

Final Draft for *Death and Chronic Illness in the Family: Bowen Family Systems Theory Perspectives* by Peter Titelman (Editor), Sydney K. Reed (Editor), Routledge, 2018

Death as a Catalyst for Reconstructing the Family Emotional System

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“If the family does not move beyond the child’s death toward a clearer definition of themselves, it is likely that confusing and chronic dysfunction will emerge.” (Hollister, 1975-76, p. 206)

This reconstruction of understanding a multigenerational family emotional system began as an effort to understand how my son’s death, in a car accident in 1995, happened as a part of our family system. I drew on many years of researching my family, using as a guide the concepts from Bowen theory that pertain to tracing the shifts in family functioning across generations, particularly before and after deaths in the family. For this chapter, I have focused on just four generations in my maternal side of the family.

I began this investigation considering nine interacting variables that I hypothesized might be important in the process leading up to and following my son’s death. Here I focus on the four that are the primary contributors, 1) reconciliation with a mate; 2) nodal family events; 3) vocational instability; 4) the multigenerational family process emerging within days of his death. At the most personal level, I wanted to discover if it would be possible to address my participation in this emotional process with acceptance and, in so doing, learn what it would take to free myself from continuing to transmit this process to those who would come after me.

The Questions Guiding My Research

Death can serve the function of opening a family system, bringing the potential to identify and perhaps resolve long unresolved emotional attachments in that family system. Having a theory connecting the family's past and present allows for exploration of often disparate and seemingly separated events. Bowen (1978) specifically noted, "...that not all deaths have the same importance to a family" (p. 327). What would determine importance to a family of any one particular person's death? I postulated that it would be a family member functioning in alignment with particular elements of the family's ongoing, cross-generational emotional process. This involved the participation of family members dependent on the stability of the continuing triangle from my grandparents and my uncle on down to my mother, my son and myself. And in the case I will describe here, the cascade of additional deaths in the aftermath of that death that revealed specific family emotional processes and family members' participation. Bowen (1978) has termed this sequencing of deaths the "Emotional Shock Wave" (p. 325) a process that follows the loss of certain family members central to the family's emotional process and one that marks the importance of dynamics previously denied.

It is one thing to know, conceptually, that triangles can carry emotional process across generations via the family projection processes and multigenerational process. Still, it is astonishing to be confronted with the reality that ones' self was part of a process going back at least 90 years ago that played a part in a particular outcome -- the death of one's child.

Moreover, Bowen theory suggests that my family would likely continue this transmission to succeeding generations. As Kerr (1988) explains: "Once the emotional circuitry of a triangle is

in place, it usually outlives the people who participate in it. If one member of a triangle dies, another person usually replaces him. The actors come and go, but the play lives on through the generations” (p. 135).

Could the larger process be known? What was the part I played? Would it be possible to alter programming the emotional functioning of the succeeding generations in that particular way? Bowen (1978) offered hope writing that the very essence of systems theory says, “that unresolved emotional attachments between people that remain viable for life, that attach to significant future relationships, and that continue to direct the course of a life” are resolvable as “.....few human events provide as much emotional impact as serious illness and death in resolving unresolved emotional attachments” (p. 331).

How does one know when a particular process operating over generations in a family has ended? Could a death and the related cascade of deaths in the emotional shockwave bring resolution to unfinished business in a family? In this narrative that unfinished business clearly related to the process in husband/wife/mother/offspring relationships and the content of a long held wish, desire, hope, expectation that things could be set to rights in the family if a mother and daughter reconciled.

The Theory and Methods Applied

The study of my family has been guided in the past by Bowen theory (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Papero, 2015, McCullough 1987) and numerous others whose presentations I heard and whose readings guided my efforts. My intent was to continue this approach in the

study of this particular path of my emotional system. The method was to gather as much factual and narrative information about the family as possible noting patterns that have emerged over generations. Since the family that one researches is one's own, the gathering of such information is rarely a neutral experience for the researcher. To give an example of the emotional information transmitted in the family, here is the kind of comment made, for over fifty years, when there was mention of a particular cousin central to this discussion:

