

An Interview with Clarence Boyd

Katie Long, Family Systems Forum editor, interviewed Clarence Boyd, who collected and edited Commitment to Principle: The Letters of Murray Bowen, M.D. (See article, page 7.)

Long: Tell me something about you in relation to Murray Bowen.

Boyd: I didn't go directly to Bowen. I became interested in emotional processes in about 1956. I got interested in Freud, and I read Freud and read Freud, but after reading him I didn't know what I had read. I read other family systems people and experienced them as systems people, but that still left me hanging. Then I began to run into Bowen. In the early '70's, I was at a state hospital called Dorothy Dix. He was coming down to the Medical College of Virginia once a month and doing a project taping interviews. I would make about a three-hour trip. I did this for a number of years.

I was fascinated by the way he thought, and I did something maybe a little unusual. I wrote down all his questions. I wasn't interested so much in what the answers were but by the way his thinking went. I said, "What kind of assumptions is he making?" Then I took the leap and went to the Special Postgraduate Program from September '79 to June '82. I had found a theoretical home.

Long: You are a clinician?

Boyd: It's not so much a clinical thing. I'm more interested in thinking about thinking. That is what drives my interest. I do some clinical work, but I see myself more as a teacher and a consultant, and I work mostly with other mental health professionals as a supervisor and teacher.

Long: How did you happen to undertake this project?

Boyd: I had attended a meeting, and somebody else had quoted one of the letters from the archives, and I said, "This would make a marvelous project – to get into those letters, rather than his more formal writings, to track his thinking." That was the original intent. It was essentially a research project. I had to submit a proposal to the National Library of Medicine. It was a lot of material

I was hoping to do it by years, but they aren't cataloged that way. They are cataloged more or less alphabetically. Some folders had ten years of correspondence with someone. So it didn't lend itself to my original game plan. There are fourteen boxes of papers. I could go through one, maybe two, of those boxes in a day, and then the curator would make copies of the ones I wanted. It took three years to go through all the papers.

Long: You didn't retype the letters.

Boyd: It would have been an almost impossible task. These letters are carbon copies, so they're difficult to read. I thought about maybe having those typed, but it sort of says something about him when you look at those letters, what trouble he went to.

Long: Did you include any of the drafts?

Boyd: These are all final copies, as far as I can tell. But I was interested in the drafts. What kind of a brain would make three copies of something before finally deciding it was ready to send? In one he wrote three copies of a draft to the _____ hotel in Los Angeles. They had messed up. He had sent a guaranteed reservation, and they didn't have it when he got there. He had sent a credit card to be charged, and then when he checked out they were going to charge him again. So he wrote a two-page letter to the manager of that hotel, which focused on responsibility and things like that.

Long: What was striking to you about the letters?

Boyd: These are not formal writings, but the clarity just comes out. He didn't hold any punches. The

clarity is so solid – “clear clarity.” All these letters have principles in them. How does one stay so focused on one’s principles for such a long period of time without wavering and without getting off track or going sideways rather than forward. That was the gist behind the title – *Commitment to Principles*. The letter, “The Lady in the Fire,” was written to someone he had known thirty years before. He had had no contact with her for thirty years, and he wrote a two-page single spaced letter to her. What kind of attitude is that? What kind of moral compass defines one’s responsibility to somebody that way? There’s a footnote in one of his letters that says, “It’s the attitude that’s important, not the words. You can’t make a zebra a mule by painting out the stripes.”

You can go through that book and use that question and say, “What’s the nature of the attitude that is fueling his response. . . his detailed response?” He would write three- or four-page referral letters, where most of us humans would say, “I saw this person and these were the presenting problems,” a paragraph at most, but he would go into massive detail.

He took his responsibility to a level most of us don’t think is possible, or certainly with me. I consider myself a reasonably responsible person, but he took his definition of self-responsibility to a level I certainly haven’t run into before.

Long: You say in your introduction that Bowen never took a day off from holding people accountable. Some people think of holding people accountable in a punitive sense.

Boyd: He was very clear that the only way to get through this life is some kind of focus on responsibility to self. If you get too caught up on trying to change others or take on the environment, you’re going to run into problems. So it was a principle of the importance and necessity for the person to focus on what he or she is going to do about his or her life. That letter, “The Lady in the Fire,” is a marvelous example of that. He put everything on her plate. He was very kind about it, but he said, “*If* you can find a way out of the hospital, *if* you can find a way to focus on what you can do, rather than fight other people. It’s full of these “if’s.”

I included some letters under the subject of schizophrenia. There are people that look at everything the patient does through the lens of mental illness. Bowen did not do that. He didn’t look at schizophrenia as something that might make you a cripple. You still had to find a way to be responsible for your actions. There are letters where he holds people accountable, even when they’re hallucinating.

Rather than a negative kind of connotation, it was a positive thing, giving the person the hope that they can be accountable. It wasn’t, “You’ve got to do this.” But the fresh air that comes when one sees and realizes that there’s something they can do about their lives, even if they have schizophrenia, is marvelous, optimistic, self-healing.

Long: There is a way in which holding someone accountable is being respectful . . .

That’s exactly what I mean. He refused to label anybody. There are letters where he would not even use the word “patient.” That would be a marvelous lens to read those letters. What is his attitude about respect for another human being? And the reverse of that. What is my problem, me, Clarence Boyd, or anybody else, in trying to be respectful, and how do I fail about that? Do I fail at being respectful and appreciative of people’s ability and creative assets to deal with what’s on their plate. And so with these letters, you have to sit back and say, “Where do I come out on this stuff?”

Long: Is there a way to sum up briefly the effect these letters have had on you?

Boyd: Those letters are in every core of every cell of my body. I still go back and read them. I still use them in teaching.

If I go through these letters and say, “OK, Boyd, what have you learned?” Things like, and this is paraphrasing him, what is the nature and the importance of attitude? What is one’s attitude? How does one define one’s moral compass, whether it’s theological, clinical or whatever? There’s a strong moral responsibility. What goes into defining that, or what will one include in one’s moral responsibility as we

go through this hectic life that we live. That would be a piece. The nature of focusing on self and the emotional process of that, with the belief that if one can stay focused on that, outcomes are going to take care of themselves. But that without that you're going to get lost.

Another aspect that we don't particularly like is that this is a lifelong effort. You don't get there. Someone asked him a question at a clinical conference, "You know, I've been reading this stuff, working on it for a couple of years. When am I going to get it?" And Dr. Bowen said, "You're going to be working on this for the rest of your miserable life." The idea is that it is a lifelong effort, and erosion doesn't stop. Some of those letters in the "Erosion" section of the book were written in the last year of his life, and he was still concerned about his own erosion. He was still focusing on that and the pull.

It's like every time your feet hit the floor in the morning, you've got to start all over. Are you going to be focused on your living, and what you're going to put into it? Albert Camus said the only real question is suicide. I don't take that literally, but I take it in the Bowen sense of what is your responsibility to your living and what are you going to put into it. You have to do that every hour of every day, and you don't take a day off from that.

Long: Is there anything you would add to what you've said?

Boyd: There's a logic to this. There is a way to look at the assumptions that are behind the thinking, the concepts. What are those assumptions? That's not talked about too much, but to me it's an important area. What's the nature of his arithmetic? He is the clearest person I've run into. Re-reading his work, you become more aware of that. If he was so clear when I read this the first time, and then I read it again and it's even clearer, what's the problem here? It ain't him.