

Family Systems Theory: Core Concepts

My intention in this lesson is to move through quite a bit of material. There is a lot of information, and it is also fairly intense. It will cause you to think about your own life. I want to begin by talking about an article called “Winning in Family Therapy.”

I think that there are three major aspects of change. One is honesty. We need to be more honest, more aware, and more truthful in facing things that we have not faced. Another aspect is grief. This is needed in every situation, not just when someone dies. In every problem situation there is usually some sort of loss involved. It may be simply the loss of what we hoped for. It may be the loss of a dream. There are all kinds of losses involved. By grieving we are able to move to acceptance. We need to have an acceptance of life the way it really is. This is the opposite of hoping that life is different than it really is, hoping for an alternate reality. Grief is at the heart of all change. The third aspect of change is forgiveness, which is another process of letting go. In this case, rather than letting go of false hope, you are letting go of revenge. You are letting go of trying to make people pay for your disappointments.

It is very important to keep those three things in order. That really is the order: honesty, grief, and forgiveness. Too often in the church, especially when dealing with couples, we race to forgiveness. We start there. If we do not start there, someone else tries to put us there. When there has been infidelity, for instance, a spouse often starts there. They know they need to forgive. That, however, is actually a problem. It is dangerous. It is not healthy, because they have not been honest yet. They have not yet figured out how they feel about this, how angry they are, how upset they are, or how hurt they are. They have not faced that yet, and they need to. They need to grieve the losses that are involved with this unfaithfulness of the spouse before they are ready to forgive, or even to have a sense of what they are forgiving. You cannot let go of revenge if you do not know that you want to take revenge. Most people are told very early on that they need to forgive. But in their heart of hearts they are thinking, “If I had a gun, I would be dangerous.” But they really do not know that. When forgiveness comes too early, usually it does not come at all. Instead, anger comes out and becomes the driving force in a person because he or she has not really worked things through. It is very sad to see. So it is important to have those things in the right order in our conceptual framework. That way we can help people not go to forgiveness too quickly. It sounds very noble. But I am sure I have made mistakes in not being enough of an ambassador for anger, actually. I need to help people be more honest and face what they have not been facing.

I want to remind us that when we are thinking about family systems we are thinking about how people’s hearts are shaped. I am emphasizing the aspect of family. That is almost the only thing I will be talking about, because this is a course on marriage and family counseling. But I want to remind you that it is not only the family that shapes our heart. Ultimately as helpers it is best for us to have one eye on the individual’s issues and one eye on the bigger context, both historically and currently. We need to be able to do both of those things at the same time to understand people fully.

I want to introduce you to a song by Tracy Chapman called “Remember the Tin Man.” The song is a reminder that we are trying to think about what has shaped people’s hearts. It is also a good example that we can learn things from expressive artists who, although they do not have the theory or know the language, certainly understand the issues.

There are locks on the doors
And chains stretched across all the entries to the inside

There is a gate and a fence
And bars to protect from only God knows what lurks outside

Who stole your heart, left you with a space
That no one and nothing can fill
Who stole your heart, who took it away
Knowing that without it you cannot live

Who took away the part so essential to the whole
Left you a hollow body
Skin and bone
What robber, what thief? Who stole your heart and the key?

Who stole your heart
The smile from your face
The innocence, the light from your eyes
Who stole your heart, or did you give it away
And if so, then when and why

Who took away the part so essential to the whole
Left you a hollow body
Skin and bone
What robber, what thief
Who stole your heart and the key

Now all sentiment is gone
Now you have no trust in no one

Who stole your heart
Did you know but forget the method and moment in time
Was it a trickster using mirrors and sleight of hand
A strong elixir or a potion that you drank

Who hurt your heart
Bruised it in a place
That no one and nothing can heal
You have gone to wizards, princes, and magic men
You have gone to witches, the good, the bad, the indifferent

But still all sentiment is gone
But still you have no trust in no one

If you can tear down the walls
Throw your armor away, remove all roadblocks, barricades
If you can forget there are bandits and dragons to slay
And do not forget that you defend an empty space

And remember the Tin Man
Found he had what he thought he lacked

Remember the Tin Man
Go find your heart and take it back

Who stole your heart
Maybe no one can say
One day you will find it I pray

Another helpful song is by Chris Smither called “Open Up.” In it he is debating whether it is better to experience the pain of feeling or not to feel at all. He says that there seem to be some advantages to not feeling, until your lover discovers you cannot open your heart. There are many singers and song writers who have discovered this. The line in Chapman’s song that stands out to me is “You have gone to wizards, princes, and magic men / You have gone to witches, the good the bad the indifferent / But still all sentiment is gone / But still you have no trust in no one.”

