

Interview with Peg Donley
Conducted by Randy Krehbiel

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For the *Murray Bowen Archives Project* of Leaders for Tomorrow at History of Science
Division of the National Library of Medicine

Krehbiel: This is May 29, 2013, and I'm about to interview Peg Donley. For the oral history project. Hi, Peg. Tell me who you are, and how you got to know Dr. Bowen.

Donley: M'kay. I'm a clinical social worker, and I went to graduate school between 1976 and 1978 at the University of Kansas, and it was during that time that I consulted with (Don Shoulberg), who had just started becoming involved in Bowen theory. So, when I started to consult with him, he introduced me to Bowen theory, and because I was interested in learning how to be a therapist, and all that stuff, I learned more about Dr. Bowen. And when I got out of graduate school, I had the opportunity to see him on a couple of video tapes. And I was pretty interested, and so, you know, I did a post-Masters fellowship at Menninger's, for a year, and people talked about Dr. Bowen a little bit then, but it wasn't really until the fall of 1985 that I started the post-graduate, four time a year, program. And that's when I- first time I'd ever really met him, and first time I ever had was sort of in a seminar, you know, where he talked. And that was a pretty mind-blowing [laughter] experience!

Krehbiel: How so?

Donley: It was, ah, he had a way of asking questions, and of making you just realize how much there was to learn, and also, how little you knew [laughter] about- about yourself and- he had a way, of really putting you in front of your own undifferentiation. In a way that was, at times, very painful. And very humbling. So, I'm never that (close), because I don't think I've ever experienced that with anyone like I did with Dr. Bowen. Just being up, front, and personal with your own undifferentiation.

I g- I don't even know exactly how he did that. But he did it pretty effectively. So.

Krehbiel: So the nature of your relationship with Dr. Bowen was what, then?

Donley: I would say, really, a student.

Krehbiel: (Okay)

Donley: I w- I had already been a therapist, had done a post-Masters fellowship at Menninger's, had been out for about four years, and I just wanted to learn more about the theory. So, that's why I started that program. Okay. Flew off- from Kansas City. Oh, Wichita, then, actually, I was in Wichita.

Krehbiel: That was in '85, you said?

Donley: Mmhmm, fall of '85.

Krehbiel: So what insights do you have about where Bowen picked up his ideas, that fueled his research?

Donley: You know I can't really say I can add much to that question, I think, I mean, I know as much as anyone knows from readings, you know, I think he got his ideas at Menninger's, I think, then moved to NIH, and really developed his research project there. The thing that I, I am so- I'll never forget this, so this is what I believe strongly about Dr. Bowen, is he had the ability to, really think outside the box. I think he could think- think he saw things and put things together in a way that no one else had ever done. And I think one of my-I-I deeply appreciate his strong interest in bringing evolution into the mental health field.

And I think that- I've always been interested in science, cause I have an undergraduate degree in nursing, and I think his ability to bring in evolution in a way that differed, fundamentally, from evolutionary psychology, and the way he did that was so revolutionary. And it took it out of the whole area of mental health, which was- which continues to be dominated by the idea that what goes on in human relationships is unique in the world. Is unique from other forms of life, is unique from evolutionary-based process in other groups. And that has been, to me, the greatest contribution that he's made.

And in addition to being able to think so differently about the world, he brought in evolution. It's not arguable. To my way of thinking, if something is based in evolution, it's not really- you can't argue, that it doesn't exist. At least, [laughter] I can't, argue that it doesn't exist. So, to me, that was the most-the biggest contribution.

Was the way he brought in evolution into the field of mental health. In addition to integrating it with the whole systems theory, and therefore making it different than general systems theory.

Krehbiel: Kind of a science of human behavior.

Donley: Mmhmm, right, right, science of human behavior. Which, in some ways, I think, is lost still. I think that the field of mental health- I mean, I think it's unfortunate that Bowen theory hasn't caught on more in the m- in the field of mental health. Um,

Krehbiel:How do you account for that?

