

Through the Lens #12 — Winter 2013

On Empathy

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“Empathy is okay, but only if you get in and out of it fast.”

Murray Bowen¹

The above quote is my memory of an informal talk given by Dr. Bowen at a Georgetown Family Center Symposium on Psychotherapy in the late 1980's. He was not particularly in favor of empathy, except perhaps in small doses and used sparingly.

Our culture, on the other hand, is big on empathy. Leaders are encouraged to be empathic with their organization's personnel, therapists with their clients, teachers with their students.

What is empathy? It is often differentiated from sympathy, but that distinction escapes me. They both have to do with feeling with or feeling for someone else—feeling their feelings. I believe that empathy became a big part of our culture when Freudian theory became powerful and dominant in our society. Freudian theory, in its most popular form, was all about feelings. Feelings were given primacy in psychotherapy, and the therapeutic project became a protracted pursuit of feelings—and feelings upon feelings. The most frequent question asked by therapists became, “How does that make you feel?” The effect this had upon the culture was multifaceted. Those effects included guiding one's decisions and even, life course, on how one felt about it—the feel-good culture. “If it feels good, do it!”

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One of Bowen's goals was to move psychotherapy away from its preoccupation with feelings. If people could begin to think more clearly, they could make decisions, plan a life course, and make better responses in relationships instead of simply reacting. They could even learn to think about their automatic responses and modify them where that was indicated.

Why was Bowen less than enthusiastic when it came to empathy? To look a little more specifically at this, let's go back to the idea of "fusion." Fusions occur in relationships when people give up or take on self to/from each other (one more dominant and the other more submissive), and when they pass feelings between one another. They happen most often and intensely when people are important to one another. It is part of the human condition that we pass feelings between/among ourselves, especially when we are important to each other. We all do it. This takes place less, however, as people are higher on the scale of differentiation (more emotionally mature). At lower levels, conversely, fusions occur more and with greater intensity.

So, since empathy is feeling for/with someone else, if leaders, therapists, doctors, parents or spouses wish to minimize the fusion phenomenon, they need to learn to minimize empathy. For professionals this principle is golden. I once accompanied someone with an "incurable" illness to a doctor's visit. The doctor—meaning well—rather whiningly stated that she was sorry he had to see "a doctor like me." (She was a cancer specialist.) This contrasted with the fact that the person had been seeing a doctor in that specialty for years who had been matter-of-fact and upbeat with the person. This person left the new doctor's office feeling some feelings that, (according to much research on how feelings affect wellness) were not going to be useful to the person's long-term survival!

Staying out of empathy might be taken as distancing, but it is not. So, if we are trying to be less empathetic with others, but still in meaningful connection, how do we do it? In the same presentation, Dr. Bowen went on to explain that the best form of connection is from the thinking side. He promoted an intellectual connection, one that thinks with people.

Does this mean we don't feel the pain of the other? No, it is a given. We will feel their pain as long as we are living humans in relationship with one another. The point was, and is, to stay as calm around an anxious other as possible, and to start thinking, making a primary effort to understand, rather than to feel for/with.

As we practice relating in this manner, some people—those who expect and want an emotional reaction, and who want to dump their feeling state off onto someone else-- will react. That is okay with me. The work now begins. How do we handle these reactions? By working on self to just “stay the course”—the course of not taking the intended emotional pass, aiming for understanding, ever curious and connected from the thinking self. This way of going is professional, parental and marital magic. As we manage self in this way, we find that in a short time, the others gain emotional calm and join us at this higher level of functioning. They soon realize that we have done them a favor. By not getting into the feelings with them, and maintaining the ability to think, they also are able to. They often end a few encounters of this nature thanking us verbally or in some other way.

That is the highest compliment we as humans can be paid. It is the best service we can render to others to whom we relate, whether long term or briefly, whether in passing or in a significant relationship.

¹ Author's recollection of his words, in an informal talk in a late 1980's Georgetown Family Center Symposium