

## **THE THREE-FOLD LEGACY OF WILLIAM GLASSER, M.D.**

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### **Abstract**

The genius of William Glasser, MD is reflected in his three-fold legacy. He presented both professional helpers and the lay public with a theory of human behavior, a practical delivery system for immediate implementation and a streamlined, efficient organization that sponsored a process for certification in the practice of reality therapy. The theory is an open system allowing for expansion and growth. It is also congruent with the findings of current neuroscience research. The delivery system provides the opportunity for innovations in its application. Since his death, the international organization continues to grow and to establish institutes throughout the world.

Surrounded by his wife Carleen and his son Martin, August 23, 2013 William Glasser, MD took his last breath and passed into eternity. He lived a full life serving others and contributing to the betterment of human beings around the world. My personal involvement with the William Glasser Institute through teaching and many other activities bears witness to my commitment and my focus on preserving and extending his legacy. This commitment began in 1986 as a member of his advisory board and subsequently as his personally appointed director of training (1988 – 2011). This article presents a summary of Dr. Glasser's three-fold legacy: choice theory, reality therapy, and a worldwide organization.

### **Overview**

In the 1960's when he began writing and lecturing, no one could have predicted that the seeds he was sowing would grow into a detailed and evidence supported process that would be applied far beyond its North American origins. Individuals and institutions continue to implement the principles of choice theory/reality therapy on virtually every continent in the world.

Throughout his life Dr. Glasser sought to demystify mental health and to create a path for people in the helping, educational, and managerial professions, as well as for the general public, to achieve a higher level of mental health by means of enhancing their relationships with friends, family, and society. He expressed his ideas in books, recordings, and lectures throughout the world. His listeners expressed astonishment at his non-technical, forthright language and the apparent simplicity of his ideas. However, he always stressed that though the ideas are simple, their implementation requires effort and a commitment to make more effective choices. His three-fold ingenious legacy consists in theoretical principles, a practical delivery system and a streamlined professional organization.

### **Legacy Number One: Choice Theory**

Reality therapy was developed out of Glasser's psychiatric practice in a mental hospital and a correctional institution. In order for it to receive the professional recognition it deserved, he believed this practical system needed a specific theory of human behavior to support it.

After searching for such a theory, he discovered control theory or control system theory as taught by William Powers (1973). He stated, "I was desperate for a theory when Powers came along" (Roy 2014, p. 183). This theory explains brain functioning with the analogy of a computer, the pre-eminent control system. It produces output as a result of input received. The work of Powers appeared to validate and explain the effectiveness of reality therapy.

Because he altered the original control theory by placing emphasis on human choice, Glasser renamed it choice theory (1998, 2011). His highly theoretical explanation of control system theory described in *Stations of the Mind* (1980) and the more practical theoretical explanation, *Control Theory* (1984) added scholarly authority and justification for the practice of reality therapy. Pre-eminent in choice theory is the principle that all motivation of human behavior springs from current innate needs and more specifically from human wants. Human needs and wants thus energize the behavioral system for the purpose of impacting the world so as to shape it in a very personal and internally satisfying manner. Consequently, the external world does not determine or coerce human beings to inexorably select one or another course of action. Human beings have choices that depend on current desires as well as perceptions of how to fulfill their needs. Therefore, choice theory differs from behaviorism on one hand and psychological determinism on the other.

### **Legacy Number Two: A Practical Internal-Control Delivery System**

Glasser's second contribution emerged from his experiences in mental health and corrections and preceded the development of choice theory. *Reality Therapy* (1965) summarized his early work and thinking that he continued to refine in subsequent years. Other applications included the sociological emphasis as presented in *The Identity Society* (1972). In this resource he described reality therapy as a 7-step process. Even in this early expression of reality therapy, the therapeutic or counseling relationship serves as the foundation for client change. He also taught that in the superstructure of skills and techniques self-evaluation occupies a prominent and even central place. In other words, clients alter behaviors, i.e., make more effective choices, if they feel connected with the helper and if they examine the effectiveness of their own chosen behaviors. He states, "No one changes his behavior away from failure unless first he is involved with someone – a therapist, a friend, a relative, a teacher – who he feels is worthwhile and who can make him believe that changing behavior is possible . . . he must be able to make a value judgment about his behavior that he can then act upon." He adds that only then has the client "established the basis for change" (pp. 119-120). Thus clients can formulate a plan of action that satisfies their internal longings, wants, and needs. Other teachers have added to his simple formulation. His early colleague Alex Bassin always taught, "Don't give up" as an 8<sup>th</sup> step. Wubbolding, (2000, 2011, 2017) expanded and further developed the original 8-steps with Dr. Glasser's endorsement (Wubbolding, 1991).