Donley: Um, [silence] I think that, unfortunately, one reason it hasn't is because the field of mental health is dominated, primarily, particularly in marriage and family therapy, by social workers. And I think social workers, as a lot, know very little about science. And have, in fact, spent their careers avoiding science. So, I think that the field of marriage and family therapy is dominated by clinicians who, are afraid of science.

Krehbiel: Hmmm.

Donley: And then along the same lines, I think the psychiatrists that probably would naturally have had a greater interest in science, got caught up in the whole medical model, and the emphasis on drugs. Because it's financially lucrative. So, I think that

Krehbiel: And it's a quicker fix.

Donley: It's a quicker fix.

Krehbiel: And, I mean, it's not really a fix, but

Donley: Right. No, I think that's right. And, it's- you can understand that, because it is quote, "medicine." And that's how doctors are trained. So, but I think that one of the things that Bowen Theory, has been, the application of Bowen Theory has been very useful, to education, to so many different fields, outside of mental health, but it's a very complicated theory to understand. And so, it, consequently, doesn't lend itself to reading something quickly, and getting it, and then you know, disseminating it out in the world.

Krehbiel: Yeah, it's not technique-filled.

Donley: Right. And it's-it takes a long time, to really understand the theory, and so, you know, why it hasn't caught on as well as, say, psychoanalytical theory, is interesting, because-but again, psychoanalytical theory was primarily taught and learned by psychiatrists. Who were interested in science, before the pharmaceutical companies took over the field of psychiatry.

And, you know, so I think that it's complicated, I really don't know, I just think that you know, social workers as a whole are afraid of science. They're afraid of- for whatever reason, I think that they want to operate as though the human is unique in the world.

Krehbiel: Just go out and do good.

Donley: They do good, right. [laughter] Do good. Mmm.

Krehbiel: So how do you think Bowen did his research?

Donley: Um...

Krehbiel: Or, what are the characteristics

Donley: Yeah, I think that, um you know, I think research now a days has become so much more identified with, really, deductive methods. Methodology. And, one of the things I remember Dr. Bowen saying once, in the post-graduate seminar, he put the question out there, "What was the difference between inductive thinking and deductive thinking?" That was one of the many things he asked. He also asked, "What was the difference between democracy and communism?" But anyways.

Krehbiel: [laughter]

Donley: He asked what the difference was between inductive thinking and deductive thinking, and I think that's at the heart of his view of research, which was really inductive, not deductive. And I think research, primarily, has been associated with deductive thinking, and

Krehbiel: And how do you differentiate the two?

Donley: I think one is takes ideas- inductive, I believe- takes ideas from something small to something broad, for example, you might see a relationship process look like this, and how is this based in something broader, like evolution.

System processes. Rather than getting down to "what does that- how do you break down that interaction and look at the details of it, and are those details researchable." So, I think that, Frans de Waal, for example, has done inductive research, also, in looking at systems bigger than just the little, minute details, of an interaction. For example. I think, although I don't know for sure, but I think that that is one of the things that distinguishes his research from what is thought of, today, as research in the field of mental health.

It's a much broader way. And of course, back then, I think that for example, when he went to NIH, I mean you can imagine, that project could never go on these days.

Krehbiel: Mmhmm.

Donley: What a different world it must have been back then. But

Krehbiel: Well, I often think of him as being a very, very keen observer. Of the human phenomena. And it goes beyond that, as you said, but you know, you can explain the theory to-to some folks, and if they start looking, they can say, "Oh, I see what he's talking about!"

Donley: Right.

Krehbiel: It's there.

Donley: It's there.

Krehbiel: But it's so hard to see, unless you (I guess are ke-)

Donley: It's like your gestalt has to almost change.

