

## **Interview with Laura Brooks**

**Conducted by Andrea Schara**

**August 31, 2023**

Andrea Schara:

My watch tells me that it's the 31st of August.

Laura Brooks:

I think your watch is right.

Andrea Schara:

Apple comes through. Well, Laura, I wanted to thank you for taking the time to do an interview for the archives, and I'm looking forward to spending an hour with you. I think that, you know, I cannot remember what year it was when I first saw you, in maybe '86? Or what year was it that you ...

Laura Brooks:

I think that was the first year that I started the four times a year program, and then I moved back East and started doing the Tuesday night program after that.

Andrea Schara:

Yeah, so you did one year in '86, like in?

Laura Brooks:

And four years in-person, the Tuesday night program, which was quite a gift. I drove down from Hagerstown every Tuesday night, and I think the program was probably about three hours long. But having that weekly exposure to Bowen Family Systems Theory was really, really just, it was a privilege. It was very helpful to me to have that weekly contact. So yeah, five years and I still had so much to learn. I'd only just begun.

Andrea Schara:

Well, what's your background?

Laura Brooks:

I have a master's in social work. It's interesting when I think back that when I got my bachelor's degree, actually in public relations, I knew I wanted to work with people. that I was curious about people, and not necessarily the family, but just how the human mind worked. And if I'd had a little bit more, someone, a mentor, I could have sorted that through --that might've been helpful. And yet, I think it was probably helpful to take a few years to sort of wander around the country after I completed my BS. I mean, I was self-sufficient. I lived in New England. I moved out to Southern California. And then finally after two years in Southern California, I decided to join VISTA, which is the Domestic Peace Corps. The Peace Corps had offered me an assignment that was not appealing.

So, I ended up being assigned to Des Moines, Iowa, and I stayed there for 12 years and it was a beautiful place to make some mistakes and do a lot of growth. And I got my master's degree in social work at University of Iowa, and this was in the late '70s when family therapy was really in the fore. So, we had one of those general classes in the program covering Haley and Minuchin. They were really hot at the time, but Bowen was in there too.

Andrea Schara:

He snuck in.

Laura Brooks:

And I heard one of the ... What's that?

Andrea Schara:

He snuck in.

Laura Brooks:

Yeah, he snuck in. No, he was there. He got my attention. I wasn't really particularly well-trained, but was curious about Bowen theory. When I was working on my graduate degree, I was in a meeting where a therapist worked with one of the other participants in the meeting exploring her family of origin. And I was so impressed by the process of looking at the multi-generational family, this gal's functional position in her family. That was a real eye-opener for me. That definitely caught my attention.

And then Mike Kerr came out to Des Moines at one point, and after his presentation, I went up to him and said, "Dr. Kerr, this is all great, but this would not work on the people I'm seeing." I saw this as methodology. I mean, I just totally obviously didn't get it, but I hung in there.

So, I think that part of my pattern through the last few decades is when I get anxious or I'm making a mess of my life, I'm highly motivated. And as my first marriage fell apart in Des Moines, I started in coaching with Don Schoulberg at Menninger.

Andrea Schara:

Oh, wow. Okay.

Laura Brooks:

And then I did two or three years of coaching with him. I was also in his small training program in Kansas City. I was really able to get better grounded, a little clearer about the theory. And then eventually started thinking about moving East, not just to be closer to my family, reconnect with them, but to be in the PGP. I had done that four times a year program at the Bowen Center for one year before moving East

So that coaching with Don Schoulberg, I remember the first meeting where he just nailed what was going on for me and just a few comments got me thinking. I think one of the most important shifts in working with the theory and working on differentiation is shifting away from what the other person's doing to you and how the other person needs to change and shifting to oneself and one's part in the process. For some reason, really, that piece came easily for me and I was off and running. I wanted to learn more. I really didn't understand the theory that much at all, but I did get that. I got that piece.

Andrea Schara:

That's huge.

Laura Brooks:

I was in the driver's seat. I mean, I wasn't really excited about being in the driver's seat, but I could see the potential for being in the driver's seat and that sense of agency that was sort of buried deep in me.

Andrea Schara:

So being in the driver's seat and Don Schoulberg kind of pushing from behind in a way.

Laura Brooks:

Yeah.

Andrea Schara:

His kind of clear is very clear about focusing on self.

Laura Brooks:

He was very clear. And it was a combination, but I still was not thinking about moving back East at that point. But what happened was I started connecting with my family. For some reason, unbeknownst to me, I still haven't found language to describe it, I moved through my very, very, very large extended family in Baltimore very easily. I just had no problem calling people, asking them questions, visiting with them. Of course, I paced the process, but I did it well enough that I didn't scare off too many people. A few people I think wondered, "What's this woman want? Is she coming back for money or what's this about?"

Andrea Schara:

My third cousin. This is my third cousin, shows up on the doorstep, what the heck?

Laura Brooks:

No, I had enough first cousins, I didn't have to go to thirds. I went to some seconds. So I was starting to move back towards the family and connecting. And then out of the blue, my father retired and he never went anywhere. He never traveled anywhere, but there's an exception, but I won't go into that. It's a one-time exception. But he and my mother for the first time after 10 years of me being in Des Moines, they came to visit me and I was like astounded, but very excited. And it was around their wedding anniversary, I threw a big cocktail party with my friends and actually the guy I was seeing at the time who I eventually married. But it was within about six to nine months of that visit that I started thinking about moving East.

