

Interview with Jean Blackburn

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For the Murray Bowen Archives Project of Leaders for Tomorrow at History of Science Division of the National Library of Medicine

Schara: So we're going to start on April 14th, (2014). And as I said on our little audio test, I'm very happy you're here to be interviewed and talk a little bit about who you are, and how you came to know Dr. Bowen, and what has been important to you along the way.

Blackburn: I'm Jean Blackburn, from Chattanooga, Tennessee. I grew up in the mountains of western North Carolina. [silence] I celebrated my third birthday on the attack on Bearl- on Pearl Harbor.

Schara: December 8th? Is your birthday?

Blackburn: December 7th. December 7th.

Schara: December 7th, okay.

Blackburn: I'll be 75 this year. [silence] I was introduced to Dr. Bowen through Jack Wilson, who had been at Saint. Eve's, and uh, training program for chapl- hospital chaplains.

And while I was away at graduate school in 1972 and 73, Jack was hired by the state of Tennessee, to work at Moccasin Bend Mental Health Institute, where I had been, for a number of years.

When I graduated I came back, and Jack was there, and he began to talk about Bowen Theory and Murray Bowen, and what he had learned, when he was at Saint Eve's. So, sometime in early '75, I believe there was a conference in Birmingham, Alabama, in which (Phil Gerhen) was the presenter, for two days.

And I went with Jack to that conference. And that was really my first introduction to theory, Bowen Theory, was through Phil Gern. Then when I took- in April, of 1975, Bowen came to Knoxville, and did a two-day conference himself.

Schara: Wow.

Blackburn: And in the morning, or, around the break at lunch he talked about the new program he was starting. So, I had had an- a taste of Bowen Theory enough to know that I wanted to learn more. So, at the- at the break, I went up and said, "Dr. Bowen, I want to come to your program." [laughter]

Schara: [laughter]That's... [laughter]

Blackburn: [laughter] So, he uh, told me to get in touch with Ruth Sager, who was not Ruth Sager at that point, but was Ruth Reilly, and

Schara: Ruth Reilly. [phone vibration ring] Oh, I don't have to answer that.

Blackburn: So she sent me the information, and I filled it out, and I was in Washington D.C. in June...1975.

Schara: What was it that appealed to you, initially, about Bowen Theory that made you decide you wanted to study with Bowen?

Blackburn: [silence] It described... what I had grown up with, in my family. Both the positives and the negatives. And I had grown up on fa- on a farm, a commercial gladiola farm, which was operated by the family. Which father, before- during the war, during the Second World War, there had been a man who came from Florida and began to grow gladiolas in the valley.

The Mills River Valley, of North Carolina. My father worked for him, and was his field foreman. Then in 1947, when the war was over, been over a couple years, my father decided that he should be in that industry for himself. So it was a family ah, endeavor. Needless to say, it was a lot of hard work. And I was at that point allergic to hard work. [laughter] In the field! [laughter]

Schara: [laughter] In the field. [laughter] What'd you have to do in the field?

Blackburn: Oh! From everything from

Schara: Mmhmm.

Blackburn: planting the bulbs, and they had to be two inches apart set face up ah- so they would per- they would mature and bring the largest blossoms. And of course

Schara: Mmhmm.

Blackburn: my father had 150 acres of flowers at one time. All over the valley. And of course it was known as the Bradley Gladiola Farm.

Schara: B - R - A - D - L - Y?

Blackburn: E - Y. L - E - Y. Bradley. B - R - A - D - L - E - Y.

Schara: L - E - Y.

Blackburn: That's what the B stands for in my- my name. But what Bowen- what Bowen theory did, in terms of my first hearing it, it helped me to grasp some of the process that had gone on in my own family. But I'd been at Vanderbilt for a full calendar year getting a Masters degree in psycho mental health nursing, and- and I had as- been exposed to endless theories but never Bowen Theory. So- [silence] And I had a clinical experience with families, in which I had to be the so-called therapist. [laughter]

Schara: [laughter]The conductor of the band.

Blackburn: Band. [laughter] The conductor of the

Schara: That- that's off-tune.

Blackburn: [laughter] band.

And...I'd been exposed to- to Jackson's Communication Theory, that was really the framework. (Roservicks.) Satir. Not so much Munichin or J. Haley, but primarily the Palo Alto folks, and that had been the model that I had attempted to work with in my clinical work, as a student.

Well, I don't think I got very far. [laughter]

Schara: You were not Don Jackson. [laughter]

Blackburn: I was not Don Jackson! [laughter]

Schara: Don Jackson was brilliant. You saw some of his tapes, from working with families, and ...just a brilliant, brilliant man.

Blackburn: Right. And then there was a psychoanalyst in New York, I've forgotten his name, but we saw a lot of his work.

