THE FAMILY THERAPY
NETWORKER

MARCH/APRIL 1991

$4.00

MURRAY BOWEN, 1913–1990

Family Therapy's Neglected Prophet?

SPECIAL FEATURE

Bowen's Legacy

Family Therapy's Neglected Prophet 24

By Mary Sykes Wylie
Murray Bowen devoted his life to charting a new path to self-knowledge and personal freedom, but died believing very few really grasped the vision he wished to leave behind.

Murray Bowen: Remembering the Man 38

Living the Theory *By Michael Kerr* • 39

My Reluctant Ancestor *By Betty Carter* • 40

A Distant Drum *By David Berenson* • 42

A Sentimentalist Under Wraps
By Monica McGoldrick • 43

The Man Who Never Explained Himself
By Philip Guerin • 45

OTHER FEATURES

The Revolution Within 50

By Nora Gallagher
Families in Czechoslovakia confront themselves in the wake of communism's downfall.

From Russia with French Fries
By Frank Pittman • 58
Can the Big Mac save Russia?

Saving Grace 61

By Peggy Treadwell
Humor can be the answer to a somber couple's prayer.

The American Nightmare 64

By Richard Schwartz
Helping families counter the toxic values our culture breeds.

Short Story: A Quiet Season 70

By Fred Wistow
A glimpse of mortality sets a man off in search of his Walden.

DEPARTMENTS

Letters • 9

Around the Network • 14

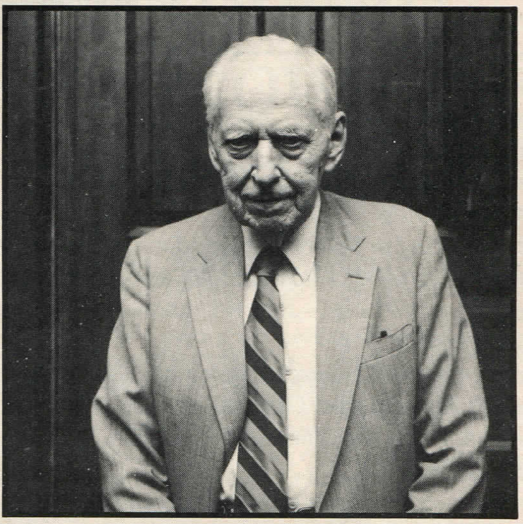
Perspectives • 19
Our large cities are turning into American Calcuttas.

Case Studies • 79
Strategies with self-defeating parents.

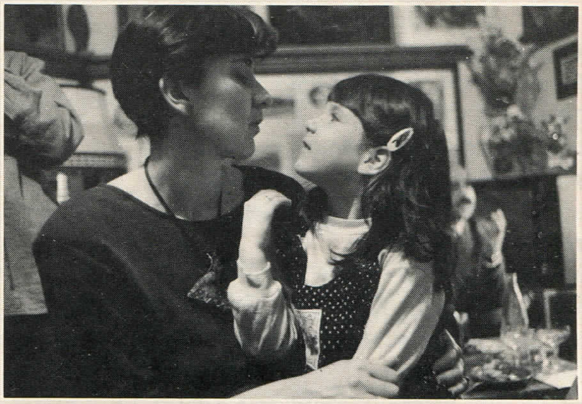
The Screening Room • 87
Cleaning up after the Masters of the Universe.

Classified • 93

Calendar • 96



GEORGETOWN FAMILY CENTER



JOAN LIFTIN/ACTUALITY

TED PITTS

March-April
1991

Vol. 15 • No. 2

Cover Photo
Andrea Maloney-Schara

BOWEN'S LEGACY

FAMILY THERAPY'S NEGLECTED PROPHET

Murray Bowen knew that personal freedom never comes cheaply

AT HIS FINAL PUBLIC APPEARANCE TWO DAYS BEFORE HE DIED last October, Murray Bowen was obviously very ill. Shrunken and frail, he sat hunched in his chair before an audience of 800 people at the annual conference of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT), hardly able to breathe even with an oxygen tube, his voice raspy and faint. Nonetheless, he looked out at the packed room with glittering, almost defiant eyes, as if to say, "However sick, however fragile I appear, I am still very much *here*."

Every person in the room, certainly almost all 5,000 conference attendees, and probably every family therapist practicing in America uses or at least knows about the theory Bowen developed and the terms he invented. The concepts of differentiation of self, family emotional systems, triangles, emotional cutoffs, the family projection process, sibling positions, and the multigenerational transmission process have been woven into the fabric

BY MARY SYKES WYLIE

of the field. "Bowen was the intellectual beacon for everyone who was first trying to understand the family," says Braulio Montalvo, who together with Salvador Minuchin helped create structural family therapy in the early 1960s. "Almost every major concept in family therapy can be traced back to him. He taught everybody." Yet, Bowen looked out at the crowd honoring him at AAMFT as if he believed that whatever his influence, however many among them called themselves "Bowenians," the vast majority had completely missed the point; they hadn't really understood what he was saying at all.

Bowen had always been something of a loner, never in the mainstream of pragmatic, problem-oriented family therapy practitioners. Since the earliest days of his career, he had considered family therapy a by-product of the vast new theory of human behavior that he believed it was his real mission to develop. Toward the end of his life, he had denounced family therapy for its intellectual vacuity, and dismissed it as an "evolutionary misadventure" doomed to extinction.

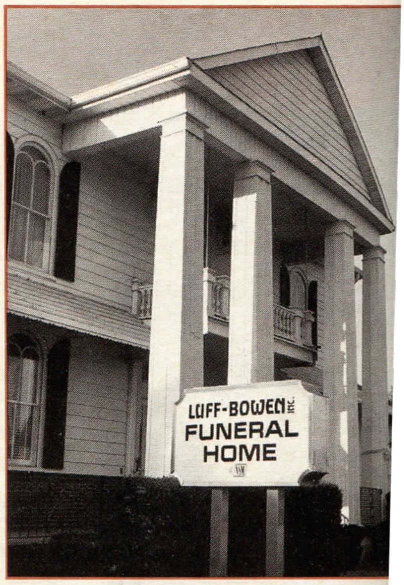
At this last meeting, he let the audience know that he had not changed his views one whit to suit the Tower of Babel that family therapy had become. "When you know you're right, you're right, and you stand there, and you say so," he said. He still believed that theory—by which he meant a comprehensive set of interlocking principles accounting for the entire range of human behavior and its evolutionary origins—was "more important than anything else" for understanding families, and that a way of thinking, rather than a set of techniques, was the legacy he wanted to leave behind. But the "way of thinking"—the theory— was being lost as the field continued moving in the wrong direction.

The story of family therapy, as Bowen saw it in his last years, was not so much about a great cause betrayed as about a golden opportunity carelessly abandoned. The promise of the field's early years had collapsed into a heap of shattered expectations, the chance for a new science of human nature lost in the torrents of marketable new therapy techniques. And Bowen himself resembled a neglected prophet who had offered his vision of truth like a priceless gem, only to see the herd sniff it and stampede off in other directions. It was true that most therapists who borrowed this or that of his concepts had little interest in the whole theory behind them. Yet few could understand his disillusionment with the field that had, after all, raised him to its pantheon of eight or ten semi-legendary "master therapists."

BOWEN'S ALOOFNESS WAS NOT ENtirely unusual for an original thinker. To some extent, each of the master therapists—Nathan Ackerman, Don Jackson, Jay Haley, Salvador Minuchin, Virginia Satir, Carl Whitaker—has stood alone; all innovators and pioneers explore new territory ahead of the pack. But Bowen's preoccupation with discovering a new science of human behavior—an overarching *natural systems* theory—set him apart from the other pathbreakers of the field. He thought that all (except Jackson) were far more interested in therapy than theory. Whatever new theoretical insights they acquired were incidental to their practice; they were all primarily clinicians, healers, not scientists or researchers as he thought of himself. They may have been master therapists, but they weren't master thinkers—by his lights, anyway.

For someone considered by many to be the most magisterial presence in the field, Bowen wrote relatively little—50 articles and his 1978 book, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, a collection of previously published papers and articles. Nonetheless, his status as a founding father is secure. Before Bowen, early family thinkers like Ackerman and Whitaker "ingeniously tried to stretch psychoanalytic theory to fit around families," says Robert Aylmer, a Bowen student and director of LifeCycle Learning Center in Newton, Massachusetts. "Bowen was the first to realize you can't translate individual psychoanalytic concepts into the language of families, and the first to see the family as a structure in itself, which had its own wiring." The family, in short, wasn't just a collection of mutually influential but separate psyches living together under the same roof. For Freud, unconscious motivation was the unperceived prime mover of intellectual and emotional life; for Bowen, the submerged ebb and flow of family life, the simultaneous push and pull between family members for both distance and togetherness, was the driving force underlying all human behavior.

While Bowen did not invent systems thinking, he was the first to conceptualize the family as a *natural* system—more like an ant colony or an elephant herd than most people cared to admit—which could only be fully understood in terms of the fluid but predictable processes between members. Such a major part o the official family therapy canon hav Bowen's ideas about the family system become that it is almost impossible t imagine the field without him. He di more than give intellectual legitimacy t the scruffy, make-do empiricism of famil therapy. In large part he created the field' intellectual scaffolding, gave it th conceptual structure that distinguishes i as a system of thought and a disciplin from all other psychotherapies.



Furthermore, Bowen introduced highly novel form of family therapy base on one family member's researching an coming to terms with his or her ow family of origin. Unlike most family individual therapists, Bowen conceive personal growth and family interaction part of an indivisible whole, creating therapy that involved both the self of t individual and the multiple relations the family.

Finally, Bowen gave family therapists new way to know themselves. " transformed the psychoanalytic process finding yourself into something partic larly appropriate for family therapy," sa Carl Whitaker. "He showed family th apists a way they could look at themsel and their own lives, analogous to Freu self-analysis, and bring that awareness in their work." Bowen, alone, made it critical point that therapists differenti themselves from their own families bef trying to help others do the same.

Bowen's ideas have been used improve the functioning of business religious congregations, and other org izations, applied to ethnic, cultu economic, and gender issues, and synth ized with object-relations and ot psychodynamic models. But none of th

---

Bowen family photographs coutesy of Mrs. LeRoy Bowen. Other photographs of Dr. Bowen courtesy of the Georgetown Family Center.

The present location of the Luff-Bowen Funeral Home in Waverly, Tennessee (far left), which was his family's main business while Bowen was growing up. (Middle) A 1929 shot of the Bowen family. Sixteen-year-old Murray, the eldest, stands between his mother and father. (Right) Major Murray Bowen in 1942, beginning five years of service in the Army Hospital Corps, which eventually persuaded him to change his specialty from surgery to psychiatry.

NOT ONLY WAS BOWEN'S FAMILY LARGE, BUT HE CLAIMED THAT HIS FATHER KNEW ALL 15,000 SOULS IN THE COUNTY.

variations on his orthodoxy gave Bowen any pleasure. "He wasn't very happy with what most of us were doing," says Philip Guerin, a former student of Bowen and now director of the Center for Family Learning in Rye, New York. "He was an absolutist who saw much of what we did as divergent—going too far from the original, and watering down the core concepts." For Bowen, therapy was of a single cloth with his entire theory; tear out this or that piece and the whole tapestry became a tattered rag. "He was not a religious man," remembers one therapist, "but you are forced to use religious terms when describing his view of theory. It wasn't just a practical, useful aid to therapy; it was critical in itself, and had an almost Platonic quality, as if Pure Ideas were the essential reality."

In the rough give-and-take of family therapy, which often resembles a football scrimmage more than a Socratic dialogue, Bowen was something of an anachronism. It was as if the intellectual messiness of these new, hybrid therapies reflected a failure to think coherently, a failure of rationality that only reinforced the general state of emotional chaos in the world. According to Bowen, therapists should not encourage people to wallow in emotionalism and muzzy confusion, but teach them to transcend it by setting examples as reasonable, neutral, self-controlled adults. Therapy should be, in fact, just like a Socratic dialogue, with the teacher or "coach" calmly asking questions, until the student learned to think for him- or herself. Defending his own principles, however, Bowen was far from dispassionate; always a steadfast critic of social conformity and orthodoxy, he became a zealous and, some would say, dogmatic defender of his own faith. In his dedication to creating an objective science of human nature, he became something of a visionary pilgrim seeking his own Zion.

