

E-Mails From Rick

A Bowen Family Systems
Conversation



Israel Galindo

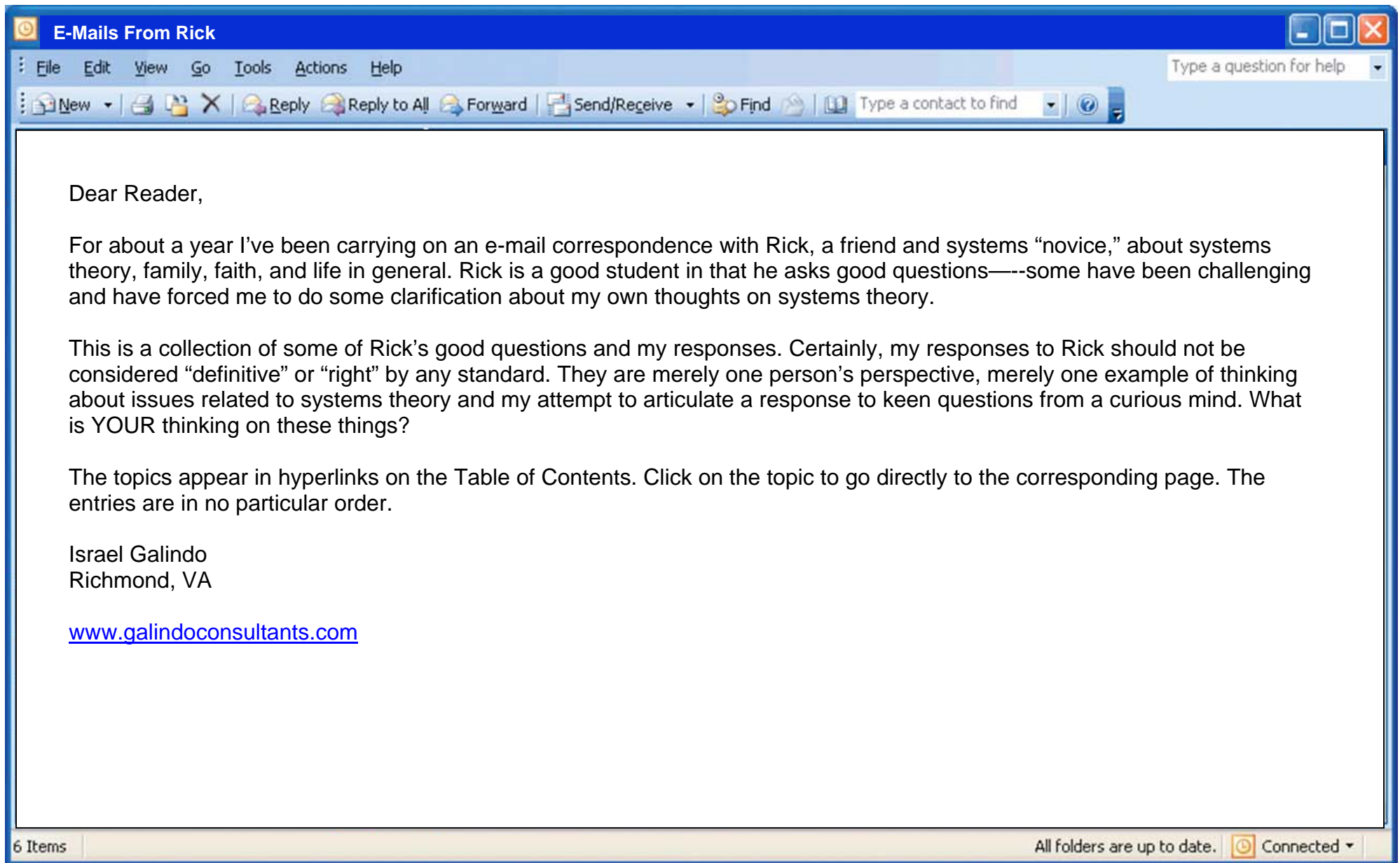


Table of Contents

File Edit View Go Tools Actions Help

Type a question for help

New Reply Reply to All Forward Send/Receive Find Type a contact to find

CONTENTS

Click on the link topic to go to the page

On Accepting A Theory	On Setting Boundaries
On Societal Regression	On Cut Off
On Teaching Systems Theory	On Getting Along
On Church Membership and BFST	On Prayer
On Self-Differentiation	On Sin
On Congregations	On the Soul and the Self
On Faith and BFST	On BFST and Christianity
On Responsibility	On BFST and God
On Neutrality	On BFST and Church
On Family of Origin and Overfunctioning	On BFST and Jesus
On Ghosts in the System	On BFST and Religion
On Determinism and BFST	On Dealing With a Teenager
On Culture and Leadership	
On Homeostasis	
On Leadership	
On Togetherness-Separateness	
On Leadership (firing people)	
On Triangles	
On Conflict	

6 Items

All folders are up to date. Connected

On Accepting A Theory

Israel,

I had a conversation with my pastor once about Family Systems Theory and came away from that discussion convinced that he did not put much stock in Family Systems Theory. I cannot remember exactly why, but that's my impression.....>>

Rick

Dear Rick,

I see that often. Lacking understanding, people tend to dismiss it. Amazing how little energy and effort people put into things because it takes work to understand. Then there's the other group who are familiar with it enough to hold a bunch of misunderstanding about the theory. Then there's the "reactive resistant" group--those who understand enough of the theory to know they'll come across issues they don't want to deal with---primarily issues related to their family of origin, the relationships they are in, and their current functioning.

<<... It probably is due to his lack of understanding. I want to talk with him further about this. So, I feel a need to make a connection between church as congregation and Family Systems Theory, that I can express intelligently...>>

There's this systems notion (applicable to teaching) that says that "you can't plant insight into the unmotivated." No matter how you SAY it, how well you EXPLAIN it, and no matter how HARD you try, people won't learn till they are motivated to do so. And when it comes to systems, the motivation needs to be about dealing with Self on an honest level.

--IG

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

On Societal Regression

Dear Israel,

Societal Regression: I have seen you use this term, and I have been seeing in some of the books I am reading. What does it mean exactly?

Rick

Dear Rick,

This is one of Bowen's original concepts. It's not unique to him, or to systems theory--William Strauss and Neil Howe have revived it in their book, *The Fourth Turning*, but as far back as Giambattista Vico, at least, the concept has been around.

As far as I can tell, Bowen did not fully develop or pursue the concept as he did the other basic components of his theory. Societal regression says that the same relationship/systemic principles that are at work in micro-systems, like a family, are also at work in macro-systems like a society. The same universal emotional forces work at that large level as work at smaller, localized levels (family, church, etc.): anxiety, multigenerational transmission, triangles, cutoffs, etc.

The concept suggest that all civilizations go through peaks and low times in terms of levels of anxiety, the capacity to self-regulate, etc. So, you can anticipate that generationally, or cyclically, there will be anxiety symptoms and "issues" that surface: war, drugs, divorce, health issue, ecology, cults, "the family", homosexuality, what have you. These are just flavor-of-the-day symptoms that have more to do with being the focus of anxiety than anything else (which is my take on "postmodernism"--this too shall pass).

This is not to suggest that these "issues" are real or that they do not have consequences. Strauss and Howe suggest that the last part of the cycle, their "turning", is the breakout of war and chaos before the homeostatic forces are able to bring about self-regulation.

Societal regression has the same structure as a family system in chronic anxiety: lack of vision, lack of self-regulation, myopia, stuckness, paranoia, lack of self-differentiated principled leadership, inability to hold terrorists and willful elements and opportunistic bodies at bay, etc.

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

On Teaching Systems Theory

Israel,

I want to teach BFST to my congregation. I can see how this is important and can be very helpful to my members on many levels, as parents, as individuals, and as leaders in the church. I'd like to offer a class on it. What's the best way to do this?

Rick

Dear Rick,

I'm glad you see the potential value of systems theory for your congregation. I agree that it can be one of the most helpful resources for a congregation's members and leaders. However, I'm suspect that attempting to "teach" it like we attempt to teach so much other stuff in church is the best way to go. And I think that offering a "class" on it will probably just ensure that it is not "learned." There are a couple of learning dynamics behind this: (1) the context of "learning" things in a congregation falls prey to the Null-Expectancy-Factor. That is, when people come to a learning event at church, they come with a null-expectancy of actually learning anything, and (2) the tendency to have a "class" or workshop on systems theory (or any other significant truth in faith or Christianity) does not work, because usually what is attempted is a form of what I call "teaching-by-telling." That doesn't work because it's a form of overfunctioning. Teaching-by-telling is basically doing other people's thinking for them, and when we do that, they don't learn.

