

# ON EMPTINESS AND CLOSENESS

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PART II

It is useful to think of emptiness in a larger framework, in three parts. There is the part of emptiness that everyone feels. There is another part that comes from not knowing and/or using one's own self. The third part consists of the emptiness that comes from relationships that do not work. When self and relationships are confused, emptiness ensues. People continually try to get from others what they really can get only from themselves, or from themselves what they can get only from a relationship. The confusion of these two leads to fusion and distance.

I have called the emptiness that is in everyone the "fifth dimension" of self. The other four dimensions are the depth dimension (everything that is in a person but without any movement), the object dimension (movement toward objects), the personal dimension (movement toward people), and time. The fifth dimension refers to the natural incompleteness of self and systems. No matter how hard or long one tries, he will never be complete. He cannot be complete as an individual nor can he be complete by marrying or having children. A system does not make a complete whole. The sum of its parts do not add up to a whole. Consequently, everyone is at least a little lonely, feels that he is inadequate, a failure — in a word, feels some emptiness. It is important to realize and acknowledge this natural incompleteness. The myth that completeness exists, the desperate search for it, leads people to attempt the impossible. If one learns to accept incompleteness, to define the fifth dimension of self, then he will engage in the possible. One cannot have complete emotional tranquility, do everything intellectually. If one tries to fill the fifth dimension of self, he can do it only by the unfulfilled expectation for it, by wishful thinking, by fantasy. When not acknowledged, people fill it in by drugs, sex, alcohol, money, attempts to accumulate self from others, conflict, helplessness, mysticism, causes, power seeking, phony types of religion, activities, etc. It leads to an unreal picture of life governed by what should be fairness, righteousness, what people ought to do, doing good — a dream. There is a confusion between ideals and reality. The way to handle the fifth dimension is to acknowledge and accept it. Once the implications of the natural incompleteness of self and systems is accepted and understood, the problem is largely solved. No longer does one look for or expect per-

fection. There is more self satisfaction in one's own humanity.

The second and third parts of emptiness can be worked on effectively, and modified. These parts cause a confusion between what one gets from self and from others. There are many functional processes between people — sex, companionship, touch, communication, sharing, openness, feedback, etc. There are many within self — responsibility, decision making, self esteem, development of values and goals, etc. It is the confusion between these two issues that leads to all the problems of identification and differentiation in families and, eventually, to acute feelings of emptiness. This confusion accounts for the "pendulum effect" wherein a person shifts from one extreme to another. This confusion accounts for homeostasis in systems as people struggle for the least uncomfortable position in a system, by trying to borrow self from others, or introduce more self from outside the family (the therapist.)

The confusion accounts for the shift of symptoms, the problems, the individual cures (accumulations of self at the expense of others,) that we all observe within families. Such confusion of identification and differentiation accounts for the emptiness that families bring to us.

Clinically, emptiness can be seen as mild, moderate or severe. In the mild forms, merely talking about the emptiness makes it better. People in the family are able to look at it closely and sit in it without disintegrating. Therapy proceeds by a direct examination of the emptiness in the person and tracking it back into the extended family. Re-evaluations of past unworkable expectations lead to change in the present ongoing systems.

In the moderate forms, people want relief, to leave the state of emptiness. They experience severe degrees of hurt, anger, emotional upset and misery. Hopelessness and helplessness are high. The opposite polarity may exist. The desire to change some other person consumes one and fills his head. This is disguised emptiness — an attempt to run away from personal emptiness by focusing on others. The helplessness is dealt with systematically by encouraging the people around the helpless one to distance from that person but stay connected. They

connect to the person around all issues except his "problems." The door is left open, connectedness is maintained but his problems are left for him to solve. They pull back from the symptoms of helplessness and do nothing to make the other person feel better or to fill his emptiness.

One must also deal with the over-responsible person who runs from his own emptiness by his efforts to help the other person. With such an individual, the therapist continually focuses on how it feels to attempt the impossible, to get that person connected with his own emptiness, to take him inside himself. These system maneuvers will often give immediate success, calm the system down and allow for later exploration of the emptiness inside and between members of the family system in greater detail. Often when the system is calmed down and anxiety relieved, these families will settle for such an adaptation and avoid the more painful exploration of emptiness that leads to change. That is their choice to make. The therapist can explain to them the way he sees it but the decision is theirs.

