

## FROM VENTURA TO CORONA: A LIFE THAT MATTERED

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### Abstract

In the Glasser biography, *Champion of Choice* (2014), Roy suggests that William Glasser's career can be divided into three important and distinct eras – The Era of Reality Therapy, the Era of Control Theory, and the Era of Choice Theory. Each of these eras represents a significant piece of Glasser's story. This article focuses on some of the "takeaways" from Glasser's life that we can keep in mind as we continue to honor his legacy.

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### The Era of Reality Therapy 1965-1977

It could be said that The Institute for Reality Therapy took off the moment Billy Sharpe touched his finger to William Glasser's front door bell on an afternoon in late 1967. Like a kid pushing the ignition switch to propel his model rocket into the sky, Billy Sharpe pressing Glasser's door bell ignited a lift off for Glasser's Institute, and especially for the Educator Training Center, that would quickly have an impact on teachers and schools across the country. The door bell ringing didn't startle William or Naomi (his wife of 46 years who passed away from cancer in 1992). They were expecting Mr. Sharpe and knew why he was coming. Mr. Sharpe had come bearing a gift, a big gift, and Dr. and Mrs. Glasser were not in agreement as to whether or not the gift should be accepted.

Billy Sharpe had flown into Los Angeles that morning from Chicago, where he worked for the Clement Stone Foundation, a group on the lookout for ways to improve both the mental health system and the field of education. Glasser popped up on their radar screen due to the overwhelming success of *Reality Therapy* (1965). In the Glasser's living room, Sharpe explained that the foundation wanted to "help Glasser get his ideas into the nation's schools faster and on a wider scale" (Glasser, 2014, p.132). The foundation's help, Sharpe explained, would be a grant to the tune of \$300,000. (Keep in mind that the average medium household income in 1967 was \$7,200). Although Billy Sharpe emphasized that the Glassers could use the money as they saw fit, Naomi didn't like the feel of it and was suspicious that strings would be attached. Donald O'Donnell, a trusted friend and advisor to Glasser who was present at the meeting, sided with Naomi and also advised against accepting the grant. Even though Glasser loved and respected Naomi and Donald, he went with his vision for what the money could accomplish and took the grant. His instincts were correct as soon thereafter the Educator Training Center became a viable force for positive change throughout the U.S. and beyond. (See Table 1 for a listing of key dates in the history of his organization.)

For Glasser, using the grant money was not so much about spending it, as it was about investing it. *Reality Therapy* (1965) was like a mental health shot heard around the world, yet few people knew what the author of the book had worked through to be able to fire this figurative shot. Few people knew, for instance, about his return to university after completing a degree in chemical engineering, to then complete a degree in psychology; few people knew about his efforts to become a medical doctor; few people knew about his rejection as a clinical instructor by the UCLA Department of Psychiatry, and their refusal to refer patients to him upon his attempts to start a private practice; few people knew about the reasons that prompted him to accept a position as a consulting psychiatrist at a prison school for girls that was 65 miles away from where he lived, a position in which others were not interested; and few people knew that he worked for almost two years at the prison school before being paid by the California Youth Authority. Money was so tight during the start of his time at the Ventura School for Girls that he borrowed 134 pennies from his

children's piggy bank for gas. Having worked through these challenges, and truly knowing the value of even a penny, Glasser was not of a mind to view the Clement Stone Foundation's money flippantly. The money would be used strategically for the greatest effect. It would be invested in teachers and students. (Click the Mama G link for a wonderful story from Glasser's first day on the job at Ventura.)

[Mama G](#)

**Table 1: Timeline of the Institute's Development**

1967	Founded The Institute for Reality Therapy Received \$300,000 grant from the Clement Stone Foundation
1968	Educator Training Center established
1977	Glasser begins to study Control Theory
1981	Advisory Board of Directors of The Institute for Reality Therapy is formed <i>The International Journal of Reality Therapy</i> is launched
1984	Glasser publishes <i>Take Effective Control of Your Life</i> , which reflects his own version of Control Theory
1987	Glasser develops the training and selection process whereby the Institute's faculty could become qualified as Senior Faculty Bob Wubbolding becomes the first director of training and professional development for the Institute
1994	The Institute name is changed to The Institute for Control Theory, Reality Therapy & Quality Management
1996	The term Choice Theory replaces Control Theory The Institute name is changed to The William Glasser Institute

### **The Era of Control Theory 1977-1996**

Chicago played a significant part in Glasser's story and the evolution of his ideas and the organization that taught those ideas. Billy Sharpe, under the direction of the Clement Stone Foundation, had flown to Los Angeles from Chicago; ten years later William Glasser flew from Los Angeles to Chicago in pursuit of an answer he had been looking for since the creation of Reality Therapy. Glasser was convinced of Reality Therapy's effectiveness, yet he was frustrated that he lacked a foundation or framework that explained why his theory worked. In 1976, a friend alerted him to a book that described something called *Control Theory*. As Glasser began to learn about Control Theory he came to appreciate its potential as an explanation for the effectiveness of Reality Therapy. Glasser visited William Powers, the author of *Behavior: The Control of Perception* (1973), in Chicago. Glasser, recalling this trip, shared with me [Roy] that he "was desperate for a theory when Powers came along." As a result of their visits and their collaboration, a new era, the Era of Control Theory, had begun.

