FAMILY OF ORIGIN NOTES
By Larry Foster

The following comments about working on one's own family process are taken from readings and lectures, particularly from *Family Evaluation*, by Michael Kerr, M.D.

1. The purpose in focusing on one's family of origin, particularly in therapy or coaching, is to move toward some resolution of attachment issues and reducing the cutoff process.

2. The primary obstacle to achieving resolution of attachment issues exists within the person making such an effort. Some obstacles are also in the family.

3. Emotional separation is achieved while "in" relationships to important others. It is accomplished by staying in contact with the family and continually working toward emotional change in oneself. The aim is not to improve relationships but to change oneself--done while in relationship to others--and this permits relationships to improve. When the focus is on the other the point is missed.

4. Another reason for the effort at working on self in family of origin is to develop the ability to "think systems" in reference to human functioning. The capacity for systems thinking depends on the ability to stay more objective and maintain broad perspective.

5. Our own family is the ideal arena to work in. It is here that one's progress depends on an ability to regulate one's emotional reactivity more effectively and get beyond biased assessment of others.

6. The capacity to observe the emotional system and oneself in relationship to the system is important in all of this. Sufficient detachment (aesthetic distance) allows one to see connectedness of people's thinking feeling, reaction, and behavior. One can sit back and watch predictable sequences unfold.

7. The procedure involves frequent contacts and periods of physical distance with one's emotional system in which one is vulnerable. One works on objectivity about the system and about oneself in relationship to that system. Going through the motions is not adequate. One must see the family as an emotional unit and one's part in it no matter how many visits are made. This effort is not haphazard especially in periods of higher emotional intensity.
8. The multigenerational study of one's family is more than doing a genealogy. The purpose is to enable one to think about the emotional process in multigenerational terms. The family is an emotional system that evolves down through the generations in fairly predictable ways. Some see this as too fatalistic. But the greater the denial of the influence of the past the greater the tendency to replicate the past.

9. The perspective gained through working on self in family of origin carries over into the nuclear family. One of Georgetown's (Family Center) most important contributions to the field comes from discovering the effect of working on emotional maturity through efforts at directly resolving attachments to one's original family.

10. In multigenerational research, emotional triangles are critical factors in defining a method to work on oneself in the context of existing relationships. This usually depends on unlearning some old concepts about behavior.

11. Labels don't improve relationships. How does one then deal with people closest and most important? A theoretical base for working on one's self in relationship to one's own family becomes beneficial.

12. Can you be in the midst of your family of origin and remain outside the emotional field? Clearer understanding of emotional triangles and more freedom from tending to diagnose others made a difference for Bowen (as one understands it). Can you make good emotional contact, listen to the stories, and not get caught? (or less so?).

13. Emotional neutrality has to do with the ability to see various sides of relationship issues and maintain some objectivity about the fact that things are the way they are in family.

14. Theoretical concepts can be used to organize the data. For example, systems theory defines three basic ways undifferentiation in a family can be expressed in marital relationship (conflict, distance, divorce), dysfunction or symptoms in a spouse (physical, emotional, acting out), or dysfunction in one or more of the children (physical, emotional, acting out). Previous families and generations had the same options.
15. The family is seen as a series of interlocking fields extending back in time. This is a major shift in the way one views why people do what they do—tends to be less blaming.

16. Working on oneself in one's family is not the process of going home and confronting members. This work is done when one is ready or near ready. It can go in fits and starts, slippage and progress—over time. It has to do with being able to see process, and one's part in it. It is not a technique of therapy as some have come to use it. It eventually involves moving to areas one automatically (instinctively) avoids while maintaining self in the system. The automatic processes are typically deeply ingrained. One can begin to see and use the knowledge of emotional pathways in family process.

17. For Rabbi Friedman, differentiation of a self has to do with the capacity to take responsibility for one's own emotional being and destiny.