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Paul Watzlawick's system-oriented psychotherapy

What Peter says about Paul, says a lot about Peter and a bit about Paul.
(adapted from Aristotle)

Paul Watzlawick: "researcher of reality, teacher, pop bestseller among philosophers, analyst, humanist, gentleman, visionary, explorer, realist, proponent of the enlightenment, citizen of the world and world famous son of Carinthia", as he was variously called by the media. Who was the man who, for decades, fascinated his readers and audiences with his books and talks? Who told the story of the neighbour's hammer, or of the man clapping his hands every ten minute to scare away elephants. He demonstrated in a simple and yet sophisticated fashion the "be spontaneous" double-bind paradox in every-day life that can make our existence so much harder. It is impossible to "forget deliberately" or to "sleep more deeply on purpose". The man who formulated the five axioms of communication. Who analyzed zero sum games in frustrated couple relationships and stalemated international relationships, and who unmasked self-fulfilling prophecies as self-constructed oracles of the future.

"He embodies originality and traditionalism, cosmopolitanism and patriotism, polyglottism and the accent of the Old Austrian", it says in the laudatory speech delivered by Rudolf Zucha when Watzlawick was granted the Paracelsus Ring in 1987 by his home town of Villach. Although he was a person of public interest, he was very shy in public; he became popular through his books, but was never a folksy person. He challenged conventional ways of thinking and was always willing to slaughter the holy cows of orthodoxy. But at the same time he cared very much for conventions, as pointed out by Fritz B. Simon, the German psychotherapist and systemic organisation consultant who had known Paul for a long time and referred to him as one of his important mentors.

The description of the life and work of my great-uncle Paul, the brother of my grandmother from Villach, that I am about to draw for the first time, is meant to be a portrait: "The careful examination of an observation reveals the characteristics of the observer," Paul Watzlawick used to say, citing Francisco Varela, the biologist, philosopher and neuroscientist. The highly

qualified Austrian managed to strike a balance between working scientifically as a professor at Stanford and as an author of popular books. In 2012, his bestseller "How to make yourself unhappy" was even made into a film and shown in German cinemas, and Dirk Baecker, a German sociologist, referred to it as "the only book in the wide range of self-help guidebooks that one really should have read." Why still this popularity? I believe that Paul Watzlawick was a person with charisma, because he lived a life of professional authenticity and had experienced what he wrote and spoke about. He lived in and travelled through most parts of the old and the new world, the East and the West; he learnt about war and peace the hard way, experienced both poverty and prosperity. He was smart and good-looking, a cousin said about him. I was told he was a loner, and another relative described him as parsimonious and old-style. A heartbreaker with movie star qualities. He had his very own sense of humour that some loved and some hated. His blue eyes could express distance and goodness. His mouth could signal both sarcastic self-assuredness and mildness. He would have liked to have a lion's tail to drape over his arm and caress it. He enjoyed joking about his Oedipus complex, and would have liked to have a Siberian tiger as a companion. He loved cat's eyes and beautiful women's legs as well as the colours of autumn, Rachmaninoff's piano concertos and the "average Italian woman in extreme situations".¹

I think Paul Watzlawick's life was a colourful and extraordinary adventure: he lived in such contrary cultures, had to cope with many strokes of fate, often made spontaneous and far-reaching decisions, and often dared to enter unknown territory. He experienced mystic breakthroughs and conventional success that he had not planned – and yet had to fight against senselessness, stress and emptiness in his daily life. A life that in my view was characterized by change and at the same time by the realization that the discovery of the present moment represents the "quintessential earthly happiness" he sought to achieve¹. His journey of experience led him from communication via constructivism to the use of Zen koans as a tool – only to realize that it is the quest that prevents the finding.

Childhood and youth in Austria

Paul Watzlawick's life's journey started in 1921 in Austria. Paul junior, called Pauli, was born on July 25th in Villach. The diminutive "i" in Pauli – his mother Emy attached it – was used in the family to distinguish him from his father Paul Watzlawick senior. Pauli was the second child of Paul and Emy. His sister Maria was born two years earlier and initially was extremely jealous of her younger brother, who developed a very close relationship to his mother. Emy breast-feeds Pauli until he is able to speak. This creates a deep and loving bond between mother and son. Paul will stay in close contact with his mother, exchanging letters with her all of her life, and will give her more insight into his own life than to anybody else. He will often joke about having an Oedipus complex. Emy was a bright and lively woman with Italian roots. She was very good at school, which was not common at that time when society was still very male-

dominated. She loved jokes and puns – and was loved by the children for her sense of humour and her ability to see the funny side of things, to grasp the root of a problem and to come up with a solution. Paul Watzlawick Senior was a bank manager. Born in a German-speaking enclave in the Bohemian Forest in Czechoslovakia, he was a serious, introverted man with a quiet appearance. He wears three-piece-suits with a pocket watch. He has a moustache and his straight hair is parted and combed back. Paul Junior, the later family therapist, will characterize the marriage of his parents as "the best marriage in the world". A few years after the parents are married and the children are born, the father is appointed as director of the bank headquarters in Vienna and leaves his bank branch in Villach. The family moves to the Austrian capital in 1923, where Paul Senior starts to build a beautiful villa with a large garden in the area called Hietzing according to the plans of Schönthal, an outstanding architect who works with the famous Hoffmann. "Someone who buys cheap, pays high in the long run!" is a motto of Watzlawick Senior, son of a factory owner. Accordingly, his suits are also of a classic style. It is mother Emy who has to keep the money together. Paul junior grows up well-protected in difficult times, but is fully aware of the family's financial circumstances, as illustrated by his later modest lifestyle. Those years of the 1920s, when the remains of Austria are being bled dry and burdened by reparation claims due to the First World War, are characterized by a poor economic situation – also in Vienna. But the father is diligent and disciplined and the mother very creative and positively minded. The family is able to live well.