Andrea Schara:

Okay.

Laura Brooks:

Okay. And this is after being gone for about 15 years with college and wandering the country. I love visiting these places. I was more adventurous than I realized. So anyway. Yeah, so I have a clinical

practice. I've worked for a bunch of nonprofits, small nonprofits, and that was fairly strategic because they paid for continuing ed.

Andrea Schara:

Okay, that was major.

Laura Brooks:

And that was huge because social workers don't make much money. And that was fine, I was living in Des Moines. It was very affordable. I made it work, but yeah.

Andrea Schara:

Well, I'm going to go back a little bit just to the magic of Bowen theory in a way that you just kind of put your toes in the water and go to visit your family. And I don't know whether that had something or a lot to do with your dad then coming to visit you, your interest in the family. I don't know. I don't know how he thought about that. But I mean, this is a pretty good process in which you're focused on yourself, you decide to make contact with your family, and then magic happens. These unusual things happen when people are brought back together again. And I don't pretend to understand that, but I've seen this many times that one of the hallmarks of Bowen, I don't think any of the other family therapists got into this that I can remember, that you should go visit your family.

Laura Brooks:

And it wasn't just visiting them. I mean, I had a pleasant but very distant relationship with them. It wasn't very personal while I was living off the East Coast. I didn't have much definition. I mean, I went along to get along kind of thing. But then when I had done the coaching with Don Schoulberg, I just found an old journal from the early '80s when I made plans for the visits back home. I used to visit back home too, and I'd sort of just say, "Okay, well, I'm coming. Tell me what you want me to do," if not directly, at least implicitly. And I'd go along, people would want to get together with me. We'd go there or there. Well, then I started defining what I was going to do and I ran into some big snags with my parents who had their own ideas.

And then in this journal, I saw all the triangles, my siblings being drawn into it. They were working me for my parents' sake, "You don't want to go see that aunt. Why are you going to see that aunt? Why aren't you spending more time with Mom and Dad? And instead of having dinner with each of us individually, why don't we all get together and have dinner because Mom and Dad want more time with you?" I mean, it's all right there.

Andrea Schara:

The emotional pressure of togetherness.

Laura Brooks:

And the thing that impressed me the most, and this was the thing that was getting me into the most trouble with my family, was I was very sure about what I was doing. I have no idea where that came from. I call myself a sleeper in the family. There were hidden gems within me that were coming to the surface, and my family wanted them to go away, like, "What's going on? And why are you doing this? This isn't like you." I mean a lot of pressure.

So that's where the biggest showdown happened with my mother when I wanted to go visit an aunt who was unpopular, I won't go into details, and sort of cutoff from the family. I asked my mother for a ride to the bus to go up to New Jersey, and my mother started crying. We were practically nose to nose, at least we were toes to toes. And she tried to stop me, "Why are you going there? I don't want you going there. I'm not going to give you a ride, blah, blah, blah, blah."

And I was pretty amazed. I'm even more amazed looking back. How did I stand my ground with this firstborn bossy mother who liked to have her way? But I did. And she never went there again, trying to change a decision that I had made that she was uncomfortable with. So that happened before they came out to visit. So that sort of stuff was starting to shift. The triangles were starting to shift in the family, and they got calmed down enough that they were able to move towards me.

Andrea Schara:

When you say triangles are shifting, are you talking about your siblings that were also kind of piling on, if I'm listening to you?

Laura Brooks:

Yeah, I didn't realize how protective they were of my parents, that when my parents got upset that they pulled the others in, who then worked on me in an effort to help my mother and father calm down. That was all sort of dormant because I'd always been so compliant. So, it's not that the triangles weren't there, they just got expressed and forcefully.

Andrea Schara:

I remember how long it took me to understand triangles that two could gang up on the third person. I just assumed that was just the way life was. I didn't give it a name or realize the danger of these two people piling up and doing you in.

Laura Brooks:

And in this case, I think my three siblings were all piling on talking amongst themselves by piling on. So there are all of those interlocking triangles as well.

Andrea Schara:

And you could see those? That's pretty amazing.

Laura Brooks:

Oh, yeah. Well, and reading about them, looking back, I don't know, the theory guided me. I knew I was doing something different. I knew it was going to stir things up. I knew that a lot of things were going to emerge, but I couldn't predict exactly what it was going to look like, but I was prepared.

Andrea Schara:

That is a great insight that theory predicts what's possible, what might happen. And you run some hypothesis about if I do this, then that might happen. I mean, it's amazing how predictable people are without even being aware of it. And then all of a sudden you have this theory that enables you to look at all this stuff-

Laura Brooks:

So I definitely-

Andrea Schara:

... and not get too excited, hopefully.

Laura Brooks:

So the piece of it that's not quite as predictable is the intensity.

Andrea Schara:

Yeah, okay.

Laura Brooks:

That's a hard term to define. But would I have predicted that my mother would throw a tantrum? No.

Andrea Schara:

No.

Laura Brooks:

I was sort of embarrassed for her afterwards, but she threw a tantrum. Yeah, it was pretty amazing. The other aspect of this is my functional position in the family was not to cause trouble. My three siblings were causing plenty. So I was sort of the sleeper in the family. I just went along. I did the right thing for the most part. So this was a very different person that was emerging.

