

“PERSONAL FEELINGS IN A FACTUAL WAY”

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In the 1970's, Dr. Bowen made a videotape at Medical College in Virginia in Richmond, Virginia on “Family Reaction to Death.” The tape continues to impact on the viewer. One is confronted and challenged by one's own anxieties, biases, and beliefs. The confrontation, which is triggered by the tape, comes from one's own uneasiness over the lack of clarity in one's thinking about the place of death in the process of the “living.” American culture and its institutions don't help the confusion either. There are scores of questions that are right below the surface and one prefers to keep the questions there rather than take responsibility for clearly thinking about one's position, then matching congruent behavior with the thinking. What is one's responsibility to one's parents? What criteria does one use for decision making, e.g., driving, power of attorney, living wills, nursing home placement, selling the home? How does one manage the lack of consensus among the children? What does one put into the responsibility of “seeing it through?” Are the “last years” an important part of the living process or separated out as a burden to be tolerated, hopefully not to last too long? When does “she's in a better place” really mean “I'm in a better place”?

The lack of clarity also applies to how the individual defines one's responsibility to self. Does this responsibility terminate at retirement. What is one's responsibility to the gift of being alive? Does living stop at a certain age? Does one become “resigned to life?” Will the increasing “ailments” define self? When does one stop learning? When does one stop being open to the environment? Can one maintain an aesthetic connection to the environment? When does one stop “giving something back”?

Answers to these questions are usually implicit, but can be observed as well as the emotional consequence of the answers.

Dr. Bowen's letter of March 1989 describes the experience of doing the “tribute” for his mother-in-law's funeral services. The challenge is to “hear” his last sentence.

March 11, 1989

Dear

Enclosed is a copy of the "tribute" at my mother-in-laws funeral, and a xerox of the funeral program prepared by the church. The tribute was a continuation of previous efforts for my own father, my mother, and my mother's brother who lived in our home for many years. My mother-in-law heard about my effort, and asked if I would speak at her funeral.

The clergy commonly dampens personal feeling, and substitutes religious ritual. My theoretical posture is to deal with personal feelings in a factual way. Everyone seems to profit from the latter. Several from Georgetown have tried to use my posture in funerals with their own family members. Whether they misestimate their own emotional control, or religious protocol, the clergy often prohibits or controls what a "relative" can say. It even happens in situations in which multiple family members say a few words. There is a relationship way beyond the impasse.

The funeral of my mother-in-law sort of combined religion and psychology. The funeral was delayed several days until she could be moved from the place of death, to "home" near the oldest daughter, who was a member of the congregation. The oldest daughter made plans with the church. The funeral program was given to each member of the congregation as they arrived. A xerox is enclosed. The pastor began the funeral with a few short readings from the scriptures. That was followed by "How Great Thou Art", which has become sort of standard in Christian funerals. The organ played the music, a clear soloist did the verses, and the choir boomed the choruses. It was my time before I realized what was happening. The content of my remarks set the stage for the entire funeral. By that time the congregation was involved in the feeling process. Everyone in the building sang, "Abide With Me", with great feeling. The pastor then closed the funeral with a mixture of religious readings and extensions of comments I had made. An open casket (common in that area) provided an opportunity for the congregation to pass the casket (looked more like 70 than her 95 years) briefly with the extended family. After the funeral there was a "reception" at the oldest daughters house, attended by over 100, with food prepared by women from all over Texas.

The funeral for just happened. It was about as personal and effective as those I had already done for my own family in Waverly, Tennessee The pastor permitted me to say whatever I wished. Toward the end of his service, the pastor regretted the distance that permitted him to know her by reputation, rather than personal contact. When I combined psychological and religious process, it helped make the past generations into a living part of the present. No one left that service the same as they had been before it. It was not easy for me, but it was good for me too.

Sincerely,

Murray Bowen, M.D.

P.S. I am looking forward to your "Evolution" conference in Anaheim 1990.