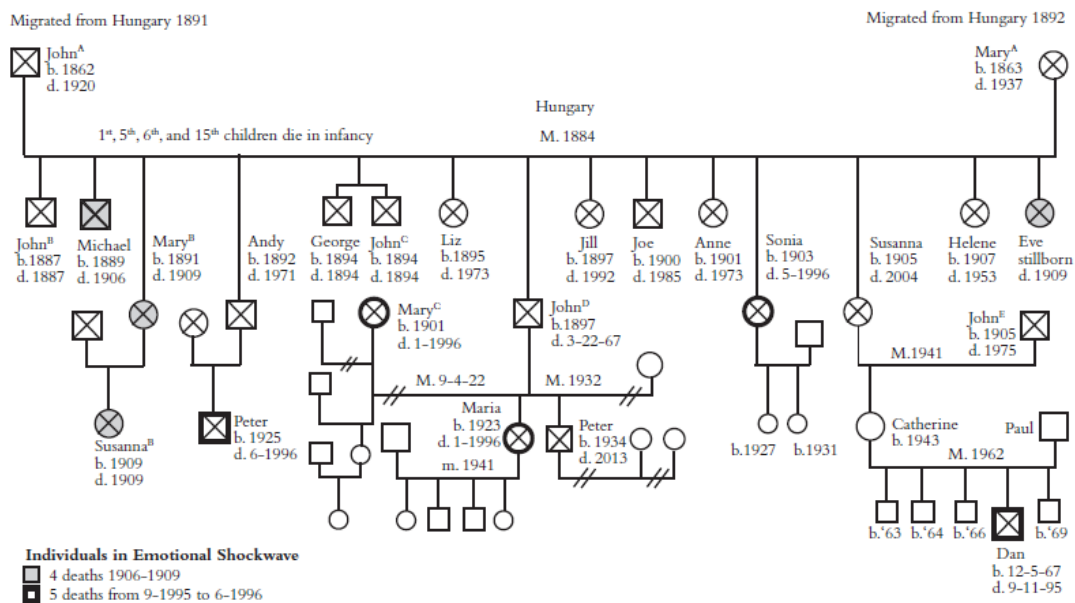
“Oh, poor Maria, you know her mother abandoned her when she was just a baby.

That woman put that little child on a train all by herself at two years old, and sent her off (a hundred and fifty miles away). She has had a hard life ever since. What kind of mother would do that?”

Over time, I collected family stories such as this one, stories certainly common to most families. I kept a journal to track thoughts as well as conversations with other family members. I video and audiotaped interviews with my mother and other relatives. In this chapter, I present an abbreviated narrative of our family's history to provide a context in which to examine certain patterns of interaction that seemed related to the multigenerational emotional process surrounding my son's death. I also made note of my own subjective experiences, including recorded recollections of odd, disturbing, and unwanted reactions that lacked a context for understanding them at the time they occurred. I am suggesting a hypothesis that upset from the past is carried across generations and is activated when conditions in the present pose the same unresolved dilemma from the past.

By piecing together this information, many dates of births and deaths, confidences and family secrets revealed in personal interviews, and the nature of past family relationships, a multigenerational process emerged. It had been there all along like an underground river only rising to the surface when family events and motivation was high enough to connect all of it. Unresolved issues among long-dead family members played out across generations via triangles. I found Hollister's (1975-76) article on "Families Who Experienced the Loss of a Child" to capture exactly what I was considering. She has written:

...members of families who in their mourning will be responsible for understanding their expectations of the child who died will serve future generations well, for they will make it less likely that the role this child played will remain active and always available to prevent examination and change... (1975-76, p. 210)



There is repetition of names here. I have identified all those with the same name, either John or Mary with a superscript to distinguish them.

The Maternal Side, Generation 1 and 2

While there is no “beginning” to any family history, this narrative will begin with my maternal grandparents whom I will refer to as the first generation. They married in Hungary and had three children before my grandfather left for a better life in America six years into the marriage. The first child, John^B, named after grandfather, died in infancy. A year later, my grandmother, Mary^A, and the two remaining children, Mike and Mary^B, arrived to join him. There were 15 children in all, twelve born in the rural Midwest town where they settled. The first, John^B, fifth, George, sixth, John^C, and the 15th child, Eve, all died in infancy. The second child, Mike, born in Hungary, died in a coal mining accident at age sixteen. My mother, Susanna, the thirteenth child was born in 1905, a year before death hit the family hard. My grandmother went into a prolonged depression in response to her oldest son’s death, in 1906. My mother’s oldest sister, Mary^B, then fourteen, became my mother’s functional second mother during the next two years, important developmental years for my mother and a difficult family time. Sometime in these years, the family story says, Grandfather demanded his wife return to functioning. Death was not done yet with the family. After marrying at age 16, my mother’s oldest sister, Mary^B, died in childbirth. Her baby, named after my mother, died within weeks of Mary^B’s death. Grandmother was pregnant through this and several months later delivered her own stillborn child. There were four deaths within three years.

Death and Birth Reconstitute the Relationship System.

There were two distinct functioning phases in my grandparent’s marriage. The first, prior to 1906, the marriage was highly conflictual according to what the family reported generally about

their parents' marriage. But while this contentiousness was remembered most vividly, careful exploration of the family's history over the years revealed that, following the deaths of the two adolescent children, (the two remaining siblings born in the old country,) in 1906 and 1909, the spousal relationship had changed. In the second phase of the marriage, there was instability in the parents. The stories of Grandmother's dysfunction after her oldest surviving son's death are numerous. Yet, there are no stories, none, relating to her functioning after her firstborn daughter's and infant granddaughter's death. Her stillborn child speaks poignantly to her distress in this year. What is known is the marriage settled to a form lasting the remaining eleven years of the marriage, that of dysfunction in Grandfather due to "black lung disease", over functioning in the form of care-taking of him by Grandmother, and intense reactivity and focus on the sixth son, John^D, then an adolescent, and the third son named after Grandfather. Grandfather, John^A, was in the outside position with grandmother and the sixth son, John^D, on the inside of the triangle. Bowen (1978) describes the function seen here: "The child functions as a stabilizer for the parents, converting the unstable father-mother ego mass into a more stable triad. Parental stability depends on the child functioning as the 'triadic one'... The triadic emotional process is adaptive and it can reestablish itself after most threats" (p. 127). This holds true in my family.

