



## Foreword

Recently a letter arrived at the Avanta office addressed to Virginia Satir. It was written by a woman who had discovered Virginia through her book, *The New Peoplemaking*. In the letter, this woman described the pain that had troubled her and her family for many years: suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, and the estrangement of family members. She wrote with great appreciation for Virginia's work, which had showed her, as she put it, how to begin dusting off the neglected pieces of the unsolved puzzle of her life and endeavor to put them together. Letters like this are rare but sometimes appear, reminding us of Virginia's continuing impact on many people through her work. More common are the letters, calls, and e-mails we receive asking for information about Virginia's life. People who encounter her work through books, videos, and workshops seem to have a common desire to know more about the life that generated so many powerful and useful ideas.

The writing of this biography, then, has emerged from the correspondence and requests that have crossed my desk, pushing and pressing me to realize that, as hungry as people are for the teachings of Virginia Satir, they are also eager to establish some kind of personal connection with her. My personal connection is what I have to share with you. I met Virginia in 1977, when she founded Avanta, a non-profit organization dedicated to training and supporting people "to be more fully human." For several years I worked with her as a trainer at Process Community, a month-long seminar for personal and professional growth. Since 1993, I have been the Executive Director of Avanta, which continues to grow and work with other organizations to promote the teachings of Virginia Satir by training and connecting counselors and participating in service projects worldwide.

When Virginia died, she left over 700 pages of hand-written and typed notes. I have read and re-read these notes in an effort to learn more about her and how she thought of the future. The notes and my own personal connection with Virginia challenged each other, lent clarity to one another, and even introduced new spaces of uncertainty about Virginia's life. Together with her work, others who knew her, interviews she gave, and books written by and about her, they have formed this biography. It is my hope that what you are about to read will be received as useful and insightful, though far from a complete representation of Virginia's life and work.

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Burien, Washington  
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## Snapshots of Virginia

When Virginia Satir talked about her life and who she was, it was usually to make a point in her teaching. This was because she genuinely enjoyed talking about herself and incorporated this into what she was doing most often: working. Her work was such an integral part of her life that inevitably she acted as if the two were one. Virginia shared herself and her stories with great feeling and enthusiasm. In her book *Your Many Faces* Virginia spoke of the diverse makeup of human beings, emphasizing the importance of accepting *all* of our diverse characteristics as who we are. She taught that by embracing what we see as our negative traits, we can effect transformation. To illustrate this point, Virginia shared her characteristics, associating them with historical and fictional figures. This is how she explained it:



When I divide these adjectives into positive and negative, the positive list comes out compassionate, sexy, wise, loving and funny, all faces I would be proud to claim to the outside world. The adjectives selfish, overburdened, and stubborn would be those faces that I would label negative. Formerly, before I understood what I know now, I would try to banish all traces of those characteristics I considered negative.

What I have learned is there is a germ of usefulness in each negative part as well as a germ of destruction in each positive part...

Since all of these parts reside in me, then I can say that inside me I have my Eleanor Roosevelt, my Marlene Dietrich, my King Henry VIII, my Old Woman in the Shoe, my Aristotle, my Jesus Christ, my Groucho Marx and my Mary, Mary Quite Contrary. (*Your Many Faces* 81)

Virginia's openness about herself demonstrated a profound awareness that how people perceive and represent themselves affects how others see them. Thus, Virginia endeared herself to others by first being endeared to herself. In addition to talking about her many "parts," Virginia also spoke about her height as an important characteristic. She claimed that her five feet and ten inches allowed her to see the world: "I was this size by the time I was ten. I haven't grown any since I was ten years old. That put me in a place where I never got into competitiveness; rather, I felt free to observe anything that went along" (Russell 4). Virginia's awareness of her own height combined with her emphasis on eye contact in a creative way. Often, when working with trainees, couples, or children and adults, Virginia would use a stool or chair to bring two people to the same eye level. This way, she argued, the taller person was no longer in a position of power over the shorter person, so the two were better able to communicate.

Virginia's efforts to bring people to the same eye level reflects that in some ways her height had a more complex effect on her than just enabling her to see the world.

I don't think that I move-in and take over people at all. I think I feel free to look at whatever I want to look at with confidence. And it's possible to understand.

You see, that's another piece of it. I don't get shut out. I think that's why I could take people that nobody else would have anything to do with, because they were so high risk. They would say, Oh no, no one can do that-and wonderfully work with them.

Persistent, I am not really persistent in one way. I just know that it will happen; I don't have to be persistent. I just move until it happens. I am not putting energy in there; I just know it will happen. It's, "which door should I open now? Which piece should be lifted up now? And, where can we go in this little piece"? It's more like a puzzle and a detective story than it is about working against the tide. And, that I also got very early. That's been with me all my life. (Russell 4)

In the above quote we see Virginia speaking with self-affirmation and confidence about her work. She intended her faith in her work to be contagious, to seep out of the page, or whatever medium she was using, and into the heart of her audience. In her revision of *Peoplemaking* she wrote,

*The New Peoplemaking* is one of my efforts to make a positive difference toward enabling congruent adults. Using many experiences with families all over the world, I have written this book to support, emphasize, educate, and empower the family. We know there are better ways to deal with ourselves and each other. We have only to put them into practice. Each of us who does contributes toward a stronger, more positive world for all of us.

Each of us can make a difference; each of us is needed. The difference we can make begins when we develop high self-esteem as individuals. A big hope I have for this book is that it will help each of us empower and commit ourselves to congruence. Our congruent experiences and modeling will lead to creative ways to understand each other, care for ourselves and each other, and give our children a sturdy foundation from which they can develop strength and wholeness. (X)

### Family of Origin

Virginia emphasized the importance of family history and its influence on people's lives, and she often used her own family background to illustrate certain points in her teaching. Virginia's grandparents on both sides were born in Germany between 1870 and 1875. According to Virginia, both of her grandmothers came from a privileged socioeconomic class and married working-class men. Virginia later speculated that her grandparents left Germany in disgrace for what was then regarded as an unacceptable breach of social custom. Raised in a climate of negative feelings toward Germans-not the least of which came from her own mother,



*Virginia and her family: Ray, Edie, Russ, Virginia, Rodger, Minnie, Oscar*

who insisted that the worst men in the world were German-Virginia resented her heritage for quite some time. She said, "I had a lot between me and my heritage, and I wouldn't even go to Germany for many years. But, I have been going now since 1975, and this last time I really felt that I had come to my homeland" (Russell 2).

