

# EVOLUTION OF A SYSTEMS THINKER

THOMAS FOGARTY, M.D.

I imagine a good way to introduce this discussion would be to try to define briefly what a system is. And a system is not easy to describe. Often the word is used as if everybody either understood or agreed on its meaning. Generally speaking, attempts have been made to talk about systems in many different ways. These include psychoanalytic theory, communications theory, general systems theory, and social or ecological concepts.

My own interest in family and systems theory grew out of my association with Murray Bowen in Washington. Starting out with some of the ideas I learned from him (e.g. triangles and the differentiation of self in the extended family), I decided to base my approach on the clinical study of people and families. It was important that theory grow from the observation of people and that it not be superimposed on them in a forced fit from some preordained bias. To that end, I have seen almost two thousand families to date. Contact with the family has varied from one visit to three or four years.

When one approaches a family clinically, the amount of information that becomes available is simply mind-boggling. We are all familiar with the amount of information that we get by talking to one person over the course of a year. When one sees a family it is generally considered that he must take, at a bare minimum, a three generation scan. With the three generation scan, the amount of information increases geometrically. Every time a new person is added, the number of potential triangles, the number of twosomes, the processes that go on inside the person and between the people, the possible combinations, interrelationships and complexities — all of these increase exponentially. The input into the head of the therapist can cause confusion and overload his circuits so that he goes into a state of acute or chronic **information overload**. Focus on key issues can become so hazy that he ends up pondering such important issues as, "Does a flea have a navel?" Thus, one of the early goals in the development of systems thinking was an attempt to organize the infinite complexities of the understanding of the person and his family.

The wealth of information led to another observation. From the clinical observation of families and their members over time, it also became clear that current ways of thinking and theorizing could not account for the phenomena that were observed. One could see kinds of scary patterns of the transmission of problems from one generation to the next. Alcoholism in one generation could be followed by the same thing in the next generation. It could also be followed by the temperance union in the next generation and leap frog as a drinking problem into the third generation. Symptoms would seem to shift from one person to the other. A wife would state that she wanted a bigger piece of her husband, more time with him. As the husband spent more time at home with his family, the wife would get increasingly depressed. When she got what she wanted, she seemed to deteriorate. Literally, a son could act psychotic on one day and his father act the same way the next day. There seemed to be a process that determined and carried the members of the family along. It was both fascinating and frightening. It was almost as if the process was inevitable and the members of the family had abdicated their ability or capacity to modify it. The movement over the generations and within the generation seemed to roll along almost by its own weight. People began to speak of reciprocal, complementary, opposite or reactive behavior. As the function of the child improved, difficulties between "seemingly together" parents erupted. Father and mother, who agreed and never fought, turned to open warfare with each other. "Little Hans" revisited. As the phobias leave the child, the parents separate. Was this a change, a cure, or just a shift of symptoms? The feeling was that there must be some connection.

Another observation ensued. Over time, it became clear that one had to abandon the traditional idea of causality. The dynamic, cause and effect, individual, motivational psychology that most of us had been taught simply did not fit. Worse than that, it often seemed to lead to increased limitations within the person and severe dysfunction in his system — his family. Blame and causality were used by members of the family system to excuse self and place the need for change in the other person. This process could go on within members of the same generation or children could end up blaming their problems on their parents. Time was involved. "I did this because you did that first." From the generational viewpoint, was it of any use to place fault and responsibility on the first generation — Adam and Eve? Were there so many variables and people involved, that causality became a useless and damaging exercise? If symptoms could shift, how could one diagnose or construct an individual dynamic picture of a person? And yet, the individual did exist. A cause and effect theory seemed to lead to explanations which led to further explanations. Little change seemed to occur.

The main impetus of what has been described was taking place in the 1950's and later. But like all developments, the roots go back much further into history. For example, a book was written in the 1890's about triangles. And Alfred Adler was interviewing schoolchildren and their parents in front of groups of teachers in the 1930's. Sociologists, theologians and philosophers have been talking about the family for centuries. So, in a sense, there was nothing new about the general interest in the family. But there was something new that did occur in the 1940's.

After the Second World War, a new science called **systems analysis** developed. With the development of the computer and all kinds of new technology, the complexities of life were given recognition. Business, science, human relationships, communications, the problems of cities, etc. were all subjected to systematic analysis. Systems analysis started out as an engineering concept to try to tie many parts into a whole picture. It recognized that one could not separate the parts from the whole or the whole from the parts. Without realizing it, this science took upon itself problems similar to what family therapists were struggling with. By the process of analysis and synthesis, the systems analyst tried to fit and interconnect the part into the whole and the whole into the parts. It tried to create a picture much like a latticework. The family therapist, likewise, was struggling with the problems of the identification of self, the differentiation of self from other and the integration of the person into the family. Let me give you an example.

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Rose is an eighteen year old girl who complains of feeling lonely and being easily rejected by people. She has occasional dates but feels empty and does not know what she wants out of life. In treatment she talks a little about herself but does nothing to narrow the distance between herself and her father. Her mother, toward whom she always felt close, remains her confidant. Where is the problem? In the lonely Rose, the overdose mother or the distant father?

After some time, she meets a boy and they get rather serious. She is unsure of her relationship with him and brings him into the office with her. She tends to be possessive of him and yet yearns to be close to him. He genuinely cares about her but also wants to preserve his network with his friends. He wants some independence. Where is the problem? In Rose, or in Jim, her boyfriend, or between the two of them?

Rose and Jim get married. For the first year, things go on. He is busy with work, friends and Rose. She feels somewhat lonely, complains mildly about his going out with the boys but is also busy with her job and housework. Where is the problem? In Rose, in Jim, in the marriage? Is there a problem?

After two years, Rose has a child — a son named Phil. She stops working because Phil demands much care. This is a burden to some extent but she also finds out that she is not so lonely when she is with her son. She can talk and coo to him. Jim's responsibilities are now larger. He finds himself spending more time at work and feeling somewhat neglected — as if there were not enough time and caring about being delivered to him. At home, he is critical of Rose but she seems preoccupied with her son. Rose's mother visits often and sometimes Rose and her mother fight over the proper way to raise Phil. Jim finds himself sitting in the living room with his father-in-law. They watch TV together, get along "well" but have little to say to each other. Whenever there is an excuse, he manages to leave to do some work, to play golf or to socialize outside the house. Phil, the son, is a little inward and naughty but seems to be thriving. Where is the problem? In grandma or grandpa? Husband or wife? In son or in father's peer group? Is there a problem?

Time passes. Phil is now sixteen years old. The phone rings in the office. It is Jim and Rose and they have a problem with their son. Ever since he turned thirteen, Phil has been keeping late hours, doing poorly in school and hanging out with the wrong kids." Father and mother, who had been distant, are now sincerely united in their efforts to change Phil. A common bond has been established between the parents — indeed a common problem. Phil is silent, wants to be left alone and when he does speak is very critical of his parents.

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The parents reassure me that they have no major difficulties. Ask yourself again. Where is the problem? In whom? Between whom? In what generation? The grandparents, the parents or the child? The peer group, the school or the family?

With the threesome in the room, the heat is taken off of Phil by asking him what he thinks of his parents. The parents are interested because the aker is Phil — the "problem." Phil warms up because the focus is on his parents. He talks about feeling close to mother in earlier years and then being cramped by her possessiveness in later years. He talks about not knowing his father at all. Mother agrees about father's distance and father agrees about mother's possessiveness. Phil's function improves but now the parents are bickering and fighting. They feel that things are getting worse. Where is the problem? In son, in mother, in father or been whom? Are they all problems? Do we need three therapists, six or ten? Who should go where about what?