In the most severe forms of emptiness, the symptoms have become relatively fixed inside one person and that person is so preoccupied with himself that he becomes **non-systematic**. He does not respond to system maneuvers. In effect, he acts like a pure individual in a system with his own feelings. He is unapproachable by the therapist or members of his immediate family. There is no leverage in the family system. He is mired in the confusion and the extreme emotionality of emptiness. Emptiness has taken over his life, his person. The emotional connectedness with other members of his family is minimal or non-existent at that moment. These people are often suicidal, are sent to hospitals for control, or receive shock or drug therapy. One must bring them out of their emptiness, often by physical means, before they can form some workable connection. They must re-enter a system before they can even contemplate anything about the misery inside of them. Once out of the emptiness, they tend to see their problems as some form of non-understandable event, a physical sickness or simply do not want to look at it. This is not surprising. One can easily understand the reluctance to face an emptiness that has on one or more occasions completely gone beyond one's control. The therapist must bring them out of their emptiness by whatever means possible and then put them back into it in a gradual, controlled, titrated fashion, being careful not to overload the circuits. In a small but fascinating group of people with severe emptiness, I have experimented with the approach of

sending them back to their extended family, not just to get connected with them, but to live with them until the severe symptoms have lifted. Where this is possible, it has produced significant relief from the severity of the symptoms in a few weeks or months and has allowed the person to see the connection between his problems and the emptiness that exists in the extended family. It fits in with the theoretical notion that people bring their emptiness to their nuclear family from their extended family and the clinical observation that **emptiness always goes back to the lack of personal connectedness on the part of everyone in the extended family.**

### Expectations

What people expect from themselves and others leads to an anticipation. There can be a large gap between anticipation and reality. It is very easy to move anticipation over into "need" and then there is another gap between "want" and "need." It is one thing to want something, another to expect it, and another to need it. If a want becomes a need and dictates the level of expectation, then the expectation becomes unrealistic and does not take the real situation into account. Part of the state of emptiness results from a confusion in the definition, emotionality, thinking and heritage attached to these words.

If one is not aware of the fifth dimension of self and system (the natural incompleteness of these processes), he will unrealistically increase his level of expectations. One must accordingly schedule into his life the expectation that things will often not work (Murphy's principle: If anything can go wrong, it will), that frustration, disappointment and hurt are a part of life and reality. The search for absolute sureness can cause such anxiety that one tries for impossible sureness or stays paralyzed, unable to act on reasonable certitude. Problems and unsureness and risk-taking are a necessary part of life. In this sense, life is one large, reasonable gamble. This is not to encourage the development of problems, goofs and frustrations, but to accept them as a part of the human equation.

Hurt is also a part of the incompleteness of man. One must expect that he will be hurt, that the emotional price is necessary to attain precious moments and connectedness. The very exposure to hurt will gradually desensitize the person and make protection of feelings and limitation of movement less necessary. The same incompleteness applies to marriage and family systems. At best, two married people can give only so much to each other. Every

family must supplement itself with a network that surrounds it. Even that is not complete. Once the limitations of the human phenomena are appreciated and accepted, one can give feedback to another person in terms of this incompleteness. The level of expectations will be consonant with reality. The feedback will then be generally positive, and negatives can be framed in this positive context. Acceptance is not dishonest. It understands that self and others are not perfect — that it is all right not to be right, to be imperfect. This does wonders for the emotional climate between people, and fosters closeness.

Many people grew up in their extended family believing that if one does not have high expectations of others, others will deliver very little. With closer observation, this principle comes into serious question. Such a principle is basically pessimistic and negative. Actually, with a high level of expectation, a family system tends to become very sensitive and very reactive, and human failures and goofs become less tolerable. Each person tends to become too important to the other, and one person, especially a child, tends to become a fused extension of the other. The forces of interdependency, togetherness and fusion become so strong that a let-down in any sector has ramifications throughout the system. The emotional climate between people becomes very itchy and explosive. Such a high level of expectation makes the doings of other people stand out and puts the focus on the production of the other person. The personhood of others is ignored and one turns away from his own self and a continuous evaluation of his own expectations.

If one can lower his expectations of others, he will have more time to devote to his own self. As one pulls back his expectations of others, he has nothing to do but expect more of himself, or at least to do a re-evaluation of his expectations of his own self. A keen focus is placed on self, on the differentiation of what one should get from himself and from others. He operates more in the realm of doing the possible and letting the impossible pass. After an initial period of misery, there is actually a sense of relief inside oneself, relief from the tiredness and the frustration of attempting the impossible, of trying to change others. At the same time, one becomes keenly aware of the importance and difficulty of developing a sense of personal responsibility — responsibility for one's own self — the most difficult task in the world. The realization of "how irresponsible I have been, of the gaps between what I said and what I did," are a lesson in humanity, of the humanness of all men, the incom-

pleteness of self.

Though the struggle for personal responsibility is difficult, there is the satisfaction of at least knowing that one is finally in the ballpark where the action is. This struggle for defining what responsibility is inevitably takes one back and forth between his extended and nuclear family; thinking about the values, goals and beliefs that one had and has; those that one copied or reacted against. A new picture of these people and life in the family emerges. Many people avoid such a painstaking re-evaluation. It is, after all, easier to blame the problem on a spouse and get a divorce or send a child to a therapist. If one faces these expectations and lowers the ones that have to be lowered, he can discover an ultimate truth — **responsibility is not really a duty or obligation, but a joy.**

One of the most common situations that clinicians see is the family in which the father is distant, a seemingly uninvolved scoundrel. His part of the family problem is obvious by his movement away from the family through overwork, affairs, whatever. Mother and child are close, get along well and are sympathetic with each other. Such overcloseness between mother and child looks good. In reality, mother is preparing that child for a life that does not exist. He will find that life will not focus on him, that his peer group will not treat him as special. He will look for special attention from the world; he will tend to base his future relationships on being close to another by having a third person as a common enemy. His expectations will be too high. He will spend a life trying to duplicate with one or many people what he got from his mother. He will feel empty and blame his spouse. Some day he will say, "How did I end up in the same position that my mother was in?"

