

Family of Origin
Land of Opportunity
For Transpersonal Therapy

By
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INTRODUCTION

For the past ten years, I have worked to synthesize Family Systems Therapy, as proposed by Dr. Murray Bowen, and Psychosynthesis. In this paper, I would like to share the basics of Family Systems Therapy and highlight the similarities with Psychosynthesis. Drawing from personal and professional experience, I will demonstrate the opportunities Family Systems work offers transpersonal therapy practitioners.

In 1975, I completed a four-year training program in Family Studies at Albert Einstein College of Medicine. I spent most of my time there studying with Dr. Tom Fogarty (a Bowen proponent) and was delighted to discover that 'I' existed. Dr. Fogarty's clarity and conviction about the 'I' was provided a solid foundation for my personal and professional growth to date. (When I first encountered Psychosynthesis I was again delighted to discover not only did 'I' exist, but 'I' was bigger than I thought 'I' was. Continuing my spiritual training I found 'I' didn't exist AND all the above was true).

A major demand of the Family Studies program was that people who were learning to do family therapy work intensely with the relationships in their own families of origin. I began a process of profound healing with my parents and brother and laid the foundation for a deep and abiding friendship with the man who was then my husband, and is the father of my son.

I propose that working directly with parents and siblings provides an exquisite opportunity for grounding transpersonal work.

THEORETICAL CONTEXTS

Family Systems therapy and Psychosynthesis both take place in the context of identifying and strengthening the personal self. The difference is that for Bowen, the 'I' is almost indistinguishable from thinking processes and is not directly linked to higher consciousness. (Bowen, 1971).

In Psychosynthesis, the personal self is the integrating center of awareness and will for the personality (Crampton, 1981, p. 712) and

includes feelings and body, as well as mind, and the psychological functions of sensation, emotion, impulse, imagination, thought, intuition and will. (Ferruci, 1984, p. 45). In Psychosynthesis, the sources of the personal self are our higher feelings of love and compassion; our higher thoughts of clarity, intuition and inspiration; and our experience of illumination and unity (Assagioli, 1965).

While Family Systems Therapy doesn't directly speak of the transpersonal, the words "value," "conviction" and "belief" are commonly used to define self, and they certainly suggest a higher realm. Dr. Bowen himself often said the 'I' position represented the beliefs one would die for.

Both Family Systems Therapy and Psychosynthesis take place in the context of the will. Although Family Systems never directly addresses will, it is permeated with the sense of it. Dr. Bowen, for example, defines self as a "definite quantity illustrated by such 'I' position stances as: "These are my beliefs and convictions; this is what I am, and who I am, and what I will do or not do. The basic self may be changed from within self on the basis of new knowledge and experience. That basic self is not negotiable in the relationship system in that it is not changed by coercion or pressure, or to gain approval, or enhance one's stand with others." (Bowen, 1971, p. 118).

For Psychosynthesis, the will is the force of manifestation in the Universe and includes strength, skill and goodness united in love. (Brown, 1983).

The intention of Family Systems Therapy is to enable the client to experience him/herself as a differentiated 'I' within the family of origin while developing and maintaining effective and satisfying relationships with family members. For Family Systems theory, "the core of emotional dysfunction is fusion...the blending of one self into another..." (Fogarty, 1975, p. 88). Bowen and Fogarty are very clear that handling disturbing family interactions by distancing physically or emotionally is not a sign of integration or maturity. Distancing is not the opposite to fusion, rather it is indicative of fusion (as is intense conflict). Bowen states, "the more intense the cutoff with the past, the more likely the individual to have an exaggerated version of his parental family problem in his own marriage and the more likely his own children to do a more intense cutoff with him in the next generation." (Bowen, 1976, p. 85).

The concept of fusion is similar to that of identification for Psychosynthesis. We are identified with something when we are unable to separate ourselves from that thing, when our identity is bound up in it. (Crampton, 1981, p. 715). Handling our identifications with dysfunctional aspects of ourselves by trying to rid ourselves of these aspects doesn't work any better for personality systems than cutoffs do for family systems.

