

Interview with Steve Wiseman
Conducted by Andrea Schara

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Andrea: This is Andrea Schara interviewing Steve Wiseman. It's October the 9th 2015. So Steve I've known you a long time and I've never really gotten to ask you questions about your relationship with Dr. Bowen and what you got out of a long time you knew him and that so that's been on the back of my mind; how can I frame a situation so that you're free to talk about whatever you want to talk about. I gave you the 10 questions to let you be familiar with what everyone else was asked to answer and give you the freedom to go in any direction you want. So maybe just start where you want to start.

Steve: Well, Andrea, it's been really such a very long and different time since that time of interaction with Dr. Bowen, so I'll remember some things clearly. I'll have a summary of an experience that happened over the course of more than a dozen years of interaction with him which was highly unusual. I've thought a little bit about the questions that you shared with me yesterday afternoon. My quick background is that I was trained as a lawyer and have worked in business for most of my life and not as a lawyer. I know when I first met Dr. Bowen because of the timing: the milestone was that it wasn't long after my wife, Kathy, father's passing. So the year was 1974. 41 years ago we came to Dr. Bowen through connection through a brother in law of mine who was trained in psychiatry and also had seen Dr. Bowen to get some counseling. He talked to Kathy and me about it. We had a lot of stresses and strains in our marriage and sought some sort of counsel that I would be able to connect to because my approach to any kind of therapy was, I think, call it highly intellectual, rather than looking for what might be going on in my own internal emotional reaction to the world; so I wasn't a very good candidate for individual therapy or I don't know what to call it traditional or other kinds of couples therapy. We together went to see Dr. Bowen and I was taken with his presence, in being with him, which I had my sense about even at the beginning, that he was non-judgemental, that he had no position, he wasn't there to try to fix. He didn't see us as a presenting problem to be fixed. He was just interested in learning what we were talking about and so I found that to be very engaging and I was caught up and started reading about and discussing theory: his own approach... what was his view, perception about how families interacted, how couples interacted or how systems related. That kind of scientific approach was very attractive to me. It was not threatening. So this interaction which, instead of the opposite of what you would think might happen, of being caught up in a magnetic attraction to a charismatic figure, didn't happen with me.

I was caught up in the learning to see if what he had written about, studied, talked about, was working on, made sense to me and then made sense to me in relationship to my interaction with Kathy. For some reason that developed over time into an ongoing monthly taped interview hour with him where he spent the time with us more. Even though we were being taped with a television camera going in the background, it tended over time to see the camera light being on. In a sense, I think, yeah I was on, but a real sense over time the interaction between the three of us; he talked to one of us at a time and sometimes we would interchange ideas and talk about what was going on. It became more transparent, a wall kind of came down for me. I wasn't really thinking so much that I was on although I

was certainly aware of the television camera being there. I looked forward to the occasion of being together with him because he had somehow conveyed to me that he wasn't there to have answers for me or us rather he was exploring what he knew about. And in exploring what he knew, what his own learning was and what we were talking about demonstrating real respect for what he was hearing from Kathy or what he was hearing from me.

Andrea: Did that in some sense provide an opportunity to think: well we're at some other level that ordinary conversations don't have?

Steve: Oh well, certainly. One of the reasons was that the format was that we were getting together once a month. So I was doing preparatory thinking about what we would be engaged in while we were talking. I wanted to... I think I wanted to accomplish, whatever that means, accomplish something while I was there.

I wanted to learn something, I want to engage with him around issues that I was wrestling with, so I was thinking about it beforehand, so it wasn't off the cuff just casual conversation. It was always a learning hour. But it certainly was the opposite of a lecture format. He wasn't telling either of us what the roadmap was. He was rather eliciting a gentle way of being a guide, from his own perspective, of how our own thinking journey would be of interest to him. So a real sharing. And I found that although he remained cool. I often worked hard in conversation with people to be entertaining to be a wise cracker or to play with words. So I found in that that had to do with a certain tradition that I thought I had been handed from affectionately called the Borscht Belt Jewish history in the Catskills. But I found him to be really engaging, witty, funny guy at the same time as he was at the same time maintaining a kind of emotional distance but being engaged and listening carefully to the words and working with words. And so I always found the conversations not boring. Not at all. And constantly engaging for me. I would say looking back on it, whether or not he was doing this intentionally, he had these two people that were willing to come to a given location in front of a television camera. And over and over and over again talk about this issue over 10 years of time. And so one way of looking at it is to say that this wily guy tricked me.

