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For the Future

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Good morning, colleague contextual therapists and other professionals who are enthusiastic about the contextual approach of Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy.

My name is Jaap van der Meiden. I am the director of the Institute Contextual Approach, and I am senior researcher of the Research-group Youth and Family. As such, I am employed at the Christian University of Applied Sciences Ede, the Netherlands. With these three organizations we organized this International Conference on Contextual Therapy 2018. And I can tell you: organizing this conference makes a long-cherished dream come true. As you all might know, the last, and as far as I know also the first ICCT was in 1997, in Philadelphia. So it was about time for a new edition, this time in the Netherlands. And I warmly welcome you all here in this country and at this University.

The fact that this second edition of this Conference is organized in the Netherlands is not only coincidentally. Already in 1967, when family therapy was rather new and still developing, Nagy was invited to come to the Netherlands. Together with his associates Gerald Zuk and David Rubenstein, they provided a training for the Dutch family therapists. So, the Netherlands was the first country outside of the US where this approach was introduced. For Nagy, this turned out to be the beginning of an intensive relationship with the Dutch family therapists. Since then, he regularly visited the Netherlands for consultation, training sessions, speeches and Master classes. The contextual therapy appeared to catch on well in this country and these visits contributed to the fact that the contextual therapy is still practiced in the Netherlands and in Belgium. In the last decades, even a growing interest in this approach is observable.

So here we are, in the Netherlands, together with contextual professionals from at least ten different countries.

Let me say something about the theme we picked for this conference. It reflects the core of the contextual approach: For the Future! Nagy himself stated that the contextual therapy *'emerges as an implicit strategy for the future, with its ultimate value residing in prevention- the most desirable "change" imaginable* (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1987, p. 168). With its focus on justice as a central theme and important driving force of intergenerational relationships (Heusden & Eerenbeemt, 1983, p. 22), Nagy emphasizes the responsibility of the current generation for the next generations as an investment in the future (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1987, p. 211). So this theme first of all helps us focus on the main goal of therapy. And the ultimate argument for the use of certain methods and techniques, according to Nagy, is 'as long as it works!'

But this theme 'For the Future!' also reflects a concern for the future. Nagy already voiced this concern, for instance when he said: *'Large scale societal moves seem to amount to irresponsible*



'borrowing from the funds of the future rather than readiness to plan to provide resources for the future' (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Markham, 1987, p. 249). And in line with Nagy, I want to highlight the concerns for the future from three perspectives: Concerns for the future of the earth, of reciprocal care and of the contextual approach as such.

First of all, the concern for the survival, for the future of this earth is a worldwide recognized concern. Nagy has already repeatedly 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 (Kurimay, 2007). And up to this point, we seem to have a hard time changing our behavior in favor of the future.

Secondly, Nagy had a concern about the importance of relationships, and the future of reciprocal care. And I agree with this concern. At least in a large part of the world we see that the attention for the individual tends to prevail above the attention for human reciprocity, solidarity and connectedness. In his interview with Margaret Markham, Nagy states that in particularly the 'western society has shown a progressive decline of responsibility for the consequences of relationships, due to industrialization, mass mobility, mass communication, and the disintegration of family ties' (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Markham, 1987, p. 249). And we could probably easily add to this list. Contextual theory with its core of relational ethics offers on the one hand a good insight into the innate sense of responsibility and care for the other. It underlines the importance of reciprocity in family- and other relationships. But in doing so, it also reveals the damage when we silence that innate sense. Denying reciprocal care and responsibility will disturb the balances between self-care and care for the other and endangers future generations. Fortunately, contextual therapy offers guidelines and interventions to enhance and enrich constructive relationships.

This leads to my third concern, a concern about the continuation of the contextual approach itself. This is not so explicitly appointed by Nagy, but becoming especially topical because of the ongoing developments and advancing insights in general, in society and in family therapy in particular.

For a start, I would like to emphasize that I do not intend to go back to a sort of pillarization of therapy-models, or would try to delineate the contextual therapy as such more stronger vis-a-vis other modalities. Nagy already stated that family therapy benefits from integrating the best of all existing disciplines. His statement 'as long as it works' must also be explained in this context. Particularly in this time of age, I think that contextual professionals should always be open to integrate the core elements of the contextual approach into other methods and techniques, and the other way around (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1987, p. 54; Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1984, p. xvi; Deissler, 1999, p. 143).

But this does not mean that contextual therapy should not need further development. On the contrary, I think that the application of relational ethics into therapy or any other field, constantly needs to be adapted. Nagy has developed his theory and therapy in the last decades of the 20th century. Since then, the world of psychology and therapy has been enriched with many new theories and insights. They will have to be researched and judged for their relevance for relational ethics, and for the amount of which they can substantiate and enrich this contextual approach.



Furthermore, if the contextual approach is to survive, it needs to align its methods to nowadays criteria. But I am aware of the different views on whether the contextual approach should try to meet those contemporary criteria. There are contextual professionals who want to be faithful to the therapy as described by Nagy and his associates, and fear any further development. Others fear that modeling contextual therapy to a method will lose the richness and essence of this approach. On the other hand, there are also contextual professionals who emphasize the importance of developing a method, because it is necessary for conducting evidence based research. Still others do not so much focus on maintaining contextual therapy as a modality on its own, but want to integrate the core of the contextual approach into other modalities. Precisely this diversity of insights requires an open dialogue on the development of the valuable paradigm that Nagy has introduced.

And there we are, concluding that we need this dialogue. A dialogue between contextual professionals, as well as a dialogue with other professionals. As far as I am concerned, an important aim of this conference is to encourage each other to engage into this dialogue. A dialogue, aimed at further developing the contextual approach towards a theory and practice incorporating new insights and developments, and fulfilling the criteria and requirements for contemporary theories and practices, but without losing the core of this valuable approach.

I conclude to wish you all a very, very inspiring and encouraging conference. I hope that this conference will meet your expectations, that there will be meaningful and constructive conversations during the workshops, the coffee breaks, the lunches, etc. But I also and particularly hope that this conference can be the starting point of an ongoing dialogue between contextual therapists from over the world. And that this dialogue will contribute to the survival of the valuable insights that Nagy has left us.

For the future!

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