

AN O. HENRY SHORT STORY

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I've heard some "professionals" say how hard it is to read Bowen, of course, inferring the difficulty is in the nature of Bowen's writing rather than the obstacles in the reader's mind. I have chosen this letter for a number of reasons. To me, it reads like a well-crafted short story. Secondly, it focuses on what the family is doing, not what the therapist is doing. The drama is in the interaction of the family members, not in the "techniques" of the therapist. Thirdly, it demonstrates a major system characteristic: The interdependence of the interactions of the parties involved. There are also places for the reader to get distracted with content, especially with the sexual themes with the father and son. What system principles are demonstrated in the therapy process? Can a way of thinking avoid the trap of the "the identified patient?" Can a family system change if only one family member is involved in the therapy process? What is the impact on non-involved family members when one motivated member focuses on self, doing what she can do to pull her functioning up a notch, with no effort at changing others? Dr. Bowen, in this letter, also articulates principles that guide his thinking and the direction of his interactions with the mother. For any clinician confused about his/her responsibility in a therapy situation, this "short story" provides major guidelines.

This letter of December 1967 is one of the few letters in the archives that describe to this extent the therapy process with a family. A colleague had written Dr. Bowen asking for his advice in helping "one parent differentiate self from a child."

December 19, 1967

Dear

You assign a "tall" order when you ask for ideas about helping one parent differentiate self from a child. I don't know how I can do with this but I can handle this best by free associating to my own typewriter, which is how I do "rough drafts" of papers. So here goes a lot of rambling stuff which you can sort out however seems best to you.

In the 1st place ulcerative colitis is a fairly severe symptom which can always triangle in one internist. That makes another "triangle" that can become operative in the field. Also a symptom like this is an indicator of one of the more severe levels of problem.

In the kind of situation in which parents cannot work productively together, and the subject cannot "let the child go" even when the child is physically absent, I work with one parent. The picking of this parent depends on the situation. There is nothing wrong with trying one parent and then changing if that one is not up to it.

The following is an example of 32 hours in 24 months. An overfunctioning mother and underfunctioning father and 16 year old son (now about 18 ½ yrs) whose overt homosexuality became known to the parents about a year ago. The father was simply not motivated to work on it, and 30 of the 32 hours have been with mother alone. One time the mother brought the older boy (homosexual one) and the 2 yr younger brother after they'd had a fight and broken out the the front door. The other hour was with father and mother together. His "soul" was so irritated with the mother that he stormed out of the office after half and hour. This session with F&M together was 18 months out. The one with mother and 2 boys was 10 months out.

My whole effort with the mother was to get her to tone down the overfunctioning and firm up an "I" for herself, and to get off the family's back. I saw her once a month the 1st year. Her "self" was so hooked up with the boy, and also father and to a lesser extent the other kids, mostly in a nagging, pushing, threatening way that I sort of despaired. She would listen to what I had to say and hear it at the time but back in the emotional system of the family there was little change. Toward the end of the first year she developed some control over "sounding off". Then she started coming twice a month. The next move was to get herself out of the position of family "disciplinarian". Instead of monitoring the behavior of the kids, answering calls about misbehavior at school, etc she began asking the husband what he was going to do about this terrible situation, or when was he going to talk to the people at school. The crescendo of this maneuver came one day when the "passive" father walked up until his nose touched hers and screamed "I am getting GD tired of you asking me what I am going to do about things". With noses still touching she screamed back "Well why in the hell don't you tell me what you plan to do about it?" The first half of the 2nd year, the h-s son was really running high wide and handsome, with the mother staying out of it (almost out) and the father permitting the boy all kinds of liberties, such as threatening to take away the car and then yielding to the boys demands. During the Summer months the son ran up \$60 to \$70 a month in gasoline bills when he would wrangle the father into getting the car. The home situation got so bad with the son completely out of control (not really because he did not get into trouble with the law-just

monumental bother to the parents) and the house falling into disrepair, etc that the father agreed to come with the mother to "work on the problem". After 30 minutes the father walked out in a huff. The mother left without making another appt but called a month later. By now, the mother was totally fed up with the father's refusal to cooperate.

