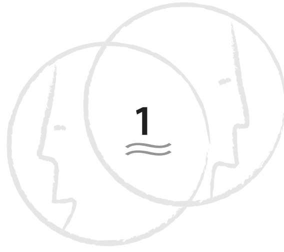

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A New Way of Caring

George and Martha came into my pastoral counseling office for our first meeting. After some preliminaries, I asked, "What brings you in?" George said, "After over twenty-six years of marriage and fighting nearly every day, we are thinking of splitting. Our grown-up son thinks we should, too. A friend of mine said you might be able to help us." Martha, with a much angrier tone, filled in some of the details as to what they fought about. More important to her than the issues themselves ("All my friends say they fight about these things with their husbands") was the intensity of the anger she felt. She was so resentful of what George had said and done over the years, and what he had failed to do, that she did not think she could ever forgive him, let alone have warm feelings for him again. George was more optimistic but he appeared rather clueless as to why she was so upset. He claimed to have none of these feelings himself. I will trace my work with this couple through the rest of this book.

The number of things couples can argue and fight about is unlimited. There are the standard issues like money, sex, love (as in "Do you love me?"), affairs, children, relatives, work schedules, roles in and out of the house, reliability and trustworthiness, vacations, beliefs, politics, and so forth. Each couple has its own creative way of discovering twists and turns in these issues. George and Martha fought over all of these. In addition, George had had a couple of one-night stands at conventions he attended.

So what do we do when couples in conflict present us with their unique stories of warring with one another, wanting our help? How do

we proceed? How do we provide pastoral counsel? What will be truly helpful? I want to introduce you to a new way of caring for people in emotional difficulty.

A mature, experienced minister had a reputation for being of help to couples in difficulty. He had a young seminarian working with him who had heard about his reputation and asked if he could sit in on a counseling session. The minister said, “Sure. As a matter of fact, a couple is coming in right now and you can join us.” So the couple came in and the minister asked them what the problem was. The husband started with a long list of complaints about his wife and all the ways she was wrong and behaved badly. At the end of his complaints, the minister responded to the husband, “You know, you are exactly right.” Then he turned to the wife and asked her how she saw things. She launched into a similar list of complaints about her husband, how wrong he was and how fed up she was. Then the minister said to her, “You know, you are exactly right.” The seminarian, staring at the minister in disbelief, blurted out, “But Reverend, you just told each of them they are right. They can’t both be right.” The minister then said to him, “You know, you are exactly right.”

This is not a postmodern book about the relativity of perspectives, or a book that claims there is no ultimate good or bad, or right or wrong in the world. As its author, I am more of a positivist than that. I believe in facts, I believe in values, and I believe there are better and worse ways to accomplish our goals. Part of the point of this story has to do with how we think about all of these things. And that is where I want to start this book: How do we think about human beings and the difficulties we get ourselves into in our close, intimate relationships? Moreover, what is a good way to get through it all and get on with doing the good things life and marriage can be about?

The Importance of Theory

Our assessment of the nature of human difficulties stems out of the theory with which we are working. Whoever we are and however we proceed to try to be of help, we will be operating out of some kind of theory about human functioning that assumes some answers to the

questions above, whether we have consciously thought about the theory or not. This is inescapable.

What "works" in counseling is a theoretical issue. If we are serious about being of help to others, on a consistent basis, it behooves us to look at the issue of theory. Does the theory fit with our identity as pastoral counselors? Does the theory's idea of a good outcome fit with our own beliefs and values about marriage?

Dr. Murray Bowen taught psychiatry at the Jesuit-governed Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. He would not have spoken about his work as pastoral care, but there was plenty of caring in his work with his patients. He had a decent dialogue with theologians at the university and a number of them were able to claim Dr. Bowen's ideas as consistent with (though certainly not the same as) their own beliefs about human beings. This was one of my attractions to Bowen as well. This book is a challenge to look at your own beliefs and to figure out where you stand theoretically. I make the challenge by telling you where I stand.

Theory, as I use the term here, does not mean an idea or a hunch as it often does in popular use, as when people say, "I have a theory about that." Bowen used the term as a scientist would, as a formal statement of how things work. It is based on observation of behavior, forming hypotheses, developing experimental protocols as a way to test the observations, and then confirmation through being able to predict behavior using the hypothesis or theoretical concept. Does the hypothesis fit what is happening? Does it allow prediction as to what will happen next? And does it offer useful explanations for the observed relationship patterns and what to do about them?