When the Austria banking crash occurs in 1927, circumstances are changed radically. Many banks collapse, Paul senior and the entire staff of his bank lose their jobs. It is a massive blow to the breadwinner of the family. The villa is sold and, at the end of young Paul's first year at school, the family moves back to Carinthia, to Klagenfurt, where Paul senior becomes Director of the Bank of Carinthia. He does not stay in this position for very long, however. When Pauli passes the entrance examination for secondary school in Klagenfurt, Paul senior decides to start his own business. In 1932 the family moves to Villach. Paul senior purchases – co-financed by his brother Franz – a bus line with four buses to serve the routes Villach-Arriach-Afritz-Radenthein-Spittal and Villach to Annenheim and the valley station of the Kanzelbahn. The bus line probably would have become a profitable undertaking if, in 1933, the German government had not introduced the Thousand Mark Ban. When leaving the country, every German citizen had to pay 1,000 Reichsmark to Germany – a sum that today would be the equivalent of several thousand Euros. That is a hard blow for tourism in Austria, unemployment rises substantially. Paul Watzlawick Senior is struggling hard. In the meantime his son Pauli attends secondary school in Peraustraße and comes to like Professor Tänzner, his German teacher, who develops the pupils' "interest in the beauty of the language and its potential."² This interest will grow in Paul as he gradually grasps the subtle power of language in influencing human behaviour. As a child Paul Watzlawick loves the attic in the family's house in Gerbergasse, his empire, where he "does all kinds of writing and studying; astrology is what he was interested in" and "he was

a loner" his sister Maria says about her intelligent young brother. In 1939 Paul passes the school-leaving examination, which was brought forward due to the political situation. By March he finishes his last year with distinction. Nonetheless, he did not particularly enjoy school, as he later wrote³: "My parents were, thank God, traditionalists. They listened to my criticism and complaints with loving attention and agreed with me: Going to school and doing exams is horrible, you are right, but you will go! With that said, the matter was settled."

Second World War in Europe

A few days after finishing school, Paul Watzlawick started his barrack service at the Reichsarbeitsdienst (RAD, Reich Labour Service) in Neumarkt am Wallersee close to Salzburg. It is now September 1939. Hitler invades Poland and thus triggers the Second World War. "Since five forty-five this morning we have been shooting back!", announced Hitler, unleashing a wave of murder and destruction that would seal the fate of millions and change Europe for ever. In autumn Paul has to join the Wehrmacht, the German army, and sets off to war at the age of only eighteen – via Salzburg to Göppingen/Württemberg, "which is more than 700 km away from us," he writes to his parents. "But it cannot be changed. My exact postal address will follow. I have sent home my civilian clothes and all unnecessary things. Please keep the post-card. Many kisses, Paul."

He spends the following months with an air force company in Welzheim, a climatic spa town where he is assigned to the air force as a soldier. "I don't want to become an officer and have described myself as not suited: that I am unable to command and things like that," he explained to the family. The next stop is Mährisch-Ostrau and then they reach Augsburg with the FLAK (anti-aircraft defence) train 45, followed by the air base Memmingen, which is equipped with a swimming pool that Paul, as a keen swimmer, takes full advantage of. He reaches the Siebengebirge, takes photographs of the beautiful landscape and the first wrecks of aeroplanes. In August the FLAK train starts moving towards France. In June Hitler starts his offensive against France, and in August the region Alsace-Lorraine is annexed to the German Reich. Again bombed-out buildings and beautiful countryside line the way. Passing through Trier they reach Versailles in August. It is in France that tragic news from home reaches Paul – his father, suffering from galloping tuberculosis, died in January 1940. In just a year the illness carried away the breadwinner of the family, only 56 years of age. Without a job he had lost his will to live and his physical strength was shaken. His son Paul reacts to this loss by losing his hair. Emy writes in a letter: "Dear Pauli, the hair loss will pass, just stay healthy for us. The package with soap, trousers and footcloths is on its way." The young soldier observes a lot, notices contrasts, the people in the country and the soldiers in his immediate environment. As a soldier with the FLAK, he and his unit evaluate cinetheodolite data with the help of (circular) slide rules to determine the trajectory of ballistic missiles such as rockets. Before the company finds out that they will be detailed to Greece, they reach Munich, where they stay for three months. The

young Watzlawick makes use of his free time to look around the town, visit acquaintances and the Prinzregententheater. He gets together with his dear friend Rudi and goes to see "Maria Stuart", "Faust" and "Othello". After the stay in Munich his unit reaches Graz in Austria, passing through Vienna, Oggau and St. Margarethen. From here they start a long journey across the Balkans. They reach Athens and finally cross the sea from Piraeus to Italy.

