

Through the Lens #11 — July 17, 2012

Fifteen Lessons Learned in Fifteen Years of Training Leaders

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I. Context

Around 17 years ago, the Leadership Development Director in the United Methodist Bishop's office—Virginia Conference—began to ask me if I would consider designing a program for clergy. It seems the bishop's office was receiving many calls from disturbed clergy who were experiencing chaos in their families or congregations. The office was at a loss as to how to counsel them.

I wasn't sure I knew enough about congregations to be of use, so I didn't really take it seriously at first. But the request was reiterated, and rather urgently. So, at some length, I put pencil to paper and began to think about what would be useful in such a situation.

Some of my initial thoughts were as follows:

- Family systems thinking had been of great use to me and many others; it had actually transformed my life and practice. Why not for leaders in the church as well?
- I thought that I didn't know enough about how things in churches worked but quickly realized (as Dan Papero had said about business leadership) that I didn't have to. They would tell me their dilemmas. My only responsibility would be to give them my view of how systems ideas applied to their situations.

- By now, having watched so very many people step up in their life functioning, I personally thought of Bowen family systems theory as a science. Not an accepted science perhaps, but a science—a factual description of the human phenomenon—as I saw it. I would explain as pure a version as I could of Bowen theory, as I thought it applied to this identified group. It would be important that Murray Bowen’s original language, that he had worked so hard to develop, be used.
- It would be a 3-year offering, with a defined 3-year curriculum. People could stay in the seminar as long as they wished, but the curriculum would repeat over a 3-year cycle. Participants would only “buy in” a year at a time.
- The format of the day’s events would be similar to that of the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family. I knew that to be the most effective plan for learning to think systems. It was designed by Bowen, and I personally knew its usefulness, having been a participant in it for five years and a faculty member another several years. (Now it’s been 24 years.)

I thought that perhaps the cost associated with such a program and the 3+ years recommended length of study would scare the United Methodists away. But it did not. I also specified that it would be not only for United Methodists only, but for anyone who wanted to be a part of it. Not only did they agree to those stipulations, they have heavily subsidized many of their clergy people in the program through these 15 years. Further, their national office has supported many district superintendents in it.

II. Development of the seminar

Over the years, the numbers have grown and the seminar has included many Protestant clergy, some Catholic priests, rabbis, educators, therapists, counselors, and lay leaders.

In time, faculty members appeared. This was fortunate, since with the increasing numbers of participants, I needed help. They each had what I call the “bright-eye syndrome.” For whatever reason, usually after speaking to the group, they became excited about it. It is a good thing to be excited about one’s work. At present there are four of us who share the lecturing and coaching responsibilities. We work well together, probably because the work

seems more like fun than work. Often we comment on who is learning more, the participants or the faculty.

Many have asked to become associated as faculty members, but I have carefully thought-out guidelines as to who works out best. There are three qualifications I have insisted upon: 1.) A long history in Bowen theory, including formal didactic training, coaching and many years of practice.

2.) Formal training in psychiatry, psychology or counseling. 3.) A religious belief. I am not concerned what that is, but that teaching staff have one. The reason for this is that theology and family systems theory impinge upon each other at many points, and the clergy want to talk about this huge part of their background. (If they didn't, there would be something wrong!) If a faculty member has no interest in theology, their eyes will glaze over during these discussions. (If I were designing a program for therapists or counselors, I would not include the third qualification.) The numbers for qualified faculty considerably has been narrowed considerably by these guidelines, but I believe the quality of the program has benefited as a result of their being in place.

In time, my husband suggested the writing of texts to accompany each of the seminar years. And so, in due course, appeared *Extraordinary Leadership*, *The Eight Concepts*, and *The Cornerstone Concept*. They have been surprisingly well received by seminaries and universities, therapists and pastors, in the U.S. and other countries.

Over fifteen years of teaching and coaching leadership, much has been encountered. Much has been learned.

III. Fifteen lessons learned from fifteen years of teaching

Of course there are many, many more than fifteen lessons learned. But these are some that stand out:

- **Clergy people are quick to learn the ideas of Bowen family systems theory.** They are more interested and go the extra mile in study. They have distinguished themselves in general, compared to other groups of learners I have experienced.

