

Interview with Ann Bunting  
Conducted by Kathy Wiseman

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**Wiseman:** Hi, this is Kathy Wiseman. Recording on Thursday, with Ann Bunting. Take it away! Alright, now we've got, we've got two of them, no, not two of them, don't have two of them. Okay, we've got two recordings for you, but don't worry about them. Okay, question one: who are you, Ann Bunting? And how you came to know of Dr. Bowen.

**Bunting:** [laughter] Okay, who am I currently?

**Wiseman:** And who have you been in the past? [laughter]

**Bunting:** That's a good question!

**Wiseman:** Isn't it?

**Bunting:** I don't know. [laughter] Ah, let's see. Okay, currently, I am the founder of the Vermont Center for Family Studies. And, [silence] and I have my own private practice, is that sort of thing? Yeah, and I have my own private practice. And have been studying Bowen Theory since 1979.

**Wiseman:** Describe a bit about your practice. What interests you, (what) kinds of people

**Bunting:** Well, I'm going to back up. Because how I got to the practice, is what- is what was important. To me. I was studying in- I had gone to the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and I- there are a lot of theories that were around then. But, the most prominent was psychoanalytic theory. So I went through the first year, and then I had an opportunity to become an intern, at Mass General Hospital. And, [silence] at Mass General Hospital, and I met a number of people there, I met a number of psychoanalysts. And, the experience at Mass General Hospital was a very significant one. Because they took all kinds of people.

And I had to interview, either on an out-patient basis or on an in-patient basis, all kinds of people. People that picked and ate their hair, people telling me that there was a dead body in their- in the back of their car, and me going to my supervisor and saying that, you know, "I think this person is crazy," but it wasn't- that was a part of the Mafia. So, I got a lot of very different experiences. Nothing [laughter] nothing that I could use, particularly, but it was an - it was an important time. The emphasis was on psychoanalysis. But at that time, I was really reading a lot in the fields of - oh, I just had it. Tip of my tongue. [animal studies; ethology]

Like (Konrad Lorenz), I guess with an "E". I just had it! That's what I mean. Anyway, so I was doing a lot of reading that had to do with animals. And animal studies.

Particularly in groups. It wasn't - and later I met Paul McKlein. Down here. But these were studies of animals. And, it just was very intriguing, I was just doing it on my own. And, from there, I was- I went to Cambridge Hospital. They hired- there's a psychiatrist there that hired me. Who was very interested in what I - in me. And I stayed there. But I always -for about a year, and then moved to Washington D.C. Now, they stressed the importance of analysis. That if you're going to be good, you have to go to an analysis.

So I did, for four years. In Washington D.C. And I found it very ineffective. But I did it. [laughter] And, along the way, I heard about Bowen. And before I left Cambridge Hospital, the person who was in charge of families there, the psychiatrist, came and said, "Whatever you do, when you go to Washington, don't have anything to do with Murray Bowen." [laughter] Which intrigued me to no end. But, I followed some of the advice, that my supervisors had given me, like doing the psychoanalysis. But I, and I, then I worked at the Jewish Social Service Agency, too. And there, they were using Bowen's concepts. Of course they weren't, really. They were using the family diagram with no real knowledge. Of what the family diagram meant. But that was my first introduction to the family diagram.

And then, I think I told you then I went to a conference, where Bowen was presenting. And, the person who was presenting had gone to England. Margaret Hall. And, on a visit. And on that, was it after the visit or during the visit? Her father died. And, this, and Bowen stood up, in response to this presentation, and said "Margaret Hall killed her father." That was my introduction to Bowen. And, he knew what I know, is that he knew, the audience was thinking that. And he just put it out there. And I was- I did a double-take. But somehow knew what he was doing. I mean, he- he was, he was addressing the emotionality, of the audience, around the father's death.

And really, it was remarkable. I never forgot it. I finished my PhD, at the University of Maryland, I had two children. And then- and I worked with (David Reese), I did my dissertation with David Reese. And then, when I finally was a bit freer, hightailed it over to the Bowen Center. Knowing that, that it had I think really something very important to offer me. So that's how I met Bowen.

**Wiseman:** I have to ask you, what happened in the meeting, where, after he said, "Margaret killed her father"? Was there this uproar?

