

# Jon Frederickson

## The Science of Art

Growing up in Clear Lake, a small town in Iowa, Jon Frederickson spent most free afternoons and weekends working in his father's blacksmith shop. Effectively an apprenticeship, his training focused on the technical precision and skill required for impeccable work in sawing, drilling, welding, braising, and forging. "In this sense, my father was my first teacher," he recalls now. "Every Saturday through the school year, and every summer vacation, I was watching him demonstrate excellence so I could learn the technique myself."

Jon recognized the same cycle of demonstration and repetition in high school, when he became an accomplished French horn player. His remarkable music career spanned college and extended into adulthood, when he became a professional musician, and though he had come a long way from the blacksmith shop, the recipe for success had remained the same. "When playing an instrument, you can have a lot of great ideas, but your work is nothing without technical mastery," he points out. "It's exceptionally technique-oriented. If I had trouble playing a phrase, the teacher would demonstrate it, and I'd repeat it back. There was constant attention to the tiny details that lead to true mastery."

When he decided to pursue his lifelong interest in therapy, however, things were different. His specific questions were met with vague answers, and his technical lines of inquiry were all met with brick walls. Finally, his professor lent voice to the issue. "He told me I was too focused on technique, when psychotherapy is more of an art," Jon recounts. "I was playing as an extra in the National Symphony Orchestra at the time, and I knew a little about art. I knew it wasn't vague and wholly intuitive, as many in the therapy field would have you believe. There is a tremendous amount of technical mastery that's needed, and a

number of critical decision points along the way. It was like a light bulb going off in my head. I knew that true excellence in art and craft has a science to it. I wanted to learn and teach psychotherapy like my father taught blacksmithing, and like my teachers taught music—through repetition, diligence, and metrics for success."

The data spoke to Jon's observation, with success rates in psychotherapy outcome research remaining relatively stagnant through the last fifty years. While other experts—chess masters, baseball pitchers, and world class surgeons—have grown more effective in recent decades thanks to advancements in technology, analytics, and training, psychotherapy has been held back by privacy and protectiveness—not by concerns around the confidential information of patients, but more by an innate aversion in therapists to videotaping and sharing their work. "Psychoanalysis, which I'm trained in, is a fairly conservative group within psychotherapy, and when I first considered videotaping sessions,

I was nervous for the confidentiality of the patient," Jon says. "But then I realized I was more nervous about violating my own confidentiality, making my work a hundred percent vulnerable to viewers. When people see your technique like that, their criticisms are systematic, detailed, and incontrovertible. There's no way to hide—you are held completely accountable for your work."

Yet in that vulnerability and scrutiny lies the power of Jon's approach. Intensive short-term dynamic psychotherapy, or ISTDP, is a form of therapy that utilizes video-recorded research to develop and highlight empirical techniques, and its success is a testament to the idea that there is science in the art of the work. "In reviewing the tape from a session, I can see exactly where a patient and I get stuck, and I can assess how to move forward," Jon says. "It's a form of quality control. Top performers are always getting



feedback, and these videotapes are a crucial tool for teaching students to recognize their blind spots in assessing the physiological signs of anxiety."

Now the founder of ISTDP Institute, an organization focused on alleviating human suffering through psychotherapy, psychotherapy training, and supervision, Jon continues to invest his life's work in elevating the standards of his field, dedicated to transforming a profession that can transform the lived experience for people around the globe. Recognizing that pain from illness, loss, and death is a natural part of life, ISTDP focuses on the alleviation of suffering. Jon himself became acutely aware of the difference between the two at age five, when he was in his bedroom taking a nap with his younger brother and sister. When he heard a strangled choking noise coming from across the room, he looked to see his brother tangled in the cords of the curtains. He jumped out of bed and rushed over to help, but he wasn't able to save him—his brother died in his arms.

The next 24 hours were a blur, with the arrival of the emergency crew and the somber faces of the neighbors who cared for Jon and his sister through the night. Through the funeral the next day, his worldview took on the endlessness that comes from realizing that some questions in life have no answers. "At five years old, I found myself confronted with death in that profound way, and began wondering where people go when they die," he remembers. "What does it mean that some people disappear and we don't see them again? What is the meaning of life and death? What are the connections? I saw my parents go through this devastating loss, and through these many questions I was exploring, I wanted to help those who were suffering."

