

From the Bowen Archives

An Interview with Victoria Harrison

*Reprinted from the Fall 2013 and Winter 2014 issues of Family Systems Forum,
a publication of Center for the Study of Natural Systems and the Family*

This is the edited transcript of an interview for the Murray Bowen Archives Project of Leaders for Tomorrow at the history of Science Division of the National Library of Medicine was conducted on April 15, 2013 by Andrea M. Schara.

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Andrea M. Schara: "Who are you, and how did you get to know Dr. Bowen?"

Victoria Harrison: When I first contacted Dr. Bowen in, I bet it was April 1975, I was Victoria Moreland. And I was known to Dr. Bowen as *Vicki*. I contacted Dr. Bowen in a desperate moment.

I had been cut off from my family for almost ten years. I had run into trouble, and a lot of it, after a young marriage and early divorce – and was *running* from my family, and running *into* the kind of immaturity that so many people do, and so many people did in the 1960s.

By the time I moved to Baltimore in 1973, I was *actively* avoiding contact with my family. And my daughter, who was born in 1962, had come to be cut off from me when she was taken out of the country by her father, after our divorce.

Without going into too many gory details, I had gotten a job. I had settled down. I had money – by 1975, when I called Murray Bowen.

Backing up a bit – in 1971 or '72, I was running Houston's first 24-hour drug-crisis intervention center that some community members and I had founded based on the San Francisco and Palo Alto models.

A psychologist in Houston, David Wellish, admired my work. He had been at the Orthopsychiatry meeting where Dr. Bowen presented his "Anonymous Paper." He brought a copy of the paper back and handed it to me. I read it and was *immediately* allergic to it. I remember thinking that I could see where I fell in the scale of differentiation of self, and it *wasn't* good.

I threw Dr. Bowen's paper out the window of my VW "bug" driving along Highway 59 in Houston, watching the pages fly out of my window, onto the highway. Talk about a gift to the world!

But I never forgot Dr. Bowen's thinking about responsibility and maturity – and *immaturity*. In 1975, when I had settled into Baltimore, I was still cut off from my daughter and cut off from my family. I *called* Murray Bowen – and he picked up his own phone!

And I told him a *bit* about my dilemma – that I was cut off from my daughter and I wanted to do something about it. My own life was miserable, I wanted to do something about that. I'll never forget – Dr. Bowen said, "If *you* want to take responsibility for your miserable situation and do something about it, I'll talk to you."

Schara: [Laughter] That was the fence you had to jump over.

Harrison: Oh, that was the fence – I was ready to "jump" and scheduled an appointment with Dr. Bowen the next week.

I don't *remember* much about that first meeting. But Dr. Bowen referred me to one of the faculty, who then became my coach. I met with that person every week – from June 1975 for a few years and then continued monthly for years. I applied to attend the Postgraduate Program in 1976.

When I asked Dr. Bowen how to *learn* – what's the best way to *learn* this theory to use it in my life, which was my initial real motivation, he said, “Become as immersed in this thinking as possible.” So I headed out to do that, very quickly, really.

The person he recommended I see for coaching asked me two questions in probably the first or second meeting, after getting a family overview. I didn't *know* much about my family, to begin with. But the person asked: “What do *you* think is in the best interest of your daughter for her life?” And, “What is so *difficult* about taking on your ex-husband?”

I guess I have to back up here and explain that my ex-husband, when taking our daughter out of the country, had effected a cutoff: He was not letting her visit me, nor were my letters getting through.

I was buffaloed – and I knew that was part of my depression.

Schara: What year did he take your daughter?

Harrison: He and I divorced in '67, and in 1970 he won a custody suit. Within two weeks, he moved out of the country, which *was* a violation of custody. But it didn't matter since I was in no position to challenge it at the time.

I went into free-fall.

Schara: Did he continue to live out of the country?

Harrison: He lived out of the country from 1969 or '70 until 1976.

What prompted the contact with Dr. Bowen was that, once I stabilized, I began to review my custody situation, thinking about ways to renew contact with my daughter. When I contacted a lawyer in Houston, who researched custody, I learned that custody had *reverted* to me in 1974. My ex had not done his paperwork or his “legal” part of maintaining custody. It was a temporary custody, and it had reverted to *me*. The lawyer recommended that I find a way for family to bring my daughter back to the States, and that I kidnap her back.

