

Through the Lens #18 — Summer 2016

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After some 29 years on the faculty of the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family in Georgetown, Washington, DC, I have decided it is time to retire from there as an active faculty member. “Georgetown,” as the center was often referred to, was where I got my first meaningful exposure to Dr. Bowen. It is where I learned most of what I know about Bowen family systems theory, and it is where many important relationships began and continue. The following is what I wrote in looking back over my years there.

LOOKING BACK, SUMMING UP

June 11, 2016

As I conclude active participation on the faculty of the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family, many thoughts and memories rush in. I'd like to share a few of these with you.

In my psychiatric residency, I had begged to get some teaching on this new thing called “family therapy.” My chief said no one knew anything about it, but it was the same thing as group therapy. If I could find someone on the faculty who knew about group therapy and would teach me, I could do that as a first step toward family therapy. I found a faculty member, Dr. Larry Beahan, who agreed to supervise me and another resident, Dr. Robert Goldstein. And that is how the first group therapy at the State University of New York at Buffalo, School of Medicine began. Our presentations were eagerly attended by all the psychiatry students, staff, residents and faculty.

Later, I would hear Dr. Murray Bowen speak at annual APA conferences. I did not understand what he was saying. He was talking about a “new theory.” I thought, “Here are the ruminations of a megalomaniac. We don't need a new theory. We already have one—Freudian theory. What is he talking about?” Psychiatrists know everything, of course. Even about each other. My problem, though I didn't know it at the time, was that I was trying to see what he was talking about through my old individual theory-oriented lens. That lens just didn't go into focus for the new systems ideas.

Living in Kansas City, I took all the instruction in family therapy I could get at the nearby Menninger Clinic. It was a two-year offering—half days, two days a month. There was nothing in it about Bowen family systems theory. If I brought up Bowen's ideas, the faculty looked at me as though I were from another planet. Only later did I learn that Bowen got his start in psychiatry at Menninger. Still later, I attended a weekend celebration of Murray Bowen and his ideas at the Menninger Clinic!

Despite these initial barriers, some of Bowen's ideas from the APA presentations stuck in my head—ideas such as “cutoff,” for example. Even then, the powerful theory began to make a difference in my life and practice.

When Dr. Don Shoulberg came to Kansas City, fresh out of the Family Center Special Post Graduate Program at Georgetown University, starting a new Menninger satellite office and some training opportunities, I participated eagerly in whatever he offered. After a few coaching sessions with him, I went to my psychoanalyst and cancelled a long-standing morning appointment with him that I had four days every week. I could see that here was a far superior way of understanding the human, and assisting humans, to anything I had been exposed to in my training up until then.

That led me straight to the Georgetown University, where its Family Center was offering a training program for professionals. I enrolled in 1981. Bowen gave a talk or led a discussion at every session of the seminar. I found the Special PG program thrilling. Once, when he began a discussion of objectivity and subjectivity, he asked, “Do you think you are center of the universe?” One participant got up and left the room. I never saw him again.

At my brother David Gilbert’s insistence, I began to write *Extraordinary Relationships*, in 1986. He is the writer in the family, actually a journalist for the Chicago Tribune for many years, and then press secretary for Governor Jim Thompson of Illinois. Excited about ideas in a paper I had presented at the Georgetown University Family Center Symposium, he really wanted me to “write them into a book.”

After reading the first draft, I realized it wasn’t any good. This was primarily because after my 5 years in the Post Graduate Seminar, I did not know theory well enough! It came through clearly in my writing. The next time I was in DC, I met with Dr. Bowen to ask him what he thought about the book idea. I also asked him what he thought about my moving to Washington so I could immerse myself in everything that goes on at the Family Center. He gave me green lights for both the book and the move. In July of 1987, I took a job as a staff psychiatrist with Kaiser-Permanente and moved to Falls Church, Virginia, seven miles from the Georgetown Center.

Soon after I moved, Bowen invited me to be on the faculty as “Medical Director.” This would mean that a physician was present to hear clinic cases as they were presented. Rarely, there might be a need for a prescribed medication. Another psychiatrist with more seniority wanted the job as well, for a year, so I didn’t actually move to the Center until a year later. By that time, I was in a shared office with Anne McKnight. I closed my practice and moved to Georgetown.

Many faculty members welcomed me and some put significant effort into making the new book better. Dr. Dan Papero was especially generous in putting serious time and effort into making “E.R.” fit for publication. The book was published in 1992 and is still in print. I learned that 90% of books die in the first year. Almost twenty-five years old, this book has exceeded all expectations.

At that time, “payment” for clinic and faculty services (attending seven to ten hours of meetings per week, teaching, and some clinic work) consisted of: a free office space and free attendance at all Family Center conferences. Any other Family Center meetings or seminars were free of charge and open to all faculty members. In addition, faculty members of the GU Family Center were automatically a part of the clinical faculty of the Georgetown University School of Medicine.

Bowen held a once- or twice-a-month faculty “Think Tank” that met on Monday evenings. Here he interacted with us as a friend: serious, funny, relaxed. He said what he thought. We did the same. People often presented short papers for discussion by colleagues.