With the marital relationship managing its anxiety by involving a child, other relationships in the family responded. With her oldest sister/second mother, Mary^B, dead, my mother, then age four, shifted to a close position with Grandmother possibly filling the void left by her sister's death.

Death Further Realigns Relationships

When Grandfather died of chronic black lung disease in 1920, four children were still living at home: the older troublesome brother, John^D, age 24, another brother, Joe, age 20, my mother, Susanna, age 15, and her younger sister, Helene, age 13. Soon after Grandfather's death, my uncle, John^D, began a relationship with a woman who happened to have the same name, Mary^C, as my grandmother. This woman was married to a minister at the time. Grandmother predicted (to others, not her son) that the marriage would be punished by God. Grandmother's response to this unacceptable marriage was to host the wedding in her home and have the newlyweds move in with her. Two months after that marriage, the oldest surviving brother, Andy, came and moved grandmother and the remaining siblings, including my mother, from their rural Midwest home to live in an industrial city 125 miles away where he was living. In a departing act of caring for her son, Grandmother left the family home to her newly married son and his wife, John^D and Mary^B, even though she believed the marriage was cursed due to "taking a minister's wife". It is evidence that energy in the group was going in to the relationships.

After the move to the city, my mother, then age seventeen, made a decision to care for her widowed mother as long as needed. She did not want Grandmother shuttled from one sibling to another. It was a life principle lived out by caring for her mother twelve years until Grandmother's death. After that, consideration could go to beginning her own family. This is an example of a non-negotiable life principle as well as part of the family emotional process. Grandmother married Grandfather in compliance with her own mother's directive. She was in love with another man but deferred to her mother. Even into her seventh decade, she indulged in musing over this man's memory and their unrequited attachment. By caring for her mother until her death, my mother avoided such a quandary. This "don't go far from your mother" theme

shows up as a feeling in me toward my mother. The mother-daughter stay close theme exists in every other mother daughter pair across the second and third generations of the family.

Generation 2 and 3

Ten months after my uncle's marriage, a daughter, Maria, is born. My grandmother and my uncle's siblings had all moved away. The marriage heated up quickly after the birth of the first child. Kerr (1988) notes, "A nuclear family can be stabilized by outside relationships, particularly by those with the extended family" (p. 267). Kerr also described destabilizing factors: "An event, or more likely a series of events, can disturb the balance of a relationship system and trigger symptoms. The event may be the addition of something new that has to be dealt with or the loss of something old that was relied on" (p. 265). Both were present here, a new baby was added, Grandmother and siblings were not nearby. As my uncle, John^D, worked two jobs, one in another city ninety miles away, his wife began another affair. The new paramour wanted nothing to do with someone else's daughter. My uncle left the marriage seeking solace in his mother. This is the description as told by my mother to me:

"My brother came to Pittsburgh. He came into the house where mother lived. He threw himself at her feet and buried his head in her lap saying he was sorry and that she was right, he never should have married her. He said he did not want to go back to his wife but he could not live without his daughter. (Grand)Mother said to bring her (here). Two days later, before he told his wife this, his wife called the family and told them to go to the train station as she had put the child on the train to Pittsburgh. She was two years old.

This story of this child put on the train alone at age two has always been a big emotional story in the family. The family vilified her mother for this. “(Rakow, 1994)

My uncle’s wife, Mary^C, then married her lover and began a new family. This is a culmination of emotional process changes to re-establish an equilibrium going as far back as the first death in 1906. I consider this a convulsion in the family system as its ramifications shadow far into the future. Kerr (1988) notes the impact of such disruption “...after system equilibrium has been distorted, it may not be possible to restore equilibrium without introduction of a chronic symptom” (p. 114). This chronic, unfinished emotional issue, cutoff between mother and daughter, reactivated prior to the time of my son’s death. The family view of my uncle, John^D, after this divorce was that “his life ended when his wife left him.” (Rakow, 1992) The psychological oneness of the family considered him incompetent to manage his own life without his wife. This illustrates Papero’s (2015) point “The members of the family...share a common mindset and...look at the world through the same lens” (p. 17). The rupture of my uncle’s marriage and his wife’s abandonment of their daughter generated a sense of deep sorrow across the family, paradoxically coupled with perpetual hope that reconciliation between mother and child would restore the heart strength of the family. The involvement of all family members in placing their continued happiness on John^D is evidence of this relationship’s entanglement in the family emotional process. No one was neutral. All family members blamed both John^D and Mary^C. The difference was their brother was pitied while his wife was despised.

