

THE APPLICATION OF BOWEN'S DIFFERENTIATION THEORY

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Murray Bowen, one of the founding fathers of family therapy, put a great emphasis on the importance, for both therapist and patient, of the differentiation process. In family systems theory, differentiation, or individuality, is an instinctually rooted life force which propels the developing child to grow to be an emotionally separate person, with the ability to think, feel, and act for him or herself. The further our differentiation process proceeds, the more capable we are of non-reactively participating in and maintaining relationships.

Edwin Friedman is an ordained rabbi and family therapist who has practiced in Washington, D.C. for over 30 years. Friedman has been one of the most articulate spokesmen for applying Bowen's theories to families and to organizations. Today I want to share with you some of Friedman's perspectives on differentiation and on leadership, especially as these apply to the Nashville Psychotherapy Institute.

My first exposure to Friedman was in his *Family Therapy Networker* article of May-June, 1987, entitled "How to Succeed in Therapy Without Really Trying." He opens this article with a deep skepticism about the possibilities for actively or willfully promoting change in any social system. He writes,

Actually, the most profound changes I have witnessed are those that no one seems to have intended or predicted . . . I've seen many families change without going into therapy and many families fail to change despite decades, and I mean *decades*, of seeking help . . . I believe my survival as a therapist . . . has to do with how I came to grips with the capacity of social systems of all sizes to absorb those who try to change them. (p. 28)

Friedman is sobered by what he calls "the resistance demons" which thwart most efforts at change in families and in organizations. Speaking of his experience of being supervised by Les Farber and Murray Bowen during the Vietnam era, Friedman adds,

I learned the madness of thinking that the therapist could prevail in a contest of wills. They taught me that no matter how many bombers you thought you had as a therapist, you could never overcome the Viet Cong lurking in the tangled jungle of the client's resistance. (p. 29)

Friedman credits Bowen for helping him to understand that the key element in psychotherapy is the "non-anxious presence" of

the therapist, functioning in a non-willful manner. According to Friedman, Bowen "believes that if one can maintain a non-anxious presence in any system, that very style of functioning in itself will have a beneficial effect, *no matter what the problem.*" (p. 30).

From Bowen, Friedman learned that it was his non-anxious curiosity about a patient or a family which was most responsible for any change which might take place. He elaborates,

When the therapist's primary concern is understanding the human condition, a natural patience emerges that enables one to out wait the resistance demons that, like the swiftest horses, can only beat humans over a short course . . . if you genuinely want to learn, you must not be willful about life, but rather let it teach you. That means you try not to interfere too much with what you are observing, except in a manner that will bring it more into relief . . . When the task of the clinician becomes learning about life rather than imposing change, the challenge of therapy lies no longer in the contest of will with the client, but in satisfying one's own curiosity about what makes people tick. (p. 31 & 68)

In concluding his article, Friedman returns again to the central importance of differentiation, by both therapist and patient or client. He writes,

I am after one thing, no matter what the symptom--promoting differentiation throughout the system. This takes me totally out of the willful position of assuming I know what choices are best for my clients. For me, symptoms are not an enemy, to be eliminated, but pathways that lead me in my quest to understand the system. And I assume once people begin to differentiate themselves, symptoms will atrophy. (p. 68)

RELEVANCE OF BOWEN'S THEORY TO THE LEADERSHIP PROCESS

In a chapter of a book entitled *The Family Therapist as Consultant*, Friedman continues his application of Bowen's theory of leadership in families and organizations. From this family systems perspective, Friedman writes, the attention is not on the polarity between leader and follower, but instead on "the organic nature of their relationship as a constituent part of the same organism." (p. 409) "The emphasis," he continues,

“is on how the leader’s own functioning within the system, his or her *self-differentiation*, will automatically affect the followers, because of the organic nature of their connection.” (p. 410)

So much of what most of us have been taught about leadership has focused on such aspects as the leader’s charisma, or knowledge, or ability to motivate others. According to Friedman, these are not as important as the leader’s own differentiation process. Here is Friedman’s synthesis:

The basic concept of leadership through self-differentiation is this: If a leader will take primary responsibility for his or her own position as ‘head’ and work to define his or her own goals and self, *while staying in touch with the rest of the organism*, there is a more than reasonable chance that the body will follow. (p. 410)

Friedman acknowledges that this is no easy task, saying,

The ability of a leader to be a self while remaining a part of the system may be the most difficult task in any relationship system . . . Yet, and this is crucial, the functioning of any organism, often its survival, and certainly its evolution, is directly dependent on the capacity of its ‘head’ to do precisely that. *Define self and stay in touch.* (p. 410-411)

If you’re familiar with Harriet Lerner’s books *The Dance of Intimacy* and *The Dance of Anger*, this may have a familiar ring. She is another of Bowen’s articulate protégés. Friedman concludes this discussion of leadership by self-differentiation with the following statement:

It is in the capacity of the leader to maintain a position and still stay in touch (without being too anxiously helpful) that the organism’s future resides. Many leaders have the capacity to stay in touch; fewer leaders have the capacity to define themselves; fewest have the capacity to remain connected while maintaining such self-differentiation. It is the most difficult part of leading any system, work, or family. (p. 411)