

October 1999 Newsletter

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Introduction

There are four points covered in this newsletter. First the movie, "American Beauty" unfolds the automatic nature of pretend relationships. People who are not too sure of what they believe pretend. People go along in order to get along. The inability to develop a solid self leads to confusion. Confusion is contagious.

The second point springs from the first. One can measure the way people make contact. Confused people are intense. The contact is frustrating. The contacts tend to be short and few in number. Research on the significance of interaction can be applied to larger social and work system and even to ant colonies.

The third point demonstrates the second point by reviewing Dr. Bowen research with families at NIH. In the nineteen fifties Dr. Bowen noted that both the rate and type of contact were regulated by the emotional intensity in the system.

The fourth point reaffirms that those who continue to work on self are more able to handle stress and strains intrinsic to various types of emotional systems. The work on self can be accomplished through many techniques when the effort is guided by theory.

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Movie Review

"American Beauty" lets you experience the cost of pretending. The seduction of suburbia begins and ends the movie. The camera pans out with a view of the almost too neat rows of homes. We hear a voice but there is no body. There are homes but no people. So there it is the image. The all-American nuclear family cut off from its roots, blind to one another, becoming a powder keg.

Leaving the movie I thought what does it take to see? Is it possible to grow a mental periscope? To work well the periscope would have to have filters recording the intensity in the relationship field. The feedback would coach your brain to respond in a way that would bring the relationship intensity down. Would people who are in better contact make it possible for endings to change?

What has happened to us? Clearly one sees increasing tension between the generation's play out. The stories of youth alienation across the country have numbed us. Metal detectors rather than periscopes are chosen. People demand more protection. The promise of such protection seems dream like. However the future does promise insights into controlling behavior through knowledge. Advances in brain imaging may lead to new classes of specific drugs, brain surgery, implants and even self-control through neurofeedback. With modern brain imaging technologies the future promises precise control of mental states that will then shape behavior. (Mapping the Mind by Rita Carter, 1998, University of California Press) Without such technology we are thrust back on the ability to reshape the network of relationships based on our own experiences and knowledge in emotional systems. And then there is emotional blindness.

In the movie the young, almost hero, carries a video camera with which he records a small but often beautiful part of life's mysteries. The camera becomes an emotional periscope. There are no filters in the movie. The raw uncertainty of who these people are is revealed in a small video clip of an empty plastic bag, dancing gracefully among fallen leaves.

The empty bag, the emptiness of the people, counter balanced by the threat of violence dancing just below the surface. The son has stayed home, like so many, just hoping to protect what is left of his mother. The father has to play the bad guy. So intent on making things right that he resorts to wrong, time and time again. Is it difficult to see how the emptiness of the mother has left the father in this scrambled position? Who is there to blame in this, the silent family? Perhaps it's easier to blame the one who dies. Perhaps we are all dying.

In the house next door to the silent family lives the explosive family. The mother dominates, the father acts out. The father finds nothing in work and no way to relate to his wife and daughter. The mother counterbalances his emptiness by looking for salvation and a kind of sexual recreation at work. No one sees the effect of their behavior on the others.

Once again the mother can not relate to her husband and turns him loose into fantasy. She lives there and he is going there. Our man is in a spin. He blackmails his boss to buy his favorite old car. Perhaps he has a deep feeling that getting things he loved will turn his relationship with his wife right side up. Our man is vulnerable. He dreams of hopeless young love. It is almost too late to be real. No one can take him back.

The teenage children bond to one another in an effort to flee the parental tragedy. The family tension is about to snowball into a psychotic level family drama. As in the movie, life continues to seduce both parents and children to escape from the responsibility of relating to one another. Like the people in the movie, we can all become scrambled, trying to relate to those who are just a bit too important.

The movie families are not destroyed through divorce. The people stay married but blindness leads to destruction. The silent family explodes. The explosive family

produces, for one shining moment, an "almost good guy." In the moments before death he understands that his latest fantasy is a very young girl, not an object. The fantasy woman is a young pretender who does not know the cost.

The threat of emotional blindness is there for us all. Perhaps this threat is what takes us to movies, to books, to therapy, to meditation. What does it take to learn? The question of how this came to be hangs silently in the air. The past generations are not there to answer questions. The past seems so unimportant. Only the nuclear family looms in importance. The past must be silent.

In the end, as death approaches, our "almost good guy," sits reflecting on an early photograph of his nuclear family. He smiles. He dies. His head is still. This is the moment that will become the past generations testimony to the future. We are left to guess how long people have been running from relationships, trading in parts of their identities, for a bit of comfort. Those who know Bowen Theory see the lack of self-definition over the generations as shadows on people. Dr. Bowen would ask, "how can any individual define a self to a mother who never defined herself to her mother?" When people lack a solid self and have many generations of emotional cut off what can be expected?

