

January 2000 Newsletter

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January 31, 2000

This would have been Dr. Bowen's 87th birthday. After WWII, as a young physician studying at the Menninger Institute, Dr. Bowen began to question the current paradigm of psychiatry. How could one integrate new information about the family with a theory that focused only on the individual? In addition he saw that focusing on what was wrong with people, diagnosis, lead to even more problems. One of his goals became to "conceptualize emotional illness as a product of that part of man that he shares with the lower forms of life." Dr. Bowen opened up his theoretical ideas to live and grow in interactive biological systems. In that spirit this edition is focused on the rules that guide behavior at the various levels in all emotional systems; ant colonies, human families and organizations. There are similarities.

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Rules rule.

If there are rules that rule, then any living system can offer glimpses of the predictable patterns of behavior that must emerge, given "x" conditions. Much of life unfolds in patterns thoughtlessly shaping relationship preferences. Can we be more aware of these forces? Would this give us the gift of choice?

Are there similar rules that guide behavior for ant colonies, the human families and organizations?

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Adapting and Fitness

Now then I am going to put ants and their emotional system on the back burner, just for a moment. It may be too big a jump. It's enough to know that at least 4,000 generations of humans have been pushing and pulling each other just to form little tribes now called families.

Humans seem to have it over the ants. We can reflect and choose. Why at times we act civilized. We have complex languages. Well, I will grant you that we may not yet know how much we rely on pure chemical signals, but lets not talk about love, just yet. Yes, ants do observe and react to what the others do in building complex colonies. Yes, ants do the signaling thing too. Signals from the larger group tell the individual ant what job they need to do to fill the gap. Can you hear them signaling? "Come close." "Go away." "Do your job." "This job is mine."

So what if we are the new species on the block? If we humans could be better observers of ants it might just help us to momentarily see our near and dear forming a system. But then perhaps it is easier to think of ants signaling rather than something that our parents and our children do to us, or worse yet something that we all do to one another.

Adaptability is how we got here. It is habit. It reflects our past. Past patterns can be influenced by awareness that allows us to change our behavior to better fit with changing conditions.

Fitness is the now process. The future is open to the flexible. Now then just how does one sense the changing conditions?

For ants fitness may be more of a random process. But those ants that can sense rapid environmental alteration, their nests survive at higher rates than those of the slow learners. The same holds for humans.

The more fit the individual, the family or the organization, the better the adjustment to changing conditions. Fitness requires more than luck to be sustained. The awareness of how people and things effect one another, seeing emotional connections, is a developing skill. Humans have learned to reflect on random events and predict patterns. We can learn from our best or worst predictions and thereby make better guesses in the future.

To predict well one has to become a reasonable detached observer. Wishing and wanting are not good traits for an observer of nature. If choice is more than an accident or perhaps a dream, then humans and other observing species are constrained by the ability to see the system' s rules without blame or shame.

Developing higher levels of functioning and making more mature choices seem to be included in Dr. Bowen's concept of differentiation of self. The observation was that if

and when one person could function at a more thoughtful level, eventually the whole system would reorganize.

Fitness is necessary as old adaptations only work for so long. Changes happen. Often we are not prepared. We gradually become aware. Like ants we change when the pressure is on.

The capacity to sense what works and what does not work is built into us at deep levels. Can we open up to our own capacity to know and sense our own internal guides?

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Documenting differentiation

When Dr. Bowen went to head a research project on schizophrenia at the National Institutes of Health in the early 1950's, he designed the research tools to observe and record behavioral shifts and the changes in relationships.

Initially little sense could be made of these observations as most observers were trained to see through the lens of Freudian theory. Gradually the staff learned to observe patterns without diagnosing and interpreting individual's motives.

This paradigm shift made it possible to see a new order of things. Now we take the theory of the family as an interactive unit for granted. Not enough has been done to prove the theory and so more research is necessary. Each advocate for Bowen Theory has to temper his or her desire to have this be the final theory by putting observations to the research test.

Research made it possible to see that the same relationship patterns existed in so called "normal" families as those that existed in families where one person had been diagnosed as schizophrenic. Symptomatic relationships were simply more intense versions of a basic pattern. The basic observation is that people put pressure on one another to change by the automatic use of distance, conflict, over involvement and symptoms. People and ants adapt to these "demands" or "expectation" often without even knowing they are under pressure to change.

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Lending and Borrowing and the Loss of Self

It was a shocking observation that a person's functioning could be stabilized by lending or borrowing emotional energy from others. Over time it became clear that the rate of

borrowing had been established by some kind of need or sensitivity developed in the past.