Andrea Schara:

And the early credit in terms of the relationship with Don Schoulberg and then Mike Kerr.

Laura Brooks:

Correct. Correct. It was pretty seamless going from one to the other. Don Schoulberg was a little bit more directed, but Mike could be at times with just a comment or two, or maybe a very light suggestion, or what about this or that. And my understanding of the theory when I was seeing Don Schoulberg, of course, it was the first few years, it was very rudimentary. But I got the cutoff piece and I got the piece, the word that he used to describe me, which is still true, it's just a matter of intensity, is that I'm a people pleaser. And I thought, "Oh, that's a problem? Really? That's part of the problem here?"

At that time, my first marriage was falling apart. So that was the shift that was so helpful to me. It worked for me to think, okay, I'm trying too hard to adapt to this husband of mine, and it's not working. It's definitely not working. I'm digging a hole. So that was the phrase that I carried with me. Okay.

Andrea Schara:

The people pleaser phrase?

Laura Brooks:

Yeah, the people pleaser thing. I like people to like me. I don't like to stir things up, but I mean-

Andrea Schara:

I'm a Southern woman, so I was trained to be that way. And I'll tell you one story with Dr. Bowen. I went to lunch with him one time because our time at Walter Reed, where he was doing the clinical conference, ran over. And then I guess he was hungry, so he was like, "Let's go to the Howard Johnson's over here in Friendship Heights and have lunch." And then we walked in and the woman has a button on, I'm here to please you.

Laura Brooks:

Oh, that's great.

Andrea Schara:

And he says, "Don't you want one of those buttons? I've already got too many of them. I don't need another people pleaser. No way." But yeah, things like that, that people take for granted, of course, you're going to be nice, of course, you come from a nice family, of course, you have manners. But meanwhile you've sold or given away your left or right arm.

Laura Brooks:

I hear you. I wasn't in a Southern family, but I was in a family where my parents, particularly my mother was underwater with my three siblings. So the message was really, don't add to my troubles.

Andrea Schara:

Oh, don't add to my troubles. Look at all that I'm dealing with.

Laura Brooks:

I turned that upside down, going to visit this unpopular aunt who's going to have a bad influence on me.

Andrea Schara:

Do you think anybody in your family got or became interested in Bowen theory because of seeing the changes you were going through?

Laura Brooks:

Not at all.

Andrea Schara:

Yeah.

Laura Brooks:

Pretty amazing.

Andrea Schara:

Yeah.

Laura Brooks:

Pretty amazing. Not at all. I mean, what they're seeing-

Andrea Schara:  
How about your husband?

Laura Brooks:  
Pardon me?

Andrea Schara:  
Your husband?

Laura Brooks:

Yeah. I think you should do interviews with spouses who live with long time students of Bowen theory. Once when I was getting off my son's back, my husband said to me ... And I was holding my son more self-responsible except I was not doing as much for my son when he was probably in middle school because I realized I was over-functioning. So I was just not doing that or trying to tame that and letting him figure things out. My husband looked at me at one point and said, "I see what you're doing to Chauncey, and you're doing that same thing to me." It was great, like, "You can see it?"

And you know what? We're still working on it after 34 years. I mean this is a lifetime process, commitment. I think that's one thing that I'm glad I didn't know at the beginning that I'd still be working on it 47 years later, regulating these patterns. They're always there as a default. Under the right conditions, they start rearing their head a bit. But I can see even now how I'm making progress, how I use my energy, where I am invested, how I deal with these old patterns that are still there, but in the background more. When they do come up, how do I deal with them? It just is cleaner. The whole thing is just cleaner and takes a little less energy. Now, am I reaching nirvana? No. And I'll never get there in this lifetime.

Andrea Schara:  
Where is nirvana?

Laura Brooks:

And even with my children, I can see how I manage anxiety differently, basically. It's one way of putting it.

Andrea Schara:  
Well, your life changed.

Laura Brooks:

But you're asking about my husband, if he got interested in theory. Has he read anything about theory? No. He just lives it.

Andrea Schara:

He's a good observer, and I like that the best. I mean, he's pretty neutral. He's a good observer of what's going on, and he can describe it. And these patterns are instinctual, I think. They're so deep. They're the connection in my view that we have with other forms of life, I think. And that Bowen's decision to tie his

theory to evolution, I think at least makes me realize how deep these things are that you're describing. We're guided by these instinctual things. It's quite amazing

Laura Brooks:

And who would've known it'd be so difficult to just push the pause button and take the time to be thoughtful about a response. I mean, it's so simple on paper, and it is so difficult because it does run so deeply.

Andrea Schara:

Yeah, that's what I think. I mean, Bowen I think pointed this out that the instinctive life or he'd use these things like the tide goes in and the tide goes out and the sunflower turns as the sun turns, and we're like that. We're being guided just like the sunflower and the tides. I don't know if there's free will or not, but I would guess that what your husband is doing in recognizing these patterns and seeing that you're breaking things up that were old and established. And now a new order has emerged, which for lack of a better term, I just think you're working on having a teeny tiny bit of free will.

Laura Brooks:

Yeah, I mean, there's so many factors that contribute to this process, but I really get it, what difference one person can make in a system, but it's over the long haul. I mean, a lot of people do have short stories about how it happens quickly in some instances, but it's really a long haul, at least it has been for me. And I see differences in my children and in my husband that I'm really enjoying. And I'm not saying that we don't all have challenges, but they're just not necessarily in the middle of the radar screen. They're manageable.

