

IN THE SPIRIT OF THERAPY

Interview with Gunther Schmidt, Dr.med.Dipl.rer. pol., (Heidelberg, DE)

By John Lentz, D.Min.

Dr. Gunther Schmidt, Diplom-Volkswirt (M.A. in economics), M.D. (specialization in psychotherapeutic medicine), is the medical director of the sysTelios-clinic for psychosomatic health development in Siedelsbrunn, Germany; director of the Milton-Erickson-Institute Heidelberg; founder of the hypnosystemic approach for psychotherapy and counseling, cofounder of the International Society for Systemic Therapy (IGST); cofounder and teaching director of the Helm-Stierlin-Institute Heidelberg; cofounder of the German Association for Coaching (DBVC), and teaching therapist of the Milton-Erickson-Society of Germany for clinical hypnosis (M.E.G).

John Lentz: Frankly, you inspire me. The way you talk about problems is deeply respectful of people, and that to me is spiritual.

Gunter Schmidt: That is my main motivation for doing this work. I studied economics, but I wasn't satisfied. I wanted to do something meaningful. When I read about Milton Erickson, I had a conversion. That was in the mid-'70s and I thought finally someone is not labeling people as silly, bad, sick or something like that, but rather saying that they are behaving in a strange way that is meaningful to them. I studied Milton Erickson motivated to do therapy so that people can be encountered as people. I worked at Heidelberg University for 15 years and saw people terribly disconnected and isolated. My main motivation was to do something to help end the isolation, because we are all connected. I don't talk much about it, but my understanding of spiritual is what we are doing in psychotherapy -- because there is little difference between what you do in hypnosis and what you do in prayer.

JL: Yes! The best prayer is one that induces a trance where you can feel accepted and cared about.

GS: An intensive trance state is always more open. Our consciousness usually wants to be in control. In trance, you give yourself over to a higher state, so to speak. The words are different, but the relationship process is similar.

JL: You talk about looking for the smallest possible change to make, and you then illustrate it with a body movement. It suddenly is so simple.

GS: Yeah, it is so simple.

JL: Yet, it is so deeply respectful of the other person. You clearly live it, and it comes through in how you express things.

GS: I experience it that way. Many of my clients come to me disbelieving that someone could respect them. But in a certain way, when I stay in this understanding; it is treating them in a meaningful and respectful way as a person. So then, people feel connected -- and that makes a difference.

JL: It is that attitude of respect that comes through so clearly about making "some little change," that caused me to suddenly understand.

GS: Yeah, that is my experience. The first time I really understood that, was in my work with Milton Erickson; it was when I understood the interspersal technique. I said to Erickson, "You are a genius." And Milton said to me, "That's nonsense. I am not a genius, but I am a very good observer." And so now I observe systematically what everyone does. When you talk in a different mood, you have a different body expression. Your voice is different and you hold your body differently; your whole organism is an instrument. The best way for me to tune into the world of the client is in a trance. And that is the most rewarding part of the work -- when I understand the world of the other. It is such a rewarding, worthwhile thing.

JL: You ecstatically describe it as if it were a religious experience. As if connecting is *that* important.

GS: I have some experiences in my private life connected to dreams, going out of the usual consciousness, or feeling connected to something more than usual. I am not so much into the Christian churches in Germany. That isn't as important to me. The organization is one thing, but the idea is another thing. And when you look around at every religion, in a sense, they are all longing for the same thing.

JL: So all of life then becomes like a religious experience, or ecstatic experience.

GS: Yeah, it's like getting into resonance, and having the same kind of waves. And that is more than any contact between two; it is becoming something more.

JL: Yes. You made me think again in a different way. It is about connecting.

GS: It is about connecting.

JL: Connecting with others is so important that we attempt to do it in all sorts of ways.

GS: For me, the systemic approach is so important for the therapeutic process, because the approach offers lots of possibilities. Human beings are relationship beings. Maybe that means the family, or society, or whatever. People are intensely looking for connection and belonging to the group; it is *that* important.

A lot of people believe they have to be alone, or they have to give themselves up to be in a relationship. So the question is how can you be in tune with yourself and your uniqueness, and then also in a rewarding relationship. My whole work goes into this dialectic balance.

JL: Martin Buber's work was inspirational in offering ways to connect.

GS: It is interesting that you mention Martin Buber. He lived close to Heidelberg. One of the most important things in his work was the so-called "ich" [German for "I"] develops in the encounter with you. The ego is not possible without a "you." It's two sides of the same coin.

JL: [laughs] I have read that book three or four times and I never saw that idea. I never understood that the ich, must have a du [meaning "you"], to even exist. Wow.

GS: Yeah, you see a child growing up, and you see the mother's eyes saying, "I am here." It begins there. That goes on all the time.

JL: When we look into a child's eyes, our brain is changed, just like the child's brain is changed when we look into the child's eyes.

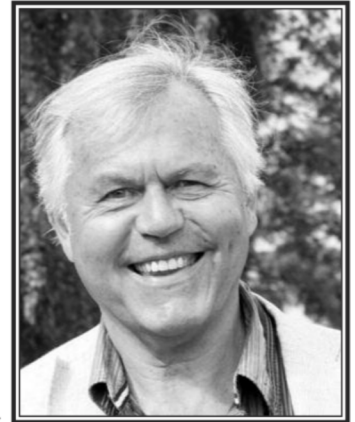
GS: [laughter] Yes.

JL: You immediately feel connection and compassion.

GS: Most of the therapy I know doesn't let us see the client like a baby. It must be with a diagnosis, and diagnosis doesn't change anything. It is our attitude.

JL: I like how you say it is our attitude. I like how for you the concept of spirituality is much more broadly defined -- so that we get to worship wherever we go; wherever we think about it.

GS: That is a good way of putting it. I didn't see it that way, but I like it. That is true.



Gunther Schmidt