In 1943, Paul Watzlawick, airman third-class at the time, gets his air force certificate for linguists from the Reichsminister for Aviation and Commander in Chief of the German Air Force, and the certificate as interpreter of the English language a few months later. This is his first official qualification after graduating from high school four years earlier. At the same time Paul undertakes another step towards gaining qualifications for his further career and towards a hopefully soon war-free future: he applies for a place at the Medical University of Vienna and is accepted. Until returning from the Wehrmacht, the student Paul Watzlawick is considered to be on sabbatical. He is employed by the Germans as an interpreter for prisoners of war: The last photographs in his war album show him interrogating allied prisoners in Frosinone close to Rome. From this time on – it is now November 1943 – his job is probably too sensitive to take pictures, and his activities in the upcoming months remain unclear. According to reports and notes, Paul Watzlawick was probably deployed in the South of Italy until 1944, working as an interpreter in the interrogation of captive allied soldiers whose planes had been shot down by the Germans and who managed to parachute to ground. His multilingual military dictionary, "The Military Eitzen", bears the marks of frequent use: In his work as a military interpreter he gains knowledge about aspects of war which had been unknown to him, and he also gains an increasing understanding of the young British and American soldiers and starts to translate incompletely – to the advantage of the "enemy" and "to the disadvantage of the German Nation."

He is still at the military rank of petty officer third class. One of his superiors wrote about Paul Watzlawick: "Intellectually W. outmatched his companions by far; he was a genuine loner who spent his free time on things that were strange for the average soldier. Personally I had a very high estimation of Mister W., because in all those years he remained true to his inner convictions and attitudes even when faced with a lot of pressure and slanderous accusations." As a son he stays in regular contact with his mother and shares his anti-war and regime-critical thoughts with her. His mother Emy imprudently expresses her critical opinions and those of her son among her friends – and is denounced. Paul Watzlawick is finally arrested near Stuttgart – where his unit is based at the time – due to "subversive activities against the state, undermining the Wehrmacht as well as violation of the Treachery Act (impertinent mockery against the Führer as a person)." At the beginning of February 1945, Paul is arrested and held at the remand prison in Stuttgart. Charges are brought against him. For weeks he fears for his life. Finally his case does not come to trial, because his complete record including supporting documents was destroyed by his superior. In the chaos triggered by the imminent occupation

of Stuttgart by French and American troops he is able to free himself from prison in April 1945. He returns to his unit close to Stuttgart, where his superior supports him and finally equips Paul Watzlawick with a large amount of money, food ration cards and the necessary documents to enable him to escape to Austria. Paul safely reaches his mother in Warmbad. Despite the terror of the war, it is something completely different that the young Second World War veteran carries with him from now on: he experiences a mystical break-through that he will later describe in many of his books and which will become the Leitmotif of his life. "The experience of near death – a feeling of peace and coherence that one has not felt before. (It is) the point, where all of us can essentially realize the unity of the "inner" and the "outer". At the moment one starts to describe, classify or give reason to this experience, one has destroyed it."

Studies in Italy and Switzerland

In the course of his work as an interpreter for the British, who had recruited the aimless war veteran in Villach, Paul comes to stay in Upper Italy near Venice. A woman gives him the idea of going to university. It came up by chance. "You could just go to university," the lady tells him. And Paul starts with his academic studies of philosophy and modern languages at the Ca'Foscari on Canale Grande, which is seen as the diplomatic training school in Italy. He would rather have gone to the University of Vienna to study medicine but unfortunately that was not possible. Paul thus takes what he can get, and makes the best of it. Hard-working, organised and disciplined as he is, he manages to pass his exams alongside his work for the English Crown, who made him assistant to the head of the Venezia Giulia Police Force of the Free Territory of Trieste in 1945. Paul ends up working with Interpol at a difficult time in an ethnically difficult region, entrusted with various significant cases, including an art robbery. The young man enjoys his work and makes a discovery that is important for him: "People told me things, for instance made confessions, and I did not even know why, because it was not in their interest to do so." Much later he will establish that there criminalists and psychotherapists have an essential feature in common – both are looking for clues. In his studies he also takes an interest in psychological aspects – he chooses a contemporary of Dostoyevsky, namely the religious philosopher Vladimir Solovyov, as the subject of his dissertation. He writes: Solovyov tried to unite the sky with the earth. And he identifies three phases in the life of the Russian: mysticism as thesis, rationalism as antithesis and poetry as Solovyov's synthesis. Paul Watzlawick is already working on the guiding theme of his life.

Once again it is by accident that Watzlawick decides to continue his education at the C.G. Jung Institute in Zürich, believing that the Territorio Libero di Trieste has no future. While on holiday in Switzerland, a heavy rain shower causes him to seek shelter in a Zurich coffeehouse where he reads a newspaper article describing the recently founded analyst institute, and at the end of 1950 the young Austrian moves to Zürich. Here the Dottore in Lingue e Letterature Straniere will terminate his thesis on "Dostoyevsky and freedom" – after completing his analysis training and his control cases with Fellini's analyst Ernst Bernhard in Rome – and graduate as an analyst in 1954.

