

Florence Kamm, PhD

Interviewed by Andrea Schara

June 18, 2012

Andrea: Now, you know, I started this project with the thought just of interviewing people for my own personal interest. Then if the Leaders for Tomorrow [now known as The Murray Bowen Archives Project] wanted to use the interviews on their website or for other reasons, they could use it and if the National Library wanted to accept these interviews, they could accept them. So those were all the contingency things. I want to do it and the National Library of Medicine says they would like the information about the people who were influenced directly in a relationship with Dr. Bowen.

In your memory of your relationship with Dr. Bowen, what impressed you about him as a person and the way he was trying to articulate theory - when you met him, what the field was like back then and what interests you since then [and how] have you used theory in your own life and in your professional work.

Florence: Well I met Dr. Bowen in 1967. My husband and I were having some difficulties with what we considered a problem with my oldest daughter, who was not doing well in school and seemed to have very little interest in studies. So my husband and I went to Dr. Bowen because I had heard of him. My husband who was a psychologist had heard of his work. He recommend that Ernest and I join a multiple family therapy group with three others couples, all of whom were psychologists, PhDs psychologists, and their wives. My husband and I stayed with that group, that was a different kind of format than I had been familiar with, it was not group therapy, and it was therapy that focused on the family as a unit, as an emotional unit. We stayed with that for about two years and everything calmed down with my daughter and she slowly but surely developed her own path, career path. She is a successful clerk of the court and is probably getting ready to retire in a couple years but she has done well. That was the beginning and really aroused my curiosity about the ideas behind the thinking that the family is an emotional unit. I really didn't have a very clear understanding of that, even as I participated in this multiple family therapy process. And so I eventually started reading and attending Dr. Bowen's seminars. It became more and more clear to me that this was an area that I wanted to pursue. The reason for that was Dr. Bowen himself was so dedicated to expanding and developing the theory using the family as an emotional unit, rather than a collection of individuals who just grow up together and then go their separate ways when they're adults. And this was pretty fascinating to me so I read more and attended seminars and Dr. Bowen had Wednesday seminars for medical students and then gradually he included and invited social workers, psychologists, and nurses. My background was nursing originally so I started attending and got to know a little more about the theory. I went into the training program, the postgraduate training program, in 1970. That was three years after I had first met Dr. Bowen and that was my entry into the profession as a family therapist. And I learned a whole lot, it was a very profound experience working with Dr. Bowen for twenty years from 1970 until he died in 1990...

And during that time, I was appointed to the faculty and to the family programs.

Andrea: What year was that Florence?

Florence: 1981 and I stayed with that work for two years because then I...with the encouragement of Dr. Bowen, I must say Dr. Bowen was a great influence. He was persistent in urging, nicely urging, people to do what they had an interest in. I attribute my move forward to the encouragement that Dr. Bowen gave me because he said, "You have to stop fooling around and go to it, I think you can do it." That really made a big improvement in my ability to move forward. So I applied for a doctoral program and started the work towards the dissertation. And I was fortunate enough to meet some people who were also on the faculty that participated in my doctoral work, which was focused on applications of Bowen theory. My dissertation was primarily focusing on change in self and its impact on my family and my own whole social network. So you, Andrea, were one of my participants...

Andrea: (laughs) Yes.

Florence: Because I had to have a consistent, because the dissertation consisted of four case studies that studied the process of change in self. Four cases studies that were done that talked about, discussed, the work of four serious people, who were seriously studying the Bowen Theory. That took me three years to do the dissertation and that was accepted. So I had to cut down on the work hours because I [was] working as a family clinician in a clinic and finding it difficult to find the time to really address the dissertation and comply with all of the requirements to succeed. I resigned from the family programs in 1983, the end of 1983 and was able to finish my dissertation, and I stayed with a real profound association. I say profound because I went to as many conferences as I could that were part of the Bowen Center. I think 1975, although I'm not sure of the precise date. It went from the family programs, to the Georgetown Family Center and now it is called the Bowen Center.