Growing up in a town of only 6,000 residents, where everyone knew everyone and lighthearted jokes were traded with each handshake, Jon had an intimate window into the tragedies that befell members of his community. Yet paradoxically, there was no outlet to talk about the events and the feelings they induced. When a neighbor committed suicide, or when a friend's son died in a tragic tractor accident, the town maintained a stiff upper lip and put one foot in front of the other. "I remember one visit to my uncle's house when I was twelve, and I overheard my father say that he had almost killed himself many times, but suicide was a coward's way out,"

Jon recalls. "It really affected me, realizing people just had to gut it out because there was no help to be had. When I came to DC many years later, it felt like I was arriving from a different planet, there were so many services available. I've remained very mindful that, in this country and around the world, therapy isn't as available as it is in urban areas."

Jon's grandfather had been a blacksmith from Denmark who immigrated to Iowa and set up a shop there. He died in 1943, but Jon's father returned home from the World War II and reopened the shop. As a small boy, Jon would sweep up, take measurements, set up the jigs, and slice iron. By first grade, he could sharpen the sickles of hay mowers used by farmers. When he was in sixth grade, his father suffered an injury in the shop that meant he couldn't work for two weeks, so Jon ran things on his own. By high school, it was clear that he was being primed to run the shop one day—perhaps after several years of community college.

Though he saw no problem with this future, Jon had always had a remarkable studiousness about him. Neither of his parents had gone to college, yet he was a voracious reader, spending all of his earnings from the shop on books. He had a particularly compelling English teacher at his Catholic high school who posed an extensive reading list to the class, requiring that every student pick twenty books to read each semester. Amongst the Shakespeare plays and existential pieces, Jon happened to come across the works of Erich Fromm. "In reading *Escape from Freedom* and *The Sane Society*, I was struck by the brilliance of economics and philosophy woven into psychoanalysis," Jon recounts. "I thought it might be cool to become a psychoanalyst someday."

At the time, however, Jon's talent lay in music. Amidst blacksmithing and a stellar academic performance, he had been inspired to practice his horn relentlessly by the remarkable kindness of his high school band director. As luck would have it, he began to show real talent for the instrument, making all-state band during his sophomore year. When he was a junior, he became the first horn in the all-state band, and he began paying for his own classes with a talented teacher in Cedar Falls, Iowa—an eighty-mile drive from his home. The teacher convinced him to apply to the National Music Camp that summer, where he was awarded a scholarship. "It was the first

summer I didn't have to work," he laughs. "For eight weeks, I was in this amazing place, surrounded by music and people from all over the world. It was a great experience, and I wanted to get out there in that world."

Fortunately, when Jon's horn teacher heard he wasn't planning to pursue music through college, he hopped in a car and paid a visit to Jon's parents, ultimately convincing them that Jon had real talent. "He really changed my life," Jon affirms. "He's living proof that you can make a difference, person by person. I don't know if he fully realized what he did for me, but he changed the course of a life." With that, Jon started studying at the University of Minnesota, continuing his classes at Indiana University and then finishing at the University of Washington. Upon completing his undergraduate degree, he became a freelance musician in Washington, D.C. When an extra horn player was needed in the Opera House Orchestra or the National Symphony, Jon was ready to take the stand. It was in this capacity, drifting from engagement to engagement, that Jon met Kathleen, the oboist who would become his wife. She was also a freelance musician, and they dreamed of getting into the same orchestra.

The National Symphony had five relevant openings over the next several years, and Jon and Kathleen made it to the finalist stage each time, but neither of them landed the job. Finally, as Jon decided he was tired of freelancing, a new thought dawned on him: what if Kathleen continued to try out for orchestras, while he went back to graduate school to become a therapist like he had wanted? With that, at age 28, he enrolled at Catholic University and played concerts every night to help cover the costs.