I suspect that the best way to try to teach systems theory is the same way you try to teach faith: by example and through experience mediated by a relationship. You can teach ABOUT Christianity in a class, and you may teach ABOUT systems theory in a workshop, but people won't actually learn to BE Christian or to "think systems" or BE differentiated (or change their functioning) that way. Just as faith is more caught than taught, so it is with what we desire to happen when we want people to "get" systems. Christianity is about BEING a Christian, more about FAITH than it is about BELIEF. Systems theory is more than just acquiring CONCEPTS, it is about maturity, working on self, while being in relationships.

I'm not saying you shouldn't have a class or workshop on systems theory in your church. Go ahead and do so. I'm sure people will find it interesting and entertaining. I'm just saying, don't expect it to make any difference in their thinking or in their functioning. Someone said that you can't learn systems by reading books. That's true too, to a certain extent. We DO learn SOME things through books---if we read a certain way. I suspect the problem isn't the books as much as the fact that many people don't know how to read--I don't mean that they don't know how to read words, rather, that they don't know how to approach reading for purpose or reading for learning. Our schools do a very poor job of helping us with this (read "How To Read A Book," by American philosopher Mortimer Adler for more on this).

But I think that there are some things we can do to help people acquire learning in systems theory. Coaching congregational leaders in their work

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

and ministry, either as a matter of course or in the midst of crisis (through challenge and coaching) tends to work. Coaching parents in the midst of their frustration or pain, or because they are motivated to be better parents (rather than changing the kid) may work. In a congregation, assuming the role of the therapist can be effective---therapists don't "heal" or "fix" their clients---they facilitate the emotional processes within the patients/clients so that the patients themselves can bring about their own healing, get themselves unstuck, etc. And coming at it "slant" often is effective, like doing reading through Friedman's Fables with a group of parents and facilitating dialogue that connects the fable with their experience.

The only other way I know that is effective is for them to see it and experience it in their relationship with you. In the same way they REALLY learn faith, also: by seeing you live your own faith and experiencing faith through their relationship with you. The bottom line is, that unless the WAY we teach affects emotional process, then we really shouldn't expect "learning" to take place--because at heart, learning is change.

--IG



[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

On Church Members and BFST

Israel,

What I'm really fishing at here is this...why should church members accept Family Systems Theory as "an authoritative or essential concern for congregational life?" When I presented information on calling, for example, I needed to give Biblical support for my statements rather than offering ideas that may be just what I think. So, I was wondering if it would be helpful to make a connection between Family Systems Theory and the Biblical narrative in order to convince members of the need to pursue greater understanding of the importance of relationship of Family Systems Theory to congregational life....

Rick

Dear Rick,

Great question, and pondering. In matters of theology, polity, doctrine, etc., I do encourage my students to appreciate the necessity of grounding themselves in biblical theology. For the reason you assert: church members more readily accept the challenge of a corrective when they can see it supported in the Bible. Sadly, though, the truth is that you can support just about anything from the Bible--as the misguided are wont to doing. So that calls for the Word of God rightly handled with integrity.

As to FST being an "authoritative or essential concern for congregational life," some thoughts.... First no one needs to accept FST as an informing theory for congregational life. But if they do not, then my question is, what theory does inform you about what a congregation is? And, is it a valid theory? Most people hold to "naive theories" to explain their experience and phenomenology. Naive theories ultimately are not helpful.

Second, the reason FST should not be so readily dismissed, is that it is a valid theory. That is, it contains all of the components (criteria) that a valid theory needs to have: (1) it describes reality as perceived, (2) it is supported by convincing evidence (data), (3) it explains phenomenon accurately (past and present, and can predict future outcomes) within its scope of concern, (4) it is disprovable--that is, it can handle new data (hence the interesting scope of biological and relational systems that are explored through FST), (5) it is fundamental enough to stimulate research and discovery and to enable other theories to build on it, (6) it is understandable and simplifies understanding (it is not vague or obtuse), and (7) it is internally consistent and self-satisfying.

Further, FST theory is relevant to and "applicable" to the congregational setting because, unlike other theories (including other "systems theories" like those of "learning organizations" and "The Fifth Discipline") it is a theory about the fundamental nature of what the church is: a relationship system, akin to a "faith community"--which it is--rather what it is not: a theological school, a mini-seminary, a corporate organization, or a business.

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

Third, to hold to the old argument that "if it's not in the Bible it must not be true," is to take a stand that is both disingenuous and loopy. Anyone who holds to that position should be held to consistency of belief. So, they shouldn't have organ music in church (no organs in the Bible), shouldn't use Robert's Rules of Order in business meetings (that's not in the Bible), should not follow "generally accepted accounting procedures" for budgeting and auditing processes (those aren't in the Bible), shouldn't practice "pastoral counseling" or use theories related to counseling, therapy, psychology, or the social sciences when helping their members in life crises (those aren't in the Bible either).....shall we go on?

Third, I don't think it's necessary for church members to accept, understand, or to believe the theory--in fact, I wouldn't insist on that. I do think there's great advantage to a congregational leader--pastor or staff--to understand, work at, and apply the theory. I can probably state that stronger: I can't see how a person can survive in ministry, much less excel, without a unifying theory that informs him or her about relationships and about self--their own growth, healthy functioning, and maturity.

If you feel the need to connect FST with the Bible, it's not difficult. Have fun creating a Bible study that examines and explains the Old Testament epic with the themes and concepts of family of origin, anxiety, triangles, multi-generational transmission, cut-offs, homeostasis, societal regression, etc. It's all there. And it's all there because the theory describes the universal and timeless phenomenon of the nature of human relationships and relationship systems like families and societies.

--IG



[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

On Self-Differentiation

Dear Israel,

FST states that we marry people that are close to our level of differentiation. Would the same be true of other relationships: the friends we choose, the organizations we join, and the churches we join (I am really interested in this one)? My thought is that we do. If so, this might explain my discomfort in many churches and relationships.

Rick

Dear Rick,

Good question, Rick. Yes, I think the concept that we marry (and are attracted to) people close to our level of differentiation is accurate. The interesting wrinkle, of course, is that even in marriage relationships one partner may choose to grow and mature, while the other may not (sort of an overfunction-underfunctioning reciprocity in that department). Then, one partner or the other chooses to end the relationship, but I've seen others who can stay in the marriage.

I agree that as a rule this is true of all relationships we have---corporate (work and church) and individual (friends and colleagues). But I think it's also true that a highly-self-differentiated, mature person has great capacity for staying connected and being in relationship with those less so. Mentoring relationships are one example of this, and a parenting relationship may be another example. And as you point out, often people have great capacity for staying in a congregation that corporately is at a different ("lower") level of faith and differentiation than one holds---whether through commitment, faithfulness, or loyalty, all the time being clear that there will be little reciprocity in the relationship. I've seen folks stay connected to congregations because they recognize that it meets the needs of a spouse or family, and they are willing, for the sake of those they love, stay connected without expecting that THEIR personal needs are met.

Self-differentiation does not negate altruism, I think.

As we've discussed, for some people, a congregation may not be able to meet their spiritual/faith and relationship needs. If one equates a "congregation" with "Church" that can be a problem. But then it becomes a matter of finding one's own faith community--usually a non-congregational one.

I find that one trap people get in is expecting that all of their personal psychic and emotional needs MUST be met by ONE person (a spouse) or ONE group (a career/job), or ONE church. I think mostly that isn't the case. There is no "one stop shopping" relationship for life and living.
--IG

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

On Congregations

Dear Israel,

Help me think through this. Here I am looking for a church. I'm trying to find "the healthiest" church (maybe congregation is a better term) possible but it appears that it is impossible or feasible (do I keep looking with no end in sight?).

FST, I think states that there is no such thing. It is more of a continuum from 0 to 100 with no one getting a hundred. Further FST would say that the issues are not so much the church but me (the stand (my differentiation) that I take in that congregation).

If that is the case should I just join the neighborhood Baptist church (literally 3 blocks away) and tried to work on my differentiation (being prophetic?) in this system even though I think there are serious FST issues in that church (keeping in mind that there seems to be serious FST issues in the all the Baptist churches I have visited so far)? Or am I missing something?

Rick

Dear Rick

You are correct (and wise), I think, in not expecting to find a "perfect" congregation or a utopian "healthy" congregation. I suppose it's more of an ideal than a reality. But ideals are what we strive for, and on occasion, can attain it, if only for a fleeting moment (before the second law of thermodynamics (and relationships) reaches the tipping point). Congregations are human enterprises made up of people and their human relationships--and that's always complex and messy.

I suppose that on any given day I'd probably settle for "non-toxic" over "healthy" in a search for a congregation. If they appear too healthy I'd tend to suspect they're pulling something over me.

But no, I don't think that I'd settle for just any local church and attempt to "self-differentiate" in its midst. That sounds more like reactive self-defining rather than self-differentiation, which includes being a-part-of a community more than it does being apart-from it. Ultimately, I think healthy places help us move toward self-differentiation, dysfunctional ones do not--they tend to keep us reactive, anxious, and defensive.