Beginning his career in India and El Salvador

In order to start practising as a psychotherapist, the "existentialist", as he describes himself in an interview, sets off on a long journey to Bombay at the age of 33. A Jewish doctor in Zurich had suggested it, and the young graduate, daring and full of zest for action, sets off for the other end of the world. India brings completely new experiences for the European. Certain events force him to abandon conventional wisdoms⁴. One of these events concerns Swamis, holy wise men who are introduced to him and who, from a Western point of view – in complete contrast to the Indian perspective – would be diagnosed as catatonic schizophrenics. And there is quite a difference between wise or insane. So which perspective is the truth? The time spent in India will become an important transition phase for the philosopher and analyst. Having engaged exhaustively with the theory of oriental philosophies at the C. G. Jung Institute, Paul Watzlawick is now confronted with it in a most practical way – with Buddhism, with Zen⁵, and especially with Yoga. For the rest of his life he will abide by his daily yoga practice. He also comes in contact with the teachings of Jiddu Krishnamurti, which will have a great influence on him. Even as an old man he will look back on these meetings and describe the spiritual teacher as one of the most important encounters of his life, and his philosophy as one of the most advanced in terms of a constructivist, autonomous mindset. "Never second hand", he takes from Krishnamurti's concept of truth: Nobody can ever postulate truth for anybody else. Access to the problems of life never comes from experiences in the past, but through immediate insight. "This state of consciousness only arises when someone is able to observe himself, his own movements and his own speech, feelings, thoughts, ideas, motives and impulsive reactions – moment for moment and day for day"⁶, according to the enlightened Indian. But Paul Watzlawick's time in India will not last, his practice as psychotherapist will not flourish – despite having influential contacts such as Jawaharlal Nehru – and he returns to Europe in 1955.

In the old world Paul Watzlawick continues his quest for mystic awareness (as he calls it) with Karlfried Graf Dürckheim, his Zen teacher in Germany, but also attends lectures by Viktor Frankl at the university in Vienna. To earn his living he takes a job at the Goethe Institute in Munich, and he investigates a remote healing by Padre Pio in Italy. Finally - without a word of Spanish, in 1957 he travels to El Salvador in Central America to take on a professorship for psychopathology and psychotherapy at the University in San Salvador. For the next three years the young analyst will teach psychodynamics according to Freud and continue his private practice in this new environment. He also receives a commission for an interesting psychological assessment: The "hypotrophic memory" of young Napoléon Lara is being investigated, and with the report Paul's name even reaches his former Professor Kenower Bash in Switzerland. The book-loving Watzlawick also has plenty of time to read; and read, and read: "Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre", Hermann Hesse, Arthur Koestler, Alan Watts and Aldous Huxley, about Laotse and the "Gotamo Buddha" by De Lorenzo and Karl E. Neumann respectively, about the Persian Mystic "Rumi. Poet and Mystic. 1207–1273". Also the "Ju-Tao-Fo. The religious and philo-

sophic Systems of Eastern Asia", "The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazali" by W. Montgomery Watt and "The Book of Tea" by Kakuzo Okakura. He gives a lecture on "Zen Buddhism", one of his favourite topics, and cites the great wise men: A monk to master Chao-chou: "What is the Tao?" "Tao is nothing else than the ordinary mind." Monk: "Is there any way to approach it?" "Once you intend to approach it, you are on the wrong track." Three years later the assiduous professor has got the feeling that "there was nothing much to expect than more of the same, and I wanted to do some science-based work."⁷ He decides to return to Vienna to open a private practice. On his way he wants to look in at John Rosen's Institute of Direct Analysis in Philadelphia, but things turn out differently, and in late 1960 Paul Watzlawick joins Don D. Jackson as research assistant and interactional (later called systemic) family therapist at the Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto in California. This will remain his intellectual home until shortly before his death.

Career in California: On the shoulders of giants

His new start in California was triggered by the extraordinary schizophrenia research carried out by the Bateson Group, which attracted Watzlawick's attention while he was working with Albert Schefflen and Ray Birdwhistell in Philadelphia on studies on body language. What he sees and hears here in Palo Alto – from Bateson theoretically and from Jackson practically – completely re-orientates him⁸ – by 180 degrees away from the Jungian psychology, away from the intrapersonal (past-oriented), analysis-based insight with its terms like repression, projection, rationalization, deferral and introjection, and towards an interpersonal (present-oriented), systemic approach with paradox interventions or circular questions. There are disturbed relations but no disturbed individuals, he learns. Suddenly the world of psychotherapy is no longer a disk but a globe. The English anthropologist Gregory Bateson does not look for the cause in the past and in the sub-conscious, but wants to understand people in their relations to the world here and now. In 1951 he had published "Communication: The social Matrix of Psychiatry" with the psychiatrist Jürgen Ruesch. Paul Watzlawick is swept away by all these new ideas. He cannot simply abandon overnight the foundations of the beliefs developed over many years, but he is open to these unorthodox approaches. The competence and charisma of Bateson and Jackson do the rest. He is astounded by the immediate results achieved by Don Jackson working with his methods in therapy sessions. These achievements cannot simply be dismissed. Paul Watzlawick has seen similar cases and knows how hard it is to help people with their problems. Jackson makes it look so easy – Paul is puzzled: How does he do it?

