

Thoughts on the Extended Family

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Today, people do not ask as often as they used to, "Why should I work on my extended family? How is it relevant to my life, to my problems?" The answer is so obvious that the burden of proof lies with those who feel it is not relevant. People in a family are important to each other. Whether father is good or bad, his title of "father" automatically makes him significant. Blood is thicker than water. One of the basic assumptions of family therapy is that if one can manage to connect with the great emotional intensity present in any nuclear and extended family, one will find that getting along with the rest of the world is easy. Many former clients call or write to me and say, "When you asked me to get along with my parents, I found it hard to see why I should. My father just died and I am now so glad that I followed your advice and connected with him."

From a relationship point of view, a person can be understood and can understand himself in the perspective of time, and in the context of movement. It is impossible to understand the self and to differentiate the self without a context to follow. A basketball player makes sense, defines his skills and is understandable as a member of a team playing a game. In other words, he can be understood in that context. To evaluate himself, he must move about in that context, in the living experience of a basketball game. Family therapy places the individual in the context of a family, a social network, and a cultural environment. A significant portion of this environment is that

extended family. We are much more influenced by the family we came from than we like to believe.

Even after death, our extended family is in the room with us. When we talk to a spouse or a child, our parents and siblings perch on our shoulders or prod us from the back of our minds often without our conscious awareness. Many more people are in the room with us than the present, living bodies. As one wanders around in the extended family, one learns humility. As one constructs a picture of one's roots through the genogram, one realizes that he is never talking to just one person.

If two people are speaking to each other, they may be incorporating the words, gestures and sometimes experiences of their extended families. This tends to make the discussion quite complex and such an experience cannot be explained by a simple transference interpretation, such as, "You are projecting your mother on to me," because more than mother's influence is inside the mind of each individual.

Many people are identified in the genogram and hopefully some can be contacted while living. A person learns that many others went before him and there might even be a carbon copy of oneself somewhere in the family tree.

The realization that you are a temporary figure in a long line of people tends to get you off a narcissistic track and away from the feeling of uniqueness and importance. Work on the extended family puts the self into perspec-

tive. Does it really matter in the perspective of time if one puts his shoes away or leaves them in the middle of the room? If one travels back far enough, it becomes clear that some of our ancestors did remarkable things in the context of their ordinary lives. We learn to understand that our parents were simply people who generally did the best they could, had their own limitations, and were at one time children themselves. They also cared about us in their own way. It really is impossible for any child to completely understand a parent. The child simply does not have enough life experience. But one of the major things that a perspective of the extended family does is enable us to realize that our parents were not born at the age of thirty-five.

As one puts one's genogram on a piece of paper, carefully putting x's through those members who are dead, issues of life and death arise. The additions and subtractions of self caused by birth and death are always significant and are potentially toxic foci of change in the family. Birth may overload a system as people struggle with the economy of space. Nature abhors a vacuum and death provides empty spaces that will be filled by others, members of the family or, for example, therapists from the network.

Guerin has spoken of the amount of information on a family that can be obtained by the study of a will. Who is left what, who is the executor of the will, who has money left in trust for them because they are deemed inadequate, who is included and who is totally left out? He has also stated that, after death, people tend to be seen either as a saint or a villain, but usually over time they are sanctified. To get a more realistic picture of our dead relatives, he advises doing a "wagon train" maneuver. This means getting as many viewpoints as can be obtained of these people from relatives and friends who knew them. No single picture will be the "truth." The composite will be incomplete but it will be closer to the reality of who people were and how they operated. Reality is always more informative than fantasy. The exploration of the extended family tells us there were many people before us. There were family patterns, themes, physical illnesses, episodes, sensitivities, and attitudes that may have continued from the distant past into the

present. When one puts many x's indicating death through so many people, one has to appreciate that someday, someone will put an x through his name and space on the genogram. He will be dead. What will be put on his tombstone? Will anyone miss him? Who will come to his funeral and what will they say about him?

It is after death or a breakup in the nuclear family that the value of the extended family becomes more obvious. Loss in the nuclear family provides a more clearly defined source of connectedness. When someone dies, it seems that work on the extended family is often attempted too late to make any difference. The person is already gone and one can never quite accomplish by "wagon training" what he could do by personal contact with a living member of the family. "Wagon training" is worthwhile but lacks the living experience of personal contact. The goal is for one to be able to imagine oneself all alone, standing by the casket of each and every significant member of one's network and family and able to say, "I miss you but there is nothing to say because it has all been said." This is an ideal to be aspired to, more than the work of a lifetime, never reached but worth trying to attain.