Virginia's father, Oscar Alfred Reinnard Pagenkopf, was the youngest of 13 children.

He was a farmer and had very little formal education. Virginia remembered, "I think my father always felt a little cheated because of that" (King 15). This feeling of having been cheated fit into a larger framework of low self-esteem that Virginia ascribed to her father, who was an alcoholic. Even so, she learned a great deal from her father's strengths, especially the importance of honesty.

Her mother, Minnie Happe Pagenkopf, came from a family of 7 children. Virginia remembered her mother as a person who was always looking for ways to fix things that were wrong. "I think that is probably one of the reasons I am successful with people who nobody else wanted to have anything to do with. I saw the potential. She taught me that" (King 17). Minnie felt education was very important, so much that she insisted the family move to the city when Virginia, the eldest, started high school in 1929.



*Virginia at 3 with her mother.*

Besides her parents' differences in education, there were also religious differences between them. When Virginia was about five years old, she had appendicitis. Her mother, a Christian Scientist, did not want to take Virginia to the doctor. Her father waited, but seeing that Virginia did not improve, he finally took her to the hospital. Virginia's appendix had ruptured. She was very ill and stayed in the hospital for several months. Despite this unfortunate experience, Virginia talked about her years growing up as good ones. She enjoyed the farm and the animals. She grew up learning a sense of ethics and values from her parents and feeling support from them.

Virginia was born on June 26, 1916 on her parents' farm in Neillsville, Wisconsin. She was followed 18 months later by twins: Russell and Roger. After the twins came Edith in 1921 and then Ray, the baby, in 1923. As the eldest of five, Virginia felt a sense of responsibility for her siblings, and she talked about taking care of them during their years growing up on the farm.

The farm provided Virginia with numerous illustrations to use in teaching. One such story was that of an old cast-iron pot, which she used as a metaphor for self-esteem:

When I was a little girl, I lived on a farm in Wisconsin. On our back porch was a huge black iron pot, which had lovely rounded sides and stood on three legs. My mother made her own soap, so for part of the year the pot was filled with soap. *(The New Peoplemaking 20)*



*Virginia with the twins.*

She explained other uses for the pot.

[A]t other times, my father used it to store manure for my mother's flower beds. We came to call it the "3-S pot." Anyone who wanted to use the pot faced two questions: What is the pot now full of, and how full is it?

Long afterward, when people told me about themselves-whether they felt full, empty, dirty, or even "cracked" I thought of that old pot. One day many years ago, a family was sitting in my office struggling to find words to tell each other how they felt about themselves. I remembered the black pot and told them the story. Soon the members of the family were talking about their individual "pots", whether they contained feelings of worth or of guilt, shame, or uselessness. They told me later how useful this metaphor was to them. (20-21)

## Education

Virginia described herself as someone who was always very curious about what took place around her. Having taught herself to read by age three, she had read all the books in the school library by the time she was nine. "When I was five," she wrote, "I decided that when I grew up I'd be a 'children's detective on parents.' I didn't quite know what I would look for, but I realized a lot went on in families that didn't meet the eye. There were a lot of puzzles I did not know how to understand" (*The New Peoplemaking* 1). She continued through her life with this thirst for knowledge, always wondering what was possible, and pursuing the possibilities she found.

When she died, her personal library had over 3,000 books. Besides the many books about psychology & human behavior there were books, pamphlets, and audiocassettes on topics ranging from music and art to religion, the world, and its people.

Virginia never stopped learning and was always looking for answers. In 1988 she wrote, "Now, many years later, after working with some thousands of families, I find there are still a lot of puzzles. I have learned from my work, and learning opens up new possibilities and new directions for discovery" (*The New Peoplemaking* 2).

Formal schooling for Virginia began in a consolidated one-room school. "There were eighteen kids in the class and we made our own pea soup at lunch time" (Russell 4). She spoke of the seven years spent there as a time when she learned easily and enjoyed herself. When it came time for Virginia to go to high school, the Pagenkopfs relocated to Milwaukee. Virginia enrolled at South Division High School, where her love of knowledge continued to develop. Years later, "Ginger" as she is called in her senior annual, still remembered one teacher in particular, Estelle Stone. In addition to being a good geometry teacher, Ms. Stone taught Virginia that she could use any opportunity, even if something went wrong, as an opportunity to learn (5).

Attending high school during the depression meant that Virginia had to work while going to school. She also took as many credits as she could, and finished high school in 1932 just before she turned 16 (Russell 5). Rearing to go to college however she could, Virginia set her sights on the Milwaukee State Teachers College (now University of Wisconsin), which she believed to be one of the best schools in Milwaukee.

I went to Milwaukee State Teacher's College to see the registrar of admissions. I will never forget him. I showed him my diploma and told him I wanted to

register as a college student. He said to me, "Well, how much money do you have?" I said, "I've got three dollars." He said, "How are you going to go to college on that?" I replied, "Well, I always can do what I am going to do." He registered me, and when I left, he called my mother and told her, "Your daughter is here and she has only three dollars in her pocket and I have already registered her in school. What about that?" My mother said, "Look, if Virginia says she's going to do it, she will do it." (King 20)

Virginia worked diligently both in and out of college to make enough money for tuition, books, and everyday expenses. She worked for the Work Projects Administration (WPA) and Gimbel's department store. On weekends she took care of children. Despite her busy schedule, Virginia still managed to do very well in college. One sociology professor, Alma Allison, encouraged Virginia's efforts outside the classroom, because she believed that education benefited from experience.

