

## DR. BOWEN AS THERAPIST

## Dr. Bowen as Therapist

Throughout the archive collection, there are numerous letters to other therapists and psychiatrists in other cities where his clinical families had relocated and wanted to continue their therapy. These letters are remarkable in their depth, detail, respect, and compassion for the families for which he had devoted his efforts to “lend a hand.”\* His optimism in the belief that impossible problems can be made more manageable was, of course, based on his theoretical roadmap that guided his “each step of the way.”\* Students and other mental health professionals often are curious about this “therapy” and unsure how theory and therapy are connected. The enclosed letter offers multiple clues to these questions.

This letter is part of a seven-page letter on to a colleague in Pittsburgh, where a family he has worked with is moving. In addition to detailed information on his referral family, he writes of his detailed process with an entirely different family that describes his therapy process, his thinking about his therapy, and how the family members respond to this process. Included is the five-page therapy summary of this “other family,” plus a two-paragraph summary of part of his “technique,” another classic short story. This letter is from July 1968. A question for the reader is do you “hear” the process or only the fascinating content?

\*Dr Bowen’s words.

July 5, 1968

Dear :

On Friday June 28 I saw and for an hour and a half review of their family situation. I will put down a few ideas about them and some experiences I have had with similar families.

The have a real "stuck" situation in that the emotional bind leaves little maneuvering room for anyone. Since my of my thinking about these revolves around a recent promising outcome with a similar but more intense problems, I will tell you about that first. The story goes back to early 1961. The father was a well-known business man in his early 50s; the mother an emotional and very talkative pretty woman in her mid 40s; the oldest child a daughter of 20 doing well away in college; the second a son of eighteen in college in who had been a fair student and good athlete in prep school; and a youngest daughter of nine in "analysis" with a child analyst. The family was well known in psychiatric circles because they have seen so many different psychiatrists for different lesser problems over the years. It was a psychological "enlightened" family. The father has a who has long been a "name" in psychoanalysis who came in to advise and mess up things periodically. The family problem remained in contained livable state until the son left for college in September 1960. Marital conflict became intense and soon the nine-year-old daughter was in analysis. Two months later the father had moved out and was in an affair with his secretary. Anxiety and acting out was everywhere. It involved detectives, psychiatrists, legal actions, etc. The mother's screeching anxiety was equalled only by the father's quiet legal moves to "do her in". Everyone was "allergic" to her anxiety, including the younger girl's therapist. This was the state of affairs when I came on the scene early in 1961.

The first four or five years I saw mostly the mother. She was the only one motivated but she had played such an adaptive role that she never had the strength to "contain herself" when provoked by the family. There was an early fight when she withdrew the daughter from analysis. I was non-committal about that point. The father, through his brother, built up the arguments for continuing, and against the mother. The analyst wrote me a letter imploring that I do something to "save" this girl by insisting that they continue the analysis. Another fight followed the efforts of the father, the child analyst, and the eldest daughter to have the mother institutionalised. I of course am against solving family problems in this way. The father demanded psychological tests for the mother. I agreed only if both parents be tested. I did not hear from him for about two years after that. I believe that was the last time any family member tried to get me to "take sides" in the setting out.

Page two

From then on, I'd only hear about the shenanigans. During that first year the parents moved into the legal arena with divorce accusations; the son began acting out at college, quit before he was kicked out, and returned home; the older daughter continued to the end of the college year and then went "Bohemian" in San Francisco; and the younger daughter was fairly calm at home with mother.