He finds himself in an intellectual paradise where his intellect is in demand. It is an age when people expect psychotherapists to thoroughly immerse themselves in the history of the patient. Don Jackson is doing the exact opposite. Paul Watzlawick describes him as extremely intuitive and very effective. Jay Haley, a member of the Bateson Group and a colleague of Paul

Watzlawick, says about Jackson⁹: "He believed, that one has the best results with patients when one believes that they do not lack anything, that it is simply a matter of a social situation." "What was developed here at the MRI was not only a new form of treatment, but a new way of perceiving human problems," Watzlawick himself later wrote¹⁰. He starts doubting more and more his analytic dogma of "insight" (as a therapeutic solution)^{11,12}: "I became aware, that there is no proof at all for the truth of this assumption. It is a dogma, entirely unverifiable and unverified, it is a belief and was the basis for my exit out of this classical framework of psychotherapy." When Paul Watzlawick finished his training at the Jung-Institute he knew more or less everything, for instance about Siberian creation myths, "but I didn't know what to do with a person who chewed his fingernails!¹³" One of his teachers had said once: "I don't cure, I analyse." Those times are over now for Paul. He works on projects based on the assumption that the clinical diagnosis is clearly reflected in the interactions between the families. With this "interactional view" the scientists are entering into new territory and achieving fundamentally new insights: The cybernetic ideas of circular feedback that Bateson had brought from the Macy Conferences now are applied to the linear-causal view of psychoanalysis, and investigated, applied and trained in family therapy at the MRI. In order to illustrate the new approach, Paul chooses Bateson's example of the dog and the stone¹⁴:

If you kick a stone while walking, energy is transmitted from your foot to the stone; the stone starts rolling with the energy that it got from your kick until it stops at a place that is completely determined by the amount of energy transmitted, the shape and weight of the stone, its surface-texture and so on. Assuming that you kick a dog, it could jump up and bite you. In this case the relationship between the kick and the dog is completely different, because the dog is moving with energy which it got from its own metabolism and not from the kick. What is being transferred here is not energy any more but information. (...) This difference between energy and information separates the Freudian psychodynamic from the communications theory as an explanation of human behaviour.

In his quest for new epistemologies Paul Watzlawick cites Albert Einstein: "It is the theory which decides what can be observed. It is wrong to base a theory only on observable factors. In reality the very opposite happens. It is the theory which decides what we can observe." Paul Watzlawick will paraphrase: "In therapy it is the theory that decides what we can do." And he gives the example of water: We never will understand the physical characteristics of water by examining hydrogen and oxygen separately, because water is a structure of relations between the two. Only the relationship results in the phenomenon water. Or as Goethe describes it in "Faust I":

*"He who would know and treat of aught alive,
Seeks first the living spirit thence to drive,
Then are the lifeless fragments in his hand,
There only fails, alas! the spirit-band "*

Although the "new generation" are dismissed as heretics and ostracised by the class of traditional psychiatrists, the Jung analyst remains true to this new way of thinking. He becomes engaged in what will constitute the first phase of his highly successful life's work: developing and researching interactional-systemic theories, and publishing his results. By 1963 he has already published his first papers: "A Review of the Double Bind" and, along with Don Jackson, "The Acute Psychosis as a Manifestation of Growth Experience". This is followed in 1964 by "An Anthology of Human Communication. Text and Tape". The linguist and psychotherapist analyses dialogues from the book "Alice in Wonderland" written by the logician Lewis Carroll. Finally Paul Watzlawick and Janet Beavin decide to write a book on a new communication model (that differs from the prevailing sender-recipient model of Shannon and Weaver)¹⁵. Against all the expectations of the authors, "Pragmatics of Human Communication" will become a communications classic. Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson define five axioms of communication.

They analyze, for example, the simple and innocent statement of a schizophrenic girl: "My mother had to get married and that's why I am here," and conclude that: 1. the girl was the result of an illegitimate pregnancy, 2. this circumstance was responsible for her mental state, 3. "my mother had to get married" refers to the precipitated marriage as well as the fact that the mother was pushed into marriage by social considerations which she rejected in her mind and held the patient responsible for. 4. "here" refers on the one hand to the treatment room of the psychiatrist, and on the other hand to the very existence of the patient. Watzlawick concludes that the patient wanted to indicate "that the mother drove her to madness but at the same time she had to be grateful towards the mother that she had sinned and suffered to give birth to her."