One very important experience for Virginia was working at the Abraham Lincoln House (ALH), a community center for African-Americans. Virginia was drawn to ALH because she wanted to work with and learn from people who were different from her. She began her work there as a second-year student and stayed until she graduated from the Teacher's College. She explained her experience to Laurel King this way:

I had not met any black people where I was. I didn't know them from anything. So, I said, I wanted to do that. I started out working there the second year I was in college and I stayed all the rest of the years. I did all kinds of stuff there. I started a nursery school; I did a play group; I did a dramatic group with young adolescents. Some of them were older than I was. (Russell 6)



Through her work at the Abraham Lincoln House Virginia had several experiences that opened her eyes to the reality of racism. She began to see the prejudice and harassment that black people confronted on a daily basis.

Virginia finished third in her class at the Milwaukee State Teacher's College in 1936 with a B.A. in Education.

### Teaching Career

Virginia's first job after college was in Williams Bay, Wisconsin, as a public school teacher. Though she said the climate there as "rigid" and "reactionary" (Russell 7) for her taste, Virginia was nonetheless taken with her pupils. She was always interested in the family lives of her students. In fact, not long into her career as a teacher, she began to go home with her students to visit with and solicit support from their parents. It was here, perhaps, that Virginia's idea of healing the family was born: "If we can heal the family," she said, "we can heal the world" (Laign 20). After one year of teaching in Williams Bay, she became the school

principal for a year.

Completing her tenure in Williams Bay, Virginia realized her high school ambition of being a traveling teacher. Her career took her to Ann Arbor, Shreveport, St. Louis, and Miami (Russell, King). The more she taught, the more she learned about her students and their families: "I realized there were a lot of things that needed to be understood that I didn't understand and that's when I decided to find some other place to get education. Somehow I happened on social work school. Someone told me about it; I didn't remember who that was" (Russell 10).

## Marriage & Children

Virginia started graduate school in the summer of 1937 at Northwestern University in Chicago and married Gordon Rodgers in December, 1941. She described the marriage as a romantic war marriage. They met at the train station when Gordon was a young soldier on leave, and they were together only a few months before he went back to the war. Early in the marriage, Virginia had an ectopic pregnancy that resulted in a hysterectomy. While her husband was away at the war, Virginia pursued her studies, finishing the coursework for her master's degree at the University of Chicago in 1943 and, in 1948, her thesis. Also at this time, Virginia began working with two young women, Mary and Ruth, whom she later adopted.

According to Virginia, when Gordon returned from the war, he and Virginia both discovered that they had grown too far apart to resume a healthy marriage. They divorced in 1949. Virginia's second marriage, to Norman Satir, lasted from 1951 to 1957. It was during this second marriage that Virginia adopted Mary and Ruth as adults. Though her reasons for adopting them remain somewhat unclear, we can speculate that it was partly out of compassion and partly because Virginia could not have children of her own. Another factor may also have been an effort to save her marriage to Norman. The dedication of Virginia's book *The New People Making* (1988) honors her adopted daughters: "To my daughters, Mary & Ruth and their children Tina, Barry, Angela, Scott, Judie, John, and Michael, who helped to texture me."

It may be difficult to understand why someone so successful in helping others with their own relationships did not find herself in a life-long partnership. Virginia's own words should suffice to explain her marriages and divorces:



*Virginia and Norman.*



*Virginia and Gordon on their wedding day.*

Had I known back then what I know today, we would have had a lot of different things happening. But I didn't know. You always look back with hindsight, and hindsight is wonderful for writing Ph.D. papers, but not very good for life. (King 37)

I have often thought had there been somebody



like me around, something might have been able to be done. I also think I don't see how I could have done what I've done in the world had I been married. And when I decided-because I've been on the verge of marriage many times-I said no, because if I wanted to roam the globe like I did, it wouldn't be fair. It wouldn't be fair to me, it wouldn't be fair to the people. At the point, I really feel it was a kind of destiny because I've been able to get to places. There are some people in the world who have other jobs to do. (Blitzer 39)

## **Graduate School**

Because she was still teaching when she began her graduate studies at Northwestern, Virginia went to school three summers before she enrolled full-time at The University of Chicago School of Social Services Administration. This was just shortly after her first husband, Gordon, had left for the war.

While at the University of Chicago, Virginia suffered some hard academic knocks. She got her first "D" ever on a paper, and a professor actually told her, "you are obviously not cut out to be a social worker." Virginia explained the negative reactions she received there on the basis of the school's not wanting a married woman in its program, much less a married woman who was not "pledged to the traditional way of doing things" (Russell 11). She left school for a quarter but returned with renewed vigor. Undaunted, Virginia accepted what the school thought was a sufficiently awful placement to discourage her from pursuing her studies. She turned that placement at the Chicago Home for Girls into an extraordinary building experience, demonstrating that she could make the best of a difficult situation with little to no supervision or help. She finished her studies in 1943, but did not get her degree until finishing her thesis in 1948.

In 1975, Virginia's power to overcome and transform hardship was publicly recognized by the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration Alumni, who awarded her a "Gold Medal" for service to humankind. As Virginia related the experience,

When I came to get the award, I said, I was privileged about getting this award because it meant something to me. But then I said, I can't understand it. I came to the University of Chicago with stars in my eyes when I was a student and I found that it offered the same old things I had received at other institutions. And I said to myself, when I grow up I am going to do this differently. And you know, I got a standing ovation. (Russell 12)

## **Virginia's Career in Therapy**

As with her philosophical ideas, it is difficult to catalog everything Virginia accomplished during her career from 1936 to 1988. She began as an ambitious teacher and developed into a well-known international trainer, offering day-long and month-long workshops the world over.

After graduate school, Virginia entered private practice in social work and met with her first family in 1951. When she spoke of this meeting, she remembered learning the importance of seeing families as the best way to get the whole picture. By 1955 she was working with Dr. Calmest Gyros at the Illinois Psychiatric Institute, spreading the idea of working not just with patients but with their families as well.

Virginia enjoyed great success as a therapist in private practice and as a consultant to schools and other agencies. Her great capacity for working with other people, even the most difficult people, was noticed by many.