Schara: Ackerman?

Blackburn: Ackerman. Saw a lot of Ackerman. Saw a lot of Satir. You know, all of those, but never Bowen. And that was in 1972. 73.

Schara: Vanderbilt was a more or less middle-of-the-road school, with a certain allegiance, maybe, to the psychodynamic way of thinking based on psychoanalysis, and

Blackburn: ...thinking...

Schara: Probably Bowen was the further-est away, maybe Jackson- Jackson was the closest to Bowen, of all those people.

Blackburn: Right. He was, right. And then- so you know, I was, it was still very psychoanalytically-oriented you know, individual therapy, and... I went to Vanderbilt with the determination that I would become the finest clinician in nursing that could be.

Schara: That's what I like to hear. [laughter] That your (sight's high). Go all the way. Go all the way. You know which way to put the bulbs in to make the best flower, so, you were one of those flowers!

Blackburn: [laughter] flower! [laughter] I was one of those flowers. But at the same time, in terms of my own experience, and I tell this story about my father, because it happened after I went away to undergraduate school, my father was also an inventor, and so he figured out how to plant those bulbs whereby machine! [laughter]

Schara: [laughter] That is awesome.

Blackburn: He figured out how to plant those bulbs by machine! After his daugh- his oldest daughter, left

Schara: [laughter]

Blackburn: And came back briefly, at the end of her college career, long enough to marry and leave. [laughter] But the other- the other thing is, I came home every summer, from college, in Florida, and worked in the flowers. My parents educated me, I didn't have any debt when I left school, they paid for it in full, and so they started me out early, learning how to persevere, and to pursue the best there was in life. I didn't appreciate that, at the age of 18. But at the age of 74, almost 75, I can look back and understand that. So that was the beginning of my endeavor with Bowen.

Was in June of 1975 after I heard him speak. Now, there is a funny story that goes with the Knoxville conference, and Dr. Bowen talked about societal regression. And in the midst of these 3-400 people, I didn't hear him accurately. I didn't hear what he was saying. So, I stood up, and I said, Dr. Bowen, and remember, I'm just- gotten out of graduate school, so I was still full of it, "Are you saying, is this what you're saying? Are you saying that the human race is annihilating itself?" [laughter] And he says, "No ma'am." And I sat down!

Schara: [laughter]

Blackburn: [laughter] But you know, there was a huge number of us who were state employees in the state mental health [laughter] department from across the state, at that meeting, [laughter] and I was functioning as a (inaudible) in hospital, I'd had a Physician of Nursing, Director of Nursing when I went away to graduate school and I'd had the position before that as the Director of Education.

That's how I got to the- from Erlanger hospital, where I was on the faculty. So [laughter]. That night we all got together, and somebody says, "We have to develop a societal therapy process." [laughter]

Schara: [laughter] Cause we're headed for extinction. [laughter] And we must stop that! [laughter]

Blackburn: Stop that! Well, there were people who were high-ranking folks in the Department of Mental Health there, and so we came up with this plan, and the next morning as we all marched in to the conference area, [laughter] the State of Tennessee employees were standing outside handing out the plan for societal- [laughter]

Schara: It had developed overnight. [laughter] Oh that is so beautiful.

Blackburn: [laughter] I told them about the emotional process, it was alive and well, you know, it was fine, you know

Schara: Yeah. Yeah.

Blackburn: And yet, looking back, it was so short-sighted. [laughter]

Schara: [laughter] Well I-I guess, in a way, that was the- the- another response, that was very common at that, in that time, is that people would say, "Well, Dr. Bowen's depressed. And that's why he sees through the glass half-darkly." [laughter] And they would come up with a diagnosis for him, rather than, you know "what can we do." Which is a little bit better, in terms of emotional maturity. [laughter] Yeah. "What can we do to- to stop this societal regression." And - but yeah, the word regression, I

Blackburn: [laughter] Stop this. Societal regression.

Schara: think, is an emotionally-laden word, and he went back and forth many times, over what- whether he should call it that. Um. Or- I think when he made the tape on it, he called it 'emotional process in society,' so he changed that word that became a catch-all.

Blackburn: That's right. And- and see, I think that's what's so interesting about Dr. Bowen, was that he would start out with [phone vibrates] um, a concept, that he saw operating. But then, as he developed that concept and he was more sure of that concept,

Schara: Mmhmm.

Blackburn: he could give it a different name. And I think that was the way he approached the research. He- he observed, he collected some data, about what he was observing, and he would prove to himself over time what was accurate.

Schara: Mmhm.

Blackburn: Since knowing Bowen Theory, is that I have made an observation, but then I would keep that observation in my head and work to make sure that it was accurate.