Rather than being a small tweak to support the practice of Reality Therapy, Control Theory represented an entire new set of core beliefs, a profound way of seeing the world, and, in particular, of explaining human motivation and behavior. Control Theory explained that people behave for totally personal reasons, reasons that come out of a remarkable internal guidance system. As a result, Control Theory challenged the tenets of behaviorism and its accompanying stimulus-control theory. Control Theory acknowledged that people are influenced by external circumstances, but it strongly rejected the idea that these external circumstances controlled or could predict how a person would act or respond. People act or behave based on unique personal beliefs and needs.

Glasser saw in the worldview of Control Theory a paradigm on which he could build. Much came out of Glasser's work with Powers, theoretically and organizationally. A more complete story of these developments can be found in Glasser's biography (Roy, 2014). However I share an excerpt here that reminds us of just how much came from Powers. His work with Powers would lead to the –

" . . . introduction of new terms and concepts that would remain with Glasser and appear frequently in his writing for the rest of his career. For instance, Powers helped Glasser more clearly see that the only person we can control is ourselves, a belief statement that would later become the first in a list of Glasser's control theory axioms. From Powers' concept of redirection and reorganization, Glasser developed his view of organized and creative behaviors. The famous 'stopping at a stoplight' and 'answering a telephone' scenarios as examples of our freedom to choose were from Powers, as was the idea of a thermostat as an example of our personal inner control mechanism. It was Powers who came up with the idea of an internal world, which Glasser later defined as our quality world. The significance of this internal world led Glasser to embrace verbs more fully – for instance, a person is depressing or choosing to depress, rather than a person is depressed. And because of BCP's charts and diagrams depicting brain activity and human behavior, it was Powers who inspired Glasser to develop his own chart on how the brain works. To be sure, William Powers had a significant influence on William Glasser." (Roy, 2014, p. 197).

Rather than simply reviewing the importance of, and the history of, Control Theory, my point here is to emphasize Glasser's pursuit of truth and his willingness to adapt himself and his organization to new ideas. When I interviewed colleagues who were a part of the organization as the major shift toward Control Theory took place, they admitted that they pushed back against Glasser's intended changes. They explained that they had been trained in Reality Therapy, most of them at significant expense, and they had been using and teaching Reality Therapy for years. Now Glasser comes along and says we are going to emphasize and teach things differently. In hindsight we know now that ultimately the organization embraced Control Theory, but at the time it was frustrating for many and even traumatizing for a few.

The shift to Control Theory is a testimony to Glasser's vision and creativity, although it also became, at least Glasser's version of Control Theory, the unassailable bedrock of future organizational values and practices. This summarizes a healthy and predictable tension with which the William Glasser International (WGI) organization will have to continually address. To what extent are Glasser's views seen as permanent truths that the WGI organization guards and protects and to what extent are members allowed, maybe even encouraged, to explore new directions and interpretations? Glasser frequently, not always, modeled a fresh view of things, constantly on the lookout for the cutting edge. Will that spirit continue now that he is gone or will we remain where he left us?

In spite of Control Theory being a major emphasis since the late 70s, the Institute for Reality Therapy's name was not changed to reflect that until 1994, when the institute became known as The Institute for Control Theory, Reality Therapy & Quality Management.

## **The Era of Choice Theory 1996-2013**

Continuing to model a fresh view of things, Glasser responded to suggestions that an overall name change of his psychological model was needed. In 1996, during the summer annual convention, he officially announced that he would no longer be using the term Control Theory; henceforth he declared that his set of beliefs would be known as Choice Theory.

And although the name of the institute had been changed just two years earlier, Glasser decided to change it again, this time to The William Glasser Institute. He felt this change would be clearer, as his name had become as well-known as his beliefs, and that it was consistent with other psychologists who had labeled their organizations similarly – e.g. The Alfred Adler Institute and the Milton H. Erickson Institute.

Beginning in 1998 with the publication of *Choice Theory: A New Psychology of Personal Freedom*, Glasser entered one of the most productive periods of his life. Between 1998 and 2008, Glasser authored or co-authored with his wife Carleen (whom he married in 1995) ten books, one booklet, and numerous journal articles. He seemed energized by the changes in his organization and was fully focused on explaining and clarifying the ideas that would form his legacy into the future.