The cornerstone of this method for facilitating differentiation are: **Coaching, the Genogram, Detriangulation and the 'I' position.**

COACHING

The process between the therapist and the individual client or family for Family Systems is called "coaching" and involves teaching Family Systems theory as well as guiding the client through work with family of origin. In psychosynthesis as well, is a respect for clients and a deliberate avoidance of encouraging a transference relationship between client and therapist.

The process between the client and therapist in Psychosynthesis is called "guiding" because the guide, while familiar with the path of personal development, does not "presume to know what is ultimately right for the traveler, who must finally make his or her own choices." (Brown, 1983, p. 5).

The Family Systems therapist attempts to "read the automatic emotional responsiveness (of the family system) so as to control ones own automatic emotional participation in the emotional process...while staying emotionally in contact with the family." (Brown, 1976, p. 53).

Dr. Bowen and Dr. Fogarty propose that Family Systems therapy can be done effectively with only one family member present (usually the most motivated one). Family Systems Therapy is for them a point of view, rather than a description of who actually attends sessions. Dr. Bowen prefers to work with the marital couple, coaching each in the presence of the other. As the work progresses in the family of origin, the couple finds the marriage healing.

A mother bringing her daughter to Dr. Bowen for evaluation as a result of school problems, finds Dr. Bowen sending the daughter home and inviting mother to bring her mother in the conjoint therapy or

coaching her on that relationship. Again, without direct intervention, the daughters school problems subside.

Coaching clients to work "**back a generation**" is also used strategically by Family Systems therapists who do directly address the marital or family issues when the immediate situation is reactively hot or contractedly blocked. I have successfully used this strategy when dealing with troubled relationships between parents and rebellious or recalcitrant adolescents. I invite the adolescents to attend the sessions and sit in on the session I do with the parent or parents concerning their relationships with their parents during the parent's adolescence. Hostilities subside and hearts open as parents emerge as real people and adolescent traumas are recalled empathetically.

Working **back a generation** has similarities to the Psychosynthesis concept of disidentification, i.e., our ability to "stand back from our subpersonalities in order to see them more clearly and to find the vantage point from which we can do something to transmute them." (Crampton, 1981, p. 715). Subpersonalities are those aggregates of attitudes and habits derived from distortions of qualities the Self is trying to manifest which are split off from the whole personality. (Crampton, 1981).

Family Systems works to help an individual differentiate his or her 'I' in relation to the various pulls of his or her family systems. The client is then helped to be in a better relation to family members. Psychosynthesis works to bring energies of the Higher Self into the personality and the 'I' and differentiate this 'I' energy from the pulls of subpersonalities and distortions. The client is helped to be in better relation to subpersonalities, releasing the positive energy at the core so it is available for integration into the personality. Subpersonalities are often projected onto family members and conversely, family members are often the models for the introject from which the subpersonality configurations are formed.

Another parallel to "**working back a generation**" is that of "**working up a level**." Many times in Psychosynthesis sessions, when working with parental images or images of significant others, the guide asks the client to become the parent or other to increase understanding and empathy. If the relationship is too reactively hot and the client's heart is too closed, the guide often asks the client to speak to or become the Higher Self of the estranged family member or significant other.

Polt creatively blends "**back a generation**" and "**up a level**" strategies by devising a visualization process in which the client imagines him/herself experiencing an unmet need in the presence of the parent, then imagining the parent as a child experiencing a similar unmet need with his/her parent. After this is complete, the client then returns to each image, focusing on having the need fulfilled. (Polt, 1983).

THE GENOGRAM

The family of origin work begins by having the individual or couple draw up a "Genogram," a three generational map of family relationships graphically depicting births, deaths, marriages, divorces, sibling order. (P. Guerin and T. Fogarty, 1972, p. 449). (See attached diagram.)

