

Interview with Laurie Lassiter
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For the Murray Bowen Archives Project of Leaders for Tomorrow at History of Science
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Schara: So today is Sunday, April the 14th and Andrea Shearer here, interviewing Laurie Lassiter. Joanne Bowen is sitting in for a bit, and Monica is sitting in for the whole time, as far as I know. Anyone can change their mind at any time, I am only partially in control. [laughter]

So Laurie, you and I have talked about things many years in terms of Bowen theory, and I think this is just such a wonderful opportunity for you to put your thoughts out for the general public, so that people can listen to what you've thought about, and I really appreciate you doing this, I think it'll be a really great contribution, and a fun time for me! So, the first question has to do with who are you?

How did you come to be interested in Bowen theory and know Dr. Bowen?

Lassiter: I'm Laurie Lassiter, and in 1976, I had an opportunity to read the Anonymous paper, it was just a xeroxed copy of the article, and I was immediately intrigued. And I had a coach, a brilliant psychiatrist, Harvard-trained, who had consulted with Dr. Bowen on own family and I was coached from 1976 to 1981.

And it became, Bowen Theory became, extremely important to me personally. From 1981 to 1985 I continued to have a real interest in it but I was working in it in my family, more on my own and learning about it I viewed it as something that was personally extremely important to me.

But I knew I never wanted to be a therapist, which I am now.

[laughter]

Schara: You knew that in your gut. [laughter]

Lassiter: I didn't think that it would offer me the intellectual challenge that I was interested in. Boy was I wrong! [laughter]

Schara: [laughter]

Lassiter: But that was prior to meeting Dr. Bowen. So, it had never occurred to me that I could have the opportunity to be coached by Dr. Bowen. I saw him as, just way too important. But in 1985 I made it to the Family Center, and I met with Dan Papro, and there were two things he said to me that were important. And one of them was "what we're studying here at the Family Center, is what we don't know about the family." The other thing he told me that was important was that Murray Bowen-

Schara: Brilliant.

Lassiter: was willing to work with some individuals, if you pretty much, I don't remember how he put it if you had a really messed up family. [laughter] An interesting... [laughter]

Schara: [laughter] An interesting...

Lassiter: [laughter] I can't remember how [inaudible] Dan Paparo put it, I know Dr. Bowen referred to it as "you have a really interesting family," but... [laughter] but anyway, so I wrote Dr. Bowen a letter. He later said about the letter, "boy, you were not going to be beat out by anybody, in the story you told about your family."

Schara: [laughter]

Lassiter: So, I was in fact trying to make the case that he would meet with me, so it was a long letter of generations of impairment in my family to try to persuade him. So I was coached by him from 1986 to his death in 1990. We never had a social relationship. He never called me by name. In 1990 when my son was born, I walked in and I said do you want to hold him, and he said "no." [silence]

But there was, I think, I know I felt a strong bond with him. And when I called him, to make the last appointment, in September of 1999- well, I should add that he did he did suggest that I apply to be in the post-graduate program. Which I had never considered, since I didn't have any experience in working with families. So he did encourage me to do that.

But the other thing that I wanted to mention was that... well, before he died he told me that I really didn't need him anymore. That I understood how to do this, and I- but that was sometime before he died. Then I called him in September of 1990, this was my last contact with him, but it was very meaningful to me, even though it was short and on the phone. His wife came to the phone and answered, and, as she usually did, said "just a minute," and went to get Dr. Bowen. But then she came back, and she said "who is it, please?" and then she went and got Dr. Bowen. So, that meant a lot to me, that when he came to the phone in September of 1990 and was on oxygen and having difficulty speaking that he was willing to take the call. And we scheduled an appointment to meet in October that would have occurred after he died in October.
[silence]

Schara: What did you think when he said "You really don't need me anymore"? "You already know what to do"?

Lassiter: I believed him.

Schara: You believed him.

Lassiter: Mmhmm. I thought he was accurate. During those four years I had picked up enough knowledge and technique, I might say, even though he said he was not technique-oriented, that I had picked up enough knowledge that I could continue the effort on my own. And in fact I did continue it, on my own. I was-

Schara: What's the difference between technique and method, is there a difference? Sometimes I say, you know, and what I'm interested in is Bowen lived theory in all the stuff that he did was the way in which he lived theory. Do you have a thought about that?

Lassiter: Well, you know...

Schara: Did you learn method? A method? Of living theory?

Lassiter: Dr. Bowen coached different people in different ways.

Schara: Mmhmm.

