

Interview with Robert Noone
Conducted by Andrea Schara (Randy Frost is present in the room)

June 15, 2012

For the Murray Bowen Archives Project

Schara: So today is June the 15th, and we've been at the clinical conference Robbie Gilbert did today. Bob **Noone:** is from Chicago, Randy **Frost:** is from Vancouver, and I've asked them to think a little bit about their relationship with Dr. Bowen, and the kind of impact he had on them as a person. What they got out of that relationship they had with him, and how that relationship then fit into understanding Bowen Theory, if it ever did; whether or not theory was important to them; and where they want to go with the ideas in Bowen Theory. So that's just sort of an opening, and Bob and Randy can talk with each other, or I might interrupt, if I can. [Laughter] As the older sister of two brothers, [I] might.

Noone: [laughter] Get a word-

Schara: And, just let you start off Bob, if you would.

Noone: Okay, well maybe I'll just start with my first encounter with Dr. Bowen. It wasn't a direct one but think it must've been 1969 or 1970. He did a day presentation on the family at the state mental health hospital that I was working at and I had just newly become interested in family. And I hadn't read Bowen but was intrigued with the day. He showed a couple of videotapes of his clinical work.

And I was intrigued by two things. One was just the questions he asked. I kept wondering, "Where'd he come up with such interesting questions to ask the family?" And the second one was just seeing the diagram of the multigenerational family. I hadn't seen it before. And I knew that I was in this multigenerational family and it had never occurred to me before. So that stuck with me. But I didn't read or pursue Bowen Theory for another five years. I was interested in other approaches to the family. And then when I decided I wanted to get a more solid grounding, I decided to go to post-graduate program at Georgetown Family Center.

And, well, Dr. Bowen was here. That was in 1975. I never really approached him that I can recall, during that year. I think I was too intimidated by him to- it was a big class, I may have asked- I certainly asked him questions, in the class format, but not on a one-to-one basis. And that, really- I corresponded with him about doing a research study, through the Department of Psychiatry, and he was very open and friendly about that, so I had some contact with him at that point.

And later, wanting to have him come out and speak in Chicago I had contacted him. But there were four of us who started the center in Chicago. I said that I would ask him if he'd be interested in coming, and he said he would, and I said, "Well, we'll get back to

you." And he said, "I'm not interested in talking to a group." [laughter] "Have someone contact me." [laughter] "But I don't want to make arrangements with a group." [laughter]

Schara: 'We'll?' 'We'll?' 'We'll get back with you?' He stopped you dead in your tracks.

Noone: He stopped me dead in my tracks. I knew exactly what he meant. So, at that point, I was the one who made the arrangements to have him come to Chicago. And it went fairly smoothly. I don't have a lot of memories about the interchanges. I just remember being so impressed with his thinking. And again, not teaching, but presenting his thinking. I thought he just captured systems thinking so well. And that was one of the things that intrigued me the five, six years before that, even before hearing Dr. Bowen, was just knowing there was something about systems thinking that was an important step forward.

I never had encountered someone who did that as well as he did. I did have a lot of time with him on his visits to Chicago and we corresponded back and forth, over the next number of years. So, in terms of some of the things that he said, I remember one time was after a conference in Chicago, in terms of I think sizing me up, and I think the [knocking]

Noone: One of the things he said when we were at the airport, I remember we were waiting, having a drink before he took off to come back to Washington, and he said, "One thing about you, Bob," he said, "You really just don't give a damn what other people think about you, do you?" [Laughter] And I thought about it later, and my response to him was, I said, "The problem with me is that I give too much of a damn about what other people think about me!" But I think he knew that. [Laughter]

Schara: [laughter] He knew that.

Noone: But that was a good twist on his part, so there were many interchanges like that, and unfortunately I just don't recall a lot of them. It was more just the process of interacting with him, that struck me and I realize I certainly had to think for myself, and that was a workout. There weren't many people that I would have a workout interacting with like I did with Dr. Bowen.

You know, I would be thinking about it before he came, I would be thinking about it before I went to Washington and thinking about it when I was meeting with him. And it was always a workout. I do remember that in terms of- comment came up today, about giving people a space to be a self. I thought about one dream I had, it was the first time I was doing a presentation at the Georgetown Family Center conference and it was an alcoholism conference. It was the night before I was going to be leaving Chicago to come to Washington, and I had a dream I had my paper there. I was in Washington, I was running late for the meeting and I was running through the streets in Washington. And all of a sudden, a wind gust blew, and my paper went flying all over the street! I was frantically running around trying to collect my paper and I finally got it. I got to the conference, and got to the podium, and Dr. Bowen was sitting in the front row. I read

my paper, and I looked up when I was finished with my paper, and his head was back, his eyes were closed. He was snoring. [Laughter]

And I thought about it, I woke up from that dream laughing, you know, all my anxiety about what he thought, and actually, he was going to be indifferent. What was really important wasn't what he thought, and I knew that going into it, but it was still my own concern about what he would think about it. But, it was very clear to me that over the years, he not only gave me room to be a self, but I had to actually work on it in relation to him.