Andrea Schara:

I think if you really buy into that you are being guided by evolutionary forces, very primitive forces, and that in a way, if you could back up far enough, you could just see how you are just a functional piece of the puzzle in your family, and you're expected to stay in that role because then everybody's safe or something like that. I don't know. But the unit, the family objects to noticing these patterns, to breaking these patterns. Why? I don't understand why everybody has to object, but I guess it goes back to something, equilibrium or I don't know what it goes back to. But it's certainly your life and your family have been changed by knowledge. You gained knowledge and now you're a force instead of a sleeper. You're a force to contend with it. And people benefit, but they don't understand, and I don't understand that much either.

Laura Brooks:

Now, I don't want to go off, I mean, I'll just make one other comment is that I've been recently doing more thinking about my sibling relationships, how to stay in contact with my three siblings. Because the stability in my family unit is markedly greater for now, and it has been for a while, than in my siblings' lives. And that is the challenge on my plate now. I mean, the ongoing challenge of being self-regulating in my nuclear family, but there's always work to be done, and those relationships have become a little bit more challenging.

My family really is good in a crisis, the schadenfreude. They're right there for you. They want the information. They want to tell you they feel badly for you. They want to say, can we help you, that kind of thing, but not in a regular, relaxed, meaningful, ongoing way. And so that's my current challenge trying to think through that.

Andrea Schara:

How do you think about it? Do you think about your one-to-one time with each one or how are you-

Laura Brooks:

That's what I've always done, but I made an unpopular decision a year or two ago, and things got out of whack. So, I am in contact with two of the three. One sister has dementia and she's really shut down. So I'm inching back towards more contact, finding ways to do that. But still, it's a challenge. I don't want to take up much time with it because there are a lot of details, but there's always something to work at, too.

Andrea Schara:

I have a brother with dementia too, and I have this little research project because he would just talk nonsense. And so, I called it word soup, you're talking word soup. And I'm getting really tired, I can't listen that much. And his wife, who died last November, she told him everything to do. I would call him up and say, "Drew, how's the weather?" And he'd say, "Margie, how's the weather?" I'd say, "Drew, don't you have a window to look out?" And so since then, I ask him so many questions like, do you want a pickle on your hamburger? And it turns out that asking questions of people with dementia who are fond of you, who can know who you are, it really has made a major difference in his functioning after his wife died. I mean, he lost weight, got put on hospice. And now he's gained the weight back and he's not on hospice. He's on something called comfort care.

Laura Brooks:

Oh, that's a new one.

Andrea Schara:

And speaking about triangles, I just think that as long as he had his wife who was his brain, he wasn't really available to have a relationship with me. I had a van so that Margie could get her wheelchair up and we could go for a drive. As soon as she got in the wheelchair, she ran over a nurse. And so they wouldn't let her. I had to give the electric wheelchair away.

Laura Brooks:

Good idea.

Andrea Schara:

But then Drew and I had a lot of this one-to-one time that you're talking about because she couldn't get in the van. And I don't know exactly how all these things work out, but everybody's a research project. That's what I learned from Dr. Bowen. I think that's the main thing that I learned is everybody's a research project and you're trying to figure out your part in dealing with him. And he did some very weird and strange things, so I think I'm calm compared to him.

Laura Brooks:

Your uncle or Dr. Bowen or both?

Andrea Schara:

Both. Yeah, my uncle.

Laura Brooks:

Well, I'll tell you, maybe this is a good time to tell you my story about Dr. Bowen.

Andrea Schara:

Yes.

Laura Brooks:

I think it was the first year of the Tuesday night program. So I had been studying the theory for a few years, but still, it's a real challenge to really grab onto this theory. So he came into our group, it was only about six or eight of us in the group and three faculty members, and so he would stop in and he'd sit at the table and he had his paper and pencil. He says, "Okay, let's start with, okay, what questions do you have about the theory?" Someone would say, "I don't get this projection process." He goes, "Okay." He writes it down on his piece of paper and he writes very slowly and says, "Okay, so who else has a question?"

"I don't get this nuclear family emotional process." "Okay." He writes, I assume he was writing nuclear family emotional process, not something like, "Oh my God, I got to answer this question again." So he writes very, very slowly, and he took about five answers or questions, and he did it every time. He never answered the question. He wrote it on a piece of paper. And I'm sitting there, slack jaw, like, "What is this guy doing? What is he doing?" But I had no idea what he was doing, but my takeaway was, this is on me to figure out.

Andrea Schara:

That's beautiful.

Laura Brooks:

That was my takeaway, because leaders can become gurus in the minds of others. And that was a real gift that he wasn't going to give us all these answers. He wasn't telling us how to think. He wasn't explaining anything. And he didn't stay much longer after the last question, he just took his pad of paper and pencil and walked out. I felt like I was sitting through a Saturday Night Live skit. That's exactly how it felt, but it was very useful.

Andrea Schara:

But you came up-

Laura Brooks:

What's that?

Andrea Schara:

You came up with the right answer.

Laura Brooks:

Did I? I don't know. I have no idea.

Andrea Schara:

I don't think you can go far wrong with "it's up to me to figure this out." I think that's a bullseye.