BOWEN OFTEN DESCRIBED AN INCIDENT that occurred when he was 15 years old. His large, extended family had lived in a rural pocket of Tennessee since before the American Revolution, and his maternal grandfather had established, in the little town of Waverly, where he was born, a funeral home and ambulance service, which his father and uncle inherited. Bowen remembered working as a helper on the ambulance and, one day, taking an unconscious teenage girl to a university hospital. All afternoon he watched the frenzy in the emergency room while fumbling doctors made frantic attempts to save her. After she died, Bowen later remembered, he decided that medicine must be better than this, and he determined to have a part in making it so.

The memory of those highly trained doctors rushing around in ignorance, fear, and helplessness seemed to encapsulate for the adult Bowen a basic human dilemma: the overwhelming power of primal emotion over so-called rational life. Like Freud before him, he thought that human intelligence and reason ran short of human conceit about them. "Far more human activity," he wrote in 1975, "is governed by man's emotional system than he has been willing to admit, and there is far more similarity than dissimilarity between the 'dance of life' in lower forms and the 'dance of life' in human forms."

That terrible scene in the emergency room, playing in his memory, would convince him that if he were to be of use as a doctor, it was not enough to be a sympathetic, detached observer—as he had been then. He must have a plan, a system, a theory, even an entire world view, which would not fail to guide him when he cared for his own patients. But what had begun as a worthwhile, though not unusual goal for any bright, idealistic young man who wanted to be of use to the world, evolved for Bowen into a far more consuming mission.

During the course of his journey through medicine and psychiatry, Bowen pursued knowledge like a starving hunter after elusive game. He read Freud, Darwin, works on the biological, physical, and social sciences, not for pleasure or education or even career, but with dogged determination to find some underlying truth, a hidden network of

Between his graduation from the University of Tennessee School of Medicine early in 1937 (far right), and the beginning of his internship in White Plains, New York, 24-year-old Bowen spent six months as the only physician in the poor, rural community of Crossville, Tennessee, where he handled every conceivable medical problem and delivered several hundred babies.

Dr. Murray Bo
Office Hours 10:30-12 J
3-5 P

BOWEN PURSUED KNOWLEDGE LIKE A STARVING HUNTER AFTER ELUSIVE GAME.

connection that he believed *must* bind the millions of disparate facts of the physical universe into one, overarching system. He had believed, he said late in life, that his ideas would eventually "supersede the current ways of thinking" about human nature, and that a truly scientific theory would encompass all of life, from the protoplasm constituting each individual cell all the way to the most complicated interactions of human beings. The science he had in mind would "connect living matter with the universe, the sun, the earth, and all living things . . . the seasons, the tides, [all] natural phenomena."

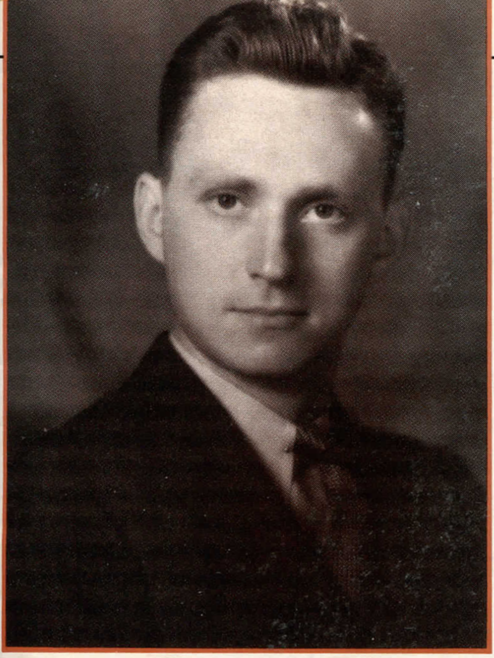
In search of this grail, however, Bowen made many stops along the way, including medical school, surgical and psychiatric training (the two had more in common during the 1930s and 1940s than they do now), and a stint in the Army during World War II. After the war, Bowen went to the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas—then famous for its radical psychoanalytic approach to major psychiatric illnesses. Bowen was exhilarated to be part of an intellectual revolution that promised to transform human civilization, and excited to be working with Karl Menninger, the most eminent psychoanalyst in the United States. "If I had a model of a person," said Bowen in his last interview, "it was Karl Menninger." In the heady atmosphere of a new psychiatric world order, Bowen joined the band of devoted, zealous Menningerites, and committed himself to furthering the cause of psychoanalysis.

At that time, some of the best and the brightest young psychiatrists were drawn to the intriguing, so-far insoluble problem of schizophrenia, and Bowen thought he might find clues to the etiology of the disease by studying the family within a psychoanalytic perspective. At that time, about the only psychoanalytic idea relating schizophrenia to the family at all was Frieda Fromm-Reichman's concept of the "schizophrenogenic mother," a needy, insecure woman whose aggressiveness and smothering overprotectiveness made her child ill. In 1951, in order to study *in vitro* the relationship between the schizophrenogenic mother and her child, Bowen set up a cottage at Menninger's where both mother and disturbed offspring could live together, and in 1952 he included a few fathers in his study. Even so, the focus of treatment was the "disease" assumed to exist within the individual patient's mind.

Initially infatuated by psychoanalysis, Bowen was, within a few years, annoyed by the lack of scientific precision in its language—its dependence upon what he called subjective "feeling" concepts, like id, ego, superego, Oedipus and Electra complexes that were drawn from literature and mythology rather than objective physical facts. Besides his dissatisfaction with analytic theory, his growing interest in the family—the dynamics betwe family members rather than within t individual psyches of each—was putti him at odds with the Menninger est lishment. As Bowen remembered it, l first presentation of his family wo (much of which he had been doing night and on the weekends) was greet politely by the staff, with the tact suggestion that perhaps his interest families represented an unresolved oe ipal problem in his own life. Perhaps should work harder on his own analys After his second and third presentatio his colleagues made no bones about th displeasure. In effect, Bowen said, "th told me, 'You're sick, you'd better something about it.'"

No doubt, he was getting some fla for his unorthodox interests, but Arth Mandelbaum, then director of social wo at Menninger's, suggests that there w something overclose and cloying abo the atmosphere at the clinic that ma Bowen restive as well. "It wasn't so mu that his ideas were frowned upon—y could bring in new ideas as long as y didn't flaunt them. But there was a gene spirit of intense loyalty to Dr. Karl a the Menninger family itself that made hi feel somewhat enmeshed. Bowen had kind of love-hate relationship with t foundation. He admired its high standar liked the intellectual challenge, a thought he had learned a lot from worki as part of a team—the team concept w very much advocated there. But he f even then a great need to separate himse to differentiate himself from the inten personal loyalties of the group. He w a very independent man, with real pione spirit, and he needed to spread his win more than he felt he could there."

In retrospect, what Bowen would c his "eight damn years at Menninger'



contributed to his deep suspicion of groupiness and a work environment that purported to be "just like a family." The forces for togetherness that seemed to oppose his individual exploration were already perhaps too much like a family, too likely to quash the individual spirit in the interests of family unity. "About 1950," he wrote in 1988, "there was a continuing deep feeling within me, which said, 'If I ever come to know precisely what I think about psychiatry, and I have the courage to say it in open forum, I will be kicked out of the profession.' "

At the time, Bowen was both collecting evidence for his embryonic theory of differentiation and creating a personal self, a kind of serene Faust who is free and unafraid to strive for knowledge and mastery because he has risen above what he later called "the emotional togetherness that binds us all." But a person trying to do just that, Bowen decided, inevitably stirs up anxiety and opposition in the group, which wants to maintain a sense of unity and common identity at almost any cost. So Bowen took the differentiating step of following his own inclinations, and began looking around for a workplace that would not stand so much in his way.

He settled in 1954 at the newly organized National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) in Washington, D.C., at the time a kind of heretic's heaven for bright, young, nonconformists. According to family research pioneer Lyman Wynne, who had come to NIMH in 1952, "Murray was only one of a number of mavericks there. Almost everybody was on the outs with the orthodox psychoanalytic establishment of the time, and anybody interested in the family who paid much attention to analysis was considered a kind of enemy. It was all very loose and lively, and you could do whatever you wanted as long as it was interesting."

When Bowen first came to NIMH, he continued studying schizophrenia, but soon found the original schizophrenogenic mother theory inadequate to describe what he was seeing. For one thing, the intense emotional attachment between mother and child was supposed to be fixed, rigid, and essentially unchanging from day to day, month to month, year to year. What Bowen observed was a fluid, mobile relationship, a constant cyclical transfer of anxiety from mother to child and back again, with functioning predictably deteriorating in one as it improved in the other.

Furthermore, Bowen and his colleagues were beginning to suspect that the ghastly duet between mother and child might actually be a trio, or "interdependent triad" of mother, father, and schizophrenic offspring. So Bowen began bringing fathers, and then healthy siblings, onto the ward along with mother and sick child. Eventually, the NIMH researchers were studying four entire families living in the hospital, as well as several other families living at home.

For Bowen, the next few years would provide one revelation after another, not only about schizophrenic families, but about healthy ones as well. For example, he had noticed that the members of the families he studied all appeared to be constantly in the process of forming and dissolving triangular alliances with one another. In each of the research families, this "triangle" comprised a very close, virtually fused relationship between dominating, active mother and her impaired child, while the odd man out was usually the distant, passive husband. At moments of severe stress, however, the father and child might align with each other against the mother, who would then try to triangle in another person to take her side, perhaps the sick child's sibling or a staff member.

In spite of what Bowen called the "flow and counterflow" within the triangles, the members of these families experienced very little sense of freedom and independence. Indeed, there was an almost gluelike quality about these family conglomerates that was, to Bowen, practically a definition of their problem. The less the dysfunctional child was able to separate from her mother—to "differentiate" herself from what he called the "undifferentiated family ego mass"—the less capable she was of independent, adult behavior, and the "crazier" she became. He found this same process true, though less marked, in healthier families as well.

By 1955, Bowen also began investigating the multigenerational origins of schizophrenia, based on the suggestion of a colleague that the disease required three generations to develop. It seemed to Bowen that emotional disturbance was not only a precisely definable relationship pattern (instead of an individual pathology), but it was also very like an evolutionary process, with origins deep in the history of the family. The pattern of emotional development in more "normal" families evolved in exactly the same way; the level of maturity and independence in any one person was the product of many generations.

Within a few years of coming to NIMH, Bowen had crystallized the main concepts of his theory of family systems. He had defined the family emotional system, fusion, and the differentiation of self. He had concluded that the triangle was the "molecule or the basic building block of any emotional system"—including extended family networks, friendships, and organizational affiliations. And he had hypothesized that the emotional processes in families extended over many generations. All in all, he had the main building blocks of a new descriptive framework for understanding human psychology, based not on the presumed psychodynamic circuitry within each individual, but on the invisible, yet living, vibrating, almost palpable web between people. Little wonder that he no longer visualized the family as three or four discrete individual ids, egos, and superegos, but as "a single organism."

During these years, along with the Bowen theory, the peculiar Bowen persona—part philosopher-scientist, part Zen master, and part secret agent—began to emerge. At NIMH, according to some colleagues, he simply didn't talk much about what he was doing, and appeared to cultivate an air of distant superiority. "Murray was always very mysterious, very oblique about what he was doing," says Wynne, who remembers Bowen as something of a guru figure, appearing both aloof and knowing, as if he had a secret the others weren't ready to hear.

Bowen drew around him a close circle of about five coworkers, no more eager than himself to join the vociferous debates about philosophy, theory, technique, and the meaning of mental illness that were meat and drink to the other young turks at NIMH. "He aroused intense personal loyalty from those on his team," remembers Wynne. "They talked about his work as if it were something very special, very exciting, but never shared much of

BOWEN ON BOWEN

BOWEN'S ELABORATE EFFORT TO alter his emotional position in his family of origin during a visit to his boyhood home in Tennessee (see page 33) is by now part of the lore of family therapy. Bowen believed that his experience during this visit not only provided validation of his theory, but "changed the direction of the family movement." What follows is an excerpt from a 1980 interview with Bowen originally published in the Networker*'s precursor, "The Family Therapy Network Newsletter," in which he discussed the lasting impact of that famous visit home.*

Q: *One of your most distinctive contributions to the field of family therapy is the emphasis you place on the therapist exploring his or her own family of origin. Just how did your interest in this approach develop out of your early work with schizophrenia?*

BOWEN: After I left NIMH [the National Institute of Mental Health] and came to Georgetown in 1959, I was given a year or two to write up the NIMH project. I decided to shift my focus away from schizophrenia to other levels of emotional problems and see how they were related. I was interested in establishing the continuities between schizophrenia and neurotic disorders. I believed that the patterns found in the families in the NIMH project could be found, in varying degrees, in all families.

