

Family Systems Theory: Secrets, Circular Causality, and Assessment Procedures

Edwin Friedman wrote a book called *Generation to Generation*. In it he has a section entitled “Secrets and Systems.” We want to begin by looking at that section. I think that looking at secrets is another one of the important things to look at when you are trying to understand what is actually going on in a family. As Friedman talks about secrets, he helps to explain the dynamics of families.

“Family secrets act as the plaque in the arteries of communication. They cause stoppage in the general flow, and not just at the point of their existence.” That is brilliant. “The communication system of many families is riddled with secrets. Favorite secrets are an affair, illegitimacy, elopement, terminal illness, abortion, adoption, institutionalization—crazy or criminal—previous marriage, black sheep in previous generation, skeleton in the closet, finances, and any minor matter where one family member says to another, ‘But do not tell dad.’ Far more significant of the content of any family secret is the ramification of its existence for the emotional processes of the entire family. These effects are specific and predictable.” In other words, it is not what the secret is about. It is not the content. It is simply the fact that it is there. Friedman goes on to mention some of the ways those effects are specific and predictable.

“(1) Secrets function to divide a family as an avalanche would a community. Those in on the secret will become far better able to communicate with one another than with those on the outside—about any issue, not just about the secret. For example, a minister once complained how he was unable to help four sisters who were recuperating from an accident because they had yet to be told that their brother had died in the same crash. He spent so much time pre-thinking everything he said for fear it would lead to questions about the brother that he was totally unable to be the spontaneous self that was the basis for his pastoral effectiveness. When that same emotional phenomena occurs in the family over a long period of time, very rigid triangles result.”

“(2) Therefore, a second effect of secrets on a family system is that they create unnecessary estrangements as well as false companionship. The secret’s existence separates people, or when they know it, they are together but on a false basis. It feels closer than it actually is. For example, a father and daughter conspire not to tell mother about the abortion. Mother and daughter’s relationship is likely to be affected well beyond the specific issue.” In other words, it is not just the abortion that they will not be able to talk about. They will not be able to talk about other things as well because of the existence of the secret. It really does serve like plaque in the arteries. It blocks not just the point of attack but other places as well. “An overall atmosphere of unnecessary distance will develop between them. On the other hand, father and daughter will become closer, but it will be a shallow togetherness.”

“(3) A third major effect of secrets on a family is that they distort perceptions. Family members will become confused or misled by information they obtain because they really are seeing only part of the picture. An ironic example of this is the husband who is considering leaving his wife because she has become cold, selfish, and distant. She was having an affair, which she kept a closely guarded secret for fear that he would leave if he found out. When she finally told him the truth at the urgency of a counselor, though he first expressed deep hurt and rage, breaking almost every glass in the house, he then began to feel better about things because he now was able to put together in a comprehensive way many messages and actions that had not made sense. Almost immediately they found they were able to communicate better on every subject.”

“(4) The most important effects of secrets on a family’s emotional system is that they exacerbate other pathological processes unrelated to the content of the particular secret, because secrets generally

function to keep anxiety at higher energy levels. When secrets are revealed, despite the fact that family members might at first be upset, either over the information or the fact that the secret is out, the anxiety level of the family generally decreases. This is particularly the case if the family continues to work at the issues that then surface, issues that often had precipitated the forming of the secret. The formation of a family secret is always symptomatic of other things going on in the family.”

“To some extent, secret formation feeds back to the previously mentioned issues concerning pain. Family members will say that they kept a secret to spare someone’s feelings. The truth is more likely to be that they did so to spare their own feelings. Few of us are irreparably hurt by upset. Chronic anxiety, on the other hand, kills. All of the above is equally true in the parish. The clergy are constantly triangled by various clandestine messages that parishioners report to them about one another or about the other minister. That network of interlocking triangles is always in operation. But to the extent that messages about the minister are reported back and forth between family members in secret, then such secrets will promote pockets of pseudo-mutuality and unnecessary estrangements throughout the emotional system of the entire congregation or family. The ultimate proof of the function and power of secrets within a family is that when they are revealed, more change usually takes place throughout the entire system than could have been attributed solely to the content of that secret. In short, secrets create and perpetuate triangles. They are always on the side of the existing homeostasis, the labeling process, and the chronicity of symptoms. They are never on the side of challenge and change.” Secrets are very serious stuff.