The old ways of obtaining energy, that have solidified into relationship patterns, can change. One person can slowly, thoughtfully extricate a self from this primal ooze. One person can be different with the important others. One person can be more self directed, more aware of the effect of their behavior on others.

Psychoanalytic theory had pointed to the intense interdependency in the mother-child relationship. Initially only mothers and the symptomatic child lived in the hospital. As the larger system slowly came into view the fathers moved onto the ward at NIH. Then it became possible to see significant changes.

Dr. Bowen noted the process in "Family Therapy in Clinical Practice" (page 14).

"Both mothers and patients seemed to be in the same helpless bind and remained so until the father could firmly establish himself as a person in the family."

I like metaphors. They are like egg on your face, easy to see. Think about humans as eggs. In very regressed families people are like scrambled eggs. There is little or no ability of one to separate out from the others.

We are all vulnerable to these mix-ups. One important person says they want something and the others become less sure of what they want or where they stand on the issue. It's a system of interlocking eggs. Or perhaps it's just the importance of the other person to us.

It's hard to be a separate egg. It's automatic to feel the anxiety of being different. In this anxiety we can all become vulnerable to reacting rather than being able to reflect on the nature of the signals that the other is sending.

This inability to be a separate egg was later referred to as the undifferentiated family ego mass.

Most people know this. In fact people often say that dependency creates the potential for anger and hate. Look at the literature or the movies.

LOVE and Just Wanting You to be Me at the Movies

One recent movie that portrayed this kind of intense, symbiotic relationship that went from a positive love state to hate and death was "The Talented Mr. Ripley." Movies do not have time to show us the complex system that gives love its edge. But we know it is a deeply rooted process.

In the movie or on the hospital ward, there is an expressed need to be close to another person. Mr. Ripley says he would rather be a pretender than to be a nobody. These rules say

- 1) You are important and therefore I am not.
- 2) I must have you as mine or I die.

Comfort and Closeness

Watching family members on the ward there would be a rigid "closeness-distance cycle."

As physical closeness increased peoples behavior became disturbed. Rules could easily be broken.

The anxiety about one's identity increases when pressure from an important person is applied. The pressure can be to leave or come closer or to perform in any way.

How do we become aware of these rules and try to expand the emotional room for others to grow and develop?

Pressure and Coping

In a family as in a business people need to rely on one another to do tasks. Pressure is going to be applied. How does a family or an organization cope with this pressure?

Those who are more emotionally mature have it easy. They can decipher the signals and tell if someone is putting too much pressure on them. Then it is not so hard to find a compromise that enables cooperation to exist.

For those who live in tight worlds, there is little ability to see the relationship sensitivity. When pressure is applied, negative outcomes can be expected.

Jumping into Others Ego Boundaries

The following is a simple example of a system under pressure. A mother needs a child to make the bed. Perhaps a new baby has just been born. There is a bit more pressure on everyone to help out a bit. When the pressure is on the child refuses to cooperate. Often the child senses the anxiety or the uncertainty in the parents. The mother is anxious, often thinking stuff like; "perhaps I did not ask it the right way." The anxiety in both the mother and the child escalates. No one is sure where he or she stands.

What kind of eggs are they? To add to the confusion the father walks into the room and attempts to solve the problem by telling them both what to do. Now they are all scrambled eggs. Solving the problem for others can escalate the insecurity and anxiety in all three people.

In both organizations and families it is easy for anxiety to escalate about who is responsible for what.

Here are four simple rules that may be useful to begin to sort out this question.

1. Please try to calm down before deciding who is responsible for what.
2. Please keep relating to others while he or she finds ways to solve problems.
3. Please try to maximizes choices for both self and others.
4. Please welcome failures.

Signals and Fear

Often in the hospital, family meetings would consider the insecurity and difficulties in making a decision. The parents could just not be sure about making the smallest decision.

When anxiety is high people's decisions are fearful acts. The fear of mistakes or of an important other making a bad decision creates intense anxiety. People can become paralyzed just trying to make small decisions.

It is under the most intense fear about the adequacy of self that the ego boundaries seem to dissolve. Often it is the two weak people, the mother and child that will form a symbiotic twosome that can not separate. The father is on the outside and the relationship system is rigidly fixed. The three are one. No one can move very far.

The fear can escalate so much that it becomes increasing clear that one of the two will die if one person becomes a separate self. The threat of possible growth and therefore separation makes it impossible for people to consider options. The paralysis deepens.