Schara: The one story you told, about him saying, "You don't give a damn about what people think about you." You know, that's such a clear pushing you back into your own emotional system, in a way. Is that what you're talking about as a workout. Or I mean, two questions, one: what do you mean by systems thinking and where did he put you with that comment, was that back into stuff that you needed to figure out for yourself, is that what you're talking about?

Noone: Not that one, I think that wasn't a workout. But the workout more had to do with, I think there would be- I had such high regard for him, that my own sensitivity to wanting to be at my best to please him, in a sense, to demonstrate my own ability to grasp the theory. So, it had to do with some of my own insecurity, I think, and then recognizing I wasn't going to get any kind of response that was going to reflect how he was responding to me in terms of what I might be looking for.

I think he had a good way of responding to what I was saying, and then I had to, in terms of following up in the discussion, just had to really think about not what I think he might want to hear, or what I thought was the correct thing to say but what I really thought. And that was something that I wasn't really particularly good at in that situation. And systems thinking, well, that's a good question, because I think just the complexity of human behavior is pretty clear to me, even as a young man, that any formulation that was going to approach dealing with that level of complexity required looking at interactive systems, mutually influencing systems. I didn't have a sense of the emotional system at the time.

I did have a sense of systems and I had read quite a bit, a broad range of systems thinking. I knew that was going to be vital for any kind of solid grounding in thinking about the family and human behavior. So his particular theory, but more than the theory, the way he thought, indicated to me that he was well-grounded in systems thinking and that was something that was very attractive to me.

Schara: Okay. Sometimes people talk about the cause and effect thinking is not systems thinking, and systems are non-linear dynamical systems, and therefore, they're harder to predict. But if you could get enough of the variables together, you might possibly be able to predict. I've heard you talk a little bit about the future, and systems, and systems thinking, and so I was thinking about this, what do you see as the future? Obviously, a natural system is a non-linear system, but there are some predictive

things. Do you think, for the human family to become more scientific, that it has to be able to predict? Or do you think that for systems thinking to move into the future, it's enough to just describe? Without predicting?

Noone: Oh I think describing is probably more important. I think that in terms of predictability, there does have to be a level of more probabilistic than anything else. So, with any very complex systems, there isn't any kind of exact predictions that can be made. Because so many variables are involved. I think you can be probabilistic. I think you can make some assessments about where a family is going, where individuals are going. Based on knowing enough about a particular family. I think you can make some predictions about where a life course is going, and you could be wrong, but you can, in a high percentage of situations with enough information, you can be pretty good about predicting where a life course is going to go, I think.

Schara: Do you think he took a reading on you in terms of his scale? And aimed his comments at you, to see whether-how you would deal with the challenge?

Noone: I don't know if he- I never thought about that, in terms of how he would try to assess me on the scale, that's an interesting question that never even occurred to me. But I do know- I did have, after not too long a period of time, I had a sense that he did respect me and respected my thinking. So, that was certainly a very basic element, I think, in terms of my relationship with him over the fifteen years, was having a pretty solid respect for who I was.

Schara: Yes, he used that - he had this long conversation with (Toman) in three tapes, I think, and (Toman), being a psychologist, was saying, like "100 points on a scale, that's impossible, you can't make science out of that, it's like ridiculous!" And he was trying to say, I think, that "I'm just pointing in a direction, and it will be it will, eventually, but more predictive. If you're in the 0-25 level, maybe it's going to be really hard, to get to the 25-50 level, or the 50-75 level. What do you think about that, do you think there's some predictability, in the

Noone: Yes, I think so. One, Ernst Mayr, the evolutionary biologist, in one book, he was describing the difference between the life sciences and physics. And described that you can have laws in physics, but you can't have laws in the life sciences. That the equivalent to a law is a concept in the life sciences. I think the concepts in the theory, as Bowen developed them, are predictive. You know, something like as simple as sibling position, there's so many variables that go into that, overall, the concept of the sibling position, says a lot about who a person is. And then if you add in some of the other variables in the theory, it adds more predictability to birth order. But, it's pretty clear there's some predictability about it, as long as again, all things being equal, and you add some of the other concepts from the theory to it, there is something very predictable about it.

