April 19, 2021

Jennifer Long:

My name is Jennifer Long, and I am conducting an interview for the Murray Bowen Archives Oral History Project. It is April 19th of 2021, and I have the privilege of talking with Dr. Walter Smith this morning. What would you like to tell us about yourself and your current professional background?

Walter Smith:

Okay. So, lots to say about my background. I'm a psychologist by training and I've come into the field of psychology... when in college, interested in civil rights and social change. Went into college to be an engineer, decided in college that I was much more interested in how to make a difference in society with a lot of social issues, and then got interested in the field of psychology, and then later in the field of psychotherapy. So I [started] a Master's program in 1972. I worked in corrections for a few years, but then became a therapist in 1977.

Walter Smith:

The first week I became a therapist, I saw a family, as a therapist. I worked in a Community Mental Health Center here in Pittsburgh, and I knew there was something going on in this family and I knew I didn't understand. And then I saw a brochure for training in family therapy. So I went to the training, and Io and behold, I got introduced to Bowen Family Systems Theory by watching Dr. Bowen's chalk-talk tapes, which were these black and white tapes where Dr. Bowen is standing at a blackboard and going through the various important concepts of his theory. And that was my introduction. That was 1977.

Walter Smith:

Today I still practice as a psychologist. There's lots to say about my career. I spent time in the mental health field until about 1987. Then I shifted to work for a Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Organization in 1987. I was a clinical director, then executive director. I left there in 2012, and then I became the director of Child Welfare Services in the county where I live in Pittsburgh, and I did that until 2018. And currently I still have a private practice that I've had since 1985. And I'm also trustee, soon to be chair, of the board of a national foundation called Casey Family Programs Foundation, that's really focused on national efforts to improve foster care and really focus on how to support children and families across the country.

Jennifer Long:

Thank you for that. When did you meet Dr. Bowen?

Walter Smith:

Yeah, so I met Dr. Bowen in 1980. I studied for two years in Pittsburgh. Paulina McCullough, is a person who is from Chile, and she was really my first mentor. She came to Pittsburgh around 1970, I believe, 1971, maybe it's even 1969. I'm not clear about the date. But Paulina McCullough was one of the first people who was a non-medical student, she was a social worker, to study with Dr. Bowen in 1961. And so when she came to Pittsburgh she worked at Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic, they had a family therapy program. In the mid-seventies, early/mid-seventies, she started a training course on Bowen theory, and I took that course in 1978 and 1979. And upon completing two years there, I was interested in continued study and decided since I had been hearing about Bowen theory through Miss McCullough's course, that I would apply to the postgraduate program at Georgetown. So, I started the

Georgetown postgraduate program in 1980, and I was there three years in the postgraduate program. And then I continued in a seminar, a follow-up seminar that met four times a year, until 1989.

Jennifer Long: How did Dr. Bowen interact with you?

Walter Smith:

So, in those years, in 1980, I was really fascinated by Dr. Bowen-the-person, as well as Dr. Bowen the, just sort of, the-founder-of-a-theory. He was a challenging lecturer. He was someone who had very clear ideas about how he wanted the classroom to be organized and structured. He would come into the postgraduate program and he would present, and then he would allow us time to ask questions and to sort of ponder things. But there were times when Dr. Bowen also would call on us in the postgraduate program. So it wouldn't be unusual for Dr. Bowen once to say, "Walter, please explain the concept of differentiation," or something like that. And then as a student, you'd be pretty nervous and you would sit there and sort of muddle your way through.

Walter Smith:

And at this time, and Dr. Bowen used to have the postgraduate students write belief papers, where we had to write a paper, present it to other students in the class, I think there were initially 18 of us that started in the postgraduate program, about something that we believed in. And so, we would go to Dr. Bowen's lecture, and we would take turns in presenting our beliefs about various aspects of important ideas in our life. And for those students that didn't write a belief paper he would say, "You have to leave the room." So if you didn't write your belief paper, then you had to leave. And it was clear that he created expectations, and he really wanted all of us to meet those expectations, and that it was clear that he was going to do the best job that he knew how to do as presenting his best thinking, his best ideas, and he was not focused on developing a personal relationship with us or to foster relationships among the students who were in the postgraduate program, but it was really an opportunity for each of us or try to kind of step up and be the best self that we knew how to be. It was an interesting time to get to know Dr. Bowen. In 1980-81, it was before he had two different surgeries that actually changed his voice. They were, as I recall, aneurysm surgeries. And so, it was an interesting time to be in a postgraduate program as he went through those transitions. It was also during the time of the postgraduate program his mother died.

