

Interview with **Randy Frost**  
Conducted by Andrea Schara

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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

Robert Noone was present in the room during the interview and makes one comment near the end.

**Randy:** I first came across Bowen Theory in a first-year course at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Bowen theory was one of several approaches to family that were represented in the course. My main recollection of reading that first paper was trying to figure out where I was on the scale of differentiation (Laughs).

I could see characteristics I had that were on the lower end and on the higher end of the scale. I ended up writing a number of papers in seminary incorporating systems ideas, drawing more, actually, from the book Pragmatics of Human Communication, by Don Jackson.

**Andrea:** Don Jackson?

**Randy:** Don Jackson, yes. That book really gripped me, actually, more than Bowen's paper at the time. After graduating, I was accepted into an internship in clinical pastoral education at St. Elizabeth's hospital in Washington. My professor of pastoral counseling, who knew of my interest in systems, suggested I apply to the Bowen program. So I did and I was accepted. The first day, Bowen gave the initial lecture, I was just enthralled, and I came away thinking that I just heard an enigmatic guru.

**Andrea:** (Laughs) that is a perfect description of him. An enigmatic guru, who really hated being a guru.

**Randy:** (Laughs) Right, but that's how it hit me. I didn't know what he was talking about but I just knew that it was enticing. He had a number of lectures that first year in the in-town program. I didn't continue for a second year but I continued with supervision with Bud Andres and then when I moved to southern Indiana I came back for the four times a year program. At the end of that training year, I was trying to put together a six month sabbatical during which I was to have a week in Washington each month. I decided to write Bowen and ask him to supervise me and I told him I was particularly interested in the overlap between pastoral counseling and Bowen Theory. He wrote back and said, "I haven't the foggiest notion of what Bowen theory has to say to pastoral counseling" (Laughing)

I think he had me confused with someone else who at one time had been at St. Meinrad. So he put a number of things in the letter that were kind of negative, "if you're coming here to enhance your standing at St. Meinrad...forget it!" (Laughing)

**Andrea:** (Laughing)

**Randy:** "But if I'm wrong about that, come ahead."

**Andrea:** So he did the same thing to you that he did to Bob, he kind of pushed you and challenged you and put you back into the emotional muck.

**Randy:** My supervisor in the four time a year program told me after he had sent the letter to me, he showed it to her. She said to him, "I don't know anything about this" (Laughs).

Anyway, I just ignored it and acted on the coming ahead part and we were off and running. It was really fortuitous because I was in a terribly anxious place in the family and really sinking, so it was an auspicious time. I actually ended up having another person that I was supposed to work with on clinical things, and then with Bowen on my own family. But I was so anxious that I talked about my own family with both of them. I reached a point where I was getting one sort of direction from Bowen and another sort of direction from this other supervisor and I said it was like riding two horses headed in the opposite direction, so I went with Bowen. He was great; he didn't get into it with me. But he had this way of picking up on things I wasn't seeing like my stepmother's influence on my father's functioning. He pointed that out, and I said yeah, you know, when my stepmothers in the room and I'm on the phone with my dad, he's talking one way and when she's not, it's a different tone. I had never thought about that. So, for the next eight, no ten, well nine years, I consulted him at least several times a year on my own family after the sabbatical and actually had my last consultation with him four days before his death, two days before he went to the AAMFT meeting. And he talked a little bit about it, saying my wife doesn't want me to go to that meeting. She thinks it's going to kill me HA HA HA. (Laughs)

**Andrea:** (Laughs) He did it despite being half-dead, that's Bowen.

**Randy:** I had a sense that this might be my last conversation with him because I'd seen him in May that year in Indianapolis; (you were there). So I just wished him well with it. But it was also at the time when I was considering coming to Vancouver and I had talked to him some about that. He said, "well there's a generic brand of the theory up there; stay close to Georgetown". (Laughs) My biggest relationship with him was as a coach, a coach to me. But he had a way of handling himself in public meetings that was very personal, so he could say things in a public setting and you'd think he was talking directly to you...

**Andrea:** Absolutely.

**Randy:** ...and that was important. I remember the first time I presented a paper at a meeting on Bowen Theory with Bowen sitting there; it was in Chicago in 1988. Bob had invited me, and I thought, what am I doing here presenting a paper on Bowen theory with Bowen sitting in the audience? (inaudible) ... (Laughs)

When we got there, (my wife and kids had come along just for the ride and to tour Chicago) I said to myself, this is not going to cut it, so I stayed up all night rewriting the paper and gave it the next morning. It was better, and Bowen's response was, "I don't know where you get your ideas about science" (Laughs) So I knew that part had to be reworked.

**Andrea:** So he didn't say the encyclopedia or National Geographic.

**Randy:** I reworked that section and submitted an abstract of the reworked paper for the symposium that year. The whole time I was presenting this reworked paper, he had a kind of ongoing mumbling monologue in the front row. I couldn't understand it but I was so nervous that when we sat down for the discussion (I was sitting down next to him), I knocked the water over (Laughs) and then he stood up and sort of lit into Walter Toman, who was the other responder. It was quite an interesting baptism of presenting. I presented the next two years in Chicago as well before we moved to Vancouver. But he just had a way of incarnating the theory and challenging you to be your own person.

And I do wonder once the generation dies off who had this personal coaching relationship, or some kind of encounter with Bowen, how one replicates that experience in future generations. You know, the writing is there, the video tapes are there, which can help, but I think there's something unique about coming up against Bowen the person that's irreproducible.