Schara: Did you ever tell him about your own family, your ant colony, and have him, coach you a little bit, on your ant colony?

Noone: Oh, yes, I, the last number of years, I'm trying to think how many years, I sought him out as a coach. I met with him when I would come to Washington and corresponded. When he came to Chicago I would take the time to get some coaching from him. He was very useful for me, you know I never quite grasped as well as I would like to, triangles. And I was just so intrigued with them, the way he would respond when I would be presenting some of the dilemmas in my family, related to, well, all kinds of people in my family.

But- and I came away, and just again, having to think for myself, what I was going to do in relation to my family. But the ability to just think of it in terms of triangles and to prepare for my meeting with him, in terms of what I thought, what did I know, what didn't I know, and what did I want to try to accomplish. And to have someone with his knowledge who could listen and then make some comments, it wasn't very specific but I certainly gained each time I met with him, in terms of what I was going to do with myself in relation to my family.

Schara: So now, just go take it to a little tiny broader thing, how is this knowledge ever going to spread without Bowen? Was he such a unique character in the way he interacted with people and taught theory that without his kind of presence it's difficult for the family systems theory to spread through the community of people who are interested in human behavior? Or do you think it'll just spread because there's enough, really, curiosity, about a complicated systems theory of human behavior that will draw people eventually.

Noone: Yes, I mean there isn't a lot of predictability about that! [Laughter]

Schara: Yes, how much the man, how much the theory?

Noone: I think it's a real question whether this theory is going to be accepted in the near future or even in the distant future. I mean, Bowen certainly speculated that perhaps, at some point, bits and pieces of the theory will be incorporated and won't be necessarily known as Bowen Theory, but eventually what's in the theory will be represented. I do think that there has not been much interest in systems thinking, or in theory, in terms of human behavior, I don't think in the last couple of decades. And I tend to be more optimistic overall. I do think that the pendulum is starting to swing the other way, there seems to be an increasing frustration in psychiatry. I think there's an awareness that, in the life sciences, evolutionary theory came along much faster than I ever thought it would.

So when Bowen started talking about it in the seventies and eighties, it wasn't in the social sciences, in psychology, or in psychiatry or even in some of the other sciences related to human behavior - Anthropology. But it's taken off in the nineties so now that it's almost mainstream to be thinking in terms of evolution with human behavior, in social sciences. I think the same thing is going to happen with family. It's striking that in all the disciplines that move towards looking at human behavior [they] take into account

multiple levels and they take into account evolutionary theory and theory. Take into account the brain, but you can't talk about the evolution of the brain without talking about the evolution of the family. And the interdependence and the coevolution of the brain and family.

So evolution's a pathway to the brain, and the brain's a pathway to evolution thinking. But they're both pathways to the family. And that's going to become more and more apparent, I think, in the next ten years. It's just a question of whether or not people in academia or in science, can look back to a theory that was written in the 1960s and 70s, and get interested in it. So it is a question of, how well can the theory be represented by individuals, like the three of us sitting at this table, in a way in which we can get heard. So it hasn't leaked into the sciences yet but I do think that's a good possibility in the next 10-15 years. But it's also a possibility it won't happen. And, these a memory or a footnote in people's descriptions about family.

Schara: Well, at least we know that you'll be doing your best to do something about it, and probably your best is probably not going to be a popularity contest, but a communication, a way of communicating with these ideas. I wonder, Randy, if you have some questions or thoughts or ideas that you wanted to ask Bob, before he had to leave?

Frost: Yes. [silence] If you think about kind of the development of your own thinking towards systems, have there been any kind of 'nodal points' along the way, where you increasingly shifted from more of an individual model to systems?

Noone: Yes, the nodal point for me was, without theory, but working on a unit in a hospital where individuals who were hospitalized had little contact with family maybe chronic patients. And working on a unit where families were brought in and I could see the difference. Because the medical records indicated they they had the same symptoms but if the family was involved it made a difference. And then sitting in people's homes, as an alternative to hospitalization, with an individual and seeing the interactional process. (Carl Whittaker) was a consultant to the hospital I was at and so was (Robert McGregor). So those were two individuals that were making an effort to have a systems view of the family that influenced me, and got me intrigued.

