

STAYING OUT AND BEING CONNECTED

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Milton Berger organized a major conference, held at the Barbizon Plaza Hotel in N.Y.C., on March 3, 4, 1977. It brought together many pioneers in the family field to address “family systems, communications, theory and techniques with schizophrenia”: Contributors included Bateson, Bowen, Haley, Scheflen, Weakland, Whitaker, Wynne and others. The conference was called “Beyond The Double Bind,” with the idea being to address what had happened in the family field since the original paper on “The Double Bind Theory” published in 1956. Over 1000 people attended the conference. *

Dr. Bowen’s letter of March 17, 1977 is a response to a letter from a friend who had attended the conference. At the conference, Dr. Bowen did a clinical interview, presented a paper “Schizophrenia as a Multigenerational Phenomenon,” as well as participated in the open discussion with the other contributors and audience. This letter describes his efforts and the principles involved in both the clinical system and the professional system. Can one be a separate self and be connected to the larger system in which one is interacting? An underlying hypothesis was that the “double bind” phenomenon was a result of not being able to be separate and connected and not a cause of schizophrenia.

* The proceedings were published in 1978 by Brunner/Mazel *Beyond The Double Bind*, ed. By Milton Berger.

March 17, 1977

Dear

Thanks much for your letter about the Double Bind Conference. I have been interested in the spectrum of responses to it. I thought it one of the best meetings in years, from my biased position. It was a very special mtg in that it brought together people who were real involved with each other between the mid '50's and mid '60's, but have not been meeting much (about this subject) for about ten years.

I had two main goals, similar to my goal when I did the paper about my own family in 1967. People have read my papers about "staying out of the emotional system" but no one has really understood it. This time I was going to demonstrate it, without talking about it. First I was going to try to stay outside the emotional system in the demonstration interview. I labored that one on Sunday Feb 6 when I made a special trip to South Beach to make the tape. It was a near perfect interview, from my viewpoint. I did not get "snookered" a single time, and this was a family with schizophrenia which is far more difficult than other families. The deadly serious family got more loose and casual as the interview progressed. I was delighted that I had accepted invitation to make the tape before the meeting. and declined and wanted to do "live" interviews at the mtg. I was glad to have that hurdle behind me before the meeting. Neither nor had families with schizophrenia, both became entangled in the emotional morass in the interview, and both ended their interviews with the families more uptight and polarized. Content oriented viewers would not notice this.

My second goal was to stay outside the emotional system of the people on the stage. I had been rehearsing this in my head for days. The peak of that came in the room, the night before the meeting, when I paced back and forth for about two hours, drinking coffee and thinking up detriangling "one liners" to use during the meeting. I had a great time chuckling to myself as I tried to prepare casual sounding "one liner" comments for every anticipated situation. I was delighted Thurs morning to find that had taped place cards to our positions on the platform and that I had the "end position". That also helped me "stay outside the system". I was prepared for any position but the end position helped. It was not possible to use more than a few of the stockpile of comments. I did better than okay in keeping myself out of the impossible polarized situations. Within myself I was delighted with success as I would define success. It was worth all the time and preparation.

Most people were able to "hear" better this time than ever before but few had really grasped what I had been trying to do. To comments about the smoothness of my interview, I said, "I just happened to get a good family". People who have considered me "cold and distant" were thrown off by my personal letter to the family the day after I saw them, etc, etc. I was having a good time listening to learned opinions of what had taken place.

There was method in my formal presentation Friday morning. People have never really understood my terminology so I took it out and replaced concepts like "undifferentiation" with simplistic terms like "emotional weakness", etc. My thinking has not changed except a few minor points. I was merely trying to use simplistic terms people could understand. I was delighted when _____ jumped on the vagueness of the term "weakness". I knew I had him snookered when he did that. I have known _____ over 20 years. He was the one who did the Hillcrest films back in 1963-65 and he has never really "heard" what I have been trying to say. "Differentiation" and staying "detriangled from the emotional system" is an emotional process. It simply cannot be conceptualized intellectually. Preaching about it does not help people to "hear", so I decided to demonstrate it and let the chips fall where they fell. I was pleased with the result. We will see how things evolve the next few years.

There were a few who were furiously furious with me. It was best illustrated by a woman psychiatrist who delivered a blistering attack while I was talking to the Time Magazine reporter during coffee break. Time may eventually run a story about the meeting. This woman was attacking my sexual chauvinism. I think she was reacting to my comments about "mating" and "breeding" in human reproduction, which I carefully planned to make my point as stark as possible. She was raging. I watched her purple face with detached enjoyment.

Thanks again for your letter. The meeting was a time for re-thinking relationships of long ago. I was also thinking of the time I first met you and _____ in Iowa City in about 1957 and then my later trip to Omaha on that snowy night when you drove me from house to the hotel through the snow. Were it not for energized people like Milt Berger the youngsters of today would have no way of understanding the evolution of the family movement and the many changes that have taken place in the past twenty years.

It was good to see you at the Barbizon Plaza and I am glad the meeting contributed something to you.

For now,