**Bunting:** Stunned. It was stunned. I mean, for me, I could feel it going up and down my backbone. But at- somehow, I knew what he was doing. I don't know why, because I don't know a lot about him, but I felt "This man is a really interesting man." And I had, you know what I had seen, about Bowen Theory, at the Jewish Social Service Agency, I don't think people were employing it particularly well. But I knew that there was something out there that I could use. By this time, I'd been through analysis - not very impressive, you know? [laughter]

And I was doing work with clients, but I didn't- I knew there was something more that was necessary. So, as soon as I had the chi- you know, finished the dissertation, had the children, I started. And I never stopped, and I don't know what I would do without Bowen Theory.

**Wiseman:** [rustling] Great. Okay, we're now gonna get the next question.

**Bunting:** That was so amazing.

**Wiseman:** What was the nature of your relationship with him?

**Bunting:** The nature of the relationship, I think, changed over time. Let's see. When I was going through the training program, I didn't see much of him as part of the program. But I always went to the clinical conferences, I was there at every clinical conference. So, did I have a personal relationship with him? He certainly knew who I was, he knew I was active, he knew that I was responding to things. I just loved going to all of the meetings. And, and when I moved to Vermont, I talked to him about - and started - a Family Center there. I mean, it took awhile, he was aware of that. And I talked about that, I think, when we used to have those days, when we all talked. What were they called?

**Wiseman:** (Those-) before the symposium? They were wonderful. Wonderful. They were wonderful.

**Bunting:** Yes. That was just really- they were wonderful. Yeah. So, And I- I would always check in with him, and say, "Well, I'll do this as long as you stand beside me," and he'd always say, "Yeah." "Yeah." And of course, I didn't need him to stand beside me! I don't know why I did that. But, he would always say, "Yeah. Yeah. Yeah" Taking it all seriously. What was the other question you asked about?

**Wiseman:** Well, this is a question I have. That was what was your nature of your relationship with him, but you, unlike other people, came from a so- a psychoanalytic world, that's what - that was your relationship system, your training system, your academic system,

**Bunting:** And it was what he had been trained in. Right.

**Wiseman:** so how did you- what was that experience? Of trying to bridge that gap? Did you leave it?

**Bunting:** I had no br- I had no gap to bridge. I was done.

**Wiseman:** You were done- [laughter]

**Bunting:** Done with psychoanalytic theory. It didn't; I told you, I'd been reading all these stories about animals and animal groupings and different kinds of animals, and what they were doing. What Bowen said made total sense to me. That we're all- you know, this is evolution at work. And so I was really interested in evolution. My father used to bring me home books, from New York City, on evolution. So I didn't have any question, about- it just made total sense to me, that you would have a theory that was based in evolution. And I - and Bowen made it possible, he tied together ties in my life, you know, experiences I had in my life. His theory did.

**Wiseman:** Right. Was there- was there a time when you were working, in the Psych Institute, that you were also studying Bowen Theory?

**Bunting:** Absolutely. And- Dominion Psychiatric Institute [Virginia], too.

**Wiseman:** How'd you do that?

**Bunting:** Well, I made a deal. [laughter] I made a deal, with a- I was part of a team, I was a psychologist- psychiatrist, psychologist, and nurses. And I made a deal with the psychiatrist. I said, "I'm, you know, I'm interested in this job, if I can do Bowen Theory. I can use it. I will utilize it. You take care of all the medication, I'll take care of the treatment." And he agreed. He agreed. And it got so that I did- I had this- I had this group, you know, you're assigned- and these were really tough people, they nearly killed me, so it was a wonderful experience though. In some ways. Because then, I could get all the multigenerational information, I-it wasn't like at Mass General, I got it all. And I could put it together.

And so, this- you know, there were various teams, there were other doctors from different teams. But my team, and my group, became famous. So nurses would come over, and sit in on it. And learn more about it. Lots of people

**Wiseman:** Because of the way-

**Bunting:** [They] found it very interesting. (Not) just the daily- Because I was allowed to use the theory. I wouldn't have worked under any other condition.