What flashed into my mind was a picture of Jesus. I do not mean an actual picture as much as an image in my head, not of what He looked like but of what He was like. I think about this man, and I know He was the God-man, but this is one who our theology tells us was also fully human. Perhaps our theology tells us more than we even realize sometimes. Perhaps part of Jesus’ full humanity was that He was someone whose heart showed. He was so genuinely real that in a righteous way He could take off His belt and cast out the buyers, sellers, and money changers from the outer court of the temple. That was the court that was supposed to be the place where Gentiles could come. They could not go into the temple itself. The fruit of Israel’s worship and relationship to God was supposed to spread out beyond the bounds of Israel. The nations were supposed to see that this is who God is. They were supposed to come to worship Him. But the Jews lost sight of that. So Jesus, with all of His passion, cleanses the temple. With all of his passion, care, and grief, Jesus wholeheartedly laments the tradition of Jerusalem. He says, “O that I could take them under my wings like a mother hen.” Jesus lived with all of this passion, honesty, and struggles to the point of sweating blood. That really can happen, by the way, but it takes an incredible amount of stress. I do not know anyone who has ever done it, but it can happen. It takes a whole-hearted person who can laugh and love.

As believers we want to be Christ-like, and yet it is really hard for us to be that whole-hearted. We want to protect ourselves so much. We do not want to put ourselves out there where someone might step on us, or where someone might not like us. It feels better to withdraw so that others are not able to see what is underneath it all. Living from our heart in a Christ-like way is hard. Usually we are repeating Genesis 3:5-6. We are trying to be like God. We will take care of things. We can manage them. We have been doing it since we were little, before we even realized what we were doing. Somehow Tracy Chapman knows about this. She knows that people can be like the Tin Man, who did not have a heart. She hopes that it can be found again, but she does not know what that will look like. But we ought to try. As believers we certainly ought to try because of that special relationship that we have.

As we go into this theory, I do not want us to lose sight of how this happens to so many people. How do so many people become like the Tin Man? How does that happen in family contexts? As we do this, you will have some thinking to do about yourself. We are trying to do two things at the same time. You should be thinking about yourself so that you can learn and grow and become less of a Tin Man, and you should also be better prepared to help others do that.

Families have an emotional life all of their own, which endures over time. There is a truth in that statement that I hope you will begin to grasp as we move along. Many of us believe that time or distance heals. We believe that if we can get far enough away, both in time and geography, that the emotional life

of our family will not impact us anymore. It is not true. It is important to figure out the emotional issues in your family, because at a heart level you will wrestle with them for the rest of your life. It is part of your brokenness. It is also part of your glory. It is not all bad. But there is bad there, even in the best of families. It is impossible to be a perfect parent. It is impossible not to damage your children in some way. That is just the way it is. You may be fortunate enough that your kids have not yet figured it out. But that probably means they are still young. I am not trying to be too negative. I am trying to help us be realistic. There are issues for us to understand. I am emphasizing this because the natural thing for us to do is to try to ignore it and pretend it is not there. You can see that when you are working very intensely with people.

I am thinking of a counselor friend of mine who is counseling a young man in his early or mid twenties. This young man had been fairly severely abused by his father for a long time. But he had been working with the counselor for some time and was making some progress. One day, however, he came in and was very excited because since their last session he had a great conversation with his father. So my friend asked him, "What happened?" He said, "I was able to talk to my father and apologize to him." He thought he had been a bad son. Now, my friend is a wonderful man. He has a great, big heart. When this young man said that, my friend cried. It was so sad. He could not be honest with himself about it.

That is an extreme example, but we all do that, especially as children. Children do not have enough objectivity. All experiences are subjective for them. Kids are egocentric. I do not mean they are proud. I mean that the world revolves around them. They cannot help it.