In 1967 the neo-family therapist becomes a lecturer at the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Sciences of the Stanford University Medical Centre. What an honour! At the same time Dick Fisch, John Weakland and Arthur Bodin found the Brief Therapy Centre at the MRI with Paul. This form of brief therapy represents a new and quite unusual approach: one of the therapists sits in the therapy room with the families while the others are sitting behind a one-way-mirror to follow what is happening and intervene via phone link when they think they have something to contribute. The session is recorded and analysed afterwards. The golden rule that gave the centre its name: in a maximum of ten sessions à fifty minutes, the client should be helped in dealing with his specific disorder. And the BTC therapists all agree: Freud was wrong in saying that "rapid cure progress is an escape into health and simply constitutes a symptom substitution." On the other side orthodox psychotherapy also agrees: What is happening at the Brief Therapy Centre (BTC) is absolute heresy, complete nonsense, at best superficial. Paul and his colleagues at the MRI begin to insert more and more cybernetic concepts into the linear-causal field of family therapy. They no longer see the patient as a monad (individual unit), but

examine the immediate group of interaction. They explore how suffering is created by circularities within the group and then try to interrupt them and change them by means of interventions. The focus is thus on the phenomenon which keeps those circularities going¹⁶. This form of systemic-constructivist therapy, which concentrates on the attempted solution, will later on be called "problem-focussed". The time gradually becomes ripe for the group's work because year-long analytic treatment is becoming too expensive for health insurance funds and insurance companies.

As a theoretic framework for the new systemic approach, Watzlawick, Weakland and Fish publish their book "Change", based mainly on the work of Milton Erickson, an ingenious hypnotherapist. Erickson is a practitioner, instructed by life itself. One of Erickson's central insights is: use the positive resources of the patient – use what the patient himself brings in. Watzlawick and his colleagues abstract from this that resistances to the solutions can be used as a good starting point for the solution – a kind of problem solution in the style of the philosophy and technique of Judo. The theoretical model developed in the book is based on a meta-change, a second-order change in the sense of the theory of logic types of Whitehead und Russell. Watzlawick explains that "mathematical group theory offers a system of terms and definitions to understand those changes that happen within a system [first-order change], which itself stays unchanged." The theory of logic types, according to which "whatever constitutes the totality of a class may not be part of the class itself,¹⁷" provides a frame of reference for understanding the relationship between elements and classes and the strange metamorphoses which lie in the essences of the transition from one logic step to the next-higher one [change of second order]. Paul Watzlawick gives an example from daily life: "The change of gear is thus a phenomenon of a higher logic type than pushing the gas pedal [which happens within the system], and it would be obvious nonsense to discuss the mechanics of a complex transmission in terms of the thermodynamics of the petrol." Or: "Someone who is having a nightmare may try lots of things in the dream: to flee, to hide, struggle, jump out the window and so forth; but as we well know, no change from one of these behaviours to another [within the system] will lead to an escape from the nightmare. The solution lies in the change from dreaming to waking. But awakening is no longer an element of the dream, but a change to a completely different state." The practical and specific implementation of understanding this mathematical and logical theory leads to the creative and inventive examples that are illustrated in the book. For a phobia-sufferer, for example, who fears that he will faint or suffocate when he enters a brightly lit shop full of people, the supposed logical solution is to avoid the situation and take some tranquilizers. Paul and colleagues see it quite differently: the avoidance is the problem. Therefore the patient is instructed to enter the shop and faint on purpose, regardless of whether fear has overwhelmed him yet or not. He can go as far as he wants into the shop but must always stop one metre before the point where his fear will overcome him. And – most of the patients found this helpful¹⁸.

For Paul Watzlawick, his mission as a psychotherapist consists in reducing specific suffering. "I am not a guru, I am a mechanic (...). I try to repair specific effects, even if that sounds very mechanistic. I do not pursue fantastic aims, that are to be reached with whatever results¹⁹," he says in an interview. Distancing himself from the psychoanalytic tradition, which for Paul works on the basis of self-fulfilling prophecies, he believes that there are stricter limits than assumed for a "psychotherapy than can be called responsible and humane. In order not to become its own pathology, therapy has to restrict itself to precise help for suffering; the search for general happiness cannot be its mission. The function of a healer therefore is the best possible *restitutio ad integrum*. In simpler words: when we take an aspirin we expect relief from a headache; we do not expect to start having brilliant ideas or never to have a headache again."²⁰ His colleague of many years, Wendel Ray, describes Paul in his role as therapist: "There are video recordings of Paul – he used to do the whole therapy in the first meeting, in the first 39 or 40 minutes. Ilka Hoffmann-Bisinger, a German therapist tells us that one of Paul's most famous interventions was: 'What would you recommend to your best friend in the same situation? What would be the downside if the problem would change? And I want to hear the second answer, not your first one. Because the first one is usually: nothing would change.' As a matter of fact, a depression can have the advantage that it gives the person concerned, for examine a workaholic, the chance to have a rest."²¹ Paul's work is in line with the brief therapy, i.e. he focuses on the problem: "A specific problem is focussed, you stick with the problem, you describe it in terms of the attempted solution that usually fails. And you try to interrupt it. Problems are faced directly. You do not undergo a prolonged analysis by jumping from one detail to another, making the therapy longer and longer. One does not say: actually there is a problem you have never seen before, which is what psychoanalysis does, trying to resolve problems by seeking the causes in the past. These are often tedious processes. Brief therapy assumes that problems – like dialogues that someone is having with himself – exist here and now, and it looks at how they are maintained."