**Wiseman:** So you got this agreement, and then people started seeing differences in the patients?

**Bunting:** Yes. The patients did. They did for sure. But then a number of nurses began to pick it up. It was just great fun. It was really fun. [laughter] I loved it. I was free- but I had to go to the meeting with the doctors, for some reason. Wasn't a doctor, but I had to go. And I had to keep my mouth totally shut. Because, they were all either psychoanalytic or something else. You know, they weren't doing any Bowen Theory.

**Wiseman:** How long did you do that for?

**Bunting:** I did that for a year. This was a trial run, because it had really tough patients. And, and I think that- I can't remember the name of the doctor now. Decided to go on- and he was doing some - he was doing things with drugs, differently. But, at the end of that year, they decided to fold it- his part, down. I don't know- I can't- I don't remember exactly why. And then I worked out-patient across the street. But it was still all Bowen Theory. So anyone who was interested in Bowen Theory came. Or, even if they weren't interested, if they were going to work with me, they just would have to go through

**Wiseman:** I never knew any of this...

**Bunting:** the steps.

**Wiseman:** I never knew- I mean, I knew you lived in two worlds.

**Bunting:** Really? Oh, it was something. Yes. But, I wouldn't have taken the job if I had not negotiated Bowen Theory. And these were tough, these were really- one person, took a whole lot of drugs and was under an electric blanket for two days, she almost died. She was on our team. That's the kind of team it was. But those patients in a variety of ways have come back to thank me.

**Wiseman:** Wow.

**Bunting:** And then I decided I would get out of the hospitals, and get out of anything where I couldn't be totally my own boss. And that's when I worked with Marilyn, and Jack and Carolyn. Here.

**Wiseman:** How did that happen?

**Bunting:** Well, how did that happen? [long silence] I presented on Bowen Theory, in Toronto. I can't exactly remember how or why I got there, [laughter] I was presenting, And they were too, Jack and Carolyn were. We all went together. It was a lot of fun. In those days. And so I got to know them, and they had an office here, where you are, And that's when I- and that's where I was. for the next number of years. until I moved to Vermont.

**Wiseman:** And then it was private practice.

**Bunting:** In Vermont.

**Wiseman:** No, but it was private practice-

**Bunting:** Well, it was private practice, and it was private practice for me, for the rest of my life. I wouldn't -I wanted the freedom of it.

**Wiseman:** So, what kind of practice do you have now in Vermont? What- how would you describe it?

**Bunting:** Well, I mean- that was an interesting experience too, because I moved to Vermont, and Dan Papero, you know, used to come up, to New York state, to see his mother, and he would have to fly through Burlington. I didn't know that, and I didn't know Dan very well. But, by 19-; I was trying to think about this with Dan the other day; it was '86 or so, one day he just stopped by my office, instead of flying across the lake. And he- and I had already got- become known, and I was beginning to teach. Just, you know, privately. And so, he said, "I'd be willing to help you out."

And here we are, all these years later. So he came twice a year, for years. For over twenty years. He comes down once a year. So, he- he just stopped in, and I decided to utilize him. And I had built by 1977- 1987 or 89, I had built up a following. And, so it just began, slowly, to grow. And grow. And grow. And then I ultimately established a board, of people. But, the one rule was you had to go to the Georgetown- you had to be trained at Georgetown.

And that board had- is still in existence. And we're still adding people. So I was always looking for people. Who would be- and it would come through my practice, who would be really interested. In learning Bowen Theory. And then, would send them to the Family Center. And then they would come back. And then, they would help me, which was then just me. It wasn't until 1990, that Vermont Center for Family Studies was established, because people had- it took that long, to get a group going. But I'm still always looking for people. And now, they've- the younger ones- have taken it over.

**Wiseman:** That's wonderful, (but)

**Bunting:** Eric, and Monica, and Michael.

**Wiseman:** Would you have insights into where Bowen picked up his ideas, fueling his research?

**Bunting:** No, only what everybody else has heard. I wouldn't have had a private conversation with him about that.

**Wiseman:** For you, what do you think he meant by research?

**Bunting:** [long silence] Oh, I just was thinking about this the other day. [silence] [throat-clearing] For me, it meant the expansion of his ideas. He had already created the eight concepts. So for me, I don't know just why- he just- so interested, in the, in the processes that bind people together. Again, I go back and of course, differentiation of self. So, I think he was always watching at every moment, for- for what I would think of as the group effect, and where is one placed. And where does one place oneself, in the family. But I don't know- I don't know really

**Wiseman:** That was a pretty good answer. Are you a good observer?

**Bunting:** Yes, a pretty good observer. Observer meaning I am tracking most aspects of the theory, versus am I contributing something new? I'm not contributing anything new. But I - but this theory lives with me. And I'm always watching it. And I was watching it everywhere.