Laura Brooks:

Yeah, I got that. I got that. And I'm a third born in my family. Both my parents were firstborns of firstborns. My two older sisters fought for decades about who was going to be the firstborn functionally. And my younger brother was the baby and the only boy, and born two months after our grandfather died, and my father took over the business and held his mother's hand. I mean, all that was going on. I was right smack in the middle of the family. So, I did have this ability to sit back and watch, but I was also adapting to all the anxiety with this pattern of just not really challenging anything, not thinking for myself, just going along, not trying not to rock the boat, which I really didn't do much of as a child. I got caught doing a few mischievous things, and I did have fun. Having fun has always been important.

So I was a sleeper in that way, but it was in me. It was in me and I was able to start tapping into my own sense of agency and capacity to have some of my own direction. But I had to get a lot of physical distance from the family to do that. And the theory helped me come back into the family after a number of years.

Andrea Schara:

Maybe you're a sleeper and an observer. You might be not taking action because you're observing everything. My little dog over there, he's observing the people in the hall that annoy him. Whenever they come around, he barks like that's going to do something.

Laura Brooks:

Yeah, you may hear mine bark before we're done. He's sitting right here. Fortunately and unfortunately he has no hearing left, so he doesn't hear a whole lot, but he thinks he hears stuff.

Andrea Schara:

But that's pretty good. So yeah, I'm going to call you an observer more than a sleeper at the moment. It seems like that-

Laura Brooks:

Yeah, my functional position, it was double-sided. It allowed me to observe because I was staying out of the fray. But the aspect of it that was challenging was keeping the distance as a way, I mean, I wasn't really defining myself. I was emotionally just distancing. But that really changed over time when I moved back East. I was the only child who said to my father, "Come on, you're taking me out to the club for lunch." That kind of thing. My other siblings didn't do that. And Dad's like, "Oh, okay."

So, I think I had a better relationship with my parents in the long run, but I think I really write that off also to just getting so much less focus. I didn't have much of a self, but I also wasn't getting much focus. And I had a little bit more freedom to be adventurous and to find a way on my own. To define, okay, what am I going to do with this life of mine?

Andrea Schara:

The big question.

Laura Brooks:

I highly recommend Iowa as a good place to grow. That's it. The sign at the Missouri, Iowa border says, "Iowa, a place to grow." And I did my training in Kansas City. So I pass the border like, "Okay, here I am at 25. I'm going to grow here." So there was that sense looking back, I was like, "Wow, I'm surprised at myself."

Andrea Schara:

Yeah, you came out of the sleeper position and used your observing self too. And a sort of brazen self too, that emerged taking your dad to the club and telling your mom-

Laura Brooks:

Wish it had come out a little bit faster, otherwise I wouldn't have married my first husband.

Andrea Schara:

Oh, well.

Laura Brooks:

But you know what? That was such a-

Andrea Schara:

We need those first husbands.

Laura Brooks:

First husbands, I'm telling you.

Andrea Schara:

Trial run.

Laura Brooks:

I think that my decision to marry my first husband, this is how I've come to think about it, this is fairly recent, it's the best mistake I ever made.

Andrea Schara:

I love that.

Laura Brooks:

Best mistake, I learned so much. I mean, I got off my duff and I started working. I really started working like, "Okay, I am not doing this again. What's it going to take?"

Andrea Schara:

What is it going to take?

Laura Brooks:

It was very motivating.

Andrea Schara:

Yeah, that is the mistake that motivates.

Laura Brooks:

Yeah.

Andrea Schara:

That's a good book title actually. If I had enough life, maybe I'd-

Laura Brooks:

That's a great title. That's a great title.

Andrea Schara:

... write another book. Well, I wondered, and you've answered almost all these questions already, but the ones about the bigger picture, will Bowen theory impact psychiatry or society. I was reading this thing the other day, which was people are getting more mental health than ever, but there's more suffering and more suicide and more death and killing and regression. And they just have this great question, how come? How come we're giving everybody all this mental health and it's not working?

Laura Brooks:

Yeah.

Andrea Schara:

Do you have any thoughts about that?

Laura Brooks:

Well, what comes to mind is a Washington Post article. I don't know if you saw it, but the title had something to do with, "I fired all my therapists." Look it up. I think it was last week or the week before. And he fired all his therapists because they all agreed with him. If I'd had the time, maybe I can go back to it. I'd love to write like that, bingo.

Andrea Schara:

Yeah, they all agree. There's not a new thought in the world. What did Alice in Wonderland say?

Laura Brooks:

After all, therapists are supposed to make someone feel good, right? So you don't want to disagree. I mean, that's part of it, I think. It's just crazy. But-

Andrea Schara:

Yeah, shock therapy like Dr. Bowen's mild shock, just write the things down and don't answer the question. I remember once, somebody came from Voice of America and they had the camera and the

tape recorder and everything, and they sat and asked all these questions. And Dr. Bowen just talked about whatever he was interested in at the moment. And I'm just sitting there like, "How does he get away with this?" The interviewer was trying not to get upset that he wasn't answering any questions and trying to pay attention to what he was saying, but you could just see this conflict. But yeah, how would you think about Bowen theory impacting mental health? I know-

Laura Brooks:

All I can tell you is the demand is very high. I still have my clinical practice. But I'm not keeping any statistics, so this is probably not that useful. But I just think more people are contacting me because they've come into contact with Bowen theory and they're interested. And many of these people have been in therapy for a long time, individually focused therapy, where the therapist always agreed with them. But will it actually be a dominant way of thinking compared to Freudian theory? Not in our lifetime, that's for sure.