This has implications for the work that we do as counselors. When working with couples, we have a principle of confidentiality, which essentially means that what transpires in the room does not go anywhere else. There are some obvious exceptions to that. Counselors usually have supervisors, but they are bound by the same confidentiality. So information stays within our hierarchical structures. There are some situations where, for ethical and legal reasons, we must break confidentiality. An example would be if a person were talking about hurting someone else or themselves. I summarize that in my own head as homicide and suicide. It does not necessarily have to be quite that extreme, but harm to others and harm to self. We are required to make other people aware of that and not keep it a secret.

There are times when we may have to meet with one spouse alone. I usually do not do that, because I try to keep things balanced as much as possible. If I am going to do that with one, I try to do it with the other. I try to avoid that, however, whenever possible. I do not really want to do individual therapy with one spouse while I am also trying to do couple therapy, since I would have a hard time managing the triangle. But it happens sometimes. A couple might be driving to your office in separate cars and they do not arrive at the same time. The one who arrives first comes in and sits down and unloads a big issue on you. They may be thinking, “This is confidential, right?” From the beginning I try to make it clear to people that I will not keep secrets in this way. Intimacy is built by the couple keeping secrets together. It is torn down by either spouse keeping secrets with someone else, even a counselor. It is not a good idea, therefore, to engage in that practice, which is why I will not do that.

Friedman has an example in his book of just this sort of thing. A wife arrives early to a counseling meeting and she is complaining about the husband. The husband walks in 10 or 15 minutes later. Friedman starts by saying, “Oh, we were just talking about you.” You might not feel terribly comfortable doing that, but some of these things that we just read about secrets almost require you to do that. Keeping a secret with one of the spouses, as small as it may be at that point, creates a false alliance. It creates distance with the other spouse who does not know that a secret is being kept. It raises the anxiety in you and in the spouse who shared the secret. It probably also raises the anxiety in the other

spouse, though they do not even know why. These things are going to happen because you have left that secret a secret and were not bold enough to bring it out into the open.

Would I counsel a couple who wanted both couple counseling and individual counseling? That would be messy. You can find therapists who say different things about secrets than what Friedman is saying. They acknowledge that this sort of situation is hard, but say that you can keep confidentiality in the individual counseling situations and not bring that into the couple counseling. I am not willing to say that they are wrong, but I do not think they are appreciating what Friedman is saying about the dynamics of secrets. Therefore I cannot think of a time when I would do that. I do have people I work with as couples, and they go to see someone else for individual counseling. I do not see how you can manage both. Of course, this is based on my assumption that what Friedman is saying about secrets is right. It is also based on knowledge of what I can manage. There may be therapists who can manage that without it creating the above-mentioned distortions. Some of my friends do those sorts of things, and they may be capable. I do not think that I am. There is enough going on with just the couple. I find that hard enough.

Let me mention a couple other concepts that are behind systems thinking. These are some of the systems elements that came from the engineering world—where this theory was developed—and got applied to families and couple functioning. The first is called circular causation. Systems thinking recognized that people generally think in linear ways as they try to analyze why things happen. That is still predominant in our culture, though maybe less so now than 25 years ago. A causes B, which causes C. Thinking that way causes us to reason through counseling situations in the following way: Someone comes to see us and says that they are struggling with B. Therefore we ask questions that try to uncover A. If we can identify the A, we might be able to change it, which will cause B to change. That is linear thinking.

There can be multiple causations. We might think we are thinking systematically because we are taking into account multiple causes. We think we are not thinking in this linear way anymore because we see how multiple factors cause the problem. However, that is still linear thinking. It is simply that you have more causes.

Systematic thinking, however, recognizes that there is no clear beginning point, which is why it is called circular causation. There is no clear beginning. There is some reciprocity, meaning B influences D, but D influences B as well, even while D is influencing A and A is influencing D. There is feedback in the system. One way of picturing this is to think about the system that controls the temperature in a room. There is a thermostat and a sensor. The thermostat allows you to keep the temperature at a desired level. For that to happen a fan may have to come on. It does that because the sensor is paying attention to the temperature in the room. Without the sensor the fan would simply keep running and it would get colder and colder. When the sensor recognizes that the room is at the desired temperature it sends a message to the fan that tells it to shut down. If the room heats up, the sensor notices it and sends a message to the fan to turn back on. Do you see all the kinds of feedback that is going on as this equipment works systemically? The temperature changes and the sensor picks it up and sends a message, which turns the fan on or off. If the temperature changes in the other direction, the sensor picks it up and sends a message for the fan to do the opposite. There is a circular process operating, and it operates perpetually. Systems thinking takes that type of understanding and applies it to relationships, recognizing that whatever we are looking at may be impacted by lots of things, some of them indirectly.