Krehbiel: Yeah, yeah

Donley: Um, so, I think that, I am disheartened a bit, by the fact that Bowen theory seems to become- has seemed to become, less and less relevant, in the world of mental health. It's not being taught very much, it's considered, kind of, an old dinosaur theory. And, that's so unfortunate, because it has so much relevancy to what people

are doing in therapy and- what-what can be useful to people. But, I don't know that it really is. Being taught very much, or you know...

Krehbiel: Well, I heard Dr. Bowen say once, it takes 200 years, for a new school of thought to be adopted, perhaps, or

Donley: Mmm. Maybe, that's right. Do you think there's much indication that that's moving in that direction, though?

Krehbiel: Well...

Donley: I don't know. Maybe.

Krehbiel: Maybe.

Donley: Yeah.

Krehbiel: I think you've already addressed this question about what kind of contribution he made to the Western scientific world, do you have more to say about that?

Donley: Mmhmm. [silence] Not-not really, I- I think he made a substantial contribution. I don't know that that contribution is really being recognized. I don't know that it ever will be recognized. That's kind of pessimistic, but, um, I'm not optimistic about it. Although, although, although, actually, I take that back. I have recently, in the last several years, become really interested in neuroscience, and have read a fair amount, in that area. And I am absolutely blown away by how much how many ideas that are being researched in the neurosciences actually support Bowen theory.

And stress, anxiety, how the brain functions, what the evolutionary basis of those things are, are so, now, so many things that Dr. Bowen said! For example, I think that- the idea for- the idea that when animals are stressed, they move towards togetherness. That has now, all been researched in the neurosciences, we know this, as a fact. Dr. Bowen never had the benefit of what we know in neuroscience to really substantiate that. But these things are, now, all being confirmed as we learn more and more, in, particularly in neuroscience, I think.

Krehbiel: Mmhmm.

Donley: So, there's a lot-I think that the more- And I think there are people, that are making significant, ah, that are interacting, with the neurosciences, and evolutionary biology, where people are, introducing others in those fields to Bowen Theory. And I think that from what I can gather, it's making a difference, to some degree.

Krehbiel: Yeah, I suppose there's a possibility that Bowen Theory, as we know it, as it becomes more integrated in other fields of science, might look a little different,

Donley: Yes, that's-yes. Yes, that's probably true. Unfortunately, the neurosciences, when it comes to relationships and attachments, (in the end) is still (Bowlby) and attachment theory, is still by far the most salient theory that's used in terms of looking at relationships. And particularly attachment.

Krehbiel: Mmhmm.

Donley: And that's unfortunate, because Bowen Theory really has much more to add. So, it may be that people have talked about this, at the symposium, but nothing's been published yet. So, that's the other problem, with Bowen Theory, is that people don't publish. I know. I do publish though! [laughter]

Krehbiel: Why- why don't more people publish, do you think?

Donley: I think that's a really good question. And I think it's because, a lot of social workers, who dominate the field of family mental health, have never learned to write, number one. They are- they don't have PhDs, number two. So they'd never really been pushed to learn to write, or to write a dissertation, or to publish! They're not-most of us, are not part of institutions that require publications. So, in order to publish, you have to be committed to do it on your own. And there's not much incentive. So, at least the Family Center has a journal, that I think, has invited many people who would not normally publish, to publish. And have been very

Krehbiel: Mmhmm.

Donley: friendly in that way. But, I think that we fall short of being very rigorous. And you know, that's really a huge failing, as far as I'm concerned. Because people can say anything they want to say, but it doesn't-the ideas don't get out! So, it's a problem. You know.

Krehbiel: So do you think you've learned something, in relating to Dr. Bowen, that is not written about?

Donley: [silence] Um, say that again [laughter]

Krehbiel: Do you think you learned something in relating to Dr. Bowen, that is not being written about?