And so those were nodal points for me. I think another nodal point was after six years of reading everything in family except Bowen, I don't think I had read Bowen yet, I was frustrated enough that my learning was very slow, and I wanted to get a more conceptual grounding. And coming to the Georgetown Family Center was a nodal event for me, because the theory, in terms of its linkage with science, was a nodal point for me. That I thought, "Here's an approach that has the potential to not become just a belief system, like psychoanalysis had, or many other, even family approaches." And it wasn't geared just towards trying to fix problems [or]-some people, but it was really something that I was attracted to, was trying to understand what goes on with people, what goes on with myself. And being aware of it highlighted the blind spots in

my thinking more than anything and just got me intrigued because of all the blind spots that it raised for me.

Schara: [silence] Yes, the consciousness of humans is the tip of the iceberg. All this stuff is going on underneath the iceberg that we're pretty blind to, really blind to. And that's the biggest problem, still probably is for people. Maybe it has to do with this whole thing about the difference between science and belief too. That people think they have an understanding of the way human nature is, and I'd say that ants have enough feeling that they understand what's going on too. [Laughter] And they have no real knowledge of the forces in the ant colony that are regulating their behavior.

Noone: Well that's certainly a, well watching families, and knowing that they didn't know what was going on in their families, and then knowing for sure. I could see something that I thought was going on in families but I couldn't see it in my own family. [That] was a highlight to me. Then knowing that you didn't have to analyze your own subjective world, you could observe the family if you're really a part of it. So here was something that I think added a whole new level of being able to move towards a science of human behavior, something that was observable.

Schara: That's really, hugely important, that you could see it in other families but you can't see it in your own self. That emotional blind spot has a tremendous impact on people, in terms of their willingness to even go to this next level, to imagine their behaviors being regulated by the family as a unit.

Noone: Yes, I think if you watch families for enough time, you see how much people can't see what's going on. I remember in a meeting, it was before starting to read Bowen Theory, Norman Paul was doing a presentation and I asked him how much awareness did he think - how much did he think awareness entered into human behavior. And, he said not very much, almost zero.

Schara: [laughter] I love that.

Noone: [laughter]

Frost: [laughter]

Noone: And that resonated for me. I mean, that's what I was thinking when I asked that question. But that was a real shift for me to, because I thought people's behavior could be more intentional including my own. But the proof was that some of it's intentional, but not nearly as much as I thought it was.

Schara: Yes, it's intentional until you walk in the room with somebody you like [laughter] And then all of a sudden, your brain turns to mush, and, wait a minute. "The anxiety in this room is driving me up the wall! How did it get here?" So the unseen, the notion of unseen forces and our sensitivity to the forces of the multigenerational family. I remember once I said to Bowen, "Family, the multigenerational family, is like a washing

machine! It washes one cycle of family and then the next cycle of family gets in there, and the whole thing just keeps on."

But there's something to this notion that by being able to be more objective and neutral and not participating in this family emotional process, whatever it is, that you do interrupt, and that some certain things, balls are thrown in the air, and chaos emerges, and people get mad at you a little bit, and something different happens when you are no longer involved in it at the level that you were.

Noone: Yes, and then the resistance to a move towards family, in learning more about oneself, that became certainly one of the primary motivators for me. I'd say "What the heck's going on here," you know. I visit family and get stuck within mini-seconds, and think about, "Okay, how am I going to get unstuck?" You know, but, at least knowing that there was a way to do that, people had done it, that was the challenge. I could tell people had done it. I knew Bowen had done it, and other people had done it, made progress, so I knew that there'd be a way to do that, so that was certainly enticing to me.

Schara: Last questions: What did you think of his differentiation of self paper, when you read that, what sense did you make of that?

Noone: I just thoroughly enjoyed it. I just thought, here's a guy who can have some fun with his family, he worked at getting a little bit more on the outside of this family, after years of work, but I thought, boy, if I could do something like that with my family, it would be [laughter]. I would love to be able to do that. No, that was very uplifting for me.

Schara: Uplifting for (you). I agree. I think that was one of the things that appealed to me, I saw this as a way that I thought of Bowen as a guy who looked at a lake, and saw a lake, and felt the wind, and decided that he was going to build a sailboat. And he was going to sail across that lake! He was the first person to be able to, really, chart the emotional winds and what would happen. And he pushed everybody back away from it. And it was like an amazing voyage out into the lake! And back again,

Noone: And he had to make some good guesses about what way to go. I remember one time, him saying that it was like he knew he had to start fresh, in terms of the direction to go in, with that new theory of human behavior. It was like being dropped in the ocean with no land in sight, and then you had to try to make a decision, "Okay, which direction am I going to swim in?" And that's where he started, in many ways.

Schara: That's really the compass that he developed for himself. And that nobody can really give you, but they can give you clues, as to the emotional process. And if you can hear the clues, then you might have a better swim, when you set out on your voyage! So I don't know, do you have to go?

Noone: Yes.