

## Virginia Satir

Virginia Satir (1916-1988) was a pioneer in family systems therapy and an inspiration to generations of family therapists. The **Satir Model** helps people rediscover their essential value through exercises that encourage self-awareness and personal growth. Her legacy is a vibrant network of therapists and lay people who continue to be involved in the [Virginia Satir Global Network](#) or in the Satir Institutes worldwide.

For a biography of Virginia, see the [entry about](#) in Wikipedia. Virginia was [recognized as the fifth most influential therapist](#) of the latter 20<sup>th</sup> century in a survey of therapists commissioned by *Psychotherapy Networker* magazine in 2006; the discussion of her starts on [page 11](#) of the article.

Dr. Janet Christie-Seely trained with Virginia Satir for about five years in the 1980s. Here, Janet talks about Virginia and her experiences with this amazing teacher.



"As a family physician, I trained in Family Therapy in Montreal in the 1970s. I had the great privilege to train with Virginia Satir, the charismatic, creative and spiritually-based creator of Family Therapy, from 1983 until her death in 1988. My husband, our four children, and I were lucky enough to spend three weeks with her in the Galapagos and Peru; being in Macchu Picchu with Virginia was an incredible experience. I received so much from her, both personally and professionally, that it has become my "burning passion" (as Wayne Dyer would put it) to spread her theory and tools to the world. I have taught in 11 countries and have founded, with my husband Tom Wright, the **Satir Learning Centre of Ottawa**. There is now an extended Satir community, of which there is a training arm for therapists. Members support one another in a variety of ways, and some attend one of two weekly group meetings in the Centre."



Virginia Satir was part of the Human Potential Movement and worked with Aldous Huxley, Carl Rogers, Gregory Bateson and others in California. One of her students, Fritz Perls, created Gestalt Therapy. Her book, *Conjoint Family Therapy*, was written in the 1960s.

She was one of the three sources of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), which was developed by Richard Bandler and John Grinder. These two videotaped her, Fritz Perls, and Milton Erickson, the famous hypnotherapist. Richard Bandler and John Grinder discovered that these three magical therapists were using non-verbal cues and communication at a non-verbal level that can, in fact, be taught. NLP can be a potent tool for change, but when I asked Virginia what she thought of it, she said, "They have the mind of the matter, but not the heart of it."

Virginia's heart was her essence, and she developed a highly non-judgmental egalitarian way of teaching people all over the world to communicate more effectively with one another and to raise their self-esteem. She believed that humans are, at the core, good, and spoke of the positive intention behind every behaviour, regardless of appearances.

She began as a teacher, but then wanted to understand the families that were causing her students so many difficulties and creating low self-esteem, so she got her degree in social work. She had a brilliant mind, but, as a social worker, was for some time ignored by the largely male psychologist or psychiatrist world of psychotherapy. Her writings were deceptively simple and free of jargon. She said once that if a writer can't be understood by a four year old, he probably doesn't understand it himself! She was given the most difficult patients upon whom others had given up, and developed her magic on what others might call the “dregs” of humanity. There is a story of her having a long conversation with a catatonic schizophrenic man who had been silent for seventeen years.

Virginia came from a farming family with an alcoholic father. When she was six, she became very observant of human interactions when she developed deafness for two years following mastoiditis. She noticed that people appeared to communicate in very different ways from each other and decided then that she was going to be a detective of adults when she grew up. Unable to hear what they were saying, she learned to detect when they were blaming, placating, doing “super reasonable” (or computer), or distracting. Once she was an adult, she developed these defensive Communication Stances that she then recognized as defending low self-esteem. She taught people how to communicate congruently (sincerely but with consideration for the other's feelings); in other words, to be the same on the outside as they were on the inside and to be fully in touch with their whole Self. When congruent, one can freely express one's own thoughts, feelings and opinions, *and* also acknowledge the thoughts, feelings and opinions of the other, and acknowledge the context of the relationship. She also taught that being congruent would raise self-esteem.

She taught in many countries all over the world and found her communication theories applied to all cultures and walks of life. There are now Satir Institutes in many countries, and her worldwide organization, the Virginia Satir Global Network (formerly known as Avanta), has members in forty-seven countries. This flourishing community that has further developed her ideas shows that her “magic” is in fact teachable. She helped therapists learn to trust the wish for growth in their clients and stop being “helpaholic” (my term). She had the racy sense of humour of a farming background, and said of herself: “I used to come across as though I were covered with breasts, and not only that but I had a sign on my forehead that said, 'Drink me!' and I almost burned out. That's bad for clients too.”

Working with her dramatically demonstrated the transformation that can happen to an individual when they develop congruence. The raised self-esteem becomes visible in a change in gait and posture and facial expression. When I first attended a workshop, I was amazed at how different the participants looked at the end of the month compared to the beginning—and how differently I felt myself!

Other tools in that workshop included learning about the **Change Process**, the **Mandala** (how to live a balanced full life), and the **Ingredients of an Interaction** (nine stages that can explain how dramatically we shift the meaning of what we hear, react to the meaning in ways unintended by the speaker, and then move into one of the defensive Stances and dysfunctional communication). With the latter, you can deeply understand, unravel, and resolve in thirty minutes a volcanic eruption between two people that apparently took ten seconds to develop; you don't have to stew for hours or days.

Three of Virginia's trainees constantly questioned her as to why she did what she did and, as a result, unravelled the secrets of her “magic”. They developed a powerful tool, the **Iceberg Metaphor**. The Iceberg represents a much more in-depth view of humans than simply looking at their behaviours, feelings, or thoughts, and then working on change at only one level. It also includes the person's deep yearnings and their core Self or “I am”, the deep spiritual level of the person that Virginia referred to as their “magnificent manifestation of the life force.” At this level, everyone experiences high self-esteem. Use of the Iceberg can move a person from problematic behaviour, difficult communication, low self-esteem, or a negative worldview to transformation at the level of Self.

Virginia's major tools were the **Family Reconstruction** and the **Parts' Party**. The Family Reconstruction is a five-act play taking one individual (who has researched his/her family history) from childhood back to the stories of his/her grandparents and then to the birth of the parents. Out of this comes a much clearer understanding of why life developed as it did for them. Obviously powerful for the “Star”, there is enormous vicarious learning for observers, who then understand their own family repeat patterns and communication in a way that can be transforming. The Parts' Party is Virginia's way of dealing with the serious subject of internal conflict or couple conflict in a playful and enlightening way.

At the Satir Learning Centre of Ottawa, we have held over fifty Family Reconstruction Workshops. These workshops take place on weekends, from Friday evening to Sunday evening and with meals provided. The workshops are powerful experiences and available to anyone providing they are stable and have available emotional support if they bump into major issues of which they have been unaware. Support is also provided in the group and in the Satir community by the two follow-up groups held at the Centre. The joke in the Satir community is that when you take a weekend your family changes! One physician wrote a ten-page letter after attending one of these weekends describing dramatic change in herself and her family afterwards!

I experienced such personal transformation from the workshops I attended with Virginia that I selfishly wanted to bring home and share the wonderful experiences that I had had in Colorado and Gabriola Island in British Columbia. I now have a community of like-minded individuals, some who are therapists and many who are not, who are learning Virginia's transformative tools in more and more depth. People describe the work as providing a toolbox for life and also a new outlook on the world and self that is empowering and enlightening. I would love to share this with more people, as the world needs Virginia Satir's ideas and transformative tools.