Maria was sent to her father, John^D, who brought her to his mother and his sister, Susanna, my mother. My mother assumed maternal care for Maria, leaving her job to stay home the seven

years Maria lived there. This relationship mirrors what happened with my mother early in her life when an older sister stepped in to care for her when grandmother was functionally absent. (A repeating pattern that probably increased chances of adapting to the new circumstances.)

When my uncle remarries, his daughter returns to live with him and his second wife. Three years later, a son is born to this second marriage. In a repeating pattern, the addition of a new baby brought disturbance to the marriage. Blame goes to Maria, now a pre-teen, who is again sent away. She goes to my mother's next older sister, Sonia, living 400 miles away on the east coast. Another of the patterns noted at the broader level in this family is that in mother/daughter pairs there is some symptom outbreak in a daughter prior to the mother's death. Sending my cousin Maria away occurs when my mother needed thyroid surgery, and she was not available to resume the surrogate mother function. In the intense togetherness here, there was a symptom cluster between the two siblings most involved: marital disturbance between my uncle and his second wife, an inability of my uncle to keep his own child with him, and my mother developing thyroid problems. All these coincided with grandmother's decline. My mother went with my cousin, Maria, to the Eastern seaboard city where her sister's family lived and had her thyroid surgery there. Sonia had two daughters of her own, younger than my cousin, and this older sister and my mother decided that this family environment, with close in age would-be siblings would best serve my cousin. Distance from her father's troubles in his second marriage was considered a benefit. It is unknown if my uncle abdicated his paternal responsibility or asked his sisters to take over. The sisters always told the story as their decision.

The involvement of my mother's older sister in this reconstruction of the family emotional system is important; Sonia was one of the deaths in the emotional shockwave. During the five years, my cousin, Maria, lived with Sonia, Maria's biological mother, Mary^C, attempted contact with her (more than a decade after putting Maria on the train alone.) Sonia blocked this effort keeping it secret fifty years. When I visited and stayed with her in 1991, she revealed it wondering how things might have been had she allowed the visit. She said she had never told anyone, including my cousin, out of fear of criticism and losing the relationship with Maria. Contrary to the positive regard between my mother and my cousin, Maria, the relationship between Maria and my mother's older sister, Sonia, was twitchy. How much had to do with that secret is a guess. Maria left that family abruptly in conflict with Sonia and there was no contact until after Maria was married and her second child was born. In contrast, my cousin cherished my mother as the closest person to a mother that she had. My mother spent considerable time nurturing, comforting, counseling Maria throughout my cousin's life. There was never a period when they were not in contact. I think now that this attention diverted a more enhanced focus toward me.

In the year following Grandmother's death, my uncle's second marriage ended. Another lifelong cutoff is in place between my uncle, his second wife, and his son from the second marriage. My uncle never functioned at a level again that could sustain a relationship. He had the minimum of contact with his daughter and no contact with his son. Neither the second wife nor son had any further contact with my family with one exception, my mother, who maintained a yearly holiday contact with this nephew until her death though she had no further contact with her brother. That nephew married twice, did not reproduce and this branch has dead-ended. From Grandmother's

death, forward, there was no direct contact between my mother and my uncle. The latent emotional energy from that triangle then transferred to my son and me at this uncle's death. That is how I understand the odd thoughts at my son's birth, the prickliness between him and me in his adulthood and the predictable pattern of exchanges between my mother and myself about him. I never heard of any desire on my mother's part for contact with her brother though my mother was in good contact with all other family members. Any information about either my uncle or my mother came through others contacts with each of them or hearsay. Comments by other siblings about my uncle were that he was to be pitied. Life had done him wrong. There were no comments on his strengths or his capacity to solve his own problems.

Thirty Years of Unsettledness

From 1906 to 1937, there was a prolonged period of unsettledness in the family. This swirled around my grandparents, John^A and Mary^A, my uncle, John^D, his two wives, Mary^C and his second wife, his daughter, Maria, my mother, Susanna, and during the last few years of this time period, my mother's older sister, Sonia. This duration of system disturbance, symptom eruption and managing of relationships through extreme distance speaks to the intensity of the upset that then goes dormant. The next thirty years were a time of little disturbance. There are no family stories of memorable upset from these years beyond the ordinary births, deaths and marriages common to any family.

Nuclear Family of Origin

In exploring the collective actions of these family members, the multigenerational process, from my maternal grandmother to my son, came to stand out from the general fabric of the family.

My parents married in 1941. My mother married distinctly out of her ethnic group, the only sibling to do so. I note this only as a difference from her siblings. I was born in 1943. My father was incapacitated four months after my birth and unable to work for several months. Mother's story is that the doctor told her she should prepare to take over the function of securing the family's future. My father had chronic symptoms: stomach ulcers and diabetes. The marriage was characterized as one of low conflict. Both parents had a deep attachment to their only child. After my father's death, I became aware of my dependence on him and his moral compass. His death in 1975 was a growth point for me and led to my first major effort to define who I was long before I came to Bowen theory.