The major task of the middle phase of living is the development, understanding and living experience of personal relationships. The work involves going one on one with each and every member of the family and, perhaps, others. As one makes contact, he gets in touch with his insides, his feelings, emotions, thoughts, values, purposes, unworthiness, etc. This is the beginning of an integrated cohesion between the complex parts of self. One learns what a personal relationship is really about. One learns the magic of connectedness, a magic that defies analysis, might be ruined by analysis, and is there to be simply enjoyed. A basic assumption of family therapy is that, if one can establish these personal relationships in the family where closeness, expectations and emotionality are ordinarily most intense, the rest of the world will be easy. The family is the primary experimental laboratory for this experience.

Time dictates that we cover the past, present and the future. The present is largely concerned with the nuclear family. The future consists of the children and any information that we have about our roots should be given to them so that family research does not die after we do. The past is taken care of by the exploration and connection with the extended family. Information and experience obtained from the extended family can be translated into the observation and understanding of patterns in the nuclear family. One can also take what is learned about the nuclear family and test it out in the extended system. This translation will not occur automatically. The translation of information and experience from the past into the present, from the extended family into the nuclear family is an active process on the part of the therapist and keeps the entire family open to the constant, ever present process of change.

The focus on the continuum between extended and nuclear families is necessary because, when one marries, he marries a person and family of origin. He does not marry into an extended family but the personal relationship with a spouse will necessarily involve the spouse's family. Difficulties in that area are commonly known as in-law and out-law problems. These may involve macro-triangles in which one spouse is overdose to his extended family and the other spouse distant from them. There may be difficulties and sensitivities between both extended families, one spouse may be close to both extended families and the other spouse distant from everybody. All of these relationships will have a definite impact on the nuclear family and can cause an emotional overload that is passed along one generation to the other. Over time, the issues that a family is sensitive to increase in intensity, conflicts are blown out of proportion, and argument and distance ensue. Every family needs at least one person with the generosity of spirit to overcome pride and stubbornness and break these hypertensive deadlocks, a person who will place connectedness above false pride. Ideally this person will not allow incidents to disrupt the process of staying connected with others.

People generally come to us with problems in the nuclear family, in the present. In my

experience, when the presenting problem has been somewhat resolved and the family is calm, there is a noticeable relief of tension as the family moves into an exploration of their roots. Kids say, "Gee, I didn't know that." Some family therapists try to work on problems by working exclusively on the extended family. But when it is done this way, nuclear families suffer and fall apart because a balanced approach is necessary, and so one must work on both the nuclear and extended families at the same time.

As one wanders through the extended family, through parents, siblings, in-laws, cousins, etc., there is a pervasive feeling of emptiness, of sadness, of nothingness and the rapid passage of time. There is regret about people who have died, to whom one can only connect in fantasy. There is regret over relationships that were allowed to die; sadness that certain incidents were allowed to interfere with relationships. The relative nothingness and seeming purposelessness of life fills the space of emptiness within the self. There is a questioning of the real meaning of caring about others, of love and desire to stop following a family pattern of running away from hurt by being angry. Some family members are seen as constantly seeking either power, control, or fame. The perspective of time helps to strip away pride, privacy, and self-deceit. Images crack and a more profound and honest self emerges. This helps lead to tenderness, the birth of compassion and consideration, and the redefinition of love, as well as brief glimpses of peace of mind.

The purpose of family involvement goes far beyond the exploration of the past to gain wisdom, and goes far beyond the problem solving of the present. It projects into the future. When knowledge and experience about the extended family are shared with the children in the nuclear family, it encourages them to develop relationships with grandparents, cousins, etc., and gives them a sense of their position in history. It gives them an appreciation for tradition, context and belonging. Whatever one learns about his parents, he should transmit to his children. This should be an on-going process so that the transfer of information becomes a part of the family experience; then when a problem arises, the individual or family members have a store of

information to draw on and don't feel so isolated.