Schara: Mmhmm. So that- that - did you see Dr. Bowen as a- a- some people say, that he- that he was a great observer, of the human condition, and he did a lot of 'field work.' [laughter] In which he would look at all those flowers, and [laughter] to use that metaphor.

Blackburn: And I-He did a lot of field-He did a lot of fieldwork. You know, and...

Schara: Were you one of the flowers, that he was-

Blackburn: I was one of the- I'm sure I was part of the observations.

Schara: [laughter] His observational research on Jean Blackburn. So, in- in his first interaction with you, he calls you he s- ma'am. No ma'am. He says. And so he kind of elevated you up, while he dinged you with a "No." [laughter]

Blackburn: : "No, ma'am." [laughter]

Schara: And he- he didn't explain, what he'd meant by that.

Blackburn: That's the- No, he did not explain. That was the interesting part of that. And, he wouldn't H- There were times, that (Lewyn) did that with me, consistently. He would just tell me "No," or "Yes," and he'd leave it with me. I think - I assume, that he did that with more than just me, but that was his way, of

Schara: Mmhmm.

Blackburn: So he sort of was a validator.

Schara: Of what was on your mind.

Blackburn: Of what was on my mind.

Schara: As far as he could hear, you. But he was- he was interested in that

Blackburn: ...you. Right.

Schara: So the first thing, in terms of, I guess, uh I have the- one of the questions here, um I guess the nature of your relationship with him.

Blackburn: Oh, I have several stories about that. [laughter]

Schara: Start anywhere you want.

Well, I think I did start with- with the first and the second, when I went up and just blatantly said, "Dr. Bowen, I want to come to you."

Schara: [laughter] Yes. [laughter] Yes, exactly.

Blackburn: And then there was, through the training, uh, and I don't know what year this was. I came two years and then I stopped. And then I went into private practice.

Schara: So that'd be 1976 you came, or 19- 77?

Blackburn: I came '75 and '76

Schara: And '76, ok.

Blackburn: Ah- well, and would have ended in '77.

Schara: Mmhmm.

Blackburn: And then I stopped, and I went into private practice in '81.

Schara: Mmhmm.

Blackburn: No- went into private practice in '78. Part-time. Started my private practice, continued to work at the hospital until 1981. '85 I was aware, that if I was going to survive, in private practice, that I didn't have enough experience or supervision. So I came back for another year. And then, I went into the post-graduate seminar, and I stayed until 1990.

Schara: Until 19- what?

Blackburn: 1990.

Schara: 1990.

Blackburn: I actually stayed until the year he died.

Schara: That's the year he died, 1990. So you were in the research group, with Dan Paparo?

Blackburn: Mmhmm.

Schara: Mmhmm.

Blackburn: Now, I think what I did, during that, was I integrated the theory into my own being.

Schara: Mmhmm.

Blackburn: So, and I- I often tell clients this, I say, "You can know about something- you can know about Bowen Theory-

Schara: Mmhmm.

Blackburn: but to really know it, you have to live it." And that's what I did. From '75 to '90, I learned how to live Bowen Theory.

Schara: So, can you sum that up? Like, sometimes I say to people, I stumbled on this idea, about Bowen Theory, about how to live Bowen Theory, and I call it 'separating a self.' So I would say, "I have a little automatic self, that's a little 's.' And then I have a more thoughtful self. Which is a big 'S.'

Which is the attempt to get out of a lot of triangles, a lot, out- of a lot of (mishigash). Um, and to be more separate. Do you have a way to- describe what it means to live theory, for you

Blackburn: [long silence] Alright, I think I do. Um. I was afraid of feelings.

Schara: [kissing noise] Sweet ones?

Blackburn: Sweet ones.

Schara: Or just angry ones?

Blackburn: A-a both! Both! [laughter]

Schara: That's good you got em both! [laughter] Pretty ones.

Blackburn: And pretty ones. I- I was afraid of em.

Schara: Mmhmm.

Blackburn: I grew up in a family, which programmed me in that direction. And I learned part of being self is to acknowledge those, is to recognize them. To- they're part of me, they're ingrained in me, but that I have the capacity to manage those, thoughtfully.

Schara: Mmhmm.

That's well-said. So that- Bowen talked about integrating feelings and thinking, and - and you had a way, of, of operationalizing that. Which is really based in your own being.

Blackburn: In my being.

Schara: And coming to the Family Center, and doing the continual contact with people who were also studying theory, helped you with that.

Blackburn: Yeah, and when I told Dr. Bowen in 1977 that I- had had decided that I would not come back, we were standing in the kitchen, over the print shop

Schara: Mmhmm.

Blackburn: I- he had gone into the kitchen, and I went into the kitchen because I wanted to talk to him.

Schara: Yeah? Yeah.

Blackburn: privately, and I knew- if he and I were in there, no one was going to come in [laughter].