Lassiter: And... [silence] you know, it's hard to say why I either signed up to be a particular research subject, or within a particular research category that he had, or whether he selected me, but I was coached in a very particular way that I know he did coach other people similarly, but not everybody. And part of that, I think, was, um... One thing I wanted to mention at the very beginning, but I didn't, is that-well, I'll get back to that I guess, in another question, but um... He coached me very specifically, he didn't perhaps he- he realized that I wasn't someone who he could just talk theory to, and that I would get it. I believe that perhaps he saw some other people as being able to separate their intellectual and emotional systems to the degree that they would be able to hear the theory without being coached in that very specific, step-by-step way. So I don't know how much of it was... I believe, at least part of it, was he recognized that I wasn't going to get it without going through the whole process in my own family. And perhaps he also recognized that I was extremely motivated and that I was willing to take risks, and I was up for it. Because I had...

Schara: [laughter]

Lassiter: ...had a pretty extraordinary experience with the theory, going back ten years, and had been always seeking for how I could keep this going. I should say also, that after I had written him the letter, he did write me a letter back, which I still keep and treasure and in the letter he said "I know a way out." So he and I had a very particular understanding from the very beginning, of our work together.

Schara: So when he said, "I know a way out," that brings up a lot of ideas and thoughts about the knowledge of the emotional system and triangles as being the way out. And that's just how my head thinks. I don't think about specifically what you should do, with your mother or father or sister or brother, that's what takes the courage but the fact that he could look at your diagram and figure "I know a way out" if you're up to it..."

Lassiter: and I believed it, and it turned out it was the case.

I wanted to talk a little bit more about-I'm skipping question three because I really don't, don't have an answer for that, but the next question I did want to talk a little bit more about the way he coached me.

Schara: Ok, so you're going to skip the insights into where Bowen picked up his ideas, fueling his research. Somehow he got to know whatever the emotional system is, and somehow he got to know how to find a way how, how how he got that, you don't know.

Lassiter: I really don't.

Schara: Ok.

Lassiter: I-I am in awe about how he-in awe of how he could have possibly seen, you know, and I think about around the time I was born in 1950 that he was figuring this out, and I think-

Schara: what he saw.

Lassiter: -you know, how fortunate for me, and...[silence]

The other thing that happened around this time is that I did realize that this was intellectually the most interesting-I had-I hadn't recognized it before meeting with him, but once I met with him and also I began to attend his talks, I realized that learning about the family as a product of evolution, so that this theory that had been so important to me personally was something that I wanted to devote my like to studying and learning about, on an intellectual level as well.

And I had never found anything even close to being as interesting as this theory is to me. But I wanted to say a little more about the way he coached me because I think it was, I think it was unique. I mean not unique, I believe that I was in a particular category of his research. This is the way I think about it.

Schara: That would make you unique, being within that category, so, that's accurate. (being in that) category.

Lassiter: And he worked with me.

Essentially, what I meant by technique, and I know it's not a good word to use, but what I meant to say is that I learned how to use the triangle to further differentiation of self, in those four years. And maybe all of you have heard me describe how he coached me to put the others together, and myself out. I'll just add, that even though I'd had that five years of coaching, which had made a tremendous-had been a tremendous opportunity for me, and then I had continued to observe my family on my own for some years. When I began the coaching with him, and as we got into it, I realized that this was a whole new opportunity, and this was a whole new way of understanding what was going on with family.

So basically, it was all about differentiation of self, and it was very personally motivated within- within me, and he responded to that, motivation, within me. So, he coached me

to put two together and self out, which-which began with my parents, let's say. And an example would be, I said to my father, "Do you think we can take that walk? Do you want to get her permission first? Do you think she'll let you take that walk?"

Schara: [laughter]

Lassiter: And then to my mother, "Are you going to let him out of his cage, today?" So I don't want to get into it, I've done so much presenting about it, but-but as I understood it, it was you put the other two together, and self out you pick up on each one's responsibility in the triangle, I mean, in their relationship, so you can see how it's the opposite of that natural, automatic tendency to take sides with one, against the other, with each one you were picking up on that level of responsibility. Well what happened was, as we went along in this process and a lot of his coaching had to do with him making jokes to calm me down because every time I went back, I was in a state, because what happened was both my parents turned against me, and my siblings sided with my parents.

So I had the situation, that I was trying to manage, of the entire family against me. And Bowen would say things like, you know take, take, you know, take good- make this a good opportunity, he didn't use that term I can't remember what he said, but anyway it would take you years to get back to this, you know very beneficial point. [laughter]

Schara: That you recently achieved. [laughter]

Lassiter: And another thing he said was he-he joked about it, you know "you really didn't know what you were getting into." you, you have hit the mother lode and it truly was, and then there were people in the extended family who also sided with my parents and he-Bowen would say things like, "well, every step you take, they're going to try to tear down your efforts." So it was a very I wouldn't say lonely, but it was a very alone effort.