I was amazed when, as I drew up my own genogram, I discovered that my mother's mother died three months before I was born during World War II, and that six months after I was born, my father was shipped to Okinawa. The moment I considered what my birth and infancy must have been like for a "new mother" facing not only the loss of her mother, but also the loss of her husband in the context of wartime, my painfully reactive relationship with my mother began to be transformed. I experienced my heart opening on the spot to this woman, this person who also happened to be my mother.

The rationale for working directly with parents is described by prominent family therapist John Framo. "The client, by having sessions with his or her family of origin, takes the problems to where they began, thereby making available a direct route to etiological factions. Dealing with the real external parental figures is designed to loosen the grip of the internal representatives of these figures and expose them to reality considerations and their live derivatives. Having gone backward in time, the individual can then move forward in dealing with the spouse and children in more appropriate fashion since their transference meaning has changed." (Framo, 1976).

Everyone doing transpersonal therapy or any spiritual path has encountered difficulty in translating or "grounding" profound insights into practical situations. Psychosynthesis has been in the vanguard of the insistence of the importance of "grounding." (Brown, 1983). The challenge of grounding is highlighted continually in sessions. I find

myself sharing an experience of breathtaking radiance and expansion with a client and the moment arises when I say, "Now, staying connected with this experience, imagine that you are facing the problem you brought up earlier and that your (mother, husband, lover, boss, inner judge, etc..) is before you. What do you need to say now to that person or that part of you?" I then often observe the client struggling with contraction and separation at just the thought of facing the heart of the matter.

Early in my family therapy training I would plan my approaches to my parents for months before I could fly back to California to see them, only to find myself caught in the same old dysfunctional patterns within minutes of arriving.

I know that powerful inner work has powerful correspondence in the outer world. For example, I have received a long distance phone call from someone, whom just moments earlier, I had completed an inner healing. Working in the flesh with parents and siblings exponentially increases our ability to embody in daily life the most powerful truths of our Highest Selves.

If you doubt this, take a look at your reaction. Is fear present? How much resistance? It has been my experience that the biggest problem I have including this method in my work has been finding clients willing to do it. James Framo addresses this. "It is difficult to communicate in words the almost instinctive, aversive response of people to this idea;" (Framo, 1976, p. 197) and..."one aspect of this anxiety is that when adults relate to their parents of today, they are, in part, still viewing the parents as they did when they were children, when they were small and more vulnerable, and when their feelings were experienced in gross categories." (Framo, 1976, p. 108).

The choice of that arena in which to work, inner or outer, depends on the needs of the client at the moment, the willingness of both client and guide, and the availability of family members. However, at the end of an intense piece of work within family of origin, one is left with not only a greater sense of 'I', but with living fulfilling relationships with those people most significant in life.

During my second year of training, my mother, a courageous woman devoted to finding and manifesting truth in her life, agreed to participate in a videotaped session in which we would be coached by a fellow trainee. At one point I heard her speak of being proud of me for

my commitment to world peace and ending hunger in a tone I always experienced as sarcastic and critical. I commented that I thought she was being sarcastic. The coach intervened and I heard my mother repeat her words with increased conviction and admiration. I heard her that time. I have reviewed this video many times and have seen the introject of my "critical mother" begin to dissolve before my eyes.

As my learning continued, I tried to reach out to my father. My first attempt consisted of a nearly silent walk around the block with him five minutes before I was due to leave for the airport to fly home. Since my father is a reserved, private person, I attempted to fill in a picture of him talking with his sisters and brother. (An important aspect of family of origin work involves interviewing and researching the family network to obtain information about parents and grandparents not available from them personally.) Another introject dissolved on the spot for me when talking with my father's closest sister, Dorothy. I mentioned that I thought my father was very puritanical and not interested in sex. She could hardly stop laughing as she recounted that when they were youngsters in Kansas, he was so interested, he suggested to her that they "practice." I then began to see the twinkle in his eye.

After two years of training, I had a discussion with my father during which I told him I struggled a lot with feeling he was not really interested in me and I wondered whether he had ever felt I was not interested in him? To my great surprise, he said, "Once when you were little girl shortly after I came home from Okinawa, you and I were going for a walk and I was telling you about something; you turned to me and said, 'Daddy, stop talking.'"