Imagine a situation where there is an illegitimate child in a family and people have kept it a secret. This may have been influenced by the pain of the loss of innocence that comes with the knowledge that the child is illegitimate. There may be a loss of respect if people know. There may be a loss of some of the joy that comes with the arrival and existence of the child. There may be regrets. All of these things

impact each other, contributing to the formation of a secret. Friedman is right. There can be other issues that are impacted by this as well. People then find it harder to talk about the other issues because of the secret.

One of the more challenging parts of this paradigm shift may be trying to grasp this concept of circular causality. Cause and effect thinking, which is the way we normally think, is not always that helpful. If a couple comes in with their problematic 10-year-old son and we are asking our questions from a linear perspective, we are going to try to figure out what the direct cause is. If we look at it in a systemic way, however, we often realize that when a child is acting out it is because he or she is sensitive and has the ability to pick things up. The child is anxious about, say, the parents' marriage, which may not be good. Even this could still be understood in a linear way, however. The child is acting out because of the parents. That is not yet systemic thinking. The next step is recognizing that the parents may have had a fight that the child witnessed. The child is anxious about it. Another factor is that the child has friends whose parents are divorced, which raises his anxiety. The child cannot talk about it because he does not have the maturity to wrestle with it and name all these things. So the anxiety grows. Here is where the circularity starts to come in. The child begins to act out on the anxiety. What do the parents do? They get more focused on the child because they are concerned about him. As a result of focusing on the child, they do not focus on themselves as much. A triangle is now operating. There is trouble in the marriage; the child is acting out, so the couple focuses on the child, which dissipates the conflict between them. Therefore they are not fighting anymore. What happens to the child? His anxiety goes down, too. So when the parents focus on the child they realize that their anxiety goes down and they are feeling a little bit better. But when they focus less on the child, they start to fight again, and anxiety increases. They have now completed the circle. This can get complicated further, because people can start to anticipate certain actions. The main point here, however, is that this is not linear anymore.

We talk about differentiation, triangles, anxiety, and people's inability to be honest about what they are feeling because that is the easiest way into these confusing circular problems. The point is not so much to be able to figure all of this out. It is to realize that A does not always cause B, which does not always cause C. Go into a counseling session with the assumption of circular causation and have your eyes open to what is stirring underneath the surface. What aspect of their heart is stirring? That will get you to the issues most effectively—it seems to me.

Let us talk about assessment procedures. Systems theory practitioners only look for two or three things. One is the toxic issues, which are the things that raise anxiety. They are the things that people avoid talking about. What are the things that people do not want to talk about? Sometimes, the most important things for you to hear are the things that people are not saying. Sometimes it is clear that they are not saying it. We will talk about genograms a bit later. One of the reasons to do something as systematic as a genogram is that it helps you recognize where the holes are in the information. When I get genograms from students and they have drawn the relational lines but have left out a hugely significant relationship, I wonder if that is the most important thing. Genograms help you see the things that are not being said. So first, what are the toxic issues?

Second, who is over- and under-functioning in the relationship? Who is taking responsibility for other people that does not belong to them? That is over-functioning. Who is not taking responsibility for themselves? That is under-functioning. There are some gender-related patterns here. It is more common for men to under-function. It is more common for women to over-function. It looks like mothering. It can look like they are being a good mom. I have a video by a man named Salvador Minuchin, who is one of the founding fathers of family therapy and system thought. It is a video of a consultation that he did with a family. In this case, he recognizes that the mom is over-functioning. Early in the session it

becomes obvious what is happening. There are four kids. The primary issue is that the parents are having difficulty with their 15-year-old daughter. But there are also two sons. One is fairly little; the other is older. But the mom, early on in the session, is fixing the microphone for the older boy, when he is perfectly old enough to do it for himself. It is almost as though she has to button his shirt, even though he is about 13 years old. That is a fairly good clue that there is over-functioning going on.

This is a very significant point. The 15-year-old was encouraged, within the system, to keep acting out because it was the only time when her parents would get together. The mom is over-functioning; the daughter reacts to it; when the daughter reacts to it the father gets involved with the mother. So the daughter keeps getting in trouble so she can keep getting reactions out of the parents. She is not thinking on this level, but she has some awareness of it. Minuchin spends a long time talking with the couple. He has the 15-year-old listen while he encourages them to figure out additional ways that they can do things together. At one point—you have to like old movies to get this—he looks at the father, who does not say much, and asks him, “How did you become Gary Cooper?”