Andrea Schara:

Not in your lifetime.

Laura Brooks:

But if evolutionary theory becomes acceptable and that we are a product of evolution, that's an important bridge, I think, to people accepting that the family unit is an emotional unit, a product of evolution, and that they were governed by these common forces across nature in all forms. It's going to be a long time coming, but I don't think it can come until people accept that evolutionary theory is factual, even though we don't really understand exactly how it happens.

Andrea Schara:

Yeah, we know about the patterns, flows go away. But yeah, so the hook of evolution becoming a real science. It's not a science now, but it is the best explanation that we have for the changes we see all around us and certainly people-

Laura Brooks:

Is it okay to bring up a-

Andrea Schara:

Yeah.

Laura Brooks:

Maybe I'll slot this in here. My recent research has been on the shockwave effect in a multi-generational family. I set out to prove what I already knew, and I've fallen flat on my face because this is another obstacle to Bowen theory being accepted. There's so much more defining of these concepts like distance, cutoff. What's it look like? What does it sound like? How do I talk about this multi-generational process? Where's the evidence that when my grandfather married and his father died two months later, that these two events are related? Where's the evidence?

Now, when you go back in history, of course there's less evidence, but taking it down to my generation, when my grandfather then died two months after my brother was born, that contributed to an intense projection process on my brother. And he is the lowest functioning in the group. Where's the evidence

for that? If I'm talking to someone who knows nothing about Bowen theory, that would be boiled down to, well, your mother spoiled your brother. And in this research, the challenge for me is, well, where's the evidence that it's more complicated, that there are triangles? There's the issue of chronic anxiety. There's all these other...differentiation... that there are these other variables that came into play. Not every child in his position would have a level of problems with his functioning that he did.

So that's my challenge in this research. And it's really the outcome of the research, unfortunately, is going to be I need a lot more information. I need to define: what does distance look like? How do I know that a couple, that there's emotional distance or cutoff in the relationship, where's the evidence for that? What they say? What they do? What they don't do? I mean, would there be agreement in the Bowen theory community, those of us who have studied the theory for a long time, is there agreement about that, how that is defined, how that manifests in a predictable way, an understandable way? I just think there's a lot more work to be done there. And I'm just scratching the surface on the shockwave effect, but this is a main thing that I've learned so far.

Andrea Schara:

Well, I'm writing a book, a memoir of my time with Bowen and my growing up, my family, and so forth, and it's going to be called something like, What Do You Do When Your Brother Thinks He's Jesus Christ? And it's kind of about my mother. My brother was hospitalized by a judge, and that same day my mother died, who he always said meant nothing to me, and she lives in Portland, Oregon. So I was always interested in shockwave. And when I worked at Tidewater Psychiatric Hospital, I did a little research. It was an alcoholism unit, and I did family diagrams, and I told the guy that ran the place, 63% of the people who were admitted here have had a death within two years. And he looked at me and said, "Well, that is like a horoscope. Never put a family diagram in any patient's folder. You're not even a social worker."

Laura Brooks:

Wow.

Andrea Schara:

Yeah.

Laura Brooks:

And is that from Froma Walsh's research?

Andrea Schara:

Is it-

Laura Brooks:

From Froma Walsh who did... in Chicago?

Andrea Schara:

No, this is just something I did. I was a patient coordinator at this hospital and I didn't-

Laura Brooks:

Oh, so you were basing it on your research in that setting at that time?

Andrea Schara:

Yes.

Laura Brooks:

Oh.

Andrea Schara:

1976, when I first met Bowen.

Laura Brooks:

Oh, interesting.

Andrea Schara:

That was the first thing I did was notice that because I was the patient coordinator. So, I just did the family diagram, and as he said, I wasn't even a social worker. I only had two years of college, what the hell did I know? I was going up there talking to this Bowen group, well, they were full of it. And the funniest thing is that that guy's wife then signed up for the postgraduate program.

Laura Brooks:

Interesting. Interesting.

Andrea Schara:

He was so negative and she was so positive. So I was thinking about this... Everybody has their own research project, I think that really, is interested in Bowen theory. I think that's a fundamental part of learning the theory is to have what you have, an interest in saying ... And you asked the most provocative question, how do you prove this? And what is distance? I mean, how do you see it even? And just really fundamental questions.

And Bowen was going to operate the community mental health clinics, I don't know if you knew about this, through medical school enrichment. They turned it down at the last moment, but he was going to train everybody how to do family diagrams, and I don't know what else he was going to train them to do and take over the community mental health. And that would have, I think, maybe made Bowen theory more just out there. Now it's kind of, it's a sleeper.

Laura Brooks:

Yeah. I'm thinking about this job that I had up in Western Maryland when I first moved back about 35 years ago. And I decided that I didn't really have enough work. And so, I decided that I offered to do all the family evaluations when they brought their kid in. If the staff was hesitant about me before that, they all loved me after that. And they waited with bated breath for my evaluation because it told a story. And it told a story from a very different perspective than a focus on the symptom. It put the symptom in context.