- **Guiding principles are a necessity for high-level leadership.** Referring back to them on a continuing basis, refining them and letting them lead, are calming and transforming.
- **An individual working on one's own part in relationships,** and not the others, is leadership magic—both in families and in organizations. Systems thinking is not about fixing the system, though many come into the seminar with that agenda.
- **Systems do step up in their functioning as the leader works on self** in relationships according to his/her guiding principles, with the assistance of a good coach. This step-up lasts as long as the high-functioning leader is there. It is welcome and useful, but not permanent. (After the high-functioning leader leaves, the system may regress.)
- **If I, or faculty members, stop doing the same work on ourselves in our relationship systems, we don't do as well.**
- **I don't have to have all the answers.**
- **Not everything, nor everyone, has worked out:**

The structure of the seminar has undergone change over time,

Not all participants have seen the value of the seminar's demands,

Not all faculty people have worked out,

But an amazing number of the elements—most—have stood the test.

- **Communication, teaching, coaching, preaching are, among other things, a relationship proposition.** So, who I am and how I say it speaks more loudly than the words I may utter.
- **Curiosity is among the great gifts** in coaching, in leadership, in relationships.
- **Evaluation is important.** Changing old patterns goes slowly, taking much time and patience. So, since change is usually recognized only in retrospect, the evaluation is designed to be retrospective. Evaluation needs to be as brief and simple as possible to cover important ground. It is ongoing,

but formally addressed each year. It is equally useful to participants and seminar planners.

- **The 10% solution.** Around the country, consultants tell me that about 10% of their practices stay around, engaged with systems ideas for the long term. That is the experience in Extraordinary Leadership Seminar as well. About 10% stay involved in the Advanced Seminar. Is it worth the effort? We believe so.
- **The power of the pen.** Writing not only clarifies thinking, it gets the word out. Academics have said that people will not read journals, but they will read books. Since the advent of the texts, it is my impression, and the feedback is, that there is more and better thinking among participants. The seminar has gone to a better level.
- **The importance of understanding and stating this science of relationships as it was set out,** not adding to it or subtracting from it—that is, not eroding theory. (I have begun to refer to Bowen theory as science, since over years of experience with it, in my mind, it is a factual description of the human. This does not mean it is an accepted science as yet.) This insistence on purity of theory presented is not a closed-minded approach. If new data appear that warrant a change in the theory, so be it. However, at the present time, my effort is to keep the teaching/writing as close to Bowen’s original statement as possible. When I do (rarely) disagree with Bowen on a point or two, I must say that this is my thinking, not his. Or when I am trying to develop a point he may have made briefly, or alluded to, to make it obvious that it is a development of theory as originally stated. Also, participants are encouraged not to teach theory until they have had a few years of study.
- **High on the scale people make room for others to be a self.** Often, Bowen referred to Christian saints as high on the scale. One example he was fascinated with was St. Francis. Saints have often been characterized as selfless. I think, however, that they were so secure in their selfhood that they had extraordinary energy to devote to others. They delighted in giving a hand up that did not minimize self or other. They loved to see others’ progress. Too often our efforts at differentiation of self emphasize our own efforts, to the point of flaunting. They make no room for the self of the other.

- **The science of relationships and theology relate on many levels.** If it is true that there is a God who wants to relate to us humans, that is an amazing assumption, and science would be only a small part of the total human phenomenon. There really would be room for a ninth concept—the supernatural, or, perhaps, spirituality. Further, if our science and our theology are both accurate—that is, they describe the human the way the human really is in fact—then, science and theology should not conflict. Where they do, more work needs to be done. In addition, there is an interesting observation among many therapists and counselors that people often become more interested in their spiritual quest after they seriously engage the ideas of Bowen family systems theory.

If there is ever a ninth concept, it will have to be based upon observed facts. A good start would be the *Handbook of Health and Religion*, ed. Koenig, et. al. Oxford U. Press, London. This book is filled with studies (over 1,000) taken from the journals of medical science that seem to indicate, overall, that the human is much better off in life with a religious belief than without one.

I often think of the image put forward by Robert Jastrow, that scientists struggle and struggle to get up the mountain, only to find the theologians sitting there on top, waiting for them.