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Command and Control and Self Organizing Systems

Businesses in today's world are trying to go from command and control models to one that seeks to free people to be more self-reliant and intelligent. Creating knowledge workers is a popular idea. In the dot.com world of today organizations and people are looking for guidelines to create conditions for flexible self-organized responses to adjust to rapid changes in the market place.

John Henry Clippinger, in his book, "The Biology of Business," says that the worlds of business and biology have so much in common that they follow the same rules. Clippinger notes that if ideas are machine like and mechanical that the organizational behavior will reflect a more rigid adjustment to changing conditions. Sounds familiar.

Since ideas are reflected in behavior Clippinger sees the importance of a paradigm shift as necessary to allow successful strategies to emerge from the ground up. Clippinger suggests that the process of diffuse control needs to spread so that individual people can understand and deal with rapidly changing conditions at the local level.

If you want to be successful in business, give up control. Individual adaptability has become increasingly important in business as people try to decipher corporate DNA.

At one level we know it is not necessary for people to be genetically similar or even all on the same page to cooperate. In a family diversity is a given. People have different roles and different kinds of intelligence. But both families and businesses can generate incredible pressure for people to be on the same page and to obliterate differences.

Individual Differences and Expanding Emotional Systems

High marks for the positive role of intellectual diversity are demonstrated in a simulation by James March in his book "Exploration and Exploitation in Organizational Learning."

Interacting smart learners do not perform as well as groups of smart and dumb learners. The too smart ones exploit and lose the capacity to explore. Once again the downside of tight coupling where a positive feedback loop can enhance the togetherness force. The pressure to agree can occur between smart people in love or at work.

Signalling A New Frontier for Awareness

In families as well as in organization there is a search to find the type of signals that can produce excellence in decision making processes. How can we make conscious decisions about what kinds of signals to be aware of? How do we then interpret and respond to signals from important others. As Yogi Berra said, "You can observe a lot by watching."

Many leaders have taken courses in mediation or alpha training to increase the capacity for sensory awareness and to reduce the reactions to ambiguity, uncertainty or just plain old confusion. Leaders are learning to see that their main job is not to control others but rather to provide a framework for decision making.

In the book "Adaptive Enterprise: Creating and Leading Sense and Respond Organizations," Stephen Haeckler carefully articulates the change in rules from the old command and control industries to the distributive decision making dot.com companies.

Speed and innovation in responding to customer requests requires organizations to increase the responsibility for decision making at local levels.

There is not a big boss nearby to tell people what to do. People are given principles that define the boundaries of the job but leaders do not tell employees what to do.

Leaders are responsible for designing the company as a system that reflects coordinated relationships between the parts and to be clear about the outcome objectives. This type of high-level business design reflects the aims and values of the organization.

Families are usually not so design oriented. The family values and principles are imbedded in the multigenerational behaviors. It matters not if one is a family leader or

the leader for a small or large organization many cultures live with imbedded rules. It takes time to understand the operating rules of any system.

What courage it takes live out principles that proscribe the ability to relate differently to others as the final solution. Slow change begins with one person.

Goeth said it well: "Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. The moment one definitely commits oneself, then providence moves too."

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EEG neurofeedback a technique that aids sensing and responding

EEG feedback is one technique that can enable people to alter old mind sets. Feedback is used to give instant information to the brain. The assumption is that random events in the brain can be selected for and then reinforced to form new patterns by accurate feedback. Over time the thought process necessary to produce states of deep relaxation or focused attention will become habitual states of mind.

A well-trained individual can focus attention on internal or external states thereby sustaining creative flow states or dampening stressful states.

Positive feedback is necessary for all learning to take place. The faster the brain connects behavior with results the faster the learning occurs. Over time the pathways in the brain are expanded. The individual then displays more flexible behavior.

From Genes to Memories

The hypothesis is that slight changes at one level can produce unexpected results at another level.

If EEG alters the blood flow then the very connectivity of neurons in the brain can be altered. If there is more plasticity in the brain perhaps this will have an effect on other levels of functioning.

The following example is from a woman who uses E-mail to consult. She lives at a distance. She had years of training in meditation and only two sessions on an EEG machine. I would consider that she had an aptitude for deep relaxation.

This woman was aware that she was getting mixed signals from her family regarding an upcoming reunion. Family members can get on one another's nerves, as there is often a long history of negative expectations and sensitivity.

In preparing for an upcoming visit from a wayward brother this older sister used an image she had obtained in her neurofeedback session. The image was of a black and white Chap Stick. Initially it made no sense. It was a dream fragment, but she treated it as important information.