Jon graduated from the Washington School of Psychiatry in 1982 and worked for four years at the American University Counseling Center before going into private practice full-time. He developed some prominence throughout the D.C. area, teaching at the Washington School of Psychiatry and presenting frequently. By chance, he happened to attend a class in 2000, in which the speaker showed his work using ISTDP. "As soon as I saw his presentation, I was dying to know everything about it," Jon avows. "I had never traveled overseas for a conference before, but I promptly signed up for an ISTDP conference in Italy. I thought it was incredible; I couldn't believe

patients were improving so quickly." Empowered by his belief in the philosophy, Jon approached one expert and asked to study with her. He then approached one of the leaders of the conference and asked to host the next one in D.C. "I was going to make this happen," he affirms.

With the supervision of leaders in the field, and with the guidance of ISTDP experts in Montreal, Jon found his own effectiveness improving dramatically. He had an opportunity to present his work at a 450-person conference in Denmark, with attendees from all over the world. "I was presenting the case of a dissociative patient—someone many people would have given up on as untreatable," he says. "But I showed my videotape, which demonstrated a pretty dramatic change in him." When the presentation ended and the crowd honored him with a standing ovation, Jon realized he had turned a corner. Having worked tirelessly in relative anonymity for 25 years, he was suddenly a superstar, receiving invitations to present all over Europe. "How does the son of a blacksmith end up presenting his research at Oxford University?" he says. "My life exploded with an entirely new career, and ever since, I've spent over two months each year training people abroad."

The training element of his work is crucial, magnifying the potential for positive impact exponentially. Indeed, research indicates that a significant percentage of therapists actually harm patients, so he sought prospects for raising the bar of proficiency by disseminating training materials to others around the world. With this vision, he launched the institute in 2009 as a way to train trainers, educate stakeholders, host webinars, sell books, and make information available. "I wanted to help as many people as possible by leveraging the internet and my time," he says. "Now, through the institute, I have a team of six people who help host webinars and conferences, and a core group of 12 people doing trainings all over Europe."

With a leadership reach that spans oceans and continents, Jon's influence is powered by inspiration. "In teaching others about my work, I show them what I believe in, what we do, and what we see," he says. "If people want to do the same thing, I invite them to join me and offer them a viable and verifiable path forward. I'm always struck by the fact that most people really long to do something meaningful. The only question we really care about answering is, can we actually

help this person we're seeking to help?"

Though his wife, Kathleen, has continued to invest her passion in music, the inspiration that fuels her has the same power as the dedication that drives Jon, allowing them to understand each other on the most fundamental of levels. "I'm truly blessed by this woman," he says. "To be a professional musician in the Opera House Orchestra, she has to practice three hours a day, even on vacation, so she totally understands what psychotherapy means to me. She understands that I could never treat it as a job, or just a way to make money. Some of my colleagues think I'm crazy because I'm always working or reading about the field, but she knows. We're two people incredibly passionate about what we do, and incredibly excited for each other that we've been able to find so much success in our respective careers."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Jon emphasizes the importance of pursuing meaning in work. "It's kind of this idea of having a vocation," he explains. "Too few people think about what their vocation is, and too many people do work that's not really meaningful to them. It's a hollow point in their life. I would urge people to find something that's meaningful to them, because passion, more than money, will make you happy. Even if it takes a while to find what's meaningful to you, give your life the natural time it needs—it's worth the time and energy to find it."

Beyond this, Jon underscores emotional intelligence as the best predictor of success,

focusing on persistence as a key element often overlooked. "As a youngster, I remember turning 25 and cursing the day because I hadn't achieved anything yet," he says. "I didn't realize that success would come with the next 25 years of persistence. I had gotten on my path—now it was time to work my tail off and remember that the race goes to the long-distance runner, the person who's willing to pursue passion and work hard everyday. In many ways, success is about the discipline to follow through. It's about dreaming without limitations, but firmly grounding those visions in the empirical observation that creates real, lasting, life-changing results."

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*President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit [www.BernhardtWealth.com](http://www.BernhardtWealth.com) and [Gordon's Blog](#).*

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