Some other things that come to mind:

- Joining a congregation is volitional--you don't NEED to be a part of any particular one, which is different from your family, which you cannot choose. I don't think we need to apologize about choosing our faith community

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

- The position you hold in the congregation is a factor; "informed member," "pew warmer," "pastor," each defines function, responsibility, intensity of the relationship, etc.
- Where you are in terms of your faith pilgrimage will be a factor. Fowler Stage 2 and 3 people are "good members"; Stage 4 people can be prophetic; there are no churches for Stage 5 people
- Congregational membership, like any community membership, involves negotiation of self--namely, pseudo-self. We give up some things, we accept some things, we learn to live with some things, we negotiate some things, we work to improve some things. It is difficult to draw a line in the sand when one is in a community.
- Where you are in your family life cycle is a factor. If you have young children who need corporate spiritual nurture and sound religious faith education you'll have certain needs of your congregation. If you're an empty-nester, you'll need other things from the congregational relationships. Each needs different things from community and different things from sustaining relationships.

--IG



[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

On Faith and BFST

Dear Israel,

I have been re-reading Fowler's Stages of Faith, and I couldn't help but think how a Bowenian would interpret some of the case studies that Fowler uses to illustrate the different stages. There seems to be all kinds of cut offs, triangles, pseudo-selves and undifferentiation going on.

Would what Fowler sees as people moving from one stage to another be seen differently from FST perspective. Is better differentiation necessary in order to move to higher stages of faith? Do they go hand in hand?

Rick

Dear Rick,

As always, your questions make me sit and ponder for a bit. Thanks for that.

I've certainly seen a connection between Fowler's theory of faith development, and Bowen's theory of relationship systems, self, and self-differentiation. The points of convergence seem smoother between these two theories since they deal with common points of concern: the nature of persons (self), the nature of relationships (faith communities and systems), and maturity (development).

While they do not speak the same language (Fowler is decidedly theological and does not stray far from his foundational work on the "kingdom of God" theology; while Bowen is very much in the clinical therapeutic voice), I think they do go hand in hand. But there is some difficulty in finding equivalence. Is being a Stage 5 or 6 (rare in Fowler's view) descriptions of Self-differentiation? Hard to say, because they have different points of concern. Bowenians, for example, refuse to entertain the notion that what they mean by self-differentiation is akin to the idea of "individuation" (Jung), a concept that Fowler (if I recall) does embrace.

There are definite overlaps, one of which is the ability to stay connected (in new ways) with others and with community (systems) while remaining an autonomous, self-determinate (principled), self. Another is that both provide a rubric on personal development (Fowler, faith stages; Bowen, differentiation). Both give attention to the interplay of the affect (emotions) and the intellect (cognitive development for Fowler, and "cerebrating" or "thinking" for Bowen). Both work out their understanding of the individual and his or her development as necessarily being a part of a relationship system (Bowen, family; and Fowler, both family and church). Both make an effort, I think, to be descriptive rather than prescriptive (Fowler doesn't say you "should" be a Stage 6, and Bowen doesn't say you "should" be self-differentiated).

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

If you can get beyond Fowler's dense and convoluted language and descriptions of the stages, and compare them with descriptions of self-differentiation, I think there are clear points of convergence. So I can accept that, yes, people who are moving toward self-differentiation will exhibit some characteristics of those persons in Fowler's "higher" stages of faith. Specifically and to what extent I haven't looked into to determine.

--IG



[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

On Responsibility

Dear Israel,

If I understand FST, responsibility (in the sense of what role am I playing in what is happening to me, how am I contributing to this situation, can I do/react differently to achieve a different result) plays a major role. If so, can any of societal problems be solved without people taking responsibility (e.g., homelessness, aids, poverty, etc.)?

Rick

Dear Rick,

Great question, Rick. This is one that most people dance around so as to not risk tipping a political hand.

Off hand, I'd say that no, no problem can be solved unless people take responsibility. By that I mean people who are legitimately responsible for addressing society's problems (politicos, managers, case workers, clergy, etc.), but also (which is what I think you're asking) those who are directly affected by the problem---often, our society's labeled "victims".

That's not a message most people like to hear.

Our current culture wants someone else to take care of the problem, but no one ever takes the blame for them. Plenty around who want to be taken care of, who are quick to claim their "rights" but unwilling to take responsibility for their own functioning.

Needless to say, it wouldn't take long for your question to launch encamped political tirades from, on one side, those who like the language of "compassion" and "rights" and, on the other, those who prefer the language of personal and civic "responsibility". In their extreme ideological stance, neither point of view accurately addresses the complexity of the issue, of course. For example your question seems to imply that all problem as "solvable," but I think the reality is that there are some problems that cannot be solved, no matter how hard we try nor the amount of money and resources we throw at it (who was it who said, "The poor you will have with you always"?). But the concepts of self-definition/differentiation, multigenerational transmission, responsibility/overfunctioning, functioning, systemic anxiety, and societal regression can all help frame the dialogue in constructive ways.

--IG

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

On Neutrality

Dear Israel,

I read some writers using the term "neutrality" in my readings of BFST. I think I remember Bowen using that term. What do they mean by "neutrality"?

Rick

Dear Rick,

I continue to wonder about that statement by those therapists you mentioned about "neutrality." I continue to think that is a misguided understanding. Although, Bowen did use this phrase in his writings, but it seems to me he used it differently than how I hear others use it.

I don't think neutrality necessarily needs to be a goal. In some things, passion or righteous indignation is appropriate. If we hold to clearly defined values and principles on things, we can't be "neutral" about everything. And if we care and love for the persons with whom we are in relationships, I suspect that neutrality is wishful thinking.

Came across this thought in a book I'm reading. Thought it might help provide a corrective:

"Staying out of triangles sounds simple, but it can't be accomplished just by stating "I'm not going to take sides with either one of you," or "I'm not going to get into a triangle with you two." Emotional neutrality can be a trap if the therapist walks on eggs so as not to give the appearance of being stymied by the partners' conflict. In fact, anxiety about remaining neutral paradoxically catches therapists in a triangular trap because they lose the ability to move freely between the partners and are paralyzed. The therapist's ability to remain emotionally calm in the face of intense feelings is critical to avoiding both the trap of taking sides and the trap of neutrality paralysis. Therapist's awareness of their personal triggers can help, as can extensive experience at dealing with invitations to get into triangles in their clinical work and in their personal lives."

From: *Working With Relationship Triangles*, by Philip J. Guerin, Jr., et al. The Guilford Press, 1996. pp. 11-12.

--IG

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

On Family of Origin and Overfunctioning

Dear Israel,

<<...on the 3rd and final day (praise God from whom all blessings flow) with a visit to my family. I could feel the angst rising in my gut even on the drive here.

And when I'm here, the system sucks me down? Back? In? to the point that I get so caught up in trying to fix other people. Remember my teflon and velcro image? Other places I'm able to wear the teflon suit. At home, I'm wearing not only a velcro sportcoat, but pants, shirt, socks, even underwear.

So . . . I need remedial coaching on how to survive a family system that has been stuck for over 100 years.

What is (is there) the difference between helping someone else and overfunctioning?...>>>

Rick

Dear Rick,

Ah, family... can't live without 'em, can't bury them alive at the old homestead....

You ask a very good question. I suppose the best answer is, "it depends...." It's much easier to do this systems functioning in contexts of less intense emotional process and anxiety than those which are out of biological connectedness, as you well know.

Overfunctioning is an anxious response that is symptomatic of:

- * a lack of self-regulation
- * a lack of clear personal boundaries
- * a lack of commitment to principles (or a failure of nerve when it comes to living up to them)
- * a patterned functioning in a relationship system.

That last point highlights that overfunctioning is not "just about us." It "takes two to tango" at the very least, which means there's an underfunctioner in the system. Further, the over-underfunctioning reciprocity often serves some broader function in the system---it enables something, but more often than not, it prevents something from happening--thereby ensuring homeostasis.

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

Over functioners are enablers of someone else's underfunctioning. So the question is, "If I'm overfunctioning, what am I enabling in another? In the system?" (The delightful deviousness, of course, is that underfunctioners are enablers of the overfunctioner's immature needs: to rescue, to be willful, to intrude, to not focus on self, etc.).

I do struggle with your good basic question when it comes to family. For example, when is extending a kindness overfunctioning? This is a tough one in families---we are expected, rightly, to "be kind" to our family members, to support them through thick and thin, and to take "care" of them--it is, after all, "what families are all about." We don't have to like our family, but we can't kick 'em out (that's a cut-off, of course, which keeps us in a stuck relationship), and faithfulness to the brood is an evolutionary necessity (after all, we want to pass on OUR genes, and good looks, and not some OTHER family's). I've seen grown, professional, Christian people make statements like, "When it comes to my family, the rules don't apply, I'll do whatever it takes." Yikes!