The use of reality therapy is inextricably linked to choice theory. Choice theory provides an explanation of how the human mind functions. Through reality therapy Glasser has given the world a comprehensive and understandable delivery system. The interconnection between theory and practice was explained by Dr. Glasser & Mrs. Carleen Glasser: "Choice theory is the train track and reality therapy is the train" (2008, p. 1). In practice, choice theory and reality therapy are now inseparable. The successful implementation of the theoretical principles formulated by Glasser requires understanding choice theory as well as

a wide range of skills for the efficacious practice of reality therapy. In teaching choice theory/reality therapy, a skilled instructor distinguishes between the train and the train track and yet communicates how they interface with each other. Educating students in the practice of reality therapy has undergone many extensions. For instance, Wubbolding has summarized reality therapy as the WDEP delivery system: Wants, Doing, self-Evaluation, and Planning (2000, 2011, 2017). Each letter represents a cluster of possible interventions with clients.

Trainers, consultants, counselors, therapists, educators, managers, parents, and others help students, clients, families, and employees explore their wants, their desires, their hopes, and their dreams. They also help define specific behaviors including actions, thinking, and feelings, followed by a fearless self-evaluation of the effectiveness of their behavioral choices, as well as the realistic attainability of their wants. The culmination of the process is practical, attainable, and mutually agreed upon plans. Clearly, reality therapy applies to counseling, the classroom, and larger organizations such as schools, businesses, and agencies. Schools applying choice theory and reality therapy on a school wide basis can work toward becoming a Glasser Quality School. For instance, the achievement of the title "Glasser Quality School" by the Yangeob High School under the tutelage of "the Glasser of Korea", Professor Rose Kim, represents the multicultural relevance of choice theory and reality therapy. The seeds planted by Glasser have indeed become trees that nourish people throughout the world.

This application of choice theory and reality therapy illustrates the universal relevance of Dr. Glasser's legacy and helps dispel the mistaken notion that reality therapy is usable only in western civilization. Wubbolding, Brickell, Imhof, Kim, Lojk and Al-Rashidi (2004) emphasized, "The evidence points toward the effectiveness of reality therapy with a wide range of cultures" (p. 227). Professor Kim has verified the existence of over 550 studies conducted by masters and doctoral level students exploring the effectiveness of choice theory and reality therapy with Korean people. Her unceasing attendance at national and international institute conferences illustrates one of her many contributions and her steadfast commitment to choice theory and reality therapy. Regardless of her successes, she continually seeks opportunities to infuse Dr. Glasser's ideas into Korean society. As she frequently says, "Over the mountains, more mountains." Dr. Glasser frequently recognized her as a loyal supporter and leader. She is a cherished colleague and one of the closest friends of my wife Sandie and me.

Further evidence of the Glasser genius is the activity of institutes and organizations throughout Asia, Australia, Europe, and the Middle East.

### **Legacy Number Three: William Glasser International**

The third component of Dr. Glasser's legacy is organizational in nature. He demonstrated his organizational genius by founding an institute originally known as the Institute for Reality Therapy. Now known as William Glasser International (WGI) with member organizations around the world, it serves as the certifying body for individuals seeking a high level of skills. He envisioned a streamlined organization with minimal levels of bureaucracy. He was the president, Linda Harshman the executive director, and he appointed me as his director of training to oversee the training programs, a post I served in from 1988 to 2011. To

illustrate the principle of lead management, he initiated an *elected* advisory board that provided him with suggestions for program development and other day-to-day issues. Closely connected with the institute is the *International Journal of Choice Theory and Reality Therapy*, inspired by Dr. Glasser and originally edited by Larry Litwack and now by Tom Parish. These three components: theory, practice, organization and one subcomponent have provided worldwide respect for William Glasser and his many contributions to mental health and education.

I can personally testify that professional people express a sense of increased respect when they learn that Dr. Glasser fired up a wide range of professional people to contribute journal articles, write books, sponsor conferences, develop national and regional institutes, and conduct cross-cultural research studies supporting the practice of reality therapy, thereby enhancing his legacy.

In summary, Dr. Glasser's legacy is three-fold: the formulation of an internal control theoretical system known as choice theory; the delivery system, reality therapy, now represented in most counseling textbooks and encyclopedias as well as in books on education. Thirdly, and often overlooked, was his organizational vision and pre-eminent contribution – The Institute for Reality Therapy, now known as William Glasser International. Of special significance is the structure of the organization founded by Glasser. He desired a streamlined system of management. The William Glasser Institute (as it was known for decades) reflected his organizational genius and can be summarized by the famous phrase: KIS – Keep It Simple.

### **The Future of the Legacy**

The future of choice theory will include an interface with neuroscience. For example, the world famous neuroscientist Daniel Siegel (2012) defined the human mind as "an embodied and relational process that regulates the flow of energy and information" (p. 43-4). This definition includes the mind as existing not only in the human brain but also in the human body and even in a person's behavior as it relates to others. This concept appears to provide a basis for Glasser's choice theory.

The future of reality therapy includes an expansion of the procedures, the incorporation of skills and techniques derived from other systems but congruent with Glasser's legacy. Adding to the credibility of the monumental work of Dr. Glasser and to the contributions of the people he inspired will be the elevation of reality therapy from "evidence-supported" to "evidence-based."

The organization started by William Glasser and expanded by his followers supports individuals and groups as they train counselors, educators, therapists, and others throughout the world. It will struggle to avoid the fate of many similar organizations that fail to resist the centrifugal force that often results in organizational fragmentation. A healthy organization and scholarly individuals will do everything possible to "keep the flag flying."

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