Many years ago I was supervising a social work unit. When kids were in foster homes, we would provide visitation on a regular basis with the natural parents. One day I ended up watching over a five-year-old boy in the office while his case worker was running some errands. I had a conversation with this five-year-old who had been placed in a foster home because he had been abused by his father. The dad had taken a belt to him and really hurt him. The boy had gone to school, and someone was helping him to the bathroom and noticed all these bruises. So they called the authorities and the kids were taken away. I was talking to this five-year-old and I asked him why he was in a foster home. He said, "I broke my truck." As I followed that a little further he described how he broke his truck and his father got angry and hit him with a belt. "So why are you in a foster home?" I asked. "Because I broke my truck," he said. He was simply being a five-year-old. He cannot be objective and step outside the situation and say, "Dad should not have done that." He could only say, "I should not have done that." Behind that developing mind is the assumption that there is nothing wrong with dad; it is all him. So the boy develops a sense of shame because he thinks that something is wrong with him.

Again, that may seem like an extreme example, but it is not really. That is the way it works for all of us. There may not be big things like that for many of us. We may go along and think we are doing all right. We have a sense that we are loveable, that people love us and that God loves us. We really feel all right, though it is not perfect. Perhaps it is God's grace that we do not always recognize everything that happened. However, for people who are struggling, it has not been all right. It has been much more extreme.

Family systems theory locates a family's problem in the nature of the system rather than in the nature of the parts. Imagine a couple who brings their ten-year-old son in to see their pastor because the boy is consistently getting in trouble. They want the pastor's help to straighten the child out. A person who is not thinking in a family systems kind of way is going to talk first with the parents and then with the child. They are going to try to figure out what they can say to the child to help him change his behavior and fix the problem. A person who is thinking in a family systems way is not going to assume that the

problem resides in one of the parts. “Part” is a funny word for people. He is not going to assume that the problem resides inside one of the people. It is not necessarily the child’s issue. Actually, a lot of the time it is not. This person is going to ask questions and listen from a different perspective. This conceptual framework will guide them in a different way.

By the way, one of the most common things that is happening in this situation is that the child who is showing the symptoms is often the most sensitive person in the family. They pick things up. Now, they are children, so they are not objective. They are picking things up, but they do not have the vocabulary or maturity to say, “Hey, I see what is going on.” So it just stirs in them and makes them anxious. They are sensitive. They pick things up. Usually kids will act out that anxiety or they will get depressed and withdraw. Someone has said depression is merely anger without the enthusiasm. Well, it can show up that way in kids. Children are often being treated medically for the symptoms rather than for the family system.

Let me say, however, that when the symptoms are severe enough, it is usually still appropriate to treat them. I am thinking of work that I did with a seminary student who was depressed enough that he could not answer a question. So I thought he needed to go talk to a doctor. We could not do counseling work on the issues because his symptoms were so debilitating. So he went and got medication, and it helped. Of course, it did not make everything go away. But we could keep talking and working.

Bowen talks about two forces. One is the force for individuality and autonomy. The other is the force for togetherness and fusion. Within the family, and within every relationship, really, is the issue of how to be connected and how to be an individual at the same time. That is very challenging for all of us, whether it is in our family of origin or in our marriages. You experience this, though you may not think about it. You experience swings where sometimes you are closer and less autonomous and other times you are more autonomous and not as close. The two really work together. Then, when you finally find the balance point, something happens. The balance point might change because of development, growth, or circumstances and events. But the reality is that most of the time the balance point is just where we are as we wrestle with the anxiety of not being able to do both at the same time. We wrestle with not being able to be completely close and completely autonomous at the same time. How do I be who I am in my family? And how can I be connected to my family?

Part of the reason for that struggle is that often the assumption in families is that we are connected when we are the same and when we agree. That is not really true, however. Connection is more about process than positions. It is more about conversations and sharing life. But it is much easier to recognize that you agree on something and think that it is because you are family, as opposed to feeling like you are connected when you disagree on something. But you still can be. The family that votes for different candidates in an election can have a fairly high level of connection, as long as they are talking about it. The more they honor one another’s position, the more they are connected. They do not have to agree with each other, but they honor each other by listening and not trying to tear the other person down. This connection is irrespective of whether they ever come to agree or not. The less the conversation is about trying to change people, especially on issues that are not moral, the more it feels like we are connected even though we are different. If we are trying to change people, then it feels like we are not really connected unless I become like you.