To deal with the problems, the Brief Therapy Centre developed the therapy model described in the book "Change": 1. a clear and specific definition of the problem is elaborated; 2. the solutions attempted up to now are explored; 3. a clear definition of the treatment goal (the solution) including a time limit is defined, and finally 4. the establishment and implementation of a plan to reach the goal (whereby it is important to translate the tactic into the language of the patient). For control purposes, step 5 involves a post-examination based on four questions. Paul does not hide the Achilles heel of the treatment: the challenge of making the patient do what he has been told and the ability of the therapist to select the proper intervention. The book, which contains such clear instructions for various tricky and tangled cases, is regarded in peer groups as a revelation. In Europe, the psychologist and communications scientist Friedemann Schulz von Thun later comments²²: "'Change' incorporated a point of view that was completely new at the time: that problems often arise out of botched solutions of the

original problems! Second-order change therefore has to address the first-order solution. (...) Paul Watzlawick never talked of empathy and authenticity, of dialogistic encounter and individual growth – these terms are from the world of humanistic psychology." And in America, MRI-colleague Wendel Ray recalls: Even "on television there was this picture of Bill Clinton holding the book 'Change' in his hand²³."

In 1976 Watzlawick's third book "How real is real? Confusion, disinformation, communication" is published in several languages and countries – in America, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands. The publishing company Piper in Munich will publish his popular non-fiction books from now on, including his later bestseller "The Situation Is Hopeless, But Not Serious: The Pursuit of Unhappiness". And again, just as in "Change", his approach in this book is completely new, because a new way of thinking has caught his interest – constructivism, as it is later called²⁴. His research on communication led him to constructivism and he writes: "This book is about so-called reality as a result of communication. This thesis seems to put the cart before the horse, because reality obviously is what really is the case, and communication is only a way to describe and convey reality. It shall be explained that this is not the case; that the shaky framework of our daily perception of reality is actually delusional and that we spend all our time patching and shoring it up – even at the considerable risk of having to twist the facts so that they do not contradict our perception of reality, instead of adapting our view of the world to the undeniable circumstances. It shall also be shown that one's belief that there only is one reality is the most dangerous of all these self-deceptions; that there are, rather, numerous concepts of reality which can be very contradictory, and which are all the result of communication and not the reflection of eternal objective truths."

Radical constructivism is again the central subject matter of his next work "The Language of Change. Elements of therapeutic communication". *Similia similibus curantur* – similar is cured by similar, is chosen as the guiding theme of the book. But Paul also makes it clear: "All curatives can be abused, just as poison can be a curative." From the very start Watzlawick makes it clear that we always only think in pictures of reality and that we cannot talk of the reality²⁵. That we create our view of the world ourselves. And as a therapist he says: "Whoever comes to us for help suffers in some way from his view of the world, suffers from the unsolved contradiction between how things are and how they should be according to his view of the world." Paul sees two possibilities: active intervention, i.e. changing the behaviour, or modification of the view of the world, i.e. changing the attitude, the way of thinking. Fully in line with Epictetus, who said: "People are not disturbed by things, but by the view they take of them." Or, to quote Hamlet: "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." Or Jaspers: "The world is, what it is. Not the world but only our knowledge on it can be true or false." Paul's conclusion: man's view of the world is built with the right hemisphere of the brain. In order to change it, one has to use the language of the right hemisphere. He suggests the necessary techniques – either blocking

the left hemisphere or activating the right one. Many techniques are borrowed from the great Milton Erickson, since dreams and failures, fairy tales and myths, hypnosis and delusion are the "language" of the right hemisphere that he worked with so successfully. The therapeutic examples that Watzlawick presents – often gems of ingenuity – are ideal as creative tools for one's own everyday life: for example the intervention method of the worst fantasy²⁶: The client is asked not to talk of what he "really" fears, but to imagine the most disastrous and most unlikely consequence his problem could lead to. In order to illustrate a simple but ingenious therapeutic double-bind, Watzlawick quotes Bandler and Grinder on the woman who could not say "no":

1. The woman's symptom: "I cannot say no."
2. The therapeutic prescription: say "no" to all of the persons present in the room.
3. The underlying therapeutic double-bind: the woman has two alternatives – either to say "no" to every person present, or to say "no" to the therapist. Both will lead to the desired effect.

The passionate music lover, who could not play the piano himself when he was a child, responds to the critics of his approach at the end of the book: "The criterion is utilization – but not in the sense of the old joke: There is no such thing as piano playing; I tried it out myself several times, and nothing came of it." And once he said: "If we, my colleagues and I, really contributed something new, then only – to quote Newton – because we stood on the shoulders of giants. Bateson, our leader and first director Jackson, and the famous hypnotherapist Erickson – those were people who essentially, each one in his own way, entered uncharted waters."²⁷ The emigrant Viennese physician Heinz von Foerster is another one of Paul's giants – and with time becomes one of his rare friends.

International reputation: How real is real?