When in the turmoil of her brother's return she was able to hear her families' comments as black and white she saw an image of the Chap Stick and smiled. This seemingly random association of the image and the polarization in the family gave her some emotional distance from the seriousness of the family.

Thinking of the Chaps Stick's ability to protect her lips she was able to stay non-reactive to the side taking. In the past she would have been drawn into the black or the white side and lost her cool. This time she was able to stay in contact with both sides of her family by seeing herself as protected from the "chafing interactions."

September 1999 Clinical Conference Series

Priscilla J. Friesen used her day to bring people up to date on ideas concerning the use of neurofeedback and brain functioning in the family. She has summarized a few ideas from that day. I am grateful for the contribution.

Dear Andrea,

I hoped to present areas of knowledge as simply as I could and describe what Bowen theory contributes to the knowledge base of neurofeedback as well as how that knowledge has contributed to Bowen theory. My intention with the videotapes was to illustrate the process of defining a self, by two women, who are informed by the knowledge of the brain.

I intended to illustrate how perception (the meaning of complex integration of sensory information) and physiological/emotional reactivity) are a product of the multigenerational processes, particularly emotional cutoff.

Each individual described their experience in their relationships when they began consultation, including their perceptions of their lives and relationships, and then demonstrated the changes in physiology/emotional reactivity and perception as they made relationship changes.

I focused upon the extended family intentionally to illustrate how perception is a part of the development of an individual in the broader relationship context. The character of that perception lives in present day relationships.

What I was trying to do in the first didactic presentation was to set the conceptual stage for watching the tapes. What I was attempting to illustrate with the tapes is the moment to moment process of differentiation of self. I think this undergirds any action. How one perceives and how that relates to the relationships is basic to the biology and psychology

of differentiation of self. I believe this can be understood and documented. This is the direction I was heading and will be in the years to come.

When I see individuals in consultation including EEG biofeedback or not, self and the relationships are in my mind. I am trying to understand this. I discuss these ideas with those that I see. I talk about the brain and patterns of adaptation and how that relates to them, their development and the multigenerational adaptations before them.

The EEG assists a person to see in the feedback during and after how their brain functioning relates to the discussion. The EEG also allows an individual to experience a brain state that they may have never experienced before, such as a more theta/beta integrated state that relates to "knowing" what it is like to experience less chronic anxiety.

This information contributes to awareness and expands the context for understanding. This moment to moment knowledge can be put into the context of the right brain, for example, holding all of memory and experience as if it is the present. So one's early life is the present. I believe the multigenerational history is in the mind/ brain in ways we will begin to understand. I explore with individuals as they think more broadly about relationships, practice with the EEG, and going back into the family to allow the brain to make connections that it has not made. Just as going back into the family changes one's perceptions; it changes the connections in the brain.

I believe this process develops the ability to think of what self-means and to see one's self in a more integrated fashion. This means that the lower brain is connected to the upper brain effectively, that the hemispheres communicate more efficiently and that the overall state of the organism is oriented to the most thoughtful consideration of one person's life with others.

The brain is a remarkably complex adaptation, corresponding to the complex relationship adaptations in the family. There are potential relationship adaptations available to the human. To think of the brain with differentiation of self as the organizing point changes the way one can understand the brain and its possibilities.

Priscilla J. Friesen, LCSW

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Book Review: "Connecting with Our Children: Guiding Principles for Parents in a Troubled World", by Roberta Gilbert, M.D.

A seasoned psychiatrist, Dr. Gilbert has clear answers to many basic questions that parents ask. Although there are still a few parents who may not care that Bowen theory is a new way of thinking that may some day revolutionize psychiatry, Dr. Gilbert does. She

makes a good case for the move to a new paradigm to aid families in understanding their current and past dilemmas. People want to know that there is a better way to think about addressing life's big challenges.

As Dr. Gilbert's stories about people carry us into their lives, the theory comes alive. Diagrams add clarity to difficult situations. The family members breathe easier. They begin to see how they can rethink and rework old family problems. There is a sense of relief.

One comes away from reading the book with greater understanding and humor about the human condition. This is probably good for us all.

Many people's ideas have contributed to the growth of Bowen Theory and Dr. Gilbert dots the landscape with other's clinical research. It is not often when one writer strives so hard to give so many people credit for their unique contributions.

Dr. Gilbert effort may make it possible for the word principle to be clarifying and freeing rather than stogy. Try one of her books, you might like it.

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