

TRIANGLES ARE ALIVE AND WELL

Triangles are Alive and Well

A subtitle for this letter could be “no one is immune.” Emotional systems don’t just exist in families. Whenever peoples’ anxieties reach a certain threshold and are playing out in any setting, characteristics of an emotional system begin to be observed and experienced. These characteristics (e.g., anxiety driven focus/blame on others) travel through the connections and conduits of interlocking triangles.

Dr. Bowen’s letter of June, 1973 describes two non-family systems (professional organizations); how individual emotional forces interact and escalate almost to a point of no return.

The first part is a report on an Orthopsychiatry meeting in which Dr. Bowen participated with other family leaders in a panel discussion. An interesting feature is the audience becoming part of the emotional system. The emotional triangle included the audience, Dr. Bowen, and a deceased family therapy pioneer.

The second part of the letter describes the emotional system (turmoil) involved around the publishing of Dr. Bowen’s anonymous paper in a book. It involved Dr. Bowen, the editor of the collected papers from the conference, and the publisher of the book. It was being driven by the anxiety over what might be “libelous.” Of importance is how Dr. Bowen’s clear position stopped the escalation and helped to facilitate the desired outcome for all system participants.

June 27, 1973

Dear

Thanks for your letter about the Ortho panel. I had planned to write to you but my world has been spinning and I still have not caught up with back work.

That was a sort of emotionally reactive audience at the panel. I had no notion of getting into the issues about , but people kept pushing and I had some viewpoints that were different. had kidded himself that through analysis, he had worked out his problems. But, he never touched the thing in his own family and then came the differences between him and , which after death were played out between and , with all the secretiveness and stories and stuff. The thing that amazed me at Ortho were the number of people with over-emotional positive reactions to my comments. Whoosh!

The process of working thru the triangle with Editor, Publisher, and Author for the "Anonymous" chapter was almost as difficult as all the triangles in my own family. In the beginning it was and as editors. There were little questions about the legal difficulties in publishing. When they mentioned their qualms to the publisher, there were still more questions. Then Mr. went to his attorney who was , the foremost authority in NYC about legal problems in publishing. She has been legal counsel for almost every important personal book published in the past decade or two. (She is the wife of , editor at the , who wrote the personal book about the years of psychotherapy and then the suicide of their only son, all of which (suicide I mean) was happening about the time we were meeting about this chapter). (This thing about their son I discovered when their book came out about a yr ago--Don't think it had anything to do with the Anonymous chapter. Also, Mr. was in a symptom free period after his first operation for a brain tumor. He was dead when the book was finally published. I don't think that had anything to do with the chapter).

The push for the Anonymous listing came from . She influenced Mr. and in turn put the heat on . First they wanted me to get signed permission from each member of my

family!!!! My God, they missed the entire message in the my years long effort. I double reacted to that. When the object is the differentiation of a self, one behaves as responsibly as one knows how, and then one acts for one's own self, according to one's own convictions, in spite of opposition. To take a wishy-washy posture in the Ed-Pub-Author triangle could nullify all the courage and conviction that went into my whole effort. I told them to forget publication under such circumstances. I would have nothing to do with it. They brought up the legal stuff. I offered to sign any legal document they could prepare to relieve them of responsibility if my family should sue. Hell, I would sort of like it if they did want to start an issue over that. I could really have a rassel with my family over that, one by one, or all together. They refused that on the grounds that publisher and editor would be equally liable. I didn't care about the Anonymous listing. Everyone knew I was the one who did it anyway, and if the Anonymous thing helped the publisher and , it was okay by me. I worked for 4 years, writing and re-writing, in an effort to tone down the personal stuff and tone up the theoretical. I was in favor of that anyway, because more people would "hear" and fewer would react emotionally, with a more intellectual theoretical explanation. The final and last draft of that thing took up most of my spare Xmas time in 1971. Even that issue was judged by to contain one or two potentially libelous comments.

I didn't mean to go into all the little emotional issues in that professional triangle, but I started and then I was into it.

The Ortho panel was a good experience. I am glad you found the energy to motivate it, and that you invited me. Best wishes to you, and all there.

Sincerely,

Murray Bowen, M.D.