Virginia moved to California, where together with Don Jackson and Jules Riskin, she founded the Mental Health Research Institute in Menlo Park. In 1962, a grant from NIMH allowed MHRI to start the first-ever formal family therapy training program, under Virginia's direction. Jules Riskin recalls,

*She was extremely creative, forceful, and charismatic. She was gifted in developing new ideas but not interested in the details of doing research. She was an inspirer. I had my first experience in family therapy working as a co-therapist with Virginia. The experience was some-what like, although I've never done it, sitting on the outside of a fast moving jet airplane. It was quite thrilling.*

In 1964 Virginia started to visit Esalen Institute, in Big Sur, California. She was excited about the learning and working opportunities there, which included meditation and bodywork, and felt free to discover and try new things and ideas. She became one of the first Directors of Training, overseeing the Human Potential Development Programs.

### **Virginia's Philosophy**

Of all aspects of Virginia Satir's life, perhaps the hardest to represent adequately is her teaching. Thankfully, the many books written by and about her provide a great deal of valuable insight. At the core of Virginia's philosophy was a profound respect for human life and the potential of each person:

Human beings are a marvel, also a treasure, and indeed a miracle. My approach, the Human Process Validation Model is based on the premise that all we manifest at any point in time represents what we have learned, consciously, implicitly, cellularly. Our behavior reflects what we have learned. Learning is the basis of behavior. To change behavior, we need to have new learning. To accomplish new learning, we need a motive, a purpose, a nurturing context, and a trust in something from the outside to help us. (Satir Notes)

For further information on Virginia's teachings, refer to Johanna Schwab's "A Bare-Bones Overview" and Sharon Loesch's "Overview of Satir's Process for Change," both of which are located in the appendix.

### **The Pioneer**

In 1964 Virginia published her first book, *Conjoint Family Therapy*, with her second book, *Peoplemaking*, following in 1972. Her notoriety grew through her books, the training she did, and her teaching methods. She was called a pioneer of family therapy and was increasingly in demand all over the United States and abroad. She became a Diplomate of the Academy of Certified Social Workers and received the Distinguished Service Award from the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy. In 1973 she was granted an honorary doctorate

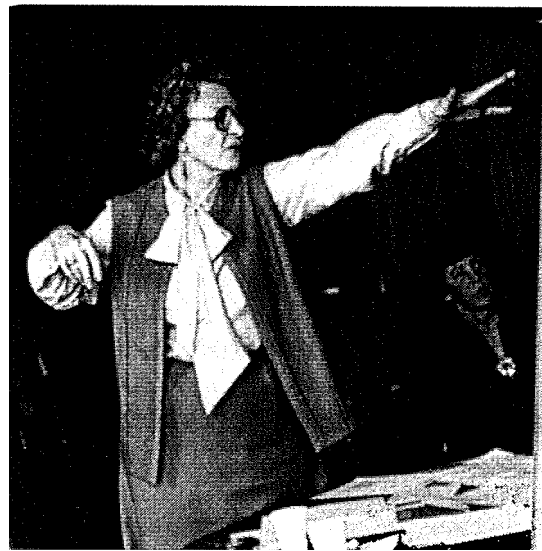
from the University of Wisconsin.

Her workshops and presentations had the power to keep people spellbound, as they learned practical things about themselves, communication, families, and communities. She used humor and made pictures by asking people to stand or sit in a certain way to demonstrate feelings externally. Using these tools of sculpting and role playing, she was able to create a safe place so that people could open themselves to new experiences.

Virginia went on traveling all over the United States, Canada, Mexico, Europe, Central and South America, and Asia. In the late 1980's she was finally able to go to the USSR, where she had wanted to go for a long time.

The importance of networking and support was a central message in Virginia's teaching. She started two groups with this in mind. In 1970 the International Human Learning Resources Network (IHLRN) was established under the name Beautiful People. In 1977 Virginia founded The Avanta Network, later called Avanta, The Virginia Satir Network. She used these networks to develop various opportunities for reaching out to individuals, families, and other mental health workers.

One such project enabled Virginia to unite her love of families with her love of nature in one- and two-week family camps. Today the Satir Family Camps continue Virginia's project of helping families in a wilderness setting. During the 1980s Avanta, with Virginia as the primary presenter, developed and offered Process Communities I and II. These residential, month-long training events held in Crested Butte, Colorado, became the Satir International Summer Institute and continued for several years.



In 1986 Virginia was invited to be a member of the Council of Elders, a select group of world citizens who meet with Nobel Laureates for World Peace. In 1988 Virginia accepted a position on the Steering Committee of the International Family Therapy Association and was appointed to the Advisory Board for the National Council for Self-Esteem.

In closing this chapter on Virginia's career, it seems appropriate to quote from the unedited pages of her last book, *The Third Birth*.

I have been traveling the world now for about forty years. The time has given me the possibility of being in contact with about 30,000 people from different walks of life. Many of these people came because they wanted help with their problems in living, or because they wanted to learn how to better help the people who had these problems.

I have often heard, "Virginia, you have helped me to find so many good things for myself. Won't you write down how you made that happen." I have now heard it so often that I no longer feel that I can continue to ignore the request. I feel a deep humility for the expression of appreciation. I also felt tremendously awed by the immensity of such a task.

Memory flooded me of the hours and hours during days and nights that I had spent with people, preparing them for the many little steps they had to make in order to take the risks that would result in the change they wanted. I remembered the carefulness and patience with which I needed to proceed so that while they were facing the pain and uncertainty that often goes along with making change, there would be no injury to their self-esteem along the way. (3)

The following passage is also from *The Third Birth*, which Virginia was unable to finish. The text is available through Avanta as a desktop publication.

I have chosen this title to focus attention on probably what has been taken for granted. Like all other things taken for granted, attention is not focused on them and their usefulness fades.

Like people take good behavior for granted, and then focus attention on bad behavior which then gets recognition that is out of proportion. People soon forget that there is good behavior, and believe there is only bad behavior.