I went to all the conferences that I could and the annual symposium. I gave a couple of papers during that time. I never really left even though I worked at Crossway, I'm the clinical director there. But I'm very much connected to the Bowen center. I found Dr. Bowen to have a profound influence on my whole career and my work with my own family. So much so that I do remember, he encouraged me to write up a trip I made to visit an uncle from whom the family was cut off. Total cutoff. My uncle, my father's brother in Poland, and I did go to visit which was a challenge because I would stay in Poland (inaudible) were not on good terms because there was sanctions because Poland was controlled by communist Russia, Soviet Russia. I made that trip anyway, wrote it up, and then put all my notes aside. A couple of years ago I would say about three years ago, I decided that I should attempt to publish it in the journal that the Bowen center publishes. And so last year, it was accepted in the journal. So I attribute all of that to the encouragement of Dr. Bowen.

Andrea: So it was in the journal, what edition of the journal?

Florence: Last year. I think it was a volume eight. 2011.

Andrea: 2011. Great. Ok.

Florence: It was called "Crossing the Ocean in Search of Family".

Andrea: Ok, yes, it's amazing how, the influence he had on you, and you could sum up very precisely. I'm going to stop and go to another file here in a minute, in a second. Let me put this on hold for a minute and go another file because I'm running out of space...

Andrea: So I will, now I have an hour on here so we are fine. What in listening to that first part what I picked up on, of course, is the summary of his relationship with you that made a turning point in some way or another is captured, I think, in this sentence “ I think you can do it, stop fooling around and get to it” (laughs)...or something like that (laughs).

Florence: That’s right.

Andrea: And that began, I don’t know what stop fooling around meant, but all of us go off on many paths and I remember him saying “people pick up a pearl as though it were really important and some silver and copper here and there along the way and in doing so they miss out on the diamonds”. It was so many things that might capture our interests but you could keep your head focused on one thing. Which you seem to have kept all the years, your focus on the application of Bowen theory, the change in self, and its impact on the family around the person. Would you say that’s right? And of course now you have Crossway Community where instead of four in-depth case studies you get, I don’t know how many in-depth case studies every month, and a lot of people have gone through Crossway...

You’ve been able to collect a lot of information on the family. Whether or not you can answer this if you want, but having a theoretical view of the family as an emotional unit, is that the main thing that really captures your imagination that allows you to just keep going with all of these families that you run into out at Crossways. Is that still such a compelling notion to you?

Florence: I think it’s the core of my work because I don’t do therapy. Crossway community is not a therapy facility, it’s an educational facility. I think Bowen Theory and the application of Bowen theory fits very well in an organization that is devoted to educating its clients. So I don’t do any therapy, I’m in an advisory capacity. And Bowen Theory directs my thinking first and foremost is that the family is the emotional unit and has a profound influence on the person or persons that are seeking to get some kind of change and improve their quality of life. So I’m an advisor using Bowen Theory as a guide and then the concept of triangles and understanding that and how to apply the knowledge about triangles has been extraordinarily useful in my work at Crossway because in any work system, of which Crossways is a work system for me, there’s going to be interlocking and interrelated triangles. And I’m confronted with that all the time.

Instead of taking things personally, I try for some objectivity to the best of my ability. It’s tough at times, depending so much on the intensity of some of these situations that I’m confronted with and being an advisor to the staff. So the theory and its eight interlocking concepts have been really useful. I don’t think I could have stayed in any job this long without getting worn down. Bowen emphasized, and he was really adamant about it, and I could understand it as I grew up, so to speak, about getting emotionally neutral. Trying for that. So my attitude about that is that Bowen taught me that there is no such thing as one hundred percent objectivity but its something to strive for. If I can keep that in mind then I can maintain some semblance of sanity (laughs).

Andrea: (laughs) In an insane world. Well I guess you got to see Bowen striving to do this and being hemmed in by the emotional process at Georgetown University and then at Georgetown Family Center. I’m sure that being a leader in a field that was just beginning and being one of the pioneers of the field and being so different from everyone else had its own cost for him. It would kind of be like at Crossway, where you might find yourself being so different than other educational facilities that by focusing on the family as a unit and articulating that to the people there. People often have a hard time,

well what's the unit as a unit, what do you mean, its controlling me, or influencing me, I just don't see it. People are...people find it often hard to see the family as a unit...

