

MANAGING DIFFERENCES VIA CLARITY OF PRINCIPLES

Managing Differences Via Clarity of Principles

The early pioneers in the family therapy field were highly individualistic, with strong personalities and opinions. How does one deal with differences of opinion, differences of perception, differences of conclusions? Can one maintain connection without trying to convince the other of one's "true" position, or try to change the other's position? Can one avoid escalating the process of discounting the other person with a negative conclusion — e.g., labeling the other as too simplistic, naïve, stubborn, or pull out the heavy personality jargon — "narcissistic" or "unresolved oedipal conflict." All of the above are focuses on personalities, which probably has little to do with the content of the discussion. Does difference have to be alienating?

People are faced with these challenges in numerous settings. Siblings disagree about how parents treated them or what parents didn't do for the children. In work settings, how often does one have the same view as the supervisor? In clinical settings, how does the therapist (non M.D.) work as a team with a psychiatrist where differences of views may be considerable? How does one manage differences with a spouse — from sex, "the correct" thermostat setting, decisions regarding parents, etc.? On a more global level, how are religious differences managed, e.g., Christian versus Muslim?

In November 1964 Dr. Bowen wrote a lengthy letter to a colleague who had recently moved to Florida. His letter touches on multiple themes, including how theory guides therapy, how respect for the other's position start from a clarity and respect for one's self, how the community/group of family therapists operate as an emotional system, and the operational similarities in all systems, including families with a schizophrenic member.

November 3, 1964

Dear

I was struck by the analogy of two streams flowing together to describe the loss of ego boundaries. A few years ago I asked a group of residents for their images of the phenomenon and several were in this general area. The closest to this particular one was an image of two clouds forming one. During October I spent 15 days at meetings, the most meetings I have ever attended in one month. In this series of papers I have used an example that has been heard pretty well. This is the idea of two people, at marriage, contributing equal shares to the "common self" but thereafter neither self ever functions with the same number of shares that were contributed. The one who functions for both uses more than half the shares. This is the idea of shares being interchangeable. One might not get back the same shares that he or she put in but the shares are all worth the same. I have used this clinically with, three or four families in which husbands and wives have had near equal incomes which went into a joint bank account. In all there were quarrels about money. In one of these families they successfully used a separation of "his dollars" from "her dollars" as a vehicle for beginning differentiation of one self from the other.

Beginning last Summer, I have been using the most successful device I have found thus far for helping the "differentiating one" to differentiate a "Big I" from the "amorphous We-ness" of the parental axis or from the "amorphous we-ness" of any other relationship in the family. The more impaired the family, the more intense the undifferentiated we-ness. A family with a borderline psychotic offspring deal almost entirely in "we think-we believe-we-we-we all levels of thought, fantasy, and action" or the twin brother of that which is criticism of what the other feels, thinks, believes and does. The family with hard core schizophrenia never really gets to a definite "we" but stay stuck on what outside authority thinks, believes and does. My goal has been to get a clearly defined "I" to crystallize and emerge from the amorphous "we-ness" morass which is the family. When a family can begin this, in one family member, the process is on its way. The clearly defined "I" is sure of self and respectful of the other "I's" in the family. I have accidentally stumbled on the phrase "stay off the back" of other family members. Families would come back and say they had been thinking about what I had said. Then I'd find they had heard "stay off the back of". To stay off the back of means to withdraw "other directed" feeling, thinking, action energy from the other and to direct the energy to finding a way to relate to what the other is rather than directing it to praising, criticizing, or any of the "other directed" maneuvers designed to change or influence the other. This provides the differentiating one with a never ending series of behaviors, thoughts, etc in the other to which they attempt to find ways to use "I" without trying to change the other. When the differentiating one can "get off the back" of the other, the other feels like a riderless

horse for a time, but this is brief and in a fairly short time the other appreciates the freedom. When the differentiating one is successful, the rest of the "family mass" goes through a predictable series of steps designed to wangle the differentiating one back into the "togetherness". The assaults on the differentiating one go "You are mean-inconsiderate-selfish-self centered and sadistic", "and whats more, the things you do are part of a diabolical plan to hurt the others". The first pressure comes from the rest of the family. If the diff. one can hold firm, then the rest of the family mass rejects the diff. one with a "to hell with you" pronouncement which brings forth depression, aloneness, and a feeling of having had his membership in the human race terminated. If the diff. one can still hold firm, this will be followed shortly by the most spontaneous and pleasureable of real togetherness.