Time passes again and changes begin to occur. "Therapy" is so directed that distant relationships narrowed and overclose relationships are distanced. Father and son are put together by giving mother control and responsibility over what son is doing or not doing. Mother is left out. In the past, she always had someone, or did she? She had her mother, her husband, her son, and again her husband. There was always someone to be with and someone to be against. Where is grandfather? He

is dead but is he? Is he somewhere in the room? Now there is no one to be with.

Mother expresses her intense loneliness, feelings of being empty and that no one cares about her. Not even herself. As father approaches son, he feels awkward, foolish, impatient and intolerant. It is difficult but he must learn to control himself and to express his tenderness. Son tends to be self righteous, to say, "See, I was right. You are the problem." He too has trouble with giving. If one has been the center, either of adoration or of a problem, it is difficult to give up that position. In time each one plunges inside himself but opens up to others. The despair, the tenderness, the bitterness and anger, the impatience, the unsureness pop to the surface. As things improve, one scratches his head. Who had the problem? When did it start? How did it happen? What went into the creation of it? Where did it occur?

The systems analyst, as a kind of engineer of the overview, was faced with problems like this. For example, the head of a housing bureau would declare that a city needed 500,000 new housing units. The analyst would place that request in a lattice work of components and wholes. For each housing unit built, there would be requirements for schools, transportation, parks, jobs, recreation, etc. His conclusion might be that only 200,000 units could be built in this particular place at this particular time. The part must fit the whole and the whole function for the welfare of all the parts.

There was a kind of natural affinity between the multiple complexities and wealth of information and the organizational ability of family therapy and the engineering science of systems analysis. Both dealt with components or units — for example, one the person and the other the housing unit. Both dealt with an overview — one the family and the other the assimilation of housing into a busy city. Both realized that the component and the overview must blend into something that worked — the person into the family and the housing into the city. Both faced infinite numbers of variables — those elements that could not be predicted. Both had to take into account past history — one the generations of family long gone and the other, the resistance of people and bureaucrats to change. Both were somehow less interested in explanations and moved more toward function — getting something going. Both heard

endless explanations of "why" this happened and both realized that it became impossible to separate out truth from fiction. Both knew that there was often truth on all sides and that issues of right or wrong were often not involved. Both wanted change, function, something that worked. The wedding was inevitable. The family began to be seen as another system.

This had all kinds of consequences. The magic of the word promised a new way of looking at people. The mystery of the word allowed many people to continue looking at phenomena the same way they always did but now it could be called a "system." The word turned the scientists on and the humanists off. That is the point we are at now.

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### Relativity

Going back to the clinical, I would find myself sitting down with families and talking to them day after day. They seemed to have different degrees of **expectation** out of life. One family would seem to be content if there were no gross problems such as a child being thrown out of school. Others would seem to want much more. They would seek greater closeness with each other or some increase in function. One could listen to members of the same family and hear the same thing. A busy housewife, surrounded by children all day would yearn to talk to her husband. The husband, surrounded by adults all day, might want a period of quiet and privacy when he came home. Both viewpoints were reasonable yet they could result in a clash. In a sense, the goal of the individual or the family seemed relative to the particular person or family that one was talking to. It became increasingly clear that the issues could not be solved on the basis of right-wrong, truth-falsehood, good-bad. This is not to say that those issues do not exist. They do. But they are not issues in an emotional system. An emotional system works on function (it works or it does not work) and relativity. When asked, "What is relativity?", Albert Einstein replied: "When you sit with a nice girl for two hours, you think it is only a minute. But when you sit on a hot stove for a minute, you think it's two hours. That's relativity."

Just as the systems analysts introduced the notion of organization and function into a system, Albert Einstein introduced the notion of time and **relativity**. He spoke about objects in a language of

**time and space**. This language is a universal one which can be adapted to the person and the system he is in. All the terms are relative to the particular family that one is talking about. Thus, one can speak of the four-dimensional self, (all the elements of self in the depth dimension, movement toward objects in the vertical dimension, movement toward people in the lateral dimension, and time), the position of each person (e.g. the helpless wife married to the controlling husband), the closeness or distance between people (e.g. "My husband is always away from home"), the direction of movement (e.g. "I want to get my husband back but he doesn't care about me anymore."), the nature of the movement (e.g. "It's not what she says to me but the way she says it."), the space between people (e.g. "I talk to my husband but he never communicates with me.")

Such a language was universal enough to encompass all human phenomena. One could talk about the one — the person and the elements and movements that went on inside him. These would include dialogues with himself and between his feelings. We could discuss the space between people where business was transacted and how some people liked a lot of private space. We could discuss the twosome — the personal relationship and the elements that go into it. And we could talk about how to get involved in a threesome without getting into a triangle. All phenomena could be understood in this framework. The element of time allowed one to study the past to learn from it, not to muddle around in it or hold grudges. One could use the present to make change so that goals in the future would be arrived at. One could talk about patience and impatience and how people were often talking at two different points in time. The husband, anxious to please, would bring a present to his wife. He was operating in the present. The bitter wife would throw the present at him because she was locked into a bitter memory that took her into the past. Of course, the terms were relative. Closeness would mean different degrees of space between self and others in different families.

### The Context

In 1957, a book entitled "Insight — A Study of Human Understanding" — was written by Bernard J. F. Lonergan. This book tried to establish a philosophical basis for understanding phenomena. Putting some of these insights together with my clinical observation of people and families led to the development of the following basic assumptions about understanding systems:

**1. All people exist in a relationship, an internal and an external relationship.** This indicates that there is an internal and an external system. The elements in each self — thoughts, feelings, memories, etc. — exist in relationship to each other. A thought may give rise to a memory which activates a feeling. One may feel like having a cigarette but think that he should not. No portion of self lives in isolation. At the same time, every person lives in relation to other people. Every person has a family that he grew up in, if not a family then the equivalent of a family. Even the most severely withdrawn individual relates to others at some time. Inner or outer isolation is impossible.

**2. The understanding of information lies in the relation of things, not to our senses, but to one another.** This abstraction draws a distinction between the relationship of things or people to one another and things or people to our senses. A perception is something that we hear, feel, see, smell, touch, etc. This is what we observe in ourselves. For example, one can see an apple fall. This is a perception but does not lead to any understanding. Now the relationship of people to people or things to people leads to the definitions of laws. For example, the law of gravity is the relationship of mass to mass, not to our seeing an object fall. Seeing the apple fall leads to experiential data but does not lead to the understanding of the law of gravity. It does not lead to scientific theory, to the development of laws.

Now, how does this refer to the therapist? It gives him two avenues of investigation, both of which will produce different information. He can have perceptions, thoughts or feelings about a person and this will give him information such as "I feel you are not opening up to me." This is a personal view but does not give any understanding of the laws of family function. The other avenue is to study what goes on between the members of the family. This approach offers the possibility of discovering and understanding the laws and rules of function in a family. It offers the possibility for the development of a scientific theory for the understanding of families. Another possibility is to study what goes on between the "doctor" and the "patient" and arrive at laws of function for a "treatment" system. But it should be clear that a treatment system and a family system are not the same thing. Nor is a work system or a play system. In approaching a family then, one has three possibilities — a personal, perceptive viewpoint, a study of the family system or a study of the treatment system.

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In this context, scientific theory comprehends every person in relation to other people and every part of the person in relation to the other parts of that same person. It relates part to part and whole to whole. The assumption is that every family system runs on laws of function. These laws exist independent of the experiential observations of the family therapist. For example, triangles and emotional fusion lead to dysfunction whether the therapist knows they exist or not. It is the task of the therapist to know these laws of function and the task of the researcher to discover new laws of function.