So, is it attitude or is it functioning? Am I being kind out of my care for my family, or am I functioning in that way out of the emotional patterns of my family?

I think it's both, and I think this is where Bowen's "scale of differentiation" helps. As you know the "higher" one moves up the scale, there is a separation between how closely feeling and functioning are related. Overfunctioners cannot separate emotional process (enmeshment, living out of family "myths", reactivity, anxiety, etc.) from functioning: you function out of how your "feel".

But more mature, self-differentiated, persons may, I suspect, APPEAR to function in the same way, but it is not from a reactive, unthinking posture. In other words, the same behavior (giving money, helping out, bailing out) may not be the same FUNCTIONING, emotionally. (A corollary, I think, can be found in Kohlberg's theory of moral development. Behaviors in response to certain moral dilemmas may be the same ACTION response in a lower and a higher moral stage of development--but the rationale and the motive for that same behavior will be totally different. So, it's not the action that is moral, it's the motive and rationale behind the action--one may be lawlessness (or rigidity in concrete observance of The Law) while the other is grace, for example. And the (lower) lawless response cannot understand it as such, but the (higher) grace response CAN understand the difference. The higher moral response knows WHY he or she will act a certain, principled, way.).

Similarly, the principled, self-differentiated person knows the difference between being "caught" in an overfunctioning-underfunctioning reciprocity patterned relationship, and the choice to be altruistic, kind, generous, or to discern the circumstance where it's o.k. to function in a way that would otherwise be "overfunctioning". This may be why it's so often true that we can be kinder to strangers than to our own family.

But this is true in other contexts. For example, on occasion I will provide funds, anonymously, for a student intern at some church to attend a denominational meeting or training event. Rightly speaking, that's something that the student's church should be doing. Naturally, those kinds of funds tend not to be in a church's budget. So, is my kindness an overfunctioning stance that enables the church's irresponsibility, or is it merely a kindness? The way I reconcile it in my mind is to say, "This isn't about the church, it's about my own values about mentoring and encouraging the next generation of church leaders. It's part of what I do vocationally. There's no on-going relationship with the church, so there's no "triangle" here. Additionally, this is something I do this ONCE for this student who happens to be in THAT church, so it's not a patterned relationship functioning. In addition, there's no expectation for reciprocity---since it's anonymous, I don't get recognition, thanks, nor do I make others behold to me (no

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

emotional strings attached). I do this because I want to." This is different, I think, to the scenario where a church member overfunctions in funding the budget of his or her church, by funding pet projects, or pet staff, is a patterned way that facilitated the underfunctioning of other members in their giving.

Ummm.. what was the question again...oh, yeah.....

I guess the best "advice", if I were to give one, is that of the great pragmatic Bowen philosopher Obi-Wan Kenobi, who said, "Trust your feelings, Luke." If you're feeling that anxiety in your gut, or that tick under your eye, you're probably overfunctioning. If you're "feeling obligated," it's probably overfunctioning. If you're being driven more by an anxious pull and shallow breathing in your chest and not from your head, it's probably overfunctioning.

Well, that's all I know about that.....

--IG



[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

On Ghosts in the System

Dear Israel,

I wonder if it might be the case that the system's memory of a previous leader only become available to it as a resource to the system after the previous leader is completely out of the system. By 'resource' I mean a tool that could be used for various purposes, such as maintaining homeostasis, keeping a principled course, or lowering anxiety in the system. ("Remember what happened when that meeting got sticky and . . .").

Perhaps it was their deaths in office, or very soon after leaving office, that contributed to making George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt figures who were not only iconic but also exemplary. The power of the papacy may to some extent be due to the fact that it is part of the position design for the papal tenure to end only upon death. Immediately the whole church has access to his legacy in a way that would be less complete if he had just retired. This might be a factor in the extraordinary impact of even such a brief tenure as John XXIII's, which 40 years of reaction have not entirely erased. It might imply that if Ratzinger has been elected to virtually prolong the tenure of JP II, the lasting legacy of his predecessor may actually be attenuated--unless the new pope quickly finds his own voice.

I am supposing that the ongoing presence of a former leader in an emotional system makes it harder to access and make use of the memories of his or her previous functioning as a leader. I don't mean to suggest that a leader's legacy only become available after death. I presume that more typical is the closure that comes once the leader has fully turned his or her attention to the demands of a new position.

What do you think?

Rick

Dear Rick,

I think your interpretation is accurate, and on several levels.

Simply put, when a person is physically out of the system---through death, a cut-off, or "lost"---I think there is an emotional shift in the emotional process, and that, to the extent to which the person occupied a significant position in the system. I think this is what we mean when we refer to "ghosts" in the system.

I suspect that part of what happens in that emotional field is that people's "memory" becomes functionally selective. This is why some are elevated to sainthood, while others are tagged and cartooned as misfits, troublemakers, bully, incompetents, whatever. (The truth, obviously, is that none of

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

us is totally one or the other). The re-framed and re-interpreted memory itself serves a function---and is, as you say, a "resource" one way or another. If the system needs a saint or a hero, the former one is wrapped up in a memory that makes him or her so. Likewise if the system needs a scapegoat.

In the case of pastors who hang around their former congregations, I suspect that you are correct that that shift in selective memory cannot happen as easily, if at all. I suppose it's akin to getting a divorce, but allowing the "former spouse" to live in an extra room in the house, even after a re-marriage with the NEW spouse in the house! The former spouse cannot be vilified nor "let go of" completely, because he or she is STILL THERE as a counterpoint. In other words, as you point out, "closure" seems to be an important and necessary part of the emotional process. Does this, perhaps, have to do also with separateness--togetherness issues?

Obviously this has little to do with "good intentions." As I am fond of repeating, "Don't question motives; focus on functioning." And as I say to people who are anticipating transitions, "If you're going to leave, then leave."

--IG



[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

On Determinism and BFST

Dear Israel,

I read your paper and was wondering about BFST and if there are some parts of the theory that are more deterministic than others....>>

Rick

Dear Rick,

I'm certain that there are. Which is part of what prompted the presentation for me. Family emotional process and multigenerational transmission suggests a strong determinism, while the concepts of self-differentiation and self-definition suggests otherwise. How do we reconcile these?

<<...my sense of determinism is best defined by the phrase, everything happens for a reason, but maybe not a purpose. I suppose this is also where I would land theologically.....>>

I think it's worth exploring what you mean by the use of the terms "reason" and "purpose". That's at the heart of the philosophizing on determinism. Myself, I'd distinguish between "cause" rather than "reason." THAT gets us past the faulty reasoning, or at least the desire, for everything to have a "purpose." Just because something is "caused" does not mean there's a "reason" behind it. And while there may be an important and necessary FUNCTION that arises out of the causality, that in itself may not have a "meaning" behind it. (So, we'd part theological company here, since I don't think everything happens "for a reason"---in fact, I'd be comfortable believing that FEW things happen "for a reason". We'd have to deal with the first obvious question, "Who's reason?").

I think too often we make two fundamental errors when thinking about this: (1) we mistake "reason" for "cause", and (2) we tend to provide anthropomorphic, teleological, or normative explanations, which set us on the wrong track in understanding "what is going on."

<<...I am pondering as well a presentation about the fact that in my family system, the church, in all kinds of institutions and organizations, I should not be a leader. I should not gravitate toward that position based on my own sibling position, and yet I do. Does that mean that some of the other parts of our experience in terms of the "repertoire of choices in life" and what limits them (the concept discussion handout) have had greater influence that sibling position?

I feel like I want to reflect on "How did a baby get here?"

I am also trying to understand my mom/brother tag team illness and ask the "why now," question. And how I function with both of them in ways

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

that are much more 1st born oriented in terms of leadership qualities. Just a few things I've been thinking about, but not really any clearly formed questions yet.>>

Those are GREAT questions. And I've seen that scenario in several instances. One thought I've had was that sometimes, if the first born (standard bearer, leader) is the "focused child" in the system, the anxiety surrounding that emotional process seems to "shift" things. Then, sometimes, the second or third child is "freed up" to take on or acquire some of the functions of the first born---who sometimes defects in place as a "first." (And of course, in some instances, subsequent siblings are "assigned" first-born functions when the first born defects in place or is not able to function in that role).

The other piece to this, in my observation, is the importance of formative experiences, which you allude to (and hence the questions on the handout). Leaving home, education (which is PRIMARILY an emotional process, not a cognitive one), availing oneself of a certain set of enriching relationships or relationship networks, and at times, moving out of one's culture, or being tossed into situations in which we are forced to take on things we ordinarily would not, can cause a shift in our personal trajectories. These experiences can be powerfully liberating and, I think, can influence (enhance?) our capacity for self-individuation. When that happens, I think it's possible to be LESS confined by the functionally, often deterministic and narrowly defining, forces in our lives.