That is a great line. Gary Cooper is an old, famous leading man in the vintage of Henry Fonda, Jimmy Stewart, and those types of people. He did a lot of Westerns. He was incredibly well-known in the 1930s and 1940s. One of the things Cooper was very good at was creating a character with very little dialogue. There were movies where it seemed like the only thing he said was, “Uh huh.” Sometimes he would get matched up with women who were very verbal, and he would hardly say a word. So when Minuchin asked him how he became Gary Cooper it was a perfect question. The man knew exactly what he meant, though he did not answer the question. Minuchin did that to identify that the man was under-functioning and the woman was over-functioning. The question was, how can we get the two of you functioning at normal balances? Well, they make some great progress. The couple begins to really connect and have conversation together. Minuchin helps the father step up more and contribute to the conversation. The couple ends up making some decisions together about what they are going to do. That is a great objective, by the way. There is more power if people decide things together. It greatly increases the chance that something will really change. An interesting thing happens at the end of the session. Since he appreciates the way the system works and the circular causality that is built into it, Minuchin leans over to the 15-year-old and says, “And do not distract them.” He stands up, shakes their hands, and walks out of the room. He does not say another thing. It is very powerful. By the way, the 15-year-old understood what was being said. Minuchin recognized that she might get anxious as the parents were trying to make their changes. He was applying the concept of circular causality.

Other things to look for are levels of differentiation, including reactivity and objectivity, the presence and function of triangles, multi-generational influences, and emotional cut-offs. That is the list of things to look for. The things that I consider to be the most important are toxic issues/secrets, triangles, and differentiation. I do not recognize over- and under-functioning well enough to focus on it. I am sometimes able to see multi-generational influences and emotional cut-offs when they are there. Those are the things that I emphasize.

Let us talk about techniques and goals. There are four major functions of the therapist. First, concentrate on clarifying the relationship between the spouses. Help them talk through high-anxiety topics. Help them have conversation, especially about the toxic issues. Help them talk about the things they have been having a hard time talking about. That is one of the main functions of therapists. These things might not seem like much, but they are. If you can draw from that list of six or seven things to look for and know how to respond to them, that can make up a fairly full piece of your conceptual framework.

What are the toxic issues, and how can I help a couple have conversation about them? This will stretch you personally, because being able to do this means entering into a relationship with the two of them and caring for them. You actually start to feel along with them. You become aware that there is something there that they cannot talk about. And you join them in that anxiety. You have to be able to exercise the courage to bring it up, knowing that they feel like if they talk about this they will be undone.

I was talking recently about a situation we faced in Ethiopia that made us re-think our counseling to a certain extent, because the situation was so different. There was a situation where I ended up drawing way back to my days in social work when I was working with kids in foster care. Often the parents' rights to these kids had been terminated and they were moving on into an adoptive home. One of the things we would try to do to help the kids in that transition was to give them a scrapbook of the history of their birth parent. We would try to involve the natural parents when we could. They needed that as they were moving on. Well, drawing from that experience, I was talking with a young woman in Ethiopia who was about 25. She was very concerned about whether she would be alive to raise her child, but she did not want to talk about it. So I tried to bring up the idea of her doing a scrapbook for her daughter. She could have her picture in it and a letter to the daughter about things she hoped for the daughter's future and other things like that. Well, although this young woman did not want to talk about this, she looked like she was doing all right. She smiled quite a bit and seemed like she was doing well. I was trying to come at this issue as sensitively as possible, hinting at things she could do for her child if she were to die. I did not say those words, but that is what I was getting at. But at the end, after we prayed, I knew that when she left she was sad. She was sadder than she had been when she came in. In a very real way I had taken some of her coping ability away. She was more realistic now, but she was sad. And it was hard, because that was my only experience with her. I had to trust that others would come alongside her and follow up. I have to trust that it will end up being a good thing. But I do not know that for sure.

Why I am saying this? That was hard to do. I felt like it was right to help her think about what she could do for her child. It was good, I thought, but it was hard. Sometimes progress works like that. People may become more upset. They do not automatically move toward feeling better. They may actually need to feel worse for progress to be made. So when a couple is hesitant to talk about an issue, it can be hard, because you might already know that this is going to cause a crisis. There are good reasons why they are not talking about it. It takes courage and conviction to believe that talking about it will be a helpful thing. Sometimes counselors will not go in that direction. They will challenge the couple to pray for wisdom. Sometimes you do not know what to do. It is hard because you join with them and you connect and you care. Doing this, then, can be like taking a punch in the stomach.

How does this apply to our own families as we think about our own genograms and our own issues? How do you go back to your own family of origin and say, "We have not been talking about these issues." Some people might decide not to pursue certain things. Let me tell a personal story that might illustrate this point.