So it is with this title.

The first birth comes when an ovum and sperm find each other and unite. The second birth is when we came out of the womb, probably one of the most startling changes we will ever undergo. Coming from a place where it is dark, where there are sounds of the internal organs working, where the temperature is even, and where the context is water, to a place where it is light and sounds are completely different, the temperature is most uneven, and the water is found only in the bath, once a day.

The third birth is when we become our own decision-makers. Some people call this being mature. It occurs when we take charge of our life, stand on our own feet. Taking charge of this process of developing our uniqueness and becoming a responsible and responsive human, among our other human beings on this planet, is a vital stage of growth. Everyone who has lived has made the first two births, but relatively few have made the third. (17-18)

### **Virginia's Illness and Death**

Sometimes myths are developed about how a person has died, especially when that person enjoys the kind of widespread admiration that surrounded Virginia. Although I feel that the following is a truthful account, there may be some myth already built into this part of her story.

One of our biggest challenges is our transition from this life to death. It is a difficult time for the person leaving (dying), and for those who are left behind. Virginia's illness and death were no exception. It was a challenge for her, her family and friends, and the many people she had touched throughout her life. Virginia used to say that she would live more than 100 years. She spoke of her 75th birthday celebration and indicated that she would invite Mother Teresa. She died at 72 years of age, which was simply too soon for her and the many she left behind.

At the end of May 1988, Virginia was not feeling well. She attended the Avanta Annual Meeting in June, at which time she complained of stomach pain. In spite of her discomfort, she carried on with her busy plans for that summer. In July she went to Crested Butte, Colorado,

where she was working as Director of Training for the International Satir Summer Institute/ Process Community Modules I & II. In those trainings she worked with Avanta members as trainers, too. Process Community Level II began first, and Virginia's abdominal pains grew severe enough for her to go to the hospital at Grand Junction. The diagnosis was a pancreatic tumor that could be cancerous.

It became clear that she needed treatment, so Virginia left Crested Butte for Palo Alto, accompanied by Avanta member Diana Hall. She was then admitted to Stanford Medical Center. At Stanford Hospital the news was more serious. She had cancer, and it involved the liver as well as the pancreas. Even as ill as she was, it was not easy for her to leave Crested Butte. Since she was there for almost two months every year, Crested Butte had become a kind of second home for Virginia, a place she loved deeply.

Once the diagnosis of cancer was made in Palo Alto, it was clear that Virginia could not return to the training. This was of great concern to her, and she began to make arrangements for the training to continue in Crested Butte without her. Marilyn Peers, Avanta's President from 1987 to 1990, went to California to be with Virginia and discuss what Virginia desired for the future direction of Avanta.

Virginia's treatment options "included chemotherapy and radiation treatment, but these were considered merely palliative. She chose instead to undertake a nutritional approach with healing at home" (*The Satir Model* 328). Several of Virginia's friends came to her home and worked around the clock to be with her and care for her. Others maintained a vigil of prayers and support by mail, phone calls, and phone messages.

Laura Dodson's piece "The Dying Process of a Conscious Woman-Virginia Satir" offers a very insightful and sensitive firsthand account of Virginia's preparation for death. Laura tells of the fears and pain that Virginia shared with her in her last days and also of the ownership that Virginia assumed over her own death. She took charge of her death as she had always taken charge of her life.

In her home, Virginia continued to fight her illness through the nutritional approach: cleansing diets, vitamins, and minerals. By late August the vomiting and other discomforts she was experiencing led her to stop the treatment. She became more restful and quiet. Laura recalls Virginia's words:

"What would you say, Laura, if I said I want to make my transition now?"

Quiet again. So profound words, so profound a moment. We sat quietly again for a couple of minutes. I found myself responding. "Virginia, if that is what you feel is right for you, I will help you." She opened her eyes and the glowing smile I had seen so often on her face was there. Her eyes sparkled, "I am 72, I have lived a good life." We looked into each other's eyes for a time. (183)

Laura continues, "After an hour, I leaned over and asked, 'how do you feel now about your decision?' Softly and assuredly came back, 'it is the only thing that gives me peace.'" (183) Later Virginia shared her decision with the family and friends around her. She also dictated a message to those who were not able to be close to her in person:

*To all my friends, colleagues and family: I send you love. Please support me in my passage to a new life. I have no other way to thank you than this. You have*

*all played a significant part in my development of loving. As a result, my life has been rich and full, so I leave feeling very grateful.*

*Virginia (Dodson 185)*

Virginia's last days seemed to be peaceful. She slept more, talked less, and listened to music. On September 9, 1988, a note came from her family reading,

*To our beloved Ginny, We are gathered together in Flood Park as close to your home as we can get. It is a beautiful afternoon with the birds singing through the trees and your favorite black squirrels running across the lawn.*

*Each of us has voiced our fond memories of things that you have enlightened us with during the past. Some of the memories brought laughter and others a deep heartfelt appreciation for what you have given to us.*

*Your deep concern for all mankind will be shared by your family as well as others. Certainly our individual experiences with you have been different; but they have shared a common thread of love and joy.*

*We wish you peace and much contentment in your transition to a greater work. All of us in your immediate family will always remember your warm touch and your nurturing love and that wonderful smile.*

*Our love and joy to you forever.*

Virginia died the next day, September 10, 1988. Laura remembers the moment this way:

When she did breathe a last gentle breath, with no struggle, we gathered around her bed holding hands. The ecstatic feeling was there again, though tainted with deep loss. She made it out of her body!

Almost without thought, ritualistic behavior fell in line. Jonathan, one of her doctors, who is Jewish, conducted the last ceremony in his tradition of breaking the glass as a symbol of transition. We spoke quietly to her. Some sang. (186-187)

Before she died, Virginia requested to be cremated. Her cremated remains were taken to Mount Crested Butte, Colorado, where she had bought a cemetery plot. I remember her asking several of us if we wanted to buy a plot with her, as it would be cheaper for three of us to buy it together. In Mount Crested Butte, surrounded by family and friends, her remains were given a final resting- place. Her grave is simple but beautiful. It has been kept and cared for by another of her friends-Allen Cox. In that place Virginia still reminds us about her love for nature, the mountain, and people.