**Wiseman:** Yes.

**Bunting:** Even when I fail at it for myself. [laughter]

**Wiseman:** This is- this is a tough question. What was the main contribution that

Bowen made to the Western scientific worldview?

**Bunting:** [silence] Ah. [silence] Well, I mean, I think he put humanity in an illusion. [laughter]

**Wiseman:** That's a wonderful way to say that.

**Bunting:** Yeah. I mean I got it. I got it- I needed that link. (inaudible). I mean it was always Bowen Theory and evolution. And I think in doing that, you know, he opened up the world. He opened up the world. For exploration everywhere. And to show a

**Wiseman:** Do you- and this is a question I have, not

**Bunting:** unity of processes, really.

**Wiseman:** Why do you think it hasn't been more widely accepted? It makes so much sense to me, at such a profound level. I wonder why it hasn't been more widely accepted.

**Bunting:** [long silence] Hmmm. [long silence] Even among- ah, there's so many different fields involved, in this. [silence] I still- I still think- well, I don't know about science, I can't speak for science, but for the general population, I don't think they really understand the evolution. Of anything. I mean, I just watch what happens - now see, I'm coming from- as a psychologist, but I watch how people still do still do basically what is psychoanalytic. You know, all the, all the, you know even all these new things people don't get that- how tied in we all are. That the range- the degree, of freedom, that we have, isn't - not so great, you know. And we are connected, this is not - you know, we are really connected. I think that's hard, for people to understand. Now, you can blame your family, you can blame the community, you can blame a nation, you can blame the world. And you're not- it's not very, productive.

**Wiseman:** To know the nature of that connection. It is questioned. [silence] To know- It is questioned. [silence]

**Bunting:** And I still think evolution is questioned. To a- not among scientists, necessarily, but among the population.

**Wiseman:** Was there anything about your own family that spawned your interest in Bowen Theory?

**Bunting:** Everything. That was everything. Yes. That was the source.

**Wiseman:** That was the source?

**Bunting:** That was the source. There was no way to explain my family, except with Bowen Theory.

**Wiseman:** Did you try- did you try- I mean obviously, with the other

**Bunting:** Ab-so-lute-ly.

**Wiseman:** ways of thinking-

**Bunting:** Yes, as I would. But with Bowen, he gave you a way through. Psychoanalysis. [doubtful noise] So, my family was everything. I was the younger sister of an older sister. An older sister of a brother. And my older sister had a lot of problems, growing up. And as did my brother. I was kind of in a separate category- I was free. I was a one- I was freer, than but I used to always watch it. And I could watch it in my family. And I could get through my family. That way. But, it had everything to do with my family. I recognized it. I recognized the concepts. I didn't have to be a brilliant scientists to see, "Hey!

**Wiseman:** Isn't this (a search) for one family

**Bunting:** I know this!" [laughter] And it helped - it helped me negotiate my family of origin. It helped me know to go and shape my nuclear family. That's for sure. And now I hope it helps me negotiate the grandparents! [laughter] That's a little less sure!

**Wiseman:** But it's been the thing that's helped you figure out your place in it all.

**Bunting:** Yes, and what was productive for me to do was not, even though I could be unproductive, many times,

**Wiseman:** We're all right there.

**Bunting:** (over), because we're all [laughter]

**Wiseman:** Is there an idea you're thinking about now, or have thought about, that would extend or refine the theory? Or something that's you're questioning, or [long silence]

**Bunting:** Um, [long silence] that's a good question. Cause I've kinda stuck stopped thinking in those terms, except ah, I'm trying to think of the, My goal, for this coming year, was to go back to the fields of ethology, in recent times, and go, go back, and really [long silence] (I'm not-) redo or rethink, in the, ah, scientific kind of (parlance), cause I've- I'm through with the kind of practitioner stuff.

