

## THE “EROSION” LETTERS

## The “Erosion” Letters

In some ways these five letters may be the most important, especially for the people reading them. The letters of his last ten years seem to reflect a major concern and struggle with his own erosion. What are the dangers to one’s life efforts (Dr. Bowen’s) when a large part of the family professional world embraces Bowen Theory? Can one’s self disappear in this acceptance phenomenon? Can self become the “same” as Bowen Theory? How do students and colleagues avoid this danger when one has tried to internalize into one’s thinking a powerful and profound conceptual theoretical system and base one’s practice from the theory?

Dr. Bowen raised these questions about himself. Would the past accomplishments define the future or does one’s future have to be an ongoing effort? What is the cost if one doesn’t pursue the continuous effort and struggle? One wonders if any one of his followers would have raised these questions if Dr. Bowen hadn’t raised them about himself first. (Freud had a similar problem with his followers.) How does one know when one “disappears”? Is it automatic that one will disappear if one doesn’t face the struggle? What is at the core of the struggle?

What is the nature of the erosion forces? These letters describe some of these forces, the nature of the struggle, and the necessity for the commitment to his principles. The pull of “togetherness and society” was the big one, but there are others, including: the seduction of popularity, arrogance (“I have it; you don’t”), and complacency in taking the principles for granted. The observer in the researcher remains steadfast to the end; “you can’t take a day off.” Each of these letters has a brief introduction.

## **Theoretical issues vs. Family Emotional Issues**

Dr. Bowen's letter of August 1980 is responding to a person interested in the Georgetown Post-Graduate Program. She had written two letters to him, one applying to the program and the second withdrawing her application.

He raises questions about the difficulty and inherent anxiety in moving toward a systems theoretical orientation which necessitates a major shift in one's thinking. Some choose not to; some pretend they can do both (eclectic); some make a decision to move forward. He connects this theoretical process to the anxiety in taking on one's family emotional issues. He also ties these themes into the erosion of emotional forces.

Commitment to principle is a lifelong effort; erosion forces are always present.

August 1, 1980

Dear

Yesterday there were two letters from you in the same mail. The first was your application for the course, and the check. The second was your letter to rescind the course. I opened them in that order. I was sort of pleased to get your application, and not especially surprised to get the second because I know you have had a struggle within you about this course.

I do not have a very clear notion of your struggle with this issue. If it has to do with theoretical-professional issues, I would say "take your time" about deciding. It takes a lot of life energy and commitment to shift from conventional to systems thinking. If the course works, one can spend the rest of one's life being bugged by multiple life issues previously thought to be solved. If the course does not work, it is a waste of time and energy. If your negatives about the course have to do with professional unsureness, do not rush into the course. Let the situation season until it goes one way or the other.

If the negative about the course has to do with your own family, I would do the opposite of "take your time". I have been "there" with my own family and a few hundred others in the same kind of situation. It is easy to resolve to take up a difficult emotional issue, to spend a small fortune on a trip designed to take up the issues, and then to procrastinate until the last moment, and then do a lousy job under the pressure of time. There can never be a "right" time for crossing a "no-no" barrier. It is almost impossible to "coach" others to bridge the impossible when one has not done it in one's own family.

There are a hundred gray areas between the systems reluctance based on pure theoretical issues and those based on family emotional issues. I am not sure just how one separates the two areas. I can do more than point up a few facts for consideration. System Theory is a lifetime preoccupation. Don't sign on unless you are prepared for the ride. Do not fail to sign on if they problem is one's own family. Do not be swayed by anyone. I am not twisting arms nor selling anything. It is necessary for me to be in an "I do not care situation" in order to be effective. I have spent a professional lifetime assembling the most differentiated faculties that discipline has enabled me to assemble. No one else has come close in this endeavor. My faculty is a thing of beauty. Most are still working as I did, guided more by principle than promise of material success. People in the "family" world are wondering if my life principle will live after me. I think it will and that the principle is strong enough to see it through. The majority of family people is guessing that my world will disintegrate, like the worlds of and . Time will tell. However the future is decided, and wither we die or live into the long distant future, I have assembled quite a crowd of great system thinkers into this faculty of mine. There is always the pressure on me to relax the discipline about differentiation, and I am eternally