**3. Any person can and must be defined by both the external and internal system in which he exists.** Both systems not only exist but are inseparable. What goes on inside a person forms a continuum with what goes on between that person and other people. Now, the word **continuum** is not arbitrarily selected. It implies that there is no distinction in content which can be made without reference to something else. An example is a space-time continuum. One can talk about space by referring to the three dimensions of space. One can talk about time by referring to the past, present, or the future. But a space-time continuum involves the two ideas of space and time in a blend of movement which neither idea, by itself, can convey. This is, in part, what is meant by the notion that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Now, let us try to reduce this to the clinical. It is a common experience to hear people separate out their own self and what they do. It is as if there is a distinct "I or me" and then this is what I do. I am "Tom" and this is what "Tom" does. That is one way of looking at things. It focuses on the individual by creating a distinction between the person and what he does — the moves he makes. Now, the idea of a continuum denies that distinction. It states that the moves I make are a part of me. "Tom," as a complex entity of feelings, thoughts, physical elements, etc. and what "Tom" does are all parts of "Tom." If the moves that I make are a part of me and not merely something that I do, then this puts me into a system. After all, I must move toward something or someone and this necessarily places me in a system with that object or person. From this viewpoint, man is always in a system.

Trying to understand the person without the moves he makes, without the system he is in, is doomed before it starts. One simply cannot understand a person by himself. Different moves have different meanings in different contexts. The context is as important as the move and both are inseparable. I am what I am and I am what I do.

A continuum states that I cannot separate my "complete I" from what goes on inside of me, the moves I make and what happens between you and me. It then becomes ridiculous to ask if the person needs individual or family therapy. Effective family therapy would demand a close inspection of the inner system and effective individual therapy would demand close inspection of the family system.

**4. The evolution, understanding and definition of a system is a gradual process.** It would be difficult to read an article in this field or go to a meeting without hearing that magical word, "system." Various aspects of a system may be discussed or the word may be mentioned and then ignored. Believe it or not, it is difficult or perhaps impossible to find out what it really means. It is almost as if the word is more magic than substance. Granted, it is a difficult and unusual concept to grab a hold on. In the long run, it is simply a new and different way of thinking about things. Most commonly, those who work with systems find it easy to demonstrate facets of systems but hard to define the end point of what a system is. I have the same trouble.

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**"The understanding of a family system starts with the realization that no person exists in a vacuum. No person is understandable by himself."**

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So far we have discussed the following. The understanding of a family system starts with the realization that no person exists in a vacuum. No person is understandable by himself. As much as you or I would like to believe that we are that influential, faint so. You and I are probably as significant-insignificant as each other. A lesson in **humility**. That is the first lesson in thinking about people in terms of systems. We all have stuff inside us and stuff going on between ourselves and those we care about. That is the **"human phenomenon."** The difference between one person and the next is what you or I do about it. We all have problems. The real issue is how we deal with them. You can run a problem into the ground or you can use a problem as a learning experience.

Let's try to get a hold on this thing called a system. I mean, what is it? You, the reader, have been there. I, the writer, have been there. What the hell does it mean? In the long run, you and I live

and die by what we are and what we do. There is an implicit and explicit set of standards or values that we "inherited" from those before us, from our families, from our immediate context. In the long run, any change ultimately lies in the change in values — in what I believe and rule my life by. Now, whatever these laws or rules might be, that is what I live and die by. So we all are right and we know (inside but not to tell others), we are all wrong. Where do I turn to? Who has the truth? Who has the answer?

What I am trying to say is that I think we all know some of those values, those rules, the ideas that take us outside ourselves. It is a fact that thinking about the family systematically has led to the clarification and identification of some of these concepts. There is no proof for this except trying it out. From experience, we can identify and define some laws and principles that are conducive toward a functional system. These laws define self in a system. Violation of these laws creates dysfunction and emotional problems in a system. Also in one's own person and those he cares most about. There is no magic about it. But there is a body of knowledge involved.

There are different degrees of understanding of these laws. Generally, the understanding is implicit. With a few people, the understanding is explicit. A good family therapist must have at least implicit recognition of these laws. A good teacher of family therapy must have explicit understanding of them. In his own way, he can abstractly and concretely define these laws.

Now, the understanding of such a system is a gradual, evolving process. Within each law of systems, in each stage of defining a system, there is a capacity for further insight so that more laws and principles can be defined. Let's take a mathematical example. It is easy to memorize the fact that  $2 + 2 = 4$ . Yet, if one really understands what goes into that equation, he has the capacity to go beyond it. He can then move into  $3 + 3$  or  $2 \times 2$ . Just so with systems thinking. For example, many families come to us with the viewpoint that the problem lies in one member of the family. This **absolutely** prevents any possibility for change. As soon as the problem can be distributed among the members of the family, it becomes possible to gain a new insight. The presence of many triangles becomes apparent. When the family learns to get rid of triangles, more insights are available. The difficulties involved in the personal relationships, in the twosomes, become apparent. Through all of this movement greater insight is attained by each member into his own self. Each one realizes that the only kind of change that is possible is a change in his own self

Eventually, the family moves toward greater function and has the ability to gain further insight on their own if they so desire. At a certain point, the therapist is an artifact in the family and should be eliminated. All of this change takes time — it is the work of a lifetime. To speed up change, the family therapist has the task of learning and teaching functional structural laws for the family.

**5. Problems are infinite in number, space and time.** The number of complexities within the human being (e.g. the amount of feelings and combinations of various feelings), the variations and possibilities of space (e.g. the distances and degrees of closeness between all members of the system), and the spread over time (e.g. we are all products of "Adam and Eve") preclude the resolution of all difficulties. Four lifetimes would not suffice. In this sense, there is no disease and no cure. The end point is never reached. The only real question is what size problem will I be working on ten years from now and can I do it from the knowledge and experience within myself and my system or do I need an outside consultant (e.g. therapist). One works toward resolution but never gets there. For example, most of us would agree that a three generation overview of most emotional problems is a practical one for any family. Yet, we realize it is a pragmatic and far from ideal approach.

**6. The rule of simplification.** The notion that problems are infinite in time, space and number carries a sense of hopelessness and helplessness with it. Why do anything about anything? Fortunately, it is possible to reduce the number of complexities. We can realize that many internal and external relationships are not **"intricate to the full degree."** They are merely built out of and extensions of simpler relationships and underlying laws. For example, difficulties in one's network can often be translated into their equivalent in the family. The child who operates in an irresponsible manner at school can be seen as a child who is irresponsible in the family in some equivalent or opposite way. But some issues are intricate to the full degree and must be understood clearly. If one really understands what a triangle is, he can use that knowledge at home, socially or at work. This emphasizes the importance of the family therapist in that he should **teach** and **not just "work out problems."** It is possible to work out or work through one triangle but how about the rest of them? To the extent that it is possible, the rule of simplification has the purpose of defining an underlying theory so that, no matter where one wanders or strays in a system, attention is focused on the underlying processes of identification of self, differentiation of self from other and integration of the "I" into the "system."

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### Conclusion

The systematic theory of self and family resulting from all of the above is the overview of the family as a space-time continuum. Using space and time, one can develop a language which is universal. This language can be applied to human phenomena and absorb any new information. It is practical and can be heard by people. It is specific enough to be useful and general enough to be not intrusive (e.g., to allow for and foster individual differences and the uniqueness of each person). It allows for and deals with commonalities and differences between people.