Schara: That's about right. [laughter]

Blackburn: And, he listened to me, he didn't ask any questions, but he simply said to me, "This center can be a lifeline."

Schara: Mmhmm. I hear that.

Blackburn: And I said, "I know that, and I won't forget it."

Schara: Pretty good.

Blackburn: So in 1975, 1985, when I realized, that if I was going to survive,

Schara: Yeah.

Blackburn: in private practice, then I would have to come back. So it was sometime f- in that period between '75 and '85 that I had several encounters with Dr. Bowen. And one of those encounters was at one conference, and I can't tell you which one, but I suspect it's on the tapes of the conference.

And it would not be the video, it would be - how much time we got, twenty minutes? I've have to go. We- it wouldn't be the- it- would be audio tapes. We had been talking about anxiety throughout that conference, and it just sounded to me like it was just a word that got tossed around. [laughter]

Schara: [laughter] Took on many forms. But none of them substantial. [laughter]

Blackburn: Yeah. So I stood up, again, saying, in the midst of all these people, Dr. Bowen, "we have- I've been listening this morning, and the word anxiety has been tossed around as if we all know the definition." "And, I'm just curious, what's your definition? Of anxiety?"

And he didn't answer right away. But he answered for me. And he said, "Anxiety is self, waiting to be developed."

Schara: Wow, that's- I've never heard that one. That's a good one. "Anxiety is self, waiting to be developed." For the little bulb in the ground. [laughter] Facing up, hopefully. [laughter]

Blackburn: ...developed. The little bulb in the ground. And I had my answer. Now I don't want to talk about the last encounter I had with him. But there's some other questions.-

Schara: Why not?

Blackburn: Because I wanna do that last.

Schara: You save the good one?

Blackburn: I wanna save it.

Schara: For the last?

Well the- I think you- you've touched a little bit, on the insights of where Bowen picked up his ideas, which fueled his research. That- you talked a little bit about Bowen being an observer, and how his observations fit with your family, and you could make that connection, that was more real, say, than psychoanalytic theory, which you'd been exposed to, or even-

Blackburn: Oh, I'd been trained in it. Since undergraduate school.

Schara: Yeah.

So, his research agenda was 'observe the family, in a more neutral way. And that- that's what you saw

Blackburn: Way. Right.

Schara: as the main characteristic of his approach to research. And then you put that together with what you just said, which would be growing a self. Self's waiting to be developed. And

Blackburn: Self waiting to be developed.

Schara: So that- togetherness force that he described in which the family regulates you. And every group regulates you.

Blackburn: Right. Every group regulates you, mm.

Schara: [laughter] And the more they like you, the more they want to regulate you.

Blackburn: Right, right.

Schara: And so w- you saw, how did you see his helping- I don't like that word, and he didn't like that word, but this- the idea that you've put in here, in terms of his research, and using his self, would be "I'm not going to explain things to you, I'm going to validate "yes" or "no," as far as the way I'm hearing you. And he always used to say that, "I hear you, I hear you."

Blackburn: "I hear you."

Schara: And it did- it meant he didn't really agree with you maybe, or disagree, but he's listening to you. And in some way or other, you saw that as, as the way he validated the person's thinking.

Which would then help that self to go on its own two feet, to go on its own way.

Blackburn: Way. Two feet.

Schara: Were there other things that you thought- I- the other thing I was thinking is "God, he was- how the heck did he ever think about the extended family" that seemed like such a leap, I -I talked a little bit about it at the meeting yesterday, that he was looking for a way to make a connection with his dad, and his dad was interested in his grandfather, and he went out to research that guy.

Blackburn: Right.

Schara: And that led to this completely- no one ever has ever thought of something so crazy, as to go research your family.

Blackburn: Right.

Schara: To grow that little self up.

Blackburn: And s- and see, I had been exposed,

Schara: Mmhmm.

Blackburn: consistently, to great aunts and uncles. My grandparents' siblings. To my great-grandparents, who were my-parent's grandparents. Throughout my life, because we lived in a community- Was a comm- was a - we didn't live on top of each other, but we lived in an area, where there was contact.

So when he started talking about the extended family, it just made- sense, to me. But it- it began, with him wanting to make, ah, or to alter, or to develop, a more um person-to-person relationship with his own father. [silence]

Schara: Uh huh. I think he told- I never heard the story about his father til way late, but I did hear his said many times, so if you can get a person-to-person relationship with the people in your family, which to me meant no judgment, Then- and it probably also meant having-setting some boundaries. [laughter]

Blackburn: For yourself.