Walter Smith:

So I remember that because he came in after the death of his mother and did a lecture in which he presented his own family, and just for the hour and a half or so that he was there, did a rather long presentation describing his effort and his family, the role of his mother and his family, her importance to him in his life. He, during the time in between his two surgeries, he did presentations about... he had some concern about dying, so he did some presentations about death and dying. So I think one of the things that stood out for me, particularly in that first year, was this was someone that did a lot of work on himself, and a lot of work to understand his role in his own family of origin, a lot of work at defining where he stood on important matters in psychology, understanding human functioning, understanding families, and made a lot of effort to try to be as clear as he could with others where he stood on important issues of theory. And I think it left all of us room, if we did our work, to describe where we stood on important issues, but he was tough. I mean, one time he asked me a question about something. I don't remember what it was. And I started the answer to the question with,

"Well, Dr. Bowen, I don't know." "What do you mean you don't know?" And he would pound on the desk and say, "If you don't know, then why are you speaking?" And I said, "But I'm trying to say," "What? You said you don't know."

Walter Smith:

So he was someone that really could nudge us to keep trying to be clear, to better define what it is that we thought we believed. To better define what it meant to sort of ask these larger questions about science and theory, and to try to then take a clear stance for what we thought, what we believed, what was important to us. I think he had a way of being, I think at times, intimidating. It was a little scary. I think a lot of us as postgraduate students were a little taken aback by him. There were times that he would come in and talk about the Bowen Center, or the Georgetown Family Center at that time, and talk about what was working at Georgetown Family Center, what wasn't working at the Georgetown Family Center.

Walter Smith:

There are times he said... he came in one time during my postgraduate years and talked about, that he was going to leave the Georgetown Family Center if the faculty didn't straighten up, and then went on to give a whole talk about organizations in the center. And I think it was this ability to sit with him and to listen to someone who is trying to make his best effort to struggle with important questions and ideas. And I think it left me, but I think it left others, with some idea about what the work is. The work is with oneself and the work is with some of these pivotal questions.

Jennifer Long:

Thank you. What did you learn from the way he managed himself with you?

Walter Smith:

Yeah, so there's several things that I learned and it's some... One thing I learned was that the effort with the theory was, is something that I would have to figure out for myself. And what would happen for me was in the second year, the postgraduate program, I came to realize that when I was in Pittsburgh I couldn't think as clearly as I could when I traveled to the postgraduate program and I was sitting in class, and I could really think more broadly, in terms of systems, I could better see emotional process and the work I was doing in my family of origin, and then when I was in Pittsburgh, it was just harder for me to be as clear. And I began to wonder, particularly after Dr. Bowen's surgery is like, "How could I manage this work on my own without being so dependent on the Georgetown Family Center for my experience here with faculty and with Dr. Bowen in order to think for myself?"

Walter Smith:

So one of the things that I came to believe is that I needed to go back and take a look at Dr. Bowen's body of work. When I went to the postgraduate program, I would spend, we were there three days at a time, and in the evenings, I would spend time watching video tapes. I went back and read Dr. Bowen's early chapters on his work when he put members of a family in the hospital, and then struggled with how to better understand the family relationships that had something to do with a family member with lots of symptoms. And I realized that I needed to find my own laboratory, my own sort of way of studying families and taking a look at families.