The next phase of this had to do with mother and father. For over 20 years of marriage the father had been a "sex hound". He just had to have sex every night-sometimes night and morning, just as a matter of course. I had talked with the mother about this many times. She said she did not like it this way but somehow she had gone along with it. Now in her angry phase when the father would not cooperate in the family problem, her self began to rebel at the sex routine. By mid September she began to find an "I" position about sex. When she refused to go along with sex, the father angrily left the bedroom and moved in with one of the kids, where he still is. One night in late September while I was out to a network meeting until almost midnight, I came home to find a call to please call the mother, no matter how late I came in. She was in a motel in Bethesda. This is a family with minimal financing. The father is a foreman of a sheet metal shop and mother a clerk in a finance office with a combined income of perhaps 10,000, so money is a kind of problem. The father does most of the remodeling, etc on the house, which was part of the rassel last Summer. He was putting in an enclosed family room on a back porch and he left his construction in a mess and refused to either clean up or resume work. Back to the Bethesda Motel. She became fed up at home and sort of "automatic like", packed enough clothes to go to work next day, just went for a drive and found herself checking in at a motel and just going to bed. She wanted reassurance from me that she was not crazy or doing something completely out of line. She wondered what the family would do next morning when they found her not there; how the father would get to work; how the kids would get to school, etc. Actually she was "acting out" running away much as the symbiotic homo-sex boy had done. It at least was something completely new and different for her and I said I did not know what it all meant but I was in favor of anything to shake up the family situation. She got up and drove the car to work next morning, leaving the family to shift for themselves. The next afternoon she returned home. No one mentioned her day away or asked questions, but after that she had a new operating field.

About a month later, in late October, 22 months out, she began to find an "I" position with the h-s oldest son. By now the boy has almost flunked out of school. He was in a commercial course which permitted him to go to school half time and work half time. He was lying about work hours, getting the car from the father almost at will, and spending much time with the "gay" crowd in Georgetown. In the meanwhile, the mother in fussing with the father about bills and finances, was now in charge of disburseing family monies. The son is quite a "dresser". She found that he had been expensive shirts, sweaters, jackets, at Woodies on the family account. He had \$195 in charges in one month. She cancelled all charges at stores, except for herself or the father and humbly suggested that repayment of \$20 per week (the boy was making about \$40/wk in his half time work, might keep him in good standing with the family, and permit him to still live in the family home. There is another old chapter in the family story worth repeating. When I first started to see them, the boy was saying that the family was absolutely impossible and that he was praying for the day we would be 18 yrs old and he could move out on his

own. His 18th birthday passed in the early Fall and somehow he forgot to carry thru with his threat. As late as the Summer of 1967, the father was saying he could move out when he could act like an adult. The boy would respond with "I am already more adult than you are".

Also in the Fall (mid November) the mother began to find some ideas all on her own. It just may have been that I had mentioned these things early in 1966, with repeated examples, etc but the mother started using them as if she had just discovered them, improvising her own special techniques as she went along. The most effective issue had to do with locking the door; locking him out of the house if he was not in by a predetermined time. In the past this boy has "been lost" for days or few weeks at a time, for a weekend, or one or two nights. In calmer periods he might come in anytime from midnight until 7 a.m. They have a house in which the parents bedroom is on the 1st floor and the other bedrooms upstairs. Now that the father is sleeping upstairs the mother has become more conscious of the house being locked. This may have made her stand more plausible in her presenting it to the son. Anyway, she announced one night that the house would be locked at 11 p.m. and anyone who came in after 11 would not get in that night. She had to get her sleep and she was not comfortable sleeping in a house with unlocked doors. The first two nights she was foiled. She locked up and went to bed. One night the father went outside for something and just happened to leave the door unlocked. The next night the younger son did the same thing. The next night she decided to stay up until 11, and to lock it at exactly 11 o'clock. The boy returned that night at 1:30 a.m. He made enough noise trying to get in to awaken mother. She went to a window to sort of "scold" him for awakening her when she needed to sleep and to suggest he might get a bed with one of his boyfriends. About 5 mins later there was a telephone call (they live 2 blocks from a suburban shopping center). Mother picked up the receiver, without speaking. The other person said nothing, she said nothing, the other person hung up, and she hung up and went to bed. Next morning the son came in a 7, got himself some breakfast, and started to go to bed. She discovered this and informed him he could not stay in the house without adults there, that she was getting ready for work and for him to be out by the time for her to leave. He protested mildly but left.