My first project at Georgetown was to do a study on the physical illness of members of the same family going back as far as I could. . . . Well, after spending hours and hours working on the three families we were studying at the time—we took them back as many as 300 years—I began to think: "I can spend the rest of my days doing maybe a half-dozen families. My own family is just as good as anybody else's. Why don't I study it?" So in the early 1960s, I began my exploration of my own family.

Now, from 1961 to 1966, I was wrestling with putting together what I would call my first real theoretical paper.* I had a pretty clear idea of the various concepts, only I had never put them together. As I started writing, though, it became obvious how many points I had missed. Finally, in 1966, I put that paper in the mail and I thought, "Now I'll get the book about the NIMH schizophrenia project done." Then, just 10 days after I put that paper in the mail, my sister-in-law's brother died of a heart attack and my whole family went into turmoil. I spent the entire fall of '66 thinking through that thing with my own family, writing letters and preparing for my visit home in February 1967. This eventually led to my paper in March of 1967 at the EPPI [Eastern Pennsylvania Psychiatric Institute] conference that, I think, changed the whole direction of the family movement.

Q: *Keeping all your plans and intentions totally to yourself played a very important part in both your work with your own family and your approach to your professional family at the EPPI conference. Why did you place such an emphasis on keeping everything so private?*

BOWEN: When you make a move

Bowen (far right) stands with his two brothers at Human Family Day, a conference held by the Georgetown Family Center in 1978 to commemorate the publication of Bowen's book, Family Therapy in Critical Practice. *Bowen's brothers were principal, though unknowing, actors in the family drama he directed during his 1967 visit home, which resulted in his famous paper, "On the Differentiation of Self." It wasn't until the 1978 conference that Bowen showed his family the paper.*

within your own family or in any kind of close relationship, the motivation for the move has to come out of the individual without the knowledge of the system. If you tell people what you are doing ahead of time, nothing will change. I had learned from experience that if you communicate ahead of time what you are thinking, the family is ready for it and has built-in countermoves.

I applied this principle rigorously in my work with my family. Even though my wife was with me on that trip, I had discussed nothing about it with her. She was as much in the dark as the rest of the family. For her to be in on it would have been to give it away and nullify its success.

Q: *Didn't she ever ask, "Murray, what are you doing?"*

BOWEN: She did not ask any questions. She just watched. And later, when I was preparing to present my paper at EPPI, I did the same thing. I did not tell anybody what I was going to do, absolutely nobody.

Q: *In your original paper about your presentation at EPPI, you talk about the high pitch of anxiety before the conference, your inner debate about going through with the presentation. Can you say more about what that was like for you?*

BOWEN: I was afraid that I might talk in my sleep and give my plan away. I remember in the month preceding the conference, I would find myself chuckling to myself. It was the greatest urge to tell someone what I was going to do. But if I had confided in even one person in Washington, you can be sure by the time I arrived in Philadelphia, the system would have been aware. I don't know how this stuff travels, but it does. So that is the way I did it. I pulled it off in a way that was totally a surprise move, in which I was totally responsible for what I had done.

I know that there are people who are concerned about my being so manipulative. They always ask how I could do what I did without explaining it all to my family ahead of time. I would say that they operate out of a different frame of reference than my own. Their frame of reference would say, if you are going to kiss a girl, you should announce your intentions ahead of time and get permission. From my frame of reference, you just do it.

Q: *I'm sure you are asked this all the time, and I'll ask it anyway. Where does the story with your family pick up after the 1967 visit? How did they react when they learned what you had been trying to accomplish?*

BOWEN: I never told them. They knew nothing about my paper until years later. You see, when people ask that question, it comes out of a feeling frame of reference that doesn't have much awareness of my theory.

Q: *What kind of question would you expect then, from someone thinking within your theory?*

BOWEN: It would be more focused on what happened and how it works rather than "Does your family know about it?" or, "What did your family do when they heard about it?"

You see, I had had experience over the years with somebody who had published a paper on some work they had done in their family and then had given it to the family to read. That article uncorked so much emotional reactiveness that they had a hard time quelling it, even years later. As for myself, at the time I delivered the paper I was actually hopeful that my family would somehow hear about it and bring it up. I was on top of the emotional situation at that point and could have dealt with it. I just chose not to bring it up myself.

BOWEN'S QUEST FOR A UNIVERSALIZING TRUTH WAS REMINISCENT OF THE GREAT INTELLECTUAL SYSTEMS OF THE PAST, IN WHICH ALL THE TRUTHS OF SCIENCE AND PHILOSOPHY WERE SUPPOSED TO BE ULTIMATELY COMPATIBLE.

You see, my family doesn't have access to the kind of publications in which the paper appeared. Ordinarily, they wouldn't find it, and why go looking for trouble? My family also knows that I would be doing whatever seemed responsible for me to do, for me as a person in relation to them. I know them; they know me. There is no problem with it.

Still, as the years pass, I continue to hear things like, "What's your relationship with your brother now?" I mean, he was mad at me for 24 hours and then our relationship was better than it had ever been before. But now, why wouldn't people know that? Why would people assume, years later, that he is still mad and not speaking to me?

Q: *Have you ever had any regrets about having gone ahead and talked about your family so publicly?*

BOWEN: No, none. It turned around the family movement. At the same time I am distressed by some misperceptions of what I did. To give you an example: Recently, a review of my book appeared in which a well-known therapist described "Bowen's personal account of an attempt to differentiate himself from his own highly manipulative family."

Now where did that come from? I would call my family, in relation to most families, one of the most calm—we use the term at Georgetown "peace-agree" families—in the total spectrum. Actually, my family is so calm and peaceful that I worked very hard to stir up a tempest in a teapot, carefully avoiding current issues about which there would be emotional reactiveness, and instead taking up tiny little issues from long ago.

Now, other people from highly reactive families have read that chapter, and when they would go to stir up their families around what I would call irresponsible, smart-alecky issues, they would come off as troublemakers. Families know what to do with a family member like that. What you are trying to do in a family is to get enough emotional reactiveness to deal with, but no more than you can deal with at a time. And when you go out with this confrontation business, you get a thing that nobody can deal with. So, everybody, including the person who initiates it, is submerged in emotional reactiveness. ■

---

* "The Use of Family Theory in Clinical Practice." *Comprehensive Psychiatry*, 7:345-374, 1966.

it with the rest of the staff. I wanted to know him better, because I liked his ideas and wanted to hear more about them. But unless I became a member of his group, I knew I wouldn't hear about them."

In meetings, Bowen "had a habit of remaining silent until nearly the end of the period, by which time everybody was waiting breathlessly for his pronouncements," according to Wynne. After a dramatic pause, he would make his brief utterance, and there would be a kind of sigh, "as if the gospel had just been spoken." Wynne believes Bowen may have been trying to differentiate himself from the family ego mass of NIMH, just as he had done at Menninger's, paradoxically by creating what looked like his own little family ego mass. Years later, Salvador Minuchin would agree that Bowen was something of a "puzzle," who "responded to questions with a mysterious smile and seemed satisfied to leave the responsibility of interpreting his smile to the other." On the other hand, says Wynne, "I think he was very shy."

Bowen complained often during his career that his theories were misunderstood or ignored because most therapists were too emotionally bound to the "family of family therapists" and their traditional therapeutic ideologies to really hear what he was saying. But part of the problem was his own difficulty bringing his soaring vision down to earth. Not only did people find the concepts foreign—a systems view of human nature is even now as hard to grasp as psychoanalytic ideas were a century ago—but they found the formal style of his papers and presentations off-putting.

Particularly in his writing, Bowen used words in a hyperrational, idiosyncratic way, combining psychological and biological terms in an odd hybrid language that many found affected and stuffy. His determinedly neutral, "scientific" style, even when writing about personal events in his own life, sometimes produced curious results. For example, his epilogue to *Family Evaluation* by Michael Kerr, which is about himself and his odyssey, is written entirely in the third person, and is, according to one critic, "an autobiographical piece with no person in it, a theory moving through time with no person attached."

By 1957, Bowen's days at NIMH were numbered. As Bowen remembered it, he was seeing at NIMH the kind of shortsighted pragmatism that would dog him most of his life. Bowen believed that he was on the track of an entirely new theory of human behavior. But his superiors wanted something less visionary and more concrete; they wanted a "cure" for the "disease" of schizophrenia. The harder Bowen lobbied for his big theory, the more he experienced delays in funding, restrictions on his space, and not-so-subtle pressures to shift his work away from his vast, evolutionary-psychological schemes to more practical matters.

Ironically, just as Bowen's ship was foundering at NIMH, a family therapy movement was rumbling to life all around the country. Bowen at first viewed this movement with cautious gratification. He thought that from this "healthy, unstructured state of chaos," an awareness might emerge of the theoretical breakthroughs made possible by the new family systems viewpoint. To his chagrin, however, the floods of new recruits were generally uninterested in the higher rewards of pure theory, but avid in their pursuit of new, practical therapeutic techniques presented by the score at every meeting.

In 1958, Bowen found a new sanctuary in the Department of Psychiatry of Georgetown University's School of Medicine. At last he had a mandate to "work on a theory that moved toward the sciences, rather than the 'therapies' that were so responsive to the media and popular approval." There, he established around himself a dedicated group of trainees who volunteered their time to learning and using Bowen theory in their own work.

While Bowen built his small kingdom at Georgetown, he was also working on the larger empire of himself, struggling to achieve the kind of independent personal and professional identity that he described in his theory. To this point, he had assembled his ideas, but he had not yet been able to integrate them into a seamless whole. It was as if he had written what he knew was an epic poem, but the stanzas were still mixed up, and he did not yet know, from the inside of his own cells, what their final order would be. He *did* know that the way out of the labyrinth would be his idea of the differentiation of self.

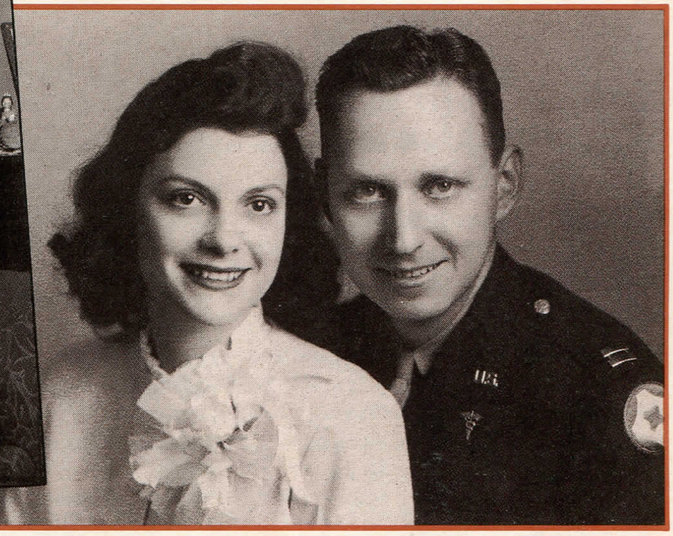
LeRoy Bowen met her husband-to-be in 1942, while working as his secretary in the Army hospital at Fort Bragg, Fayetteville, North Carolina. A year later, they were married (far right). A month after the wedding, he was posted to Europe. In 1958, the Bowens posed with their four children during a visit to Waverly (immediate right).

TO BOWEN, DIFFERENTIATION OF SELF meant the ability of an individual to separate emotionally from the undifferentiated family ego mass—to achieve independence and maturity without losing the capacity for free emotional connection. He concluded that the emotional problems in families were directly proportional to the sway members' feelings had over their ability to think. The more undifferentiated they were, the more they fell into the category of "no-selfs" or "pseudo-selfs"—people whose insecurity and emotional neediness forced them to give up individuality in exchange for love and acceptance. More differentiated, "thinking-oriented" people, on the other hand, were far more secure about their identity, free to pursue meaningful goals and engage in close relationships (without fear of smothering), and were usually more successful in every area of life.