### Some Laws of Function in the Family

**1. All human beings seek closeness.** The law of gravity indicates that objects are attracted to each other in proportion to their mass. just as objects are so attracted, people have a natural affinity to each other. People crave closeness with other people. Now, first of all, it should be understood that closeness is a relative matter. What might appear as closeness to one person would be regarded as distance to the next. There is no clear cut line of definition and no boundaries of normality and abnormality. From a clinical point of view, closeness is present when it is verified by all significant members of the family as being present, over a reasonable period of time. In this way, the family, itself, becomes the final criterion of closeness. That's as it should be.

Secondly, there are basically three systems operating between people — the thinking system, the emotional system and the operating system. It is important to separate out closeness in all of these systems. One can move close to the other person in one system and be distant in the next system. A thinking system is based on fact. In its pure sense it might represent the tremendous admiration a student might have for the genius of an Albert Einstein. An emotional system is quite different. It simply represents a feeling. One could admire the genius of Einstein and at the same time feel an aversion to him because of the way he dressed. The third system is the operating system and it defines what one does in a physical way.

A husband may stay distant from his wife in the sense that he does not express his felt emotions. Emotionally, she is on his mind. He worries about her and, in his own way, cares deeply about her. Emotionally, he is close to her but in the operating system, he does not express it. He is emotionally close, operationally distant and unthinking.

Thirdly, the value of a person, the amount of self mass, the attraction to a person, his degree of charisma — all of these and others are largely in the eye of the perceiver. One may be attracted to another in many ways. These ways would include physical attraction, respect, intellectual admiration, etc. but, most of all, the attraction between people is an emotional one. It is a feeling process. The human tendency is for one to be attracted to the other by the way he perceives the emotional mass of the other person. An example of my own would be my tendency to place a personal sense of loyalty that I felt from someone else at the head of my list. Where I grew up, in the Bronx, you'd better be loyal or have your head taken off. A child will relate more closely to mother because of her sympathy, her giving in, or her looking more empathic than father. The point is that the emotional mass of the person will largely lie in the eye of the perceiver and will be delivered according to that perception. But the result is clear, the law is clear — like it or not. If one person is moving toward the other, then the other must represent a larger emotional self mass — even if the movement is through anger, tenderness, compassion or hatred. **Movement toward or away is a key concept.** One can move toward the other to get something from the other that he should get from himself — self confidence, security, etc. One can move toward the other to control him, to prove that "I am right." One can move toward other important people for an infinite number of reasons. One can do it in reverse. How often can I shake you by my threat of suicide so that you move toward me? How often do I have to go into a depression to get your attention? I am sick, don't you see? In the long run, it is the same process. Movement toward represents a smaller emotional mass moving toward a larger one. That is unless — unless what? If I decide that I ought to move toward the other person. Not emotional blackmail, not pity, not feeling sorry for, but my personal decision. Then moving toward someone or something means something. Movement away represents the opposite. It can be done from spite or because I believe in it. Ultimately, one gets into the guts of the difficult. Why should I make that effort? How much do I really care? How important are you to me?

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**"It is not generally known that, if one puts one object inside of another, they will repel each other — they will distance from each other. This is what happens in fusion."**

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**2. Fusion leads to distance.** Fusion can be defined as a blending or melting together so that one thing unites with another. To go back to the example of objects, it is not generally known that, if one puts one object inside of another, they will repel each other — they will distance from each other. This is what happens in fusion. One person acts as if he were inside the other. Clear examples include mind reading wherein one person acts as if he knows the motivation of the other. Other examples include assuming responsibility for another person, blaming the other for something inside of me (e.g. "You make me angry"), and talking with a "We" or "Us" as if two people were perfectly similar. Fusion is opposed to the concept of differentiation. Differentiation implies a clear definition of one's own self boundaries. It defines a distinctness between one and the other — a separateness, a space between one person and the other. This characteristic of the well defined person leads to the ability for one person to distinguish himself from another, to know where he begins and ends and where the other person begins. This sense of discrimination defines what I can expect from myself, what I can expect from others, and what is going on between myself and others. I must learn to make decisions about myself. Advice is something that I can get from others. To know where self ends and the other begins so that I do not assume responsibility for the other person is an example of differentiation in the external system. To confuse thinking with feeling is an example of fusion in the inner system. Law #1 leads to closeness. Law #2 defines the propensity for closeness to become fusion with resultant distance between people. Two people try to get close, anger arises, they argue and then retreat to opposite ends of the house to nurse their grudges. And so the scenario goes — back and forth.



**3. Triangles are always dysfunctional.** So far we have discussed people moving toward each other, then having a tendency to get inside each other and fuse. Over time there is an alternating distance and fusion and people will search for that degree of distance where the emotional pull toward each other is felt but the tendency toward fusion is decreased. It can be compared to someone holding two strong magnets, one in each hand. If he holds them far enough apart, he can still feel the magnetic pull but can manage to hold the magnets apart with a minimum of effort. Beyond a certain indefinite point, if enough distance is required, the system will break, with both parties going their own ways (e.g. divorce), change into a more functional one, or triangle in an attempt to gain stability. Let us go back to an example from nature again. Two objects will take a position in relation to each other, determined by their mass. If another object is thrown into that system it will take a position in relation to the sum of the masses of the two objects already present. Thus, it will move closer to the larger mass and relatively more distant from the smaller mass. The three object system will stabilize into a triangle. So too in a people system. When distance gets so great that the system is in danger of breaking, it may triangle to avoid a rupture. The third leg of the triangle is usually a person but may be an object. A television set often serves the function of allowing people to sit in the same room without bringing up real issues between them. They do not have to acknowledge the emptiness and boredom between them. A father and mother classically can "unite" and avoid looking at their own problems by having a "problem child."

A distinction should be made between a **triangle** and a **threesome**. Every threesome is not a triangle. A triangle is designed so that two people can avoid confronting each other. It prevents the resolution of problems in the two person system since these problems are never discussed. The issue becomes the third person or object. Therein lies its dysfunction. On the one hand, the third issue is necessary to stabilize the twosome, and on the other hand, the third issue or person is seen as a problem. A threesome is quite different. It really amounts to **three simultaneous twosomes**. It is not used to avoid the development of a personal relationship.

Now, just a word about a very vague entity called **self mass**. We have already discussed how objects in space take a position with other objects in direct relation to the mass of the objects. Now, self mass refers to all the elements in a person — abstract and concrete thought, feelings and deeper emotions, physical elements, imagination, the craziness in all of us, our values and spiritual elements and the moves

we make over time toward objects and people. A person moves toward the person who is perceived to have the larger self mass and, in a three person system, relatively more distant from the one who is perceived to have the smaller self mass. At any given point in time, the evaluation of the self mass may vary depending on what one is up to. A child may move closer to mother whom he perceives as warm and sympathetic and relatively away from father who is seen as angry and strict. At the stage of knowledge we currently are in, it is not possible to define a concrete, functional concept of self mass. Some aspects are clear, e.g. that anger is never useful, that patience, assuming responsibility for self, not assuming or mind reading, etc. are useful. Dysfunctional aspects of self mass are clear. Suicide attempts may increase self mass temporarily when it brings people closer out of pity. Over time, repetition of the same move does not have the same effect. Thus, self mass lies largely in the eye of the perceiver and is basically, but not completely, an emotional process.