Andrea: A trickster.

Steve: Right. But that he was genuinely interested in the process and what he was hearing from us. Although my relationship with him was not one of... I wasn't running into a room embracing this warm teddy bear. It wasn't at all that; but it was still a very engaging process. It was strangely attractive because it was so intellectual. But we were talking about process in a way that I could then go away and think about that process; how it was my family process was affecting me and I would say that over a long period of time I had an intellectual appreciation of some sort. A slowly growing understanding of where he was coming from. I had not very much success in incorporating that into my own behavior in my own life. I think I became a dilatant in understanding and being able to talk about the approach using systems thinking, about the world, but not being able to actually in the moment be very successful at practicing what I had been discussing, learning, talking about, pontificating about, didn't take in an emotional sense in my core. Yet I would say looking back over many many years in my experience with Bowen enabled me... it eventually led me to a lot of reading that I did...let's call it Buddhist philosophy. I saw a lot of correspondences of what it means to work on self first, loving self in a Buddhist sense and working on self in a Bowen sense.

And even today here we are 41 years later... In work and creating a way of looking at... Something I've worked on recently was helping writing a paper to help an organization about the work it was doing, how it was interacting and how leadership was doing; what the leadership of the organization was doing and in regard to over the last five years having been divorced more than ten years ago recovering a connection with my kids that had been severely damaged in my divorce. Really thinking about how I would re-establish that connection and working and fortunately having a...actually this wasn't just generated by me, but I was open to what Kathy was doing with making me feel welcome and trying to re-establish that connection in a more warm and genuine way with her, which enabled me then to have a much better and growing connection with my own kids, which I do now as adults. And I think that Bowen helped me without talking to me, without my reading Bowen Systems Theory. Twenty years after I saw him.

Andrea: That's amazing.

Steve: He plays a role in what I think and do now in work and in my life. I've been able to understand what it means to not be a way or another way, not to choose in some black and white way, but just the sensation of having whatever psychological theory you want to use to approach this. It could be talking in terms of cognitive behavioral therapy having a science behind the reason why you're doing it. Having a theory, not a science, but a theory behind the reason why you're taking the time to think in the moment; it's a way for me, in my amateur approach to Eastern philosophy, to be able to have the moment to think when the tiger is leaping out of the jungle at you; in that moment which happens often during the day and that moment of anxiety producing or reaction outside events that are people or things that pop up that ordinarily would [produce anxiety] or earlier in my life would have produced a lot more reactivity and a lot of things I would later regret saying, doing, whatever. That work that took time over many years of time but was part of my...whether I was working on it from day to day it really wasn't work it was just that it was kind of a growing awareness, a growing way of thinking that gave me time to be less reactive in the moment and more thoughtful in the moment. I would say this: it's hard to summarise but having a set of guidelines that make sense that lead one to have the time to think enables personal growth and less reactivity to things as they pop up in life and enables one to be more thoughtful, develop one's own set of principles. And this really strange thing happened when that started to happen which is that it became easier for me to have a warmer emotional connection than I would have had prior by being more thoughtful and you would think less emotional. So what does less...it's not really emotional emotionality it's reactivity being less reactive enabled me to have warmer emotional connections with people which I treasure.

Andrea: Absolutely. So if I hear you, it's complicated; but basically in this relationship with Dr. Bowen and his asking you more questions you get to be a better observer of your own reactivity and what it was either in your family or your business that would trigger these reactive states in yourself and then by observing that you get better control over it.