And no one knew about it, my husband didn't know about it. I didn't confide to anyone about it, and my family knew nothing about Murray Bowen or Bowen Theory. In fact, they've never heard anything about Bowen Theory until, I think it was last year I did show them the chapter that I had written for Lynn Margulis' book.

[silence]

But it was a very alone effort and after he died I continued that I, very purposely, maintained a situation in my family, in which all my family was against me. People don't understand this, and it would take a lot to try to explain how beneficial that was for me. But I remember, you know, it was from 1990 to 1996, I was determined to continue the effort that I had started with him. But around 1996, and he had told me, he had said you know, I had gone into it, and we had gone into the effort.

I-I believed, in the beginning, that I would always be in that position, by that position I mean I would always be in the position that my family was trying to tear me down. And somehow that was okay with me, I was just going to keep at it. But he told me, he said "You know what", and I'm paraphrasing, I don't remember how he said it, but he said, "You know what, um, it's not like that because in time, they're going to let you go." And

he said "If-if a person had to keep this kind of effort going, they wouldn't be able to," he said. It would be too much. "They are, the family, over time, will let you be free."

"They'll give up trying to tear you down." [laughter]

That was interesting, to hear that from him. But I didn't actually experience that for many years later. That I kept it up all on my own, for ten more years-I mean, nine, six more years, after he died.

But then it was a combination of me realizing that I could be, I could soften, in my, in my relationships, with the family. And also maybe it was that I was just so tired. [laughter]

And I will say, also, the um that another thing that I did is the you know, he had encouraged me to apply to be part of the postgraduate program, so I had to manage being coached by him, and a radically different way than apparently what anybody else was doing. [laughter]

Schara: Right.

Lassiter: And but one of the things I- one of the decisions I made, right at the beginning, well, after you know, one weekend where a bunch of us went over to the Arlington Motel, and we- we slept together, and we, so to speak, we roomed together, I mean you know, we chatted, and after that I realized

I was not going to connect with anyone, in the postgraduate program, [laughter] and I avoided being friends with anyone, for many years. Probably until around that period, you know, 1996. I'm not sure about that, but I know that that was a turning point in my recognizing that I could relax a little bit, with my family. Um-

Schara: So that was what year? That you- '96?

Lassiter: (19) That I...that I could relax?

Schara: That you could relax?

Lassiter: But I don't remember,

Schara: How bout with the

Lassiter: I think it was maybe sometime later with the postgraduate. I mean with the Bowen Network.

Schara: Mmmhmm.

Lassiter: Um. But I think that was a very good decision, about the postgraduate program, that first weekend there was so much gossip about all the faculty, and- and I was there, really, for one thing, which was differentiation of self.

[silence]

Schara: I know you've had another example of differentiation of self with the New England group. I don't know that if you did a differentiating move with the postgraduate people or the Bowen people

Lassiter: No, I didn't, and

Schara: at the Bowen Center.

Lassiter: but the effort I made, with the New England group, was successful. And it was- it went through a period in which all of the people in the New England group were against me. [laughter] Sounds funny to say it, I have a skill. [laughter]

Schara: [laughter] Well, I was, I was thinking as you were talking that your skill is the importance of the self to survive in an intellectual way, that really doesn't harm others, it- it upsets them, because you're not going along with it, but it doesn't harm them. And yet you can survive, and prosper for your own differentiation, for your own level of maturity. And that that's a very unusual way to think about triangles, that triangles are, without meaning to, impinging on people's freedom. In very intense ways. And that there's a way to get- to get out of that.

Lassiter: The interesting thing is, I have a very favorable position in my family now. Very favorable. [laughter]

Schara: . [laughter] Yeah. [laughter]

Lassiter: So that's an interesting kind of phenomenon.

Schara: Does very favorable mean that you have greater ability to be yourself with others, to what-what does that mean?

Lassiter: Well, it has- it has to do with my being more free to be myself, and at any point to take an outside position comfortably. But, what I meant by that also includes that my family looks favorably upon me, and there's a lot of affection shown toward me. People look to me for leadership, but I don't feel pressured into any type of over-functioning position either. Everyone in my family has picked up their function. [silence] So that...[silence]

Schara: Ok.