This was a disruptive family. During the early years I saw various combinations of family members together. The father would get mad at the mother and storm out after ten or thirty minutes. One time the father wanted "analysis" for himself. He lasted about three sessions quitting when I failed to "understand" and take his side. The family disruptiveness between the parents was present to a lesser degree with any two family members. About two years out, I saw the daughter a few times after she had returned from San Francisco. She ended up in psychoanalysis which lasted about two years. I saw the son. He was challenging, cynical, and helpless. Part of this was his usual posture toward life and part his opposition to mother's pressure. The parents went through a nasty mud-slinging divorce in which the mother "lost" almost every count. Lawyers, judges, and everyone else would get offended at her anxious attacks. Though divorced for four years, the parents are still emotionally involved with each other, much calmer now than in years. The father has lived lavishly with beach houses, boats large enough for Caribbean cruises, etc., while keeping a series of mistresses. He defaulted in alimony payments and the wife went to work to buy the necessities. Of course she still went overboard bailing out her irresponsible children. She began to do rather well in her own business. She sued him for back alimony. He appeared in court in tattered clothes pleading poverty and trying to prove she had more money than he, and the alimony was unfair. For the first time she kept her anxiety contained and the judgement went in her favor. Over the years I saw the mother less frequently, down to once a month, then four times a year, and then a termination that lasted a year. So my total "hours" with this family has been about 250 hours. The mother just never "had the ability" to become the solidly "differentiated" one who could influence the family.

The main part of the story has to do with the son and older daughter. The son went from bad to worse. He was a wandering "Bohemian" for a year. Then he began working for his father and sharing the father's angry attitude about the mother. He lived with a waif of a girl whom he married after she became pregnant. The father ran out on the son (left him in charge of the business) as he had done with the mother. The son's wife ended up in a mental hospital with the infant son being passed from one to another. The son began using "pot", then narcotics, and then LSD. Within a year he had been arrested for possessing, and for transporting and selling narcotics. The son disappeared into the hippy world, a long haired and bearded disciple of peace who was against the "establishment". His wife took the infant son and returned to her family of origin in the South. Deep parental anxiety about the son was tremendous. They would try to find him or get word about him while he eluded them. Occasionally he would return to demand money and then leave "forever" when they gave only half what he demanded. The older daughter was a "working hippy" who shared an apartment (pad) with a girl friend in town. She worked part time and finished college while living with a series of men hippies. She was active in "liberal" and "anti-establishment" causes. Her analyst was not able to analyse her out of the situation. In the fall of 1966, a year after the analysis was terminated, I began seeing her once a week and then

Page three

three times a year.

I was delighted to have an oldest sibling from an unchanging family, motivated to do something for self. The "oldest", functionally if not actually, usually feels tremendous guilt about the family. They have tried in their own inept way to be responsible for the family and have given up in despair. They have a built in "go power" if their energy can be directed to understanding emotional systems and the responsible functioning of self, rather than irresponsibly trying to "help the helpless". Her insides had been almost as attached to the brother as the parents. A friend could say, "I saw your brother and he looked awful" and her stomach would go into spasms which would drive her into action to check up with telephone calls, etc. My suggestion was to try to find a way to get her guts unhooked from her family. A lot of talk and examples went into this, plus defocusing all the explanations she had learned from analysis. She did a pretty good job detaching from her family but was "snookered" by increased dependency on the boyfriend and ended up pregnant. The boy promised to marry her if she wanted him to. Rather than live with this, she decided on and got an abortion within a week. Within weeks she had separated from the boyfriend and his group of hippy friends. This girl was tremendous in her determination to find a way to get herself emotionally unhooked from her brother and her parents. She could maintain fair non-reactivity to and stories about her brother, and even to her mother's anxious reactions to the brother's problem. She heard the brother was living in a "pad" in Philadelphia. She went to see him to test her ability to keep her insides and her "self" calm in his presence. She did well. About this time, with all the emphasis on "treating" hippies, I decided to make a concerted effort on the hippy member of this family. To use the term "treat" in this sense would defeat the whole effort. The daughter was a pretty good student of family systems (about fourteen months after I started with her). The brother was said to be in San Francisco. A hippy is a refugee from his family. The family "chases" him, even though this is expressed only in worry and thoughts, and the hippy knows it. When in trouble, they return sporadically for handouts, leaving angry when only half their demands are met. After deserting the family they "join" a pad but the same disruptiveness exists within the "pad". Then they desert that "pad" and move on to another and another. They exhaust the "pads" in one city and then move from city to city. Any attempt at psychotherapy represents the "establishment" and they have to move on. Some researchers such as have gone in the direction of "joining" the hippies. let his hair grow and emotionally he has come to sort of identify with their "cause", from which position I think change in a real hippy is near impossible.

