

ALONE IN NO-MAN'S LAND

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For the large majority, one's beliefs are defined by the culture in which one lives and practices, a culture which responds to the forces that are present at any particular time. The culture prescribes (and often demands) what one is to believe and little variation is allowed, and if the variation is too great the individual is punished. This process is easily seen in the history of psychoanalysis. This process may help explain why followers of Freud were often more "Freudian than Freud", which produced increasing degrees of rigidity and dogma that had little to do with the original principles and purposes.

At the Menninger Clinic where Dr. Bowen trained and practiced for a number of years, there were strong emotional forces within the multigenerations of the Menninger family that impacted on the culture of those who worked in the institution and were a part of the professional family. Dr. Bowen was well aware of the dangers of going against the existing culture both professionally and socially. The Menninger culture was largely defined by the beliefs of Franz Alexander, an analyst and former student of Freud, who was based in Chicago. Many analysts who had fled Europe during World War II were part of the Menninger staff. In addition to this analytic culture, Alexander encouraged a certain morality in reference to family relationships that were no doubt problematic to Dr. Bowen.* It became important for him to focus on "knowing myself, what I believe in, and what I stand for."

His letter of April 1961 is to a former patient of his from his Menninger days with whom he periodically corresponded.

* For some of the sordid details see Lawrence J. Friedman: Menninger, The Family and The Clinic, Knopf, 1990, esp. pages 82-84.

April 27, 1961

Dear

I am going to respond to your letter with a story about me. The past year has been one of the most profitable in terms of my own growth and maturity. Last Summer I spent several days at the Menninger Clinic, the first real visit (more than a few hours) since I left in 1954. One of the best visits was with the business manager, a fellow with whom I have one of the freest and most open relationships I have ever had. We were talking about the future of analysis and psychiatry, and the problems of dealing with some of the deeply imbedded concepts, so jealously guarded by the senior hierarchy in psychiatry, which really represent what is "sick" about psychiatry and, in my opinion society too. He was very complimentary about my efforts in that direction. My essential communication was to ask for his help. His essential response was, "I believe in this effort. It is sorely needed. I will be pulling for you and hoping that you can help turn the tide but I cannot support you actively. I have a family to support and I need my job."

At Christmas I put a note on my card to him. I said that my efforts to write a book were of great help to me toward knowing myself, what I believe in, and what I stand for. I said that during my years at Menninger's, I used to believe that if I was ever successful at knowing what I believed and what I stood for, and if I ever had the guts to stand there, I would find myself all alone in the middle of no-mans-land. The book is bringing me closer to that goal than I ever dreamed would be possible. Now, as I get a little closer, I know that if I ever reach that goal, I will not be alone. There will be an awful lot of new and wonderful people there. He responded positively, honestly, and knowingly on the theme "no man is an island".

The writing continues to help me know me, as nothing else has ever done. Now I have a kind of goal of one day putting together a research staff in which each person is sufficiently clear about his own identity and sufficiently sure about himself, that no one HAS to respond either to praise or criticism, and no one HAS to attack the identity or beliefs of others, and no one HAS to preach or defend his own identity or beliefs.

Best wishes,

Sincerely,