Donley: [silence] Um, I'm not sure I understand the question. Let me see-let me say this, I think that, the field of neuroscience, is where the next, big, huge acceleration's going to be in terms of looking at systems thinking, and evolution, and confirming, with all the evidence that's out there in the neurosciences. I think that this is knowledge that Dr. Bowen never had. I suppose one could say the same thing about neuro-feedback, that the instruments that are available now were not available back then.

I don't think there's any evidence that would refute Dr. Bowen's ideas, in fact I think the- I think the opposite is true. That the ideas coming out of Bowen theory all now being substantiated in research. And, um, so there's a lot to learn! I think there's a lot to learn still. And I think that how- but one of the things that I think is very important is to make what is available out there in evolution and the sciences, applicable to people who do therapy.

And this to me has also been a very- has been a failing, to some degree, of how to make the sciences and evolution applicable to people who are on the front lines, doing clinical work. I think that that -that -that has not happened well.

Krehbiel: Mmhmm.

Donley: And so, you know I don't know now, if I got out of graduate school now, would I even I don't know if I'd be interested in Bowen theory. I suppose I would have, but um, it's hard to say.

Krehbiel: Yeah. So is there anything about the family, in which you grew up, that spawned your interest in Bowen theory?

Donley: Um, there's no question that Bowen theory- I was in a postgraduate program, in Menninger's, for a year, and that was like in 1979. So the heyday of family therapy. Yeah, people were doing therapy behind two-way win- two-way mirrors, I mean, it was wild and crazy back in the, in the early '80s. And I can remember, I was working with

somebody, Don Shoulberg, consulting with him around my own family, and issues in my extended family. And I had just gotten married, and at the same time then I was doing work at Menninger's, which was, totally opposite, of anything related to Bowen theory!

And I was like, living these two worlds. So like as a clinician I was doing this wild and crazy stuff, you know, and Minuchin was really big back then, and, and, you know, consulting with people outside, this two-way mirror, and videotaping, all that jazz, and yet, at a personal level, I was working- I was trying to manage my life, and the reactivity in my life, through Bowen theory. And I really struggled with the fact that, if this was so useful to me, why wasn't I doing this clinically?

I think- and I can remember, I struggled with that for years. I mean, really it was five or six years, before I started at the Family Center in the fall of '85. So I'd been out of school then for six years. Seven years, and had never integrated these two things. Didn't know how to do it. I just knew the way I was trained at Menninger's, and what I was doing was in no way related to how I was working personally. So, in- in the fall of 1985, I began to make that integration. Which is actually the year I met you! No, no, no. Is that right?

Krehbiel: Could be.

Donley: Maybe. Yeah. At Prairie View. In the middle of Kansas.

Krehbiel: Mmhmm.

Donley: So- and you had just gotten back from Washington right? Yeah.

Krehbiel: Mmhmm. Well I was there, ah,

Donley: You were there '79?

Krehbiel: '79...for a year.

Donley: For a year...'79 to '80.

Krehbiel: Yeah, and then did the four times a year after that, for several years.

Donley: Okay, so I started Prairie View in 1980,

Krehbiel: I would have just gotten back, yeah.

Donley: And you were- okay, mmhmm.

Krehbiel: How long were you at Prairie View?

Donley: 1988 to '88.

Krehbiel: Really?

Donley: In 1975- I'm sorry, 1985, 1980 to 1988, I was at Prairie View, the first five years I was at Newtown, the last three years I was in Wichita.

Krehbiel: Oh, okay.

Donley: And that's really-those were the years, where I really started to integrate what I was doing, professionally, and what I was doing personally. It was very slow! God! It took me years, to do that. I don't know, it seems so odd, now, that I look back. How could it have taken me so long? [laughter] But it did.

But it was immensely helpful for me in terms of thinking through my marriage, and my relationship with my step-children, and my parents, and all those sort of things. I mean, it isn't that anything was so unmanageable, it was just your run-of-the-mill stuff, but it really gave me a map, it was helpful to me, I think.