The running away is the hippy's way of denying his intense emotional attachment to his family. They DO return periodically. My thesis with this family was to leave the boy on the long leash, and not chase him, and to work toward making the family environment one a little more solid when he did return. I already had one family member beginning some "differentiation of self". Once one family member changes and can maintain it, then other family members can change a little. The immediate goal here was to go as far as possible in helping the family detach themselves emotionally, which meant cutting the son out of the family worry, concerns, fears, thoughts, and fantasies, and the action that goes with these subtle feeling states. If the family could make some reasonable progress with this, I could predict that he would return. Of course I was operating only through the daughter and the parents were deeply (*illegible*)

. . . turmoil inside herself and the father by pulling strings, trying to work subtle angles to get him to a psychiatrist, and providing behind the scenes legal aid. The daughter was sufficiently "shored up" inside herself that I suggested she "bug" the parents as a way of desensitizing them to the boy. She would go see mother, kid her for being indifferent and not worrying enough about the son, and say this was evidence she didn't love him. The mother would scream, "shut up. You're playing games again. Don't come here after you have been to Dr Bowen". She even "bugged" the father into showing that he cared by going to San Francisco to find the boy. The father found the boy, had one pleasant "togetherness" evening, donated \$200 for necessary expenses, and then was ordered to "get out of town". After four or five months of this, I thought it might be time to expect a visit from the boy. I was expecting a short visit, a shorter return to hippie-land, and a longer visit home, a shorter return to the hippies, etc.

After about six months the son returned "only to straighten up some of the court cases and to clear up his draft status". He brought part of his San Francisco "pad" in a car bought for \$25. The group included his hippy "wife" (a teen aged daughter of a minister who sounded almost catatonic); a boyfriend called "God"; and "God's hippy wife who had one of her five-year-old daughters. The last girl had become pregnant in the San Francisco pad from which she had twin daughters, one of whom stayed behind at the "pad". The S.F. entourage set up in a "pad" in downtown Washington and gradually began making contact with family. The son had hair and beard to his shoulders and the beads and weird garb that goes with the movement. People would ask to take his picture, which he permitted and seemed to enjoy. His first contact with family was to go to his sister's apartment and steal some of her blue jeans. She made profitable issues throughout the family in recovering them. The entourage visited the mother and left lice on her furniture. His mother permitted her maid to wash the son's clothes. The maid ran them through the washer four times before she would touch them with her hands. I expected the group to stay around a couple of weeks. Instead, "God" and his "wife" and her child left for a "pad" in New York. The son demanded a \$5,000 lawyer fee from parents, and ended up handling his own case in court with some free legal aid, and winning dismissals and probations in every case. His argument that he was "bisexual" convinced his draft board to drop him from their lists. He appeared with short haircut, shave, and conventional clothes "only to get a job". He has now been here six months. He is working regularly and living a conventional appearing life though he still "talks hippy" to his family and insists regularly that his stay is only temporary to "save some money".

The major change has been in the other daughter who has maintained this remarkable emotional detachment from her brother. She manages to maintain frequent contact with him. The parents and younger sister are also much less emotionally invested in him. The mother still cannot be in his presence without intense emotional reaction between them. The daughter says she "has been a person" with him for the first time ever. She can accept him for what he is without being judgmental and is free to be herself. Also during this period she has moved out of her "working hippy" environment with a new apartment and new friends. In speaking of her change, she says there has been a big change in the kind of boys she becomes involved with. Now they are more "body types"