Steve: Yeah I would say that in talking to this particular individual when you're talking to me it probably would be a good idea for me to say about myself that I was an incredibly reactive child and young adult. Well I was brought up with a woman who generated constant reactivity in me and debated me from morning to night about everything from the time I was able to speak which enabled me to be a fairly decent debater but didn't enable me to be a fairly clear thinking person. And it took a long time for me. Somebody else might have come from circumstances that enabled them to start off with the ability to be less reactive and more thoughtful. What I'm saying is that Bowen finally enabled me to get

to a place that I wouldn't have gotten to because of my training and my training was held to be quickly reactive. How to debate everything with anybody.

Andrea: And part of it too was that Kathy changed the way she was dealing with you. She was able to come back into a relationship with you too.

Steve: Oh yeah cause I had yeah...

Andrea: You had two people working on this reactivity in the family. And I think you described it beautifully: the family generates a lot of reactivity. You're left with sort of an automatic way to behave and the same thing's true for Kathy. And then she's able to get control of her reactivity. And I think you said a warmer relationship.

Steve: Well it was more open and accepting of me not because of what happened between the two of us didn't happen so much between the two of us as it did with my own life and my own behavior in the world which was to be taking risks in business over and over and over again in a way that became alienating in regard to me and my relationships with other people and certainly my relationship with Kathy and led me to...and this was many years after we had stopped seeing Dr. Bowen. Kathy had good reason to be constantly reactive to me for the rest of her life because of the way that I dealt with the world and with her. And it was remarkable to me that we were both able to get to a place a decade after divorce where we have a really warm, and without mincing words, I think we have a loving relationship today. It's mutually respectful relationship today that enabled me to have this amazing relationship once again with my kids.

Andrea: Fabulous. So it takes time but Bowen ideas about the family as an emotional unit controlling or I think he said governing your behavior. So Kathy has her father's death. When you all started this journey with Dr. Bowen.

Steve: Yeah well, right. But her mother's death where Kathy had tremendous responsibility in her household. Her mother's early demise some years prior to her father's had as such impact on what was going on with Kathy.

Andrea: Was that a later insight or did you see that in the beginning? That Kathy's emotional reactivity with her family was part of your marriage.

Steve: Kathy's mother's death at the time that Kathy and I met was probably as much as anything else responsible for Kathy deciding to get married to this guy that she knew. Well, I don't know that she would have gotten married to me otherwise. And some of it I think that she needed to have that connection with someone. I think I wasn't aware of that at the time. I was a kid. We were both children really, we were 22 year old children when we got married. But I want to make one thing really [clear] and what's really important to me when I'm talking about my relationship with my kids it's all of this stuff I'm talking about the journey and talking about what happened with me and Bowen and what's really important to me is that through all of this what happened between Kathy and me and my own struggles in life. What happened that Bowen enabled to have happened, I'm really clear about this, is that three children survived it and survived it and flourished on their own despite what was happening because of the slow incremental growth that was happening within me and within Kathy. Over time [it] happened at a rate that was sufficient that the focus wasn't on them, that the focus was on whatever else it was between the two of us and what was going on in our lives. I would say that Bowen Theory enabled these kids to escape the emotional turmoil that was going on between their parents and enabled them

to grow into successful adults. Not just that it enabled them to survive but enabled them to flourish as successful adults. And I am very thankful about that.

Andrea: Yeah, I hear you. I can see the picture of the family. You know anybody's family where the parents are trying to deal with challenges, real challenges in their own families. And if you turn your back on that it's pretty easy to focus on the kids and what's wrong with them instead of focusing on what's going on in my marriage and how did I get to be so damn sensitive (laughs) and then be able to look back and see what was going on in the extended family.