Dr. Bowen pointed out that people had long been looking at old fossilized bones embedded in sedimentary rock, of creatures that lived many thousands of years before us. No one knew quite what to make of the bones, especially since many of the creatures were not known to exist anywhere on the planet. Then along came Charles Darwin who offered a theory that could help make sense of what was being observed. As Bowen said, without Darwin's theory we had a kind of "observational blindness;" we were unable to account for what was right in front of our eyes. This is what a good theory does for us. It provides a way of seeing what has always been in front of us.

Whatever you arrive at theoretically for yourself will have tremendous practical significance. All action is based on some sort of presumption about the nature of reality, of what constitutes human nature, and what it means to be effective in our acts of helping. We cannot function without a theory, whether it is examined or not.

A Brief History of Bowen Family Systems Theory

Dr. Murray Bowen worked with a huge variety of deeply troubled individuals, couples, and families. His truly pioneering work in developing family-systems-based psychotherapy, starting in the early 1950s, is equivalent to the kind of revolution wrought by Sigmund Freud. He won a National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) grant to hospitalize not only his severely impaired schizophrenic patients but also their mothers. Quickly discovering that the emotional issues were much larger than just between the patient and the mother, he got another NIMH grant in 1954 to hospitalize whole families.

He put together a team of researchers to observe, as objectively as possible, family interactions. This was not primarily a treatment program. He wanted to understand the functioning of these families and what sort of family processes might, for example, lead to a schizophrenic break for "the patient." Whole families lived in cottages on the NIMH grounds as they led normal lives. The father went off to work and the "normal" siblings of the patient went to school. The researchers observed each family member on a round-the-clock basis. They watched the family as it "ate, played, and worked together through periods of success, failure, crisis, and physical illness," for up to two-and-a-half years.

The prevailing theory at the time was that the schizophrenic child's problems were a result of a dominating mother and a passive father. However, the mother was seen as the real problem. She was called the schizophrenogenic mother. Bowen wanted to see whether any of this was so, and how things worked in these families. Eventually, he began to see that the psychotic breaks of the patient were, in fact, the symptom of an emotional process at work in the whole family.

Bowen, who enjoyed watching football, said that his research was

like observing families from the top of the stadium, rather than being down on the sidelines and having a more limited, partial view of the action. From up high, with a wider angle of view, he could see the whole process of interaction, what each person was doing and how they were moving within the family.

By 1960, he decided that most children's problems were connected with difficulties between the parents. He stopped treating the children who bore the symptoms and who appeared to be "the problem" in the family. Parents who bought the idea that the issue was theirs and that they needed to modify their relationship discovered that their child's symptoms disappeared. He began to use his theory exclusively with all of his patients, including those in his private practice, and it lead to good treatment outcomes.

Then he made a huge, unprecedented jump: he began to apply his concepts to himself and his own family. Thus began a twelve-year effort to study his own family of origin and his part in the emotional process there. He discovered a consistency of emotional process through all of the families he worked with, including his own. The primary difference between them was in the intensity of the emotionality, with the most symptomatic families being the most intense.

In addition, his psychiatry residents at Georgetown tried out his ideas in their own families as well as with their patients. He noted that the students who worked on relationships with their own family members were also doing the best in their clinical work. They were working out their own personal and relational issues with the use of his theory, and presenting themselves less often for therapy.

The Family as an Emotional Unit

Bowen developed the idea of the family, rather than the individual, as the primary unit for understanding human functioning. He thought trying to understand problems from the individual point of view gave only limited information. Individuals' problems (and strengths) are strongly connected to their interactions with others. Individuals contain only a part of the problem. They are not "*the* problem." A good understanding of any one individual is accomplished only by seeing that person as part of a larger whole.

This perspective is not the same as seeing the family as a group. The group concept is still about a collection of individuals who have "group interactions." His approach conceives of the family as a single emotional organism, not simply as a group of individuals who have somewhat closer emotional ties. Even though the forces may be invisible, the governing power of the emotional system over the individual can totally affect the trajectory of a person's life.

Bowen's thinking about families went against the prevailing theoretical and therapeutic ideas of his day. Nearly all of psychology and psychoanalysis focused on the individual and the deep inner processes of the psyche. In couple conflicts, for example, the difficulties might be because an obsessive personality had married a hysteric personality. This was a typical diagnostic formulation. Each person needed psychotherapy in order to get past their impasse. I used this model when I began doing counseling after graduate school. I did not just use it with counselees. I could also diagnose my wife's problems, or anyone else with whom I had conflicts. Conveniently, the individual model allowed me to leave myself out of these diagnostic formulations.