So this description of these two forces is fairly profound. Bowen says it needs to be balanced. He says it is a lifelong family process. Symptoms occur when the forces are seriously off balance. From this little bit that we have said, you can already begin to apply certain principles to counseling situations. If a family comes to see you and there are symptoms occurring, a major assumption is that something is

seriously off balance in this struggle to be connected and yet independent. They are having a hard time finding the balance point. That is part of the reason that symptoms will often come up at key developmental points in life. Symptoms will come up when kids become teenagers. Symptoms will come up when kids, particularly the oldest child, goes off to school for the first time. When a five-year-old child goes off to school for the first time, the whole family feels a higher need for that child to be an independent and autonomous person. They are going to be off at school for four or five hours on their own. There is a pretty high level of letting go that has to take place. Mothers know that, typically. Fathers sometimes do not. Sometimes they do, too. But it is still there whether they know it or not. Symptoms can come up at that point because people fight it. They resist it. They do not want it to happen. As a result you can end up with a young child who is afraid of school. From the perspective we have been taking, it is not usually going to make the most sense to treat the child. You need to work with the family or with the parents.

That is an example of one developmental type of issue. Adolescence is another developmental kind of issue. A teenager, just because they are a teenager, changes the balance point in the family system. More autonomy is needed for that child. The whole family has to grant that and adjust to it. The acting out we see in teenagers is often an effort for them to try to be their own person and break free from the efforts of parents to not let them go. It is very hard, of course. How do you as a parent give your child—your growing, maturing child—responsibility when you already have data that show they do not handle responsibility well? But that is really what is being demanded of you as a parent. You have to give them responsibility. You have to give them enough space to try. The way they are going to grow is through their failure, their trying, and your support and help, not by preventing the effort.

There is a good book out by Madeline Levine called *The Price of Privilege*. Levine is a psychologist who does lots of counseling with adolescents. She started to see something in her practice and started to wonder if her situation was unique. So she did a survey of lots of other therapists and found that people were experiencing the very same things. She ended up writing a book about it. One of the main points of this book is her concern—she works with kids who grow up in affluent circumstances—that in essence these kids are not developing a sense of self, a sense of who they are. Part of the reason is that these kids are being protected from any kind of challenge. Let me give an example. She sees some kids who go to the same school, live in the same neighborhood, and even take the same classes. She has two kids in a class who had a 10-page paper due on a particular day. The night before the paper was due the power went off in their community for four or five hours. Both of the kids lost stuff that they had done on the computer. One of the children came in to see her shortly after and she was tired because, after the power came back on, she stayed up to do the paper. The other child whom she saw was not tired because her mom did the paper. The mom reconstructed the paper from the child's notes and turned the paper in.

My wife and daughter both teach in private schools where there are pretty affluent people. My wife teaches fourth and fifth graders, and my daughter teaches second graders. I asked them if any of the parents do that and they said, "Absolutely." Parents are helping their kids with homework all the time in a way that it is obvious who is doing more of the work. That is a developmental problem, because the kids are being sheltered from the challenge of having to deal with crisis. In a very real sense, they are being sheltered from taking responsibility. I am saying—applying this theory—that this has to do with the fact that these parents have not found the ability to let go. The central challenge for parents, from day one through emancipation, is to be continually letting the child experience a little more responsibility as they move through life. Because of these forces, that is not easy. It is an easy concept, but it is not easy to do because the pull for connection is a strong pull. Even while within the family there is a pull for autonomy, there is another pull not to lose connection. You have to give up a little bit to gain the other. It is tough to find the balance point, and it messes us up in a lot of ways.

It is more important to listen than to agree. In a relationship it is not as important that you agree as that you listen. Do we recognize that a goal of marriage is not necessarily to agree about everything? I think sometimes we think that we are going to agree on everything.

I can remember sitting in the living room one day when my wife did something that she does sometimes that annoys me. I had a thought that went like this, "That is just part of Carolyn and who she is. If it were not there I would miss that." Even as I thought that I realized that it would still be annoying, which possibly exposed the foolishness of my general assumption that my wife would never annoy me. My wife is supposed to be the kind of person who always makes me smile. That is the other side of thinking that connection is based on agreement. My wife is supposed to be this independent, strong, real person whom I listen to and she listens to me. Sometimes in listening we change each other, and sometimes we do not.