And I was looking at the multi-generational family and including pertinent information like a death. It's one of those cases where people brush up against the theory, but they don't engage other than reading a story. So what's the difference between those of us who grabbed onto it and probably so many other people who have come up against it and just let it go by? It's really curious to me because especially

these evaluations, assessments, whatever they call them that I was doing, people were really interested, but that was it, wait for the next one.

Andrea Schara:

You know the story about the blind man and the elephant and you only can see a little bit of it if you grasp the trunk or the tail? But I do believe that stories are the way to open a door. It's a perception. So I mean, we are perceptually blind to how the system is manipulating us through these mechanisms that you talked about where we can't see it. And maybe if you've had a big enough hit in your family, then your perception toward the family changes because you've had this shock. And a shock can open your perception.

Laura Havstad used to always say, the people with the worst problems are the ones who stick around. There was something to that. But I think the shock changes your perception, but I can't prove that. But I think you're developing, question number nine, have you developed ideas that could amend or refine the theory, or do you have evidence that could further prove the theory? And it seems like you're on the cusp of this question here.

Laura Brooks:

Well, yeah, I am on the cusp, and there's a long way to go. And that's where the research is so important, so important. It's a different level of research than the research I did on adoptive families where I got this perspective into the literature that I think was important, but it doesn't get much attention. People are still going to think that the genetic history of the adopted child is what's driving the boat.

But I think this shockwave research is particularly challenging in a different way. And that is how to provide sufficient evidence of defining some of these terms. I mean, what does family projection look like? How much evidence do I need to come up with, and what kind of evidence, to convince someone who doesn't know the theory that, oh, okay, well, that makes sense.

And I've wondered if maybe, one of the ideas that's far in the back of my head because I don't really have a whole lot of time, but is engaging those longtime students of the theory in a project of trying to define some of these things. What does it look like? Now in my adoption research, I observed it in the home, and I got reports from the parents. I collected facts of functioning. This was once a year for 12 years with this one particular family. And I think I had enough information to be somewhat convincing that there's an emotional process taking place that has an impact. And I think I gave enough evidence of that.

For the shockwave effect though, I'm going back generations. But even in my own generation, I'm challenged to come up with enough evidence. So maybe I can recruit some people in a group, maybe the research committee. I thought about that just yesterday, if I could recruit the group. Barb Laymon [Dr. Barbara Laymon] and I talked about this several months ago, could we get a group together where... I don't know exactly how it would be done, but there just needs to be more definition and some consensus about it. What's cutoff?

Andrea Schara:

Well-

Laura Brooks:

How do you measure cutoff? How do you measure intensity, which I've always thought was a huge problem in the theory. Everyone gets anxious, everyone focuses on their children, everyone gets health issues, all of that, but how about intensity? It's the intensity of it that makes a difference. And that has to do with, of course, I think, chronic anxiety and differentiation. But how do you measure intensity of distance or projection process? Because I think what I've done through the years, by default, I look at the functioning in the person, which is one way to go at it. Well, look at all the symptoms in this person. Well, that's not really evidence that it's connected with the family projection process to a newcomer. Okay, how do you prove that those are connected?

Andrea Schara:

I think what Bowen talked about, which may be part of this, is the functional facts that things repeat over and over again. And then the fact that you can disrupt these patterns and those certain predictable things happen when you ... Now, I don't know, of course, I had five people in my family, my grandparents. I had one grandfather left, and my parents and my other grandparents had died within a short period of time. And so the shockwave idea is that that person's functioning was stabilizing the group to some extent. And once that person leaves, the group doesn't do as well, and the weaker ones really don't do as well. And I think that's a good explanation and a reasonable way to look at the correlation in time that people die and symptoms appear. But Bowen was very clear to say it was two years.

Laura Brooks:

Two years of a-

Andrea Schara:

A shockwave.

Laura Brooks:

Oh.

Andrea Schara:

There's before the person died and two years after that, the symptoms around that. And I mean, my mother dying the day that my brother was hospitalized by the judge, bam, it's right in your face, but still-

Laura Brooks:

It's in your face, but if you're talking to someone who doesn't know Bowen theory and they were to ask you, well, where's the evidence for that? The theory posits that, but where's the evidence that they're connected in real life terms? I mean, I buy that they're connected, but when I'm talking to someone who doesn't know the theory, there's a big opening there for, well, how do you know that? Well, they happened in the same month or day or within two years of this or whatever. I don't disagree with you. I'm just saying that's what I'm up against.

Andrea Schara:

Yeah, can you use functional facts that these things are predictable? 63% of people in a hospital have this issue with loss. And I've forgotten the name of the guy, Bruno or Bono or something like that, that has looked at it and said, most people recover from-

Laura Brooks:

Oh, Dr. George Bonanno or something.

Andrea Schara:

Yeah.

Laura Brooks:

Yeah, interesting.

Andrea Schara:

So, he has got some of the better evidence, even though he's generally saying that most people recover from these things. But he's looking at the wife and he might not be looking at the son that got whatever symptom. So, he's not looking at the whole unit. He's looking at the recovery of the spouse, I think, in most cases. But he's done a lot of research and he's very open to Bowen theory.

Laura Brooks:

Yeah, I heard him in Chicago and he got at that variability. I mean, there's wide variability in response, which you can easily sync up with Bowen theory in terms of differentiation.