Along with the name changes already mentioned, two additional changes in 1996 were more controversial – the first being Glasser's decision to reject all school discipline plans, and the second being his decision to have faculty members sign an annual agreement that they would only teach his ideas in the way that he stated them, taught them, or endorsed them. Significant change usually does not come without drama, and these two additional changes led to frustration, hurt, and even schism for some. That Glasser felt so strongly about these areas should cause all of us to really consider the issues as he saw them. The biography (Roy, 2014) dedicates an entire chapter to the events leading up to and following the convention of 1996, but for now the takeaway is that Glasser possessed strong resolve when he believed in something. In fact, during his 1996 convention speech he said that if, because of these organizational changes, he had to go it alone, he would.

In his 1996 decisions we see Glasser modeling firmness and setting clear boundaries, while in his 1981 decisions relating to the addition of Control Theory he modeled openness, exploration, and flexibility. Not all were pleased with his Control Theory direction, as it called on the organization to look at things differently and nudged some out of their comfort zones. Similarly, not all were pleased with the boundaries coming out of the '96 convention, with some even feeling like the boundaries were coercive. But in both cases it must be remembered that people always had a choice. Whether seeking new vistas to point his organization toward, or seeking compliance from organization members regarding a boundary he saw as essential, Glasser absolutely defended an individual's freedom to make a choice. This, as I stated before, will be an appropriate tension as the William Glasser International continues into the future. Such tension is not necessarily negative. It simply has to do with what being loyal to William Glasser and his beliefs looks like. Does loyalty to Glasser look like guarding boundaries or seeking new vistas, or a healthy combination of both?

Toward the end of his career Glasser stated that he felt the survival of the institute depended on its ability to position Choice Theory as a public health solution. Were he still with us I am sure he would be throwing his energy into this cause. For him it has always been about taking the mystery out of psychiatry or psychology, so that anyone could access the ideas that contribute to good mental health. In the same way that people have a basic understanding of how to get and stay in good physical shape, he wanted people to have a basic understanding of how to achieve and maintain good mental health. Whether we are seeking new vistas or guarding old boundaries this is the challenge before us.

I was very pleased that an event took place in time to be added as the Epilogue in the biography. The Epilogue involved a *What* and a *Where*, both of them important. The *What* was a commendation by the California State Senate "recognizing and thanking Dr. William Glasser for a lifetime of achievements and meritorious service to humanity." The *Where* had to do with the place and the event at which the award was conferred. An excerpt from the biography captures the moment –

"Glasser had received previous awards in front of large audiences of fellow professionals. This award, though, the California State Senate resolution, was conferred during a graduation ceremony, held July 26, 2013, inside the California Institution for Women, the women's prison just outside of Corona, California. The setting was smaller than the national conferences in which Glasser had received his other awards, yet somehow it felt more right, more significant. Those in the prison gymnasium on that day were there to see 112 women graduate with a choice theory certificate of internal empowerment coaching, as designated by Loyola Marymount University. Les Johnson, the Director of the Choice Theory Connection Program, gave the award to Carleen Glasser, who attended the graduation on her husband's behalf. Glasser was struggling with pneumonia symptoms and the respiratory issues that ultimately took his life.

It is so fitting that the last award Glasser received was given to him at a women's prison. He began his career at the Ventura School for Girls, a correctional facility of the California Youth Authority. Now, less than a month before he died, he was recognized for his work throughout the state of California and beyond, and especially for his work right there in the prison.

As of September, 2013, 618 women inmates had completed choice theory training. Over the last four years, 175 of the 618 have been paroled. Of the 175 parolees, only five of them have been re-incarcerated. That is a recidivism rate of 2.9 percent, compared to the average statewide recidivism rate of 70 percent. I am convinced that nothing would have made Glasser happier than the women parolees successfully returning to society. Knowing him, he would have wanted to talk with the five who returned to prison and help them to set up a new success plan. One of the keys to reality therapy is, Never Give Up.

As we each work to advance Glasser's legacy, may that be our mantra as well.

## References

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## Biography

Jim Roy is the author of two books relating to Choice Theory, the first being *Soul Shapers: A Better Plan for Parents and Educators*, and the second being the William Glasser biography *Champion of Choice*. Jim also writes a Choice Theory blog, which you can access at <http://thebetterplan.org>. You can contact him at [jimroyglasserbio@gmail.com](mailto:jimroyglasserbio@gmail.com).





**Board Meeting, 2002, El Segundo, CA**

Front Row, left to right: Pat Robey; Linda Harshman; Bill Glasser; Carleen Glasser; Susan Katz

Back Row, left to right: David Jackson; Tom Smith; David Dymont; Jean Seville Suffield; Bob Wubbolding; Bill Abbott; Bob Rapp; Nancy Muir Dees; Al Katz

(Photo courtesy of Pat Robey)



**2004 International Conference in Chicago, Illinois, USA**

Al Katz giving his traditional toast to Bill and Carleen on the "anniversary" of their marriage, which was celebrated each year at the International Conference.

(Photo courtesy of Pat Robey)

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