Steve: What I'm trying to do... I think what I'm talking about is that nobody... Neither one of us used our children in any way in regard to each other. Kids weren't caught up in the struggle of their parents so that they were able to have the space to develop how they did. I think to say it in a funny sort of way that children who had been more loved certainly more loved meaning more depended on by their mother would have... meaning that either one of the parents or both would have needed more love from them... would have caught them up in a process would have stunted their own development. So I think that having the chance to be thoughtful at least in regard to keeping the problem whatever, all the worldly problems, all the whatever relationship problems that were going on between Kathy and me between the two of us and not sucking them into it gave them the space to mature as individual people and grow into their own life experience and have their own life success.

Andrea: When you think back on this time that you spent with Bowen are there things that he said that stick out in your mind? One question and another question would be have you ever gone back and looked at those tapes and what do you make of it if you do?

Steve: I did a long time ago look at a couple of tapes. My immediate reaction was to think to myself what a self centered preening jerk. This young man was who had the audacity to be talking about things he was thinking about as if they were relevant to other people. Like I would be teaching somebody something that I knew. I don't have an answer to you about a particular phrase that Dr. Bowen would say to me but it amazed me that he enabled me to... I'll use these terms "to get away with what I was doing" that he didn't just hit me over the head or come over and give me a smack on the head and say you know we need to have an authentic hour here. I'm not here to talk to Dr. Wiseman about his theories. I'd like to have real conversation going on here about what is going on between the two of you in a way that may be of some help in your marriage. Maybe even some help to you personally. Please get off your... take a step down from the podium and let's have a serious... He enabled me to have that slowly dawn on me. I came to my own realization about. I mean I didn't realize how terrible it looked until I looked at it but I did realize it over time.

Andrea: Yeah, years later when you looked at it because you would see it right after you filmed it.

Steve: Oh yeah, you couldn't see it then.

Andrea: You couldn't see it then. So that's what's so great about it.

Steve: I was so filled up about how great it was, I couldn't see it then.

Andrea: And so perhaps this slow way might be the only way.

Steve: I think a slow way is a lot better than no way. I don't think there is a fast way.

Andrea: (Laughs) It might be the only way. I saw this YouTube video about a bicycle that these engineers constructed so that when you turn the handlebars to the right the wheel turns to the left.

Steve: Yes I actually saw that.

Andrea: You did see that? It took eight months for that guy to figure out how to ride the bike like ten feet without falling off because of the way the brain is wired. So you could kind of use that as an analogy here. You come in to talk to Dr. Bowen about the fact that the steering wheel is going one way and the wheel another and it takes that however long until your brain becomes flexible enough to allow you to ride the bicycle or to have a warm relationship.

Steve: Well I'll use your metaphor in a different way for me. Suppose my own training, unlike yours, suppose my training by my mother or my life training is that for you when you turn the bicycle left it goes left for me I am actually trained to turn it left to make it go right. That's my training and the rest of the world turns left to go left. My training is I'm turning left to go right. And now I've got this training in my brain about how they interact with the world. And it's not working.

Andrea: Frustrating.

Steve: So OK it's not working and I want to do something about it. It would take a long time and a lot of conversations for somebody in Dr. Bowen's position to be able to demonstrate to me somehow. He certainly would never be able to train me to train my brain pathways to go left when I want to go left there would have to be something that I would have to somehow think through and experience and get feedback about. And I think that would be a slow process and it certainly was for me until I got to be turning left when I was thinking left.

Andrea: Well, it makes a lot of sense to me that that's how hard wired it is the brain.

Steve: Yes.

Andrea: And that's one of the reasons it takes such a long time. I think the other thing you put in is his genuine curiosity about how long does it take or what are you thinking right now and even if what you were thinking, on looking back, was seemingly superficial it was how you were learning every single month.

Steve: I had a thought to make this into something that would be relatable. That is to say that as an example of what I would say in regard to turning left to go right it would be that for nine people out of ten they would look at the expression or the words or tone of voice coming from a woman and those nine... I'll say men in this case nine men would hear the expressions, tone, words coming from a woman and hear them as curiosity, regular questions, entirely appropriate. I would hear those questions, that facial expression, that tone of voice as criticism and that my training is that it's criticism.