I married at age eighteen moving several hundred miles away until giving birth nine months later then returning to where my parents lived purchasing the family home from them. Within six years five sons were born. In one of the conversations after my marriage, my mother told me "I lost your father when you were born; he came back to me after you married and moved away." (Rakow, 1994) I had no way of conceptualizing this as an emotional triangle process back then. I simply recorded it. My husband married a "package". He got a wife and mother-in-law as a unit illustrating Bowen's (1979) point: "Spouses may maintain their most important relationships to the past generation, their parents" (p. 126). And illustrating Toman's (1976) point, "A man who takes an only child for his wife would be well advised to consider her mother... (that) often comes as a part of the package" (p. 186). In the early years of my marriage with children arriving so quickly I would ask myself, whose life am I living?

Death and Birth, a New Thirty-Year Cycle

In March 1967, my uncle, John^D, died in the state hospital with a diagnosis of Organic Brain Disorder. His daughter, Maria, attended his funeral. Neither of his wives attended nor did his son. The birth of my fourth son, Dan, followed nine months later, December 1967. A death followed closely by a birth can sustain a system's equilibrium. There is a continuing representation in the triangle managing the original unresolved issues in the system. None of that was thought about back then. Kerr (1988) speaks to functioning positions within a family system that seem apropos here: "People are born into and occupy functioning positions in a family, positions that have an important influence on many aspects of their biological, physiological, and social functioning. These functioning positions are molded over many generations and are anchored in emotional, feeling, and subjective processes" (p. 50). This birth did not fit in to the reproductive sequence of my nuclear family. Other births were eighteen to twenty-four months apart. This one was twelve months between births and nine months after my uncle's death. This birth prompts the first awareness in me of some connection to the larger family system though it was not understood as that at the time. On seeing the baby, my son, for the first time the thought came instantly that he looked like his maternal great grandfather along with panic that this was not good. What did I consciously know of him? Then it would have only been that he was a harsh man to his wife when drinking, that he sent his fifteen year old daughter to town to buy more drink and she took refuge with her godmother never returning home again, that he was multilingual speaking and reading Hungarian, Slovak and Russian and that he worked in the diamond mines in Hungary. I never met him; he was dead twenty-three years before my own birth. What would drive my cells to react with panic that my sweet new son looked like him? This odd thought was powerful enough to remain in my memory until after my son's death. I now consider it evidence that I was a conduit for anxiety transmission and the

thought was an intuitive¹ rapid cognition of the automatic emotional process transfer occurring then but not understood then. McCullough has asked, “What was the emotional significance of the person who died? The next person who’s born gets some of that significance.” McCullough (1987) notes that a family’s unfinished emotional issues, the ingrained reactions, can come forward if a birth connects to a death. Both Bowen and Kerr touch on this automatic experiencing as part of the emotional transmission process. Kerr (1988) writes, “One of the major revelations of the study of the human family was that the functioning of individuals, including internal psychological and physical functioning as well as behavior, was far more regulated by relationships than previously thought”(p. 39). Bowen (1978) also notes, “The emotional system operates through all five senses, and most often through visual and auditory stimuli...I believe the automatic emotional process is far more important in establishing and maintaining relationships than verbal language” (p. 348). Epigenetics is moving toward explaining how real and PERCEIVED trauma in one generation can cross three generations without personal contact. (Jones, 2014)

Realignment of relationships after a birth

When my mother’s perception was that I needed her to assist in caring for the growing brood of grandsons, she retired “to help Cathy with the kids.” This coincides with the birth of my son whose death is integral to this telling. This would fit with the description of an only child’s dependence on parents if there were multiple children (Toman, 1977, p. 187). It was after this birth that I began to consider life goals other than mothering. It was also now that I moved to the outside position of the triangle that was now comprised of my mother, my self, and my son, representing his grandfather, John^A, and his uncle, John^D. Mark Twain (1874) has sagely

described this “History never repeats itself, but the Kaleidoscopic combinations of the pictured present often seem to be constructed out of the broken fragments of antique legends” (p. 430).

An unanswered question is how did this transmission go into my family and not that of my cousin, Maria, who had four children of her own? The only answer I have is the anxiety was bound elsewhere in her family and they were not part of the triangle with my mother, my son and me. Anxiety has left its mark in their lives but not from this specific triangle.