who are more athletic and action oriented. On dates they spend more time doing things. Old boy friends wanted to talk philosophy and "rights". She says she would like to find men who do not have "this thing about women", this "fear of women", and who do not force women to sit in judgment on them. They promise to do something, fail to do it, and it is hard not to become judgmental. Boys now are not pitiful and they don't need women for ego enforcement as former boys did. Boys now are like little boys trying to show off to impress the girls. This type is not ideal but it is a big improvement over the former ones. I asked what she had done to attract this different kind of man. She says she can be inviting and still keep her distance. She formerly needed too much to be "cared about". It has been several months since she has found herself saying "You don't love me" or "You don't care" to get some positive expression from the boy. She says, "The way to deal with this is to hold yourself back and watch and let things take their natural course." She says she does not need to control things as formerly, nor does she get into being controlled. Also, "Detachment does not seem the same as it did a year ago. Formerly it meant aloofness. Now it is "being like a flower" and that does not mean hippy flower. It means being yourself for what you are, and just being there without chasing and without withdrawing". She also says, "I feel my center is inside of me and getting larger. I used to feel my center was outside of me". These are a few of the changes she describes. The important point here is that this twenty-six year old self-supporting daughter has been changing rapidly, she has worked hard at maintaining frequent contacts with her family, and significant family change has occurred in relation to her change.

I did not intend to go into this much detail about his family but it has been a recent experience and I thought I'd go into the detail to save a copy for my record. I have been pleased with this promising start on a real hard core "hippy" son whose only visit to my office was almost seven years ago. This kind of thing happens when one can find a single motivated family member who can get some differentiation started and WHO WILL MAINTAIN ACTIVE CONTACT WITH THE REST OF THE FAMILY. I found myself thinking of this family as the described who is more a borderline or "acting like a hippy" than being a real hippy.

For a long time I have wanted to write to ask about people's reactions to seeing my videotapes. We first began sending out the tapes about six months ago, most people see them without much previous knowledge of my theory or method, and most saw them "cold". The reactions have run the gamut, people usually interpreting them in their own frame of reference. A common reaction has to do with my "nervous laughter". This is something I have worked on for years. My first move in the presence of a family is to get myself "back peddled" out of the emotional intensity of the family field until I can see the humorous or comical side of it. The human phenomenon is as comical and humorous as it is serious, if one can see that side of it. So, I work on me until I can see the light or the humorous aspects of the problem which is my way of "getting outside" the family emotional field. If I can get me out, then it is usually easy for one family member, and then another, to also get loose and free of the intensity that binds them. This is the opposite of the majority of therapists who "empathize" and "put themselves into the family emotional system to understand". I think a therapist who can stay reasonably "outside" is worth many times as much as the therapist who "feels with" the family. Anyway, a fair amount of my time goes to this "keeping myself out of the family emotional system" and to working with the family from my "outside" position. Often I go real intellectual as a way of tuning down the feeling system until it is "loose" and more workable. Once I am reasonably "outside", comes the problems of the gradations of comments that are possible to those within the system. This has come from experience. The goal is a lighthanded comment that hits the point squarely and that elicits a smile or some lightening of the emotional intensity within the family. A too abrupt comment can be heard by the family as "hostile", and it in fact might be hostile in the emotional context of the moment. So, about half my time goes to me and keeping me "outside" and about half to activating the process within the family. Picking up the opposite of the obvious (reversal) can be one of the most effective ways to make a point.

Anyway, I have had all kinds of reactions and interpretations of the various techniques and approaches that have been developed over the years. If you have any special comments on this, I would appreciate them. Several times this year I have shown videotapes "cold" and I know some of the reactions. Two weeks ago I preceded a tape with a half hour explanation and people seemed to see more and get more out of it, with less guessing about what I was doing. Sometime this summer I think I may do a thirty minutes or perhaps one hour videotapes explaining theory and method, to be sent along with "new" loans, if people are interested. If you have any reactions to this, I'd sure like to hear them.

I know I have wandered in this letter, but it is easier for me to wander than be concise. My apologies for flooding you with words.

Sincerely,

MURRAY BOWEN, M.D.