In the 1980s and 1990s the professor of the art of living Paul Watzlawick has gained widespread popularity. He is written about, invited round, criticised and honoured. This second phase of his work is characterized by his popular books, the books on constructivism, and especially the spread of his ideas by means of his many trips as a corporate consultant and speaker. Often his books are not understood the way he meant them to be; but his ideas are disseminated and many of his examples will gain common currency: such as the concept of the half-full-half-empty glass, the story of the hammer or of the elephants scared off by the man clapping his hands. Also his insight: one cannot not communicate. Paul comes to Europe to give lectures, people from Europe, often doctors, come to Palo Alto to attend his summer programs. One of Paul Watzlawick's central concerns is his notion of second-order reality, based on Heinz von Foerster's second-order cybernetics²⁸: The basic thesis says that for man there is no absolute reality for second-order-reality but only subjective reality. Often there are completely contradictory perceptions of reality, which we naively take for real reality. The first reality, first-order reality, refers to purely physical and therefore largely objectively determinable char-

acteristics of things, and thus either to questions of so-called common sense or of objective scientific procedures. Second order-reality relies on the attribution of sense and value to these things and hence on communication. In concrete terms: the first order-reality of gold, i.e. its physical characteristics, is fully known and can be verified at any time. The importance that gold plays in human life since primeval times, however, especially the fact that twice a day in an office in the City of London it is attributed a specific value (thus a very specific aspect of reality) and that this value attribution largely determines many other aspects of our reality, has little to do, if at all, with its physical properties. "But it is this other, second reality of gold that makes you rich or poor. (...) And in the area of this second-order reality it is absurd to dispute what is 'really' real," Paul emphasizes. And: "As has been said, too easily we lose sight of this difference, and are not aware of the existence of these two realities at all. We live by naively assuming that reality is how we see it, and everybody who sees it in a different way must be bad or mad. That I jump into the water to save a drowning person, can be objectively established; whether I do it out of human kindness or cheap showmanship, in order to top up my heavenly bank account, or because the drowning person is a millionaire, there is no objective proof, but only subjective interpretations. The actual delusion is the assumption, that there is a «real» reality of second order and – as the clinical psychotherapist believes – that 'normal people' are better versed in it than mentally ill people.²⁹" Because, according to the constructivist Paul Watzlawick: where there is no reality, there can be no distortion of reality.

"The specific aspect of the new point of view," as he points out in his book "Munchausen's Pigtail and other Essays", "is that it causes less suffering." Its name: radical constructivism. Its characteristic theme: That all we can ever know about the 'real' reality is – what it is not. He quotes an illustrative example of his constructivist colleague and friend Ernst von Glasersfeld. A ship's captain has to pass through a narrow strait in a dark, stormy night without any navigation aids. He is not familiar with the strait, he has no charts that would guide him. For this captain there are only two possibilities: either he passes through the strait and makes it to the safety of the open sea on the other side. Then all he knows is that the course he chose was in line with the unknown reality of the strait. He found a navigable route but he does not know if there were other perhaps shorter and less hazardous routes. If, on the other hand, he hits a rock and loses his ship and his life, then, at the last moment, he can at least be certain that the route he chose did not conform with the reality of the strait and that it was not the right one. In neither case does he actually know what the strait is like in the real and absolute sense.

"I believe that on our journey through life we are all like that captain." And: "If our view of the world matches, that is that our second-order reality does not crash painfully anywhere, we feel in harmony with our life, destiny, god, nature or whatever name we use, then we are able to deal with major unpleasantness with reasonable calm. If this feeling is missing, we fall into despair, fear, psychosis, or start thinking about suicide. The greatest mental and artistic achievements of mankind are obviously driven by this desire for harmony and certainty," according to the experienced therapist.³¹

Old age and death in Palo Alto

In the year 2000 the systemic-constructivist family therapist, multi-linguist and charismatic lecturer has to give up his transatlantic travelling activities due to old age. Nonetheless, he remains true to his office at the MRI to the end. His work, his books are his life; his life's work is in his books. The Zen-Buddhist key theme of the mystical breakthrough and discovery of the present moment was a continuous red thread through his publications and shaped his own life. Essentially he was a reserved person, and enjoyed peace and quiet when he was not appearing in public. He treasured the "great in the small", he was a master of complexity-reducing techniques and was convinced of the simple but powerful "as-if" therapy. A year before his death he marries for the second time and finally has to move out of his MRI office. He dies on the 31st of March, 2007 at the age of 85 in Palo Alto, leaving no children. His body is donated to science. Over his life he sold millions of books in order to disseminate his ideas and he never gave up his Austrian citizenship. His nieces commemorated the bearer of the Paracelsus ring of honour with an inscription on the family grave in Villach; his colleague Giorgio Nardone founded the Watzlawick ONLUS at the Centro di Terapia Strategica in Arezzo, and the Austrian Medical Chamber in Vienna introduced the Watzlawick ring of honour. The international author appreciated Goethe, who had written: "The meaning of life is life itself." And he often quoted the Buddhists: "The path is formed by treading it". Paul Watzlawick's path was, in my opinion, characterised by high flexibility, a courageous quest for knowledge and awareness, his sense of responsibility and his intuition. It was a life of change and ambitions until Paul had reached the present moment – the subject that should have been the title of his last book, a novel. He never wrote this book "The discovery of the present moment" but he dedicated his life to it. Finally, however, it became a book about his extraordinary life after all.

The first biography on Paul Watzlawick worldwide was published in June 2014: "Paul Watzlawick. Die Biografie. Die Entdeckung des gegenwärtigen Augenblicks" by Andrea Köhler-Ludescher (Huber Verlag Bern, 2014); see: <http://www.verlag-hanshuber.com/index.php/paul-watzlawick-die-biografie.html/>

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