Andrea: Yeah.

Steve: Now how do I take my reactivity that what I'm hearing is criticism: be it a marriage with a woman who's just asking me questions that perfectly appropriate normative questions and hearing them all as criticism. Well how do I change that. That's not easy to change, that takes a lot of time and some way to get there. It doesn't just take time it takes some sort of base theory that you can learn about to say well maybe this, maybe my base thinking, the neural pathways in my brain are screwed up and that I could actually have a different approach to this and take a moment and over time be less reactive to the facial expressions, tone of voice, questions. And although given the right amount of tension in a relationship I'll still hear it as criticism it may take more tension, more of the circumstances of heat, the flame would have to be turned up higher for me to start hearing the questions today as criticisms that certainly was 41 years ago when I was talking to Murray Bowen.

Andrea: It's beautiful the way in which we are trained, as you say, and I believe that's pretty accurate that we're early on trained and then when you go back and look at those tapes. I think if you did it again you would have another... maybe look at the young man as I think the Buddhist describe this also: this more neutrality more detachment and greater acceptance. And this is the kind of thing that happens when [you have] less reactivity to the most important people to you. It enables a sort of wisdom to emerge as you become less and less reactive.

Steve: Well that's the conundrum because what Buddhism talks about is giving up attachment but you're giving up attachment in order to achieve connection. What does that mean? You know it's in and of itself it's just a conundrum. But to be able to be emotionally unattached is to say: to be not reactive. To have a clean open way of relating to the other that enables the two people to embrace each other because they are not attached. That is so odd in Western thinking that I don't know how you get there in ordinary therapy. I think that Bowen enabled the beginning of that to happen with me.

Andrea: Right. So ordinary therapy would be about more you describing a beautiful relationship around thinking, basically, an ordinary therapy would be a relationship about feeling.

Steve: Yes.

Andrea: And there'd be little effort to integrate your thinking and your feeling. But I think it's fascinating to me to see and think how many people who watch these tapes and who will be able to watch them in the future because they're all at the National Library of Medicine and people can go there and watch these tapes can learn and maybe learn faster than you did because of your example. Not really a question but that's my...

Steve: Well maybe someone sees a guy who is full of answers they'll be able to see that and say well "hey" (laughs) "I'm not going to that. This guy is clearly out of bounds." This is what not to do. Let's watch Bowen over here and see how you're supposed to be and you know that would be a good way of learning and in effect learning don't be like that. Or you could watch Kathy being in the middle of that and learn from her being in the middle of that.

Andrea: Or you may just look at it to say this is where psychiatry went in terms of learning. You know that psychiatry itself as a field also learns. So the kind of result that you've had might not be obtainable in the amount of hours that you spent with Dr. Bowen and I don't think normal psychiatry can produce a result like the one you're talking about here. So I think psychiatry itself is also learning from this which was one of the other questions in there.

Steve: I have a prejudice Andrea and I'll tell you my prejudice is that when you say normal psychiatry and we were just talking about feelings. I think that normal psychiatry has to be rejecting of an approach to emotionality that is thinking. It's almost not understandable because normal psychiatry in my way of thinking about it is dealing with emotionality as a positive and wants to explore emotional interaction between people as if that's what's going to be a fix. And I just think the focus is in the wrong place and if you look at a different way of looking at it but your training and your way of thinking and looking at things is about emotionality you have to reject a theory that talks about thinking. So I think that Bowen by its very nature Bowen systems is very difficult to adopt. It's very difficult for the normative psychiatrist to say I want to use this as my base for getting people to be more closely connected by teaching them how to be more thoughtfully distant. You know it's not an oxymoron. And so I think Bowen systems is always going to have a hard row.