Now the rules of the game have been changed. Formerly he had been fighting to get away - now she is urging him away. Put in terms of the old symbiosis, she is taking action stands to convey that the symbiosis is no longer there. There have been innumerable examples like this in the past six weeks. The father has sort of faded out of this interaction between mother and son. The father still sleeps upstairs but he has been coming and going on a more regular schedule and "almost every day he does some kind of repair job that should have been done a year ago". The younger boy also comes in under the curfew. He is 15 or 16 now. The youngest child, a girl of about 14 has never been much involved in all the stuff. A couple of weeks ago the family had the first Sunday afternoon outing with the entire family in several years. They all went together to see a movie and then out to eat together. Returned about 8 p.m. The boy announced he was going out and would return about midnight. The mother said the door would be locked at 10 p.m. The boy yelled "What! You said the time was 11". Mother said "I'm sleepy tonight and I have to go to bed earlier". As the boy protested the unfairness the mother said she was getting sleepier and now she had decided to go to bed at 9 instead of 10. The boy called her arbitrary, mean, and wishy-washy. Mother said the lack of sleep made her

that way. He went and took a shower, came down for a snack, and as he went to bed at 9 said "Goodnight Mom". Another night he called about 9 to say he was at a party and would be in about 12. She let him know the latest time for getting into her house that night was 10 p.m. He snorted and protested and then came in a couple of minutes under the deadline.

The mother has been doing almost a stop-watch job on the door. She says it is fabulous to see the boys come in within a minute of the deadline. She thinks they must be staying in the yard until the very last moment or they would not be able to shave the deadline so close. The older boy is so preoccupied with dealing with his mother that he has sort of forgotten about the h-s problem. I mentioned this story to someone who wondered why the older boy did not outdo her by getting his own key. It would be no great feat to steal a key and have his own made. When a parent is this sure of self, the other simply never thinks of defying the parental boundary.

This is hardly a typical example, whatever "typical" means, of working with one parent to define a "self" in relation to a child. It is striking because it is a new and satisfying success in a family in which I never saw much hope. I thought the mother would continue her "compensating" over functioning, the son would run out and stay homosexual, and the other kids would have some kind of major impingement. IF THIS MOTHER CAN MAINTAIN HERSELF IN RELATION TO THIS SON WHO WAS WELL ALONG TOWARD PERMANENT HOMOSEXUALITY, THEN HE CANNOT CONTINUE HIS HOMOSEXUAL WAYS. A year ago he was going to be a hairdresser for women. He had perfectly groomed long hair, well kept and always in place. During the year he has given up his ambition to be a hairdresser and his hair has become about an inch shorter each month. He now spends so much time thinking about his mother, and in being preoccupied with angers and what he is going to do next in relationship with mother that HAS NO TIME FOR HOMOSEXUALITY.

So many things have been left out in this thing of working with mother that I will not even begin to try to list them. I have been very active in teaching and instructing - better said communicating knowledge to her. In this, if one gets in the position of preaching, or if the therapist gets perceived as the one who knows the answers, and her action then become an extension of what "the therapist told her to do" the whole damned thing would have flopped. Much of handling self in this depends on how the therapist's inner self is calibrated. Also important is the fact that the father was in this ego mass with the mother, that she had to get some working detachment from the father before she could begin to deal with the son. I am not claiming this as a therapeutic success, BUT THE MOTHER HAS SUCCESSFULLY MASTERED THE FIRST STEP and when one can achieve a success like that, then the succeeding steps become a litter easier. Always lurking along the way is the possibility that the situation will become more liveable along the way, with resulting lack of motivation to put the energy into the problem that is required for change.

When I got your letter, I never intended to write this much, but when thoughts get rolling, each is succeeded by another, and here they are all jumbled up.

Best wishes to you and your effort there.

Sincerely,