I was at least 32 years old when I had this discussion with my dad. I was astonished that he had carried that memory for 28 years. From that moment I began to see my father as a real person with feelings and sensitivities, who cared very much what I felt about him.

DETRIANGULATION

The primary instruction to Family Systems trainees in working with family members was to find the main "triangle" and then "detrangulate" it. For Dr. Bowen, the triangle is the "basic building block of any emotional system, whether it is in the family or any other

group. The triangle is the smallest stable relationship system. A two-person system may be stable as long as it is calm, but when anxiety increases, it immediately involves the most vulnerable other person to become a triangle. When tension in the triangle is too great for the threesome, it involves others to become a series of interlocking triangles." (Bowen, 1976, p. 76).

Triangulation is the way human beings habitually handle the anxiety which arises in the face of intimacy. Intimacy brings up issues of autonomy, fear of loss and abandonment in the vulnerable context of primary relationships. Only in the last twenty years, have we begun to have the clarity and increased consciousness to work through these issues so that relationships can be deeply satisfying.

Triangles are not always dysfunctional! They are dysfunctional only to the extent that they represent an intimacy. Rather than relating 'I' to 'I' and facing conflict, people in relationships focus their attention on a third person, object or activity. Dr. Fogarty joked frequently that the average length of time any two people relate one to one before they triangulate ranges between thirty seconds to two minutes. Common triangles include: parents focusing on acting-out child, a marital couple focusing on in-laws or an extra marital affair, a marital couple focusing on one partners drinking or drug problem, a boss and employee focusing on sports or business or friends focusing on gossip.

An early uneasy alliance between human behavior luminaries Freud and Jung was maintained by their focus on their common disagreement and mistrust of Alfred Adler. William McGuire in his book Freud/Jung Letters, describes how they avoided dealing with their major disagreements in this way for years. (McGuire, 1974). When Jung finally took an 'I' position and challenged some of Freud's views, their friendship and correspondence ended.

Dr. Bowen describes the shifting of alliances within triangles. "In periods of calm, the triangle is made up of a comfortably close twosome and a less comfortable outsider. The twosome works to preserve the togetherness, lest one become uncomfortable and form a better togetherness elsewhere...in periods of stress, each works to get the outside position to escape tension in the twosome...when available tensions are very high in families and available family triangles are exhausted, the family system triangles in people from outside the family, such as police and social agencies. A successful externalization

of the tension occurs when outside workers are in conflict about the family, while the family is calmer." (Bowen, 1976, p. 76).

In my family, the major triangle found my mother and me in the close-conflictual position and either my father or brother in the distant position. As my mother and I began to have a rewarding relationship, I suggested my dad and I take a short vacation in Arizona to play tennis (something we both enjoyed and could triangulate enough to keep us from being too anxious to relate at all). In order to bring this about, I had to "operate the triangle" (Bowen, 1971) by enlisting my mother's full cooperation. Once I did this, she actively encouraged my dad to take this trip with me.

This was the first time I had my father "all to myself" and had an opportunity to really know him. We played lots of tennis, talked, laughed, got cranky, and when the weekend was over, I found myself full of pain about ending this special time. I shared this with my father and found him to be as tender and understanding as I had wished all of my life. Our relationship continues to be full of subtlety and sensitivity.

According to Dr. Bowen, the work of detriangulation is so powerful that "when the triangular emotional pattern is modified in a single important triangle in the family, and the members of this triangle remain in emotional contact with the rest of the family, other triangles will automatically change in relation to the first." (Bowen, 1971, p. 125).

This was true for my relationship with my brother which became more intimate even before I directly addressed it (or him). My work with my brother involved taking a ten day trip across the U.S.A. during which we visited all the important living relatives in my mother's family. I had a twofold purpose for this trip. The first was to spend time being with my brother. The second was to "bring to life" my maternal grandparents. My grandfather had been cut off from the family since my mother was a baby and died when she was twelve; and, as mentioned, my grandmother died shortly before I was born.