**4. All systems seek homeostasis.** Homeostasis is a balancing mechanism. It is a compensatory relationship which tends to keep anything relatively constant. It does this by the gain or loss or mutual interchange of one substance into another and then back again. The balance of mass, forces, energy and living creatures in nature is an excellent example. The same process exists in people systems. Forming a triangle is an attempt at balance. Generally everybody in the system favors change but the idea is that the other person should do the changing. This prevents change since **the only change that is possible is when I change myself**. Now, in a dysfunctional system, people will try to increase self mass by borrowing self from other at the price of fusion. One of the best ways to be a saint is to marry a scoundrel. One of the best ways to look thin is to join a fat woman's club. One of the best ways to be "normal" is send your child to a psychiatrist. All of these are self-borrowing mechanisms. When enough self is borrowed or lost, symptoms develop. This process explains both the development of symptoms and their frequent shifting between the members of the family. Thus, in the words of Walter Cannon, homeostasis represents "the mechanism in a system which reduces large environmental fluctuations to small internal deviations." The external system in the family is trying to reduce fluctuations caused by fusion, distance, overcloseness, triangles and "borrowing of self" within the family. Each member of the family system is trying to reduce fluctuations in his own self caused by the external processes in the family. Remember, all positions in a dysfunctional family system are uncomfortable but not equally so.

The struggle is to get into the **least uncomfortable position**. For example, the distant husband is generally less upset than the pursuing wife.

Homeostasis is opposed to change. It tries to deny that change and stress are a part of life. Thus, dysfunctional systems increase dysfunction and the development of symptoms by trying to avoid change. This is important to know and to teach to families. As soon as one member of the family makes or tries to make a significant change, other members will try to get that person to stop rocking the boat. The homeostatic mechanisms in the system will try to negate that change and to discourage that person from changing. That makes **change a very lonely job**. It also means that one should not expect medals when he initially tries to change himself.

**5. The more of a self that one is, the greater will be the tendency to be close with others.**

This rule is kind of obvious. The more self mass, the more of a self that I am, the more others will move toward me. The greater the self mass, the greater the attraction — the emotional bonding between people. But this is a two edged sword. It imposes a responsibility on me. What am I doing, who am I dealing with, how am I doing it, where is it occurring, etc.? That I must live up to. If I get my spouse to move toward me out of pity, will it last? If I gather my relatives and boyfriend about me because I tried to commit suicide, where will they be after the fourth attempt? If people move toward me out of fear, because I am angry at them, where does that get me in the long run?

What is unclear, is the question of what a functional self mass is. At the present time, to a large extent (just like truth), it is in the eye of the perceiver. Fortunately, there is a way of figuring this out over time. Put a number of people in a room and watch who moves toward whom, how they group, and how they interplay within groups. Put a man in a room with his family and watch whom he moves toward, the ones he talks to, the time he spends doing what. Now, all of this may be done for many different reasons. Don't become an analyst. Ask a question. Ask, but be receptive to the answer. It may be politics. Just watch it all. The elements at work in each individual at that moment represent the operational (and true) definition of how self mass is perceived **at that moment by the individuals involved for whatever motive**. It may represent physical attraction, sexuality, the power and respect that comes from a particular position, adoration or conflict, intellectual brilliance, empathy, a sense of security and trust, safety, personality — whatever — the list is infinite. But, the point that I would like to make is the operational one. One

moves toward a greater self mass. It is greater at the moment or in the long run. It is obvious that one person could be more involved with his boss at a particular party and less involved at another party. Eventually, the person who really believes in himself will believe that people will move toward him. He will place his head on the chopping block. He will put his own self on the line. After all, I cannot think much of myself if I believe that others are moving away. I realize that this is a somewhat vague concept that must be discussed. I would hope that, someday, someone will come along and define what is an objectively, functional self mass over time.

**6. The more one is a person or self, the greater is the tendency for fusion.**

Recall the image of two strong magnets. The closer they get, the greater is the tendency for them to "unite" and the greater is the effort required to keep them close but apart. Just so with the human phenomenon. The more one is a person, the more assets he has, the greater is the tendency for fusion. There will be a strong tendency for him to be surrounded by those who worship him, mock him by being a carbon copy of him, and abdicate their own self. They become followers. The leader gets into the "big I" position. Woody Allen once made up a mock funeral oration for a prominent man that said: "He was a great man. Before he died he donated his ego to Harvard Medical School." This is an easy trap for a capable person with a large self mass to fall into.

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**"Operationally differentiation means that one knows where his own self begins and ends — there is always a space between one's own self and the other person."**

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**7. The more one is a person or self, the greater is the requirement for differentiation.** Self mass describes what is in the person, in the box, in the container. Differentiation describes the boundaries. It is the lines around self; it is the box; it is the container. Draw a circle. Self is inside the circle. Differentiation is the line you have drawn. It is the boundaries of self. Operationally, it means that one knows where his own self begins and ends. It means there is always a space between one's own self and the other person so that one knows where self begins and ends and the same about the other person. It means that I know what I should get from myself and what functionally can come from the other. What is functional is established by what works for me over time in the systems that are closest and most important to me — my family, nuclear and extended. So now we have another complication. The more a person develops and works on himself, the greater his self mass will become. The greater his self mass is, the greater will be his tendency or the tendency of others around him to fuse. The conclusion is inescapable. He must develop his "I" (self mass) and his differentiation (self boundaries) at the same time. One cannot do one without the other. Thus a system is born.

**8. The tendency to fuse varies directly with self mass and inversely with the degree of differentiation.** This simply follows from what has already been said. The father who is seen as the "capable" one in the family will be "seen" as the one with the largest self mass. If he is poorly bounded, defined and differentiated, he will tend to tell everybody what to do and remain poorly differentiated. It is especially difficult for him. If he refuses to make their decisions for them, they will accuse him of being hardhearted, unconcerned, uninterested, etc. If he makes their decisions for them, he fuses into them and they get into the "helpless, no-self" position. Frustrated either way, he may retreat into himself, question his values, change his self mass at the very time when he should be working on his boundaries, his degree of differentiation.

**9. Increasing distance between two or more selves in the family system represents a loss of self mass.** This law has to be interpreted carefully. It certainly does not refer to all forms of distance. There is a useful form of distancing. If one distances because he wants to get his head together

and realizes that the distance, by itself, does not solve anything, then he does not undergo a loss of self. It is a temporary maneuver. If one distances because he knows that he is overloading the system and that to go further will result in an emotional explosion, then he does not lose self. He protects the self he has. If one distances to unhook himself from a dysfunctional system (e.g. marked dependency), then he does not lose self. Thus, one has to apply this law over a period of time. The problem with distance erupts when it becomes the automatic, spontaneous, predictable result of emotional fusion or fear of fusion.

After all, there is a thing called choice. To a variable extent, every human being can control and modify his own existence. The effective use of distance may represent the careful attempt on the part of one member to "buck" a dysfunctional system — to do something different. An example would be a mother trying to pull herself back from overcontrolling her helpless son. To accomplish this she might have to look away from him or take a walk when she begins. These distancing maneuvers help her to remain patient since there is often a time lag between an effective move by one in a system and the consequences on the other person or persons in the same system. But the point must be made clearly. Distance by itself solves nothing. As a tactic, as a way of getting to something, it may be the most important thing that one can do at any particular moment. The real question is — what am I up to at this moment? — what is my purpose? — do I realize that I will eventually have to move back in? Distance from the other person can clear a head and buy time. It is never a solution. If used as a solution, it results in the loss of one's own self.

**10. Nature abhors a vacuum.** A vacuum can be described as an empty space, a gap, a void. Strictly speaking, there can be no such thing over time. A vacuum tends to get filled one way or the other. Now, if one person creates an empty space in the family system, others tend to fall into it or fill it. Think of all the people who say they "have to" do such and such because, "if they don't, who will do it?" The void may be real or imagined but it still tends to get filled. The person who distances because of whatever reason tends to leave a void and the other person will tend to fill it. This creates the common pattern of distance and pursuit. An example is the husband who distances by saying he has no feeling for his wife and she pursues him to maintain the marriage.

