

## Through the Lens #3

### Parenting Cycle

Roberta M Gilbert, M.D.

A previous column took up the subject of parents and children from the point of view of parents. But what about later in life, when it is often said that the children become the "parents?" Actually, I don't think that children ever "become the parents" if they are guided in their thinking by Bowen family systems theory. But as aging parents become less able to function independently because of physical or mental/emotional symptoms, their offspring most often become involved in their lives in a different way. They become more or less responsible for and taking care of their parents.

#### **Rev. GH from Texas writes:**

*Dear Dr. Gilbert,*

*"In reading the column in the newsletter I began to think about the subject [parents] matter from a role reversal perspective. In the congregational setting we are encountering adult children struggling with parenting their parents (physical, mental and spiritual issues). Can you speak to that and/or provide resources focused in the area of adult children and their changing role from a systems perspective?"*

#### **Dear Rev. H:**

I don't know of anything in print but I opened up the subject in June at the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family when I presented an all day clinical conference on the subject of aging parents in the family system. This gave me a wonderful opportunity to think through the subject from my own experience and to listen to that of others.

I had the opportunity of confronting the issue in my own family for the past few years. It began when I was "elected" by the family to help our mother and father leave their retirement community. They no longer satisfied the community guidelines. That is, they could no longer drive. I was there to help them decide on the next phase of their lives. I took it as a great compliment to my family work in reconnecting. They asked me, the family cutoff, to be the one to guide our parents through this crucial time.

As our own family experience played out, there were two types of relationship opportunities for which I developed guiding principles: Crisis time-the time of rapid change and the continuing long-term work.

#### **Crisis Time**

A crisis is a time of rapid change. In our family, when it became apparent that Mom and Dad could no longer safely drive, they were no longer candidates to stay in their retirement community. My husband and I were willing to make room for them in our home, but they did not want to come live with us. No one else was available. There was a "staged" community in development near one of our brothers and he was adamant that it was the place for them.

Dad was very interested in this idea, but Mom wanted nothing of it. There were many phone calls and visits to them by me. After taking in all the facts I determined they could actually afford such a place. Two guiding principles at this time were; "Stay with the facts; financially and the possible alternatives" and "These are their lives and it would be their decision as a couple." I would be present as they thought it through, but would mostly observe, listen, and ask questions. I would not allow any decision by me or the rest of the family to be pushed on them.

During the visits to Mom and Dad at this time, Mom was quite emotionally upset. There were many tears. "I had always thought we would die here," she said.

I saw, in all of this an opportunity for differentiation gains. I made it my goal to be in good contact with Mom's emotional states, not take them on and not try to shorten the process or be disrespectful of her strong feelings in any way. At the same time, I would try not to absorb the anxiety myself. Dad, while he made it clear he was in favor of exploring the option of going to the new center, did not try to influence Mother, nor intrude into the process that was taking place between her and me. At this time, a guiding principle was that "this time of crisis in our family would be a wonderful opportunity for me to build more basic self, i.e., work on my own level of differentiation of self."

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Another guiding principle I discovered necessary throughout this time was "keep in good contact with the rest of the family as the process unfolds." This was an opportunity for me to change some of my old patterns. It was more automatic for me to go charging off in my own direction, not mindful of the rest of the organism. My family were all interested in the events that unfolded and wanted to know how things were going.

Eventually the emotional process played itself out and Mom was ready to go visit the facility, "just to look." Once she and my Father saw it they were most favorably impressed and shortly made the decision to go there to live.

### **The Long Term**

Guiding principles for the longer term included the work, already under way, of staying in good contact, in person and by phone.

There were many memorable family events in the small town where they lived, hosted by our brother, Steve.

After about 4 years, Mom died suddenly in the night at the age of 91. That was about 6 years ago. Since that time, Dad has declined physically, but mentally is quite sharp. He has little quality of life because of his respiratory, vision and hearing problems.

Our brother Steve died in a train accident a little over a year ago, precipitating a more abrupt decline in Dad's health.

A friend from town visits Dad every day. He often has visits from one of us. Occasionally, he is strong enough to visit his church with one of us.

My goal at this point is to stay in good contact with Dad, though it is difficult to keep a conversation going with him.

It has been inspiring to my own work to see how creatively one of our brothers has been able to arrange small outings and meaningful times with Dad.

Of course, there is no one "correct" situation, according to Bowen theory, once people have lost a degree of functioning.

Some will live with family members. Some will go into a center. Some will be able to maintain life in their own homes a very long time with more or less family support. Theory does not dictate the answer. But it does provide a way of thinking about every family and relationship situation, which makes for a better outcome for both the parents and their caring offspring.

Both my parents were tremendous resources for me in different ways. I like to think that I was able to be a resource for them at a crucial time when they needed a little steadiness for thinking things through. I believe that this experience has already made me more of a resource to my own adult children as well as to my extended family.

No matter which way it goes in any particular family, as people feel their way towards life change, and making appropriate arrangements, opportunities abound for managing self in a principled way, that makes for differentiation of self, looking through the "lens" that makes a difference. Fortunate is the family who has someone in it working on self in this way. ♦

Written in 2008

If you would like to contribute questions or comments to this column for Dr. Gilbert to address, please write her at: [rgoffice136@gmail.com](mailto:rgoffice136@gmail.com).