Lassiter: Not to say there aren't bumps in the road, and challenges but just how extraordinary it is to me personally, having lived through the early period, in which I was the most impaired child in the family and how difficult it was, to be in that position. And then how difficult it was to get [laughter] out, of that position! [laughter] So for me personally, even though...

Schara: [laughter] So take courage.

Lassiter: You know it's nothing extraordinary, going on in my family, at this point, in terms of our functioning we don't have extraordinary functioning. But to me personally given the history, it's amazing to me [laughter] that combination of that people like and accept me, that they respect me, they don't cross me, and I'm free.

Schara: [laughter]

Lassiter: I'm sure I have- I know I have a ways to go, but in my family origin, things are very different than they- than they once were.

Schara: So if I were to come back around to the questions and look at the-the main characteristic to his approach to research, this is what I hear you saying, anyway, is to take a reading on people and what he thought they were up to and capable of doing, and then to figure out how to communicate with them as best he could, some ideas that could help them make their way through the emotional system.

Lassiter: That's my guess about it, because, having heard from some- I was confused, because I assumed that for whatever reasons, I assumed that everyone in the faculty had gone through this same process and that isn't the case.

Schara: So you were a later research project, maybe he had other research projects that didn't fare so well [laughter] early on. Possible.

Lassiter: Well I would just want to repeat what I said before, that I think it was a combination of my high level of motivation, with my high level of need. In other words, I was not going to get it by sitting down and talking about the theory. I had to be coached step by step by step by step. And he- he really came through for me. There were times when I - I mean, there was, you know, he'd go back and forth. I mean, one time I-I was whining, you know "I don't know what to say, tell me what to say, I can't think of what to say." And his answer was, "Well, get yourself more differentiated, and you'll be able to think of it." But other times, he would tell me what to say, it was very specific, very, you know, really helping me make my way out. Which I never would have been able to without that level of coaching.

Schara: Are there other people who you would coach like that?

Lassiter: Well I would coach anyone like that.

Schara: You would coach anyone the (whole)

Lassiter: If they were interested and willing regardless of any-any other...

Schara: Do you think-

Lassiter: And that, I think that -I think this is perhaps true of all of the people who coach people-who you know, who are part of the Bowen network, that How do you know what to do, to assist others, in the effort? You base it on what may have made it possible for you to learn, so [silence]

You know, I'll just add that most people aren't willing to- to go through that kind of process in which everyone is united again. And-and also I have to add probably a lot of people don't need to go through that kind of process. So -but I did want to talk about it in this interview, because I see the interview as something that might be useful to people in the future. And because I- I have such...

Schara: Absolutely.

Lassiter: ...great gratitude to Dr. Bowen and to the theory, and to the difference that it's made in my own life, that I feel a strong responsibility and strong motivation to let other people know about it. And if I can, if by talking about my own personal difficulty, and how the theory made it possible for me to make it through, if that's helpful to people in the future, I'd like to -I'd like to do that.

Schara: It makes sense to me that Bowen, the way he coached you. In my view, it may have been that you are an unusual person, and it may be that he was refining his methods of communicating with people too, and he took a risk, in, towards the end of his life, in being more open with you.

And you were ready for it, and he was ready for it, so it, it may, and again I don't know, but as far as I could see Bowen, he seemed to constantly be changing his research methodology with people, and trying something to see what would happen if you did this and if you did that with people.

And he had a way of saying it, which was a funny metaphor, but he looked out at all the postgraduates and he said, "I'm going to put you all in a pen, and I'm going to see which one of you can jump the fence."

"And the ones that can jump that fence, well there's a higher fence just after that."

[laughter] "And I'll see which ones of you can make it over that one. And when you get over that one, there'll be another fence." "And let me see who can get through that one."

Lassiter: And that's life too, isn't it.

Schara: And that's-and that's life too, and sometimes people are fortunate and they have the silver spoon, and they can go through life and they might not be like the Buddha, and find their way out of the garden of paradise to discover the suffering that awaits all of us. [silence]

Lassiter: Um...something in what you said, I'm just trying to remember, huh, what was it you said again, about this?

Schara: Always altering his research to see what he could do

Lassiter: Yes. Yes, I have wondered about that too.

Because I have, over time learned, that not everyone was coached that way because I had assumed this-this was the way he- So, anyway, I wondered too, was it the timing of when we met up, was it- There were all different possible factors. I do know he did coach- that there were others that were in that research category, but not everyone.

Schara: Well 1986 was after his - the aneurysm, and- and his voice was paralyzed, and- and I think that he was an eternally curious person, and I think that he also viewed each person as an individual on that scale of differentiation of emotional maturity and I think he had an amazing ability to see each person as an individual. And I -if you listen to his tapes, when he interviewed families, he was always changing, it wasn't that he found a way and he kept doing this way.