**Wiseman:** In your own life?

**Bunting:** In my own life. I'm not- but in my own life, I have a lot of questions that I need to answer, somehow. So my goal- I just ordered Jared Diamond's three books, for instance.



**Wiseman:** Extension of the theory,

**Bunting:** So, my- what was the question again?

**Wiseman:** ideas that have- that you're thinking about that would extend- questions about the theory, or extensions of it that you're thinking about.

**Bunting:** [long silence] That's a good question. And I just don't think I've thought about extending it. Because I don't regard myself as a scientist. However, in a way, it's something I'm looking forward to, in some way, doing.

**Wiseman:** And by that- to-

**Bunting:** I was just talking to (Louise Rossio) about that today, yeah.

**Wiseman:** About moving more toward the science of it rather than the practice of it?

**Bunting:** Yes. And particularly as it pertains to evolution. Which would mean, you know, looking at all things that people are already looking at, really. [silence] But in a way, without having a practice, I have freer time. And it's important to me to [silence]

**Wiseman:** Important how?

**Bunting:** kind of just keep thinking about this, just keep learning. I just find it fascinating.

**Wiseman:** I'm the same.

**Bunting:** I don't know why other people don't find it fascinating.

**Wiseman:** It's so infinitely intriguing! [laughter]

**Bunting:** Yes.

**Wiseman:** It just- it boggled my mind, that people wouldn't wanna understand their families to the utmost degree, not to find fault, but just they'd like to.

**Bunting:** Well I think the world's getting so small and we're- and we're up against some really [big issues] like global warming, we can't afford not to be looking.

**Wiseman:** It's a- it's a real question I have. Um, Have you evidence that would further prove the theory?

**Bunting:** Hm. I have lots of evidence that would prove the theory. It's all in my records. Yes!

**Wiseman:** Is it? Talk- if it-

**Bunting:** I mean it's just- I mean, every time you hafta kinda be tracking things all the way around, so I mean, I was partially joking, but that is certainly where one does a lot of thinking, one has to think very carefully about what's going on. Using the theory. That's-

**Wiseman:** So you're- so as you as you look to the future, and what you're going to do, what you're saying is, "I'm - this theory is ultimately interesting to me, I am [spending] less time sitting in my office doing a practice, I can think about this differently. I can use this time."

**Bunting:** Well I was thinking it would be really fun to do that, to really spend time. I mean a lot of people have, all through the symposiums, I haven't. I mean I have, of a lot of things, but I haven't. That, and - and there are some things I want to transcribe from my family. And I want a multigenerational family. On both my father's and mother's sides.

**Wiseman:** What do you want to transcribe?

**Bunting:** Now [words of] the great- great- grandparents of my children. I have my grandmother's diary from the time she -she wrote in it, for - I'm trying to think of how old she was. Most of my mother's childhood. Up to the last entry, is my wedding.

**Wiseman:** What happened at your wedding? [laughter]

**Bunting:** She just records things, you know? She wasn't like trying to write a great- you know- she- this is what happened. But underneath it, it's clearer to me how the family was functioning. And what she was doing,

**Wiseman:** And just recording the facts?

**Bunting:** to help it. Yes, I was trying to put them on a diagram. I had- yes, because I know some of these facts.

**Wiseman:** And you have those, of hers?

**Bunting:** I mean, that's a lot of writing. Bless her. I do. And she- and it was only like five lines a day.

**Wiseman:** Oh, were you lucky.

**Bunting:** If it were more than that it'd be hard. But I know. Yes. So that- I had been trying to type that up, but I- and do something with it. But, because projects like that, will reinforce a belief that there is something multigenerational that's being passed down.

And that you could actually be affected. By what the past has done. Somehow, most people don't like to know that.

**Wiseman:** That you're just, what, a clean slate when you (come), there's no influence? It's really scary, well,

**Bunting:** Right. [silence] Scary.

**Wiseman:** those are the ends of those questions, but I wanted to ask you, is there any - is there any question that you would like to answer? [silence] Any at all.