That did not sit well with me. It didn't make *sense*. I had had enough glimpses of maturity to know that [kidnapping] didn't seem like the thing to do. But I had no alternative; and when I contacted Dr. Bowen, and then he referred me to the faculty who consulted to me, *that* [custody situation] was my initial focus.

“What is in the best interest of your daughter?” And, “What makes it so hard to take on your ex?” Once I'd answered those two questions, I knew what to do.

I wrote her father that it was my belief that contact – an open relationship with *both* sides of her family, with her mother and her father – was the best basis for our daughter's life. I told him that a lawyer had recommended that I *kidnap* her, and I did not think that was reasonable. And what was he gonna do – about making the open contact possible?

Within a week, I received a letter from my ex. It was pages long, single-spaced. It was an *indictment* of me, as a mother and a wife. It included all the reasons why he and his second wife were keeping our daughter from me. I never answered that letter.

Within another week, I got a phone call from my parents. My ex had bought a ticket for Elizabeth Ann to return to Texas and visit the family for a month.

Schara: Wow, that's *impressive*.

Harrison: My parents wanted to arrange for her to visit me. That's what happened.

Schara: Within another week?

Harrison: Within another week.

Schara: That's impressive – that he could get over a long-held grudge, write down all the reasons for the long-held grudge, and then it dissipated somehow.

Harrison: It was amazing. I've long said that was a systems miracle. That was a Bowen theory miracle.

Schara: It untangled the tangle, and it put a slight bit of pressure on him in a way by your saying, “You know, I thought about kidnapping, and I decided that wasn't the principled way to go.”

Harrison: That's right.

Schara: But I think you aimed high enough – indicted him slightly – and he didn't want to stay in that position.

Harrison: Well, I have a little bit of a different way of thinking about it. I think, I think there was a very well-veiled threat. My letter conveyed, “I'm willing and able to deal with you in a straightforward way.” And he responded to that. There was a veiled threat that, if he didn't, I had other steps I would consider taking. But anyway, I think that he, too, had the best interests of our daughter in mind. When I could spell that out, he knew the right thing to do. He's the younger brother of a sister, and he can fall in line with what makes the most sense. And I think he did that.

Then, in the course of that visit, with my daughter in Baltimore, several things happened. She was 13. One, she started her period, right there, when she was with her mother.

Schara: Wow.

Harrison: I got to be a part of that in her life. And then she wanted to live with me – and stay – which, again with coaching, I was able to say: “Elizabeth Ann, I do not think that a major life decision of this sort can be made without talking to every important person it affects. So, let's go ahead and do that.”

So I presented it forthrightly to her dad – and to my parents – and she thought it through carefully. She did it on paper: “Pros with Mom, cons with Mom.” “Pros with Dad, cons with Dad.” And the same thing happened, with her dad and my parents. They were willing to talk and think about the pros and the cons.

And *I* was willing and able to take steps toward what it would take to reorganize my life around being responsible for my daughter under my roof. I looked at different houses. I looked at schools.

By the end of the two weeks that she was with me, she had decided that – though she wanted to be with me – she thought she had a *responsibility*, as a big sister, to be with her half-brother and half-sister.

Schara: That is so interesting.

Harrison: She went back to Holland, where the family lived at that time. Within one month of that, Andrea, my ex-husband had arranged a transfer with his family back to Houston. By the end of the *next* six weeks, that family had moved back to Texas. Our daughter now had access to my family, his family, and me -- on a regular basis. *That* was life-changing – for all of us!

Schara: That was a systems miracle. In bold!

Harrison: That really was based more on the *coach's* ability to use Bowen theory well, and my ability to pick that up and build on it with my own innate good sense. From there began more of the real *work* on differentiation in my own family. It went from there.

So that's the story of how I came to know Dr. Bowen, and the real power in Bowen theory.

I'd been in and out of therapy – conventional therapies – since 1967, when I separated and then divorced. I was in deep depression and could not organize the senses to read. I ended up in and out of graduate school, in part because I literally could not focus. I lost the ability to *read* after I divorced,

and I was in graduate school. Reading had been a *lifeline* for me, in my youth. And I couldn't read!