It is extraordinarily difficult for the person who is accustomed to move in to stop it. He jumps into the vacuum, the empty space between people where business is transacted, automatically. To avoid jumping in he must face the fear, mistrust and impatience within himself.

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**"The idea is that one fills only that portion of the space between people that is appropriate. One does not move to fill that portion of the space left empty by the other."**

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It is also interesting to note that **no sound can cross a true vacuum**. This has clinical relevance to communications within the family system. No matter what one's orientation is, everybody in this field talks about communications at one time or another. It is no accident that communications theory represented one of the earliest and most popular ways of seeing the family as a system. Now, I would like to tie this in with another idea. It is common for people to think that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. But, **in the presence of a vacuum, the shortest distance is not a straight line**. In the presence of a void in the space between people, the direct approach will not work. Let me give some examples. Mother yells and screams at her irresponsible son all day. Son leaves a vacuum by not listening to her, tuning her out. She keeps after him and becomes background music. There is a communications vacuum. Another one: husband does all his figuring inside his head but never tells wife what he is thinking and feeling. She feels the void between them, assumes that he does not care about her and moves to get him to change. Here we see a void between the two of them.

Now in all of these situations, the resolution of the difficulty must be approached indirectly. In both cases, mother and wife must learn to pull back from son and husband. They must avoid jumping into the vacuum. They do this by defining their own **"I position,"** the moves and the elements in self that one must be responsible for. The idea is that one fills only that portion of the space between people that is appropriate. One does not move to fill that portion of the space left empty by the other.

All issues are resolved in a thinking, feeling, operating context between people. The presence of a vacuum between people, filled by one person, makes that a dysfunctional context. Any issue thrown into such a context will never be resolved. Other elements contribute to such a dysfunctional context but that is not what we are discussing.

**11. A system, functional or dysfunctional, depends on the active participation and cooperation of every key member of that system.** With the onset of dysfunction in the family system, fragmentation begins to occur. Integration of the members into the system deteriorates into disintegration. Husband sees the problem in wife, children in parents, parents in children and one generation in the other. Actually, the problem lies in the system with components of the problem in each member. The family system and its members fit hand in glove no matter what they say or the way it is presented. It is easy to feel sorry for children as if they are the helpless victims of parents. It is easy for me to sympathize with the family member that feels the same way that I do. The bias of the therapist will tend to intrude. There is one way to eliminate this bias. That is to realize that **every member of the family deserves each other**.

Now, that is a very provocative statement. It is important to understand what I mean by it. It is intended to be non-judgmental and carry no moral meaning. It simply means that, in an emotional system, the parts fit into each other — the hand fits the glove. An example. A husband and wife have distance between them. A child comes along and mother and child get overdose with father distant at work. Father's distance at work is dear. Mother's ignoring of father is clear. The child, being 6 months old and helpless, plays the part of a six month old, helpless child whom anyone could love. The idea that people deserve each other has nothing to do with good-bad, right-wrong, up-down. It simply has to do with each member having a part in a problem.

This law also inspires **hope and humility**. It inspires humility because I must realize that I am no better or worse than other members of my family system. In a sense, if I am critical of them, I am being critical of myself. But there is also hope implied in this law. It means that change can be introduced into the system by one or more members. It means that, if one key member changes, the system must also change or break up. This does underline the fact that hope brings awesome responsibility with it.

**12. The same laws apply to the internal system in self and the external system between people in the family.** In understanding the inner system, what goes on inside a person, it is important that the same ideas are used. An inner system is a functional process with the parts fitting into the whole of the person and the whole fitting into the people system that that person is involved in. One way to foster this and to get away from cause and effect (which often leads to a "blame system") is to use the same language in the inner and external systems. Just as a husband can clash with wife about problem X, so a feeling in oneself can say "I want to smoke" and a thought can say, "I think I should give up smoking." Then one can get triangled into a situation, such as a fight with the boss, where the tension rises so high that he says, "I will smoke." He might end up in a doctor's office and say, "I think I will give it up."

**13. The final test of self mass and self differentiation is the capacity to attain closeness in a system without fusion.** This conclusion is clear from all the above.

#### **Antacids**

I fully realize that, up to this point, the meal that I have provided may be indigestible. It has been made up of many elements. Many of these may seem disconnected. I would like briefly to review them in the hope that a clearer picture might emerge.

#### **Summary**

**Murray Bowen:** Murray Bowen could be seen as my father. He talked about the triangle as the building block of the immature family. He traced levels of anxiety over three or more generations. He showed how the intensity of this anxiety could rise so high and diffuse among people so widely that one ended up with an undifferentiated family ego mass — a large glop of people so undefined that a feeling in one was experienced as a feeling in the other. He tried to get people to define their "I" positions out of this glop, so they could move up the scale of differentiation. His most effective tool was to stay out of triangles with the families he saw and to send members of the family off looking for a person-to-person relationship with the members of their extended family.

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**"Is the basic difference (between people and objects) that people have the ability to make a choice."**

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**My job:** A wide clinical experience enabled me to learn (at least to some extent) what works and what doesn't work in families. Constant contact with families kept me honest and concrete. Theoretical abstractions had to be reduced to the operational, to the move called for in each family, to the functional, to real live people with specific difficulties. The interplay between theory and practice led me to an enlargement and definition of the ideas that grew from the observation of people over time. Abstractions were not superimposed on people. One example of this was that I found myself dropping almost all "psychological terms" from my vocabulary.

**Systems analysis:** This engineering science provided a latticework that fit the parts into the whole and the whole into the parts. The result was a continuum made up of analysis and synthesis. The person could be put into the family system. The goals of validation by observation of movement and function (in terms of "does it work or not") were emphasized. The emotional system was moved from endless explanation to change. It also provided the beginning of a common language of time and space. It provided a scientific basis for the beginning of systems thinking about people. It was my analyst.

**Albert Einstein:** My cousin Albert taught me about time and relativity. From his work, I was able to define the concept of the four-dimensional self. This puts every self in a consistent continuum with other people. It allows for the beginning of a definition of the inner system that is consistent with the external system. He reinforced and clarified an evolving language of time and space. This language spoke of the position people were in, of distance and closeness, of movement toward or away from, of time, space and direction. He led me to a study of the laws of nature and object relationships. He fascinated me with the following question. Is it possible that the same laws that apply to objects also apply to people? Is the basic difference that people have the ability to make a choice? Thus the human being can play one law against the other (e.g. fly an airplane).

**Bernard Lonergan:** My brother Bernie taught me how to understand. He focused on the difference between a perception and studying what actually happens between people. By observing what happens between the members of the family we discover the laws of function in the family. My perception of a "patient" leads to the study of a **treatment system**. They are not the same things. A treatment system is full of potential bias and personal viewpoints. He emphasized the importance of context and how any piece of information could be understood only by putting it into a context. He provided a philosophical basis for the understanding of people, families and systems.

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**"People seek a distance at which the emotional attraction is still felt but the effort at preventing fusion remains within the comfortable range."**

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### **The "I" and the System (Identification, Differentiation and Integration)**

It could be stated, with a good degree of accuracy, that the universal problem of man is how to have an "I" and enter into a system with other "I's." This would have to be done without one person losing his own self or borrowing self from others. Ideally, a people system should foster the growth and development of all the people in it. All too often the system acts to suffocate the individual and the individual acts to disintegrate the system. Functional closeness is the goal of thinking about the family as a system.