One small, nontherapeutic example of the usefulness of the perspective of family as the primary emotional unit is when I do consultation with various kinds of staff groups. As part of my work with them, I often ask them to do a presentation of their family of origin to the group. As each staff member presents his or her family, the others express some variation of enlightenment like, "Ah, now I get it. I can see how you got to be the person you are with us here on this staff." The person's staff behavior is put in a larger perspective. It is as if they are seeing a person whole, as part of a larger unity that they knew nothing about before; they are now getting the complete picture and the person makes more sense to them. Staff groups find this helps them stop personalizing their problematic interactions with one another.

Thinking about People in Their Emotional Context

Seeing the family as a single emotional organism requires a major shift in our own thinking. From infancy, not just in graduate school, we are taught to see problems as a result of processes within individual people and their personalities ("You are a bad little boy"; "You are a good little

girl"). This goes all the way back to the garden of Eden. When God asks Adam about eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam blames Eve. She was the problem, not him. Then she blames the serpent, attempting to excuse herself. Neither one included him- or herself as a part of the problem. The more anxious we are, whether as participants in an emotional difficulty, or as helpers, the more likely we are to fall back on the individual model—"The difficulty in this relationship is you. You need to change and things will be better."

George and Martha each perceived themselves as a victim of the other who was the oppressor. We as helpers can easily take on the expected role of rescuer, siding with one individual against the other. This is a standard triangle. It is automatic. All families do a version of it around many different issues. Being a fluid process, the role of each family member can change. Family is where we learn our specific ways of acting out the pattern. Then we can play it out in any social grouping as adults: in a congregation, in our workplace, with friends, and even at a societal level between groups of people.

George and Martha had been to another counselor many years before coming to see me. George had the clear sense that the counselor sided with Martha and saw him as "the bad guy." George said, "I know I did a lot of bad stuff, but I don't think it was all just me." After just a few sessions with that counselor, George refused to continue so the marital counseling stopped. Martha continued for a few more sessions and said she enjoyed the counselor's support but eventually decided it was not doing any good if George was not involved.

Bowen's research team, in those early days, also could fall into this typical triangular way of thinking. In families where there is psychosis and anxiety is very high, it is a powerful temptation. His team members tended to identify with whomever they thought was the victim (they did not always agree on who this was); they would applaud the rescuing hero in the family, and be angry with the oppressive villain or persecutor. Bowen had to keep pulling them back from this individual good/bad orientation that required finding who was the bad guy that needed to change.

Slowly the team became more able to take the focus off the problematic behavior of a particular individual and his or her inner motivations and watch the overall process within the family, and even within themselves. They could stick with speaking in simple terms about the

consistent patterns of family interactions, and how these fluctuated as the emotional intensity of the family went up and down. They learned to speak of function and stopped using the language of motivation and defenses that went with the individual model. They began to see the family as an emotional unit.

In our role as pastoral caregivers, even if we are not committed to the individual model, the more dramatic the parishioner's story (say it involves incredible acting out with wild drinking behavior, or homicidal or suicidal behavior, or physical abuse) the more we as helpers are likely to become anxious. The higher our anxiety level the more we feel the expectation to rescue particular individuals in difficulty. Those who can stay calmer and think systemically have a better chance of maintaining a unitary view and acting on it. The normal forces of emotional systems will want to drag us back into the individual model. It may "feel right" to do so.

Bowen described the difficulty his research team had with understanding families in the early days of his work:

> A nonparticipant observer might aspire to scientific objectivity, but, in the emotional tension that surrounds these families, he begins to participate emotionally in the family drama just as surely as he inwardly cheers the hero and hates the villain when he attends the theater. Clinical staff members have been able to gain workable objectivity by detaching themselves emotionally from the family problem. When it is possible to attain a workable level of interested detachment, it is then possible to defocus the individual and to focus on the entire family at once. (Bowen 1978:50)

In this book I show how finding the "workable level of interested detachment," what is also called neutrality, is the best way we can help people with emotional conflicts and difficulties. It is not easy to put this approach into practice. Apart from the intellectual challenges of understanding the theory, our own personal family functioning plays a major role in utilizing the theory. By becoming better observers of people in difficulty and reducing our level of emotional reactivity when in contact with them, we will get beyond blame and provide a better resource for them to deal with their difficulties.