Emotionally, I was too disrupted by the divorce. "What a shock." That was *not* expected. I had been *pushing* for the divorce. I had been in and out of therapies without any real success at gaining maturity or being a more responsible person. I recognized that this kind of therapy (based in Bowen theory) was a really different way of thinking about change.

I was very interested in change. I was interested in *social* change. I was interested in *personal* change. It was a natural step for me to start working with the postgraduate program in 1976, when I was accepted. Well, actually, I wasn't accepted, but I went anyway [Laughter].

Schara: You just showed up?

Harrison: I had applied – and saved the money – to come. It was in my bank account. I applied and I never got a letter sayin' yes *or* no!

So I thought, "Well, this is an interesting outfit. Perhaps this is just one of the tests!"

I called the Bowen Center and said "I've sent my check. When is the first class?" Nobody *said* that I'd been declined. So I showed up and went to the first class. After class, Dr. Andres said: "May I speak with you?" Then he said: "I declined your application. I thought you needed another year – of work to stabilize your life. I think things are too disrupted in your life for you to focus and make the most of the postgraduate program."

I said, "Well, Dr. Andres, I can understand that – but I saved the money, I cleared the time, and I'm ready to start." And he said, "Okay."

My original thoughts were: I'd gone to Rice, I was pretty smart, and I thought, "You can learn anything in five years." [Laughter] I would give it five years. The more I learned – about the background of concepts and thinking in Bowen theory – the more convinced I became that *none* of us knew enough, and that this was a real theory.

I had a *wonderful* class at Rice called "The Philosophical Foundations of Science" – and my Masters at Antioch was on the study of the different ways that concepts determine behavior in psychotherapy practice for the therapist. So I'd done enough thinking about the differences between ways of thinking to realize that Bowen theory really was a theory; it was not a rulebook or a "cookbook" for life.

It was important to *use* the theory to gain more knowledge about aspects of human nature – my own family and human nature – to extend knowledge. I became so invested in that process, Andrea, that five years became 10 years became 15 years.

Now 30-some-odd years later, I've never really *stopped* orienting around the programs at the Bowen Center – the Georgetown Family Center, the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family. I became more and more involved – as Bowen used to say in quotes – "involved with the outfit," or a *part* of the outfit. That's what Dr. Bowen called it in the early days. Before I was invited to serve on faculty, Dr. Bowen would say that: "Vicki – you are part of the outfit."

And so I have stayed "part of the outfit" in various ways over the years. But the backbone of that for me is realizing the importance of *using* the theory to develop more knowledge – about myself and my family, but also about human nature – as a part of the natural world, as a part of evolution. I'll never exhaust what there is to learn.

Schara: You're an unusual person to have such an orientation to knowledge. I think this is part of what people often are drawn to in Bowen theory. People are drawn to the Bowen Center as a way to connect various parts of "discrepant" areas of knowledge into a broader look at human behavior.

Harrison: It occurs to me now, as you and I are talking, that the "steam" behind my motivation really was a powerful combination of the problems in my own family and life *and* that intellectual curiosity, that sense of the importance of ideas – and how they both liberate and constrain human functioning.

I don't know where that comes from in my own family history or lineage. It may have been in part the importance that religion and a spiritual tradition plays in my family over many, many generations, perhaps. It may have been the *political* – the implications of a political bent. My family has always had a political bent, a bent that politics makes a difference, that how you vote and how you *think* make a difference in the real economy of the family, and in the *life* of the family. It's a *passion*. My family is passionate about politics.

I don't think it comes from football. [Laughter] I don't think so – though I did grow up in a football family and a football town. And Dr. Bowen loved his football.

Schara: There's something about a "team" that is a great metaphor for a family. I think, on the other hand, you can see that the team can turn on itself, and the family can emerge into conflict and into a disregard for the higher rules that govern the behavior – the principles. A team or a family does better when it's oriented to principles rather than reacting to what they don't like about each other, or what bugs them about each other.