But he was always altering the way in which he approached even the same people, like the Welford and Bronsons tapes. So that's 15 years and you can see how different he was from the beginning, toward the end.

Lassiter: Mmm.

Schara: And I think all of this was a sort of a trial and error approach, in which when he made the connection with someone like you, and people could go all the way, that was that was extremely important to verify his theory.

Lassiter: Yeah, probably so.

Schara: And that's why he put the kind of effort into it that he did with people who had some guts and willpower.

Lassiter: And I think that we were both taking a risk.

Schara: Mmhmm.

Lassiter: Because what we were engaged in was [silence] was deeply emotionally charged. It was a deeply emotionally charged effort. I mean, even though that's not really putting it right, but what I mean is the emotions that became triggered by the effort of, for one thing, (the mosting). You see, I had been pretty central to the family problem, I know I'm jumping ahead now to another question, but and I had I- I had definitely played my part to the full, in terms of contributing to the family problem. [laughter] So for- that was another reason, why I was grateful for an opportunity to contribute to some sort of solution. He used that word, solution.

To the family problem. Of course, I had been the solution early on, but that's not what he meant! [laughter] We were going to find a different kind of solution to the family problem. So yes, he and I were a kind of team...

Schara: Mmhmm.

Lassiter: and we each did our part, and we each one of us faced quite a bit of risk, and it may be that he was-and he was aware of this -I mean, I remember this very well, he

said in some families, he said "Well, I think only one or two of you ha -are going to have to die in order for this thing to get resolved." So he was, I mean he made a joke about it, but he was aware of the risk involved. And it was a risk to him professionally, too. You know, if the family had if I had been, if I had managed things differently, and, so He was lucky, because I - he had a team member, who was going to manage it all alone. Who knows how my family might have, could have reacted, you know, if they had known about what was going on. So, I think it was a risk, and maybe, because he was near the end of his life, he was more, I think, as you're suggesting, I hadn't really thought of it that way, but perhaps because he was near the end of his life he was-he was willing to go for it, in terms of that level of risk, and I was willing to go for it too.

Schara: Mmhmm.

Lassiter: I had already had enough experience with the theory to recognize that it would that it was- that it could work, and but- but still, I had I experienced a great deal of risk, as one by one they all lined up against me.

Schara: Absolutely.

Lassiter: And as I mentioned before and I want to emphasize it, is a lot of the, a lot of the coaching had to do with making jokes to [laughter] reduce my anxiety. Because every time I came, whether it was monthly or every other month, but it was either monthly or every other month, I would come in, I was very worked up. [laughter] And I had a story to tell, about what had occurred, with the family. And he would take

Schara: [laughter]

Lassiter: Whatever the family reaction was, we build on that, so the next step would relate to how the family had reacted in the most recent step. [laughter]

Schara: [laughter] So, just to clarify for the audience or whoever's listening, is that the what you're really describing here is the automatic nature of triangles and the side-taking in which one person is more impinged than others, and you can participate in the impingement.

Lassiter: Sure.

Schara: and become the family problem. That's kind of what you're saying, "I participated in it and I wanted a better solution than to be the impinged one, and have the family continue this through the generations." And by going it alone, they can't really impinge on you anymore, and they have to figure out what to do with that anxiety that is in them too. You have it in you, and they have it in them. And then-

Lassiter: It was extremely stressful for the family

Schara: [laughter] Yes, my family agrees. This was an extremely disgusting way of [laughter] growing yourself up. But I- that's what I hear that his-his discovery, in a way, is that the way through it is, and he says this in his writing, but it doesn't flesh out with what the emotional part of it is for people, it's a simple word to de-triangle a self, it- you can't differentiate without de-triangling. But he doesn't put in that all the emotional stuff that happens to you, and all that is required in being able to describe, that's what I think you did, to your mother and father, how they're playing their part in it. You just described it back, well "Do you want to let him out of his cage?" [laughter] And things like that which are so beautiful, and yet so horrible, at the same time. [laughter] It's and uh- And so that Bowen theory offered something that psychoanalysis couldn't offer in terms of setting people free. It's a completely different way, and then you took it all the way into evolution, and looked at how cells do this impinging stuff, I don't know if you want to touch on that?

Lassiter: Mmhmm. Of course. But did you want me to answer the question about what I see as his main contribution?

Schara: Sure.

Lassiter: Um, and you and I had talked about my doing a second interview at some time, and then I might say a lot more

Schara: Mmhmm, yes, definitely.