With the increasing popularity of video taping, it is fascinating to imagine what can occur in the future. A parent will be able to press a button, see his own father and allow his children to hear him. This is an example of instant extended family therapy in the living room. The great hope of family therapy lies in prevention. There is not enough family therapy experience over time to document this hope yet and it will take many generations of follow-up. As therapists, our hope is that if someone knows his roots, experiences them to the fullest extent possible, and works on relationships before death ends a life, this will result in increased function, decreased emotional problems, more productive introspection and closer personal relationships.

None of us are as free as we would like to be or believe that we are. In everyone's life, there are themes, patterns, cultural and emotional forces, secrets and dark clouds that silently determine our thinking and the course of our lives. The Holocaust is a good example of this. In some families, it has taken several generations to talk about it. In other families, the silence has yet to be broken but the past continues to influence the lives of family members.

One needs to question what freedom is. I believe that we are much more helpless than we like to think. Real freedom is the ability to see one's self, one's extended and nuclear family and other important parts of our emotional and social network in balance. If self is defined in this context, it will become defined in the most emotional terms possible and be less dishonest because it is exposed to the harsh light of reality as it is experienced by people who live with us. Such a context will bring out in ourselves and our family an understanding of human beings in their multi-faceted roles. Mother will be seen as a person who happens to be a woman, who happens to be a mother of two, who is very intelligent and productive but who has a short fuse and can be unreasonable. Our evaluation of ourselves will be subject to the input and understanding of significant people. We will be better able to decide what to keep and what to let go to improve the self.

It is fair to assume that everybody wants to

improve on the family he came from. Much of the freedom that anyone has in life comes down to an identification of all the elements of the self and the differentiation of self in terms of the boundaries of where the self ends and others begin. Freedom is really the ability to use self selectively. As long as one is reactive to anyone, including the members of his extended family, he is simply reactive to others and continues to be determined by others and is not free.

Work on the extended family offers certain advantages. It enlarges the field one is working in so that the emotional tension is not concentrated in one person or one relationship but over the entire family. We often see families with a "marital problem," trying to get everything from each other. Their level of intensity and expectation is so high that no twosome could live up to it. Once married, they cut off from family and network, move toward each other and fuse with the resulting explosion. Sooner or later, one becomes a pursuer and the other a distancer but the cutoffs persist. Involving the extended family serves to spread the anxiety so that the emotional climate in the nuclear family can grow calmer. This does not solve the problem but sets up an emotional climate that may allow a solution to occur.

Another advantage to working in the extended family is that multiple pictures of self will emerge. The context does not create self but brings out different facets of self lying dormant within the person. In fact, every time we change the context, we bring out a different part of self. A mother is different with her child than she is with her own mother. By enlarging the field, we change the context and get a more complete picture of the individual. People in an angry marriage may be able to listen to their children when they can't hear each other because they already have fixed viewpoints of each other. Work on the extended family allows anxiety to be distributed among others and serves to defuse nuclear family conflicts. Sometimes such work is necessary whether one wants to do it or not because the extended family is involved directly in the presenting problem, for example in-law difficulties. When someone is pulling back from the nuclear family, they need a place to go. In child-centered families, we often try to pull the overdose

mother back from the child so that she can gain objectivity and allow the distant father to move in. As we pull her back, work on her extended family keeps conflict and tension within the family, spreading it out to decrease the intensity and not allowing it to spread into the community in unmanageable ways. Triangles in the family are more intense but easier to focus on than triangles that spread into the network surrounding the family. We are often helpless in trying to get change in the community because of conflict of interest, complexity and lack of power.

Another technical advantage of this work is that affect and emotionality are built into the family. It is a natural asset and one need not substitute the artificiality of a therapeutic system for it. Working with the family system takes advantage of the working assumption behind family therapy: People in a family care about each other no matter what they say or how they appear. However, there are some limitations with work on the extended family. It is not a form of magic, but then little that is done in therapy is anything but hard work. The work requires determination, patience, time and may be low on immediate reward. Some people are not reachable, and will not connect no matter how a person tries. One may also find that he has to distance in order to connect. People also misuse work on the extended family to avoid problems in the nuclear family. A useful general rule to remember is that if one comes to therapy with a problem in the extended family, the major difficulty probably lies in the nuclear family. The opposite is also true. The translation of understanding from the extended family to the nuclear family is not automatic. It is a mistake to assume that one can work on one and the other will automatically work out. But, it is quite true that emotional experience in one will help function in the other. It is also true that the living experience in one area will often be different than in the other area and change must be experienced in both. The therapist must cover both extended and nuclear families and make the translation explicit.