**The Legacy: "because every end is a new beginning..."**

Though Virginia did not live forever, her work continues through the many people she has touched. Since her death several books (see bibliography) have been published on her teachings and ways for us to work towards our "third birth." Today Satir Centers and Institutes are operating all over the world. In particular, Avanta carries on her work with a current and ever-evolving scope.

Since Virginia founded Avanta in 1977, it has been a forum for developing ideas, techniques, skills and training. Through national and international conferences, workshops and training efforts, as well as the efforts of individual members, Avanta has used the inspiration and drive that Virginia inspired to reach thousands of people worldwide.



## APPENDIX

- I. Bibliography
- II. Summary: Tables of Virginia Satir's accomplishments
  - A. Career chronology
  - B. Conferences and teaching seminars for 1987 & 1988
  - C. Virginia Satir's affiliations & memberships
- III. Brief descriptions of Virginia's teachings
  - A. Johanna Schwab, "A Bare-Bones Overview"
  - B. Sharon Loeschen, "Overview of Satir's Process for Change"

### Resources

*For further information contact the following:*

Avanta, The Virginia Satir Network ([www.avanta.net](http://www.avanta.net))  
2104 SW 152<sup>nd</sup> St #2, Burien, WA 98166  
Phone: (206) 241-7566  
Fax: (206) 241-7566  
E-mail: [office@avanta.net](mailto:office@avanta.net)

Archives: Library, Oral History Program, University of California,  
Santa Barbara, CA 93106  
David Russell  
Phone: 805-893-3062  
Fax: 805-893-4676

Science & Behavior Books  
P.O. Box 60519, Palo Alto, CA 94306  
Phone: 1-800-547-9982  
Fax: 650-965-8998



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- Virginia Satir's Legacy: Highlights of Virginia's Life and Practice
- Michele and Bud Baldwin, Joan Winter, *Through the Family and Beyond: Full Esteem Ahead: A Tribute to Virginia Satir*. Santa Clara, California August 1991.

**TABLE A**  
**Career Chronology**

1936	BA, Education, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
1936-41	Teacher and principal in public schools after receiving her bachelor's degree in education
1941	Leaves full-time teaching to study social work in Chicago
1948	MA, University of Chicago, School of Social Service Administration
1951	"Sees" her first family
1959	Co-founds the Mental Research Institute, Menlo Park, California
1961	Makes first European presentation, Vienna, Austria
1962	Directs first formal family therapy training program
1964	First Director of Training, Esalen Institute, Big Sur, California
1964	<u>Conjoint Family Therapy</u> published
1969	Conducts first annual month-long residential training of therapists and people in the helping professions at Esalen
1970	Founds International Human Learning Resources Network (IHLRN) which meets annually
1972	<u>Peoplemaking</u> published
1976	Awarded the Gold Medal of "Outstanding and Consistent Service to Mankind" by the University of Chicago
1976	First annual Satir Family Camp, Pacific Palisades, California
1977	Founds Avanta Network, an International Training and Membership Organization
1978	Awarded an honorary doctorate in Social Sciences from the University of Wisconsin
1981	First annual Avanta International Summer Training Institute Process Community, Park City, Utah
1982	Selected by the West German Government as one of the twelve most influential leaders in the world today
1982	President of the Association for Humanistic Psychology
1985	<u>Time</u> quotes a colleague, "She can fill any auditorium in the country", after her stellar contribution to the Evolution of Psychotherapy conference in Phoenix, Arizona
1985	Selected by the prestigious National Academy of Practice as one of two members chosen to advise on health concerns to the Congress of the United States
1986	Selected as a member of the International Council of Elders, a society developed by the recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize
1986	Honorary member of the Czechoslovakian Medical Society
1987	President of the First Family Therapy Symposium in Prague, Czechoslovakia
1987	Member, California Commission to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility
1988	Travel to USSR - May
	June - Avanta's Annual Meeting
	July - In Crested Butte - 10 days for the Avanta International Summer Training Institute, Process Community

**TABLEB**  
**Conferences & Teaching Seminars 1987 - 1988**

1/16-17/87	Gestalt Institute of Southern Ohio, Columbus, OH
1/22-23/87	The Forum on Chiminal Dependency, Inc., Sacramento, CA
1/30-1/23/87	Peace Conference, Palo Alto, CA "World Peace Begins at Home"
2/5-8/87	University of Miami, Coral Gables, FL
2/10/87	Unity of Palm Beaches, West Palm Beach, FL "In Celebration of You"
2/16-17/87	University of Connecticut Medical School, Farmington CT
2/20-22/87	Alethia Foundation, Ashland, OR "Making Contact - The Quest for Relationships"
2/27/87	Center for Self-Esteem, Mt. View, CA "Self-Esteem in the Classroom"
3/1-21/87	Personal/Professional Development, Gabriola Island, B.C., Canada Seminars: "Through the Family and Beyond"
4/4-5/87	Oasis Center for Human Potential, Chicago, IL "Family Therapy and Personal Growth"
4/9-12/87	Interface, Tucson, AZ
4/13/87	Cherokee Nation, Tahlequah, OK "Becoming More Fully Human"
4/14-15/87	Youth Bridge, Fayetteville, AR "Peoplemaking and Family Building"
4/19-21/87	The Glendale Humanistic Psychological Center "Family Therapy, Human Communication, and the Process of Change"
5/2/87	Life Skills Program, Palo Alto, CA "The World Begins at Home"
5/8/87	Wisconsin Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, Madison, WI "Children and Adolescents in Family Therapy"
5/11-15/87	Czechoslovak Medical Society, Prague, Czechoslovakia "The Patterns Which Connect"
5/16-17/87	Familientherapie Zentral, Hanover, West Germany "The Growth-Oriented Approach"
5/18-24/87	Munich Family College, Munich, West Germany "Seven Days of Family Reconstruction"

