last several years, but it was only in the last 6 months I could even "partially predict" what he was going to say.... I realized this long ago because Dr. Minuchin speaks many languages. And has a healthy respect for words. His words are deliberate, they are chosen. It was a beautiful thing to watch.... I occasionally use words to fill in blank spaces. He always used words consciously. What I would say in 3 sentences, he could say in one. I use words to decorate. He used words for purpose.

From seeing his respect for words I have learned to appreciate Dr. Minuchin's use of metaphors. I see this now because the word "table" is different in many languages.... because the word "love" means something different to each person.... He honored that each person relates to words differently and metaphors allow them to self-identify rather than being labeled.... So instead of saying "the wife watches the child too closely." He would say "who's a better detective? You or your spouse?" He further gave them choices so the buy-in is stronger. "Are you a sheriff or a defense attorney?" No labeling... You choose which you are. Metaphors and choices.... Clients were able to connect – and belong – to how they self-identified.

As his “assistant” Dr. Minuchin included me in opportunities that gave a rare perspective on the world of family therapy. I have been on video conference presentations with China and Italy. I have coordinated presentations in Mexico. I have seen him supervise classes across the country. I was able to watch “backstage” as he conducted presentations with audiences from 50 to 5,000+. He approached each of these events with the same commitment to clearly identifying what his message would be. He was meticulous. He would write his thoughts on paper and then have me type them and revise them with handwritten notes and eventually be able to give versions of it “off script” to his audience. It appeared effortless but required so much of him.

One of the best parts of working with Dr. Minuchin was observing his self-reflection. We are aware of his “reputation” in textbooks, with other therapists, and in the mainstream. But what you may not realize is that he would always step back and evaluate what was accomplished... How was that interaction? was that email too curt? What was the audience response? Did I choose the right video to present? How did the therapist respond to challenge? It was endearing to see him so concerned, so vulnerable, and it made me respect him that much more. He was evolving. He would even apologize to me after supervision if he felt he was too harsh with me (which, by the way he NEVER was).

Two days before we had to say goodbye he asked me why I was so loyal to him. He made me cry. I was thinking the same thing about him. He thanked me for loving him.

I’m very private about our time together because I took seriously the responsibility of his work and our bond was special to me. It’s hard to put into words what I’m feeling. My years with him is only 1/10 of his life and only a fraction of what he has accomplished. He has quite

the reputation from his work in the early years and many may, or may not, be aware of how his approaches have tempered over time as he himself did. I saw a softer side of him that you don't read about in textbooks and a vulnerable side that many forget exist in our iconic role models. I was blessed to experience the softer and more patient Minuchin who still pushed and still made you uncomfortable but I also was blessed with the opportunity to watch HIM process and continue to evolve.... I'm so thankful to have been blessed with his influence and his presence in my life.

He gave me the best gift I could ever ask for. He gave me a place to belong.

If you take nothing else away from my words today, simply remember this.... Salvador Minuchin, the creator of Structural Family Therapy, at 96, was still learning. He was still molding his perspective of the world and his approach to therapy. He continued to change. It is my hope we will always push ourselves to do the same.