As my brother and I spent those days trekking across the United States, we began to sort through our misperceptions of each other. As we explored our different experiences growing up in the same family, we forged a path of caring and clarity between us.

My research on my mother's family during that trip led me to a

very important piece of information. I was tracing the theme of the distant or cutoff father/daughter relationship through two generations (my mothers and mine). My mother's father had a "nervous breakdown" shortly after her birth and couldn't maintain his law practice in Chicago. He went to O'Neill, Nebraska (then still somewhat a frontier town in 1918), resumed his law practice and ultimately became the mayor. The story was that my grandmother didn't want to move to the "wild west" so she and my mother remained in Chicago with only infrequent visits from grandfather.

In O'Neill, I found a picture of my grandfather showing him sitting in front of his big roll-top desk with a picture of my mother as a little girl prominently displayed. The moment I saw that, I sensed a love and connection with his daughter deeper than any distance of miles could separate. At that moment, I also became connected with my grandfather, and through that connection, experienced an increased sense of self-worth.

'I' POSITION

In preparation for writing this paper, I contacted several clients whom I had coached with family of origin work as long ago as ten years. I asked them to recall the most profound aspect or aspects of this work as it lived in them now.

One woman, Judith T., now a professor at a major eastern university, recalled a letter she wrote to her father to begin a dialogue about her recurrent feelings of unworthiness due to considering herself "selfish" (a notion with which she felt sure her father would agree). As soon as her father received the letter, he called, full of concern for her. Judith reported that what he said to her (which did not correspond to her imaginings) was not as important as the deeply experienced realization that "my father loves me and loves me a lot."

Judith added that this letter represented the first time she ever approached her father from an 'I' position rather than a reaction, and that is has provided a framework for a fulfilling relationship for the past ten years.

The 'I' position, in addition to being the definition of one's beliefs and values, is also "the responsible" 'I' which assumes responsibility for one's own happiness, comfort and well being, and avoids blaming

others for any discomfort and unhappiness." (Cain, 1976, p. 68).

The 'T' position in action assumes responsibility and is a key operation in the differentiation process. In the above example, Judith did not approach her father blaming him for "making her feel unworthy" (which she had certainly done in the past). She took responsibility for her reaction (and in this case, her projection) and writing to her father from her experience, created the opportunity for her father to approach her with love and compassion.

Much of the coaching and guiding I do is concerned with helping clients reveal for themselves (and thereby diminish the power of) the dysfunctional belief systems out of which they subconsciously operate. I then encourage clients to take full responsibility for the process of incorporating those beliefs even if that process has been largely or totally unconscious, and even if the outer message initiated the dysfunctional belief. This may not seem fair to the personality, yet for the Higher Self, it is a reflection of unity with the energy of "Cause" in the Universe. (And, practically speaking, who else could or would take responsibility?)

In 1948, in an essay entitled General Aspects of Dream Psychology, Carl Jung stated beautifully, "If we dissolve the time honored and sacrosanct identity between image and object the consequences for our psychology, too, can scarcely be imagined: we would no longer have anybody to rail against, nobody whom we could make responsible, nobody to instruct, improve and punish. On the contrary we would have to begin, in all things with ourselves; we would have to demand of ourselves, and of no one else, all the things which we habitually demand of others." (Jung, 1948).

CONCLUSION

The opportunities found in a synthesis of Family Systems Therapy and Psychosynthesis are myriad and range from providing experiences of self worth, clarity and compassion, personal responsibility and unity consciousness, to providing deep and fulfilling relationships with parents and siblings.

My present relationships with my mother, father and brother are now reaping the harvest of this synthesis. These connections are so rewarding, mutually supportive and just plain fun, that I am eternally

grateful that I lived long enough to experience our love, our remarkable individuality, and our choice to be a family. My greatest joy now comes from the opportunities my work provides to share this harvest.

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*old Gaelic phrase meaning "Friend of the Soul"