The process of achieving greater self-differentiation, however, even for the relatively intact, was very difficult. A person's basic level of differentiation was the product of several generations and could not be altered in a few weeks. For this reason, Bowen took the long view of both theory and therapy. Differentiating oneself from one's family not only required understanding entrenched and complex patterns of family interaction, but acquiring the skill, patience, and self-control to talk directly with one's most intimate relatives without blowing up, giving in, going crazy, or running away.

Bowen had seen his ideas work with client families. He had made progress differentiating himself within his profession. He had even had some small success clarifying his relationship with his parents. But he had never really tackled the entrenched triangles of his whole family, a process that would require him not only to enter the lion's den, but throw rocks from close range at an entire pride of sleeping lions. The opportunity for this daring adventure came in late 1966, when a distant relative of Bowen's died, and Bowen began making plans to return home in February 1967.

Bowen had spent years tracing the genealogy of emotional patterns in families, including his own, in an effort



to help himself and others extricate themselves from the emotional quicksands of family life. But if it is impossible for anyone to emerge completely from the family ooze, Bowen's own family presented a particularly formidable obstacle to differentiation. Not only was Bowen's family large, but he claimed that his father knew all 15,000 souls in the county, by looks if not by name. He once tested his father, he said, by asking him if he knew a strange boy standing at a distance. No, he didn't know the boy's name, Bowen's father said—had never seen him—but he knew whose son he was by the way he walked and the expression on his face.

WHEN YOU MAKE A MOVE WITHIN YOUR OWN FAMILY . . . THE MOTIVATION FOR THE MOVE HAS TO COME OUT OF THE INDIVIDUAL."

Most people in his family, Bowen was proud to say, had "left their tracks wherever they went," certainly in Humphreys County, where family businesses included a farm, a store (selling, among other items, furniture and coffins), two funeral homes, a tin shop, and other concerns amounting to one whole block of downtown Waverly, Tennessee (pop. 1,000), of which his father—a "go-getter" said Bowen—had also been mayor for 18 years.

Though of old Protestant stock, the Bowen family was no longer particularly religious, and yet they were immersed in an ethic of hard work, personal responsibility, and self-motivation of which the Puritans would have approved. In such a family of nonstop overachievers, Bowen, as "an overresponsible oldest son" of a father who was "an only child who has functioned as a responsible oldest," and a mother who was "a responsible oldest daughter" of a "responsible oldest son," must have grown up feeling, well, *responsible* for leaving *his* tracks as well.

Making it even harder to differentiate from such a large, close-knit, and overpowering kin network, Bowen's family was remarkably stable and congenial. No alcoholism, divorce, suicide, and not much overt conflict ruffled the waters of a rural family that might have been painted by Norman Rockwell. Why would one even want to differentiate from such an ideal, all-American family?

Bowen never discussed how his family background motivated his personal and professional interests; he would have objected to such a traditional, psychodynamic perspective. "The idea to differentiate came from his theory," says Joan Winter, director of the Family Institute of Virginia in Richmond. Says Winter, who spent many hours interviewing Bowen, "That was the lens through which he viewed everything. He thought all families were pretty much the same—the patterns he was describing were universal, and fusion wasn't just something that happened to 'pathological' families—he figured his own, relatively healthy family would be a good lab for testing his ideas. Besides, he had better access to them."

The death of a distant kinsman in late 1966 gave him an opportunity to put his theory to practice in his own family. Bowen decided to go back to Tennessee and, applying his new understanding of triangles, engage in a short, intense, all-out campaign for his own differentiation of self. Taking advantage of the shock waves of anxiety the death sent through his family of origin, which he believed made them more vulnerable to positive change, Bowen spent weeks before his trip home planning an emotionally nonviolent confrontation with them that would help him both neutralize their anxiety and achieve his own independence. He worked out a byzantine strategy calibrated to raise as many old emotional issues in the family as possible. In a calculated pose of innocence and helpfulness, Bowen wrote a series of letters and made several phone calls to his parents, two sisters, and two brothers, telling some what the others had said about them, warning some of imminent catastrophe in the family, hectoring others about their family duties. It was a masterwork of manipulation worthy of a double agent and it did exactly what he intended: "stir up a 'tempest in a teapot.'"

As part of his plan, Bowen drew the fire of each family member toward *him*, on the theory that as odd man out he would be less likely to be drawn into any triangles and thereby seduced back into the family mass. In order to remain safely outside, he worked "to keep the entire family in one big emotional clump, and to detriangle any ally who tried to come over to my side." Typically, he told no one about the scenario he had planned, not even his wife, who accompanied him home to the emotional whirlwind he had precipitated.

As Bowen tells it, everything went

JESS SEWELL BOWEN, SR., 1887-1974

MURRAY BOWEN TAUGHT HIS students that the funeral of a parent was not only an opportunity to experience the meaning of the loss, but also a chance to clarify one's connections with other family members and take crucial steps toward differentiation. Bowen was 61 and already renowned for this theory of the family at the time his own father died in 1974. He invited much of the staff of the Georgetown Family Center to attend the funeral in Waverly, Tennessee, where he delivered the following eulogy.

AS A MEMBER OF THIS FAMILY, I WISH to speak briefly about what my father meant to me, to his family, to this town, and to this county. Thoughts go more to how he came to be the man he was, than to what he did. Through his biological heritage and his own persistent effort, he lived a long time. This, in turn, influenced his family. He and Mother were married over 63 years without a serious illness or death in any of their five children, in their children's wives or husbands, or in their grandchildren. I was among a few privileged to have lived over 60 years with both parents alive and functioning. Papa Jess was proud of his intact family. In his prayers, he often offered thanks for the many years with an unbroken family circle.

Jess Bowen, Sr., was born July 9, 1887, 10 miles south of Waverly, at Hurricane Mills, on his father's farm, later known as the Cannon farm. His father died when he was two. Until his mother remarried when he was 12, his family was mostly him and his mother. He gradually lost contact with the Bowen side of his family. Until recent years, he knew little about the Bowen clan that came from Wales to Pennsylvania almost 300 years ago, who pioneered the frontier in Virginia and Tennessee before the American Revolution, and who were important in the commercial, professional, and political life in the state, even before Tennessee became a state in 1796. He and his mother were living in Waverly by the time he was five, and he adopted Waverly as his "family." Except for one crop season on a farm at Hustburg, a year working in Memphis in his teens, and a year away in prep school, his entire life was spent in his beloved Waverly. When he and Mother were married in 1911, he joined the Luff family. The name Luff-Bowen has been more than the name of a business.

In 1961, Bowen (far left) and his four siblings gathered together in Waverly to celebrate the fiftieth wedding anniversary of their parents, Jess and Maggie May Bowen.

He was self-supporting and responsible for the situation around him in his early teens. His life priorities were responsibility for himself, responsibility for his family, responsibility for his business, and then responsibility for the town and the county. Responsibility for self extended from grooming, to personal habits, to his total philosophy of life. Personal appearance was important to him. He managed to wear tailored suits, even in the lean years when he drove a second-hand car and new suits came infrequently. His personal habits came from his own strict code of right and wrong. He lived his life more by example than sermonizing, and more by action than deploring the situation. Once he could be responsible for himself, he could then be maturely responsible for others. To him, responsibility for others might be a helping hand when a man was down, or it might be a kick in the pants if the other needed it to get going. Responsibility for others extended beyond Waverly to the entire county. Once he told me he knew every adult person in Humphreys County until after World War II. He might not know the first names of all the children, but he could watch their mannerisms and the way they walked and know who their parents were. After World War II there were too many new people working in the industries for him to know them all. He came close to treating all people as equals, and he wanted each to have full opportunity to make the most of his abilities. If he knew all the people in the county, then they all knew him. The amount of energy he had for all people was great, as was the amount of time he spent thinking about, and working on, projects that were good for the town and county. He did not extend himself to state and national affairs, lest he not have enough time for those close to him.

Jess Bowen also knew Nature and the animal world, which seems more rare now than it used to be. He could watch a family of birds or animals and intuitively know what they were about. I first thought this was part of his early interest in hunting and fishing and I did not pay much attention to it. In later years when I learned this was a unique "at homeness" with Nature, I tried to learn it from him. It was too late. He assumed all people had this ability to observe Nature and to know man's relationship to it.

Each of you has had your own experiences with him, and you have your own private memories about him. He had an unusual ability for special and very personal relationships with a wide range of people. Years ago there was a school teacher who did not return his greeting when he tipped his hat and spoke to her. He made a project of this. He began standing directly in her path, tipping his hat and speaking, until she would return his greeting. He and she had a special relationship as long as she lived. The affectionate exchange of nicknames was part of his personal relationships. The old-timers who called him "Lizzie," from the 1900 to 1910 period, are mostly gone. His most enduring nickname, "Papa Jess," began in the late 1920s, when he was about 40. It caught on and has since been used by more and more people, especially those close to him and those younger.

If he had one hallmark that stood out above all the others, it was his special sense of humor and his distinctive laugh. He had an uncanny ability to see the humor in a situation, to express it in a few words, and to laugh at the situation and himself. Most of you remember a number of "Jess Bowen comments"—straight talk done with humor. The comments came automatically to ease an awkward situation or to enliven the routine. The last day of his life, in the hospital, desperately ill and miserably uncomfortable, he was still able to joke and make wisecracks about the situation. I wished I had a tape recording of his laugh for people to hear at his funeral. One could only guess at the kind of humorous comment he would have about his own funeral.

There are other Jess Bowen hallmarks better known by his family and longtime employees. He had an extraordinary degree of self-discipline. Above all, he tried to do what he believed to be right, rather than what he wanted to do, or what was expeditious for the moment. He was always searching for new facts, ideas, procedures, and inventions to improve himself. He did not impose his thinking on others, nor did he permit others to impose their viewpoints on him through coercion. He was a religious man but he never formally joined a church. For him, religion was a strict code of living to be used seven days a week. Privately, he was not persuaded by the emotionality of religion, and the public profession of religion on Sunday, to be discarded during the week. His strict life-style was communicated more by his presence than by enforcement. To his children and his employees, he could communicate, "Do it now—and do it right," with enough humor to soften the message and enough definiteness to be heard. He was not taken in by an excuse or a plea of helplessness. From childhood, I remember his stories about "Mr. Can't." A child who used the excuse, "I can't do it," only stirred comments such as "Who is Mr. Can't," and "Where does Mr. Can't live." His was the steadying hand, in his family and elsewhere. There was a noteworthy example from my childhood. When Mother would get concerned and fearful her young sons would be hurt or injured in their adventurous activities, he would calm the situation with his frequent statement, "The Good Lord looks after a boy until he is 16—after that, he is on his own." That statement occasionally still echoes through my thoughts even now, half a century later. None of his children ever had a serious accident or injury, except for Roy's broken leg during his senior year of high school football.

Jess Bowen had a zest for life and a life-style that made it fun to be alive and to work hard. Through being his own unique self, he created a healthy atmosphere in which others could grow in their own way. I remember a tear on his cheek and a sincere wish for my success when I left for New York to intern, and again in front of this funeral home in 1941, when we said goodbye as I was leaving for the Army. This family and this county were blessed to have had him over 87 years. He contributed much to all of us. Though we shall miss him, and our lives will never be the same without him, his gifts are alive in us and we shall carry on into the future. To him, in this final parting, from all of us, I say, "Thank you, Papa Jess." ■

exactly according to plan. His brother, who had been avoiding him for years, now turned up in a righteous lather, threatening a libel suit and accusing Bowen of being drunk when he wrote the letter. Soon, Bowen was at the center of a three-ring family circus, cleverly turning away wrath, pouring oil on troubled waters, and generally conducting the family orchestra like a maestro. At the end of the epochal visit, by remaining detached, good-humored, and undefensive, he had calmed his family's anxiety, initiated a higher level of mutual understanding, and differentiated himself once and for all.