Not too long ago someone called me up and offered me a job. I first got this in the form of a message on my voice mail. When I got it I laughed because it was from a counseling organization that comes from a different perspective. I laughed because I thought that they did not realize who they were talking to. So I called the gentleman back, and he said, "No, we understand. We think we are probably pretty close." I did not really believe that, but we talked again, and again he said that we were fairly similar. For a while I did not really know what to think. Part of me thought, "Just say no. You know this is not a match. This gentleman does not understand." So for three days I was thinking that I was going to call him and tell him no. But every day I would come home and tell my wife that I did not call him. I did not know what was going on, but I could not go through with it. Finally, on the third day I realized what it was. It was two things, though I cannot remember the second. The first was that I was thinking about how being in that position would give me the opportunity to change these people. Well, that is silly. The other thing I cannot remember. So I called my wife up and told her that I was finally going to call the gentleman because I finally had some clarity on this issue. When I told her the first reason she said that it made sense. But when I told her the second reason she said, "No, I do not think that is it."

That was a mixed moment for me. I was annoyed. I do not think I was annoyed because she was being annoying. I was annoyed because she was not agreeing with me. I had been working on this for three days, trying to figure it out. I finally figured it out, and now she did not agree with me. But at the same time I thought, "Is it not good that my wife feels the freedom and has the strength to say this? Is it not a wonderful thing that I have a woman whom I am married to who can disagree with me, even though I want her to agree with everything I say?" I want my wife to think that everything I say is right. I want her to assume that I would not say anything that is the least bit off the mark. But thankfully she does not live up to that. It is so good for me. It is such a gift from God. So when that moment came when we were sitting across the room and she did something that I found annoying, I realized that I would miss that. There was one special moment there of connection. It was connection over an annoying thing. It was the same way with the phone call. She disagreed with one of my ideas, and I was bothered by the fact that she did not agree with me, but there was this wonderful connection. I might even say that I know that she gave herself to me honestly, truthfully, fully, and completely by disagreeing with me.

If what we are talking about is right, and I think it is, of course this is true. Of course there can be great connection through disagreeing. But that is not the natural way we think. The natural way we think is that connection is by agreeing. The people who came up with this theory were on to something. They got there by observing people and by trying to organize what they observed. As we go through this theory, it seems to me that most of this is not contradictory to the truth of Scripture. Occasionally, they are right on target. I think what we have said here is truthful.

Suppose you are working with teenagers whose parents are very confining and as a result the teenagers are struggling with their own identity. However, you are confined to working with the kids and not the parents. Is there something that you can do? I am sure I do not have a complete answer. That is a hard question. My first thought is, work with your supervisor to see if they can loosen up your bounds a little bit so you can do some work with the parents. I think it is great when the people who are working with teenagers have a meeting every quarter, or at some other regular interval, with the parents. They can use those meetings to inform the parents about life as a teenager today and what the kids need from the parents. Another partial answer to that question is to help individuals to grow in their own maturity, so that they can enter into the family situation in a way that is less reactive. We might say that we are trying to help them be better differentiated. We want to help them be not as reactive.

I have an image in my mind. I understand that we are talking about teenagers, so I realize that this would be very hard. But it can happen. It can be done, and you can help them do it. You can coach these kids to have different kinds of conversations with their parents. The kid can go and say to their parents the kinds of things you think need to be said to the parents. Parents will listen to that—sometimes, at least. Other times they may not. They may not be mature enough. They may feel threatened or be reacting to something else.

A family system is something like a mobile. That is one picture of it. When I think of a mobile I think of being in vacation Bible school as a child when we got pieces of coat hangers and we tied strings on them and cut out little paper shapes and attached them and made it all balance. We would hang those in our bedrooms. If you would knock one of the elements off the mobile, the whole mobile would move. That is what happens in a family. Whatever it is that knocks an individual in the family, whether it is negative or positive, it impacts the whole family. So if you can coach these kids to move back into their family situations and handle it a little differently, it is going to impact the whole family. It creates an opportunity for other people to respond differently. They may respond well or not well. But the opportunity has been created. That is my second thought. Help kids think about what they are feeling when the parents say something they do not feel is reasonable. Help them get a handle on what they are feeling, and help them to think about it. Help them to think through how they could express those feelings to their parents.

