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Family Systems and Me

I was asked to give a presentation to a group at a Family Systems Institute (FSI) conference this year so I thought I would share some of what I learned in preparing for that.

The theory taught by the FSI is the Murray Bowen Family Systems Theory. It is complex and very hard for me, as a novice, to explain what it is about. One way would be to say that families are emotional units where people do not always behave with maturity and objectivity. Amen to that.

It was my mentor Jay Hughes who suggested I look into family systems theory. I assumed it was to help me better serve my clients. It ended up, as with most of Jay's comments, to help me with my family and with my role in it. I love learning about life, even if it is accidental!



I am privileged to help many people prepare their last Will and Testament. I could meekly accept instructions and give them a version of a template with the names of their kids in it. In fact, I used to do that until I realised that there was very little “testament” in it, very little of the person making the Will.

I see that, if doing estate planning, I ask people to face difficult scenarios and make mature decisions for people who may be very upset. I learned that people often feel “peace of mind” after going through this process and see that there was nothing to fear. I saw that people were prepared to do this because of their legacy. But legacy is more than money, people remember the life and the personality that came before. It is natural that we all have unresolved emotional attachments.

Bowen said there were unresolved emotional attachments in everyone and we are driven to avoid facing them. The widespread acceptance of Eckhart Tolle's “The Power of Now” reflects this. But Bowen said, “the concept deals with the way people separate from the past in order to start their lives in the present generation.” Going into the past forensically is the way through this. I think we should

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help those who come after us by leaving clear clues and telling our story. If we are going to leave directions, shouldn't they be good ones based on our attention to what we really feel and think?

The highest purpose in my work is to help people #beabetterancestor. This involves having a proper understanding of what we have endured and will pass on, good and bad. As you know, children will more likely watch what you do than listen to what you say. The good news is that we live our legacy and even late turnarounds will be noticed. So, start now I tell them and we show them the initial steps.

Bowen did not have any quick fixes but encouraged people to reduce anxiety and work on their self-differentiation (their ability to develop and maintain mature emotional connections in their relationships without feeling a loss of their self). His focus was on the facts of our family's past and how they impact us. Like creatures in the natural world, we often react from our reptilian brain and use our intellect to justify our actions later. In reality, our decisions are not always based on pure logic.

Largely, we can only give what we have. Unless we work on our emotional life, it is likely that our self-differentiation will be similar to that of our parents. Some of us would like to do better than that!

More for enjoyment, I have been following the poet David Whyte recently and he says we pass on our trauma and our legacy is how we dealt with it. I realised that this was pure family systems theory. I don't know about you but there seems to be a million great ideas out there but when they align I find it very powerful. Snap!, said my brain, pay attention.

Whyte has a poem, "The Edge you Carry with You": "You know so very well, your childhood legacy: that particular, inherited sense of hurt, given to you so freely by the world you entered." He also says "nothing will warm you except your own walking." We have to do the work.

In my experience, death brings emotional intensity to the surface anyway and those who will determine what type of an ancestor you were will have to navigate that. If you have already shown how to act from intellect in a time of turmoil, that will be a part of your legacy. Without some work in the past, sadly we see families who have no experience of making good decisions together fall apart.

For those who want to work on their family legacy, they see that a family does not have to cost a fortune. I help them visualise a campfire when they are 80 and a grand-daughter is being welcomed at age 25 onto a family council after having done some educational and foundational work prescribed by the founder. As the founder steps away from the fire into the darkness, they know they have paved the way to be one of the great families. Ghosts become ancestors and the stories about them are not scary. We are all sowing seeds, encouraging growth and eventually making way for the next gang.

Like a stockbroker who buys the shares he recommends, I have done some of this family system work. I have skin in this game. It has helped me see my parents as real people, as children in houses where adults had to deal with the emotional challenges that life throws up, and later as adults dealing with their inheritance. It has helped me see that improving my maturity can have long lasting consequences for my family. Hopefully, the value of these family shares will withstand market turbulence and continue to rise over the long term.

It is not easy work, but it is important. Whose opinions and "likes" do you most want?
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