Harrison: Well, you're putting a lot of yourself into this interview on that, but I would agree that in my family principles are important. My mother and my father had much more well-defined principles than I did. And they *talked* about them.

The emotional reactivity, the symptoms, the threats to survival, that my family experienced – shortly after my birth – overrode the capacity to steer by those principles in a way that was genuine. I think the principles became more dogmatic. My family became more critical of others.

I don't think that would have happened without the culmination of World War II, the anxiety of that great war for the families whose fathers were fighting in Germany and the Pacific; without the seven-year drought that threatened the family land for my father's family; *and* without the deaths in my mother's family that stirred up such reactivity around the time that my brother and I were young.

The turmoil of all that played a part in my mother's eruption with Type-I diabetes at a time, in 1947, when diabetes could still be a life-threatening experience. So all the principles in the world could not hold up in the face of the turmoil that was unleashed in the family and that shaped my brother's life and mine in ways that no one intended.

Thank God for Bowen theory, that allowed me to put together the pieces of the puzzle in a way that helped me back off of diagnosing my parents and being frightened of the family and start what has been a lifelong process of knowing it better, and becoming more of a known entity in my own family.

It's work in progress, to this day – believe me.

Schara: Let me ask you to think about Dr. Bowen's research, which he began at Menninger back in the days of psychoanalysis. He watched the transference, and I've read that he saw that the resolution of the transference showed a kind of "scale" in the way in which people were more or less mature, and develop more maturity, in the transference. He could see that this variation was more important than the labels or the diagnosing, as you say, of people.

And he began to put this research together. Maybe you have some insights into this that would allow people without a transference to "grow themselves up." Do you have ideas about the way in which Bowen developed his research agenda – with you in particular, with other people? How his ideas about how to relate to you to set you free?

Harrison: Dr. Bowen was *not* my consistent coach. I was *in* coaching with one of the faculty, and two or three times a year I would talk with Dr. Bowen, just to give him an update on what I was working on and thinking about.

I was a participant in the postgraduate program for three years and then continued for a fourth and fifth and then began to be part of the clinical staff. I would go to every meeting I was allowed to attend.

Dr. Bowen chaired many of those. Those were some of the ways that I experienced or was under the influence of Dr. Bowen.

Plus at some points, Dr. Bowen was willing to take me on. I can remember, for example, borrowing a cough drop from him. I had a cough, and he had a cough.

I borrowed one of his cough drops. Then I get this note: "Vicki – I have spent months finding the cough drop that works for my throat. They are rare, and you have used one of them. What are you going to do to find your own damn cough drop? And the ones that work for you?"

Well, I knew what he was talking about. I really bought the idea that differentiation of self, that the maturity you were talking about earlier, can be developed. It depended in part on assuming responsibility for myself and depending more on me than on others.

I began to do that in as many ways as I could. Dr. Bowen influenced that – from all of the ways that I would interact with him – walking down the hall, as the chair of a meeting or when I was talking to him by myself.

I remember, in 1980, in the Postgraduate Program, Dr. Bowen said that to really use this theory well, you had to study something – you had to study something independent of symptoms in your own family. By then I was ready to do that.

Studying symptoms in my own family had gotten me well into using biofeedback instruments to look at the reactivity in myself and others that were part of physical symptoms. I was very interested in how Bowen theory applied to a better understanding of physical symptoms in health because there were symptoms in my own family. I was using Bowen theory and physiological research – research on stress, research on physiology, and the use of biofeedback instruments – to study physical reactions that were part of symptoms, to see how they changed as somebody stabilized. Physiology is also part of stability.

So I was doing all this work on health and physical symptoms, but those were all over my own family, and all over my clinical practice. I decided, by golly, if I was gonna have some real research experience, that was more than participant-observation research, I would have to study something beyond symptoms in my own family.

I decided on reproduction! I didn't know there were any reproductive symptoms in my family. I also thought, every family has examples of reproduction. Most families, if you know enough, have examples of what people would consider "symptoms" of reproduction or symptoms around reproduction.

Later I came to look at my own teen pregnancy as a symptom! That was an example of reproduction – *untimely* – unplanned and untimely reproduction that's under the influence of the family system and the natural environment.