In "American Beauty" the push and pull of the marital relationships, spelled out in the last newsletter, has fallen to a lower level where people live in fantasy, daydreams and nightmares. Those who recognize the push and pull cycle have a chance to take responsibility for handling the possibility of violence between people who need each other way too much. Rules can help people by spelling out what will happen ahead of time. "If you do this then I will leave, call the police etc." One has to have a self to make a rule and then follow it.

In the movie as in life, we can use things or control other people to reduce anxiety. These automatic mechanisms spring into action when the system is overloaded. For many the urge to reduce tension is greater than any principle. Bowen Theory is a guide for those interested in changing old ways of relating to important people.

One goes back to the family to alter patterns and reconnect with important people in a more self-defined way. The hope is that this effort will eventually reduce tension and promote the ability of others to be better defined. As "American Beauty" shows, how we observe and manage emotional intensity will lead to dramatically different ways of seeing and being in life, even life at the movies.

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The Social Nature of Relationships

If one were to summarize principles (defined as a rule or code of conduct) derived from Bowen Theory they might be boiled down to "work on self while staying connected to others." This is a short cut for describing the effort to differentiate a more mature self in one's family of origin. The scale of differentiation is one way to look at how people are able to separate feelings from thinking. The assumption is that a better level of integration enables people to make more mature choices in life.

There will always be many opinions about what exactly Bowen scale of differentiation says, as it has not been spelled out in great enough detail to test. If evolutionary criteria are applied to the usefulness of differentiation as an adaptive mechanism then it should noticeably effect three generations of a family.

One could say the same process operates in ant colonies or work systems. The social system must be organized in a way that produces a desired outcome. The survival of the colony or the company beyond that of the present CEO or the queen is needed. Perhaps someday all social groups will be ranked as efficient, productive, mature or the opposite. ("Ants at Work: How an Ant Colony is Organized" by Deborah Gordon, 1999, The Free Press) First, ants must learn to see others as individuals. Then small differences in the rules that govern the rate and type of contact in an ant colony determine its viability. The same rule may apply to the human family and organizations, "work on self while staying connected to others."

Patterned ways of interacting were described by Dr. Bowen in his concept of the triangle. People automatically stay close to one another by using small movements towards or away from each other. When anxiety is down closeness between two is possible, for some amount of time. There is always a third on the outside. Even Adam and Eve had the problem. No wonder it's hard to raise children. Someone has to be on the outside. In his early writing Dr. Bowen use to refer to the interdependent triad as a three-person system. It was "the molecule of any emotional system." People just naturally rely on one another and then get uncomfortable and look to an outsider for relief. Reliance leads to dependency. Dependency makes people sensitive. People cooperative and threaten one other at the same time.

As time goes by there are predictable moves that most outsiders will use to get into closeness with one of the others. This is easy to see in a family unit. The child can often divide and conquer the parents whose relationship is not secure. At other times one parent can destroy the other by getting the child to take sides and hate the other parent. This often happens following a divorce.

At times a child or a parent can be comfortable in the outside position. Some amount of distance can protect people from increases in tension. Parents often feel tension states. If the tension can be handled in an open way then children are not involved. Children are sensitive to the nonverbal clues of the parents. When there is emotional blindness the children will pick it up and reflect back to the parents the state of the family.

In the parental twosome it is often the uncomfortable one that initiates movements to preserve the togetherness. If the closeness can not be restored there are other anxiety absorbing mechanisms that can reduce the tensions: drugs, (legal and illegal,) affairs, or physical and or emotional symptoms in one or both partners.

The hard one to see is how people project internal discomfort onto others. Projection is pervasive. One function of the "I" position may simply be to untangle the possible web of confusion as to who feels or is responsible for what. It appears that there are rules that under girds the functioning of healthy families and work systems. The uncovering of these "rules" will demonstrate how a collection of individuals becomes a functional unit. John Holland, in his excellent book *Emergence from Chaos to Order*, describes many finding demonstrating that "a small number of rules can generate systems of surprising complexity."

One rule, "work on self while staying connected to others" applies to both families and work systems. Often lower level people will express symptoms of anxiety that are generated further up in the organization. Dr. Bowen use to say that he was not a leader, he simply knew that if he saw a problem that he must play some part in it and therefore he would simply work on himself until the problem was resolved.

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Research at the National Institutes of Health

When Dr. Bowen went to head a research project on schizophrenia at the National Institutes of Health in the early nineteen fifties, both he and his staff kept detailed records of the shifts and changes in relationship patterns. Initially only mothers and the symbiotic child lived in the hospital. Eventually the fathers moved onto the ward. Then changes began to be seen. Dr. Bowen wrote in *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (page 14) that "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." In very regressed families people are like scrambled eggs. There is little or no ability of one to separate out from the others.