As to my son’s growing up years in our family, there was nothing out of the ordinary beyond what has been mentioned. He moved into adulthood with no difficulty or particular concerns and left home at age twenty-four to move into his own home. On reflection, it comes to me that my son was a “focused on child” only in the grandmother, mother, son triangle, not in the nuclear family. He was the connective tissue of triangles from the past in the present. My son’s birth filled a functioning vacancy in the triangle within a family chronic anxiety field. There was some awareness in me of a sensation I now would identify as chronic anxiety. It was experienced as fear that he resembled his maternal great grandfather and that was a threat in this family. The chronic anxiety expressed itself over the years as a prickliness when we were around each other. I described our relationship as that of a “prickly pair.” This was a sensation within me without an understanding of its origin. My son was aware of it too and each, mother and son, tried over the years to be able to tolerate this inner tension in the presence of the other, without any way of understanding it before his death. As an adult, my son also put it into words “I don’t know why but I feel tense around you. I really wish I didn’t.” (Rakow, 1992) How does chronic anxiety play out generations removed from the original upset in the triangle in the past? After my son’s death, I knew these sensations and relationship patterns were a remnant of

relationship process and unresolved emotional attachment transmitted down the generational line.

A repeating, predictable, pattern in this triangle took the form of the inability of speaking with my mother about my son. I bring up my son in conversation with my mother who then shifts immediately to negative comments about her brother and her father. This recurred many times. I made note of this, recognizing it as a repeating pattern, after beginning the study of Bowen theory in 1982. I noted both confusion and fascination with this chain reaction. I did not note as important the change this produced in me, wariness in any further discussion with my mother regarding my son. I found myself speechless and the conversation ended when this occurred. Bowen (1978) and Papero (2015) both define such a shut-down as an emotional reflex. “The closed communication system is an automatic emotional reflex to protect self from the anxiety in the other person” (Bowen, p. 322). Not recognizing this pattern as such is another example of being blind to what was right in front of me. I only came to understand it after my son’s death.

1994-1995 Activation of the Seventy-Year Cutoff

In December 1994, my long-gone aunt, Mary^C, from generation 2, recruits her granddaughter to find her first-born daughter, my cousin, Maria. This is her dying wish. Mary^C had told no one she was married to my uncle and had a daughter she gave away. Beyond her third husband, this was a secret in her second family. The granddaughter searches, finding a male cousin with the family name in the city where I lived. The male cousin, Peter, sends the granddaughter with her grandmother’s dying wish directly to my mother now living in my home. They speak and information is exchanged to reach Maria directly. The granddaughter quotes her grandmother:

“There isn't a night that I go to bed that I don't wonder where my daughter is.” (Rakow, 1994)

The first in this link of possible reconnection, the male cousin Peter, was the nephew who was born at the time of the convulsion in the system in 1925. He is also the cousin who gave me the gravesite where my son is buried. This is just fact. I have no way presently to attach greater meaning to the timing of his birth and his subsequent death in this narrative. Following this call, my mother speaks directly to my cousin, Maria. It is during this phone call that Maria first hears the family story of her arrival on the train seventy years ago. I asked my mother how it was possible Maria never knew this when it was such a big story in the family. She said, "We just never told her." (Rakow, 1994) The emotional impact of these calls was later observable when my mother says her legs were numb, she felt done in and she had to go lay down. Another example of the intensity is the relief my mother expresses later, “I have been waiting for this all my life.” (Rakow, 1994)

For the first time in seventy years, two of three original participants in a convulsive episode in the family's history, Mary^C and Maria, were in a position to address unresolved differences. The third original participant, my Uncle John^D, was dead but the system did have an unknowing representative in my son Dan. The intensity level of emotional arousal rose in those who had been present seventy years ago and were still living. Letters, phone calls and many discussions between my mother, my cousin Maria and my mother's sister, Sonia, occurred reviewing the years of the family's grief and helplessness with the situation. Bowen (undated) confirms that bridging cut-offs releases bound up intensity: “The intensity of the emotional reactivity in making contact with the past is directly related to the intensity of the emotionality that was buried in the original emotional cut-off.” (Bowen, undated-1) At a system level, this potential

connection opens up the possibility of bridging a long awaited reconciliation. During these months, my son, working nearby, had lunch daily with my mother. How much was directly discussed between them of this matter is unknown to me. I do know my son would have been responsive to his grandmother's distress. In addition, I do know her criticalness of me toward my son increased during this time.

Confluence of Life Events Similar to Original Convulsion Recurring 1995

It is the who, what, when and where that can make a difference in the ability to manage the reality of a death. My son's death September 11, 1995 occurred in a perfect storm of colliding variables. The multigenerational transmission process activated by the effort to bridge a 70-year cutoff had the extended family holding its breath in apprehension and fear – fear it would occur and fear that it would not. Our nuclear family system and my son's life in the present moment was also in flux. His two brothers had moved away, another became engaged and while his brothers' lives were moving forward, my son's was stalled. I was in a wait and see place with him. Concern for where he was in life and waiting for an indication he might accept some discussion with counsel from me.

