

CAN FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY AND THERAPY EXIST OUTSIDE THE  
WASHINGTON, D.C. BELTWAY?

## **Can Family Systems Theory and Therapy Exist Outside the Washington, D.C. Beltway?**

The environment one works and lives in never has been known to be but so loving and accepting. Clarity and focus on one's beliefs and values has never been of much interest to the environment and the powers that run it. A tension exists (between self and the environment) with it being less anxiety-provoking to do either/or rather than both/and. Cutoffs from the connection with the environment are a short-term remedy but the environment usually takes its revenge, usually when one is not looking. Becoming one with the environmental forces is the least anxiety-producing adaptation. But how does one know when one disappears? (Don't despair, there's always politics as a career alternative.)

Can there be a clear and sustaining focus on principles without one's anxiety turning into dogmatism and arrogance? How important is an organizational structure that is supportive and "understanding"? How does one account for some followers of Freud to be more "Freudian than Freud"? Does one have to be a missionary of the good word? What turns the "good word" into the only word?

Subjectivity is always at work. Hearing and perception always take place in and are processed inside one's brain. Students of Bowen theory seem to hear different "versions." Perhaps the best that can be hoped for is to be respectful of the role of subjectivity and not pretend it doesn't exist, and not pretend one is "objective."

Erosion of one's clarity in thinking and practicing systems is a common experience once one leaves the Bowen atmosphere at Georgetown, as a trainee returns home to the real world.

Dr. Bowen's letter of April 29, 1980 is a response to a trainee's report, observation, and questions after returning home. As usual, he doesn't offer solutions to the phenomena, but he does articulate some of the key principles involved in one's effort of making family systems theory an integral part of one's thinking.

April 29, 1980

Dear

Your letter came today. Thank you for a wonderful report. You probably are better able to see the systems in your homeland right now than you will ever be able to see it again. You are fresh back from having been away a long time and from having been well schooled in another way of viewing the human struggle. Make lots and lots of notes now, so you can have a reference for the future. With each passing day you will become a little more indoctrinated back into the old system. Your new orientation can fade so fast and so subtly you never notice the fade-out. Tomorrow you may not be able to remember the observations you would have recorded today.

Now, what are you going to do? Or how do you go about trying to establish a "systems island" in that can remain definable and identifiable and viable when the winds and rains and sun and snow and all kinds of other forces are constantly eroding the structure. How do you go about getting a partner to help you maintain the identity of the structure when the partner never really agreed with the structure in the first place. was one who maintained a reasonable facsimile of his structure by staying in his office, with his license, and refusing to join the APA or those other people who insisted on some modification of the structure before they confer acceptance. How are you going to maintain a structure when you are unsure enough in the beginning, and all others insist you are wrong? How far can you trust your own head when the logic and reasoning of all "important others" seems so logical and right? Do you modify some small detail in one place to pacify the opposition and gain acceptance into the professional world, or do you risk rejection by the profession over some piddling detail?

I had high hopes for you in the beginning. I still have hopes. You have no better compass than your own head. How far can you trust your head when the opposition KNOWS your compass is wrong. On the rightness of your compass, and your ability to trust your own compass, this life endeavor depends. The Georgetown Family Center will be watching with an abiding interest. If your life effort succeeds, we will be interested in the phenomenon. If your life effort is half successful, that will be of interest too. If your life effort falls on its face, like most life efforts, that too is of statistical interest. Now we are down to Faith-Hope-and Prayer, to be employed only when one's head jumps out of gear and the only asset is trust and hope. The Family Center is contemplating the formation of a Committee on Faith-Trust-Hope-and Prayer for those who lose their way in family and societal systems. The FC aims always to support its own. The regular people are always available for consultation as far as they can go. When that fails there is always the Committee of FTHP. Lest you should ever doubt.

As usual,