Dr. Bowen's emphasis on "studying something" was for anybody, not just for academicians. People could learn science and learn from science. The importance of making viable connections with the natural sciences and his ideas about a research "attitude" were of great value for a clinician, and for people who wanted to do better in their own lives.

Dr. Bowen's emphasis on research, and how broad it was, governed some of the decisions I made about my own life course, and what I did with theory. By 1977, I added the use of biofeedback instruments in my own life and work, and in my clinical practice. With the instruction and influence of Lillian Rosenbaum, I began to spend time at the National Library of Medicine, reading everything I could on stress. I began to think about how stress research could be improved by Bowen theory. How would I use Bowen theory to understand the variability in stress reactions?

So that early work launched what has become, really, ongoing efforts to “study something” . . . beyond the symptoms in my own family.

I wasn't there in the early days of Bowen's research. So I don't know where Bowen picked up his ideas. I know what he said in wonderful lectures that he gave in the Postgraduate Program. He talked about some of the origins of his ideas. He talked about people like Gregory Bateson, who had been an influence in his life. He talked about people with whom he interacted. Even before the Postgraduate Program, I was drawn to Gregory Bateson, and his writings. So I knew the value of participant-observation research. I knew it was a disciplined effort– I knew it wasn't just telling stories. There was a method to being a good, careful observer.

I was motivated by Dr. Bowen's incorporation of what amounts to participant-observation research as part of working on one's own maturity and also as part of clinical practice. Being more of a scientist means knowing your own biases, recognizing when your own reactivity clouds your view of the phenomenon. Working on ways to develop a factual base of information – I saw that as so valuable in all areas of life.

So I found the focus on research to be really valuable. Conducting research in the field of reproduction, and how relationships between family members regulate reproductive functioning, is an ongoing, long-term research focus for me.

That has led in a number of directions. It led me to a sabbatical at the Institute for Reproductive Medicine and Endocrinology in Houston. It led to the opportunity to study ovulation and how reactivity to relationships in the family played a part in producing different ovulation patterns.

It led to pursuing opportunities to work with physicians and biologists who are willing to entertain the possibility that human reproduction is also under the influence of our reactivity to each other and to the natural environment. There is a growing body of knowledge about that now that did not exist in 1980, when I began to read, read, read, and formulate research projects of my own in that arena.

Schara: What did Bowen mean by "research"? Sometimes I wonder myself whether he wasn't researching each person that he met along the way and how his relationship with them would impact them.

I have that idea that he was such an observer that everybody he met, and every interaction, was part of his “research” as to how people would grow and develop through little, I want to call it, “interruptions.” When you describe the actual way in which one or two things could set you off on a path – the importance of the beginning and then the complexity that it has led to in your life is, it's quite a good example.

Harrison: Andrea, you knew Dr. Bowen in a way that was truly unique to you and him, to the relationship you and he had. And so I've always been interested in your observations about what he was doing, or what you thought he was doing. I didn't know as much about what was behind his eyes and what he was thinking. I knew a little bit of that.

I also think that he was running his research experiments, or projects, in a way with all of us – with everyone. What I did have, for myself – independent of you and anyone else – was a conviction that Dr. Bowen was working on his own differentiation of self in relation to each and all of us, and the challenges we presented to him.

That was as much for his own sake as it was [laugh] for mine, though I benefited, greatly, from being on the receiving end of that over the years. It was definitely part of my motivation to keep working on myself.

I never thought that Dr. Bowen was being malicious or insulting. I know people who did. And they missed out on a lot of opportunities to learn by distancing from or avoiding him, through what I considered a subjective reaction to him, that I just didn't have. Part of that was the conviction that he

was really working on this himself. Part of it was research. Part of it was a genuine effort to stay free, and leave others free, to develop their own thinking.

I took it as a personal challenge and commitment to develop my own thinking with this theory; and I've gone in directions that represent my own work, and thinking, beyond Dr. Bowen and what he thought. I was so grateful for the opportunities to present that to him and hear what he thought about it. For example, when I started studying reproduction, he said two things that were memorable. One of them was: "Don't turn this place into a fertility clinic." And the other thing he said, which I think was more valuable, was: "If you want to understand reproduction, you better start with differentiation."