As to the leadership issue---a nice angle to explore. As you think about this, it may be worth considering that (1) leadership is not monolithic or one-dimensional, and (2) leadership is primarily a function, not a "role" or anything else. So, why can't a second or middle or last ("baby") be a "leader" if being a leader is multi-dimensional (for example, not necessarily about "being in charge" or about "being the strongest") and is primarily about a function in the system?

After you ponder on your good questions, let me know what you've determined (no pun intended).

--IG



[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

On Culture and Leadership

Dear Israel,

<<...I do have a question for clarification regarding today's conversation. _____ said that his church members were naturally friendly and caring for others. We noted that the (Former Church) members were not like that. I thought that was interesting because both of these churches had the same pastor, and his apparent leadership style did not seem to influence both congregations in the same way. It seems to me that the "nature" or "identity" of the people was more of an influencing factor in the way the people live their lives, than the leadership factor....>>

Rick

Dear Rick,

Good questions, Rick. Let me see if I can clarify my thinking on this. I must preface this by saying that these complex matters usually involve more nuance and more dynamics than I am able to get my mind around. Hence, the paradoxical nature of understanding or interpreting some of what this is all about. But then, paradoxical pretty much sums up the church, does it not?

I concur with your observation that the "culture"--which includes a church's identity is more influential in some things than leadership. But that does not deny the amazing influence of leadership (note I do not say "power" of leadership, a notion prone to much misunderstanding in my estimate). One example arose in our conversation today related to how a church senses that a leader "gives permission" for a church to "be itself." I think the case in point was that Fred followed a previous pastor that was emotionally "prickly" and distanced. With Fred's coming, the church felt great "permission" to be its genuine warm and "hugging" self again.

This may be related to that concept that congregations tend to "borrow self" from their pastors (the person in the Leader, "L" position)---in fact, inordinately so, it seems to me. (For the "exceptions" to this, my hunch is that the pastor is not the emotional de facto "Leader" in the system---there may be a matriarch or patriarch lurking about exerting influence).

Misunderstanding the power of culture, and a lack of respecting it, along with a misunderstanding of the "power" of leadership to being about "change" is one of the most common traps that clergy fall into. I think it's one of those things that does them in every time.

--IG

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

On Homeostasis

Dear Israel,

<<...You stated that when a minister leaves a church the people will fall back into a 20%-80% position, which implies that leadership is more influencing than a group's nature or identity. I said that if the "process" is a good one—one that empowers people and is transformative, then the people will act out of their "nature" and that they would not fall back. I believe they will fall back only if we continue doing church we always have done it—a program oriented, content based approach which produces the 80%-20% rule....>>

Rick

Dear Rick,

As tends to happen in winding conversations over lunch, I suspect we're talking about two different things here. Or at least, we're talking about two different "levels." Being a "warm and fuzzy, hugging, friendly" church is different than being an effective church in terms of identity congruent to one's avowed mission.

I concur that intentional, clear, and effective processes and structures enable good functioning. Case in point: putting the processes and structures in place that change the universal 20/80 homeostasis to, let's say, 50/50 (that's ambitious, at best!). But note what that takes: visionary leadership with both the will ("will", not "willfulness"--there's a difference) and the courage to pull it off (paying the price---resistance, sabotage, losing members, etc.), competent key leaders (staff and lay) to work the structures and processes, and the "persistence of vision" to keep it going (but not only in the sense of maintenance, but in the sense of facilitating evolutionary change/growth).

But we are talking about "managing homeostasis" (which is, I think, closer to the point, rather than what most people talk about, which is "managing change"). Which in my view means that I will not be surprised that when the person(s) in the L position leave the system, the congregation will fall prey to the power of homeostasis and revert back to that 20/80 functioning, which again, seems universal in so many areas.

Part of this may lie in the functions of leadership, and of the persons in the L position---which includes: the VISION thing. "Without a vision the people perish" or at least, revert back to homeostatic comfort zones like 20/80. Additionally, let's not dismiss the significance and influence of the functional theology of calling and giftedness. When the leader who is called and gifted in facilitating those functions for the congregation we are talking about, leaves the church, if the NEXT leader does not possess those same gifts and that same ministerial functional call---why would we expect that person to help the church "carry on"? Again, I think we're back at that "borrowing self" thing that church are prone to. As I say (often, I think), "As much as we would wish it to be otherwise, congregations are highly dependent on clergy and staff for their functioning."

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

So, enjoy the ride while you're there. You're only responsible for your tenure, not what comes after you.

--IG



[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

On Leadership

Dear Israel,

<<...So my question is, "Is the best kind of leadership characterized by a self-differentiated leader who doesn't try to change people but permits them be who they truly are, or a leader who attempts to change them—that is, to make them better than they are?" Why is the incongruence between one's self-differentiation and an attempt to change a group or culture towards greater maturity? I think I understand BFST to say that the self-differentiated leader does not try to change others—that change in oneself is the only change that can really happen. ..>>

Rick

Dear Rick,

Ah, very good question (1000 points for you today!). I think that is THE question(s) (though the phrasing tips your hand).

Yes, BFST says that the most effective (not "best", that's a value word) leadership is characterized by self-differentiation (at least, working at it). Yes, the most effective leadership seems to be not bent on changing people, but rather facilitating THEIR own differentiation and growth.

No, I don't think it's about trying to make people "better" than they are (that tends toward willfulness. After all, "better" will always be 'in my image and my way'). ("Better" at what they do; more "effective", yes---that's just management, the structures and processes. And leaders need to do that too.).

Yes, effective leadership CHALLENGES people to be better, to function healthier, with more integrity, to move toward growth. But "challenge" is different than trying to "make" people better. Truth be told, some people don't WANT to "do" or "be" better! That's tragic, but remember that even Jesus asked, "Do you want to be healed?"

I don't see a lack of congruence between working at effective leadership functioning (self-differentiated), working on one's own maturity, and understanding that leadership is about INFLUENCE of presence, not about changing others.

We influence ("change") the culture, and others, by being a part of the system---being clear about our values and principles (vision) while staying connected to those in the system.

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

But remember that leadership is not an individual function, and we cannot self-differentiate as individuals apart. The system influences us also. Both leadership and self-differentiation are reciprocal dynamics---hence, we're back to the paradox.

--IG



[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

On Togetherness-Separateness

Dear Israel,

Hi I just wanted to say hello and ask you a question. I was just wondering if you thought through awareness of oneself a person can improve their ability to balance closeness-distance in their intimate relationships. I have been struggling with this and need to get a better understanding of it over time. I appreciate your feedback regarding this. Take good care and ill talk to you soon.

Rick

Dear Rick,

Not sure what you're asking exactly. A fuller example or illustration about what you're referring to in terms of "self-awareness" and "closeness-distance" would help me get a better grasp of the concern at hand.

But I'll take the question as it is and take a shot at it: yes, I think self-awareness can help us deal with together-separateness issues. In fact, self-awareness is often, I think, the first step. (I used that term, "self-awareness" as one of the components for effective leadership in my latest book).

You'll have to define what you mean by self-awareness, of course. By that I mean primarily, a self-awareness of one's own emotional functioning. While that includes how one "feels", it is more about how one responds emotionally, or "functions" in relationships. You can think of it as a hybrid of emotional intelligence (EI) and self-differentiation (SD).

When we deal with self-awareness, by the way, we're not primarily trying to answer the question, "Why?" That may be of interest, and may be of a little help, but not much. In other words, psychoanalysis is helpful only to a small extent. After all, if you can ascertain the "Why" of how you function or of your emotional reactivity, you're still left with the issue of what to do with that. And the truth is, many of us will never learn the "Why" behind why we are how we are (Much less the "why" of how OTHER people are. Which is why I say "Never question another person's motives." They're probably unaware of their TRUE motives themselves. Therefore, focus on functioning. Self-awareness may start with just noticing how we respond (emotionally) in certain situations and in certain relationships. And then, seeing how we function in response (or reactivity) to those situations or relationships.

I do think that the separateness-togetherness issue is a fundamental one in relationships. The "moving toward" and "moving away" from people, but also issues, circumstances, and relationships. This is, as you indicate, much involved in issues surrounding intimacy. I don't think that BFST

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

answers all of the why's and wherefores of this dynamic, but it does identify its functioning and symptoms in relationships. Focusing on emotional functioning also helps us not get caught in the trap of assuming that there is a "normative" level of separateness-togetherness reciprocity, or of intimacy, for that matter.

--IG



[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

On Leadership (firing people)

Dear Israel,

When we met you said something to the effect that you recommend leaders fire the least effective person when they come in, just to demonstrate someone is in charge. Is that what you said? If not, how would you put it?

Rick

Dear Rick,

Yes, I said something to that effect.