**Bunting:** [long silence]

**Wiseman:** No, any, in general.

**Bunting:** Out of those questions, you mean, or just any?

**Wiseman:** Well, here's a question. You describe a sig- a very personal experience, know- learning this theory, while in fact it was a very - it was a learning- it was- what was started as a learning experience became a very personal experience. For you. I guess I have a question, is how did Bowen do that and not get caught up in the individual relationships? Do you know what I mean? They were so personal, this theory leads to personal relationships. And yet, he really was a master at not, I guess that's how we (inaudible) manage that. How do you-

**Bunting:** He was. And some people could handle it. Well. And worm their way in.

**Wiseman:** So, what does that mean?

**Bunting:** I wasn't one of them [laughter] That meant- he gave off this message, well, he would always put me in triangles anyway. You know, like he did with everybody. "Oh, you and so-and-so, blah." He would always- [laughter] which is a way of saying, "I'm defining myself." Yeah. If I'm asking him a question, or I'm doing this, or that,

**Wiseman:** When you had gone after (help), if you-

**Bunting:** it's like "You and you and you," or "You're just like dadadadadadada." So, you know, what- how did we get back on Bowen, again?

**Wiseman:** Well how, I mean, the- he managed the relationships, by defining himself to people that were very important to him. [silence] Whadda you pick, when you think back on that, what do you remember? Of how he did that?

**Bunting:** Well, I certainly - well, he could be really straight-forward. That wasn't a good presentation.

**Wiseman:** Really? That wasn't a good-

**Bunting:** [laughter] You know? That wasn't, you know, that was too, you know,

**Wiseman:** He'd say that to you?

**Bunting:** what would the word even be, Oh, he'd say, or even worse, he would say, "Oh, there's brilliant Anne Blabbity blah doing this," you know?

**Wiseman:** "There's brilliant Anne (Docherty)?"

**Bunting:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah. Right. Which- so he's always That- and so I really- and the other thing is, he looked just like my father. [laughter]

**Wiseman:** What'd that do? That's-

**Bunting:** Threw me for a loop. Not just like my father, but he had a remarkable similarity. So, I was always careful around him I think, in some ways. And I think he knew that.

**Wiseman:** Careful meaning maintaining your distance- what'd you?

**Bunting:** Yes I, I maintained some distance. The last time I saw him, just before he died, he was at me again with this "You and so-and-so, and so-and-so, you're all alike." [laughter] Because you know, he was just trying to define himself. And he would know we were all coming in. For personal reasons.

**Wiseman:** It's a great thing. "You, you, you are all alike."

**Bunting:** Yeah. And the minute he says that, that's what he- that's how you detriangle. I mean, you detriangle immediately.

**Wiseman:** That's real-

**Bunting:** That's how he, he did.

**Wiseman:** And what (was) great. If I could do that when I was on the outside of something, like "You guys are really all alike, I'm the odd man out."

**Bunting:** No, he didn't mean it that way.

**Wiseman:** He would be (mean).

**Bunting:** He meant, "Oh, you're just alike. You know, do you really get this theory?"

**Wiseman:** Gosh, oh, wow.

**Bunting:** But, except it wasn't about that, it was about, "Don't look for togetherness with me."

**Wiseman:** Any (just) last thing (yet) that you want to recall?

**Bunting:** [laughter]

**Wiseman:** Of Bowen, or [mic noises]

**Bunting:** Well, I mean, I've - I have greatly valued all the people surrounding Bowen. They've been very important in my life. And he brought them together, as colleagues, as friends.

**Wiseman:** As friends or colleagues?

**Bunting:** I mean, he kept us all going. [laughter]

**Wiseman:** Or we kept him going, I mean, I think, for the group, kept him going. It's- how long did you know him?

**Bunting:** I began there I th- in '79, I think. I was there for three years. And then I was always around, I mean I was always at the clinical conferences, or presenting, whenever we were presenting.

**Wiseman:** You were there. Okay. And nothing-nothing else?

**Bunting:** Yeah.

**Wiseman:** That (bird) is pretty good.

**Bunting:** Not that comes to my mind right now. Except I'm really grateful to him. My life would've been quite different.

**Wiseman:** Oh, I think - I think I would have been dead. I don't think I would've survived. Without this theory. I think I would have been eaten up. And- [tape ends]