### **How to Enter Emptiness**

Almost all people will enter the emotional state of emptiness only because they have to. The course of events, circumstances or the accidents of life will intrude themselves onto a person. He will feel crushed, lost, empty and miserable. He will tend to muddle around in these feelings or move away and run from them. A rare person may be willing to enter emptiness voluntarily without such stress. At any event, it is important for the therapist to understand the process of entering emptiness so that he can encourage people to get something useful from their misery, hurt and pain — a learning ex-

perience. People will ask, "What should or can I do about it?" **The answer initially is to do nothing.** Let it sweep over you so that you can get in touch with it, experience it, be able to paint a picture of it. He must be able to define the emotional elements of his emptiness first. Doing something about it would be an effort to run from it at that point. With more experience and a greater knowledge of self, one can get to the point of entering his own emptiness whenever he is faced with an emotional problem. Over time he can learn to enter it voluntarily and move more rapidly into doing something with it. Initially, one should simply sit in his own emptiness and identify and experience it.

To enter emptiness, one must learn to **lower the level of his expectations as close to zero as possible.** If wife is sometimes late, expect her to be late all the time. If son is a poor student, expect him to fail. If nobody appreciates you, expect it. Where expectations are ordinarily met, there is no problem and one does not have to work in that area. These are not reversals. In reversals, one is trying to get the other to react in a certain way, to meet expectations. This is a sincere attempt to get oneself into emptiness, to avoid totally any effort to change the other person, to give up. To guard against raising expectations, one must **refuse to tell others what to do.** No attempt is made to try to change another person. He says nothing that even verges on an expectation, order or demand.

This is especially difficult to maintain when the other begins to live up to the very expectations that one has given up. Every fiber in one's body will pressure one to raise his level of expectation again at that point. At that moment, one must strain to make every effort to keep the expectation at zero. People often say, "But if I don't expect anything, nothing will be done." That is true. One either does it himself or it is not done. Lowering expectations provides the tearing apart from emotional expectations that is necessary for personal re-evaluation of misperceptions out of the past. This is best done in the family because that is where expectations are highest and most intense.

Naturally, all of this does not apply to children. One tries to gradually lower expectations of children so that around age 16 in our culture, they are largely working on their own expectations. Over time, parents retire from directors to advisers, giving advice only when it is asked for. In the family, one should not expect any more from husband or wife than he would expect from any man or woman outside the family. The same is true for sons, daughters, fathers and mothers, brothers and

sisters. It is a common experience for people to get along and function well in their network relationships in the world, and poorly in their families. They are unhooked, less invested, more objective and expect less from their network of friends and workers. If people would **examine how well they function in some areas of their life and make the equivalent translation to their close family relationships,** they would improve their function in the family 100 per cent. Lowering their expectations in the family will allow similar closeness to occur.

Parents should experiment with resigning from their position as parents. Much has been written by the experts (?) that implies, if one only knew more, he could be the perfect parent. This only reinforces the drives toward completion and perfection and accentuates the unsureness and failure that follow any attempt to be perfect. By resigning their position, parents could cut down on their levels of expectation of self and children, re-evaluate where these expectations came from, begin to be a person who happens to be a parent among other things, afford to fail, experience relief, and improve the emotional climate between parents and children. All of these efforts to lower expectations will put issues and events into perspective. It is these crazy expectations that get activated in blood relationships, coming from the past, that make closeness impossible.

At the same time that one lowers his expectations of others, he continues to deliver to others what he thinks is workable, what he thinks he should, what he believes in doing. There is no sulking attempt to "get back at." What he delivers to others will change automatically as he re-evaluates his life from the position of emptiness. He also continues to do the "survival" stuff, all of the things that are necessary to keeping the physical life of the family system going. That is one of the real difficulties in change. One is trying to change self, but there is a real living system that must be maintained during that change. He cannot give up on the "survival" stuff such as going to work, etc. In time, a strange thing will happen. The less one expects, the more he will get. Though he may not get what he previously wanted, he will get "more and better." The more you expect of others, the less you get emotionally. The job may be done but the emotional climate is stifling. Decades from now we will all be dead. What will it matter if beds were made or unmade, if cigarette trays were empty or full? What will matter, and influence people long after we are gone is the emotional

legacy that we leave to our children and through them, to their children. This will have influence when we are all forgotten. It is these unworkable levels of expectation, largely transmitted through the generations, that turn people off. It is the sorting out and lessening of these expectations, the elimination of demands, paying attention to the development of functional emotional climates between people in the family — these turn people on to closeness.