When entering a system, a leader often encounters ineffective or dysfunctional workers left over from the previous administration. This is due either to the former leader's lack of dealing with personnel issues, or from the systems tolerance of underfunctioners or irresponsible people. Either way, the firing of such "dead wood" employees is a good first step for an incoming leader. It helps the system know that there's someone in charge and actually, tends to be a favor to the unmotivated worker (I remember these kinds of workers THANKING me when I fired them!). The most important benefit, however, is to communicate to the BEST people in the system that you value their work and will not tolerate underachievers in the system.

I find that one trap that leaders fall into is forgetting that they are responsible for the SYSTEM first, and only secondarily to the individuals in that system. Too many fail to realize that being "nice" and "understanding" does not correlate with being effective when one needs to address systemic pathology. A surgeon has to cut to heal; a good systems leader often needs to "bleed" the system of its pathogens.

When a system tolerates underfunctioners or irresponsible and underachieving workers, the best workers tend to perceive that as a discounting of their effort and quality of work. Ultimately, you'll lose your best workers first if this becomes patterned. Which means that eventually, the system will lose the very resources it needs to excel.

--IG

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

On Triangles

Dear Israel,

<<...I also had one quick question, hope you don't mind. I was wondering if you thought that working on the triangles in one's family of origin was a pathway to achieving higher differentiation? Do triangles, and not becoming detriangulated, inhibit this process to differentiation as well?

Hopefully this question is clearly stated and not confusing or abstract. I'm working on being more concrete in asking the questions. Thanks. ...>>

Rick

Dear Rick,

You ask a good question, though I'm stumbling on the way you asked it. Working on the triangles in one's family of origin is basic work, I think. Identifying the way the triangles got patterned, which triangles are "permanent" (chronic), more or less, and which triangles form in times of acute anxiety, is one of the first steps in genogram work.

Not sure that I'd look at it as a "pathway to achieving higher self-differentiation," though. If there is a pathway to achieving self-differentiation, I'm certain it involves more than just working the triangles, as important as that may be. Certainly, though, it is a part of it.

Another wrinkle here is that there are two more fundamental goals in identifying the triangles in one's family. One is to be aware of one's own functioning in the triangle. For example, when acute anxiety rises in the family system and a triangle forms that involves me, what function does it serve the system, and what can I note about my own function in the triangle (overfunction, underfunction, mediator, anxiety bearer, peacekeeper, instigator, etc.).

It helps to clarify in my mind that there are "relationship triangles" and "anxiety triangles." Relationship triangles are those that I'm always in by virtue of being a part of a system, like my family. So, I'm ALWAYS in a relationship triangles with, for example, my wife and my sons. When anxious emotional process hits, however, I may get into an "anxiety triangle" (the key is that it involves anxiety and emotional processes like reactivity). In that case, the triangle that gets formed may be me--an issue with a child--my spouse. It tends to be a result of patterned reactivity fueled by anxiety.

Second, I don't think the primary issue is "de-triangling" in our family, but more accurately, it's about deciding how we will function in the triangles we are in. More specifically, an attempt to "detriangle" in our families may lead to a cut-off (another anxious reactivity posture that paradoxical

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

ensures that you will remain "stuck" in the triangle), while staying in the triangle (staying emotionally connected to all parties) while focusing on how we will function will lead toward self-defining our stance and position in the system, which MAY lead toward a more self-differentiated way of being.

--IG



[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

On Conflict

Israel,

<<...I'm trying to understand how one deals with conflictual relationships.

If one has a relationship that is conflictual, how does one go about handling that? I understand that first one has to realize that one is playing a part/role in the conflict and such one should work to understand that (how, when, etc.). I also understand that one can't change the other person as a way of eliminating the conflict. One should remain engaged, calm, etc. and work on ones feelings and appropriate response.

I guess my questions is what does one do when the other person is abusive, verbally or physically. How does one respond to that from a BFST perspective? How can one stay connected when the other person is trying to hurt you verbally or physically? What does one say, if anything or do?

Does the other person need to admit/acknowledge that they have done something wrong for one to remain in relationship? If so what does one do if the other person refuses to do so?...>>>

Rick,

Dear Rick,

Good question. Sounds to me like you have a handle on this. One place to start in understanding, and handling, a conflictual relationship is to "depersonalize" it and ask systems questions. "What is it that keeps this relationship conflicted?" is a better question than "Why is this person such a jerk?" Is this some sort of enmeshment? (though Bowenians tend not to use that term), How is this playing into homeostatic forces? In what ways is anxiety at play here? Are there reciprocity dynamics at play? Assuming this isn't personal, what is it about? And, yes, what's my part in this?

Your insights that you can't change the other person, remaining (emotionally) connected and non-reactive, and working creatively on your own response are on the mark.

However, you also say, <<...I guess my questions is what does one do when the other person is abusive, verbally or physically. How does one respond to that from a BFST perspective? How can one stay connected when the other person is trying to hurt you verbally or physically? What does one say, if anything or do?...>>

Which seems to suggest that this one's a little outside the occasional acute blow-up that is normal in any relationship. When there are patterns of

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

pathology, the rules are different, I think.

The situation you describe, it seems to me, is one in which BFST tends to be most helpful to some people. Especially to Christians, who tend to be "too nice" to be effective in some circumstances. When a person gets verbally and physically abusive no attempt at rationality is of much help, I think. That's because the person is not operating out of his or her resources, best self, or rationality. This is a sign of someone who has lost his or her center and is acting out and striking out--someone who has lost the capacity for self-regulation and has no sense of boundaries.

In that case, I think the best approach is "containment." That is, setting boundaries. My term for it is being "redemptively ruthless." Avoiding hurt feelings (on the part of the other person) isn't the issue. Being "nice", and rational, isn't helpful. Self-regulation and setting the boundaries of the relationships is what counts during this scenario.

<<...Does the other person need to admit/acknowledge that they have done something wrong for one to remain in relationship? If so what does one do if the other person refuses to do so?...>>

This is a very good question. You describe a common trap people get stuck in. First, my own point of view is that it's not very helpful to "question people's motives." It seems a waste of energy to try to peg WHY someone acts out (it may be interesting, and if you have the luxury of time to psychoanalyze it, it MAY be helpful, but ultimately may not help you much). We can readily admit one of two things: the person is functioning in a reactive, anxious manner. Once we're clear about that, what does it matter what the motive is? The person who is anxious and reactive has little capacity for insight about what is motivating their behavior. Which is why it's more helpful to set boundaries than it is to ask that person "Why are you doing this?"

Second, people do seem to get stuck on that "admit you've done something wrong, say you're sorry, and then we'll be friends" thing. I don't get it. First of all, it seems rather a willful posture to set conditions for re-connecting. What people really mean is not "apologize", that is, just admit that you were wrong--but, they want to insist further---"and you have to MEAN it and really FEEL sorry!". That, it seems to me, is not grace (love does not insist on its own way, said Paul) and is more evidence of being stuck and willful. Further, it seems to assume that the other person has the capacity to understand that what he or she did was wrong--that's not always the case. Additionally, did we not understand that that kind of functioning and behavior happens when someone is in an intensely anxious state? It's like asking someone to apologize for their behavior during a time they were experiencing an episode of insanity. Not even our courts insist on that.

I think the key here is that you can define the conditions of the relationships you are in. You can choose to insist on how another person feels, thinks, and responds, or you can recognize that relationships are messy, fluid, developmental, nowhere near perfect, and open to however you want to work out and negotiate the relationship. Insisting on conditions is what gets us stuck. Extending grace, rather than insisting on one's own way, is what heals relationships.

We can also decide what relationships we want to be a part of, and which we do not (even Jesus modeled that from what we see in the NT). Not all relationships are good, healthy, or redemptive. I think we have both the power and the freedom to choose which ones to have in our lives--those that will be a resource for us, enrich us, help us grow, and challenge us, or those that will bring us down. Why is it so difficult for us, when

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

asked, "Why don't you want to be my friend," to say, "Because I just don't like you. But don't take it personally."? Or, "Thanks, but I don't need another friend right now." If that sounds harsh, recognize that it's just a way to set a boundary. Yes, the person will get their "feelings" hurt, but it's better than saying, "Because I think you're neurotic and emotionally arrested, I think your values are suspect and your attitudes toxic and I'd rather spend my time with someone healthier and more mature who will enrich my life rather than suck my life energy in trying to pretend that I like you and stroking your deficiency needs." (Obviously, I've been working on my Enneagram 5 thing. I'm getting better, really).

That's all I know.

--IG



[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

On Setting Boundaries

Israel,

<<..What do you mean by setting boundaries? Can you give some examples? And what does one do if the other person refuses to accept those boundaries? Does stepping away until things calm down a good response or this is just a form of distancing?...>>

Rick

Dear Rick,

Setting boundaries can include several things, I think, depending on the circumstance and the relationship, including expectations and conditions. My boys are young adults, of legal age, so they have great freedom to do things they want. But they both have chosen to live at home. So, while they can legally do a lot of things, as long as they live in MY house, they need to abide by the boundaries I've set---including curfew for them and/or their friends; and what is permitted in the common area "family spaces" in the house.