confronted with the issue of whether my effort to maintain discipline is in fact discipline based on knowledge, or whether it is emotional rigidity in me. The societal forces would have the world believe (societal forces in our era go toward undifferentiation) that my "so called" discipline is in fact a "pathology" in me. And so it has gone around every decision for the past twenty years, at a time when the world is slowly regressing to a lower level of functioning. It is very easy to go along with the world. It is damned difficult to hold onto discipline based on knowledge when the opposing principles also appear solid.

I believe my faculty is solid as long as I am here to "ride herd" on it. I think it has enough discipline to maintain the structure after I am no longer here. Have been working on that for over twenty years.

I am merely free associating to my typewriter. The kind of debate going on within you is a familiar one. Maybe you can pick up a few ideas from this as you continue the debate for the next year.

Have about run out of steam.

Aug 5, 1980

Started this letter to you Fri eve Aug 1. Had several interruptions including family members leaving for vacations or returning from trips. Ended up watching the late evening news and never did get back to this. Then I pulled this sheet out of the typewriter expecting to finish next day. Too much going on everywhere since last Friday.

In re-reading this, I find a lot of detail about things you know already. I am just preoccupied with keeping the shop on a predetermined course. It happens every summer, while my people are making curriculum changes for the following academic year. There are always those who respond more to the popularity pull than to discipline. It keeps me on my toes to keep principle better defined than the erosive forces of togetherness.

If there is anything my crowd can do to lend a hand with you and your situation in            let me know. You will have your own brand of problems as you build your own Institute with a crowd of divergent associates, each with a different view of the family world, with emotionally determined coalitions, political parties, and sects, that can go toward secession and splintering if popular votes is the determining force. I will be watching            with interest.

There are pleasant memories of my brief visit with you and your group in June. Give my regards to            and the children.

Sincerely,

Murray Bowen, M.D.

## **Lag Time**

Dr. Bowen's letter of July 1985 is to a director of a training program from which he had recently returned. His pattern was to write a letter after his participation in various training programs throughout the country, reflecting on current themes in his own thinking.

In this letter he discusses some of the "chaos" in the field, natural systems thinking and its difficulties, and how popularity and success breed erosion.

July 30, 1985

Dear

Enclosed is the airline ticket stub for my recent trip. Will you please pass it along to whomever on your board takes care of such.

The professional part of my trip went okay, as I saw it. I was glad to have been present for the party in your honor. It was recognition for the hard work that has gone into your operation.

You have a unique place, with good trainees who have inquiring minds. They may some day find their way through the present chaos in the field. I believe there are some factors to account for the theoretical distortion. A natural systems idea, only thirty years old, appears to be sound, but people are people. It takes time for people to shift from one thinking dimension to another. They have no option except to think with conventional theory. They hear a little, unwittingly mix it with conventional theory, and truly believe they have mastered the shift. Another factor is societal process. It becomes a "surge" when teachers, and the proprietors of systems ideas, are more influenced by popular opinion than their own diluted theoretical thinking. This process has slowly eroded Family Center faculty. It seems to occur more on the periphery when teachers do not have time to pursue their academic motivation.

This human process is massive. I have no way to "prove" that I have not been influenced by the lure of popularity. I do not think so. I developed the idea, I had the courage of my convictions when it was not popular, and I have tried to stay on course through the further development of concepts. I say this because critics say I started with an assumption, and anyone is entitled to an assumption. This may be a way to understand the lag time in accepting a different idea, and why the "dark ages" are still alive and well. Systems ideas have become popular in a few decades, but new variables such as population explosion, instant communication, and the resultant increase in the reactivity of the masses, may make it longer than the estimated two centuries before human behavior finally becomes a real science.