Walter Smith:

So, one of the things I learned is that the effort for me to understand Family Systems Theory, had to be one that I had to pursue for myself. And I had to find my own path to figure that out. I had to find my own way of watching families, observing family, studying families. And it wasn't as simple as simply learning the theory in the traditional ways that I always learned everything else. And I think I got that from realizing that this was Dr. Bowen's life effort and not simply a set of theoretical ideas. They were a set of theoretical ideas. They were about humans, and it is a branch of science, but he came to this through a pretty enormous effort, pretty dedicated effort on his part, and if I were to make a contribution, understand the theory, I also needed to do that. Dr. Bowen had this way of being direct with you without it feeling so personal. He could have expectations for the work that you said you were going to do, that he expected us postgraduate students to do without it being work that he cared if you did, but if you decided you were going to step up and do the work, then he would step in and join you. He would work as hard as you did. He would put as much effort into it as you did. So I think it left me a little bit freer to try to figure out for myself, "What did Walter Smith need to do in order to really know and learn and understand the theory?" And I realized that I needed to do this more for myself and less to sort of learn something in the traditional ways I had been learning.

Walter Smith:

I think I started the postgraduate program with lots of my own questions about my family, about the work I was doing as a psychotherapist. And I think those questions became even more important as I got to know Dr. Bowen, as I watched him pursue his questions. I think it helped me realize the importance of me pursuing mine. And this all became really important when I joined the organization that was focused on child abuse prevention and treatment, because I really left the mental health field in Pittsburgh, an agency I was working at, to join this child abuse prevention and treatment organization in order to find my own laboratory, my own way of being able to watch families. I went from this rather large mental health agency to a smaller organization of 25 people, but we were doing a lot of work at that time on physical abuse and sexual abuse, seeing whole families. And it really gave me a chance to use child abuse as a laboratory to watch families, realizing that what I was maybe able to discern and see in watching families where there are symptoms of child abuse probably related to all families, and not just families with symptoms, with those symptoms. And I think that that effort on my part came directly from watching Dr. Bowen's effort.

Walter Smith:

Another thing I should say is in Pittsburgh, we were relatively close to Washington DC. There were six of us that made an effort to start the Western Pennsylvania Family Center. That started in 1985. But Dr. Bowen started to travel to Pittsburgh three to four times a year in 1984. Dr. Loretta Nowakowski was a professor of nursing at the School of Nursing at the University of Pittsburgh. And she brought in Dr. Bowen for a lecture series and then starting in 1985, and this lecture series continues in a different form today, but has continued since. Dr. Bowen came for the Bowen Lecture Series 1985 through 1989, I think maybe even parts of 1990.

Walter Smith:

So I was able to see Dr. Bowen in the postgraduate program, but also hear him personally lecture in Pittsburgh three to four times a year. And then as a founding member of the Family Center, we always had dinner with Dr. Bowen the night before he lectured, on a Saturday. So I was able to sit and just have more informal contact with him pretty regularly for those five to five and a half years before he died in

1990. And so that was another way I got to know Dr. Bowen more informally. So not just in a postgraduate program, but also then.

Walter Smith:

And again, I would say what I've said already about the ability to sit with him, ask questions, watch the way in which he struggled to get clarity about what he observed in families, about trying to better define a theory that described a family emotional system. Just watching the pretty personal effort involved in it. It was, it's really a lifetime work that he was involved in. And just realize that he not only thought in terms of emotional systems about a theory or about families, but also about the Family Center, about his own family, about the field, the family therapy field. That he was constantly making an effort to watch, observe, and think systemically about almost everything that he did. And that was really useful.

Jennifer Long:

Was there a reason for studying Bowen theory in your own family?

Walter Smith:

Yeah. My interest in mental health was for many reasons. I was interested in social change and social movements. Going to college in '69, it was a time of civil rights, so I was really interested in social change. And also, my father was an electrical technician, so I had an inclination to be an engineer. My mother was a social worker. She graduated from Howard University in 1943 and worked as a social worker. And so about halfway into my... after my first year of college, I really got interested in the social movement. My mother was active in the Civil Rights Movement, and I was inclined, too.

Walter Smith:

But, so on that level of just areas of interest, I think my parents had enormous influence, in a way that I was going to be an engineer, which I was really interested in science then, and then later interested in social efforts, social work. But I had an older brother who developed schizophrenia in the mid to late seventies. And I always knew there was this difference between my brother's functioning and my functioning. Apart from the time I was 12, he was four years older than me, I really started to see that we were in the same family, but we really had two very different levels of functioning.