Some of these boundaries issues have to do with regulating people who are invasive, perhaps abusive in their behavior, emotionally or physically. You don't have to take that. So, a wife sets boundaries like, if you come home drunk, you can't sleep on the bed. If you hit me or the children, I call the police and you get arrested. Parents can set boundaries with their children and teenagers (why this is so difficult for some parents is beyond me). For example, helping the teenager understand that if he has the wrong attitude when speaking to you (arguing, being disrespectful), that (1) they do not have the right to be listened to, and (2) that you will not tolerate it and will not speak with them when they are out of control or irresponsible. If you need to, just walk out of the room—when things calm down, then give the "lesson"—when you are disrespectful to me, you will lose one of the most important resources you need: your parent.

Boundaries may be related to the concepts of core/real-Self and Pseudo-self. Invasive persons tend not to be able to discern at one point they cross the line in terms of appropriate sharing of Pseudo-Self and entering into the territory of core-self.

One thing to remember: we tend not to NEED to set boundaries when we have a healthy relationship with mature, centered persons. But boundaries seem to be a handy thing, and even healthy people need them. As they say, "Strong fences make good neighbors."

--IG

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

On Cut Off

Israel,

<<...In another place in your reply you mentioned that sometimes one realizes that this is not a good relationship to be in and one chooses to end it. Is this cutoff? Or is that necessary at times?...>>

Rick,

Dear Rick,

I've been trying to work this one out for a while. One way is to avoid talking about cut-offs as "bad" and focusing more on the function that a cut-off provides. As you point out, a cut-off can provide distance. And while a cut-off is always a poor way to manage anxiety, sometimes it is necessary, I think. My example is that of a mother/wife that cuts off from her abusive husband (and perhaps his dysfunctional family) because she gets clear that staying in the relationship is not good for her and toxic to her children. She does this knowing full well the consequences of that action, but also is clear that she is willing to pay the price and work through it.

In one sense, one puts distance in the relationship with the other person, but I don't think it's accurate to say one "ends" the relationships. I often remind people that "relationships are forever"--for good or for ill. Even death does not end relationships, it's the reason why we grieve (so choose your relationships wisely).

Another challenging concept in systems theory, that Edwin Friedman speaks of, is related to Self-Differentiation in leadership. And that concept is that the clearly self-differentiated leader has the capacity to choose principles, or persistence of vision, over relationships. When Friedman talks about that functioning, I don't remember it as being framed in terms of cut-off.

--IG

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

On Getting Along

Dear Israel,

Here is another question: If two people in a system are not getting along, what according to BFST, should an interested observant do? I think it calls for the observant to work on his anxiety, stay in relationship with each, recognize that this is there issue and let the other two work on their relationship. But what if the other two are really being vicious and hurting one another? What if one is more vulnerable?...>>

Rick

Dear Rick,

It seems to me you've got a handle on this one. You seem to have a handle on the dynamics of the triangle and of boundaries. But your question seems to suggest that somehow the DEGREE of anxiety or the FORM of behavior between the two other parties in the triangle will change the "rules" of how to be in a triangle. That is a real question, and makes for a tricky prospect.

Principles do not change with circumstances. They are universal and fundamental. But "rules" do change with circumstances. So, when we are talking about relationship triangles, are we dealing with principles or with rules?

I get some of this when I talk to parents about the triangles in sibling rivalry. Basically, I tell them, this is a triangle, this is how a triangle works, this is the consequence if you intervene in the other side of the triangle in the relationship between the siblings. They "get it", but then start throwing up a lot of "what if" or "in this case...". The rest of the time of that discussion is spent illustrating (and stressing) that the dynamics of the triangle don't change with the circumstance---but one can change how one responds based on the circumstance or the intensity of the particular situation. That's not often easy to do.

For example, it usually is true that one of the parties is more vulnerable, and identified as "the victim." But the fact is that intervening in the form of "rescuing" does not really help the "victim." It just keeps that person as "victim" and leaves him or her powerless. But your intervention can be creative and appropriate if you work the triangle. For instance, by working on your relationship with the victimized party in a way that empowers him or her to deal with the situation on their own.

One response to your question may be that it depends what place in the system the "interested observant" holds in relation to the others in the triangle. In certain circumstances there can be appropriate intervention. For example, I've experienced the same dynamic in two systems: different scenario, different parties, but in both, I occupied a place in the system where intervention on my part was appropriate. One was when I was a

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

principle at the school. I had two teachers who were acting out and disrupting the school, their classes, the parents. I called them BOTH in and talked to them BOTH at the same time. Basically, the message was, "I, your boss, will not put up with your behavior. Act like adults or you're both fired."

The other was with my boys, that sibling rivalry thing again. In this case, I was the Parent in the system. So, I called them both in at the same time and gave them both the same message, "I, your parent, will not put up with your behavior. Work your stuff out between yourselves or suffer my consequences."

In both cases, my position made me responsible for the welfare of the SYSTEM, but not of the particulars of the parties involved. In both cases my functioning was necessary for the sake of the system--but ultimately, that perspective helped the individuals involved regulate themselves. I suspect if I'd focused on the individuals and their "issues" and got triangled in, I'd only make it worse and on top of that, take on their anxiety to boot.

--IG



[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

On Prayer

Dear Israel,

If BFST says we can't change anybody, that the only one that can change somebody is themselves, does it make sense that a Christian to pray that someone would change? Would God, presupposing that he could, be interesting in changing someone that is not willing to change?

Rick

Dear Rick,

Sheesh, Rick. Do you stay up at night thinking about these?

Good question, another BFST and Theology issue. This one's tricky, but here's my off-the-cuff response, so don't hold me to it...

First of all, I think it's an oversimplification to say that BFST says we can't change anybody (sort of like my overstatement that "we can't teach anybody anything."). I think BFST has a more sober and responsible view of "changing others" than tends to be uncritically held. At best, it warns against the consequences of being willful about trying to change others to our own values or predilections. But, yes, even therapists know they cannot change the other person--but they can both challenge and resource (enable?) the other to change when THEY are willing and able. And this is facilitated by the therapist's own functioning in the relationship.

Second, we need to bring God into this picture, and invoking the deity is always a tricky prospect. Here I'd have to ask questions concerning your theology and assumptions about God, God's interaction with the world and persons, God's will, and God's intent. We'd also have to ask pesky questions about free will. Likewise, I'd have to ask questions about your belief about prayer---its function, power, nature, etc. For example, some would hold to the purpose of prayer as being primarily about changing ME, not God or others. If that is so, then your question is moot.

Your question, by the way, is one from the emerging theological debate of the day: universalism, or universal salvation. Most will agree that God's intent is that all "be saved." Will God save those who do not WANT to be saved?

Obviously, your question poses a BFST triangle: the person praying---God---the other person. But there are other triangles too, which include, motivation, issues, and anxiety on the part of the person praying, his or her relationship with God and the other person, and then subsequent and derivative issues connected with those.

But I think that all is, as we like to say around my shop, "academic." I think it's a good thing to pray for others, and I think we should. I think often

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

our expectations are naive or overly ambitious, perhaps.

But, to the point of your question, here are two quotes: First, I often tell audiences, "God's greatest desire is for us to love God; but God will never coerce us to love God." And a second quote from C.S. Lewis: "In the end, there will be two kinds of people: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, "THY will be done."

But then, there's the pragmatic Jewish theology of my good friend, Rabbi Sidney Weinschneider, who says, "God is God. He can do what He wants." (in a Yiddish accent).

--IG



[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

On Sin

Dear Israel ,

How does systems thinking address the issue of sin?...>>

Rick

Dear Rick,

My first response is that systems theory does NOT address the issue of sin. Systems theory strives to be "scientific" and as such, concerns itself with "observable facts." So it does not delve into philosophical or moral issues per se. However, that does not mean that systems theory cannot inform or be useful to those who do claim a faith stance.

For example, clinical psychology as a discipline does not concern itself with "sin" either. But its discipline has in one sense redefined and helped us understand better some human behaviors. The result is that certain human behaviors that we once categorized or understood as "sin" or as a "moral deficit" we now understand, from a faith orientation, to be disassociated from a moral framework. We still attempt to help people deal with those behaviors, but do not condemn the person for it and are now better able to "condemn the sin but love the person."

<<.... It seems to me that systems thinking is primarily about creating a less anxious system—a "be cool" mentality....>>

I'd challenge this assumption. Theories, by definition and nature, are not "about" creating or undoing anything. Theories are schemas that help us understand the world more accurately by getting to the essential ways that "things actually are." But theories are applied in various forums---in the case of systems theory, for example, in therapy, counseling, relationships, organizations, leadership. Further and more specifically, in family relationships and congregational relationships and systems.