### The Therapist and Expectations

The same ideas about expectations that work in a family will work in "therapy." The therapist will function better if he will concentrate on understanding the process in the family, on communicating his message dramatically and clearly, and focus less on wanting to get change in the family. The more he expects, the less he will see and get. The more he expects, the less he accepts and the more frustrated and angry he is apt to become. It is the therapeutic position to say, "If you want change, here is how. But it is your decision and, like all of us, you must live with the consequences." The therapist can introduce the subject to lower expectations by running it through the imagination of the person he is talking to. How would you think, feel, and act if you expected nothing from so and so? I know you can't change your feelings directly, but would it make any sense to you to try it? Could you refuse to act on those feelings of expectation? What would it be like inside of you if you did? Tell me about your emptiness. Could you define a plan so that you could stick to those lowered expectations when every fiber in your body wants you to run from the emptiness?

Most of the difficulties one hears about from people in his office will center in the nuclear family or in one member of the nuclear family. It is easy for any person to think he has finished with his extended family. He sees them less often, can develop a polite, civilized relationship without warmth, or can stay distant from them. The therapist must avoid accepting this limited, narrow view of expectations. The emotional push within the family, from the extended family, is operational in the nuclear family no matter how it appears or is presented. The expectations in the nuclear family are often a fill-in for what one feels he missed in his extended family. Or they may be attempts to duplicate what one imagined to have happened in the extended family. Expectations and emptiness emotionally link the nuclear and extended family

in any problem area. Perhaps one can never return home. Certainly he can never leave home. The therapist must remember that, in order to wipe out unworkable levels of expectation. One must go into emptiness and its connections with the extended family. It is the development of emotional separation while maintaining connectedness that will lead to change in self and different levels of expectation of self and others. Distance will never do this. Attempts to modify expectations without going into the past will result in temporary acts of will that don't last or emotional disconnectedness and distance. These attempts to change will not take root and will be vulnerable to any stress in the future. Such attempts at lowering one's expectations, limited to a person or the nuclear family, can lead to lower levels of anticipation and may decrease disappointment and anger when they are not met. But they end up with a stiffness, a distance (even though civilized) and not closeness. The lowered expectations are used to protect oneself from disappointment and hurt and not to re-evaluate self and expose self to hurt.

In the conflictual, uncooperative emotional system between husband and wife, or parent and child, it is the demanding and unworkable expectations that feed and maintain the struggle. If one can pull back from the other and eliminate the expectations, then the conflict will diminish and the possibility for the development of a pleasant emotional climate will be increased. This must occur before many of the issues can even be dealt with. Otherwise, one is condemned to go back and forth over particular issues and arguments endlessly. Even though the issues are real and often reasonable, the climate, the fix people have on each other, is such that nothing can be accomplished. The introduction of the emptiness in each member of the family, getting behind the anger, will do much to improve this climate. As the family discusses expectations and their roots, each member begins to discover that **it is precisely where one finds it most difficult to lower his expectations that he has his greatest emotional investment.** A seemingly distant, uninvolved father may find it extraordinarily difficult to lower his expectations of his wife. This tells us that, despite the physical distance, his greatest emotional investment is in his wife. He is more husband than father. It reveals where one is really "hooked in" despite the way things look or what he would like to believe.

The intrusion of emptiness and lowered expectations on the therapist and the family forces

both to re-evaluate all the reasonable "shoulds" and "ought to's" both in the family and in the therapy game. Though they may be reasonable, none of these is helpful if they do not work, i.e. contribute to the development of a functional emotional climate between members of the family, verified by those members over time. It is only this climate which will allow the natural forces in a family toward closeness to emerge.

## Images

Images are what people place between their emptiness and hurt and other people. Everyone has some emptiness and, therefore, everyone has some kind of an image. Even people who pride themselves on being real, genuine, honest, truthful, open and instantly personal (like instant coffee) have an image. On careful examination, that is their image — the very openness they pride themselves on. It is a kind of non-image. As with all people, they begin to open up and drop the facade when one touches their emptiness and emotional sensitivities (if they will let you). The purpose of the image is to hide the emptiness from oneself and others. Others may foster the same or a different image by labeling someone "a good mother, a bad father, an alcoholic, a psychiatrist, an aggressive person etc." A quality in self, perceived or misperceived by both self and others, can contribute to the image. It may be so clear and strong an element in the person that it becomes mistaken for the person. That is lay/ professional diagnosis.

Expectations of self and others are often based on these images. A shy person will marry an extrovert only to find that the extrovert is also shy. Extremes are much alike. Over time, with the images stripped away, two peas in a pod marry each other. They vary in details and look different. Their images are different, but their emptiness is the same. A shy person may appear shy because he looks to protect his feelings and says little. The extrovert has the same feelings of loneliness but protects them by the aggressive moving into people. The discussion of emptiness serves to rend apart the image, to tear it down. It strips away the facade and makes strong men cry and positive people unsure. It allows other people to get to know them and to get beyond the assumptions of an image. It is dangerous, scary business. The experience can be so shattering that it should be approached carefully. It is shattering enough to crack the fix one has on himself and others. It paints such a human picture that others can resonate with it. Other people can sympathize in a positive way with someone who knows and

communicates his own emptiness. Such communication and understanding is the personal, indefinable aspect of closeness that goes beyond structure.