Walter Smith:

And so, when I got interested in psychology in college, I started reading a lot about... to understand something about mental disorders and how they develop and try to explain. And in the early seventies, I was reading a lot in psychoanalytic theory and this idea, the "schizophrenic-genic mother" was pretty big then. And it never made sense to me because my brother and I had the same parents, but yet we ended up, very different levels of functioning. So, when I saw Dr. Bowen's original Chalk-Talk tapes that would have been 1977, 78...77. It was really the first time in all the theory I had been reading that someone actually explained this conceptually.

Walter Smith:

How could one understand sharp differences in functioning of siblings who had the same parents, raised in very similar family, emotional conditions, but whose level of functioning was really different. And it just made it... Something rung. It just made a lot of sense to me. Something rung true about that. So I started to get really interested in, "How does one explain these sort of more fundamental questions?" And in Paulina McCullough's course, there was an emphasis on doing research on one's own family of origin. And as I started to present what I knew of my family history, and then started to develop relationships with extended family. Start to begin bridging some cutoffs in my family, start to begin to explore what is the multi-generational process.

Walter Smith:

Things really started to make more sense about how does one explain these differences in siblings, my brother and I. And I think I spent a lot of my life kind of thinking my brother was the special one and I was on the outside. And I was always in a bit of a resentful position that sort of somehow he got more from my parents than I did. It was the first time it really started to make sense to me that being a child under the emotional focus of one's parents, given some of the anxious events that went on in my family, may have made my brother, on one hand, special to my parents. They spent a lot of time worrying about him, focused on him, but that has a huge impact and can have a huge impact on that child's functioning.

Walter Smith:

And me, and my parents just never worried about me. They just always figured, "Oh, you'll be fine." And whatever I did or decided to do, there was lots of space for me to sort of figure out for myself. And so that was really helpful, and the theory is really helpful, and it made really kind of basic sense. And I think that's part of what got me to pursue interest in it. I think when I started as a therapist, I was always interested in theories. So long before my study in Bowen theory, I was interested in psychological theories, but when I started as a therapist, it was always important to me to try to figure out a clinical hypothesis for all my clients and sort of start to put things together. So when I started seeing families early on in '77, I was really kind of challenged to figure out how does one explain all that you could see that might be going on in the family with a hypothesis or some theoretical construct. So when I ran into Bowen theory, in his Chalk-Talk tapes, I think it really sparked my personal interests, but it also sparked my sort of professional interests and tried to explain what I either knew about my own life or what I could see in the clinical families I was treating but could not explain.

Jennifer Long:

Has your family and/or your life been changed?

Walter Smith:

Yeah. So it's always an interesting question. And I would say, I think the effort I've made in keeping Bowen theory central to my personal and professional life has been pretty fundamental in helping me function as well as I have. I've been fairly successful in some ways. I don't think my efforts with Bowen theory have fundamentally changed the course of my family. I think my family marches along in the way it has. I think it has certainly helped me to better manage myself in my family. It has certainly helped me to better manage my life and better manage my professional life. I certainly have been able to derive for myself principles for how to make important decisions for myself. Principles that sort of guide my functioning both personally and professionally.

Walter Smith:

I think the theory has really contributed greatly to my ability to kind of engage complex social problems like child abuse and try to sort through, "How does one try to make an effort to do something about something as complex and vexing as the problem of child abuse in families?" I think in those ways I've made a contribution. I think... I've been impressed with how much I have not changed. How much

aspects of who I am or... When I went to my 50th high school reunion, everybody recognized me right away. Everybody knew who I was and people said, "Oh, you're just like the Walter I've always known." So it's not like somehow some basic aspects of me are different.

Walter Smith:

But I do think on a very personal and professional side, I have found enormous meaning and purpose in living the life that I've lived with a really clear sense of my goals and purpose and meaning to the things that I've done and being able to have a life that in which I've set up, I'm on my seventh five-year plan for my life. I started writing them in the mid-eighties. And to have a life where I'm able to set up goals for myself, set up principles every five years to guide, my important decisions, the direction of where I want to go and then to be able to organize my life to make those things happen has added an enormous amount of meaning and purpose and direction to my life.