We have already discussed the use of two strong magnets as one of the descriptive models for family systems. If one magnet is held in each hand, the closer the hands get to each other, the greater the magnetic pull and the greater the tendency for the magnets to "unite." So it is with people. The closer two people get to each other, the greater is the emotional attraction that exists between them. The greater the emotional attraction or pull, the greater is the tendency to unite, fuse and blend into each other. We have all experienced how easy it is to see problems in someone objectively if we are not close to them. It is so much more difficult to deal with our own problems and those closest to us. This is not because we care less about our own family but because we care more. There is more emotional attraction of anger, pity, compassion, resentment, expectation that goes on within one's own family.

People, then, seek a distance at which the emotional attraction is still felt but the effort at preventing fusion remains within the comfortable range.

This amount of distance-closeness will vary from family to family. It will also vary within the same family around different issues and problems and between different members of the same family.

So, people seek closeness without fusion but have trouble doing it. The occurrence of fusion leads to distance. When the degree of closeness that members of the family expect does not materialize, its absence is filled in by the development of symptoms in or between one or more members, the creation of triangles, and the family has a "problem." Increasingly, closeness tends to deteriorate into fusion to be followed by distance. Complaints of loss of individuality ensue. "I don't know who I am. I have not been a real person since I got married." Emotional disruption is common in the system. "My feelings for my wife are dead. I only feel bitterness. I wish she would leave." Distance ensues. "We haven't talked to each other for three months. He is never home and I am just as glad." Now there is a problem. Now let us consider some of the elements that enter into it in terms of the "I," the system and fusion.

## **FUSION**

### **The Identification of Self**

The identity of self is that which makes up the individual person. It includes all the elements of self. Such a list is almost endless. I like to picture this in terms of the four dimensional self.

The dimension of time amounts to 25% of the person. It includes the insurance man who plans exceptionally for the future, the impulsive person who wants everything in the present, the bitter wife who cannot forget what happened to her 25 years ago. It includes the existentialist who lives in the "being here and now" and the Freudian who muddles in the past. It includes patience and impatience. The patient one can become paralyzed and create a vacuum. The impatient one will jump into the vacuum. It includes those who interrupt and those who say nothing. It involves learning that change occurs gradually and that explanation without movement gets nowhere. Finally, it includes the idea that death is a part of life and our time is limited.

The **lateral dimension** is 25% of the person. It is a dimension of pure movement and involves movement toward people. It is the dimension of

Elements In self	What I Know	The gray area	That which is knowable but unknown by me	The unknowable
spiritual				
values				
Abstract thinking				
concrete thinking				
feelings				
emotions				
physical				
imagination (fantasy)				
craziness				

the personal relationship — how one gets close to people. It is not something that a person does but it is a part of the person.

The **vertical dimension** is 25% of the person. It involves movement toward objects. Like the lateral dimension, it is a dimension of pure movement. However, movement in life is rarely pure and is often a mixture of objects and people. A salesman is constantly mixing the two. Giving it equal priority with the personal relationship indicates that movement toward objects is as important as movement toward people. Try it. Don't eat for one day and see how rapidly your stomach moves toward the object, food. It includes watching TV, reading a paper, having a drink, eating, looking for an apartment, worrying about getting gas for the car.

The **depth dimension** is 25% of the person and only 25%. In previous theoretical constructs of the person it was seen as almost the entire self. It includes the infinite complexities of self — all the feelings, thoughts, memories, genes, physical aspects, etc. Following is a somewhat arbitrary scheme of how I like to visualize it.

Just a word about the chart above. Under the heading of elements in self, I have included topics which cover the range of the infinite complexities in self as far as I am concerned. A separate heading is made for feelings and emotions. Feelings are mostly the "feelings" that we are aware of such as anger, anxiety, etc. Emotions represent a deeper set of

"feelings" — much of which is out of our awareness. Thus a deeper emotion of anger that is out of awareness might show in the physical realm as a headache or hypertension. There are also headings going across. These form a sort of continuum of awareness. The continuum spreads from what I think or feel that I know, through gray areas where I am unsure, into that which is knowable but I don't know it and finally into that which is unknowable. For example. I know how to use electricity. I am not sure how they explain it in college today but I have some idea. I know there are books in the library where I could get more information. And nobody really understands the essence of electricity. I feel that I am depressed. I feel I can explain parts of it. I could go to a psychiatrist and learn more about it. But he wouldn't know "why" either. One final comment. The thinking aspects of the depth dimension can come into greater awareness by active teaching and learning in the classic sense. The emotional aspects come into greater awareness by moving in a different direction in order to have a different emotional experience which will provide a different set of feelings and a vision of multiple possibilities which when attempted will provide a new set of feelings inside self.

The degree of awareness of self is always relative to the context — the context within oneself at the moment and the external context between self and the other people around. One thing is sure. No one even remotely approaches total awareness. To do this he would have to know all the thoughts, memories, feelings, experiences and even genetic makeup. He would have to be aware of how he uses these selectively in his movements toward objects and people. He would have to have a keen sense of how time influences his life, the past, the present and the future. He would have to know how to use all of these elements selectively, depending on the situation. But to the extent that any person can look at his own self objectively and use his own self, he has this sense of self identification.

### The Identification of Others

At the very heart of what I am trying to explain is the idea that no person is an island unto himself. No person, no piece of information can be understood without putting it into some kind of context. For example, it would be impossible to understand or explain what a car battery is without mentioning other parts of the car engine. Up to this point, we have already discussed some of the elements in the identification of one's self. All of these apply to the identification of the other person. But the process is more complicated, difficult and full of the potential for error. It is all too easy to use the **projective process** — to protect my understanding of myself and my reasons for whatever I do onto the other person. When I do this, I act as if the other person is some kind of a duplication of myself. If I assume that, I get into trouble. I deny the uniqueness of each and every person. A hint — always take the few seconds it requires to ask the other person what is going on inside his head. Even when you already "know."

### Differentiation of Self from Others

Whereas identification refers to what is inside self or what is in the other person, differentiation is quite another process. Differentiation marks the outlines of the individual. It separates one person from another. It states where self ends and other begins. It represents the ability to distinguish and determine specific differences between one's own self and the other person. It is the ability to be aware of myself and the other person **at the same time**. It means that one can be sensitive to other people without being determined by them. To do this I must know what I have to get from myself. I must know what I can helpfully deliver to the other person. For example, I can get advice anywhere and it may be useful or useless. I must make my own final decisions myself. If I say, "You make me

angry," I am undifferentiated because I put the feeling of anger in me and the cause in you. I am acting as if you are responsible for my anger. Yet is that true? It is my feeling and perhaps I should learn to laugh at you or myself. If you ask me why I am doing something and I say, "Come on, you know," I am undifferentiated because I am asking you to read my mind.

### Differentiation of Others from Self

The only difference here is that the focus is on the other person. What properly belongs in and to the other person? What are the limits of what one can realistically and functionally do for the other person? This has to be done without borrowing self from the other. It is easy for the wife of an "alcoholic" to look good by trying to help him. Ask her what she wants from herself, for herself. She will give you an answer in terms of him, not herself. "I would be happy if he stopped drinking." She is not responsible for his drinking but she is borrowing self from him. As long as he has a "problem," she does not have to look at herself.

This then means that we must emphasize the necessity for the other person to be allowed and encouraged to have an "I" position of his own. When parents are told this, they ask, "Would you allow your daughter to do this?" My answer is: "I will allow her to be different. I will not support anything that I think is irresponsible."

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### "What is the difference between therapy and dysfunctions?"