My main concern is the Georgetown Family Center. The past few years at Georgetown, and in my other personal appearances, I have tried to focus on critical issues between conventional theory and the ultimate potential of disciplined systems theory and therapy. I hope that I contributed something to your trainees. I believe you have erred in believing the Georgetown Family Center represents a standardized thinking orientation. That was a goal in the early days. Then came the lure of popularity and success, and the slow erosion of theory dictated by the reactivity of the masses. And so it goes when people are more interested in personal gain than the long term future of coming centuries.

Considerable energy went into reducing pages into the few paragraphs in this letter. I shall use the text of this communication in a few other appropriate places. It is an interesting world, don't you think?

Sincerely

(signed "Murray")

Murray Bowen, M.D.

## **Theory vs. Therapy and Good Intentions**

In a world so driven by subjectivity, how does one keep a focus on theory and not be pulled into the “feeling - technique orientations” in therapy that the mass of therapists want to hear? Good intentions can cause a lot of problems; wanting to be “helpful” can become a moral dilemma for the clinician.

Dr. Bowen’s letter of November 1985 is to a director of a well-known training center, whose staff is more grounded than most in theory. Even in this center the “problem” is present, with participants not seeing that his therapy is driven by his years of “step by step” work on theory, attributing his demonstration interview with a family to his personal “magic.” If he focuses his lecture on theory, he fears the audience will call the lecture superfluous. This letter offers the reader an opportunity to clarify one’s responsibility as a clinician, and what drives that responsibility.



November 29, 1985

Dear

For weeks I have been planning to write but Yogi Berra keeps getting in the way. And he is a nice fellow, too. I heard the sign in N.Y. yesterday when the "new look" Jets shriveled in Detroit's dome yesterday. I was hoping they could make it. That was all because Detroit does not have to mow the plastic grass but once a year.

The January meeting time is better for me than December used to be. I always seem to get overlaps in December. The time with our outfit gets priority and I do not like to crowd the schedule. Come January 7, I will plan on the 10 a.m. EAL shuttle and plan to return on the 8 p.m. shuttle.

The past couple years, a tremendous amount of time has gone into basic concepts, which includes all the professional disciplines, differentiation details about emotional system, and the way the masses of mental health people are triggered into subjectivity and reactivity, in the process of reporting on their own families. The first awareness of "own family" reactivity came in the early 1970's when we no longer permitted more than one good "own family" paper in the yearly symposium. That was a drop in the bucket. Since then it has been devoted to our own faculty, to training, and the eventual integration of theory with science. The 1985 Symposium was among the best. Several former trainees are doing superior work on basic concepts. The whole thing came more into focus a year ago when [redacted] who had a year of training in Pittsburgh, began his effort to put out a book of "own family" papers. Verbal cautions were unheeded. During the Summer of 1985 he began seeking permission to reprint papers from former Symposia. They had been printed in the paper back "collections" from the symposia. The Fam Cntr followed publishers protocol, and left the decision with individual authors. Most authors either knew why "own family" papers were avoided, or they deferred to my decision. [redacted] kept on. I will enclose the copy of a letter I did to [redacted] early in the fall of 1985. See what you think! Some peripheral people went along with [redacted] who will publish his book. They see my objection as a personal peculiarity in me. They cannot see that every "own family" paper arouses audience feeling, which defeats the ultimate superiority of the therapy. Ho Hum. So goes the world. It is not much different from what was predicted 15 years ago. It will reduce Fam Systems Therapy to the levels of other therapies.

[redacted] recent letter contained innumerable symptom manifestations of a feeling-technique orientation that does not know theory. I wondered how in the world she has a responsible position at [redacted]. It was a little bit similar to the situation encountered at Gttn a few years ago, only more so. I wondered if she is an "anomaly" or if she represents the average at [redacted]. If she is average, then you either have a conceptual problem, or you can join the other "techniquers". I wrote her a "kidding type" response which she cannot "hear", except to call herself "normal", and refer to me as a peculiar personality trait.