I am getting too long winded. Here is a good example of what "I" can do. A wife who had long been bossy and dominating, was trying hard to tone it down. She reached a point of being real sweet and diplomatic in her bossiness. They both work in town and ride home together. It annoys the wife for the husband to drive thru the heavy Bethesda traffic when they could go thru the park. She was wondering how to ask him to turn and go to the parkway. After careful thought she said real sweet like, "Honey, why don't you turn at Dorset and miss the heavy traffic". E-E-RUPTION!!! "Damned bossy woman-treating me like a child,etc,etc". She presented this as evidence that the problem was an over-sensitive husband. I said that no matter how sweetly she said it, she did say YOU TURN and I suggested she try the same statement using only "I". A few days later as they approached the turn to the parkway, she said, "I do not like to ride through that heavy Bethesda traffic". The husband said , "Okay" as he turned to the parkway. There are a few hundred little ins and outs to this differentiating business. The ones who fail are those who use the narcissistic "I" which makes demands on the family mass. In these situations, the family mass will "blitz" the narcissistic one.

Since early October, I have been on a one track mission to differentiate me from the other people in family work. We had a meeting at EPPI which I think is probably the first and only meeting at which all the family people were together at once. Only then did I become aware of the intensity of the emotional system within that group. I have spent years trying to define a self in relation to families, my own family, psychoanalysis, psychiatry, medicine,etc without being aware of the system among family people. The same stuff was going around that group that goes in any family with a schizophrenic offspring. I spent two days working on me while the other talked about "these families". At the end of the second day I tried a small speech directed carefully at "I" with as much respect as I could muster for the "I" of others. As soon as I had finished, the character sitting next to me said, "Thats what I like about you and your stands. You don't stand anywhere for anything!" The instantaneous rejoinder make me think I must have been partially successful. By the end of October I was doing

better. There was a wonderful two days with . It is easier to describe an interchange with the best known analyst in , who I have known casually for some years. I did a pretty good paper-not the best but good. My old buddy was champing at the bit to get the floor to "discuss". He did about 10 minutes, the essence of which was "There is nothing to this family psychotherapy that marriage counselors have not been doing for 20 years". There simply didn't seem to be anything to say about this in the meeting. At coffee break said, "I guess you want to knock my head off." I said, "Knock your head off! You might need it. Why in the world would I want to knock your head off?" came back with, "Because of what I said!" I said that he and I were in two different worlds and miles apart in what we believed but I respected his opinion. If he respected my opinion that was fine but if he did not respect my opinion I still could not be mad at him. looked like he had been hit with a wet mop. Only six days later and I both attended the Chesnut Lodge Symposium here in Rockville. When I walked into the room, there was old buddy waving for me to come sit in a seat he was saving for me. You'd think we were long lost brothers who had not seen each other in six years.

I have been real pleased with me and this two month effort this Fall. The more I have been able to define me, the more I can respect the others, and stay out of the emotional system. There were about 400 people registered for the symposium with " ". You know and how he operates. He had been jumping up and down challenging me for a day and a half. At the hotel we had adjoining rooms so we were pretty much in contact. The afternoon of the last day he spent some 20 minutes "taking me apart". The meeting was then behind schedule and the chairman was in a spot. He called a coffee break immediately after finished. The audience wanted this exchange they had been promised and they were pestering the chairman to give me "equal time". As the session resumed, I was sitting by . He asked if I was mad at him. I asked him if I should be mad at him. He said I certainly should be. I said, "Okay , I am madder than hell". He said, "That's the stuff. Get up there and say it. It will do you good". The chairman asked if I had anything to say. I said I did have something to say but it would not take too much time. The message was that I had known for many years, that there were basic differences in our concepts and psychotherapy techniques, that we had talked about these at various times over the years and also at this meeting, that the audience might be uncomfortable with widely differing viewpoints and they might like to have "family" consolidated into one neat bundle, but I was not going to permit this audience to wangle me into an argument with my old friend .

It is my impression that this monologue, which is too long and probably too disconnected to make sense, represents my current preoccupation, that it was kicked off by your reference to self, and that it does not have a heck of a lot to do with your letter, but here it is anyway. Best wishes to you and and the family in your new life in Florida.

Sincerely,