Andrea: Yeah. So that psychiatry itself might possibly learn something but it would be a small segment of people who are dedicated or learned psychiatry. And it's hard to say what the future will bring. I do think that people like you who've altered themselves significantly have... you drop a stone in the water and it ripples out... you have that kind of impact that Bowen used to say something on the order of: when society gets into more and more of a mess it'll just be like a family in a mess and a family in a mess looks to the most differentiated person to lead and that will probably happen in society. That as more people are impacted by this way of thinking that it will slowly and I do mean slowly, for him slowly was 200 years that was about 8 generations. Where people would become more aware of their emotional reactivity and the way they're wired to react to others.

Steve: I'm not optimistic.

Andrea: (laughs) I can respect that. Are there other questions on here that you want to tackle?

Steve: You asked the last question which I cannot conceive of. I'm not in any position to respond to this question. I would love to hear and maybe this is going on and I just don't know about it. I'm not connected to what's going on in the world of Bowen Theory. But the question that you asked was who might benefit from Bowen's ideas today yet effectively have no access to them and that's a real problem. That is that I believe the world would benefit from access and doesn't have that access. And how would you get. What would you do to provide to open up the society of people who know about Bowen to bring people in to be able to get pieces out into the community in some way that this thing could have a societal impact that it's not [having]. That we're not going to wind up in a place where otherwise we're headed and headed in the sense I think of it in the same sense as I think of climate change and the rising seas. It's happening in the year 2100 is coming we're not going to be any other place then the seas are going to be somewhere between 10 and 30 feet higher than they are now and we'll all have left the coast of the United States and the rest of the world and nothing that we're going to really do other than talk about it is going to make any major changes. And I think that what Murray finally, Dr. Bowen finally, came to

was his last principle which has to do with disintegration. And I don't know societal disturbances...

Andrea: Societal regression.

Steve: Regression. And I don't know. In regression my own head doesn't come to that plea that society as a whole turns to the most differentiated person as a leader. I don't get there. And I think we're seeing that right now in the Republican nominating process right this very minute. I think we get to a different place. And it's an unfortunate place. So I think that things are... I don't know. I know we carry on anyhow and carry on, carry on but I'm not hopeful.

Andrea: Well in a family it has to get pretty bad before people are going to try to change.

Steve: I understand that.

Andrea: And that's pretty common. As long as people can postpone the situation and do some hustling on the side and make a few bucks or whatever it is that they're trying to do. The situation is not one that calls for differentiation. So if you can postpone it it's going to be postponed.

Steve: Well I think what the situation calls for is acting... I don't want to get into it this is like a political thing but we're moving in the direction in which we're moving is not differentiation it's exclusion. We're putting walls up around different classes of people in this country as well as around the rest of the world as wealth increases. You're seeing it reflected in a polarized society. So I don't know. Anyhow...

Andrea: Families get polarized too, people don't want to see each other. They don't want to have anything to do with those so the same exact thing that goes on in families. And again I wonder whether or not just one by one people picking up on their own responsibility to relate more respectfully to the difficult, the most difficult, the most challenging people in your own family doesn't help people to change society. I don't know.

Steve: Well that's the last question, the one I'm wrestling with.

Andrea: The last crusade.

Steve: I have no way to answer your last question but I think it would be fantastic to have everybody take time out for 30 days a year and have all the smartest people get together and teach each other what Bowen Theory is about and spread the word.

Andrea: I used to get it down to: from genes to means. We need better means to influence our genes. And when you have better means. The idea that you could actually create a change in evolution itself. That was one of his thoughts that differentiation of self over the generations as you said your children have a better chance that genetic material that you're creating is being selected for because it gives children a better, gives you a better chance to have a better life. So it's over eight generations this kind of process could actually impact the gene pool.

Steve: Well maybe over the course of the lifetime of one generation it would be great if it would influence the mean, pull in enough people, that would enable a better supply of people to come along in the next generation.

Andrea: (laughs) I very much like that.

Steve: OK, well thank you for talking to me about this.

Andrea: You're so welcome.

Steve: You've taken me back over many decades. It's been delightful catching up with you.

Andrea: Thank you. I enjoyed it. Thanks a lot Steve.

Steve: Sure.