Learning Bowen Family Systems Theory

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On numerous occasions over the past several weeks, three things have been confirmed for me. The rather artificial and yet psychologically significant transition from one calendar year to the next seems to be a good time to share them. Actually, if you know Bowen Family Systems Theory (BFST) you already know these things, and this simply amounts to a reminder.

1. Learning and becoming a more mature individual in relationships is a matter of “being” first of all, and of “doing” only if it is based on being rather than technique. Techniques for dealing with oneself or others may be helpful in some circumstances, but they are superficial and seldom hold up over time. What makes a difference in one’s life and work is becoming a well defined and emotionally well-regulated individual. That is the work of a lifetime, and one in which we benefit greatly from collaboration with others who know BFST.

2. The practice of being well differentiated, especially with one’s family but also with friends and work colleagues, is not focused on short-term gain, and it is not about changing or getting something one needs from others. Sometimes genuinely being oneself (well-defined and emotionally well-regulated) will result in agreeable responses from others. But more often it will elicit reactivity and criticism whether covert or overt. Whenever one’s focus is on the response of the other rather than on one’s own functioning, one’s self-definition is compromised or completely sabotaged. Focusing on the response of others will almost always defeat one’s intentions.

3. Emotional systems (family, work, friendship circles, etc.) will change when even one member of the system is able to become better differentiated and less reactive in system relationships. However, it is good to remember first, that such change is most likely to happen over time, often a long time, which means the one making the self-differentiating effort must persevere. In the meantime, the one becoming better differentiated (at least a little better than others in the system) will find themselves less anxious and so healthier regardless of resistance in the system. Be observant, curious, as calm as possible, and let the system find its way. Your job is to be that better defined and less reactive you.