Shortly after arriving, I began clinical sessions with Dr. Bowen for myself every two to four weeks. Sometimes I would leave these sessions scratching my head, wondering what he had meant by something he had said to me, only to understand more fully what he had said after some weeks had passed! Once he said that his goal had been not to develop relationships that would help people, or to promote himself (as in “Bowen” theory—he resisted that designation in the beginning) but to give the world an impersonal theory that could eventually be shown to be accurate by scientific study and replications, making the study of the human an accepted science. He did not believe Freudian theory—coming out of one man’s head, and the heads of people on the couch—could ever be a part of science. Systems theory would be a theory that people could take and use for living, not dependent upon the therapist. One time he explained triangles to me. Another time, he read to the faculty in Think Tank a thank you piece I had written to him. I told him he should have asked my permission, but it was encouraging all the same.

There were also the two Wednesdays a month that started out as a “societal issues” meeting and became later a “theory” meeting. There were clinical conferences taught only by him at that time, and also the “Third Thursday” meeting, where he presided over presentations by outside thinkers or Family Center faculty.

Before his death in 1990, Dr. Bowen referred to the “moth-eaten” quarters of the Center. A search for a new home was begun. After calling a realtor advertised outside the building next door, I suggested we go take a look. It is the address we still enjoy.

During those early years, I was able to publish two scientific pilot projects in the Family Systems Journal. One tells of the turn-around that occurred in teens in a group home in Kansas City where I consulted, when the staff made more of an effort to connect the teens with their families. The other describes eighteen patients at the Kaiser-Permanente Clinic who were addicted to prescribed medications. Psychotherapy with the patient and the significant other on relationship patterns, as well as defining myself in the triangles of patient, self and prescribing doctor, were of great use in recovery.

Another, regarding the efficacy of the then-new drug Prozac, was never submitted anywhere for publication. It was for my own interest. A few years ago, deans of departments of psychiatry went on TV to announce the same results that I had known many years ago! I thought, “Why is it so difficult and so slow to get simple research done and out to the public?” I screamed at the TV, “How hard would it be to jot down on the back of an envelope how the people are doing!” Bowen theory had excited a long-lost curiosity in me. I think it lies dormant in many physicians who are made to follow algorithms and drug company protocols.

After six years in Georgetown, I moved my office back to Virginia, in Falls Church. The perennial lack of parking meant that it had been difficult to keep a practice going at the Center.

In 1999, *Connecting With Our Children* was published by Wiley and Sons.

In addition to serving as Medical Director those six years, I supervised and lectured in the special postgraduate program for eight years, sat on the editorial board for the new Family Systems Journal for many years, and presented an annual Clinical Conference for some 20-plus years.

In 1998, the Bishop’s office of the United Methodist Church of Virginia asked me to start a seminar for their clergy. I made it: 1.) a three year offering, 2.) rather expensive by some standards, and 3.) open to all who applied, thinking (hoping?) those caveats might not work for them, and that they would rule me out. To my great surprise, they accepted them all. Extraordinary Leadership Seminar, now almost 20 years old, has had several iterations, and now (for the last decade) meets in Richmond, VA, at an Episcopal retreat center and is attended by clergy and business people from all over the country. Some have gone on to attend the BCSF special graduate seminar. They often attend Bowen Center Clinical conferences.

The seminar has a defined curriculum that repeats every year for three years. The first year is about leadership, as seen by Bowen theory. The second is about the eight concepts of Bowen theory, and the third, about differentiation of self. There are three texts that go along with the curriculum, *Extraordinary Leadership*, *The Eight Concepts*, and *The Cornerstone Concept*. Lots of repetition is built in because people learn slowly and repetition is a great teacher.

An advanced seminar began early on, for people who had completed at least three years of ELS, and it now meets in Falls Church— twice a year, for two days, in conjunction with Bowen Center annual meetings. The phenomenal success of the seminar is owed in great measure to its faculty: Kathleen Cotter Cauley, Kenton Derstine, Bonnie Sobel and David “Scotty” Hargrove, all of whom have particular experience equipping them for such work.

A few months after moving to Florida in 2013, my husband Joe Douglass died. He, an acclaimed author of many books on national security and intelligence, initiated a publishing company for my work. As well, he edited them—and did he ever. He asked me to do a rewrite of one book 18 times! He made so very much possible. Without his inspiration and know-how, and now living much farther away from Washington, I have known that before long I would want to retire from my responsibilities at the Bowen Center.

That time has arrived. I announce my retirement with very mixed feelings, of course. But we don't make big decisions based on feelings. . .

I don't intend to "fade away" as an old soldier--I am writing a new text, and do a limited amount of speaking. But I do intend to lighten my load, perhaps have a bit more fun and watch with pleasure as younger, more energetic but highly qualified and talented people come on board. The good news is that **they are there**, ready and willing to carry on. I believe we owe that good fortune largely to the wisdom and planning put into developing a next generation of systems thinkers, to Dr. McKnight.

My great thanks go to Anne, and all my colleagues there and around the country—and thank you, Dr. Bowen and Bowen Center for all you have given to me. I only hope that my goal of getting Bowen theory more out into the world, by writing and whatever else I may have accomplished, has been some small measure of giving back. I owe a really exciting and wonderful second half of my career, as well as great improvement in many family relationships to all of you, and will never forget it.

So for now, from paradise—I mean, Florida—that wraps it up and I will plan to see you at least twice a year at Bowen Center meetings. With thanks and all good wishes for continued and many successes,

Roberta Gilbert

**If you have a question or comment you would like addressed in this column,
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