Florence: Well it was Dr. Bowen who taught me, one: to look at it and try to understand the emotional basis, why people are so reactive, and in many cases resistant. Not everybody is but certainly to no small extent. I have met people who are very resistant to thinking of the family as an emotional unit. And I believe that the difficulty lies in the fact that it's very uncomfortable to really grasp the notion that each of us is very dependent and there is an interference there. I think there's more of a trend to deny that interdependence. It's more comfortable to think, "I'm my own person, I'm my own man and I don't have...once I'm an adult and self-supporting I don't depend on anybody". Because I believe that the family influences us well after we leave the family as a teenager, as a college student, that influence is still profound. So that's my notion about where that resistance comes from because it's misconstrued, if the family is an emotional unit then we don't have much....then a person doesn't have much control over one's own destiny because the family is guiding us in this sort of subliminal way. I think that's a misunderstanding of what Bowen proposes as an emotional unit. But that's much more in tune with individual thinking.

Andrea: I know that he was very interested in E.O. Wilson and ant colonies and so I started taking some...we're like a bunch of ants and you meet your friends in the foyer and that interaction with them decides...makes you decide what you're going to do. If you see a lot of people that are guarding the colony, and then you go to the garbage detail, if you meet a lot of people that are going to garbage detail and guarding the colony then you go out and look for food. But their functional role is more or less determined by those who they run into and those who have, so to speak, gone before them. And I've sort of seen that as a little bit of a metaphor of what happens, it's way more complicated than that, but I think what Bowen did is point to all the parts of the elephant and you don't have to stick with any one concept, or you can stick with one concept. But if you look at all eight of them you at least get an idea of the outline of how big this elephant is that's influencing you over the generations. And you get some idea of what you might do about it. When Bowen wrote his chapter, the second chapter in his book, he said that he had these residents and that he would talk to them about going to the extended family and about twenty-five percent of people would take it seriously. They were the ones who would do really well. He didn't do therapy with them. This was an educational format too, but they would go home and try to reconnect with people and this made an amazing shift in their ability to be present in other relationships, it was like magic. He also said in that chapter that he realized his contemporaries didn't have enough time to really consider that there were other ways of looking at this thing called the family. That they were busy with whatever it was that they had come up with, whether it was Lyman Wynne or Carl Whitaker, or Nat Ackerman, they all had their own thing and he said I'm going to have to go it alone if I want to do this. I'm not going to find people to understand exactly what I'm up to. Now you may remember that Phil Guerin wrote this article called, "The Man Who Never Explained Himself".

After Bowen died various people were asked to write an article. That was the title of the one in which he said Bowen never really explained what he was up to in training. The people that he found had 'go power', just to put it that way, they could understand something about the family as an emotional unit and they had go power to get things done in their own life. I don't know if I would say that he had attracted people who could carry on after he died, in a way I was thinking, he found a way to define himself after he died, through the people who he had relationships with, to whom Bowen Theory became important.

Florence: Well that's the characteristic of great leaders. That they have this ability to influence people to carry on the work in some way, that's the real leadership.

Andrea: Now do you think that's going to carry on beyond your generation?

Florence: I believe so. I believe so.

Andrea: Do you see a greater acceptance...

Florence: I see evidence of it because I just...I was at the computer and someone in my family, in fact my son, said that he was interested in getting the Family Center journal, and he lives in the southwestern part of the country. So I gave him the website address and he put his name on the list for subscribing. Then I realized as I went through the Bowen Center website, and there are training centers all over the country and internationally too. I think that considering the expansion and the geography of all of this interest nationally and internationally, I think the chances are pretty good that there will be a continuation. Now whether the basic ideas can get distorted that way, with so many people being trained and then they go off and try to apply the theoretical ideas but that's a process too. But I believe that yes, it will continue well on into the future. That's my thinking on it based on what's happening with the increase in interest throughout the country and internationally also.

I must tell you that another thing points back up to Bowen's generosity too because when I started, when I was accepted into the doctoral program I started the dissertation. Then I had to develop a committee and I asked Dr. Bowen if he would do me the honor of being on my committee. He said that he didn't have the time or the inclination to attend committee meetings but he would be willing to read all my papers and make comments. When I had to send copies of all my papers in preparation for the dissertation, I sent him a copy too. He was on the committee as an advisor and he read every word because he would send them back to me with comments in the margins. Every paper.

Andrea: (laughs) Wow.