Krehbiel: Mmhmm. Absolutely. I think of it as an anchor, or a rudder.

Donley: (...know?...) Yeah. Mmhmm. I cannot imagine my life without using the lens of Bowen Theory, I -I've oftentimes wondered what my life would be like, had I never gotten involved with Bowen theory. I don't know. I can't really imagine. But-

Krehbiel: Okay, so Peg, tell me what ideas you've developed, that you think extend or refine the theory. Cause you've done a lot of research. You've done a lot of work.

Donley: Mmhmm. Um, wow. I-I've thought about that when I looked at this question, how I was going to answer this. [silence] I think that there are certain ways that males and females function in relationships.

That are based in evolution. That have never really been-have never really been articulated, and written about. Now, I say this with some caution, because there's been sort of a bias, against talking about gender issues. I think. As though, these are uniquely human. So, I guess in talking about this, I would say that I think that males and females evolved with different- with some differences, in the brain.

They have to do with maternal and paternal relationships, sexual relationships, and how they're managed, in families. That I think play a part in how triangles work.

Krehbiel: Mmhmm.

Donley: In families. So, on one levels you could say, "Well, triangles are ways that relationship anxiety is managed in groups." All of that I would agree with. But I think there are, as we learn more and more about the way neuropeptides work in the brain, I think there are ways of refining this. And, of looking specifically at the way males and females in pair-bonded humans, function in relationships and triangles in the family. That are based in evolution. They're not based in what makes a human unique. I think, that is an area that I'm interested in defining, and refining and developing as time goes on. I think that if- Bowen Theory makes me curious about the way the world works. About the way relationships work. About what's universal about relationships. That makes what goes on with humans dovetail with what goes on with you know, fruit flies. With what goes on with other primates. I think these- I think- I hope to extend some of these ideas, in the future.

Krehbiel: Mmhmm.

Donley: Maybe.

Krehbiel: So is there a place, for marriage, in the future?

Donley: Well-

Krehbiel: In the species?

Donley: There's a place for pair-bonding.

Krehbiel: Okay.

Donley: Call it what you want to. The human is a pair-bonded animal.

Krehbiel: But not necessarily monogamous.

Donley: But not necessarily monogamous. And I think that if you look at all human cultures, you see pair-bonding in humans. And this has to do with evolution of the brain. And what has evolved in human behavior, in the brain. That doesn't mean there are not exceptions to that. There's some humans, that never pair-bond.

And I think there is a way of explaining that, in terms of multi-generational process. Same process goes on in prairie voles, same process goes on other non-human primates, that are monogamous, or have pair-bonding relationships. I think marriage, is kind of a cultural, institution. I don't think pair-bonding is. I think we're probably built to be serially pair-bonded, maybe. I don't know. But we certainly are built to be pair-bonded mammals. And this has to do with paternity, it has to do with females needing males around, to help them with their young. I don't think- I think marriage is a cultural invention.

Krehbiel: Mmhmm.

Donley: And it probably- it works, you know. In this culture it works. It doesn't work in all cultures. I mean, there are other cultures that are polygamous, and polyandrous, and all of that.

Krehbiel: So what do you do with the idea of love?

Donley: Well, the question is whether there's- (Sue Carter), who's a big researcher, in oxytocin, and who has done an enormous amount of research in prairie voles, puts out the question, you know, that a lot of it's just a chemical process, probably goes on in prairie voles as well, it's simply a way of describing attachment, probably.

Krehbiel: Mmhmm.

Donley: It's not anything mystical. You know, we want to believe that love is mystical, it's basically just how our functioning is intertwined with the functioning of another. That

we are dependent upon, oftentimes, parents, children, spouses, it's not that different than probably what you'd see in any animal.

We just have a more sophisticated way of talking about it, you know. so, I think that, what I would have said three years ago, what I did say three years ago, when I didn't know as much as I did now, is I would have questioned whether we're- the question of monogamy. I don't think it's a- I don't think that, if you transcend the question of monogamy, you're really looking at pair-bonding. We are a species that pair-bond.