Schara: But it meant a lot of things, whatever this person-to-person relationship was. That that would help you grow up more than anything else you could ever do. And he used to say, [laughing] family was group therapy for free. [laughter]

Blackburn: Yeah, I remember him saying that. But some point, in that 2000- ah, 1970'-75 to '85, I was going on about something in the seminar one day, yeah, I don't even remember what it doe- what it was, but all of a sudden he stopped me, and he said, "would you do your spouse in?" [laughter]

Schara: [laughter] A great interrupt. I'm going on and on and Bowen just slaps me, with a wet towel. He was like...

Blackburn: With a wet towel! And damn, if I didn't? I couldn't hear what he was saying, [silence] Ah... I'm an oldest, married to a youngest, not truly youngest, but the same era as we were all born, before the Second World War, and so he was the youngest, of that constellation, and I was the oldest. [silence] Um,

Schara: So, his research, as to living theory,

Blackburn: Right.

Schara: would be some kind of a, a way of looking at you to figure out when you're on track and when you're not.

Blackburn: And when you're not.

Schara: And more interrupting, I call it, or, and you say validating, but I

Blackburn: When you are off-track, he would interrupt when you were off-track, but

Schara: when you were off-track, he interrupted and he did it in a way that was like-out from left field. How the heck did he even get out there? You didn't even notice he ran all the way out to left field!

Blackburn: That's right. [laughter]

Schara: And found something. Corncobs to throw back at you. You know, something.

Blackburn: To throw back at you.(You didn't.)

Schara: But that was his kind of research, to see whether or not your self would grow, when he threw the corncobs at you.

Blackburn: Mmhmm.

The other funny story I remember about seminar, and I think it was after- it may have been- when did you go- when did you come to the Center?

Schara: I came in '76.

Blackburn: Yeah, you came the last year I was there before I took my break. Well, I can't remember if it was the first year or the last year, but of course (inaudible) working at a state institutional situations in which we were working with schizophrenic, low-functioning folks. Dan kept raising the issue, I kept raising the issue, of "how does this work, with people who are so low-functioning. So one day, we were in seminar pushing about that [laughter]

Schara: Mmhmm.

Blackburn: And he- he got really intense, and he says "Goddammit, I started with schizophrenia." [laughter]

Schara: [laughter] That didn't say how he did it. But it said he did do it. He did do it.

Blackburn: No. He did do it. He did it.

Schara: He did it. "I started with people who are schizophrenic."

Blackburn: And then I began to pay attention, to this: [silence] And I remember this happening. I was paying attention to the answers on the tapes, that were being shown. Rather than the questions. And I began to pay attention to the questions. [silence]

Schara: So, you got more interested in the probing?

Blackburn: Right, I got more interested in the probing.

And what I found happening, in my own clinical work, was I began to ask more thoughtful questions. And I- I was fortunate enough, to have the facilities to videotape the sessions I did, that I then sent to Georgetown to my supervisor. [silence] So, I could get feedback about that superv- about how I was doing, in terms of understanding process and understanding thoughtful questions.

Schara: What does it mean, understanding process? I never know what people mean by that. It's like a catch-all word. What is process?

Blackburn: That's a s- kind of question I asked Bowen about anxiety, what is it? Well, process is some- is, and I've been schooled in content and process, from undergraduate, and I've always like you, have been somewhat confused about it. But I have come to understand, that what the content is, is the what, one is discussing, [silence] and that might be in, that might be a- example, of a family situation. That's the content, somebody's describing that, and- Now, I'm listening to what happens. Who says what, when, where, all of that, and I consider that the process.

Schara: So if you have just one person in the room, what is the process they're describing?

Blackburn: [silence] Oh, my. I knew you'd- end up stumping me today somehow. [laughter]

Schara: [laughter] That's just cause I'm stumped myself!

Blackburn: I think it's-I think it's their own emotional process that they're describing.

I think it's what's happening within that's being described. They're describing an external situation, and they don't always put themselves in that external stitch-situation. And I pay attention to the language they use.

If they use the words "we," "I," "they," I hear different things with each of those kinds of pronouns. If they use the- the name, of people, there's more separateness there.

Schara: So you're looking for that-ability, of people to-

Blackburn: and that's part of the proc-

Schara: be emotionally, to separate it, and not be controlled by this emotional system, as much.

Blackburn: ...not be controlled...as much.

Schara: Most people don't even know there is an emotional system controlling them.

Blackburn: Exactly!

Schara: They think it's all love! Or all, "they're not nice to me."

Blackburn: Mmhmm.

Schara: Whatever it is. So, I don't know how much thought you've put into the emotional system, being a part of all life, but living on a farm, and I dunno if that makes any difference, to the emotional system as part of evolution, being an important part, and seeing that maybe the strength, of the emotional system, compared to the - sometimes I think I should have done it the other way, in my book, I had little 's' was the automatic self, and big 'S' was when you could be more separate, and stand on your own two feet. And manage.