Andrea Schara:

Yeah, I think that's true. When I look at the newspaper that says, 400,000 people are going to die because of fentanyl overdose, and mental health has let us down in all these ways, I just think about who could really benefit from knowing Bowen theory? Could it be more useful? I call it common sense Bowen theory. That's what I call it, it's just common sense. Of course, there's an emotional shockwave. How much evidence do you need for that? I don't know.

Laura Brooks:

If you're going to prove the theory, you need a lot.

Andrea Schara:

Yeah, if you're going to prove the theory you need ... Yeah. I think Patrick Stinson, I guess you know Patrick well too, and he really wants to prove the theory. That's why I collect these interviews. I'm more like, I want to see what people are doing, how far they've gone, what did Bowen theory mean to them? How did it change their lives? And these are all stories, but I think they're compelling. And I think it will draw people more towards the theory when you have these, like your story, a remarkable story of how your life changed. And that's really what people want. They want their miserable lives to change. It's not that complicated when you explain it. You stopped focusing on the other person, you started focusing on yourself. You went to visit your family and then magic, so much, so much. So, I don't know.

Laura Brooks:

I hear you. I hear you. And I do think Patrick Stinson is raising a lot of questions along these lines. And so I've been influenced by that because I think he's making a good point. And just to take this full circle, how do you get the theory out there? Is there a way to get it out there? I mean, I can plant seeds in the adoption world. People are very stuck though in an individual viewpoint. I mean, I'm still stuck there sometimes after these many years.

Andrea Schara:

I'm only stuck there about my ex-husband.

Laura Brooks:

Actually-

Andrea Schara:

I'm just joking. I couldn't resist.

Laura Brooks:

Yeah, we don't want to go into ex-husbands. I have some contact with mine.

Andrea Schara:

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

Laura Brooks:

I thought that was a good question. People like Native Americans who, it's all about the natural world, that group of people who are, they're already in it. They already know it. They study it, they work with it. They see the system in that regard.

Andrea Schara:

Beautiful.

Laura Brooks:

It's an easier transition, I think, into looking at some of these concepts in theory. But I think most therapy now is still based on Freud, and no one knows it.

Andrea Schara:

It's not common sense, Bowen theory.

Laura Brooks:

So I don't know. That's all I would have to say to that. I wish I could come back in a couple hundred years to see if it's still in the mix, or is it going to go away and come back in 500 years?

Andrea Schara:

Depends. It depends. Yes-

Laura Brooks:

I did read a book. I just read a book recently called Ministry for the Future and it's written by Kim Stanley Robinson. He's a scientist, and it's about climate change and the response of the human and the ingenuity of the human.

Andrea Schara:

What's the title of it again? It's called?

Laura Brooks:

The Ministry for the Future.

Andrea Schara:

Okay.

Laura Brooks:

It's a very different kind of book, even hard to describe. Robinson's his last name. I recommend it because it actually gave me a little bit of hope that the ingenuity, I mean, the human is very, very creative, very smart in so many ways, so stupid in others. But how the human has in the future, it's a bit of a sci-fi, it's a prediction, how the human will adapt to climate change and survive in some form. Anyway, it's 500 pages, so I'm really-

Andrea Schara:

Okay, well, I can-

Laura Brooks:

... literally shrinking it into two or three sentences.

Andrea Schara:

Dr. Bowen used to tell me, I was on the library committee, he said, "And here's how you read a book. You read the first paragraph and the last paragraph in each chapter, you read the intro and the last paragraph. And if there's a first paragraph that you really like, you could read the whole chapter."

Laura Brooks:

Well, movies work that way for me. They got to grab me in the first 15, 20 minutes. But the reason I picked it up was I read that it was on Obama's shortlist talking about a relationship process. I thought, "Oh, well, Obama liked it then, maybe I will." And it was very, very interesting. Anyway, I know our time is up here. Do you have anything else?

Andrea Schara:

I just think it's been great talking to you. And the observer, sleeper transition that you made, I think is appealing to a lot of people who would like to be able to do that, too. There's a lot of sleepers out there, so maybe your story will make sense to some people.

Laura Brooks:

Yeah. Well, thank you. And this is a privilege to be in the archives.

Andrea Schara:

Yeah, it's so great to have the archives.

Laura Brooks:

Yeah, and this is great that you're doing it. I mean, it's such a creative idea. You have lots more people you can interview.

Andrea Schara:

Yeah, that's true. That's true. I'm going to interview people who did not meet Dr. Bowen or sit in class with him, but learn just from other people's work and also from what Bowen wrote. And I mean, the letters to his family are unbelievably amazing where, my final thought, he cracked open this thing, I'll call it the thing that keeps us from really talking to each other, really understanding what's going on. And he really found a way to communicate to his own family what was really going on. And he did that with his profession, this is what's really going on.

Laura Brooks:

Yeah. Well, it'll keep me busy for a long time to come, the rest of my life.

Andrea Schara:

Exactly.

Laura Brooks:

Well, this has been a privilege and I thank you very much for including me, and I need to set some time aside to listen to some of these interviews.

Andrea Schara:

They really are great. Okay. Thanks, Laura.

Laura Brooks:

Great. Thanks again.

Andrea Schara:

You were great.

Laura Brooks:

Bye-bye.

Andrea Schara:

Bye.