We very seldom, if ever, feel one thing. The teenager might say, “I feel angry because my parents are treating me like a little kid.” Well, what is underneath those feelings? Perhaps it is that he does not feel respected. That is something that he can go and have a conversation with his parents about. It could go like this, “Mom, when you say I have to come home an hour or two before everyone else whom I know has to go home, what I feel the most is that you do not trust me. I feel that you do not respect that I can handle this.” Well, that is going to be a different conversation than the kid who simply gets angry. So perhaps coaching in that direction would be helpful. I could see some group teaching that goes in that direction. Help them to think how they could be more honest. To be more honest they have to get below the anger or sadness or whatever it is. They have to get deeper down. What are the things that would be important for the parents to know? What are the things that they would want to know and probably do not realize that they are doing? They are simply trying to do what they think is best and safest. They do not realize that it is making the child feel like they do not respect him. So it is worth having that conversation. The parents might still not change. We have to help the kids realize that. But they might come up with a way that the child can show that he can handle more. Perhaps that is a good question to give the child to present to the parents. He could ask them, “How can I show that I can handle it?” The parents might not like you for teaching the child that question, because it is a hard one to answer. But I think it would be a good way of approaching the situation.

Underneath all of my musings here is the question, how can we help people keep having conversations about the things that are really going on underneath the more obvious feelings? That is part of why we are talking about this theory. It is so that we can get an appreciation for what is taking place at deeper levels. That way people can talk about it, and we can talk about it with them as counselors.

Let us talk about the cognitive-affective model. There are two bases for operation. This can get a little confusing. There are two forces and two bases. Bowen tends to talk about things in pairs, and sometimes they all get mixed up together. The two forces are individuality and togetherness. The two bases are the intellectual and the emotional. Bowen is trying to address more of the heart than most systems do. Most people look at either one or the other, but not both at the same time. Bowen is particularly looking at the interaction between the two.

Mature individuals use both capacities. In those who are less mature, the emotional capacity dominates, which leads to fusion. This is a simple understanding of personality that enables one to understand the complexity of individuals functioning within the context of a family. One thing that is crucial to understand about this is that it does not mean that these people look more emotional. Rather, it is internally that these emotions are dominating. The thinking is not in charge. The feelings are. They might not even be identified or known to the person themselves, but the emotions are driving choices and behavior. The choice might be to withdraw and be quiet; therefore it may not look like an emotional person. A common picture is of the man who is very rational and focuses on his business, yet in his family relationships he does not have much to say and is not very present. If you would ask him, he might not even have words for emotions. He has a very small vocabulary for emotions. This may very well mean that the emotional component is dominating. It is dominating to such a degree that it is being suppressed. He is afraid of it. He is anxious about any feelings coming out that he does not know what to do with. So he just pushes it all down. If his heart were a computer hard drive, the hard drive would be fried. This does not mean that his emotions are not the driving force. They are the driving force even though they are not what is expressed on the outside.

On the other hand, there can be people who are very expressive, but they are in the same position. What, then, am I trying to say? I am trying to say that it is not what you see on the surface that matters as much as what is driving a person internally. The loss of balance in emotionally immature people can look very different in different people. You can tell it when you ask a person to think about what they feel, because they will respond in a way that does not sound like thinking. This will be the case with both types of people. The person who is reserved will not have words for it. The person on the other end of the spectrum will only have words to describe their activity, not their real concerns and feelings.

Fusion often occurs when the emotional capacity dominates. Fusion is the term for what happens when individuals are too close. When that happens the individuals are increasingly vulnerable to the influence of others. Emotional reactivity is greater. Boundaries become blurred. The togetherness force has a greater influence than it should on the individual. You will often see reactivity in the following type of case. A somber business man, for instance, might be known for having a real temper. When he gets crossed he reacts very strongly. It can seem like it is over-the-top for what the situation deserves. I am not saying that anger is automatically wrong. Rather, it is that over-the-top reactivity that is the issue. The reaction is far greater than the situation warranted. That is a fairly good sign that the person is not well balanced or differentiated. In other words, the emotional capacity is dominating, and he is not really able to keep thinking about his emotions. When someone who works for this business man does something wrong, it feels to him, even though he might not think about it, like this person is out to get him. So he reacts in a way that attempts to protect himself. He thinks he needs to get this other person

back in line because they are out to get him. Usually, the reality is that no one is out to get him. If he were thinking and his emotions were balanced he could recognize that. He could put that thought in its proper place. He would think, "Maybe that is what is happening, but I will need to learn more. I do not have to act on that now."