Walter Smith:

I don't think I would've been able to do those things without a theory that really speaks to this idea of differentiation of self and how does one define itself and how does one go through an effort as part of a family or a profession or a society, define a place for oneself in family, in society, in a profession, and then hold ground and stand on principles that you've declared to be important. I think the theory has been a part of that, but I think saying it's a theory probably understates the effort to learn the theory. So there's the theory, which are the ideas and are awfully important, but then there's the years of work one does with oneself and one's own family. There's the years of preparing for presentations and trying to think through yet again, "How do I manage these complex interlocking relationships, whether they're in my family or in the organization I'm working for, or in my professional life?" But I think all of those challenges as well as having a theory to help me think through those challenges has certainly made my life better.

Jennifer Long:

How do you think Bowen theory will impact psychiatry or society?

Walter Smith:

I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I think the verdict's out not just on Bowen theory, but all the theories that stand today. I sometimes joke with people when I'm lecturing or talking that 200 years from now, people will sort of laugh at us. "They used to sit in rooms and talk to each other." So certainly the science that we're a part of is relatively new. It's just not that old. I do think there are some fundamental aspects of Bowen theory that will be influential. Now, how influential they'll be in science, I'm not sure. But I think this idea that one can develop a science of human functioning that is really akin, related, interconnected with the other natural sciences is... it's really a central idea in Bowen theory that I think is really important.

Walter Smith:

It wasn't until I really started studying Bowen theory that I started to realize just how differently we humans think about human functioning from the way we think about the rest of life on the planet. And I think Dr. Bowen's idea that life is all part of a natural process and that there can be a theory that is integral with the other natural sciences that begins to explain how humans function, as well as how ants in a colony function, zebra in a herd function, how other living organisms function. That we can develop a single science, or at least sciences that can be interlocking, is terribly important. And the degree to

which Bowen theory will influence that, I don't know, but I do think that as science moves along, particularly the field of psychology and the science of human functioning, I think eventually we'll get in that direction as a body of science and we'll less depend on constructs like the ego and superego and id, and less depend on just looking at behavior or thinking, we'll move more in the direction of us humans as part of the rest of life. I still think largely people think about human functioning separate from the rest of living things on the planet. I still think we've come up and generate ideas that are distinct and don't readily apply to other living things. So what I'm hoping is that Bowen theory and all of us who are in this field make some contribution to that effort, because I think that direction is a key direction for not only our field but for science.

Jennifer Long:

Have you developed ideas that could amend or refine the theory and/or do you have evidence to further prove that theory?

Walter Smith:

Yeah. I've never been that interested in developing new ideas. I don't know that I've developed any new idea. I do think what I've been really interested and focused on is, how can these ideas in Bowen theory help advance the quality of human life? So if you take a problem like child abuse, which is really a rather vexing issue: one out of five, six kids in the United States are sexually abused before age 18. So you take something that's relatively common. You take family violence, and it seems to go on year after year after year, and I always say, and as I said to myself many times, "Well, if you're so smart, why don't we do something about something like that?" Which is really important.

Walter Smith:

And so, I do think I've been able to make a contribution to understanding how Bowen theory might be able to change the ordinary way we think about a problem like family violence, and to approach it in a way that actually could make a difference for individual families, but maybe also for groups of families in a community and certainly for how organizations may practice. And so I think I've made a contribution in the way the theory can be applied and the way the theory can be useful. And to me, the goal of science isn't simply to explain, and it isn't simply to predict. I mean, those things are certainly part of science, but it's also to explain and predict in ways that actually become useful and enhance human life.

Walter Smith:

So I think the sciences that will survive will be the ones that actually do make a difference and make a difference in the quality of our lives. And I think there are lots of really enormously complicated, vexing problems that continue. Structural racism is a really kind of vexing issue, and I've watched organizations and people and groups go at a problem like that for decades and decades. And you get some movement, but there's something about these rather vexing human dilemmas that keep perpetuating themselves. And I think, because of that, they become really important to look at. And it's certainly our effort to just say, "Well, that's a problem, here's a solution." And just apply the solution to it, will take care of it, because it doesn't work. It hasn't worked well.