Variables in my son's life replicating the original cut-off during these immediate weeks preceding his death were a reconciliation with a mate initiated two weeks before his death, then her subsequent departure to the West Coast on a planned visit four days before his death. His activity the day of his death would have been different if she was nearby. My son had serious difficulties at work the week before his death due to external complications, out of his control, and internal upsets about those. Bowen (undated-2) has referred to clinicians making promises to clients that cannot be kept as a "breach of unconscious promise." This upset at work meets

that definition substituting his employer for the clinician. Next, there was a personal betrayal in a close friendship. Then an upset between my son and me three days before his death. My perceptions were that this was a regression prior to a growth spurt in him. If I could just stay present but non-interfering to him, he would find his way. I invited him to stay in contact. He did, contacting me the day before his death to make amends. It was a solid conversation of two people who care about each other. There was none of the old “prickles” between us. Without consideration of the multigenerational factors, his death was an outcome far removed from my expectation. The day after our amends, my son died in a car accident. It is useless to speculate on wondering what the trajectory in the family would be if my uncle had physically died back in 1925 when the intensity reached a rupturing apex and the family’s emotional future took this course. Though others noted that the quality of good functioning in his life ended then the emotional process in place continued. Just as the odd thought of extended family connections came at his birth, when going to see my dead son for the first time at the funeral home, I had a distinct awareness that his death was connected to my ancestor’s lives and something of import was ending – another intuitive rapid cognition.

Emotional Post-Mortem

Following my son’s death, no action was taken on the cutoff between my aunt and my cousin. Within four months, the deaths of people actively involved in the sustained chronic anxiety began. In December 1995, my mother informed my cousin Maria of my son’s death. What was the delay in telling my cousin of this? Speculating, I would say my mother’s functioning was so impacted by my son’s death she did not write or call Maria and apparently, her older sister, Sonia, did not either. Sonia lived only 20-25 miles from my cousin, she was the aunt who took

her in and raised her for five years and she also knew of the attempt to reunite by her biological mother both early in life and in 1995. Reflecting on this now, it illustrates how isolated and over-protected my cousin was in the family. No one told her the facts of her mother giving her away and no one told her of my son's death until the end of December when my mother wrote to her. January 2, my cousin, Maria, died unexpectedly. Her biological mother, Mary^C, died January 14th, with no notification that her daughter had died. Five months later, May 1996, my mother's older sister, Sonia, died unexpectedly. A month after this, June 1996, my male cousin, Peter, died. He was mentioned earlier for giving me my son's grave and being the first family contact in the reconciliation effort. Peter's gift of the grave solved a thorny, chronic issue in his own branch of the family. It was an action that could be conveyed as, be careful what you wish for as it might have powerful consequences when you get it -- a theme that fits with the family emotional process presented here. All these people were healthy when my son died with the exception of the long gone aunt, Mary^C. Who knows how to weight such things? Considering an emotional shockwave as directly related to the chronic anxiety stream in the family is illustrated here.

The only other prominent participants remaining alive were my mother and my self. I wish I could explain that beyond the two of us being still tightly bound. The cross-generational "clumping" of not knowing where a person begins and a person ends was addressed between my mother and me after my son's death. The rest of the original "clump" were dead. The lens shifted directly to my understanding the relationship with my mother, who was ninety years old at the time of my son's death, living with my husband and me. I saw how each of us, in our togetherness, were a variable in his death. I was working on my relationship with my mother for

many years but never put together all these pieces: the thought at my son's birth which, later at his death, I interpreted as my being a conduit for transmission of anxiety, the life course changes in my mom and myself at his birth, the prickliness between my son and me as he approached adulthood and launching his own life, the predictable emotional reflex when I mentioned my son to my mother and she shifts immediately to her brother and her father. The course our relationship took after my son's death was further evidence. His death surfaced the depth of unresolved emotional attachment between mother and offspring over four generations and specifically between my mother and me. It defined the context to my efforts for further separating a self.

My mother wondered why I was not a comfort to her as I wondered the same about her. I wanted her acknowledgement that I had lost my son. This led to conversations such as Mom saying, "*I feel empty inside. I feel like a ghost*" or "*I feel like a walking skeleton.*" In the months and year following my son's death, I asked, "*Why can't you comfort me? Why can't you say 'I'm sorry your son died.'*" Her response was "*He was more my son than yours*" or "*I've experienced much more death in my life than you have.*" (Rakow 1996-97) This reflected the emotional process around deaths from the earliest days in my mother's life from the time of her brother Michael's death back to 1906 and to my son's birth following her brother John's death in 1967 when she retired and I moved more on my own life path. For myself, I was clear now about the fusion between us. It was important to me to know if my mother had it in her a) to recognize the boundaries of the generations and who was the mother who had lost a son and b) to offer me motherly solace. I kept this in my heart without negativity; I just wanted to know if it was possible. I thought my chances in life would be better if she could. On Mother's Day, 1997

she accompanied me to the cemetery. Standing at my son's grave, my mother expressed her sorrow that "your son died." So simple, so profound.

I consider this another nodal point in the resolution of the chronic anxiety of seventy years. My mother lived with us seventeen years, eight of those years before my son's death and nine years after it. She died at age ninety-nine in 2004 outliving all her siblings and many of her nieces and nephews. She died in her own bed, as was her wish. I understood my place in her dying as walking beside her on this last transition, being a resource and comfort to her. Her strength in her own dying and the openness of our relationship through that time left me with no awareness of grief after her death. Our living relationship was done. My admiration for what she made of herself in her life has continued to grow. Having a theory to offer enlightenment, she did the best she could.