Shifting gears for a moment, people tend to be attracted to those who are at similar levels of differentiation. Through observation, Bowen figured that men and women marry people who are at similar levels of differentiation. Therefore we may come from families that are very different in terms of their externalities, but the level of differentiation that each individual has been able to arrive at will be very similar in people who marry. Another way of saying that is that people will be at similar levels of maturity. Mature people do not tend to marry people who are immature. Immature people do not tend to seek people who are mature.

Bowen used a scale from 1 to 100 to try to rate people on how well-differentiated they were. I do not understand the scale, honestly. It is a mystery to me. I do not see the necessity of it. He was using it for his research. But I mention it to point out the fact that no one was at 100. That does not happen. I do not think there are people in the 90s. Bowen's assumption, actually, was that most of us are below the midpoint. You might think, then, that Bowen would think you are less mature than you think you are. That is probably true. I might like to think I am close to the top, but the reality is very different. It is a real struggle to keep this balance. Often we do not do it that well.

If people tend to marry people who are at similar levels of differentiation, will they also mature at the same pace? It depends. An important factor will be that the couple continues to have substantive conversations. These are not just conversations about logistics. They are conversations about how you feel. That will help a couple continue to grow at the same pace.

I have been concerned for a number of years, especially the last four or five, about certain situations that I have observed with friends of mine. One of the spouses seems to go through an identity crisis and, at least in their minds, they are changing. In their mind they are growing. I question that, because it tends to manifest itself in this way. The spouse will say, "I have been living the wrong life. I have to go live the right life. And to live that right life I have to get rid of my old life." This sometimes leads to divorce. It leads to an abandonment of the kids. Often it is mothers who do that. I have enough data to know that what they are thinking is, "I was suppressed. I was not who I needed to be. I was immature. But now I have discovered who I am."

I am wondering if we can apply what we have learned to this situation. This sort of thing happens when a couple is not sharing their struggles. It happens when the spouse who is going through this transition does not share it. Then, all of a sudden you have one person who is saying that they are growing in a different direction than the other person. All of a sudden they feel like they are in such different places regarding how they look at the world.

Let us talk about some core concepts. The first one is what we may call the identified patient. Because we are looking at the whole family system, rather than merely at what is happening with an individual, when we see an individual who is exhibiting symptoms, family systems thinkers think of that person as the identified patient. They are the one the family has identified as the problem, or they themselves may have volunteered this. The term "identified patient" is used to try to remove the pathology from the individual and help us to see that someone has been identified as the problem, but that does not mean that they are the problem.

Another concept is homeostasis. This is basically the idea that a system tries to bring itself back to the balance it is used to. Families resist change. Even when a family is in a miserable situation and they hear ideas being offered that may help them get to a better situation, they will resist it. The miserable situation feels like home. Bringing these last two concepts together, if you pull out an identified patient from the family and treat them, often someone else in the family will show symptoms in some way. It may not be the same way. If you pull the identified patient out, it changes things that the family needs. You could imagine it this way. It is like a system of pipes. Actually, this theory comes from the world of engineering and has been applied to families. In a plumbing system, if you spring a leak, it is going to be at the weakest point in the system. It is not going to be at the strongest point. It will be the weakest point. In a certain sense, the identified patient is in some way the weakest point. Now, “weak” may not be a negative thing. It may be that this individual is the most sensitive and aware of what is going on. If you pull that person out, now there is a new weakest point, and the leak will spring there next.

Let us think about the situation we mentioned earlier where the teenager who was having difficulties was coached and enabled to go home and start having some adult conversations with his parents. The concept of homeostasis suggests that the parents are going to respond in a way that will get the teenager back to normal, even though it is more of a problem. The parents may respond in a less mature way, which will recreate the system the way it was, because it feels like home. It feels safe. Systems develop the way they do for reasons. Usually they develop the way they do because that is the most comfortable way to handle anxiety in the family. In a dysfunctional family, for instance, or in a family with an alcoholic, the system might state that you do not talk, or you do not feel, or you do not trust. Those would be things to look for.