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The secret to this posture is the realization that one must foster the ability of the other person to become "knowable." To do this, one must learn to listen, to try to hear and not correct the other person, to avoid interruptions, to decline the invitation to make assumptions, to be interested enough to want to find out about the person, to stop mind reading, to accept and not to change, to believe that what a person says is important because a person is saying it. I must learn that taking care of myself is a full time job. I must learn that I have neither the time, responsibility nor capability to change the other person. An interesting idea. How often do we, as therapists, tell one member of the family to leave the others in the family alone and then proceed to tell each member how to change? What is the difference between therapy and dysfunction?



### **The Emotional Climate**

We have already discussed that everything takes place and is understood in a context. The emotional climate refers to the conditions that exist between people at any particular time and over the years. In the development of this climate there is a trend of fundamental concepts and attitudes that become **pervasive**. Ultimately, there is a complicated emotional tone that is set up between people. This tone is never set up at any given moment. It grows more positive or negative over years. It is very much like having an emotional bank book. The rich get richer emotionally and the poor get poorer. Over the years, people make deposits and withdrawals from that emotional bankbook. If they have built up a very positive balance of love, caring about, interest, closeness, wanting to be with each other, patience, listening, openness, then they can take any emotional bill in stride. If husband is out of sorts tonight, wife can overlook it because she has that strong emotional balance working for her. She says, "What the hell, everybody has a bad day." She does not take it as if everything is personally directed at knocking her down. At the other extreme, if there is a negative balance of jealousy, malignant motivational mind reading, disinterest, selfishness, impatience, shooting from the hip, then every negative factor that occurs will only confirm that pessimistic viewpoint. **Pessimism** represents and fosters the disintegration of a system. It is the deadly enemy of **hope**.

We are all too familiar with the openly angry, conflictual family where charge is met with counter-charge. We are all familiar with the polite family who solve problems in two visits but never really open up and accomplish something. We have all been with the intense family that "really" wants to learn something but never seems to move anything into action. We have all been deluged with questions about the "right" thing to do in this and that situation. Generally speaking, many of the concrete particular issues (Should I push my son out of the house? Should I tell my wife that I no longer care? If I tell my mother, she will be hurt. Must my daughter be sent away?). Many of these issues are not solvable at the moment. People precipitate issues without taking the time to cultivate the emotional context. Mother screams and son tunes out.

**No issue can be put between the two of them until the emotional context has been rearranged.** The cart has been put before the horse — the issue before the emotional context. What I usually advise is that mother do a pull back so that she gives son no orders. Other things can be done and this immediately creates a different context.

When the emotional system has cooled off, then one can work on the issue.

So, all families have their emotional tone. Some times the therapist contributes to that tone or context. If he had difficulty in his own family, his bias will tend to intrude. He will side emotionally (and it will show indirectly) with father, mother, children, man, woman, the individual, the system, the present, the past or the future generations. In his office, he sets the context. It is important that the family therapist understand that all business is conducted in some kind of context. This context, this tone, this complex combination of attitudes and feelings must be set up before any issue can be handled. Any salesman knows this and can tell you how he does it. Set the tone. When this is done, people can begin to talk to people.

### **Islands of Sensitivity**

This refers to emotionally loaded areas that lie both within and between people. Some are brought to the relationship and some develop within a relationship. They may represent a particular look, an attitude, a word, a topic, a tone. They may be a husband rolling his eyes toward the ceiling as his wife is talking, furiously turning the TV set off while son is watching, wife's, off-handed disinterest in her husband's work, the mention of mother-in-law, my friends, religion, topics such as national alliance, sex or drugs, and the tone of labored patience, clipped speech, or fury. All these have in common the fact that they represent heavily invested areas. An emotional storm can be kicked off by touching any one of these areas. This can be done either in awareness or by stumbling over them. It really doesn't matter if the stumble was done on purpose or not. Over time it will be interpreted as malignantly purposeful by the other end of the relationship. So, these islands of sensitivity, over time, lead to a certain fix, a set of mind. Each person now "knows" the other and the mind is closed to a different viewpoint. Acts in the present are interpreted as if they were always simple extensions of the past. There is little or no room in each head for a new viewpoint, a different perspective. Alternative courses of action are eliminated. At this point, start a process and it goes on in a predictable way — **the anticipation becomes father to the result.**

Thus, past experience with a particular problem, plus assumptions which are confused with fact, plus the tendency to generalize that the same event always has the same significance — all of these confirm the exquisite sensitivities and fix them into concrete in the mind. This hair trigger is then set to explode the emotional system at any time. When the family faces us, they try to dodge and avoid this explosion. They are not resistant. They are scared and with good reason.

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**"Families are built on multiple interlocking triangles to the extent that they are dysfunctional. It seems that nothing is ever simple in a system."**

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### Triangles

So far we have been thinking and talking in terms of simple two person systems. They may be multiple and interlock but they were two's made up of two one's — individuals. But families are built on multiple interlocking triangles to the extent that they are dysfunctional. It seems that nothing is ever simple in a system. To the extent that the degree of identification in self and other is vague, as the degree of differentiation between self and the other person becomes fuzzy, as the emotional climate deteriorates, as sensitivities increase — so the system tends to disintegrate. Increasing distance ensues. At this point, the tendency to triangle the process and avoid the facing of real terrible, fear-some and potentially serious consequences looms in the background. Without change, the human phenomenon is to avoid these problems by forming a triangle. Mother and daughter can avoid facing difficulties between them by focusing on brother. Wife and husband can do the same by focusing on son. Two friends, ill at ease with each other can gossip about someone else. A father and mother, about to separate, can avoid the emotional, financial and social consequences by suddenly finding out that their son is on drugs and that now is the time for unity and for "helping son." Or they can decide to stay together "for the sake of the children."

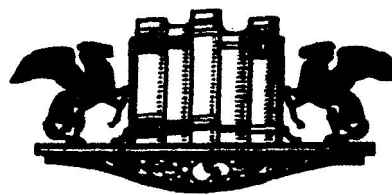
### The Undifferentiated Family Ego Mass

Murray Bowen describes this as an emotional oneness with the other person or persons. He sees it as the loss of objectivity about one's own self in relation to the family system. He visualizes it as the inability to stay outside the system but still relate to the members of the system — the loss of the capacity to deal with others without distance. In place of the emotional oneness, he tries to create person-to-person relationships. This would be seen

as the opposite of the undifferentiated family ego mass. This mass or glop is the end result of a loss of self (Who am I?), a loss of other (I can't understand her.), a loss of the boundaries of self (Why won't he help me?), a loss of the boundaries of the other (I have to control my son.), the development of sensitivities (Don't talk that way about my mother.), triangles (We only stay together for the sake of the children.). At this point it is hard to see, to define, to propose where I would like to go. Where am I? Where are you? Where do I start? Where do you begin? Everybody talks at once. Nobody listens. Ask father a question. Mother answers the question and son jumps in to tell her she is wrong. Father tells son to keep quiet. That is the undifferentiated family ego mass. Getting out of it frequently demands taking a somewhat lonely, uncomfortable "I" position and having the courage to see it through.

### So what? How to? What do I do?

I'll give you a hint. Pick a person in your family — a son, a daughter, a mother, a father — but pick someone whom you really have trouble dealing with. Try to get something going. Try to accept them. Try to tell them that you were equally involved in whatever problem the two of you are concerned with. Try to set up a person-to-person or a personal relationship. When you get the feeling that they are not worth the trouble, when you feel that they are impossible to get to, then you are ready to start. Then you are at the beginning. How you finish it is up to you.



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