When there is too much togetherness or fusion the symbiotic relationships maintain a rigid "closeness-distance cycle." As closeness increased the anxiety about who is who increases. People can only talk about their insecurity and difficulty in making a decision. They can not do it. The child picks up on this uncertainty. When anxiety is high people's decisions are fearful acts. The fear of doing it wrong or allowing the other person to face life's consequences becomes paralyzing. Closeness would produce the fear that one of the two would or must die if one person became a separate self. Early in the research this was described as incorporation anxiety.

Neither the mother nor the patients had the inner strength to control the intensity of the distance and closeness cycles. It would have required that one be separate, less fearful or more able to give up the immature closeness that symptoms can generate. For example, a mother would report a major breakthrough in feeling close to her son only to become very symptomatic herself or the son would collapse into psychosis. Tension and unsureness folds the system back into old patterns.

Over time various attempts were made to recruit outside strength by getting a staff member to help one of the family members. It was possible that by getting someone on your side, by using rules, traditional ways of behaving, an expert's advice or any structure one could then feel safer about making decisions. One never had to stand-alone. The internal dynamic is found in the wish to be mothered or the inability to accept help.

Often the staff could see the anxiety shift from one person to another. The mother would begin to become sick and then strengthen her negative, worried focus on the weakness in the patient. If the son or daughter would fight back that was a positive sign for the patient. The closeness with the mother would be disrupted but the patient would function at a higher level. The mother would become symptomatic when she no longer had a weak person to focus on. After any closeness there would be explosive distance in the family and the family members would then begin to react to the staff.

The staff was trained to remain objective and relate to the family without taking sides. In this way the anxiety could not remain at the same level. People would have to find ways within self to manage the increasing relationship pressure, as the staff was unavailable for incorporation to solve the family problem.

With the arrival of the fathers individual psychotherapy was no longer used. Initially the mothers were the active decision-makers, the patient weak and the father devoted to the mother and often very weak. The father saw the issue as having to side with either the child or the mother. It was as though there was little thought given to the father's need to maintain a separate, principled stand of his own. In some families the above dynamic can be the opposite. The parents can change positions. The father can be authoritarian and the mother weak. This occurred in a minority of the NIH cases.

The first people to change were the fathers. They were the first to become interested in their own identity and having convictions of their own rather than borrowed convictions from the staff or other family members. Mother and patient were in the same position until the father could establish his own identity in the relationship. The parents did not have a close relationship with each other; they had an emotional divorce. The children experienced this anxiety and would act it out. The children could only have a close relationship as long as the other parent permits it. The anxiety is so intense that any closeness by others is seen as a threat to someone.

Research on the families was used to alter the structure of the ward. All staff and family members were present when issues were discussed. The meetings were tape-recorded.

The records were open to one and all. The staff recognized that relationships could become distant and hostile when there are secrets.

The families job was to understand what the problems were in each nuclear family that kept people at a distant and unable to relate to one another. People have to relate in order to solve every day problems of living. How people related to one another became the focus of attention.

Considerable effort went into helping each family member define his or her own self and to differentiate his or her self from that of others. The goal still is to handle the chronic anxiety that runs in the system without having to manipulate other for comfort. The pressure is on the individual to make decisions by simply saying what he or she will or will not do.

Schizophrenia represented a good look at a clean symbiosis. Often families where there are drug problems are seen as good example of dirty symbiosis. Drugs are used to modify anxiety and fill in the gap. This way no one has to develop a self that might disturb the system. The system can remain as it is. The sensitive one can just be numb to the difficulties.

In these families as the anxiety increases, there is a strong need to be responsible for others or a strong desire to be successful in business and distant from the family. The over functioning person has the attitude "I can do it myself, I do not need others." This is an attitude used to mask the anxiety and concerns of functioning in relationship too important others. The hope is that if one is successful enough they will gain the approval that they deny they need. The wife appends herself to the career of the husband and can become a no self. The husband can append himself to the wife and the reverse scene will be played out. These two people are not well defined in their own lives. They are not separate people. People at lower levels of emotional functioning are forced to borrow energy and ideas from others. However when anxiety goes up symptoms will emerge in the one who has adapted the most. A fairly normal family is a flexible one in which the parents can shift their functioning according to reality needs without threatening the other. When the parents can be emotionally close any strategy they chose for managing the child will work. So the answer improving functioning, work on self, work on self and stay connected to important others.

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Neurofeedback and the Challenges of Developing a Self

Each month the Georgetown Family Center sponsors a Clinical Conference. In September Priscilla J. Friesen used her day to bring people up to date on ideas concerns this new field. She has summarized a few ideas from that day. I am grateful for the contribution.

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 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, meaning that the lower brain is connected to the upper brain effectively, hemispheres communicate more efficiently and 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

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