

Family Systems Theory: An Example

One crucial element in marriage is that each spouse has the ability to pay attention to his or her inner life, put it into words, and be honest about it. That is really a summary of a lot of the things we have already said. You have to pay attention to the heart.

We want to put issues behind us so we can go around them or past them rather than go through them. Change occurs, however, when we have to go through them, and going through them means we have to grieve things and forgive them. That is often a way to re-experience pain, like the Ethiopian woman I described in an earlier lesson who ended up sadder after our time together because she was facing the issue more honestly. The challenge for couples is to pay enough attention to their own inner lives so that they can actually name their feelings and make them part of the relationship. That is another summary of what we are trying to do as counselors. We want to hear enough of the story so that we can help the couple notice what they are feeling and put it into words. We do not just want them to be able to put it into words when they are in the room with us, but when they are actually living their lives. Sue Johnson's book *Hold Me Tight* is about this same thing. How do we help people notice what is really going on in their conversations? A person's protests may be about what they are not getting, what they need in their inner life. The protest begins to go both ways in the relationship. It is really about an issue that never gets recognized. Sue Johnson attempts to help people do this very thing. Pay attention. Put it into words. Make it part of your relationship in a more honest way. That is a good summary of a lot of what has been said up to this point.

I would like to discuss Eric Clapton's autobiography, because it is a good illustration of the impact of story on a person's life. It illustrates how your story and history can shape your life. Clapton is an English musician. He was born in 1946. In the book, he reflects back on a time when he was quite young and he recognized that there were secrets in his family. Around the age of eight, he figured out that he was the secret. People would be whispering until he would walk in the room and then they would stop. He was eventually able to put the story together. He figured out that the man he looked at as his much older brother was telling the truth when he referred to Eric as the little bastard. Eric figured out that the man he thought was his older brother was actually his uncle. The people he thought were his parents were actually his grandparents. The person he did not see very often, but thought was his sister, was actually his mother. She was sixteen when he was born. This was at the end of WWII. She got involved with a Canadian Army officer and became pregnant. She let him know that, but he went back to Canada. She stayed out of the public eye after that point. Eric was born in the upstairs bedroom of her parents' house. Not long after that she went away and eventually married someone else and had a couple of other kids. Eric was raised by his grandparents as if he was their child. This was all a big secret. But during family gatherings Eric became aware that people would be whispering and often stop when he would come in. That is how he realized that he was at the center of this story. Eventually he figured it all out.

There is a very sad aspect of this story. The secret became more open when Eric was about 12 or 13. His mom came to visit with Eric's two half-sisters and her husband. Eric asked his mother, "Does this mean I can call you mom now?" She said, "After all they have done for you I think we should just leave it the way it is." That felt like terrible rejection. As Clapton tells about the rest of his life, it becomes obvious that there are some clear connections between that event and what happens later. He became a terrible alcoholic and an extreme drug addict. Those were two phases of his life. After his alcoholism he went through rehabilitation and got sober. But then he got horribly addicted to heroine. He spent huge amounts of money on heroine. He was living with his girlfriend at the time, who was the former wife of

George Harrison. Both of them were terribly addicted. Clapton ended up going back to rehabilitation and got off heroine. After a number of years there have been some really significant changes in his life.

One of the intriguing questions is what happened to Clapton during his second time in rehab. Clapton is very honest in the book. He is very open, honest, and even-handed. He talks about disputes with people and what he sees as his contribution to problems. As you are reading this you get the feeling that this man, who is now in his 60s, is a relatively emotionally mature person. He says that he was supposed to be in rehab for a month, but he recognized after a day or two as he was going through the groups and saying the right things that he could do that for a month, but it did not mean that things would change. He knew that. One day he was alone in his room, and he thought about how he had heard people talk about surrendering. So he got out of his bed and knelt down and prayed. And something happened. I do not think he knows what it was or how to describe it, but something happened. He basically prayed that he surrendered. He gave up. Where is he spiritually? I do not know. I do not know that he knows. I will not be surprised if when we all stand before the throne one day that Eric is standing there, too. Perhaps I will not be surprised if he is not. But he talks about praying for certain people every day. He prays a lot. It is very clear that he is theistic. He believes in God, and he understands the Gospel.

There was a change that happened in rehab at a heart level that stretches back into Eric's early story. It shows up in a couple of ways. Eric had several different relationships with different women, and he had a few children from these different relationships. One of the children was visiting Eric in New York with his mom. Eric was walking down the streets of New York on his way to an apartment building where they were staying. When he got there, however, there was a big commotion on the street and lots of emergency vehicles. Eric's son had been playing a game in the apartment, which was several floors up. There had been cleaners there, and they had taken the screen off one of the windows, and the window was left open. Eric's son, who was five years old, ran out the window and fell to his death.

Throughout this time period Clapton kept going to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. People asked him, "How did you keep from drinking?" But it really was not an issue for him. It was not a temptation. It seems that Eric came to understand that the alcohol and the drugs were not about a high. They were about escaping, numbing, and avoiding the things that were going on in his inner life. But now he had stopped avoiding, and he knew that he could not avoid this terrible circumstance. He would just have to face it and grieve through it. He understands how life works. You cannot get around these things. You have to grieve them.