- 5/29-30/87 University of Louisiana, School of Education, Louisville, KY
- 7/11-8/21/87 Avanta Network, Crested Butte, CO  
"The University of Becoming More Fully Human"
- 7/31-8/2/87 Mental Research Institute, San Francisco, CA  
'The Theory of Practice and the Practice of Theory"
- 8/17/87 The Association for Humanistic Psychology, San Diego State University,  
San Diego, CA  
"Meditations and Inspirations"
- 8/24-28/87 Tiospaye Network, Rapid City, South Dakota  
"Bridges of Understanding" (A training seminar for Indian and Non-Indian  
people)
- 8/29/87 South Dakota State Corrections, Springfield, South Dakota
- 8/31/87 Children and Family Services Training Center, University of North Dakota,  
Grant Forks, ND  
"Family Reconstruction and Native American Families"
- 9/12/87 International Institute for the Study of Systems Renewal, Antioch  
University Learning Group, Seattle, WA  
"Processes of Peace"
- 9/15/87 Benyessa School District, San Jose, CA  
"The World Begins at Home"
- 9/16-17/87 Family Service of Rochester, Rochester, NY  
"Family Therapy"
- 9/25-26/87 Center for Children and Parents, Anchorage, AK
- 10/1-4/87 Istituto di Terapia Familiare, Rome, Italy  
"Making Change with Couples"
- 10/23/87 Oak Grove Adolescent Hospital, Concord, CA  
Psychiatric Facility - "Dedication Address"
- 10/30-31/87 Coastal Community Counseling Center, Braintree, MA
- 11/2/87 University of Rhode Island, Kingston, RI  
"Peoplemaking in the Family"
- 11/4/87 Bryn Mawr Hospital, Providence, RI  
Hospice Program, "Bereavement Seminar"
- 11/6-7/87 Maywood College, Scranton, PA
- 11/10-11/87 Wiley House, Bethlehem, PA
- 11/13-14/87 Pastoral Care and Counseling Center, Maitland, FL
- 11/20/87 North Carolina Group Behavior Society, Greensboro, NC

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- 12/10/87 San Juan School District, Cannichael, CA  
"Self-Esteem"
  - 1/11/88 Ohlone School, Palo Alto, CA  
"Effective Parenting"
  - 1/15/88 Ventura County Schools, Ventura, CA  
"Pathways to Self-Esteem and Social Responsibility"
  - 1/16-17/88 United States International University, San Diego, CA  
"Healing Relationships Through Conscious Change"
  - 1/21-22/88 Professional School of Psychological Studies, San Diego, CA  
"Making Contact"
  - 1/29/88 Burnett Academy, Middle School, San Jose, CA  
"Self-Esteem"
  - 1/29/88 Center for Applied Intuition, San Francisco, CA  
"Expanding Dimensions of Psychotherapy - Opening the Intuitive Gate"
  - 2/1-5/88 Citizen's Summit, Washington, D.C.  
"A New Way of Thinking"
  - 2/8-26/88 Ministry of Justice, San Juan, Costa Rica  
"Family Violence and Community Prevention"
  - 2/27-29/88 Latin American Technical University, San Salvador, El Salvador
  - 3/3-5/88 University of Miami, Miami, FL  
"Therapist as Healer"
  - 3/7/88 Miami-Dade Community College, Miami, FL  
"Humanizing Authority Relationships"
  - 3/9-10/88 Caribbean Center for Advanced Studies, Puerto Rico  
"Advances in Family Therapy: New Techniques and Strategies"
  - 3/14-15/88 Holos Institute, Springfield, MO  
"Roots of Societal (Family) Distress"
  - 3/17-18/88 Delta Association, Bellingham, WA  
"Pathways to Self"
  - 3/19-29/88 Personal/Professional Development Seminars, University of British  
Columbia, Gabriola Island, B.C. Canada  
"Peace Within, Peace Between, and Peace Among"
  - 3/30-4/3/88 Personal/Professional Development Seminar Training, Honolulu, HI  
"Exploring Families with Virginia Satir"
  - 4/8-9/88 National Association of Social Workers, Akron, OH  
"Two Days with Virginia Satir"

- 4/13-14/88 Consultation Center, Albany, NY  
"Creating a Climate of Motivation and Trust... Within the Self and Within Families"
- 4/15-16/88 Western New York Institute for the Psychotherapies, Rochester and  
Niagara Falls, NY  
"Nurturing and healing Family Systems"
- 4/18-19/88 Stormont-Vail Regional Medical Center, Topeka, KS  
"Healing in the Family"
- 4/21/88 Oklahoma City Community College, Oklahoma City, OK  
"Self-Esteem and Mental Health: Step by Step"
- 4/22-23/88 Hillcrest Medical Center, Tulsa, OK  
"Transition for the Older Adult: Caregiver Issues and Family Dynamics"
- 4/25-26/88 YWCA Resolve Family Abuse, Charleston, WV  
"Family Reconstruction"
- 4/30-5/1/88 Oasis Center for Human Potential, Chicago, IL  
"Family Therapy and Personal Growth"
- 5/3/88 Nueva Learning Center, Hillsborough, CA  
"Self-Esteem"
- 5/5/88 American Association of University Women, Los Altos, CA  
"Self-Esteem"
- 5/8-6/5/88 Bekhterev Institute, Leningrad, USSR  
Moscow State University, Moscow, USSR  
Georgian Academy of Sciences, Tbilisi, USSR  
University of Vilnius, Vilnius, Lithuania
- 6/11/88 Avanta Network Annual Meeting, Canada
- 7/88 Avanta Network, Crested Butte, CO  
A few days at "Process Community Level II"

