The eighth concept in Dr. Murray Bowen’s emotional systems theory is “emotional process in society.” He makes the case for the extension of family emotional process into larger social systems and finally to the whole of society. In a paper he wrote in 1974 he spoke of a societal regression which he thought began already in the 1950’s and ’60’s,

“Society’s emotional reactiveness in dealing with societal problems is similar to the years of slow build-up of an emotional breakdown in a family. When the first symptom appears, the family either ignores it or does enough to relieve the immediate symptom, considering the problem to be solved. Then they continue the usual course until another more serious symptom, which is followed by another superficial effort to relieve the symptom. The process keeps repeating until the final breakdown, which is seen as having developed unexpectedly” (Bowen, Family Therapy in Clinical Practice, 1994, p. 273).

Bowen’s hypothesis was that this societal regression grew out of society’s anxiety over changes occurring with increasing rapidity.

“…[humanity’s] increasing anxiety is a product of population explosion, the disappearance of new habitable land to colonize, the approaching depletion of raw materials necessary to sustain life, and growing awareness that ‘spaceship earth’ cannot indefinitely support human life in the style to which man and his technology have become accustomed. [A human being] is a territorial animal who reacts to being ‘hemmed in’ with the same basic patterns as lower forms of life. [Human beings tell themselves] other reasons to explain [their] behavior while important life patterns are the same as non-thinking animals” (Ibid, p.272).

Is there any doubt that anxiety has continued to increase over subsequent decades and into the twenty-first century? There is growing evidence that basic building blocks of American society are breaking down: increasing rates of alienation, apathy, rebellion, delinquency, and violence. The American family, that institution that bears primary responsibility for socialization in our society, has been seriously compromised.

Bowen thought that such societal regressions simply needed to run their course, and he suggested that the current one would extend for decades to come, until a “final major crisis” would come, he thought, in the mid-21st century. Bowen student and colleague, Daniel Papero, also suggested it would last into the mid-21st century, at which point society would run out of stop-gap or “quick-fix” responses. Bowen said,

“A regression stops when anxiety subsides or when the complications of the regression are greater than the anxiety that feeds the regression. [Human beings are] are not willing to give up the easy life as long as there is a way to ‘have his cake and eat it too … The type of [person] who survives that will be one who can
live in better harmony with nature. This prediction is based on knowledge about the nature of [a human being] as an instinctual being, and on stretching existing thinking as far as it can go. There are many questions about what [humanity] can do about [its] environmental crisis. The thesis here is that [it] might modify [its] future course if [it] can gain some control over [its] reaction to anxiety and [its] instinctual emotional reactivity, and begin taking constructive action based on [its] fund of knowledge and on logical thinking” (Ibid, p.281).

How should leaders respond to societal regression, and specifically to the one we are currently experiencing? Robert Creech, Professor of Christian Ministries and Director of Pastoral Ministries at Truett Seminary of Baylor University, suggests three foci or strategies, which I recommend in slightly altered form.

1. Leaders should focus on themselves, their functioning, their roles and their responsibilities rather than on the anxious reactivity of others. Self-definition and self-regulation is the gold standard in the face of anxious systems. That will inevitably involve one’s exploration of one’s relationship to family and the bedrock work of self-definition and regulation there.

2. Leaders should focus on the “big picture” and on their vision for their own and their organization’s future. This is a version of number one above, because it again requires self-definition and encourages such work at definition in the life of the organization one leads. It requires one to be clear about and always conscious of one’s own beliefs, values, and principles. The search for quick-fixes for symptoms—the shapes societal regression take—will simply find problems and issues (the symptoms) recycling in new forms.

3. Leaders should focus on finding their place in nature. Bowen said that the type of person who would survive the current regression and its crises will be “the one who can live in better harmony with nature” (Ibid, 281). That sense grows out of his insistence that Bowen Family Systems Theory was a natural systems theory. Human beings are part of an earth system that is under siege by a human population that does not recognize its interdependence with the natural world and all its creatures; therefore, we either do not recognize or will not acknowledge our limits. Our self-definition within the earth’s natural system is mistaken; it refuses the reality of our interdependence. As powerful as we may be, we are not in charge, and there are no quick-fixes for our environmental challenges. Appropriate and life-sustaining action will only grow from an acceptance of nature’s way and our dependence on it. Understanding our relationship to the natural world is a foundation for understanding our relationship with one another and for creating and nurturing healthy human systems.