Walter Smith:

And I think in these areas, we've been working on child abuse prevention for decades and decades and decades, and how much progress is there? So I think we have to stop and say, "Let's reform the questions. Let's get a different set of hypotheses about what might be going on here." So to that end, I

think I've been able to think about family violence in a way that's more neutral, less polarizing. That's able to bring a way of understanding how aggression and violence is a part of human functioning rather than a problem to be solved, rather than pathology to be cured, rather than a disease that someone has to get rid of, and it's more embedded in and the way we as humans function and maybe other species as a function.

Walter Smith:

And in that way, begin to better understand, if we want to do better and not have children injured in families, there are ways to get there but they're not as simple as, "We just need a campaign against child abuse and we'll be able to reduce it." I won't get into all the details of that. But so to that end, I think I've made a contribution. It hasn't really been my goal to add, quote, "to the theory," and that might be for others. I do think the most remarkable part of theory to me, although there is a big focus on differentiation of self, to me, the most remarkable concept of Dr. Bowen's has been the family emotional unit and to understand the functioning of the family as a single emotional unit, I think is the most underlying idea in the theory.

Walter Smith:

And the idea and concept of differentiation of self, I think, is the most important concept. But I think it terms the underlying ideas, the family as an emotional unit is... it's just a remarkable idea, to think that families as we see them, and I think most people... Dr. Bowen said once, "I'd like to get through one day thinking systems the entire day." And I was always struck by that thinking, "It is so difficult for us to really look at ourselves or our family or families and think about everything we see, it's really part of this interlocking set of relationships in which we're all, in every moment, simultaneously influencing the function of others that we're highly attached with, rather than seeing individuals who are interacting and seeing sequences of interaction.

Walter Smith:

So this notion of the family emotional unit, I think, it's really been central. I mean, I think that's his idea, I think, I've tried to build on that idea in order to try to explain, or at least understand family violence and then take some of those ideas into very practical applications in public agencies or in my practice as a psychologist in order to better understand family violence. But I would say those would be my major contributions.

Jennifer Long:

My last question is which parts of our society and which professions might benefit from Bowen's ideas today yet effectively have no access to them?

Walter Smith:

Yeah. I mean, it might be a little queer to say most, but I would say in most of the circles that I travel, that I work in, the work I do for the foundation is nationally, so lots of different places... the work I've done in child welfare and public agencies, other work I've done with other foundations, I would say, not only is there not knowledge of Bowen theory, if people have heard of it, they don't really understand it. But there's not even an awareness of some of the more fundamental ideas that I think are part of Bowen theory, like that the family can be seen as a single emotional unit. That an organization could be thought of as an emotional system. That what we're seeing humans, is driven by natural processes and forces that are in other aspects of nature.

Walter Smith:

I think largely what I see is that the disease model and that people see a problem, they're trying to think of what to do about it. So they want a treatment. They go after it, they measure outcomes. They see that something's changed and then someone else tries to modify and improve the treatment. Not a bad strategy, so I don't want to sound like, "No, that doesn't work." It does work but then it doesn't work. So there are real limits to it. And most of the people I see don't think beyond that, and don't think beyond trying to change and fix what they're focused on. And so I would say most parts of society could benefit not so much from just learning Bowen theory, but actually learning an approach to vexing complex human dilemmas that really tries to underscore that each of us are part of the problem.

Walter Smith:

It's not something out there we should do something about, but it is out there. It exists as part of natural forces that are in nature in us. That we first need to understand that and appreciate the way in which it has emerged and developed, and then begin to figure out newer strategies for how to address it. I don't know how those ideas, quote, "can get out there." I think your colleagues that we have in the Bowen Family Systems field make enormous efforts at this. There's lots of centers, lots of professionals out there, but I think a large swath of society could benefit from a newer way of thinking about how to address important human concerns rather than just the disease model.

Jennifer Long:

Thank you for that and thank you for your time. Do you have any last words?

Walter Smith:

Oh, I could go on for a long time, but I do appreciate the work of the Archives Project. I think it's important work for now but also for the future. For those of us who had the benefit of spending some time with Dr. Bowen in person, it's important to try to capture, not for personal reasons but really for reasons of the theory, capture that experience. So thank you, Archives.

Jennifer Long:

Thank you again for your time and for the interview today.

Walter Smith:

All the best, Jennifer. Thank you. Take care.