That doesn't mean the theory can't go forward into the future and that people can't get a flavor from hearing others who knew him but ultimately, if the theory is worth its salt, it becomes independent of the person.

I remember once he told me, "I'm looking forward to the day when we can get the Bowen out of Bowen theory".

**Andrea:** I had this conversation with Phil Guerin, who actually was the one who suggested it. According to Phil, he suggested that Bowen use his own name. He and his wife were having dinner with him. Bowen said that there are so many theories of the family. There's general systems theory, people would say that they have family systems theory. So (Guerin suggested) why don't you use your name to make it a separate part of knowledge about the family. And so he reluctantly went along with that.

I wonder whether or not, Bowen, as a researcher, could see things that other people can't see and that's why he was so good at what he did. I don't know what Dr. Gilbert was saying this morning. Something like she thought that Bowen had said that he had the whole theory in his head before he left the Menninger Institute. I'm not so sure of that because after looking at the NIH papers, I noted he didn't bring the father in at the beginning, he just had the mother and child there. Bowen was investing more into the symbiotic relationship initially and he didn't see the whole thing start to change until he brought the fathers in. The fathers were the first ones to define themselves. But nevertheless, my main point is that Bowen as a researcher and an observer had the ability, perhaps, to see the system in these various ant colonies. And when you came to see him, he saw your ant colony. And when Bob came to see him, he saw Bob's ant colony, and then he could relate to you in a way to help you understand the colony and in a way that could enable you to get you out of the "mishegas" with him. That is the transference stuff. I remember when he gave his paper, something about trying to end transference and one of the guys who could have been Carl Whitaker, I think it was Carl Whitaker, who said to him that, you say that its not about transference but when I see you I'm in a transference up to my ears. (Laughs)

**Randy:** (Laughs) I hear that.

**Andrea:** So it could be both of these things, the charisma, but to me it has always been this incredible ability that he had to see the ant colony in the human family, and to relate to you about that and then you felt that he had this secret knowledge, he knows somehow or another about you and the family and how the hell does he see all this...

**Randy:** The enigmatic guru.

**Bob:** I think your comment about the way he presented himself in public and at meetings was really striking. Being able to respond in a way, which is very personal, and at the same time being able to represent his thinking and to be clear when others were trying to tell him how he's representing his thinking. Bowen was able to be clear with others, that that's not my thinking, this is your thinking. And here's my thinking.

But I think that capacity to see the ant colony and being able to see emotional currents...I think he was just a master at that. He said a lot of subtle things, that when I would reflect on them, I would think, yes, that was obvious, but I wouldn't have seen it. But yes, he was a master, I think, of picking up some of that family process that was going on.

**Andrea:** And the de-triangulating stuff that he was doing, like the mumbling when Randy is giving his talk, that was another trick that I saw many times. And it was almost a taunt. You know, do you want to interrupt me cause I'm going to act out? A lot of the Third Thursday meetings were where he kind of was acting out, challenging the small in-group and then the people in the audience would just get paralyzed on how to deal with him. And I always take to heart what he said that I learned the most that I know from schizophrenics. Perhaps the test was can you deal with me? In a way, that was always sort of the test, I thought. But I'm not one hundred percent clear about that, but I don't know if you experienced him as testing you and pushing you a little bit, it sounds like it when I listen to it.

**Randy:** I think that letter he wrote to me was a challenge though I didn't see it that way at the time. I was just flattered that he bothered to write back (Laughs). Like Bob, I had such a high opinion of Dr. Bowen that when he wrote back, that was pretty, pretty amazing. At the same time, I got a little more clarity about what Roberta Gilbert was meaning by being equal today. There were times, even in a consultation with him, when he would ask you questions, or make statements that you could reply to, that suggested he was trying to learn from you, as well.

I remember one time, it was probably around the time when he was formulating his ninth concept idea--he talked about people who make predictions like Jean Dixon but noted that you never hear about all the ones that don't come true. And I said, well, there are people who have pretty good percentage rates on their predictions. And he listened to that, I think. Or the time he would ask, I guess it was a question he asked around a lot, "who was more differentiated Adolf Hitler or Martin Luther King?" I had an answer for that one (Laughs).

**Andrea:** Oh goodness (Laughs).

**Randy:** I don't know if he agreed with it or not but he listened to it and chuckled. I think there was that effort on his part to be respectful and challenging to the other. Bowen stories are just legion.

**Andrea:** They're legion; they are. They seem to contain some common elements if you listen to it for a while - his ability to be separate and create a space, finding ways to be interested in you and then your gaining knowledge about the way your head worked, basically. But he could clobber people, I mean, he did clobber people. And it wasn't always the nicest to be pulled up short. But I believe that he was just curious to see if you would get up again after he smacked you. A lot of pretending goes on and some people pretended that they didn't get smacked, some people, didn't get back up to deal with him.

**Randy:** But in a consultation, he had the capacity to be present in a way that was unusual. I never came out of a consultation feeling clobbered. Challenged maybe, but never clobbered. Now in the public arena maybe, though again, it was more of a challenge to your thinking, but still a kind of respect there.

**Andrea:** I hear you. I think you have to go now. I was going to get your picture before you go, one second, so I can put it into my little collection here. That's a good one (picture taken) Thank you, I appreciate that.

Ok, yeah, so you know, I wanted to ask you Randy because I asked Bob about the future of systems thinking and where you think it will go without Dr. Bowen's presence...(to be continued, machine is turned off).