Blackburn: See, my- My family came from the dirt.

Schara: Yeah, yeah.

Blackburn: That's emotional process. My family earned its livelihood from the dirt.

Schara: Oh, it had to understand the process of life itself.

Blackburn: And my father was a genius. At that process.

Schara: Mmhmm. Mmhmm.

Blackburn: He knew what to do, to get the earth to produce.

Schara: And your mother?

Blackburn: Oh, my mother was the motivator of it all. [laughter]

Schara: Like Helen of Troy. [laughter]

Blackburn: Helen of Troy. Man, my father would make decisions and she would react so intensely to it, and my father would just keep going.

Schara: [laughter]

Blackburn: [laughter]

Schara: Helen of Troy could not turn him back. [laughter]

Blackburn: No way. [laughter] But she worked just as hard as he did. They both did.

Schara: That's a good way to put it. When you think about- I guess that's the part about your family that's sparked your interest in Bowen Theory.

Blackburn: Mmhmm, it is.

Schara: Have you- There's a question here, about the main contribution that Bowen main to Western science worldview, and I more or less put that in because I think Western science has such a problem with multiple factors and influences, and it's looking for cause and effect, and it

Blackburn: What-

Schara: - one reason that it may be that Bowen Theory's had such a hard time gaining more common acceptance is that it- it's complicated to explain how multiple factors influence families in society, et cetera. And uh...

Blackburn: We're trying to be linear thinkers. Education trains us to be linear thinkers.

Schara: Right. Mmhmm.

Blackburn: Which, is not systems thinking. But when you grow up

Schara: Mmhmm. Mmhmm.

Blackburn: living from the earth, you have to learn to be systems thinker. I think I had that built into me.

Schara: Mmhmm. Mmhmm.

Blackburn: from birth. [silence] You didn't put those bulbs in the ground and they produced a flower.

Schara: [laughter]

Blackburn: There was a lot of steps that had to happen. In between.

Schara: And all your work could be washed out, if you had a flood, or if it didn't rain, or

Blackburn: Exactly.

Schara: You know, a lot of things can happen in terms of ch- external changes, to that, that bulb, Might not live up to its potential, depending on what had happened.

Blackburn: Right. Right. Right.

Schara: Do you think, you know, the question that-

Blackburn: Well, let me, let me add something, about Bowen.

Schara: Yeah, go ahead.

Blackburn: I think Bowen, growing - and, I never discussed this with him, but I think Bowen, growing up in rural Tennessee, and you were there, you know what it- rural Tennessee looks like, south of- of um, Nashville. It's a farming area. Now he- his family, were not necessarily farmers, they were more in the service industries with the funeral home. But I think he knew, about the earth. I think he experienced

Schara: They lived off the land there when he was young. I mean, his mother canned, and they grew their own

Blackburn: Mmhmm. Right!

Schara: food, and he had to do all the chores, and take care of the animals, and-

Blackburn: absolutely. Right, just like mine did. Just like mine- Right, just like- Right. And I think that-

There is a way to think systems and at the same time recognize the linear process. You know. Evolution is somewhat of a linear process. It changes, over time, but there's a lot of systems that go into that. What the outcome is. I think there's a way of- putting that together. Or side-to-side understanding, there's both ways. I think Bowen had the capacity to do that.

Schara: He used to say, when evolution is seen as a fact, that family systems theory will be seen as a fact. but, uh.... I'll put that off into 200 years, or so, and

Blackburn: Right, but I think family systems theory is being seen more as a fact than evolution is, and I don't think people understand that they're related.

Schara: That could be.

Well, when you, when you think like that, you-you know the ideas of Bowen Theory coming into society, back to you know, stop the regression, [laughter] do you -do you have any ideas that would extend or refine the theory, from your experience here, and how we're going on.

Blackburn: I think my effort, in the theory, has gone into understanding the influence of anxiety. That's where I've put my efforts.

Schara: So it's been 23 years since Bowen died, and when you're extending the theory in terms of anxiety, what do you -what are you thinking about. Is it -does it offer enough knowledge, about anxiety?

Blackburn: No. No, and that's what I have focused on. Is attempting to -I teach, in the therapy that I do, the process of anxiety.

And that comes out of nursing. [silence] Because nursing was just, a mass of dealing with anxiety. Constantly. Hildegard Papeu, did phenomenal work, on anxiety.

Schara: How do I spell that?

Blackburn: P- A - P - E -U

Schara: P- A - P - E -U

Blackburn: Pap- Papeu. Cause there's an L in it. Hildegard. She was a- an associate, of Sullivan. You know and of course Sullivan began the idea of the mother-child relationship being part of the, quote, "pathology." [laughter] But Hildegard spent a long time working on anxiety.