To the extent that there is a gap between all the elements in a person and the public relations image he projects or has projected onto him, there is a problem. Exposure of these elements inside self is actually a strength but is often experienced as a weakness. Many people see denial of their own flaws as a strength, and move to buttress the image and protect the vulnerable inner self. No corrective action is taken, only protective action. When the gap between the emptiness inside self and the image becomes too wide or is threatened by exposure, then an inner anxiety, an inner tension arises. This anxiety will spread through the system to other people since the continuation of the image is critical to all the people in the emotional system. If one is seen as the strong member of the family, what would happen if he were known to be weak? Exposure of the emptiness in one might expose the whole group. Anxiety can also be a manifestation of a thinking feeling gap within a person. Feelings that want to be protected and intellect seeing the inevitable exposure of the image can come into conflict and create turmoil.

Therapists become anxious when they sense gaps in their understanding of families but cannot put their finger on the empty part of the story. The gap in the therapist comes from not having a clear general theory or a method of tracking what is happening here and now in the family in this particular episode. As therapists, they go through the same feelings of emptiness as the "patient" but less intensely since it is not their family. Some seek endless supervision to narrow the therapeutic gap. All of these gaps inside a person and between people must be narrowed. The gap between what a person says and what he does reveals the hidden inner emptiness inside self. Looking at that gap, stripping the image away, gets one in touch with his emptiness. Communicating about what one has discovered removes the image. The gap must be defined in a context because one must observe what he does. All of this demands self examination in a context with other people. If one wants to discover what kind of patient he is, he uses the doctor/patient context (transference.) If one wants to discover self in his network, he gets into some form of group-encounter therapy. If one wants to discover self as husband, father, son, brothers, etc., he

goes into family therapy. Other members of the family system can help a person in narrowing and defining these gaps. If they take clear "I" positions about where they stand, then the person under scrutiny will be forced to deal with them and take his own position, his real position, a gapless position and not an image. A concrete reaction with consequences will be demanded. One of the jobs of the therapist is to create movement in the family so that each member will be encouraged and forced to drop his verbal garbage position, his image, and expose the gaps between his verbal position and his movement position. The movement position, over time, exposes the real self and the emptiness in each self.

Images cause real difficulties. They limit what a person can be or become. They demand a tremendous amount of energy to maintain and bring with them a sense of being a phony. To protect the image and the emptiness behind it, one has to avoid openness and sharing. The consequence is loneliness. Images, as adaptations do work up to a certain point. They do protect against hurt. But they prevent closeness. As a solution, they are partly effective but the solution eventually becomes the problem. Instead of working on understanding and communicating the emptiness and hurt, one devotes more and more of his efforts to preserving the image — the very image that might now be causing the problem. The fear of exposure, of being found out, of what others will or might think, causes a person to tell others only as much as he wants them to know. Inevitably there will be gaps between this incomplete information and what the person actually does. These gaps will be filled in by speculation creating misunderstanding and unfulfilled expectations. The gaps and the unfulfilled expectations will create a credibility problem with strong mistrust. The focus on preserving the image and avoiding shame may lead to a sense of false pride wherein you really believe that people do know you and will give you what you want without asking. "My image is so clear, others must know me." Disappointment is to be expected. Images also have the strong disadvantage of encouraging fixes on self and others. "I know you and you know me." A fix assumes that I know me and others. It leads to disinterest, boredom and a closed mind. If we know each other already, what's to say, what's to discover? The revelation of emptiness in each person in the family is often a new slant. The tracing back into the extended family leads to new insights. All of this creates interest and the realization that we never get to know ourselves totally, or others either. Assumptions get replaced by facts.

Sensitivities and their trigger points become identified and more clearly understood. Emotional mines in the family field diminish in size. Communication replaces pure introspection.

## Openness

Through this discussion, we have spoken of communicating one's emptiness without blame, accusation or helplessness. Openness is simply a necessary part of closeness. Experiencing emptiness without openness is an individual process. It goes on inside the individual. It will strengthen the individual but will also decrease connectedness if everything is kept inside. Privacy may lead to some form of individual change, but it kills off change in the family system. And knowing about the other person should not be confused with knowing what he will or will not do. Knowing means being aware of the thoughts and feelings that go on inside a person as well as what he does. It is from these thoughts and feelings that one's level of expectation comes. If the expectation is unmet, it is apt to be followed by a demand which will make things more upset. One may decide to meet or deny any expectation, but he should at least firmly know what that expectation is.

All groups (drug, alcohol, encounter, marriage) recognize the value of opening oneself up. They often err by confusing openness with "getting it off your chest" or they do not teach the tools for getting openness effectively operational in the family. But a large part of their effectiveness is due to their ability to encourage people to admit what they really are behind their images. This stops self-deceit and fosters self-honesty. In the process of opening oneself up to others, a person finds that he is not so terribly different from others. This is both a relief and a lesson in humility. By playing one's picture off the listening wall of others, confusion is lifted by listening to oneself and formulating what he wants to say. Feelings, long bottled up inside, are put into perspective with other aspects of life. Keeping an inner secret tends to accentuate the significance of that feeling. Exposure puts both emotionality and concrete problems into perspective. In the long run, everyone has openness whether they know it or not. Their life is an opinion, an "I" position. What they do or avoid doing is an opinion and this will be seen sooner or later. Privacy is a myth that one pays a high price to preserve. Playing oneself off others clarifies and enlarges self.