If something happens in a family that makes them nervous, raises anxiety, or makes them afraid, it is likely that the family will develop patterns where they do not talk about it. If they talk about it they will have to act like it is real. That is too scary. A member who steps up and says, “Wait a minute. I am going to talk about this,” is breaking the family rules. Most likely, the family is going to act in a way that says, “Do not talk about it. Go back to obeying the rules. You know the rules.” Ironically, if you asked the family what the rules are, they would not know. They are developed through collusion. Silently and together a family ends up in a place where they just know how things are done.

When you do a genogram, one of the things you are trying to figure out is what the family rules are. When you are working with people, try to figure out what the family rules are. What are they afraid of? What emotions were going on when big events happened? What did they do with those emotions? Understanding the concept of homeostasis helps us to recognize that it is hard for families to change. It also explains why these patterns can go from generation to generation to generation.

Thinking systemically is the key. Try to see the whole, and dig down to understand what is driving it. When I read student genograms, the comments I write again and again are, “What is underneath this? What is behind this? What feelings are being responded to here?” It is a hard habit to get into. Family habits typically try to get us to think about the surface issues and no more. They are all about not talking, feeling, or trusting. Family habits try to get us to stay away from those things because they are dangerous. What I am trying to say is that it is not dangerous. It is a way to become more honest. It is therapeutic. It is helpful. It causes growth. It is sanctifying.

Let me give an example. A family has four kids, and one of them has moved to Brazil. Perhaps they moved to Brazil because there was a job opportunity there. Perhaps they speak Portuguese and this was an opportunity for them to continue to practice their Portuguese. But more often, if we dig down deep, it will have something to do with cut-offs. Maybe they have been the identified patient. In other words,

they have been the one stepping up and saying, "Wait a minute." They have been the one protesting the fact that the only way to be connected to this family is if you are the same, and they are not the same. So they are a rebellious kid. But the rebellion is really anger over a desire to be loved.

There is a quote from Jackson Browne that captures what I am trying to say. He uses a metaphor to describe California, but there is truth in the metaphor. He says, "California is shaking like an angry child will / Who has asked for love and is unanswered still." I think that feeling is in the depths of so many of our hearts. We have asked for love, and we are not answered. Some of us react to that in anger. Others react in shame. They think it must be something wrong with them. They think they are not loveable. There can be all kinds of ways to react. So we can have the rebellious kid who is asking for love, but when you ask for something through protest you tend to get something like protest, or defensiveness, or anger, back. You do not get a good answer back. The sad thing is, this is not a measure of whether these people love you or not. But people can go for decades or even a whole lifetime not knowing how much their parents love them. So people try to get away from things and make them better. They think moving to another part of the world might help. The only problem with that is, while it reduces the intensity, it does not solve the problem. While the person is down in Brazil, deep down in his heart he feels like he is not very loveable. That feeling deep down in there is really the thing that needs to be addressed and looked at. It is very much a family issue. It goes back to what we said earlier when we talked about how to be connected when we are different. I will tell you that it is very hard.

I am old enough now that I have friends who have kids in their 20s. As these parents notice that their children are different from them, it can be very hard. It is hard to hang in there and love those kids when they are being rebellious. The kids are disturbed and are wrestling with who they are. The only thing that feels right is for them to be very clear that they are different from their parents. That is very hard on a parent. It is very challenging. As Christians, we have the best chance at handling that, because we have a special relationship with God. He can keep our hearts settled so we can keep taking the risk of loving this child who may not receive the love. That is very hard. Loving someone is like playing a slot machine. I am not saying it is right. But that is the way it often works. You will not keep putting money in if you do not get something out once in a while. Eventually you are going to walk away. Most of us approach relationships that way. However, that is not the type of love the Bible enjoins on us. Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loves the church. It is very hard, but this is what is really expected, even demanded, of us as parents. We need to keep doing that.

It will help us when we can recognize that there is something behind the behavior of our children. Understanding this as a system helps us not take it so personally. That is probably the greatest difficulty when it is your child saying that you have messed up. If you can know that this is a whole family issue, you will be helped. There is something going on in this person that has been impacted by the way this family functions. There is still individual responsibility. There are still things this person may have done wrong, but I am saying that for this person to stay in the relationship it may help to recognize that there is more to it than just the individual dynamics. My child may be telling me they do not love me, but I should not take it at face value. More is going on. It is more likely that when they say something like that it is just the opposite that is the real concern. They want to know you love them. They are not sure they are worth loving. If we can see that hunger in their heart rather than the attack, you will have a better chance of stepping around it and trying to address the real issue.