And I think- she spent a lot of time working on anxiety from the perspective of pathology, um, in many ways, and yet it's an innate part of life, it's an energy of life, that's created when the organism is threatened. And the problem is, that when we were living in caves, anxiety really served a purpose.

And it's still the same today, it-we haven't altered that process of response to threat, real or imagined, very much, it's still the same as it was then. That's where my efforts have gone.

Schara: Do you- do you see yourself, as extending theory in this regard, or?

Blackburn: And part-

Schara: Or just-when you're working with families, you're focusing on managing self

Blackburn: No...

Schara: under anxious situations, and

Blackburn: ...situations...

Schara: trying to discriminate whether it's real or imaginary.

Blackburn: Right. Most people don't know what anxiety is. [silence]

Schara: Unless their heart starts fluttering [laughter]

Blackburn: Well, then they don't call it anxiety, they call it panic, which is the highest, maximum form of anxiety.

And I try to help people learn to intervene early in the process of anxiety, before it gets to panic level. And yeah I don't know that that's an enhancement, of the of the theo- I think it just sort of helps people understand the theory. I don't know that it expands the theory at all. I don't think it really does.

Schara: Well, a lot of people do think that that anxiety could be a separate concept, it could be fleshed out more, and I know Priscilla and other people myself, work with neurofeedback, think that anxiety going into the soma, I think- I don't know if you were here when Priscilla was talking about that on

Blackburn: Oh, yeah.

Schara: That- that that's could be like a - like a psychosis. It goes into the soma, instead into the emotional breakdown in the individual.

Blackburn: That's-Well, that's my system- my family systems automatic, for anxiety.

Schara: Just illness (inaudible) physical illness.

Blackburn: ...physical illness. My father, when he was working, when he was working in the- the um gladiolia industry, when he first got started, was constantly ill, and he had diarrhea all the time, and that was really puzzling to me.

But one I li- and I even kinda understand that, before (inaudible) was involved, when I went to nursing school, I began to under-understand that process. [phone rings] But I- how much time do we have, we're over time, we're

Schara: Well, it's - I dunno, you have to get your plane, but oh- okay, you've got enough time? Okay then.

Blackburn: No, I- I'm, I've got enough time.

Schara: Oh. I know you were going to put in one more story...

Blackburn: I was gonna put in the last contact I had with Bowen.

Schara: Okay.

Blackburn: Um, by the way, he and my father were the same age, they were born the same year.

Schara: Okay.

Blackburn: Um- I was - there had been a - person, who had worked with me, in Chatanooga, who was a psychologist. And she worked in the- one of the mental health centers. And she came to Georgetown for a year, but she just- couldn't think that way. But she wanted me to come and work with the mental health center staff. [laughter] I started in the spring, 1990, with the staff [laughter].

I got so anxious, because of the reactivity. The staff was told, "this is mandatory,

Schar: Nothing like taking people's self away from em. [laughter]

Blackburn: The tendency was so (inaudible).

So, my husband had a conference in Quebec, and we were going to fly through Chicago. So, I told him that I had to go see Dr. Bowen. Dr. Bowen was in Chicago, at

Schara: Oh yeah.

Blackburn: in May, and I think you were there.

Schara: What year was this, was this the last one? 1990?

Blackburn: Yeah, this was right before he died.

Schara: This was right before he died, I remember that.

Blackburn: And so I went. The- morning - somebody had just given him pure hell, all morning. At that conference. And it was a reactive situation -and of course, I was there

because I was so anxious that I just had to talk to Dr. Bowen, about what was going on. With this staff. Well, the morning break came, it'd been really intense, and he got up, and he came down, he sat on the first row of the auditorium. Well, I decided, "this is my chance." Not even giving a thought about where he might be, having done that morning, and the reactivity that was there.

So I go up, and I say to Dr. Bowen, I sit down by him, and he acknowledges me. And of course he wasn't- he was not, really, he wasn't well, at that point.

Schara: He didn't have enough oxygen.

Blackburn: Didn't have enough oxygen. And somebody had told him, if he'd stop smoking... [laughter]

Schara: I'm sure that helped. [laughter]

Blackburn: I know it did! It didn't help me, but it [laughter]

Schara: I would have given him another cigarette, if- (I'd have) helped him.

Blackburn: Anyway, I sat down and I said, "Dr. Bowen, I'm working with this mental health center group-" and out of his mouth came, "God damn it, it's not a group!" [laughter] This is the... the whole place,

Schara: [laughter]

Blackburn: turned and looked at the two of us. And I said, "Dr. Bowen, I'll have to think about that." And I got up and left! [laughter]

Schara: [laughter] He was that quick to see the process. That was quick.

Blackburn: That was quick. So... That togetherness stuff, just sneaks in...

Schara: Mmhmm.