"I had actively participated in the most intense family emotion possible and I had stayed completely out of the 'ego mass' of my very own family!" Bowen exulted. "I had gone through the entire visit without being 'triangled' or without being fused into the family emotional system . . . It was the total success of the operation that was surprising, exhilarating, and exhausting . . . It was equivalent to having finally mastered the secret of the [family] system and having gone all the way to the goal line in one try." Even 20 years later he remembered the occasion with characteristic Bowenian hyperbole. "*My arrival [at home] on February 11, 1967, was a hallmark in the history of the family* . . . By the time this new meeting was 30 minutes old, *I knew that I was totally successful on the first try . . . I finally knew one way through the impenetrable thicket which is the family emotional system*" [italics in original].

Well. Bowen clearly experienced the event as something between being born again and inventing the wheel. Indeed, his account of the experience is instructive, often amusing, and oddly appealing: we see a man actively gaining independence from his family and we feel a kind of envy. Would that we could be so self-possessed, so cool-headed, so quietly masterful when surrounded by our families—the people who can still reduce us to pouting childishness, no matter how suavely adult we are away from home.

Yet there is the disturbing sense that this is exactly the vision we are meant to see, that Bowen has prepared for us an allegorical coming-of-age drama—Arthur claiming the sword Excalibur—written, produced, directed by, and starring himself. The story does not reveal someone "selfish and hostile and hurtful," as Bowen said critics called him, but rather a man who believes he has taken ultimate responsibility for himself by literally creating himself. When asked about his life and work at his last interview, Bowen said, “It is not so much my family that produced it, as *I* produced it,” as if his family—that powerful Tennessee clan—had had almost nothing to do with the making of Murray Bowen.

Having tried to be the wise son to whom nobody much listened, he had finally left his own tracks on the family turf, and he intended to do the same in the profession. He decided to use his successful struggle for independence from his family as the springboard to a similar victory for differentiation from his profession. Months before he made his trip home to Tennessee, Bowen had been scheduled to present a paper about his theory at the Family Research Conference, to be held in Philadelphia in the spring of 1967, before a small, select group of family therapy’s leading lights, including Minuchin, Whitaker, Jay Haley, Paul Watzlawick, James Framo, and John Weakland. Instead of presenting the paper he had already prepared (advance copies of which had been sent to all participants), Bowen made his visit home the subject of a surprise paper about his own family. Not unreasonably, the conference, at which he now planned to present his own personal story to the unsuspecting leaders of his field, assumed the importance to him of a heroic ordeal. “I wondered—did I dare do the same thing to the ‘family of family therapists’ that I had done with my own family? I did dare to do it!”

For all the triumph he felt about his success at home, however, the figure who presented the paper was a rather unusual Bowen—not the highly intellectual, superior, and rather arrogant person he could sometimes be—but a quieter, softer man. Whitaker remembers that at the meeting, “He spoke very personally, as if speaking to close friends, or like an analysand, and we were all his analysts listening to him.” Others cite his courage in talking about his own family at a time when personal revelations were considered an embarrassing gaffe in professional circles. “Bowen always had the rap of being so intellectual, so cool,” says Carolyn Moynihan Bradt, one of the founding faculty members at Georgetown’s family therapy training program, now in private practice. “But here he was, the first person to be so self-revealing in presenting his own family at a conference. He was so daring to do it.”

Bowen considered the paper not only a major breakthrough for himself, and a smash-hit at the meeting, but a benchmark in the history of family theory and therapy. He had initiated, he later wrote, “a new trend nationally . . .[that] also spread into international areas.” As a historical event, the 1967 paper has been compared to Freud’s self-analysis; but even Freud had never publicly presented such a straightforward and undisguised case history of his own family. For Bowen and later his followers, the presentation had the almost legendary quality of Martin Luther’s appearance before the Diet of Worms in 1521, when Luther declared his independence from all authority but his own conscience, and finished with a resounding, “Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise.”

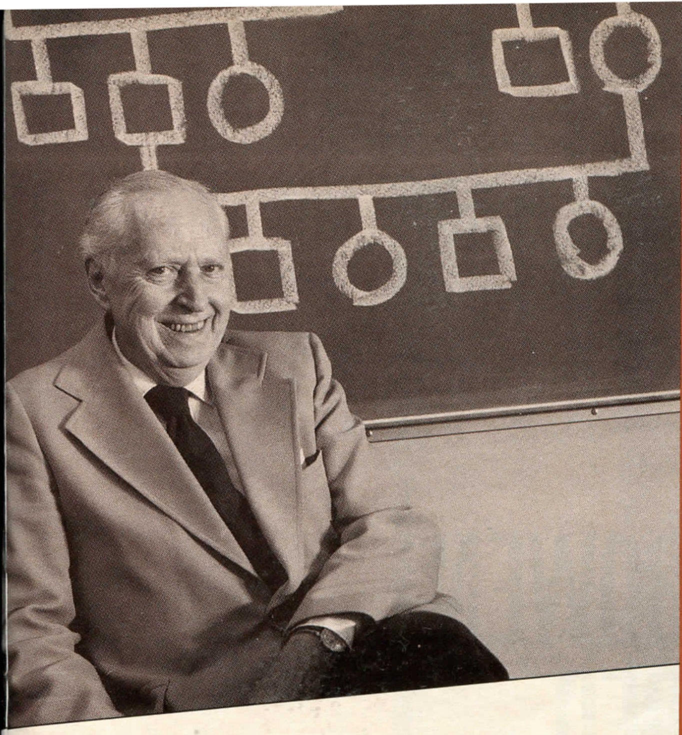
THOUGH BOWEN MAINTAINED THAT differentiation was essentially a neutral reference to the degree of a person’s emotional separation from family of origin, his discussion of the term seems to ring with approbation of the more, and disparagement of the less, differentiated. There are mutterings among Bowen’s critics that his discussion of human differentiation as a giant step up the evolutionary ladder brings him uncomfortably close to suggesting the emergence, in effect, of a race of *ubermenschen* standing above the rest of the hoi polloi. As one therapist commented, not entirely jokingly, “Differentiation measures the degree to which we have evolved from the organic web, how far we’ve come from the primeval slime mold” of instinctual life. Another, who had trained with Bowen, suggested that he had implicitly postulated a form of Social Darwinism (the belief that the wealthy, successful, and powerful are more highly evolved beings, biologically superior to the less well-endowed) that could sound almost fascistic at times.

Bowenians respond that this is a blatant misrepresentation, though they agree that the term differentiation can be “a very elusive concept,” says James Framo, distinguished professor in the School of Human Behavior at U.S. International University in San Francisco, because it refers to a degree of inner freedom and independence that can’t easily be assessed by an outsider. “Basically, it has to do with having a secure sense of who you are, a strong sense of your own values, standards, and the ability not to become reactive to your closest intimates.” Michael Kerr, Bowen’s successor as director of the Georgetown University Family Center, says it is very simple: “Differentiation is the ability to think, feel, and act for oneself.”

Some therapists wonder how new the concept of differentiation really is. “It includes characteristics that are generally highly regarded in mental health circles,” says Alan Gurman, professor of psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin Medical School. “Maturation, moral development, the ability to cope with stress, modulate anxiety, and assert yourself without stepping on other people’s toes; in short, being your own person—psychodynamic therapists have been talking about all that for years.”

But Bowen’s concept of differentiation has acquired an almost mystical overlay in some circles. One therapist compares it to the enlightened state of the archetypal Zen warrior, and Bowen himself wrote that a person measuring a hypothetical 100 on his early scale of differentiation—if such a being existed—would be “perfect in all levels of emotional, cellular, and physiological functioning.” Charles Paddack, a Bowen-trained family and marital psychiatrist in Kensington, Maryland, describes it as a profound, but sometimes mysterious state of total selfhood, saying, “If you don’t know whether you’re differentiated or not, you aren’t. It’s like asking how much a yacht costs—if you have to ask, you can’t afford it.”

INDEED, AS A TEACHER AND A MENTOR Bowen let his students know that differentiation, both personal and professional would never come cheap. “You hav inherited a lifetime of tribulation,” he sai in his last interview. “Everybody ha inherited it. Take it over, make the mos of it. And when you have decided yo know the right way, do the best you ca with it.” Within this homiletic piece advice is a truth that he believed mo people, including many family therapist



Bowen's pioneering use of the genogram and his frequent appearances on the conference circuit during the '60s and '70s made his concepts standard tools of family therapy. With Virginia Satir (right) celebrating Human Family Day at Georgetown in 1978.

had forgotten: learning to know oneself is the most compelling and yet the hardest of human tasks, requiring the most courage, determination, and faith. The goal, the reason for attempting the task at all, is freedom, an elusive, ambiguous reward that may exact a high price in loss of love, popularity, wealth, and the cozy security of togetherness.

Bowen's theory, to which he gave his life, virtually demanded a kind of hardness, an internal discipline that precluded the gregarious congeniality that might lull the anxiety of his trainees wondering how they were doing. Indeed, learning to live with anxiety was part of the training. To be a good, differentiated therapist required the capacity to outgrow the hungry, insecure need for praise and approval from others, especially the most significant other. Said Bowen, "We all have some kind of vulnerability to believe what we are *supposed* to believe, rather than what we ourselves believe." His goal was to transcend this vulnerability as much as was humanly possible, and to instill the same goal in his students.

Bowen made it very clear that the seeker along this path could expect a good deal of discomfort, and he often made his students very uncomfortable. His trainees complained that they were expected to take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience while working at the Georgetown University Family Center which he founded in 1975. The poverty was quite literal; funds for the center were limited, so most of the faculty and students worked as volunteers. Bowen, who never cared much about money anyway, was not always tolerant of those expressing pedestrian needs to make a living.

The demand for loyalty included a requirement for a kind of intellectual chastity. Bowen required complete allegiance to his ideas and allowed little deviation from the true path. He seemed to believe his own theory was still too new, too fragile to withstand the blooming confusion of the therapy marketplace, and his students too vulnerable to expose themselves to the promiscuous eclecticism of the outside world.

HE WAS FAMOUS FOR OFF-THE-CUFF REMARKS AND QUERIES THAT WERE LIKE PSYCHOTHERAPY KOANS.

Some students compared the Center to a cocoon, but if so, it was hardly a cozy, comfortable one. Bowen was strict, businesslike, and countenanced little frivolity at the office. An implicit code of behavior prevailed, though few of the rules were ever spelled out. People were expected, for example, to dress rather formally, with men in dark suits. "There was a kind of undercover joke," recalls Jack Bradt, a psychiatrist and former Bowen student now in private practice, "that you could tell Bowen people because they all wore G-men suits, and looked like FBI agents."

Just as at NIMH, Bowen's mystifying reticence only fed the guru image he allegedly detested. "He didn't often make comments to us, and was very cautious about what he said," remembers Bradt. Still, "everyone always sat on the edge of their seats waiting for what he would say, which was generally very little. He would make a strange remark, like 'Wet birds fly at night,' and we would go off pondering and puzzling what he meant. We spent a lot of time asking each other, 'What did he mean by that? What was he thinking?' We were always trying to read into him something more than he'd actually said. It seemed to be part of his power that he kept people riveted to him, waiting for a message."

If Bowen could not bring himself to approve of any deviation from his fledgling theory, he tried hard to distinguish between loyalty to the theory and to himself. He may have inadvertently encouraged discipleship, but he did not really want disciples. Framo remembers that he considered Bowen his mentor, but would not have dreamed of telling him so. "He didn't like that kind of relationship," Framo says. "He thought it was of a piece with being commercial or social," as if the mentor-student relationship smacked too much of mutual dependency, an unhealthy merging of selves, or of an unholy contract between two people who were covertly using each other for their own gain.

Bowen seldom agreed outright with people or complimented anyone. It was as if agreeableness and personal ingratiation was a kind of "lending of self," at odds with the high standards he set for his own and his students' differentiation. But however uncomfortable trainees may have found the Georgetown Family

Continued on page 77

MURRAY BOWEN REMEMBERED

IT IS INEVITABLE THAT FIGURES LIKE MURRAY BOWEN, WHO shatter old paradigms and forge new theories about human behavior, excite our curiosity about what they are like personally and how they handle the ordinary challenges of human relationships. Bowen himself tried to discourage this interest in his personality, seeing it as a distraction from his treasured theory. Yet, at the same time, by so publicly using his own family experience to validate his ideas, Bowen invited the very scrutiny he found so unwelcome.