Lassiter: But I did just want to get a start on it. And these were the three things that I came up with, one was that the family functions as an instinctive system. The second one was the regulation of the individual, by the group. And then the third one was the variation in the differentiation of self in every sibling group. Those were the main, broadly, of course it doesn't really get into the triangle and differentiation of self, but

Schara: Well what was the second one? I didn't-

Lassiter: Oh, the second one was the regulation of the individual by the group.

Schara: So that's the triangle one to me.

Lassiter: Yes, and as I say, I didn't really get into the specifics of differentiation of self in the triangle, but that's what I have in mind.

Schara: So the family functions as an instinctive....

Lassiter: System.

Schara: System.

Lassiter: And then the individual is regulated by the group, depending of course, the degree to which of course, on level of differentiation. And then, that there's variation in differentiation of self in every sibling group. I'm going to speak more about this, when I get to your question.

Schara: M'kay.

Lassiter: So your question, you're now asking the last question- Is that true? "Have you developed ideas that would-"

Schara: "extend or refine the theory?"

Lassiter: I mean, is that where you are?

Schara: Yeah. I think, you know, there's so much more that can go into any of these, and as you say, we'll get to it. But I think to just give an overview of the questions, put in here, that would be great.

Lassiter: Mmhmm. Yes. And then we can perhaps do a second interview at a later time, that would include

Schara: Mmhmm.

Lassiter: a lot more. Or some- it wouldn't have to be that long of an interview, but it might include some different information. So the first thing that I did, was to, one of the things that I admire so much about Murray Bowen, and some others, is the capacity to, and the real effort to, keep so much complexity in mind. At any given moment. And one of the differences in the way that I began to work with-with the theory, and to work with speaking about the theory, presenting the theory, is that I tried to boil it down, because the complexity was too much for me, to it was too much for me, to keep in mind at one time. And so I boiled it down, basically, to the triangle and differentiation of self. And of course that was partly based again on how I had been coached by Murray Bowen. That- those were the- those were the most important concepts. And how I learned about the theory. So my effort, now, we're getting into the intellectual effort as opposed to the personal effort that I made.

That was to boil it down and understand the triangle as a regulatory mechanism. And to describe the details of how the triangle functions to control the feelings, physiology, and behavior of the individuals in the group. And that the triangle also preserves the unequal distribution of stress, in the group. Which I see as being very important.

[silence] So that was the first thing that I did, was to try to study and begin to present. In fact, my first presentation was in 1991. [silence]

Schara: At the Bowen Center?

Lassiter: Yes, at the symposium, in 1991.

Schara: I remember that.

Lassiter: And that was the first time I began presenting about the triangle. [silence]

Schara: How would you-how was that received? In your way of thinking?

Lassiter: I had a number of individuals, including Phil Lorio, come up to me, and show a lot of interest.

Schara: Okay. Do you think that, is an indicator that you were speaking in a way that people could hear what you were saying?

Lassiter: And- I think-I think so, to some degree. That was a -that was my first

Schara: Okay.

Lassiter: effort to try to talk about the triangle. And the conference was not actually on the triangle, it was on, the conference was on, I think it was on death in the family, actually. [silence]

So, another contribution, that I've made probably-well, another contribution, is that this variation in differentiation of self, the unequal distribution in development that it has a function, for the survival and reproductive success of the species. I believe that the human evolved to produce both higher and lower levels of differentiation of self. And that it was natural selection, and the level of the group, that favored those groups that had this unequal distribution of differentiation of self. And along with that of course, the unequal distribution of stress.

Schara: Why would natural selection do that? What's the advantage of having this?

Lassiter: I tried to communicate this, I've tried over, over many years actually, I've been trying to communicate this, and I'm going to try to communicate it again right now. [laughter]

But the idea is, if you can imagine, I'm going to try to say it very simply, but if you can imagine two groups, and, these are- these would be groups that are actually evolving. Two evolving groups. Hominids, but not human yet.

And let's say that one group, and I don't believe that this is an accurate representation of what was actually going on, I'm just using it to try to communicate in a simple way, why it is that I believe that the production of both higher levels and lower levels have contributed to the success the successful survival and reproduction of the human species.

So, think about it. You have two groups, and I remember years ago in Vermont using the white board and drawing the two groups. So, if you have one group, let's say everybody on one group has, they're at level 50, in terms of differentiation of self. So there's not an unequal distribution. But then you have another group, in which you've got a number of people with 75, or over 60. And you've got a bunch of people who are around 30 and you've got some others who are 15.