My mother's family was not one that thought or talked about feelings much. My grandmother was a survivor. She buried five of her children before she died. Somebody quoted my grandmother as saying, "Do not pray for old age." It hurts to bury your kids. How can you be a survivor when you bury five of your kids before you die? In her case, she did not think about it. I remember having a conversation with her when I was in my 20s. I did not know the story, and I was learning about these things. I responded to some of the things she was saying with amazement. She answered me by saying, "It does not do any good to cry about it." Actually, that is wrong. It does do good. It is not that my grandma was completely without tears. I saw her cry at one of the funerals. But generally that was not what she did. When my

father died, my grandmother said to my mother, “Now, do not get caught up in self-pity.” There is a piece of that that is true. But what my grandmother meant was more extreme than the truth, and my mother took it that way. Because of the inability to talk about it, when my father died my mother was not able to bring much comfort to me. In later life, the last 10 years or so, that was probably the biggest developmental influence on me. It was trauma, but it was un comforted trauma. Trauma is not as traumatic when there is comfort. Trauma that is comforted probably does not have as much, or possibly any, long-term effects.

It became clear to me that there was no way to talk about this with my mother. She would not be able to hear what I was actually saying. Because of the damage to her own heart, what she would hear would be something like, “I think you are a terrible person.” Consequently, I was left to grieve this by myself. I had to accept that mom could not do that. It was still her responsibility, but she failed. I have to accept and grieve that failure. I have to accept that that was my life. I was hoping for a mother who could someday come through for me and do that. I had to recognize that mom could not do that. I had to appreciate what she could do and give her grace for the things she was not able to do. I have never had that conversation with my mom, and I do not expect to have it. I do not think it would work. Am I doing that because I am being wise or because I am scared? That is not clear to me. It is probably a little of both.

Why am I saying this? To communicate the point that it will take wisdom as you find things that are startling, or as you get a new perspective on a difficult relationship. I do want to encourage you to love these people well and to recognize that you are taking something away if you decide to expose a secret. Friedman is right in what he says about the secrets. I think he is also right in that there will generally be a crisis, anger, or upset feelings. But the anxiety usually goes away. Perhaps that is why it always seems like it is an aunt who brings up these issues. She is relieved to finally get it out. Be sure to ask yourself if your motive for doing this is good or if you are still angry and you want to get revenge. Your motive should be that you want a truer relationship.

Let me mention a few more points that Bowen makes. A therapist avoids joining the family in ways familiar to the family by maintaining objectivity, or a non-anxious presence. We have said this before. There has to be a willingness to talk about things that the family does not want to talk about. As we start to feel some of the anxiety that the family is feeling, we need to deal with it. We need to keep thinking about it so that the anxiety does not drive what we do with people. Clarity of thought needs to determine what we do.

The counselor functions as a teacher and coach. I talked about being a coach earlier. Coaches help people anticipate situations, think about them, and they possibly even role-play to help people do things differently.

Counselors make their own positions clear. They make “I” statements. I really appreciate what Bowen says here, writing as he was back in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. This was very countercultural in the counseling world. The first time I went to social work school, there was a lot of course work on learning how to be clear about your own values. What are the things that are essential to you? You needed to know that so that you could set it aside and not let it get in the way. Of course, it was not as though you could really do that. Today people recognize that you cannot really do that. Now people say that you should know what is essential to you so that you can use it. That is very different. But that is what Bowen said. In the context of a counseling world that taught you to know what your values were so that you could keep them out of the way, Bowen said that you need to make your positions clear. He is right. It is therapeutic for people to see a person model for them what it means to be genuine. That may look

like you saying, “If I were in your shoes, I would feel like this.” Or, it could look like being clear about how people are impacting you. Be able to look someone in the eye and say, “I really appreciate what you are saying. In the conversation we are having, you are being open with me and I am enjoying you.” Talk about the relational process that is occurring. Or, you might have to say, “I have a feeling that while you have come in for counseling and there are things you need to talk about, I feel that you are not talking about them. I am feeling like you do not want to let me in.” That is an “I” statement. This is your experience. That can be huge for people who would find that rare in their families.

We have said that a counselor has to avoid fusion with a family, and one way to do that is by making “I” statements. But does that not generate fusion? Actually, by making “I” statements you are being well differentiated. Being well differentiated in the relationship creates the possibility that we can be connected but stay clear about who we are. Fusion is being connected without the clarity of who we are. It is as though we are the same. We are almost blending ourselves as opposed to staying distinct. Fusion and attachment are two different things. Attachment is not bad. Fusion is attachment on the basis of being the same. Attachment on the basis of being real with each other is fine.