This leaves me in a big quandary about January 7. If I focus on theory, most will not hear. Most will hear my stuff either as related to a peculiar personality (all in me), or when is he going to get thru the superfluous boring details, and on to the significant stuff about family

therapy? If the focus in on a "case", they see the result as some kind of personal "magic" which is strictly within me, rather than yrs of step by step work on theory. Most people want to "easy way out", which is to build a house of cards on a foundation based on con--?

I do not know the answers to these monumental issues. Thirty yrs ago I was guessing it might be 200 yrs before human behavior could become a science. That estimate decreased for a time, but now it is up again, largely the product of societal forces. For years I have doubted the wisdom of more and more BCC's as a teaching device. I do not know THE WAY, but I have tried to stay consistent with science and not waste energy on those who follow a more conventional base. It is a free world. People can go in any direction they choose, and I do not choose to be some "tin Diety" who monitors the thinking of the faculty.

A couple of yrs ago, I started a voluntary evening think tank for those interested in science and basic concepts. It is for "know nothing" people who can accept the notion that knowledge is deficient. This automatically includes a large group of faculty who assume they "know it all", and who have done rote teaching. Some come once or twice and drop out. They say an evening for superfluous stuff is too much for those who already know it. The group started small but has slowly grown. Everyone has reason for participating, which is within self. If someone presents an abstract of a paper from Science or Discovery, the group gets restless or disinterested unless the presenter has a specific point to make. Overtime, a spectrum of rote faculty members have resigned. New teaching responsibility goes to those who have demonstrated awareness. I believe the new attitude at the Symposium this year was a direct result of the volunteer evening mtgs.

I am not about to know the RIGHT WAY. Learning is a forever thing that is far beyond the emotional reactivity of others. It is not a respecter of previous postgraduate training or sex. It is purely for those who can somehow KNOW, and who can sort through the mountains of details to find bits and pieces that fit the science mosaic. The group does not favor those OTHER DIRECTED people who are against the contribution of other authors. It is all for self and not AGAINST anyone.

I have no idea where we will come out. There may be as many misadventures in this effort to separate the wheat from the chaff, as there was in presenting the theory in the first place. Time will tell. At least it is changing the face of the place that used to be known as the Family Center.

Maybe you can see why I am in a quandary about January 7. If I did a lecture on theory, it would be called superfluous by too many, and would not get beyond their previously diluted baseline. If it was oriented around a live family, people could cover the cracks with a "magic" pronouncement that ignored the years of step by step effort. I am going to the Milton Ericsson conference in December where 6500 psychotherapists are trying again to capture some kind of Magic that belonged to Erickson.

Do you have any ideas?

Sincerely,

Murray Bowen, M.D.

## “...My Own Failure”

The last years of Dr. Bowen’s life found his thinking focused on the erosion of the “impersonal facts of theory with personal feeling states.” He held himself and his faculty accountable. His opinion was that “lag time” would decrease appreciably if he held to his unpopular position of theoretical accuracy.

His letter of May 1989 to a director of a training program with close ties to the Family Center offers his thinking about the subtlety of the erosion process—whether it be with himself, his faculty, or students in training programs.

A larger question not directly mentioned in this letter has to do with much of the “science” efforts in today’s world, with results being reported based on unclear theoretical assumptions and concepts, and treatments being implemented on these inaccurate conclusions, again the erosion of theory in the therapy process.\*

\*See Norton Hadler’s book previously referenced.

May 20, 1989

Dear

This is a response to your letter of May 12, 1989. There is a compilation about dates with in Green Bay June 14 thru June 16. I will return the late evening of June 16. is doing June 17. I cannot lend much of a hand to her because of fatigue. Maybe I could see you in Chevy Chase Sunday June 18. I have worked long and hard for this thing with .