And there are lots of reasons for this. And a lot of it has to do with childcare. Taking care of infants. And the fact that the human is so dependent, on its mother, or parents, for 18 years before it can be independent.

So monogamy, and pair-bonding, had to evolve, in that- in that evolutionary way, to support the extended period, that the brain grows, outside of the mother's body.

Krehbiel: Mmhmm.

Donley: So, and but people have showed that they're crazy around monogamy. God Almighty.

Krehbiel: [laughter]

Donley: You know, and betrayal. And (feeding). Crazy-making, you know.

Krehbiel: Have you given much thought to what some people had thought might be Bowen's ninth concept?

Donley: Concept.

Krehbiel: Spirituality, or something along that line.

Donley: I have no interest in spirituality. [laughter]

Krehbiel: [laughter]

Donley: To be honest with you. None! I'm one of the few people that has no interest in spirituality. I don't have any interest in spirituality. I think that Mike Kerr's concept of the

unidisease, as one of the potential ninth, is interesting. I do. I think that the idea of the unidisease, is pretty revolutionary, in a way. And I think, has much more potential as a Ninth Concept, than spirituality.

It's hard to- spirituality is such a product of language, and such a product of things that are uniquely human, it's hard for me to find how you would -how you could put that into Bowen Theory. Although, the concept of sibling position, is another one, that I've always thought is a little squeaky, frankly.

Krehbiel: Hmm. Really?

Donley: Mmhmm. Sibling- because, you know, I don't know, I mean, I think- I think it's a relevant idea. I don't know that it's a concept, but I'm not the one to say.

Krehbiel: Mmhmm.

Donley: I think it's so much less substantial, than, say, multiple generation transmission process, or triangles, or differentiation of self. But, I don't know. You certainly do see, I think, sibling position, I guess, in other species. Sometimes more, in some species, then others, you know.

Krehbiel: Mmhmm. Mmhmm.

Donley: But I think that the brain, is going to be the-the big next horizon. And -and whether that's in neurosciences, whether that's in the technology of neuro-feedback, which I think is very interesting, although, I don't do much with it, but, at any sort of theoretical level, but I think the- what we're going to learn about the brain is going to blow us all out of the water, in the next decade or two. You know.

Krehbiel: Yeah. So, are there other things that you think of that you would like to-

Donley: Mmmm.

Krehbiel: to address, before- (we close)

Donley: Well, I see- no, I think I've addressed everything, I think that I- I had thought for awhile, a couple years ago, I got really interested in "How can I get into a university and start teaching?" You know, I was really interested, in teaching. I was interested in

teaching, in Social Work! Because, My God, social work is needed! But, that's a lot of work, and-and you have to jump through too much- too many hoops, and -but I sure wish I could make a difference. In the people that are coming out of school now. Because I have the enthusiasm, to do it. I just don't know how to do it in a way where- I mean, I have a training program, you know, 8-10 people a year, of therapists. But, you know, I don't know how to get new people, really interested in these ideas, who are fresh out of school!

It's a real problem I think. Well- I think it's a problem. I just don't know what to do about it. And I don't know- I mean, I'm interested in teaching but I don't know that I want to

Krehbiel: Yeah.

Donley: jump through all the hoops to do it. It doesn't- there's too time-consuming, and I wouldn't get paid enough.

Krehbiel: [laughter]

Donley: You know?

Krehbiel: (For sure.)

Donley: But mostly, it's time-consuming.

Krehbiel: Yeah.

Donley: More than anything. So, I think that's about all.

Krehbiel: Okay. Well thank you, Peggy

Donley: Yeah.

Krehbiel: This has been delightful, and certainly you met my expectations.

Donley: Mmm. [laughter] Well, ah damn, I wish we weren't all getting so old.