There is nothing more detrimental to change than the notion that one can figure himself out inside his own head. He digs a hole in the ground that goes deeper and deeper. That hole is called emptiness. The shovel one uses is an exaggerated sense of privacy.

Some people, rugged individualists by nature, confuse openness with being a burden to others. People who think little of themselves are often afraid that they will be seen as a burden and this will turn people off. There is a way of presenting one's emptiness without bitching, without helplessness, as "my problem to deal with, a way that makes me more knowable and easier to resonate with, easier to get close to." When people trade off the stories of their emptiness over time to each other, many of the sensitive, highly personal malignancies in the relationship disappear. The more this is done in the family, the more closeness is possible. People will want to be with each other and no longer see it as an obligation. This can put some juice in a marriage (or any other relationship) by restoring the open, unfixed view that people had of each other before marriage; when they didn't take each other for granted. They both wore a new face every day. Everyone started with a clean, interesting slate.

In terms of "how to," the very fact of being open must precede the nature of the content in importance in both the mind of the talker and the listener. If one jumps in too fast with comments such as, "That is not true; let me give the facts; I disagree; be honest," he decreases the willingness on the part of the other person to be open. We let children mispronounce words when they first learn to speak. Later, when they are better at speaking, we correct them. The listener must focus on encouraging the other person to talk, to be open, and not concentrate so much on the content. The person who is starting to open up must, somehow or other, learn to take a chance. Though he will be aware of his concern about what others are or might be thinking of him, he must put this out of his mind and be willing to look foolish. In anticipating criticism, etc., he will delay opening up until he is sure. Yet, it is the very process of opening up that will bring sureness. His goal must be developing the ability to open up, not knowing or being sure of impressing others. Confusion, the first stage of knowledge and part of emptiness, has to be exposed. Then he finds it is not so terrible to "not know," to goof, that one can talk without knowing answers.

In opening up and talking about emptiness, there is no one thing or right thing to say. He does not ask, "What do you want me to say?" One feel-

ing and thought leads into another. **One simply thinks out loud.** He learns to paint a picture of himself, to turn in his rough work, and not just give conclusions. He gives all the thoughts and feelings that are leading him to his conclusions. This is not free association though it may resemble it. It could be called focused free association. It is focused on himself, on his emptiness, on its roots in the extended family.

Becoming open is a continuous process so that one does not allow emotionality to build up and then burst out when it can no longer be restrained. Such an outburst will surely overload the emotional system and send reactive waves around the family. Openness is a gradually evolving process. It starts slowly and, like a personal relationship, takes time to develop. Those who claim they do it immediately are really dumping feelings on the market place. Let the buyer beware! Getting these feelings off one's chest merely makes one feel better. They go into another's chest and are eventually returned with interest. The other side of the coin is that one should not confuse absolute honesty and openness. Honesty is really relative, and absolute honesty is often cruelty.

Openness often means taking the trouble to state what may seem obvious. It is better to err in this direction than to tell incomplete stories or to expect others to know you. I am not encouraging obsessive details which people use to hide themselves. If you assume that others know you, you never open up, and they never do get to know you. They assume what you are. Some people are so acutely aware of their own feelings and thoughts that they are an open book and expect others to read them without saying anything. One can err in the other extreme too, by thinking that he knows a person. If you know someone, if you know too much, then you don't inquire. Generalizations and labels prevent knowing and openness. To speak of "all men" or "because I feel this way, you must too," precludes learning. If my feeling is everyone's feeling, projection of self onto another is fostered. Other people cease to exist. Differences become confusing.

### **The Forces of Individuality and Togetherness**

In family life, there is a continual struggle between the forces of individuality and the forces of togetherness. The forces of individuality are represented by man's struggle to find his "real self," his identity, as if there were a real self. There is no real self, no complete real self. A person is a vari-

able entity, depending on the context, stimulus, etc. The search for a real self is a search for the impossible, for a defined entity that does not exist. If one has found himself, he has established some kind of a dynamic or other fix that is a real unreality. It may be comforting but it is not workable. A person can and should develop some principles which he will regard and use as universals. But much of his self is relative to the context. The context will bring out different facets of his person. To overdefine his "I," his principles, his beliefs, is to exaggerate individuality. To have no "I," no principles, is to neglect individuality.

