

Unresolved Emotional Attachment

In Life, in Death and Beyond

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The following article is adapted from a presentation at the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family Spring Conference 2016.

Murray Bowen, MD, posited, “Few human events provide as much emotional impact as serious illness and death in resolving unresolved emotional attachments.” (Bowen 1978, 331)

The emotional attachments formed at birth initially are necessary for physical as well as emotional survival. Bowen wrote, “The development of self occurs, in the case of each person, in and through the networks of relationships with other members of the family system.” (Bowen, “Diversity from Unity”)

The fundamental emotional challenge to balance individuality and togetherness has its origins in the triangle between self and mother and father. Bowen stated that this triangle:

. . . is the most important primary triangle in life, and the one in which a person develops the triangle relationship patterns that remain relatively fixed in all relationships. (1978, 531)

As I understand it, elements of unresolved emotional attachments include:

- The degree to which people look to others to regulate themselves
- The degree of sensitivity to others that comes from adapting to the parental family in childhood
- The degree to which people are unsure about self

As I see it, these elements fuel the “anxiety that goes along with” the unresolved emotional attachment.

I think it is interesting to note that in his writings, Bowen described the “unresolved emotional dependencies” that families have on each other (1978, 113), as well as the “unresolved emotional attachment . . . that somehow must be handled in a person’s own life and in future generations.” (382)

As Bowen wrote:

All things being equal, the life course of people is determined by the amount of unresolved emotional attachment, the amount of anxiety that comes from it, and the way they deal with this anxiety.” (537)

In my view, this is an important message, suggesting how much anxiety comes from unresolved emotional dependency on others.

The process of growing up involves the ability to move toward increasing emotional independence and maturity, and to have “self” regulated less by the emotional attachments developed in childhood and more from growing a more mature self.

I also think that it is interesting to bear in mind that the level of intensity is also a challenge to be reckoned with. Bowen wrote, “One of the most important functional patterns in a family has to do with the intensity of the unresolved emotional attachment to the family.” (433)

So, what degrees of intensity challenge one’s efforts to manage oneself in the parental triangle?

- How much self adapts?
- How much self accommodates?

- How much self gets lost in the process?
- How quickly one is able to recover after accommodating?

Further questions:

- Under what emotional conditions is one more apt to seek approval?
- Under what emotional conditions is one more prone to distancing?
- Under what emotional conditions is one more apt to become conflictual?

Personal Effort at Resolution

I am now going to tell you my story of efforts to resolve degrees of unresolved emotional attachments in the parental triangle. Telling a personal story is risky business. My goal is that the emotional process is what stands out.

In Virginia, several weeks before her death, my mother said to me, “When you go to Pennsylvania to see your father, will you please give him my phone number and ask him to call me?”

At the time of her question, my mother was dying of pancreatic cancer and my father was in a rehab for a recent serious stroke. My parents had been divorced for twenty-nine years at the time of the onset of their illnesses and deaths a few months later.

When my mother asked me to intervene on her behalf with my father, the intensity of my anxiety in this triangle increased. In my opinion, my mother wanted my father to understand why she left him. My mother wanted my father’s approval and his understanding of her decision. “I am the conduit,” I thought. “I do NOT like this.” Although by this time I had made steps to get out of the middle of my parents, I could still get triggered.

Before the divorce, I took my mother’s side. After the divorce, I took my father’s side. Although I finally listened to my mother’s side and was able to talk with both parents about no longer taking sides, degrees of sensitivity to their approval remained unresolved.

So, after hearing my mother’s question, I said to myself, “Uh-oh, my father is not going to want to hear this.” And, I told myself, “My mother is too sick for me to ask her to call him herself.”

After arriving in Pennsylvania, I said to my father, “Mom wants me to give you her phone number. She wants you to call her.” In a surprisingly gentle way, my father said to me, “I do not need your mother’s phone number. I won’t be calling her. I have nothing to say to her.”

Despite the gentle delivery, this was not a message I was looking forward to giving to my mother. In fact, I ducked.

I watched my father do his rehab exercises. Before the routine was over, he collapsed. The nurses put him back into bed. Before I left him to go back to my mother, my father handed me a new pair of hospital socks. He said to me, “Please give these socks to your mother.”

At this point, I was somewhat relieved. I had something to give my mother from my father. But, this was a wimpy way out for me. Unresolved chronic anxiety about their approval was driving me. I did not have the courage to tell my father that my mother will *not* like to hear that he would *not* be calling her. I did not have the courage to say to my mother, “My father will *not* be calling you.”

In other words, these degrees of chronic anxiety and unresolved emotional attachments were going every which way in this parental triangle. My parents were challenged in their inability to talk with each other, and I was challenged in my inability to represent myself clearly to either my mother or my father.

Anxiety has been described by Bowen as “the automatic emotional reactivity to perceived threat, real or imagined.” (“Anxiety and Emotional Reactivity in Therapy,” Bowen and Kerr video.)

Was the threat I was perceiving real or imagined? Bowen was known to ask if people had the ability to see their families, their parents in particular, more as people than as “emotionally endowed images.” (1978, 531) In this process of resolving degrees of the unresolved emotional attachments/dependencies to my parents, to what degree did I still see my parents as “emotionally endowed images,” and to what degree was I able to see them as real people?