In my opinion, you have a major version of the same "erosion" phenomenon, that has insidiously killed the Gtn Fam Cntr program. A copy of my "Erosions" paper has guided my effort since Jan 1989. Maybe it will contain a few ideas. In a few months, the Gtn Faculty has been reduced to a few. The Faculty is human too. It is a long hard road for the precision of theory to stand firm in the midst of popular subjectivity. It is all too human for people to "erode" the impersonal facts of theory with personal feeling states. When theory is eroded, facts like the "differentiation of self" is lost in personal mass of eroded theory.

The long odyssey in Kansas resulted in a completely new theory that bypassed much of the heartland of Freudian thinking. It produced a new way of thinking about the human phenomenon, including a whole series of new "concepts", never previously known to the profession. A "throw away" of that effort was a method of "family therapy", before the profession had heard about family therapy. THE PAST 35 YEARS HAVE BEEN SPENT IN TRYING TO COMMUNICATE THE DETAILS ON THE NEW THEORY. Most of that has been my own failure. Mental Health people pretended they understood. The erosion process was too subtle, and I was too busy to bother with details of training. Slowly there was awareness that theory was being bypassed; that Family Systems Theory was being taught as if it consisted only of a few concepts, own family, the loss that went with death, family diagrams, triangles, and squiggles on the board; that family therapy was little more than a technique appended onto a royal mix of theory that included much Freud; that all the previously discussed details about natural systems and the many forms of evolution, were being lost in the theoretical mush; and that I, and the Faculty must have played a part for so many graduates to get that impression. It was more than Societal Regression. I defined Societal Regression in the early 1970's. By the early 1980's I was wondering out loud. THE WORLD NEUTRALIZED THE THEORY AS IF IT DID NOT EXIST. In my opinion, it missed THE important point of the whole thing. It was present in the Gtn Faculty too. LAG TIME??? Who knows? GTN reacted as if I was an unrealistic fellow. They gave me lip service and humored me, but Freudian Theory was too fixed to be abandoned. got a few points in his book, BUT IT SERVED MORE TO FIX Bowen Theory, as if it was a simple extension of Freud.

May 21, 1989. Too weary to finish this last nite. Mental health professionals probably cannot change faster than "Lag Time" permits. If this be so, it might be decades before "lag time" catches up. How do I spend the rest of my life? Do I applaud the popularity of a watered down version, and increase the "lag time", or do I stay with theoretical accuracy? Obviously, the "Erosion" paper indicates I have chosen the latter. Lag Time will decrease appreciably if I stay in this popular position of theoretical accuracy. Your goal in is a little different from mine. Your staff is struggling for popularity. You have more awareness than the others, and you cannot change without them. I will send this copy of "Erosion" so you will know where I am. was a good experience for me.

(handwritten: Sincerely

Murray Bowen

## **Principles and Saying No**

With Dr. Bowen's increasing popularity and acceptance, many organizations wanted to recognize his importance and role in the family therapy profession. AAMFT wanted to give him an award at their annual meeting. He declined the "honor."

His files contain this undated letter draft. It is unclear whether this letter is a draft for even if it was sent. The letter was not finished or signed as all of his other letters were.

Principles are principles and if compromised they aren't principles anymore; again, his clarity and commitment.

Dear

The principles that gave me life on the planet force me to decline the kind offer of AAMFT for an award at your annual meeting in San Francisco this year.

I believe that some version of natural family systems theory may have more to contribute to the long term future of the human cause, and to all forms of life on planet Earth, than any development in the millions of years of evolution of the brain of homo sapiens. Perhaps the evolving human brain of the future may discover the natural secrets of the universe.

They are more involved in the immediacy of the human dilemma of this age than the future of the universe and life itself.

If my guess is accurate, AAMFT (and some other polarized family organizations) has chosen to be more interested in the immediacy of human affairs than the overall. If I accepted the award I would be perceived as agreeing with a future divergent with my own. Though good friends of many years have embraced the present course of AAMFT, principle is more important than the immediacy of human recognition.

As one fleeting form of life, on one tiny star, in one galaxy among many, I believe the evolving brain may someday know a tiny bit more about the universe in which homo sapiens is a transient passenger. To each his own. I believe my own minuscule life may contribute more to