Often the search for individuality leads to a kind of distance wherein the person protects his turf (himself and the space around him.) His tenuous hold on self leads to using distance from others to protect his emptiness and image. His emptiness comes out when people who have been pursuing him stop the pursuit and distance from him. His sense of self depends on others trying to break into his living space. He is lost when ignored by those he cares about. This is a pseudo-individuality since it is so dependent on the pursuit of others. He really is afraid of closeness and often will sense an awareness that he "will lose himself" if he moves closer to another person. Moving close to another person means that he needs their approval, cannot be different from them, must agree with them, or he will feel rejected. The workable forces of individuality depend on the establishment of operating principles that cover the appropriate spectrum of life. They have been tested over time so that one is thoughtfully and emotionally convinced of their substance. They are designed to define the "I" in a context with people who are most important to self. The rest of life is contextual, an experienced experiment.

The forces of togetherness spring from the natural human desire for closeness. Carried to extremes, they lead to a search for completeness. Carried beyond the possible, such forces lead to fusion, a uniting of two people, and resultant distance. They try to defy the natural incompleteness of people and systems. As if one can become complete by fusing into a united twosome. Togetherness forces are experienced most intensely in relationships bridged by blood and marriage — the family. The togetherness forces drive one into the position of a pursuer, trying to accumulate a completeness from the other person and fill in the emptiness in self. The pursuer will avoid dealing with his own emptiness — his own problem. He will continue to move in until finally and completely frustrated.

Eventually, he will give up, look elsewhere, or move away into an angry, hurt distance or develop symptoms of one sort or another. When the pursuer decreases his level of expectation of other people, he goes into his own emptiness. The forces of togetherness are completely emotional and represent the systems aspect of human understanding. Without them there would be no connectedness between people. When exaggerated, these forces produce over-responsible people (for example) who go into their emptiness when they get exhausted. The over-responsible one hooks up with a distant helpless one. When the helpless person is given up on he will go into his emptiness.

It is these clashes of ideologies, of forces that represent the human dilemma. How to be an individual and work for a corporation. How to be a person and a member of a family at the same time. No one wants emptiness. Images fill in gaps until they no longer work. Some worry more about encroachment from the forces of togetherness. The pursuer desperately wants togetherness. These forces get out of balance, swing too much in one direction or the other, vascillate back and forth, clash or distance and separate. Various adaptations such as the development of triangles or symptoms strive to rebalance the system in adaptive form without change.

The individualist must learn to appreciate and deal with the togetherness person. Without togetherness forces, there would be no emotional system. Togetherness people must learn that the individual with his differences not only exists, but is after all, the way that people are. What is called for is knowledge, experience and respect for both forces. The function of the therapist is to teach the knowledge and foster movement so that people in the family will get experience. The function of the family is to gather experience through movement and for each person in the family to develop a profound respect for each and every member of the family. By working on one's emptiness, levels of expectation are decreased and redefined in terms of the possible and impossible. What should I get from myself and what can I get from others? I will be me whatever that is, and you can be you. This demands a careful examination of the inner system (the insides of people), as well as the external system (relationships between people.) One cannot be understood without the other. Each must be defined so that it gets into a working blend with the other. If individuality and togetherness are defined in terms of each other, a working definition will

ensue. That is the whole purpose of seeing the family as a system. If they are defined in terms of myth, should be, I want, the misperceived perception of the extended family, or individually — if that is done, then they will lead to distance-pursuit patterns, fusion and emotional divorce. Closeness will become impossible. The forces of emotional togetherness and connectedness must be reciprocally balanced by the operating principles of individuality. If one thinks completely in terms of the external system, he will be frustrated by individuality. If one thinks completely in terms of the inner system, he will be lonely and isolated. In either situation, closeness will be lost and emptiness will grow.

## COMMENTARY

**Philip J. Guerin, Jr., M.D.**

Many Family Therapists see two families a week for a couple of years, attend a workshop or three with Bowen, Sari; Wtaker and the like and then consider themselves full fledged family systems clinicians.

Fogarty followed a different route than that. Originally trained in Internal Medicine, Fogarty like others in that field was impressed by the large percentage of his medical practice in which the physical symptoms seemed tied into a heavy emotional overlay. His interest in this eventually led him to leave his medical practice behind and enter a psychiatry residency at Georgetown. While there he met Murray Bowen and despite relatively limited contact with him, Fogarty finished his residency and left Washington viewing the family as the important unit of clinical intervention. He returned to New York from Washington in 1963 and began working at a Mental Health Clinic in Westchester. In that setting his unorthodox ideas and practices added to an innate allergy to administration quickly got him into trouble with his fellow professionals. Fogarty's response to this was to move into a back office in the clinic and start seeing 35 families a week. Over time there was a gradual shift from the clinic to private practice but throughout he has maintained a consistent level of 35-40 families a week over the past 13 years. I believe this clinic experience combined with his relatively limited contact with Bowen focused Fogarty's work much more on the nuclear family unit rather than the extended family which is Bowen's major focus. Fogarty to this day remains the only major figure in the "Bowen" camp who has never pre-

sented or written in much detail about research in his own extended family field. This nuclear family focus has resulted in Fogarty's structural concepts of the marital relationship. Like Minuchin's structural approach to child centered families, Fogarty's structural approach to marital discord is demonstrably effective. The long term effectiveness of both of these methods is in question. Can the nuclear family modification resulting from these methods of intervention be maintained without successful movement to restructure the extended family? It is my belief that the extended family needs to be modified in a way that (1) expands the quality and quantity of relationship options available within a particular family system and (2) at the same time opens the system's potential to deal with toxic transgenerational issues. In my experience without this modification the problematic nuclear family will recycle more rapidly and run a higher risk of becoming fixed. My suspicion is that Fogarty's clinical observation of this recycling phenomenon, combined with his expressed concern that the rush towards family systems was burying the individual, triggered him to move toward his conceptualization of "emptiness." I see Fogarty's treatment of this concept as his attempt to tie the insides of the individual with the process of the extended family field.