Some of his colleagues saw Bowen as a gruff, distant, and even arrogant character. For others he was an uncompromising visionary, a man whose humor and calm wisdom spurred people on to life-changing journeys of intellectual adventure and personal discovery. In what follows, five widely respected family therapists who knew Bowen give some glimpses of how he lived out his own theory and of the human qualities that made him such a giant in our field.

TOM WOLFF

MICHAEL E. KERR

Living the Theory

MURRAY BOWEN LIVED HIS THEORY in his own unique way. He never suggested that the way he did it was the way others should do it, although people often heard it that way. He continually emphasized the importance of separating Bowen theory from Bowen the man. But if Bowen's theory reflects his personality rather than universal principles of the natural world, then Bowen failed in his principal task: namely to distinguish *what man is* from *what man says he is*.

Learning Bowen theory from a book is impossible, except in the most limited, intellectualized way. It helps immeasurably to see someone put the ideas into action on a day-to-day basis. Watching Bowen live his theory, both in his relationship with me as well as with others, was essential for me in integrating the theory into my own life. It wasn't a matter of Bowen's giving lessons on how to differentiate—no one can tell you how to do that—it was being able to watch not only how he abstractly defined the principles of differentiation, but how he acted on them.

Several weeks after Bowen's death, I spent a full day reviewing my 25-year personal and professional connection with him. I thought about the many instances that highlighted Bowen's effort to live his theory, and what I had learned from watching and being with him. Four memories stood out, three of which were connected to funerals.

In November 1969, my schizophrenic brother committed suicide. I had known Bowen for only six months, and had just begun my fellowship in child psychiatry at Georgetown University Medical Center. My brother had been living with my mother in Philadelphia before he killed himself, so I traveled north to be with my family. Bowen happened to be in Philadelphia at a professional meeting. I managed to reach him that night, and told him the news. He offered to meet me the next morning.

My time with him was extraordinarily useful. I described the events in my family preceding the suicide, and when I finished he said, "Mike, maybe your mother pulled up her functioning and your brother suicided in reaction to it." His comment was a much-needed jolt; it gave me a way to think about the suicide, not just to feel about it. Until that point, enormous pain and guilt had precluded any objective thinking. I began to have some ideas about what triggered the suicide, and I could use that understanding to guide me through the funeral. Even though Bowen was clearly affected by the suicide, his comments and questions came from theory, and that helped me enormously. By the time we said goodbye, I was ready to deal with my family.

For the next few days, I concentrated on spending time alone with each family member, time that allowed for feeling, and for talk about our feelings. By the time we buried my brother, family members were supporting each other very well. Self-recriminations and blaming others, which, if left unchecked, could have divided the family for years, gave way to a desire to help each other any way we could.

When Nathan Ackerman, one of family therapy's foremost pioneers, died in June 1971, Bowen urged me and others to attend the funeral. What I most appreciated about Bowen as I watched him interact with the Ackerman family and the Ackerman professional staff was his ability to make personal contact with everyone. He was not afraid of feelings—he worked to make them emerge. There were plenty of tears for Nat, and Bowen was right in the middle of it. With all the talk I had heard of Bowen and his theory being too intellectual, I was struck by how he seemed more able to deal with his own and with others' feelings than almost anyone I knew.

Three years later, in November 1974, Bowen's father died, and many of us at Georgetown Family Center went to Waverly, Tennessee, for the funeral. Bowen was delighted to have us there and showed us around the family business—the Luff-Bowen funeral home—explaining which were the best caskets and talking about the whole funeral process. He knew the process well, having grown up around it. I credit no other human being more with helping me see that death is really a part of life, and that a funeral is for the living, an occasion to help survivors move on.

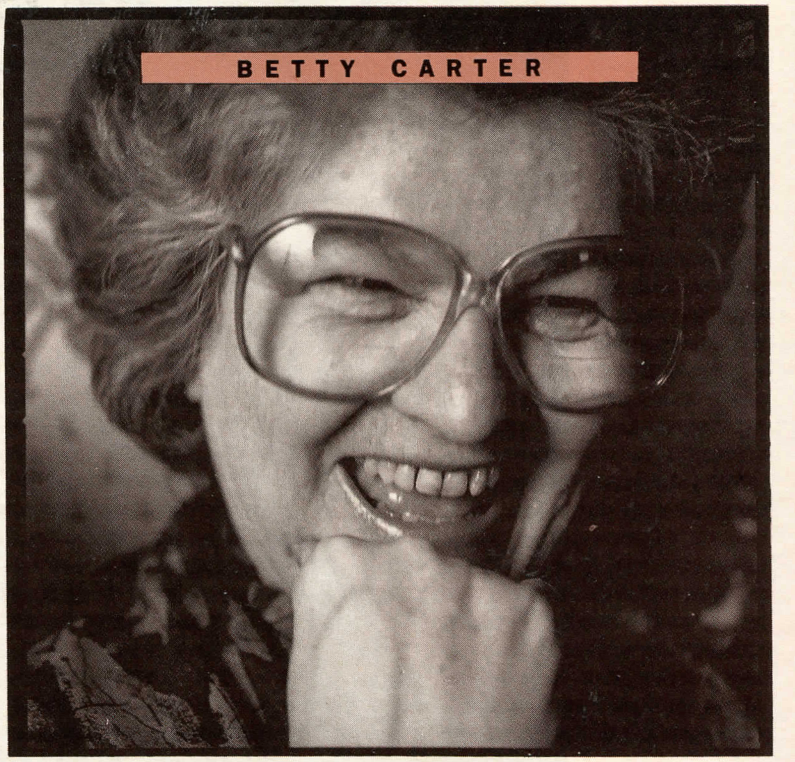
Soon after the funeral, Bowen made a presentation at Georgetown Family Center in which he talked about his recent experience. He said that while he had felt intensely about his father's death, none of the feelings had lingered, and none had been so intense that he would call them "grief." He attributed the nature of his response to the fact that he had fairly successfully resolved his emotional attachment to his father before his father died. I thought it took courage to openly say he wasn't grieving for his father, since some people would have recoiled from such an "unfeeling" statement. But the courage to say what he thought and felt was characteristic of Bowen.

About two months before he died, Murray called me late one evening to say, "Mike, I want to talk to you; it's important." I agreed to go to his home office early the next morning. I was uncharacteristically apprehensive about our meeting, thinking he was going to tell me he was ready to die and that I must take over the reins completely at the Georgetown Family Center. Well, just the opposite. "Mike, I have a new project planned, one that deals with the homeless. The Family Center can make a huge dent in that problem, if people are willing to work at it!"

Bowen was much more alive than most people even while he was dying. He could have dented the homeless problem, just like he dented psychoanalytic theory and other widely accepted "truths." The man believed in himself and in his theory. He backed up his beliefs with actions, actions whose long-term impact on psychiatry and medicine will, I believe, be far greater than most people realize. ☐

Michael E. Kerr, M.D., is the director of the Georgetown Family Center, 4400 MacArthur Blvd., N.W., Suite 102, Washington, D.C. 20007.

SYLVIA PLACHY



BETTY CARTER

My Reluctant Ancestor

I FIRST MET MURRAY BOWEN WHEN I introduced myself to him in 1972, in the lobby of a hotel in Vermont where a family therapy conference was in progress. "I have a problem in my personal family," I told him.

"What kind of problem?" he asked.

"My father is dying of cancer and we have a very distant relationship. I have my genogram," I added, holding up a folded sheet of paper that spelled out my family connections. Murray gestured to a sofa in the lobby and spent almost an hour talking to me about how I might change my relationship with my father before he died, and how I could handle my family's reactions to that change. He was warm, friendly, kindly, and good-humored, exuding an ease and approachability that he seemed to save for clinical encounters, but that I seldom saw otherwise.

I had been nervous accosting him like that, and I was aware of the split second during which he evaluated my request, deciding whether to brush me off or respond. Once he decided to deal with me, his remote manner vanished and he focused all of his attention on me and my genogram. Dozens of people walked by, but we could have been sitting alone in his office. His questions were many, his comments were few, and he ended with a cheerleader's rallying cry: "This is such an interesting family! You'll get a lot out of it if you pull this off even halfway." And he was right; I did. It was only an hour, but it was a turning point in my personal life, a shift of such power that I have often returned to it mentally, trying to get hold of the secret ingredient for my own clinical use. I still don't know exactly what it was, except, perhaps, his assurance that this was important and that it was doable.

We eventually developed a professional relationship. I traveled to various conferences at his institute in Georgetown, Washington, D.C., and he consulted frequently at the Center for Family Learning, where I was director of family therapy training. Ours was not a peer relationship—Bowen led, I followed; it seemed natural, since he was the creator of the theory I was learning.

After my early family therapy training, which had left me with various unrelated concepts floating loose in my brain, I was immediately attracted to the intelligently constructed, elaborate yet flexible framework of family systems ideas presented in Bowen's theory. And the best way to learn the theory, besides experiencing it in your own personal life, was to sit in a conference or a clinical consultation during Bowen's earlier days, as I did, and listen to him preach and chuckle and scold and harumph his way along. You could criticize his reserved, WASP style if you wanted to, but you knew he was onto something profound. If you stayed and listened, and opened your mind and your emotions, his ideas tapped into the underground of our experiences in human family relationships—not just surface, behavioral tricks, although he was good at those, too.

I remember one conference that featured the movie *I Never Sang for My Father*, based on Robert Anderson's play, starring Melvin Douglas as an aging, irascible, critical father and Gene Hackman as his grown son trying unsuccessfully to get closer to his father. In one scene, the frustrated character played by Hackman finally loses his patience, tells his father off, and slams out of the house. The audience of family therapists erupted in applause. Bowen stopped the movie, came to the microphone on the dark stage, and said in a low, intense voice, "Everyone who just applauded has a big job to do in your own personal family before you go messing around with other people's families." He then spoke (preached) in a very moving way for about a half hour about fathers and sons, parents and grown children, and the responsibility to oneself and the other; the benefits of working out those relationships; the emotional penalty for "dutiful distance," and cut-offs. We left the conference quiet and thoughtful.

Not everyone stayed with Bowen or his theory long enough to get hooked, and I myself walked out of the first clinical presentation of his that I saw before I understood what he was doing, because I found it stilted, repressed, and dull—the opposite of my ideal back then: the '60s encounter-group experience.

I thought that "letting it all hang out," expressing your emotions freely by having a high-intensity encounter, was the road to improving relationships. I couldn't imagine what this man Bowen thought he was doing with his endless, low-key questions, and why he didn't encourage the couple he was interviewing to talk and fight with each other instead of only with him. Later, I saw a tape showing a group of four couples, and Murray *still* questioned them one by one, so I said, "This is crazy," got up, and left. It was some time later that I came to appreciate the transformation of the emotional climate from frenzied to thoughtful that came about through the low-key questioning.

Murray tried never to interject his own emotional reactions into the client's story, but kept his questions explicit and matter-of-fact, regardless of the content under discussion. My all-time favorite Bowen question was the one he asked a client who was a voyeur and who had come to see him after years of psychoanalytic treatment: "If you hadn't just had a course in the horrors of sleeping with your mother [the client had done so until age eight], just how would you evaluate that experience?" Talk about reframing!

I ***WALKED OUT OF THE FIRST CLINICAL PRESENTATION OF HIS THAT I SAW BEFORE I UNDERSTOOD WHAT HE WAS DOING.***

Meanwhile, it took several exposures to vintage Bowen sermons on the workings of the family emotional system before I became convinced that Bowen's ideas were worth pursuing. And it took some pursuit and some effort to find out just what it was all about. Murray tried to make himself and his ideas available in the early days—he attended virtually every meeting, small or large—but he wouldn't sell himself or his ideas by ingratiating himself, and he greatly feared having the ideas watered down and misunderstood by therapists looking for a quick fix or a new technique.

I never got much from Bowen's writing either, which seemed to me turgid and convoluted, a result, I suppose, of trying too hard to convey exact nuances of ideas expressed mainly on a highly abstract level.

I think it was Bowen's propensity to focus on ideas at what he felt was a properly scientific and intellectual level that made him so suspicious of attempts to paraphrase or adapt his ideas on the clinical level. Here he was, trying to connect his theory of emotional systems to the world of hard science—biology and evolution and all that—and here we were, Monica McGoldrick, myself, and others, weaving feminism, ethnicity, and all manner of radical ideas that he didn't approve of, into his theory.