Back to my mother’s original request, “When you see your father, ask him to call me.” So, what was the threat? My mother was asking me to do her a favor. What was the big deal? Was this a real or imagined threat? At that time, I was fifty-something years old. Was my survival really at stake? This request was in fact an *imagined* threat. But, it *felt* real.

What was unresolved here?

- Anxiety and fear of disapproval?
- Pressure to do it *her* way?
- Uncertainty? Should I or should I not be taking this request from my mother to my father? Whose job is this anyway?

And so the emotional process went from Virginia to Pennsylvania and from Pennsylvania to Virginia.

Back in Virginia, I gave my mother the socks from my father. The next thing I knew they were on her feet. I *never* brought up the phone call. My mother *never* asked.

However, opportunity to grow up kept knocking. The morning of the day of my mother’s death, she started an incessant groaning. The minister’s visit, the hospice nurses’ questions of possible pain, and any and all other attempts to figure out what was wrong failed. Then, I had an idea. It occurred to me that she needed a message from my father. I knelt beside her and said, “My father wishes you deep peace.” With that, my mother put her hand up to her chin and closed her mouth. She did not groan again. I was with her when she died eight hours later.

But it was not over yet. The parental triangle was alive and well. The next step was to tell my father what I told my mother in his name.

Up from Virginia to Pennsylvania, I told my dad the story. When I got to the part about “my idea” and that it involved him, he leaned forward from his pillow and, with a look of intense inquisition, asked, “And, what did you tell your mother I would say?” I said, “My father wishes you deep peace.” With that my father leaned back and said, “Thank you. That is exactly right.” My father died twenty-three days after my mother.

In Summary

- What happened in the dying process?
- What changed in me?
- What changed in the parental triangle?

In the dying process, the intensification of the anxiety in the parental triangle revealed how caught I was. Curiously this level of being caught in the triangle also brought with it a degree of objectivity about my parents’ inability to make person-to-person contact with one another.

The change in me was an increased awareness of the anxiety triggered by the unresolved emotional dependencies manifested in the fear of *not* getting approval. Alas, I was not nearly as resolved as I thought I was! As Bowen stated, “All people have an emotional attachment to their parents that is more intense than most permit themselves to believe.” (433)

Although the emotional divorce between my parents was not resolved, their messages regarding one another in the triangle softened. This seemed to enable me to be less reactive and more thoughtful in communicating

between them in the triangle. They were somehow able to die with some modicum of increased connection to one another.

In my experience, after the deaths of one's parents, the family systems beat goes on.

And as Bowen stated,

The basic relationship patterns developed for adapting to the parental family in childhood are used in all other relationships throughout life. The basic patterns in social and work relationships are identical to relationship patterns to the family, except in intensity. Overall, the emotional process in social and work systems is less intense than in the original family. However, there are exceptions to this in which the intensity of relationships in work systems approximates the intensity of the original family. (462)

In my experience, there are always others in important relationships – marriage, social and work – that will continue to trigger the unresolved emotional attachments in self and in the family system. The basic relationship patterns developed in the parental family in childhood” challenge us to one degree or another throughout life.

For better or for worse, illness and death can bring emotional intensity to the surface. With that comes the opportunity to resolve degrees of unresolved emotional attachments in ways that can lower the level of anxiety in self and in the parental triangle.

Sequel

My husband died fourteen years after my parents. He also had a serious illness -- actually two forms of dementia, Alzheimer's and Lewy Body dementia. He gave his brain for research that revealed these facts.

Like my mother, I had separated from my husband. Unlike my parents, my husband and I did not divorce. But like my mother, I wanted my husband to understand why I separated from him. I, too, sought my husband's approval. I wanted him to see his part. I had too much focus on him. That focus kept me from focusing 100% on my part.

Two nights before my husband died – after all the children and grandchildren had been with him – a hospice nurse pulled me aside and remarked, “Your husband seems to be stuck. Is there anything you have not said? Is there anything you can think of to say?”

Deep down, I knew there was. I realized then that I had been hoping that all the “good stuff” I had done would override my having to go back to this element of unresolved emotional attachment (needing approval) and deal with my truth – that I was more invested in getting his approval than taking responsibility for my actions and accepting the consequences.

I needed to get my thoughts straight. I wanted to be as objective and thoughtful as possible, especially at this poignant time. I called my Bowen consultant.

The next day knowing what I needed to say, I sat beside my husband and said:

I am here to say that I am seeing the emotional process that drove me to put pressure on you to approve of me and to understand my separating from you. That would be putting pressure on you to get me off the hook. And I am seeing that you could not talk with me about that subject. I understand you're not going there.

I also said that I was seeing the process between us as a function of those times when the unresolved family emotional processes in each of our family systems collided.

My husband died the next morning with my daughter, our dog and me.

What else changed in me within the family system? Something shifted in the process of *seeing* and *accepting* the similarities in the emotional process in my parents' marriage and in my own. In that shift, a sense of calm, a lessening of anxiety prevailed.

I have come to think that the unresolved emotional attachment that develops in the process of adapting to the parental family in childhood presents useful obstacles in the process of growing up.

Hanging in and leaning into the wind of unresolved emotional attachment, painful as it may be initially, does over time lower the level of anxiety that, as Bowen said, “goes along with” the unresolved emotional attachment.

References

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