Florence: (On) Every paper, he had comments. He put the effort into it which I thought I was extraordinarily fortunate, to have him look at my papers and make corrections, to make comments and really help...

Andrea: Did he ever trick you? Did he ever say funny things to you or...

Florence: All the time!

I had a good time and it was after, I would say, two to three years, I don't know the exact date, that I started tricking him back. So that had a good time.

Andrea: What was the tricking about theoretically? So I have my own views about the importance of tricking and how he used himself and he took a reading on other people's emotional system and what that was all about. Do you have a theory or a hypothesis about that? What was he up to?

Florence: I think it was part of his way of him defining himself. And sort of controlling his part in the possible triangulating with his clients, of which I was when I was seeing him for consultation about my

own changes. But he would...I think that was what... the way I see what he was doing. Everything that he attempted to do in relationship to his disciples, and he just hated that term, just hated it.

I think it was an attempt to warn people about getting into a big togetherness with them. So he would do these push-aways and if that's what you call a trick, yeah, then he was into that a lot. I think it had to do with his defining himself but I would, I never took that, as a personal affront. I remember a personal example would be... he was lecturing, I think at the Medical College of Virginia, after one of his video tapes, which trainees were permitted to observe, the medical college in Virginia in Richmond and he said something, if I can remember, "I ain't nobody's father except to my own children".

I raised my hand and he said yes, and I said "couldn't you make an exception?" and he growls back "no exceptions!"

Andrea: (laughs) That's so funny. I remember at the end of his paper that he delivered to the professionals about his own family and at some point he, somebody or another, I think it was Carl Whitaker again, got up and said "the minute I laid my eyes on you I was up to transference over my ears" (laughs).

Florence: (laughs).

Andrea: So you could think about it as pushing people, his de-triangulating, if you would, pushing people into their own craziness, into their own family was part of this stuff to at least bump up against people with their very, very active imaginations as to how they might get Bowen on their side. But there were quite a few incidents of these things, I love that..."I ain't nobody's father but my own children". Meanwhile the more he says that, the more people feel like, "well you're the kind of father I want" (laughs).

Florence: Right. Well then of course I got up and asked him if he could make an exception... "No exceptions!"

Andrea: Exactly. They test him all the way and he was ready to respond all the way.

Florence: Right.

Andrea: And I wondered also, you know I don't know if you have an opinion about this or not, but he in that '83 era, he made a much more clarifying turn away from family therapy towards science and defined himself in any number of ways to different professional organizations and had everybody at the Family Center write letters. I'd forgotten what the names of those letters were but it on the order of "why are you here, what are you doing? What do you want to do? To be on the faculty? What does it mean to you to be on the faculty?" and I think that was a really, pretty good thing and I think a lot of people resigned from the faculty at that point because either things, in your case, were important that you were doing and you just didn't have enough time...

Florence: Time and energy because I was working, I was working full time. I had cut down a little bit but I was also running out of funds...

I had set aside a certain amount of money, to pay for the tuition and the cost, doing the dissertation. I thought well if I continue at this rate I will probably need another couple of years. Then I made a decision at that time that I was just going...well as Dr. Bowen said, "get to it, stop messing around".

Andrea: What did you make of all the people resigning at that time, the letters being written, clarifying...

Florence: I thought that the program, the family programs, at the Georgetown Family Center, were in a state of transition and with it the level of anxiety that comes during times of transition started to escalate and with it triangulating and resignation. That was my take...

Andrea: So do you think it had something to do then with Dr. Bowen's health, he had the aneurysm...

Florence: I do...

I do. And then there was the core of people that gathered around him and supported the efforts to keep going and develop theory. And then of course there were more and more science types, that were invited to be the distinguished guest lecturer at the symposium.

Andrea: Right. It was almost as though, in a way, the application of Bowen Theory had to take a back seat for the science of, what I call trying to convert, sometimes I think about trying to convert principles into functional facts. Or how to make a science out of functional facts. That the human family was so hard to measure that at least you would have a little more perspective if at least you looked at how to measure ant colonies. And chimp colonies, just took it to other life forms, you might be able to see emotional process with greater neutrality and see what emotional process really was in other species, then maybe you could apply it to the human family. But until such a time all these applications in the therapy world took on a little bit of a negative hit, I think. How do we...