So think about it, which group is going to be more successful, in perceiving reality accurately? Think about it in terms of leadership. And I think that's what it was, is that the humans needed some leaders with a higher level of differentiation of self. That those leaders would be able to perceive the environment more accurately. And they'd be able to, with higher levels of differentiation of self they'd be able to they'd be able to be less reactive to the emotional stress. Say they're meeting an environmental challenge they'd be less vulnerable, to the emotional pressure based on people's reactivity to the challenge, emotional reactivity to the challenge. And that they'd be able to take a position, and that the rest of the group would tend to follow.

Um, because remember, people- when I say the others would follow and then I've given this other example and I just want to explain, that people are drawn to differentiation of self. Everybody wants it. My family wants it, they respect it. And-and they appreciate it. The difference is, just to briefly go back to my personal experience, the difference is that working toward differentiation is a completely different kind of experience than having differentiation already! [laughter]

Schara: [laughter] Okay, I hear ya.

Lassiter: So enough said on that, at least this time around. [silence]

Schara: So another thought in there, is that when you have variations within the family group, you have different ways of adapting to stress too. And it may be, I can remember in Calhoun's rats, it's that sometimes that the ones that could connect with the higher-ranking ones, not differentiations ones, and the lower-ranking ones, were the most creative ones.

Cause they could deal with the people at the top and the people at the bottom, but they had more adaptability, to manage self in changing environments. It's not the same thing.

Lassiter: It's not, and I'm actually interested in that, but for myself, my own interest is in only in differentiation of self. And the unequal distribution of it. And- and the unequal distribution of stress. That I think that has functioned to make the human species more successful, in survival and in-in reproduction. [silence]

And then just to repeat what I've already said, that this unequal distribution in variation of differentiation of self, and the unequal distribution of stress, is determined and regulated by the group. Everyone participates in that, in that automatical emotional process. And then I'll just add differentiation of self, using- going back to Bowen's letter to me, it's a way out.

Schara: Mmhmm.

Lassiter: So, it's important for me to add here, that- I will never be satisfied with this, (the way that) nature has come up with- with the survival and reproductive success of the human species.

And perhaps it's because, you know it could be because of my own personal experience, and people say, "well," you know, "the ones with the lower levels of

differentiation, they're ok, because- because they- they're getting this good leadership, from the ones with the higher levels of differentiation." But having had a- quite a low level of differentiation myself, and now knowing the difference, I can say that the suffering is very great, in lower levels of differentiation.

Schara: Mmhmm.

Lassiter: So, even though I have described how the way that nature came up with obtaining higher levels of differentiation, which is, as Bowen laid out, it's on the backs of the ones with lower levels of differentiation. And just briefly, to state let's say the oldest child is the one most focused on, or it could be the youngest, or it could be the most beautiful one, who knows! But that does make it possible for someone- for another sibling - to be less focused on, and to be able to grow up- We don't have time to go into it, but to be able to grown up more free of the family emotional process. So that's the way nature has created higher levels of differentiation of self. And nature's way of doing it has brought the human being to this point, to be, clearly, the most successful species on the planet.

Schara: We haven't been here long enough to really call us successful, but yes.
[laughter]

Lassiter: ...to claim success...that's a good point. But-

Schara: We've spread everywhere...

Lassiter: but at least we have succeeded in surviving and reproducing. So my interest is

Schara: ...and spreading all over the planet...

Lassiter: I believe that Bowen Theory offers a way to provide knowledge about this that the human species can move toward creating higher levels of differentiation of self, in a new way. And that's my greatest interest. And then, you know, Andrea, you and I have both read James Shapiro's recent book, *Evolution from a 21st Century Perspective*, and going back to Murray Bowen in the 1980s, and he was- it just goes without say that it's just awe-inspiring how much ahead of his time he was, in- in so many areas of thinking. But anyway, in the 1980s Murray Bowen said "some day the human may be able to direct his own evolution." And then reading Shapiro's book and recognizing that all of life is engaged in directing our own evolution - that it's not this... I believe Shapiro was right, and of course I had 10 years of mentoring by Lynn Margulis, so I have a different view of how evolution occurs. She certainly did not believe that- that evolution occurred through random accident. She believed that the individual organism was, as a living being, at every level, even at the level of bacteria, that it was a sensing being. That it had, in a very broad sense, a cognitive ability, that it was sensing the environment, and that it was changing itself, to some degree. Within limits, as Murray Bowen would always say. But anyway, I believe that Bowen's theory has a contribution to make, in

that very grand...I know it sounds even grandiose, to say that Bowens' theory will have a contribution to make to the human directing its own evolution, in the future. But think about it, that it's not- it turns out that it's not this process of just waiting for random acts of (genetic) mutation to occur.