Every experienced therapist has heard innumerable stories from family therapists in training. "I visited my mother over the weekend in California and we had contact like we never had before. Everything is fine now." In

reality however, the work is slow, painful and patient. It takes time and one is never finished. Another problem can be the potential for division in the family. When father is working on getting closer to his children, mother may be working on pulling back from the children and working on her extended family. This may cause distance in the marriage and can be a source of grave concern to the marital pair in the nuclear family. It often appears to them as if the marriage is falling apart. The therapist must emphasize to the family at this point that these moves are done in sequence and stresses and strains are perfectly normal and to be expected. If the family tries to work on all relationships at the same time, the result will be overload, confusion, scattered movement, and fairly soon things will return to the status quo. None of this work should be used as a destructive assault on the extended family or a method to fix blame on any of the extended family members.

How does one approach one's extended family? Many people are not prepared initially to make any move. They are too full of blame, accusations and bitterness. They have to take time to try to understand their parents and siblings. They have to be coached on their approach. Preparing to connect with one's extended family requires coaching and the development of a certain mind set. The approach depends on how hot the family relationships are. One can write a letter which offers the advantage of being able to rewrite it until you have it the way you want it to be. This is the safest method but the most impersonal. One can use the telephone which allows one to have control and get distance and is less impersonal. The actual physical visit is the most personal, the most rewarding, and certainly the most difficult.

Guerin has often spoken about encouraging people to simply spend time with their folks, not doing any analysis, but simply learning to be in their presence without their level of anxiety rising. During this period of time, no actual work is done, no episodes reviewed, no issues brought to the forefront. The immediate goal is a relaxation of the emotional climate. The purpose of this contact is not to blame and not to judge. An analysis of the motives within

our parents and siblings misses the point and puts people on guard. One of the best approaches is to try to get people to simply talk, to paint pictures of their life, while you listen. I try to tell people that their goal is to be able to write a book about their extended family, about each member so that anyone could read that book and feel that he knew all of those people — what they thought, what sports they played when they were young, their dreams and hopes. To do this, one might pick up a photograph album. Looking at these pictures will often inspire stories that lead to other stories.

We teach people who are full of bitterness because of a long-remembered injustice to speak using the word "I" and not "you." If one speaks only about oneself it is impossible to blame the other person. Since the goal is emotional connectedness, the "truth" is unimportant. Discussion about the truth often leads to arguments. Connectedness is an emotional process and has nothing to do with the truth. We coach people to relate to that part of the other's statement with which they can agree. This prevents arguments. Often in the extended family triangle mother is overdose and father distant. If son calls home, father will answer the phone, say "hello" and then leave to get mother to talk. We try such tricks as having the son ask father questions that father is expert on (even making the issue up) so that mother could not answer it. We try to get son to go one on one with each parent when the other parent is absent since this is the best way to get to know that person. If one tries to connect with both parents at the same time, distant fathers will distance further or mothers can suggest tea if things get too hot. As in all emotional understanding, it is necessary to go

at least one generation behind our parents to understand who they are behind the image that they project. I try to tell people to look at their own life and select someone with whom they have a close, personal relationship. Examine that relationship and see what goes into it. Is it the kind of relationship in which any topic can be discussed, and there are a minimum of sensitivities? Does each person listen and show that he cares? Can the relationship lapse and then resume if one bumps into the other in another city? This is the kind of relationship one should try to get going with his parents. As one gets better at this kind of connection, he learns that connectedness is just that, a connection for its own sake, without any expectation from the other. And further, he learns that his parents emotionally deserved each other, that they deserved him and that he deserved them. He learns that parents are important people no matter what they have done or not done. They are important because they are his mother and father. Finally, in a relationship, each person is responsible for dealing with his own extended family. Father must deal with his own family and not expect mother to do it for him.

The above seems so obvious that I no longer answer the question, "Why should I work on my extended family?" All it involves is connecting with one's roots. The burden of proof lies with those who ask the question. Anger and bitterness toward one's extended family can close down and destroy pieces of self, keeping them stagnant and severely limiting their growth. Knowledge of extended family history which leads to forgiveness of the mistakes of our parents and an acknowledgment of our own sometimes similar mistakes is a giant step toward being at peace in one's own life. It is a journey which, no matter how treacherous, should not be missed.