In and of itself the topic of emptiness muddies the boundaries between psychology, philosophy, religion and other categories of organized thought. Just the idea of emptiness could absorb somewhat like an unfillable vat an infinite number of descriptions of the affective experience. Taken to its ultimate, man's emptiness can be viewed as spiritual. Aquinian philosophy (1) suggests man's emptiness be handled by intellectually investing (believing) in a personal deity. When man's will is symmetrical with this personal deity, emptiness then ceases to exist and is replaced by perfect happiness. Such perfect happiness however is not attainable in this life. The Atheist and Agnostic would propose that belief in such a personal God is the projection of man's need for a deity to re-enforce his denial of the inevitability or his emptiness.

A view of man in his entirety must include, the **psychological** (intellectual and emotional space with people), the **spiritual** (intellectual and emotional space with whatever form his or her God takes) and the **physical** (the nurturance and care of the human body). Our primary concern however in this context is man's psychological space.

Let's move therefore to emotional emptiness as a clinical phenomenon. There are numerous ways of getting into "emptiness" as a psychological space. Certain episodes and milestones in the naturally occurring human life cycle trigger the emptiness experience automatically. As an effective state emptiness frequently cohabitates the same emotional space and time as joy and accomplishment. i.e. birth of baby, marriage, going away to camp or college, etc. Experimentally the "emptiness state" can be arrived at by an on purpose jumping down into one's insides. Fogarty recommends this in his "Voluntary depression," qualifying it by adding the task of then taking one's voluntary depressive experience back into the extended family field. In my experience this method can be hazardous. The hazards are tied into (1) the potential of people to become infatuated with emptiness and the beauty of suffering as an affective experience, (2) if on the immersion route one's footing is lost it can be an unnecessarily painful course to crawl back up. Often the voluntary depression and the frequently occurring infatuation which accompanies it are not then translated into successful movement into the extended family field. On the other hand if the foray into the extended family field does take place it is done in such a way as to confront members of the family with an intense and toxic process delivered in a state of high anxiety with a high level of blaming communicated directly or indirectly.

This leaves us with a similar kind of structural and process problem that we find with psychoanalysis where considerable time and effort is expended rummaging about one's insides in order to sort out one's introjects and externalize them into the transference of the therapy relationship where they can be interpreted. Up to that point the P.A. system works beautifully but it falls short in the working through process. The failure to translate interpreted emotional process into relationship change in the "fictitious working through period" has left far too much long term depression isolation and intellectualized extended family relationship cutoffs in its wake. Some psychoanalytic therapists, Robert Simon, M.D. of the Ackerman Family Institute among them, have tried to combine a modified transference psychoanalytic therapy interspersed with periods of coaching the patient through extended family field excursions. This process is an attempt to facilitate and concretize the working through process. This type of attempt to blend the two frameworks of conceptualization can be bur-

densome even in the hands of the most skilled clinicians.

If one were to pause at this point and propose as a hypothesis that whatever emotional process each of us has introjected can be abstracted about in systems terms as well as intrapsychic terms, we would be left with the potential of exploring the introjected family system with all of its secrets, myths, projections, alliances, cutoffs and tying that into the external family of reality. The follow up hypothesis could be that all of the conflict in a person's life is tied into a combination of (1) the present behavioral interaction of his/her family system, (2) all of the buried family systems conflicts of the past in whatever form they were introjected, (3) other reality factors of the present which form and shape the context in which it is happening.

The relevance of all this is tied into its pragmatic application in the art of intervention. What is the most efficient method of dealing with all of this? Over the past nine years personal and clinical experience has lead me to believe that if one merely takes the steps to:

1. Do a personal genogram and outline the 3-4 generational family field. Names, dates, relationships, etc.
2. Research the toxic transgenerational issues, (i.e. money, death, divorce, etc.)
3. Explore relationship cutoffs and long lost segments of extended family. (parent's siblings, grandparent's siblings, cousins, etc.)

All of the emotionally loaded process, both inside of self and outside in the system will begin to surface automatically. Then it becomes simply a matter of time, motivation, effort, an understanding of family systems theory and a well developed plan to facilitate management of one's own anxiety and maintain focus on changing self. With all of that work to be done there's just no time to be empty. Vonnegut has proposed artificial extended families as the answer to emptiness and loneliness. Bowen has proposed revitalized biologically connected real extended families, Fogarty the "emptiness experience." Existential philosophers and psychologists suggest other varied paths. The answer lies . . .

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