Schara: Even for the bacteria. Which can sense, and figure things out.

Lassiter: Mmhmm.

Schara: So maybe it's not so grandiose, but really just a practical way of seeing how life is that Darwin couldn't see in his-in his time. And Bowen somehow could see it.

Lassiter: Mmhm.

Schara: and he could communicate that to people like you, and now you can put it into better words, maybe, or clearer examples of what this process of differentiation has to offer, if people want to go through it. And if not [laughter, down the river. There's always that.

Lassiter: Yeah, Bowen used to say, you know, I have to say, you know, in addition to all his wonderful jokes, that reduced my anxiety, he also had a way of motivating me and one of the ways he had was saying, "Well, you know you have a choice. You could always just go down the drain. [laughter]

Schara: [laughter] Just go down the drain (inaudible)

Lassiter: He had a lot of-.... anyway. Um, and just one last thing, you know, because I'm just coming from this extraordinary Variation Conference, um that I do think that it's possible, just to repeat what I said yesterday, that I do think it's possible that this period of regression, which, it's like what was going on in the Dark Ages, you know. We hear about the Dark Ages, they were so dark, and yet there were so many creative impulses during the Dark Ages, as historians have been able to discover.

Anyway, yes, there are all kinds of signs that we are in a regression at this time. And Bowen described it, and he identified it as a regression. And yet, within this period of regression, there are also there's all these creative things going on. And, just a guess, but my guess would be that this period of regression is actually, and of course, we're also facing a huge environmental challenge, that this time, we've created for ourselves [laughter]. Um, and that we're in a period of co-

Schara: Right.

Lassiter: -evolving and co-creation, with all of our symbiants. Which are not just the bacteria that live within us, but the trees, the plants, and how life is actually

Schara: Mmhmm.

Lassiter: life, as I believe as Lynn Margulis believed, that life is creating the environment in which it lives. And it is creating an environment that is more conducive to life. Anyway, just a guess that this time of regression, obvious regression, certainly in the way humans are organizing ourselves, that it could be a preliminary period to a real jump, in in the hu- in the evolution, of the human species.

Schara: That's- that's also what Jack Calhoun thought about, that we're approaching the eye of the needle, he would say and around 2023-2024, the human will have to make up its mind, or certain numbers of them anyway. Which way we're going to go. And if you pass through the eye of the needle to become a more, what he called, cooperative species, that the disasters could be avoided that would come with the increasing 7, to 9, to 10 billion on the planet. But there will have to be a choice, as you say.

Lassiter: I mean, I would say it's differentiation of self. I think when you talk about being cooperative, people can misunderstand what that means.

Schara: That's right, that's right. I don't think- but, yes, exactly, I know what you're exactly saying. I'll put it this way, to me, only when you are well-enough differentiated, can you cooperate. There isn't a cooperation, when you're getting done in, [laughter] and being forced to do things that you do think are the right thing to do. Or you see no reason for them. So, to me, that requires being able to stand alone, in order to cooperate. So that, in your story, you stood alone. You took on a certain amount of personal suffering, and your family took on a certain amount of personal suffering, to emerge and be able to better cooperate, because there's more self.

Lassiter: I agree with that.

Schara: So, that's what I think. I don't think that Calhoun understood anything about differentiation, but he understood that there would have to be a decision made, and how can people make these kinds of decisions. I think you put it extraordinarily well, how people come to make these kinds of decisions by accurately assessing the environment and making decisions, or the leader takes on more stress. And it's not as stressful.

Lassiter: And that ability to contain a great deal of stress, and- and to be able to manage those challenges.

Schara: Well, is there any other question or thing that you want to put into this? I think it would be a real privilege to have another hour with you, and to expand on these ideas. But I want to make sure, if there's anything else you want to put in, for this one.

Lassiter: This is all, for today.

Schara: [laughter] Okay. Thank you very much.

Lassiter: Thank you, for this opportunity.

Schara: That was great. Great fun. And a lot of good stuff. I didn't ask you, Monica, beforehand, you've been sitting here, listening

Monica: Um...I'm not going to put anything on here, but -but I found it fascinating, to listen to, and there was something I was-Yeah, no, I found it really fascinating. I found this piece at the end about the cooperation out of differentiation and cooperation out of undifferentiation...interesting. And So, I was sort of starting to reflect. And then I lost the end of what you were all talking about, but- but, um, I thought the whole interview was fascinating.

Schara: M'kay. Well, um, this one, didn't-