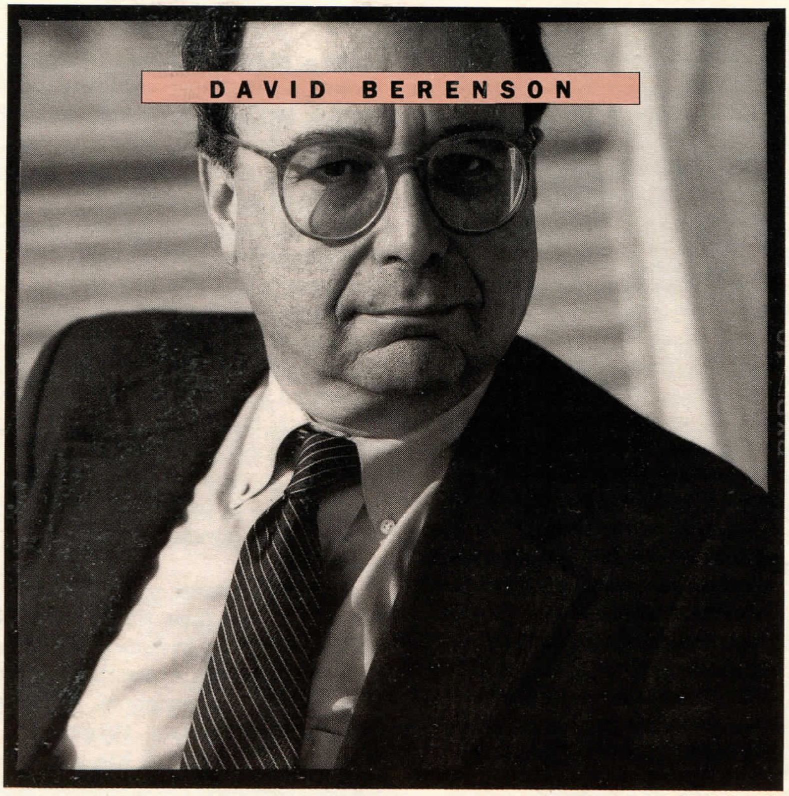
He had graciously agreed to support Monica's and my work in 1980, by writing the foreword to the first edition of our textbook, *Family Life Cycle*, although he warned us that there were some "conceptual difficulties" with the model we presented. I didn't really understand what he meant, but I knew our paths were diverging more and more. He labeled the 1960s a period of "massive societal regression"—I thought of it as a period of significant advances in civil rights and social realism.

He made sarcastic remarks about "people who waste their time distinguishing an Italian from an Irishman." His response to questions about women's issues was to dismiss them as peripheral to the main concepts of systems theory. He was becoming considerably less interested in therapy and more interested in defining "man's [sic] connection to the larger universe of natural systems." My colleagues and I were more and more thinking "social"; Murray more and more thought "biological." In 1988, when we published the second edition of *Family Life Cycle*, with its emphasis throughout on the social, cultural, gendered context of family life and family therapy, we told the publisher to ask Murray if he'd rather we omit his foreword. He said he would rather we left it out, and we did.

During the 1980s, as I became more widely known for my feminist ideas, it always seemed problematic when I was asked about my basic theoretical orientation. I knew that Murray would regard "feminist Bowenite" as an oxymoron, and yet I like to give credit when I use the ideas of others. I usually ended up saying that I claimed Bowen as my ancestor, even though he undoubtedly wouldn't claim me as his descendant.

I have never really minded the fact that Murray disapproved of my adaptation of his ideas. After all, it was his theory that taught me about differentiation, the process of distinguishing your ideas from those you were taught, and learning to give yourself permission and approval instead of trying to get it from your parents or your gurus. Thanks, Murray, and rest in peace. You made a monumental contribution. ☐

Betty Carter, M.S.W., is the director of the Family Institute of Westchester, 147 Archer Ave., Mt. Vernon, NY 10550.



CRAIG MOREY

DAVID BERENSON

Listening for The Distant Drumbeat

I FIRST GOT TO KNOW MURRAY BOWEN when he became my therapist in 1973. Up to that point, I based my opinion of him on what I had seen at a few conferences, and on his general reputation: a developer of some important new ideas, but too obscure in expressing them and somewhat distant and difficult on a personal level, sort of a curmudgeon. Nevertheless, when, as an ambitious young family therapist, I moved to Washington, D.C., I figured it wouldn't hurt to see Bowen for some coaching. I might even learn something.

I came to my first session with my genogram and family chronology, and launched into the patient mode I had learned in psychoanalysis, earnestly describing how I felt about the people in my family. I was a little startled when Murray interrupted me to mention something about his wife's family, but quickly regained my stride. He then told me a story about a woman who, while visiting her family of origin in Minneapolis, stayed in a motel. "It usually takes about eight hours to get fused back into your family emotional system. She was really determined to change, and stayed someplace where she could keep her head clear."

When I started telling him how depressed one of my relatives was, he asked, "How do you know she's depressed when you're not around?" His questions, anecdotes, and the genograms and triangles that he drew on his little blackboard threw me off balance, and as I walked back to my car after the consultation, I felt lightheaded. It began to dawn on me that he might really be up to something different from what I thought therapy was about.

I had scheduled another appointment with Bowen for six weeks later (certainly different timing than psychoanalysis) so I figured I had better have something to report back to him. If someone had asked me why, I probably would have said, "Because of the transference—everyone knows that's how therapy works." I was going along with Bowen as I had gone along with my parents, teachers, and analyst, reluctantly doing my homework. On Bowen's recommendation, I decided to start with my mother's extended family. I scheduled a trip with one of my cousins, only four years younger than my mother, to visit my mother's parents' graves.

I knew very little about my grandparents other than that they had both died before I was born (my grandmother had died when my mother was a little girl). As we were driving to the town where they grew up, my cousin told me several stories I had never heard before about my mom as a girl and a young woman. I began to see my mother as a sister and a daughter, not just as my mother, or my father's wife. When we arrived at the cemetery where my grandparents were buried, I began to feel dizzy and flushed.

I returned home five hours later and took my temperature—it was 102 degrees. The next day I felt fine, with a sense that something fundamental had shifted, both in my relationship to myself and to my mother. From then on, I continued my extended-family work because it was intrinsically valuable, not as a means to an end or to please anyone else.

I had sessions with Murray perhaps 10 more times over the next year and a half. Sessions were of indeterminate length, always at least an hour, sometimes longer. Bowen usually left the initiative for scheduling the next appointment up to me, sometimes tentatively suggesting four to six weeks between meetings. In his work with me, Bowen always stayed the understated, somewhat humorous coach, never becoming a transference figure or magical technician. In many small, casually offhand ways, he undercut the hierarchical, even authoritarian atmosphere that frequently develops in therapy. While Murray was profoundly allergic to what he called "weness," he was skilled at getting across the sense that we're all in this together, of differentiation as a life-long task in which one is grateful for small advances.

Sometimes, when I felt stuck on a particular issue, he would pause and say, "Well, let me tell you about this one." He would draw a genogram on the blackboard and tell me a story that placed what I was going through in a broader perspective. The story was usually about someone who had been able to be less "twitchy" with his or her extended family. It left me with the option of making a differentiating move or of letting the situation be. We didn't officially end the coaching; we just didn't happen to schedule another appointment.

As I got to know him and his theory, and as I explored my own extended family, it became clear to me that Bowen was not intentionally obscure, as I had initially thought. Rather, he was trying to point the way to the deep emotional power of the family's "togetherness forces" to a profession preoccupied with the experience of the individual. Here's how he put it when I interviewed him in 1976, reprinted in his book *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*: "This theory contains no new ideas. It operates on an order of facts so simple that everyone knew them all the time . . . I have compared the theory to a distant 'drumbeat' that people have always heard. The distant drumbeat is often obscured by a noisy foreground drumbeat, but it is always there and it tells its own single story to those who can keep the focus on the distant drumbeat and tune out the noisy insistence of the foreground . . . [people are] so emotionally involved in the automatic 'dance of life' they cannot see."

BOWEN NEVER HAD MUCH DOUBT ABOUT THE PROFOUND IMPLICATIONS OF HIS THEORY.

Bowen never had much doubt about the profound implications of his theory. Once, when visiting him, I said, "Murray, you frequently talk about your ideas as being reasonably accurate. It strikes me that they're absolutely right-on." He matter-of-factly replied, "Yes, I know." For several years, Bowen and I would get together occasionally when I was in Washington or he was in California. I would tease him about how he had succeeded in attracting a coterie of followers who were trying to fuse with him. He would tolerate it good-naturedly, appearing somewhat bemused about his semi-guru status.

Over the last few years we lost contact. I have some regret that I never got around to sending him a recent article on spirituality I wrote that mentioned him. I was going to enclose a cover letter that started, "While I've become pretty comfortable about taking God's name in vain, I'm a little afraid of taking Murray Bowen's name in vain." I chuckle when I imagine how he would have responded. ☐

David Berenson, M.D., is a faculty member, California Graduate School of Family Psychology, and is in private practice. Address: 215 Main St., #207, Sausalito, CA 94965.

SYLVIA PLACHY

MONICA McGOLDRICK

A Sentimentalist Under Wraps

DURING THE EULOGIES AT MURRAY Bowen's funeral, a friend leaned over to me and said, "I don't get it. Was this a human being they're talking about?"

"I'm afraid this is just the way Murray would have liked it," I couldn't help responding.

The speakers, all male, spoke, for the most part, in a dissociated way about facts and theory. You could hardly find Murray anywhere. These impersonal speeches were followed by readers, all but one female, who read mostly from the bible of Bowen's writings. I imagine Murray would have appreciated the WASP emphasis on facts and theory—God forbid his mourners get caught up in the mushy "togetherness" forces of personal reactions to the man.

But what a paradox that included in this dour ceremony was one of Murray's favorite pieces of music, the lush "Lara's Theme" from *Doctor Zhivago*, and a romantic poem by St. Francis that Murray apparently loved and wanted read because he felt it encompassed virtually his whole theory of differentiation. The poem reads, in part:

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith; Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light, and where there is sadness, joy.
Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console,
To be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive.

That was Murray—the lyrical sentimentalist wrapped up in the hyperobjectified cover of a curmudgeon. Outsiders rarely understood his ideas, interpreting his theory as eschewing feelings and valuing only facts, science, and rationality. I think his Southern, WASP, male language indeed got in the way of people hearing his ideas—which had everything to do with love and respect and forgiveness and human connection.

Despite his foibles, Bowen worked endlessly to keep his eye on the big picture and had great humility about his own struggle to keep his thinking clear. He was a remarkable role model as a clinician, always showing the most profound respect for clients, never insulting them or making them feel diminished. His curiosity about people was deeply inspiring.

Some therapists thought his theory applied only to the upper classes, but I remember one consultation he did with a couple on welfare who had lost their child because of severe and repeated child abuse. With his low-key storytelling and irresistible Southern twang, he shifted them in the course of a one-hour session to becoming fascinated researchers of their own family process, assessing their own part in the patterns in which they had become embroiled. In the end, the husband commented that he wished he could go right on talking, so affirmed did he feel, in spite of Bowen's honing in on his personal responsibility for his abusive behavior.

I think it is a great misfortune that Murray's ideas have been so little understood and that he, and so many of his followers, have become so removed from the mainstream of the family therapy field during the past 10 years. Maybe now that he has died, as one Bowenite suggested to me, people will be freer to hear his ideas because they will no longer have to contend with his formidable personality.

Murray certainly could be crotchety—even downright nasty to many of his students at times—coming down hardest, it seemed, on his closest followers, criticizing them in public or behind their backs for their lack of differentiation. He seemed to manage clients much more effectively than he did his followers. He had great difficulty tolerating people differing with him up close.

There is something mystifying to me in the cult that formed around Bowen—he who laid out the path for differentiation. Sometimes his followers seemed like clones, clinging to his concepts and language in a humorless way that was so unlike Bowen himself, who always managed, even after the most grandiose pronouncement, to follow with a joke suggesting that he not take himself too seriously.