Blackburn: So, anyway, I- I went to - session started over, and then we break for lunch. And we had box lunches. Bowen was behind me. The tables we m-m in a U-shape,

I pick up my lunchbox, and I come right here, and I sit down, at the top of the "U."

Bowen's behind me, he gets up and he goes around and he sits right here. [laughter] And you know what happened. The- I was talking to the other person on my side, I wasn't paying much attention, and then I looked up and Bowen was staring at me. And he (goes) [gesture] So I get up [laughter] and I go over, and this time I squat down, so we're eyeball to eyeball, and he says, "What did you want to talk to me about?" And I-I gave him the story, that I was working with the mental health center staff, and didn't use the word group again,

Schara: Yep. They're real people on that staff.

Blackburn: They're real people on that staff.

Schara: They can get into an amalgam of a group-group, but that is not to your advantage. [laughter]

Blackburn: So, I told him the story, and he thought- "Man," he said, "work on those relationships." [silence]

So the next time I went to the mental health center, I said, "we're not going to do anything today," I said it kinda like this, "We're not going to do anything today except talk."

"I just want to talk with what you're thinking." [laughter]

Schara: [laughter]

Blackburn: And I ended up by saying, "I know that you have been told that you have to be here. But if you choose not to be, then that's fine, with me."

Schara: [laughter]

Blackburn: Well, I went on and I had a great experience, but those people who were just so highly reactive just sort of faded away. And then those people who were really interested in it, turned out to be 6 or 8, people who were interested, one of those people who has really learned Bowen Theory, pretty well, another one of those theor-people, when she got in real trouble, emotionally, in her life, she sought assistance with consultation from me. So, I think the effort was worth it. But, had I not gone to Chicago, it would have been a disaster.

Schara: [laughter] A group would still be a group [laughter] Oh, that is a beautiful story.

Blackburn: That group would still be a group [laughter] And I worked with several mental health centers' staffs, but that was the most difficult one I had, ever.

Schara: [laughter] Well I don't know, do you, do you have a - any other stories that you want to put in here? Or any questions that you have for me? Anything else you can think of?

Blackburn: Yeah I have a question for you: how in the world did you happen to select me? You know, I'm just here, I don't do much, I come for what I get out of it, I don't contribute a lot any more.

Schara: Well, I don't know, you know, exactly, it's a- it's a- there are a lot of people who've had a relationship with Dr. Bowen, maybe because you have the same kind of experience in your family, I'm not sure exactly what it was, that- but your - your life course has been interesting, I think.

And just that you've stuck with it a long time, so, I'm looking for the people who have known Bowen for a long time, and have some kind of an overview. And you being from the same area, kind of, geographical area, might- might also add more to it.

Blackburn: Mmhmm. I do have one more story.

Schara: Okay.

Blackburn: My father was born in 1913. My grandmother had wanted to be a nurse and my- her father refused. But the year my father was born, she bought a book. It- The book had to do with 'Caring for the Family.' And in that book, copyrighted in 1913, is the family diagram.

Schara: Wow. [laughter]

Blackburn: Bowen was in Asheville, and my parents retrieved that book for me, when my grandmother died, and they were going through the house, and they just thought I'd be interested in having that book. And so I took that book and showed it to Dr. Bowen, I said, "I want to show you what I've found in one of my grandmother's books." And it-it happened to be about mental retardation, except they called it feeble-mindedness, and- and he looked at it, and there he just, he said, "Well, I did steal some things." [laughter]

Schara: [laughter] Some things were worth (inaudible). I put-

Blackburn: [laughter]

Schara: "I couldn't- I didn't have time in my life to flesh out all of (Walter Tomlin's) sibling's positions, and there it was, I just incorporated it, into the theory, and-"

Blackburn: Incorporated it in! Right, right.

Schara: And he said, "I thought Freud's transference, the marker of the two-person relationship, was extremely apt,

Blackburn: Mmhmm.

Schara: exact, and you could look at that, and see the way people could resolve that and there was a scale of differentiation, in terms of emotional maturity."

Blackburn: Differentiation. Mmhmm.

Schara: So, you know, he could be pretty clear about where he got s- his different ideas.

Blackburn: Yeah, he could. He could talk about. Mmhmm. Alright,

Schara: Alright, dear. Well-thank you so much, I appreciate that, and

Other speaker: Sorry to interrupt, Andrea, where's the tapes?

Schara: They're up on that wall.

Other speaker: Okay.

Schara: Right there. I'm- we're done here.

Blackburn: Thanks, I appreciate that.

Schara: Oh, you're so welcome.

Blackburn: Can I have a copy of that? (Thing I find)

Schara: You sure can. Yeah, just-

Blackburn: Yeah, 'cause- (So I move and (inaudible))

END OF AUDIO