Family-of-origin work is the best way I know to bring together

theory and practice in our own lives. When we can achieve this way of thinking, and act on it, while in the midst of emotional processes in our own family, we will do a much better job with those we counsel.

Systems Thinking, Theology, Causation, and the Counselor's Role

Our main theological traditions, being the product of more individualistic philosophies, do not reveal much in the way of systems thinking (in spite of our term *systematic theology*). Causation is an issue that can interest both scientists and theologians, but they come at it from very different angles and with different assumptions. Biblical and theological thinkers are concerned mostly with ultimate causes. They try to answer "why" questions. When human beings behave unlovingly toward one another, we say that it is because of sin. Sin becomes the ultimate explanation for all of our bad behavior.

Science does not deal with ultimate causes. It cannot answer questions like why do we exist? or why are we sinful? It is interested in proximate causes. Scientists ask questions that have to do with *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, and *how*. It is the same with Bowen theory and therapy. As Bowen theory practitioners, we do not ask why. Other forms of psychotherapy can spend a lot of time on why questions. This makes them more philosophical than scientific. Often their answers become elaborate and convoluted. This is in part why the psychology section on bookshelves is right next to the religion section.

Once we get started down the "why" road, it becomes a never-ending journey. Each "why" leads to a new one, and we sink deeper into the primordial ooze of causation, more and more losing any sense of what to do about it all. By restricting ourselves to the proximate causation questions, we counselors can deal with the observable facts of human functioning. None of us understands our own motivations, let alone those of others.

George and Martha had frequent arguments over "why" each was the way they were. When I told them that trying to discover the answers to those kinds of questions was not going to get us far, they agreed. As they learned to focus on the more proximate questions they gradually

got out of the "why" thinking orientation. A focus on the functional facts is a way to understand complicated emotional systems.

I am even tempted to say that "why" questions help us to avoid taking responsibility for our actions. In the garden of Eden God did not ask Adam and Eve "why" they ate the fruit of the tree. God simply asked about the fact of eating. Did they do it? But they responded with "why" answers. They would have loved to debate the "whys" with God and, ultimately, they might even have been able to argue it was God's fault that they went against the command not to eat the fruit. Debating "why" can let us off the hook.

I am not arguing there is no such thing as evil in the world. What I am saying is that when we eliminate ourselves from some sort of involvement in the problems we face, this is itself, in fact, a kind of evil. It can be, metaphorically speaking, the work of the devil to eliminate our own responsibility in our difficulties. Theologically, if we take the doctrine of the fall seriously, we cannot escape partial responsibility for the sins of the world. The good thing about this is we can be part of the solution as we focus on our part in it all.

In terms of traditional theological categories, I am talking about the doctrine of humanity, or theological anthropology. To go down this theological road is not the subject of this book. Who we are as human beings and how we factually function in relation to one another, at what times and in what ways, is where Bowen theory and our theology meet. We come at it from different angles and we use different language systems to talk about it. But the phenomenology of the action is the same.

In my role as counselor, I do not think of myself as an evangelist. I see myself as like John the Baptist, preparing the way for the Lord. In a sense, I am calling people to repentance, asking them to look at their behavior with each other and change it. I do not use biblical language to describe this to them. Functionally, I am asking them to think about their beliefs and values within the context of their marriage and family life, and decide how they could better live whatever faith they profess.

I see my work within the traditional theological category of sanctification—that we will grow toward becoming better, healthier, and more mature human beings. Bowen's concept of differentiation of self—maintaining who we are as individuals, while in relationship with others—is a primary goal of the counseling. Working on this

goal is not a matter of salvation or works righteousness. We are justified before God whether we are better functioning human beings or not. However, working on our level of differentiation could be viewed in theological terms as growing into the human beings we are called to be.

As a pastoral counselor I regard myself, conceptually, as living on a bridge that connects two countries. At one end of the bridge is the land of science and Bowen theory and the concepts it uses. At the other end is the land of theology and its understanding of the purpose of human beings. They each have their own language and frame of reference, but both refer to the same human phenomenon. I never try to merge the two into one coherent way of thinking or language, but I can go back and forth, from one country or language system to another, and have commerce with both sides. If anything, I am the connection between them. I am the unity between the two in my own beliefs and opinions.