Later, his mom was dying in Canada, so he went to visit. He has had very little contact with her. He never had contact with his natural father. He did not have a relationship with his mother. His sisters were there, and it was a hard thing. The woman he wanted a relationship with and needed a relationship with, he never had a relationship with. She never stepped up to that. She died, and any hope that was there was now gone. That was harder for him, I think. He does not say that. It is my interpretation. He does say that he got busier and he stayed busy. He was doing projects in California and England and flying back and forth. He says, "I really did not know what to do, so I kept moving." He could not face the death of his mother as well as he faced the death of his son, but he could recognize what he was doing. He was avoiding this, and he knew it. He did not get into alcohol. He got into work, instead.

The book is a wonderful depiction of someone who is dealing with his family issues and how they shaped his heart. It illustrates some good, healthy ways of working through that. It also includes some good examples and stories of what God can be up to in the process, even though it was not clear to Eric what God did. It seems clear to me that God intervened at some level to do something. Whether it was common grace or special grace I do not know.

Let us shift topics for a moment and discuss a couple of issues. As a counselor, how do you leave your work at work and not continue thinking about it when you are at home? I try to limit my thinking to the drive home. A long time ago I read an article where a man talked about how he would envision himself hanging his briefcase on a particular stop sign on the drive home, and he would pick it up there in the morning. It seems funny, but there is something to that. I had a special challenge creating some separation between work and home the first four or five years of my job as a social worker because my office was three houses away from my house. I walked to work. If I needed to go out for visits I would walk home to get the car. I could go home for lunch. There are some great advantages to that, and also some challenges. There was a telephone pole along my walk home, and I treated that telephone pole like the man treated the stop sign. I tried to put it all there and pick it up in the morning. You cannot always do it. But you need to try to find some way to discipline yourself to create some separation.

For pastors this can be difficult because you are going to see the people you are counseling on a regular basis. That is why you need to discuss how what you talk about is going to stay in the office. When you see each other on Sunday morning and you are shaking hands at the door and the pastor says, "How are you doing?" he means, "How are you doing?" He does not mean, "How are the things going that we were talking about in our counseling session earlier in the week?" Keep that to the counseling room. Set up those boundaries. It is somewhat artificial, and you cannot do that completely, but you need to try to work at it. The counselees need to help you work at it, too. When the counseling relationship is terminated, it needs to be fully terminated. You might actually need to say the words, "Good bye." It can be hard to say those words because you do not want the relationship to end. But you have to be disciplined enough to recognize that this is the end. That is hard. Many pastors want to say, as the person is leaving, "You can always come back." But that is trying to avoid the pain of the fact that the time together is over. You have to work on the discipline of setting up boundaries.

You will be helped in doing that if you can remember who is responsible for the change. It is difficult because you care for the person, and so you can keep thinking about it. But if you are feeling too much responsibility for the change, it is really going to be hard to stop. You are going to reassess all the things that you said and did. The truth is that it is really hard to break people, or to mess them up. It is really hard to do that. It is not that we cannot do wrong things and make mistakes. I do not mean that. But usually when we make mistakes we get opportunities to correct them. The most common mistake I make is that I miss things. But the opportunities usually keep presenting themselves again. By the fourth or fifth time I usually pick up on them. Be comfortable with the fact that you will make mistakes. You are not likely to really mess people up that way. In addition, you usually get opportunities to correct the mistakes you will make. But it is hard to be comfortable with the fact that you will make mistakes if you are feeling a great responsibility for the change. It is a works-righteousness mentality that you are feeling, really. You are thinking that the change is going to be dependent on how well you do. But that is not how change happens, according to the Gospel. That is change in a works-righteousness way—if you do this right, then you will get good results. A Gospel-centered approach recognizes that you cannot make this happen. They need to work at it, but there is also mystery to the process. God is involved. That is true whether the person is a Christian or not, it seems to me. There are other things involved that we are trying to contribute to, but it is mysterious, sometimes guess work, and we do not always know what is going on. We are trying to come alongside and help. Stay away from the idea that if you do things right, they will have to change. The entailment of that is that if change is not taking place then you must not have done things right. That is a deadly place to be in. It is not true.

It is all right for you not to know what the problem is right away in a counseling situation. You are not supposed to know what is going on, really. It is all right not to know what is going on. Counseling is

often like going into a dark room and wandering around. Eventually you get to where you are going. But you do not know that immediately. You go forward with the process, watching and paying attention to what emerges.

I do not do a genogram while I am in a session with people. Some counselors do, and it can be good. I am not saying that it is wrong to do it. But I focus on having a conversation with people. It would be too easy for me to get distracted if I were doing a genogram while having a conversation. I want to look at people and pay as much attention to both the non-verbal and verbal cues as I can. After a session I take notes, doing a genogram to see what I missed and what we did not talk about. Sometimes I will then go back and talk about things that we missed. Genograms are a tool, but do not be a slave to them. You need to experiment with them and see how they best work for you. Further, there is not one right way to do a genogram. There are some standard rules and symbols, but there will be many situations that will not fit the mold and you will simply have to make notes on the side of the genogram. Most of our family histories will require notes. You will have to be selective in terms of how much detail you put in the notes. For instance, I do not know what order my mom's siblings were born in.