Reflecting from a Systems Perspective

"The period immediately following the death of a child is often a time when family roles and expectations change. It is also a time when members of a family can more clearly perceive each other as individuals, can examine the role each person plays, and can interrupt the process by which disabling roles are passed on to future generations.... After a child has died, a seat is empty and a role is vacant." (Hollister, 1975-1976, p. 205)

In the preceding pages, we have seen one distinct aspect of an otherwise far more complex family emotional process over a period of ninety years (since the first destabilizing death). Across those four generations, this family managed to sustain a number of unresolved emotional

issues with the cooperation of multiple individuals. For so many years, the family lived in a state of heightened, concerned, uncertainty about the reconciliation among a father, mother, and daughter that never arrived.

Within this family process, I focused particularly on the multigenerationally transmitted process as lived in the triangle of my mother, my son, and myself. While I did look as closely at other parts of the extended family system, at my own nuclear family emotional process, at my husband's extended family and at the myriad of other variables that were part of my son's and other deaths in the shockwave, I have not included that here. In shedding light on just this one pathway of family chronic anxiety -- projected across four generations -- there were confirming discoveries of a multigenerational emotional process.

- A history of unresolved mother/offspring separation carried forward across generations through interlocking triangles that persisted even after the original participants were dead and upon which the family's togetherness balance depended.
- Chronic anxiety from the distant past felt at a primal level of intuitive rapid cognition and kinesthetic experience, which included a chronically anxious mindset among family members involving persistent distortions of perception. Jones (2014) has noted, "that a person's *perception* of the social environment can reach deep into the genome and alter cellular level processes even if the threat is only imagined" as it was here. (p. 117)
- An emotional shockwave response to death involving those persons connected to this particular thread of chronic family anxiety via the aforementioned triangles, which guided me to understanding my son's death in this larger context as well as my role in the process.

- A cut-off binding the unresolved anxiety from the first generation that, when bridged, released that anxiety with such force that, in this case, it drove the shockwave.

In the sequence of deaths called a shockwave, a reverberation occurred throughout the family attachment network related to the functional position of individuals living the inherited triangles and the activation of the original disturbance. My son replaced my Uncle John^D in a cross-generational triangle. My uncle's death in 1967 transferred emotional energy into a new generation at my son's birth. When the issues in the original cut-off became active in the present, 1994, the absorbed energy bound in the original triangle activated. My son's death released the energy bound in that triangle as the system then adjusted to a new reality about an old, long-held experience in the family. The cascade of deaths following my son's death settled the long-held intense desire/question as to whether my cousin, Maria, and her mother would reconcile. They would not. What remained was would another mother (mine) and a daughter (me) reach some resolution in our relationship, the remaining remnant of the fused relationships in this cross-generational anxiety stream or would things continue predictably with some other family member filling in the triangle gap. For me, as an active participant in this process, understanding the family as a system explained what previously had been unexplainable. It taught me how chronic anxiety operates across decades and how it is revealed in the triangles of a relationship system.

Since the death of my son and the subsequent shockwave, my family has stayed with its developmental tasks. The family has grown to include seven grandchildren. Each of them know their Uncle Dan's name, have visited his gravesite and have a sense of who he was. In studying

my family, I have considered the idea that nature abhors a vacuum and without resolution, emotional issues will be projected into the future. In my own efforts to define a self I came to see my part as being a conduit for the chronic anxiety, a fused daughter, a participant in the unresolved emotional fusion operating in the triangle between mother, daughter and son and denying what the process revealed even as I was diligently studying theory. Before my son's death, my entrenchment in the emotional process and "observational blindness" allowed me to dismiss the clues of that participation. Has this small piece of the chronic anxiety process in my family ended due to resolution of a piece of the unresolved fusion between my mother and myself? How would one confirm that? A little change toward separation can have long reaching impacts. Only time and additional attention to family process will reveal if this piece of the family process is no longer driving its way into the future. I have noted two thirty-year cycles in this family. Only twenty years have passed so far.

"...he who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep, pain that cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despite, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God." (Aeschylus, 525 BC - 456 BC, translated by Edith Hamilton, 1930)

Endnotes

¹My understanding of intuition is as an information signal from the family emotional system. The signal itself is neutral. The response of the recipient to the intuition is shaped by that person's level of emotional maturity. In this case, if I were more of a separate self and understood the intuition as an informational signal connected to present emotional process, there

would have been a different internalization of and response to it. An unanswered question is whether generating/receiving an intuition serves a function for the emotional system. In my experience, it served to perpetuate a process already in place. I formulated this definition after listening to a discussion on intuition that occurred at the 53rd Annual Symposium on Bowen Family Theory and Family Psychotherapy, Nov 4-5, 2016, sponsored by The Bowen Center for the Study of the Family, Arlington, VA

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