Florence: I do think that that transition was very, very difficult for people who were trained in traditional psychotherapy and psychodynamic thinking. Very difficult because it is so different. That was my thinking about the transition at that time.

Andrea: And now that you've been at Crossway for a while...

Florence: 21 years.

Andrea: 31 years at Crossway.

Florence: 21.

Andrea: Oh 21! I was there for about ten doing consulting and had a great deal of fun with you and Kathleen Guinan during that time. And really I look back at that as a great opportunity. Also, I just thought that Crossway could be a model, that it seems like an application that has a way to test and to show such fantastic results that it could be more of a model. It's gone into model building, having a Montessori school and all kinds of elaborate editions to the basic...

Florence: A Montessori approach goes very well with Bowen Theory because Bowen Theory is the overarching paradigm that is used at the Crossway and Montessori is the pedagogy, the approach to early childhood education that is used in the school for the young children so I think it fits. I don't have counseling with that, that's also another thing that has attracted me to stay with the development of Crossway. The section or the part of Crossway with programs that I'm with is the Family Leadership Academy, which is the educational facility for low-income single mothers and their children, and their young children, who attend the Montessori school. And it's a residential program so there's a whole lot of learning to be done when you have families living right there. You can observe their functioning. That's my story Andrea and it's now four o'clock and are we just about winding down, I hope.

Andrea: Yes, definitely. I really appreciate your time.

Florence: I hope it's useful.

Andrea: I think it is the most useful thing that you can do right now is to gather up the stories of people who had direct contact and who were motivated in some way by what they saw Bowen do. Stand up and get to it as you said. I think that in a very profound way enabled others to stand up and get going. 'Cause he had his own tribulations that he had to slog through within the profession so I really...

Florence: Now you were one of my subjects in...

Andrea: Yes.

Florence: ...in that study. Was that useful to you?

Andrea: That was useful and it was the first time I had really drawn out a big map of my family to put it all on one page. Before I had a nuclear family map, I had my mother's family, my father's family, my great uncle's family but to have it all like a sea before you and there you are just one little piece of it all, just floating through the generations. So a bit of fluff on the water, so to speak. But there you see a whole humungous part of human nature floating down the generations and spawning the next generation. It's quite something to see. I do think that it enabled me to be a lot more neutral about all that had happened. I think you were very good at asking questions that looked at the positive side. And perhaps that also comes across in your remembrance of Murray Bowen is the positive way that he interacted with you. I think that you have used that in the way that you then interacted with me in the sea of difficulties that I was up against. And so that's extremely helpful.

Florence: Oh thank you.

It's very nice to hear that.

Andrea: And it gives you a way to count too. How many of your great aunts do you really have a one to one relationship with, when's the last time you went there? And they're not even in Poland, they're just in Elyria, Ohio (laughs).

Florence: (laughs) But just as a final thing I am one of the oldest generations, one of the oldest people in my family. This month I'll be 87...

Andrea: Congratulations. That's awesome.

Florence: (laughs).

Andrea: Well now reflecting back on this, you're a good influence and a good example the only way to be real leader, I think. What made you pick me as one of your four people?

Florence: First of all, you liked to talk.

Andrea: (laughs).

Florence: (laughs) You know, I couldn't very well go into interviewing a person who I would have to drag information out of. I wanted to make things easy for myself and it's a horrific job of searching out people who wanted to talk to me about their families in a personal way.

So that was one and then I couldn't very well do the project with someone who had only very limited information because then how could they enlarge on the story, the life story, so to speak, that was also another factor. And you were most generous and available. So that was it. I was sold on it.

Andrea: I didn't know if I had tricked you into doing it or not. But it was really a great fun project and I did get a lot out of it. You know, if more people made a project out of this simple little idea that when you begin to change yourself a lot of things happen in what now we might now call correlations between your changes and the change in your family group. It's hard to make a factual science out of correlations but if you got enough people that showed how this happened, I think it could be what you call a functional fact. That the process will change itself.

Florence: Yes, among the scientists they call that or the statisticians call that statistically significant (laughs).

Andrea: (laughs) Yes, if Ernest were here he'd put in his two or three cents about statistically significant and how...

Florence: He certainly would, I have to go now.

Andrea: Alright, thanks for your time. And have a great day.

Florence: You too, thank you.