That has borne true in so many different ways. I think that reproduction happens at all levels of differentiation of self, and that reproduction is influenced by the ability to be thoughtful, and the energy exerted toward thoughtfulness, as well as by our reactivity to relationships and the natural environment.

Schara: Well, that fits with the last question and also with the scientific-worldview question: Developing ideas to extend Bowen theory. Once you start on these pathways, you might be guided by theory, and then you might be extending theory and challenging the current scientific worldview about reproduction.

Harrison: I can't help it. That's where the facts lead! I don't consider the work I do to be either "proving" theory or adding concepts. I know people who think about it that way. I respect many who do -- but that's not the way I think about it.

The way I think about it is simply using the concepts in Bowen theory. Differentiation of self and the level of anxiety would be two concepts that guide the design of research (observational studies, to the extent I can make them). That has taken me in the direction of developing new knowledge and integrating knowledge, from biology and medicine. That leads to a different view of the factors that govern reproduction – or fertility, infertility and reproductive symptoms.

The utility of that bears out in clinical practice, in examples of people who've been able to interrupt and modify their anxious physiology enough to recover from endometriosis, for example, and to maintain recovery from endometriosis.

Some have gone on to conceive and carry pregnancies I do not think they would have, had they not used the ideas in Bowen theory. This means understanding the family more factually, recognizing patterns of reacting (including physical reactions) that play a part in the development of symptoms, interrupting those reactions, and functioning differently in relation to others. People become less fearful, less “caught up” in the anxiety of others. They take more responsibility for self and engage the work on differentiation that Bowen theory outlines.

When people do that, it gives, as Bowen wrote (and I wish I could give you the page number, but I cannot), it “gives Nature a better chance” to function. It gives Nature a better chance to reproduce, without threatening the family or the person or the baby.

But it operates within constraints of the natural world. Bowen theory allows us to understand those constraints better than medicine and mental health know how to do. Every human being on this Earth is not going to reproduce. We can thank Mother Nature for that. But every individual can contribute to the reproduction, and functioning, of their family in a productive way.

I just think that a percentage of what we experience as human suffering can be ameliorated by a better understanding of the constraints – and flexibility – afforded by being part of natural systems. Bowen theory is the best way I know to gain greater understanding. There's so much we do not know, and a good theory is very important in addressing ignorance and expanding knowledge.

Schara: If you took it to the level of the brain, I guess the lower parts of the brain that are more instinctive can be slowly influenced by the higher cortical parts. But sub-cortical stuff is going on and on and on and leading people probably into greater suffering because there's not some awareness of

these constraints that would take down the reactivity. How do we escape these by going into a different part of the brain and becoming more aware, and therefore enabling more choices that are principle-based rather than these reactive, instinctual urges that, before you know it, you've eaten up all the corn that was supposed to be for the winter?

Harrison: Well, one of the things that I think you and I both know, but that I would love to be able to demonstrate – in a more scientific way – is that one person's higher brain activity can influence the sub-cortical activity in another.

That is one of the things I think Dr. Bowen was able to do. He had the ability to stay separate enough - - to be thoughtful, amused, curious, interested in my miserable situation, and anyone's miserable situation. He could engage more of my ability to be thoughtful, curious and interested in the face of the reactivity that was present.

One of the things that I think is the greatest responsibility I've got – as a teacher and therapist and person – is to be able to continuously work on how to engage my own thinking in the face of emotional reactions in relation to others. To engage their best thinking and maintain my own. It's a day-to-day process. There are days when I can, and there are days when I can't.

Schara: But it is just so beautiful that, as you put it, there's a way to engage with people and activate a part of the brain that is not this instinctual thing. We go back to the very first encounter with Bowen, and he says something to you about “if you're willing to take responsibility for your miserable situation, I will talk to you.” And that began a lifelong adventure of figuring out various and sundry ways to take responsibility, which I think is just an incredibly beautiful way that he could take a look at you, and listen to you for a bit, and figure out how to relate to you without getting in your way.

Harrison: He did do that – most of the time.

Schara: Sometimes, I'm sure – I mean, he was a tricky character .

Harrison: Can we stop on that?

Schara: That is a beautiful place to stop.