**TABLE C**  
**Virginia Satir's Affiliations & Memberships**

**EDITORIAL BOARDS**

Couples and Therapy - Honorary Editor  
Journal of Psychotherapy and the Family

**BOARD MEMBERSHIPS**

Activists for Alternatives, New York, New York  
Aletheia Foundation, Ashland, Oregon  
California Association of Student Councils, California  
Cancer Support and Education Center, Menlo Park, California  
Children's Resource Group, Miami Beach, Florida  
Educational Film and Video Project, Berkeley, California  
Eye Health Education Center, California  
Health Optimizing Institute, Del Mar, California  
Institute for Person-Centered Approaches to Peace, La Jolla, California  
International Family Therapy Association  
James Thomas Fifer Family Foundation, Edmonds, Washington  
K.I.D.S. (Kids International Distribution Superstation), St. Louis, Missouri  
Manitoba Human Relations Center  
Meta Development, Aptos, California  
National Association of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NANLP)  
National Council For Self-Esteem  
National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse  
Oasis Center, Chicago, Illinois  
Parents Anonymous of Kansas City, Missouri  
Person Centered Expressive Therapy Institute, Santa Rosa, California  
Planet Earth Project, Nashville, Tennessee  
Professional School of Psychological Studies, San Diego, California  
Third Age Life Center, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

**ASSOCIATION MEMBERSHIPS**

American Academy of Psychotherapists  
American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (Clinical Member, Approved Supervisor and Fellow)  
American Civil Liberties Union  
American Family Therapy Association  
American Group Psychotherapy Association  
American Orthopsychiatric Association  
American Psychological Association  
Association for Humanistic Psychology  
Avanta: The Virginia Satir Network  
California Confederation of the Arts Common Cause  
Council of One Hundred, Center for Soviet-American Dialogue, 1988  
International Association of Social Psychiatry  
International Council on Social Welfare  
International Family Therapy Association  
Italian Society of Family Therapy (Honorary - Rome, 1987)  
Lakota Development Council  
League of Women Voters  
Mid-Peninsula Peace Center  
National Adult Children of Alcoholics  
National Association of Social Workers  
National Conference on Social Welfare  
National Council on Family Relations  
National Academies of Practice  
Sierra Club  
Venezuelan Association of Human Potential (AVEPH) (Honorary, Caracas, Venezuela)  
World Federation for Mental Health

## A Bare-Bones Overview

Johanna Schwab

The Satir model is a dynamic, organic, humanistic systems approach to growth. It integrates existing resources to transform and make realistic changes that go toward the empowerment, healing and growth of the individual and the healthy functioning of his or her system. This system can be family, professional, social or political.

### ***Learning and changing are based on beliefs-***

- That change is always possible.
- That we have within us all the resources necessary for growth.
- That any past learnings that are unsatisfactory and painful can be replaced with new learnings.
- That learning occurs within a framework that is comfortable, warm, and nourishing.
- That everything is subject to use as a resource.
- That all behavior is an effort at growth.
- That choices are decisions one makes at a moment in time using the original ingredients for identity and have the potential for being a nourishing source of growth and energy.

### ***Recognizing that people share basic needs common to all-***

- To survive
- To grow and learn
- To make sense and order
- To get close to others

### ***That learning and changing happen when there is a context that is-***

- Humanistic-relating to people
- Dynamic -moving and changing
- Organic-nonhierarchical
- Creative-allowing new possibilities, inputs and coping

### ***With an emphasis on increasing skills to have congruent communication-***

- To give, receive and check out information openly, clearly, directly.
- To express one's needs appropriately.

### ***Noting that communication occurs at a time and place***

### ***And with a purpose***

### ***Raising feelings of self-esteem-***

- By seeing differentness as a channel for growth.
- By reinforcing the uniqueness of each person.
- By empowering and energizing each person.
- By manifesting sexuality in ways that are fitting.
- By making decisions based on reality rather than on who has the power.
- By being in touch with one's resources.

### ***Resulting in living the five freedoms***

- "To say what one thinks, instead of what one should say;
- To see and hear what is there, instead of what one should see and hear;
- To feel what one feels, instead of how one should feel;
- To ask for what one wants, instead of waiting for permission;
- To take risks in one's behalf, instead of choosing to be safe"

-Virginia Satir

adapted from Schwab, *A Resource Handbook for Satir Concepts* (Science & Behavior, 1990)



## **Overview of Satir's Process for Change**

Sharon Loeschen

In order to conceptualize Satir's work, the author has created an artificial construct defining the phases of her work. The phases are a direct reflection of Satir's philosophy and her understanding of the universal phases of change.

In the first two phases, Satir begins to establish rapport and enhance self-worth in order to help people have the strength and the courage to move out of the familiar, out of "status quo". She then works to help people gain awareness and acceptance of themselves so that they can go on to make the needed changes by practicing new ways of being.

The phases will be presented here in a linear fashion, each building on the other. This is for the purpose of assisting the reader in understanding Satir's process. In actuality, Satir was organic in her way of working-flowing back and forth between the phases as needed.

### ***Phase I-Making Contact***

The first phase of her work is that of "making contact". It was during this time that she would be reaching out and attending to people, in order to establish a connection and enhance each person's sense of being special and unique.

### ***Phase II-Validating***

The second phase of her work is that of "validating". In this phase, she would work to enhance self-worth further by letting people know they have value. She did this by reflecting their thoughts and feelings, by appreciating their efforts, by letting them know change was possible, and in general by doing whatever she could to enhance their sense of self-worth.

### ***Phase III-Facilitating Awareness***

The third phase of her work is that of "facilitating awareness". Here she would work with people to help them gain new awareness of themselves and others. This would include feelings, beliefs, and ways of coping.

### ***Phase IV-Promoting Acceptance***

The fourth phase of her work is that of "promoting acceptance". She would work to help people accept their humanness and that of others.

### ***Phase V-Making Changes***

The fifth phase of her work is that of "making changes". Having laid the foundation of enhanced self-worth and self-acceptance, she would move on to help people make actual changes in their behavior.

### ***Phase VI-Reinforcing Changes***

The sixth and final phase of her work consists of reinforcing the changes made in the previous phase. Here she coached people, guiding them in the practice of their newly acquired skills in order that these might be more fully integrated.

adapted from Loeschen, *The Magic of Satir* (Halcyon, 1994)