But he was also a generous teacher and mentor who could at moments bowl me over completely with his affection, his humor, his love of gossip, his stories, his willingness to teach with his last breath, and his curiosity about "the human phenomenon." I remember in 1977, when I was going through a very painful breakup of a family institute I had helped found, I called Bowen for a consultation. He asked if I'd mind meeting in his hotel room, and there we sat while he drew out the triangles involving the staff of the institute and their family members, calmly challenging my self-righteous indignation about what had happened with his chuckling jokes about fusion and cut-offs in the emotional process of family systems.

In 1972, I first heard him give a presentation on his theory in which he said that if you don't work on having a personal relationship with your mother, you'll never really have one with anyone else. I argued with him in my head throughout the talk that he didn't know my mother. I then signed on to work with and be coached by Phil Guerin to get a handle on this theory—and to get a personal relationship with my mother. After about a year, Phil said that if I really wanted to get the theory I should go study with the master and he gave me an introduction to Murray for his monthly seminars at the Medical College of Virginia.

I FIND IT STRIKING THAT SO MUCH OF WHAT BOWEN HAD TO OFFER IS NOW INTRODUCED TO THE FIELD AND HEARD AS IF IT WERE NEWS.

I began commuting to Richmond. At first, I was puzzled. His interviews were so undramatic—just conversations, really—full of stories and humor, bringing out the best in people with his Tennessee drawl and his quizzical, often baffling comments and questions. But I found that each month, on my way back from Richmond, I would be making "to-do" lists regarding my own family relationships. How was he getting to me? I think it was his ability to keep thinking about emotional processes and encouraging clients to get in touch with what really mattered in their relationships.

As my own work evolved, profoundly and directly out of Bowen theory, Murray thought that I, like many others, had "lost it." Though he wrote a generous foreword to the book on the life cycle I coedited with Betty Carter, he was dubious about its value as a clinical concept. When I moved toward studying ethnicity, and even more when I began to explore gender issues, he was convinced I had gone beyond the pale. And, although my work on genograms was derived from his ideas, he viewed it as a dangerous popularization that might be used as a gimmick. He was troubled that others would get trapped in the glitter of techniques and content, and lose sight of the primacy of theory in family systems work. I believe he was right in many ways in railing against the field for moving toward whatever is popular and tending toward the lowest common denominator. He always seemed to struggle between his desire to get his message out there and his fear that his ideas might be misused for purposes he felt were unethical, even destructive, especially anything that lured helpers into becoming part of the problems they meant to solve.

I find it striking that so much of what Bowen had to offer is now being reintroduced to the field and heard as if it were news—notions about the creative use of systemic questioning, or using circular questioning alone without making any so-called interventions, "restorying" the family, the attempts to avoid pathologizing language in favor of empowering descriptions of human relationships, paradoxical and positive reframing, the attention to the nonintrusive ethical stance of the therapist—all seem to be reinventions of what Bowen had been saying all along.

As far as I can see, there are no systemic ideas yet evolved that cannot be encompassed into Bowen's profound and rich theory, which explicitly includes all levels of the system, from the cellular to the broadest ecological level. I wonder why his ideas have been so hard for people to appreciate. Did his person, or his language, or his followers interfere with therapists being able to hear his ideas? Did our culture's preference for the quick fix, the trendy, and the dramatic make less appealing a model that emphasizes personal responsibility within a framework that requires rethinking systems at every level and does not stop at the interior of the family? I hope that the field will now be able to acknowledge the enormous rigor and wisdom of the work he has bequeathed us. ☐

Monica McGoldrick, M.S.W., is director of family training at University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey at Piscataway. Address: 671 Hoes Lane, Piscataway, NJ 08854.

PHILIP GUERIN

SYLVIA PLACHY

The Man Who Never Explained Himself

And I won't miss his moods
His gloomy solitudes
His brash, abrasive style
But please don't get me wrong
He was the best to come along
In a long, long—while
(Lyrics from the
Broadway musical *Pippin*)

BOWEN ENTERED MY LIFE ON A SUMmer day in 1967, as a Georgetown professor who lectured to the second-year psychiatry residents during our rotation at the university hospital. As a lecturer, his constant focus on theory created a dryness that left something to be desired, but there were rare times when he would take on the fire of a Southern evangelist passionately spreading the gospel of differentiation in his mesmerizing Tennessee accent. That day, his message to the residents was provocative and clear: "You people are among the brighter ones on the planet. Trouble is, you think you have all the answers when you haven't even found the questions yet." Having challenged our arrogance, he went on to share a portion of his own professional history. He spoke of his days at the Menninger Clinic, his 13 years of personal training analysis, his research on schizophrenia and how the more he attempted to explain his new theories, the more he was in trouble with his peers and mentors. From that last experience he developed a philosophy to which he firmly adhered: Operate from your principles and never explain yourself. In 23 years of Bowen-watching, I never heard him explain himself once. That summer day his message began a process that would change the course of my professional life.

Two months later, I asked Bowen to supervise me on an individual psychotherapy case that I wanted to convert into a family case. He said he wasn't interested in family therapy anymore but was now trying out some of Ross Speck and Carolyn Attneave's methods of family networking with schizophrenia. If I were interested in that and found a suitable case, he would supervise me a couple of times a month. My response was to convert the case I had mentioned into a family network experiment. The supervision consisted of 13 meetings during a nine-month period, plus attendance at a networking meeting that Bowen himself was doing once a month. During those nine months of supervision, he never once told me what to do in the meetings of my network. Instead, he would listen, pad in lap, playing with his pen, frequently reaching into his coat pocket for another cigarette. When he did speak, he would tell long, involved stories of his work with schizophrenia. The moral of these stories was always the same; it had to do with the intensity and power of the emotional process in schizophrenia and how only a few people could face up to it without "getting caught" by its power and behaving like anxious robots. Bowen believed that schizophrenia was the "great teacher" and that an essential ingredient in becoming a competent psychotherapist was having the experience of wrestling with its power.

By the following spring, I had decided to leave the residency at Georgetown to take a position as chief resident at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York. During my first year in New York, I commuted back to Washington once a month in order to continue my contact with Bowen. The first Thursday evening of each month, I would leave New York and head for Washington. By 6:30 Friday morning I was at Bowen's house, ready to drive him to the Medical College of Virginia in Richmond for a day of watching him work with families.

The rides to Richmond and back were often the most enlightening parts of the day. Having access to his considerable experience and his unique wisdom was the gold, but the rich ore had to be sifted from the dysthymia and the disillusionment of a prophet undervalued in his time. On the return trip I would pick at theory, especially as it related to my family of origin, and practice detriangulating. Bowen would sleep, smoke, speak of his beloved Redskins, and even, at times, get personal. On one return trip, he informed me that there was no rush to get back because his wife was attending a play at the National Theatre that evening. I chided him as to why he wasn't going as well and how he shouldn't be so phobic of togetherness. In typical fashion he snorted and said that as far as he was concerned, plays were nothing more than "faked emotional systems."

Another highlight of those times was the annual Georgetown Family Symposium. Every fall, alumni of the Family

Training Program would converge on Georgetown for the annual homecoming weekend. Instead of a football game against the Baltimore Psychiatric Institute, each graduate would compete to demonstrate the latest and the best twists that had been given to Bowen's theory. A guest lecturer was also invited. The finale would be the most recent wisdom of the master. It was a wonderful refueling ritual.

One year, Nathan Ackerman, who was that symposium's featured guest speaker, asked me if I would allow a "poor old man" one question. "Explain to me, if you can," he said, "how a cold fish like Bowen, who is so afraid of his own feelings, attracts such a large cadre of loyal sons?" The astutely observant Ackerman was somehow puzzled by the way his own dominant and emotionally pursuant temperament evoked a response of distance from so many of his professional children, while Bowen's almost mystical aloofness seemed to encourage discipleship.

Bowen's favorite stories about Ackerman always centered on a game they played in which Ackerman, often in front of large audiences, would prod Bowen to express his feelings more freely, especially his anger. Bowen would respond by telling the story of his favorite Menninger patient, a person with a world-class talent for provoking anger in others. Bowen related that on leaving Menninger's, he expressed a wish to take the patient with him so that he (Bowen) could become the best person in the world at not being provoked to anger.

Family therapists have wondered for years about Bowen's lack of expressed emotion. Was it that he didn't believe in the value of expressed emotion and therefore was uncomfortable with it? Or was it that he was uncomfortable with it and therefore made up a principle to minimize its expression in his presence? Bowen's goal was always to get people to speak factually about their feelings without the surrounding capsule of anxiety, that he believed produced reactivity in others.

Whatever his personal allergy to the "stickiness" of expressed emotion, Bowen could stand tall in the midst of the thickest jungle of intense emotion and anxiety, somehow connect with the person or people experiencing it, and by his own calmness, calm them and lead them out into the clearing.

How did he connect? He listened. He respected people, their intelligence, and their personal boundaries. His questions, which accounted for more than 90 percent of his communications, at once let people know that they were being heard while giving them the simultaneous experience of his wisdom and his strength. He believed that pushing people to express feelings did two things: produce distorted or pseudo-emotional responses and retard movement toward differentiation and improved functioning. By his fact-focused questions, he hoped to prod people's thinking about important issues and events. If he was successful, anxiety would be lowered and an undistorted flow of expressed emotion would occur. The patient was thereby offered the opportunity of an experience in distinguishing between thinking and feeling systems. The purpose of each of these steps was to produce a flow of movement toward differentiation.

From 1973, when the Center for Family Learning was founded, my contact with Bowen remained consistent. He came once a year to the center as a visiting professor in our postgraduate training program. His teaching time was divided between a formal lecture and a case consultation. His interviews were superb to watch, at least for those who knew his theory and could track what he was doing clinically. The question-and-answer periods that followed his interviews would be filled with his preacher stories of clinical encounters from different times and distant places.

One interview stands out in my mind. The patient was a woman in her early 30s who desperately wanted a baby but was fearful that her parents' concentration-camp experience might produce a genetically defective child. During the consultation, Bowen asked the question, "How in the world would you explain that?" more than 20 times. In response to his questions, the woman wove a fascinating tale of intense anxiety permeating the family, cut-offs from the extended family driven by an argument over the distribution of restitution money that the family had received from Germany, distance in her marriage, and her anxious overfunctioning for a younger sister. At one point in describing her relationship with her family of origin, she spoke of "feeling like we were all wrapped in one skin." Bowen smiled, appearing just a little stunned, and told the woman she had "a beautiful problem." It was as if his concept of the "undifferentiated ego mass" had been reborn, live and on videotape.

Near the end of the session, in a grandfatherly way, he placed a hard candy in his mouth, raised the index finger of his right hand, and said, "Let me share a few thoughts." Bowen told her that her anxiety about potential genetically defective offspring was more "psychological than real" and that he thought that if she decided to have a baby, "everything would work itself out okay." He encouraged her not to take her husband's distance so personally and to make a project of getting out of the overresponsible position with her sister by giving responsibility for her sibling back to her parents. Most members of the audience that day were amused by his description of the "beautiful problem." Some thought he was turned on by the very attractive person he was interviewing, but those who knew Bowen realized he was invigorated by her validation of his theory.

The last three years of Bowen's life were often painful for those who loved and respected him. The stress of increasing infirmity amplified his irascibility. Some would have preferred his fading from the scrutiny of public appearances. But Bowen didn't believe in lying down or giving in before the time had come, certainly not in response to someone else's discomfort. Clearly, he had decided that the time had come in early October 1990. At the annual meeting of the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists, he chose to say goodbye as he had lived, on a stage, preaching his theory with his last available breath.

When I heard of his death, I reflected back to one of his visits in the early 1980s. Bowen had spoken of the family emotional system and cancer. Blanche Kaplan, one of our faculty members, commented after Bowen's presentation, "I finally got the message. If you're differentiated enough, you won't die." On October 9, 1990, however, the master of differentiation proved Blanche to be wrong.

People like Bowen, calm in the absolute assurance of their truth, provide us with an emotional anchor, an object of constancy. When they die, only those parts of them that we have incorporated into ourselves remain. Bowen's ideas, his clinical work, his dedication to values have made a difference to the many people whose lives were touched by him, directly or indirectly. For those people, for at least a little while, when someone says "Bowen," it will matter. ■

Philip J. Guerin, M.D., is the director of the Center for Family Learning, 16 Rye Ridge Plaza, Rye Brook, NY 10573.