So choosing the specific context will help us more accurately work at the functions of "applied theory." We do this by giving attention to the fundamental and universal principles that the theory provides. (Aside: most people seem not to know what is a principle and how to use it. Lots of misunderstanding about that. I'm working on a presentation on that).

So, as to your following issue, applied systems theory in the area of congregational systemic relationships is NOT about making the system less anxious. That tends to be a common misunderstanding. It's the stance of those who want systems theory as another tool in the kit for "managing" the system or getting the system to do or be something they want. Applied systems theory is not about getting anybody or anything to be or do something. Unfortunately, I still hear this all the time, even from "experts" in systems theory---usually along the line that the leader's job in the system is to "lower the anxiety." It isn't.

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

<<...But, what if someone in the system is intentionally creating havoc? For example, a fundamentalist, trying to change a church that is basically moderate by rounding up a small handful of folks for charismatic studies, trying to undermine the ministers by making false accusations, participating nominally but intentionally leaving on Sunday morning to worship in another church, etc....>>

Good example. This is where systems thinking can be very helpful to the leaders in the system. To start, systems will be helpful by NOT defining--or labeling--that behavior as "sinful." Rather, the leader will have a better capacity to not be reactive toward the person, choosing instead to seek to understand what is going on. Notice I didn't say, "understand the person," I think that's a less-than-helpful activity (not that you shouldn't try, just that in the end, it may be less than helpful in functioning better in the situation).

In terms of the behavior, the leader will have the capacity to ask questions more appropriate and helpful to the situation. These questions will not question motives, or focus on the individual exclusively. Those questions will be "systemic questions" that will help the leader understand what is going on from a relational matrix perspective, thus avoiding reacting in a myopic way to the anxiety. This also helps the leader to not take it personally--because it probably isn't.

Second, the leader will be able to recognize the behavior for what it is. In the case you described, the behavior seems very WILLFUL. That seems to be coming out in the form of resistance, sabotage, and criticism. Through applied systems theory the leadership will be able to recognize it for what it is and respond appropriately and---this is the most important part: creatively and redemptively. Leadership will get clear about the decisions that need to be made, the FUNCTION that leadership needs to provide and not get so stuck on the things that tend to do us in in anxious times, like people's feelings, the content that is expressed ("the issues"), people's feelings about US, trying to be "nice", or focusing so much on the individuals and "personalities" involved that as leaders we miss our primary responsibility: to Self (the principles, beliefs, and values that inform us--in other words, our integrity to those), and to the system as a whole.

So, for instance, a systems perspective can help leadership in this case determine efficiently if this person is acting out because he or she lacks self-regulation and is manifesting the anxiety that is in the system, or if this is a willful person. If leadership determines that this is a willful person, that's when my theology helps me understand that this indeed is "sinful" behavior (remember that the "unpardonable sin" in the Bible is willfulness--specifically, willful blindness). Further, in this case, this willfulness is the worst form of evil--it is coercive, preys on havoc and on the weak, and seeks not to connect, but rather to make persons into "others" ("them" and "us"). It seeks to change others by bending them to the willful person's own values, beliefs, perspectives. It is the worst kind of human evil and totally antithetical to the Christian faith. In this case, leadership needs to practice courage, because the only way to deal with such a person is to confront the sin--unapologetically, brutally if necessary. The trap for those unschooled in systems theory in this scenario tends to be to fall into a hostage-taking scenario. That happens when three conditions are in place: (1) a hostage (real or imagined), (2) undifferentiated leadership, (3) an unreasonable faith in reasonableness.

The systemic trap here is to assume that you can reason with a willful person. You can't. You basically have a terrorist in the system.

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

<<..... How does systems theory address sin within the system when that sin is unhealthy to the system? My reading on the subject is limited at this point, but there seems to be a lack of mention of sin in what I've read....>>

Again. You're right that there is a lack of mention about "sin" in the literature. That's because the theory is not oriented to deal with theological issues. However, YOU do have the theological background and orientation to do that. Sin is always destructive to both the individual and the system. I think what the theory helps with is not so much focusing on the "sin", but on the leadership functions that can effectively address the sin. Or, on a more personal level, helping us deal more responsibly with our own sin.

<<....On a larger scale, where does theology mix with systems thinking?...>>

O.k., that's one for another e-mail. But this is one thing that the [Leadership in Ministry Workshops](#) strives to address continuously (also, watch for a future issue of the Review & Expositor where one article will address this). But here's one way they "mix" in the context of your question. One thing that systems theory can help us recapture is a more biblical understanding of sin. By that I mean the both systems theory and biblical text and theology understand sin from a corporate perspective. There is no such thing as "individual sin." Sin is always corporate. Isn't it interesting that a theory that does not claim a "religious" stance would provide that corrective to the church by calling us back to that biblical understanding?

--IG



[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

On the Soul and the Self

Dear Israel,

<< . . . is the "self/basic self" the same as the soul? It sounds to me like they are...>>

Rick

Dear Rick,

I personally don't think so. But I'm certain a Bowenian wouldn't say that either. The primary reason being that "soul" is a religious/theological construct, and Bowenians strive to be "scientific." The soul is not reducible to an "observable fact."

<<... . . . is the "self/basic self" the same thing that Joseph Campbell refer to following one's "bliss."...>>

I don't see it that way. Self is a core concept in and of itself, so not easily, or appropriately, equated with "something else." But I think Campbell's concept of following your bliss is a good example of what a self-differentiated person is able to do. But strictly speaking, Campbell's concepts seem closer to Jung's idea of individuation. One curious thing about Bowenians, they are quick to say that self-differentiation is not the same thing as "individuation." And, given the definition of self-differentiation, they are correct. But I do not see inconsistencies between what Jung describes as the process of individuation and what Bowen says about what a differentiated person looks like and functions.

--IG

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

On BFST and Christianity

Dear Israel,

. . . it seems like FST is very compatible with Christianity. It seems that much of Christianity could be understood through the lens of FST. On the other hand, how would FST see Christianity?...>>

Rick

Dear Rick,

Interesting questions. I'd nuance that observation by saying that BFST is not antagonistic or incompatible with a faith stance--like Christianity. But neither is it "compatible" if only because Christianity is such a varied faith tradition. Some expressions of Christianity find more compatibility with BFST than others, I'd say. And, for certain, BFST tends to challenge any naïve notions we may hold about faith, beliefs, and relationships.

I think much of Christianity can be understood through the lens of BFST because Christianity is a genuine human experience--and understanding and interpreting the human experience--and relationships--is what BFST is all about. So much so, that as you may know, Bowen was working on the "ninth concept" of his theory, which he called, "supernatural phenomenon." I suspect he would have had some interesting things to say about religion, faith, beliefs, and spirituality if he'd worked though it.

How would BFST see Christianity? I think it would take a scientific observer stance and see it as an expression of a universal human phenomenon and experience (which includes a spiritual component--the "supernatural phenomenon" that Bowen identified). I remember sitting at a table at a systems conference and a therapist asked that question--along the lines of wondering why BFST seemed to be such an interest to clergy and spirituality. When no one answered, I (uncharacteristically), offered that both ask the same fundamental questions: what is the nature of persons and what is the nature of relationships in the human experience. Buddha spoke and all were duly impressed.

--IG

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

On BFST and God

Dear Israel,

Here is a thought. Assuming for the sake of my argument that there is a God. God's system is the Kingdom of God to which we are all invited to be a part of. FST would say that all systems are interconnected (i.e. family, work, societal, kingdom of God, etc.). We really can cut offs/distance from systems. It is not possible or healthy. So cutting off from God can't be healthy, can it? FST would say that the goal is to be in relationship while maintaining "self." ...>>

Dear Rick,

That sounds like an appropriate analogy. I would add to your final statement a qualifier like "being a true self," or being a "full free, autonomous, self," or being an "authentic self." I feel I need to add that qualifier because of so much pseudo-self, artificially acquired sentimentality that goes on in churches today--especially the so called praise services or contemporary worship experiences. Visiting one church a few weeks ago they sang, ad infinitum, a praise chorus that seems to be "hot" lately. The lyrics go on and on about "...and I neeeeeeed you.... I'm lost without you....." (to much swaying and emoting). All I could think of was how this was fostering a Christian faith as co-dependency stance (and how clueless the worship leaders seemed to be about that).

I agree that God wants a relationship with all persons. But I also believe that God wants a healthy, mature, non-dependent relationship with persons who are themselves mature, full selves, not pseudo selves. I don't think God created us to be co-dependent.

<<...It would seem that many in our world today then struggle with having a relationship with God. For many the solution to the anxiety this produces is cut off and they think the problem has been resolved when in reality it has not...>>

This sounds right, but you're going to have to tighten this up a bit for clarity. Not sure what you're really saying here. Yes, I think it's a given that people's basic problem is cut-off from God. Or, as Jung put it, "all problems in mid-life are spiritual problems." This is the fundamental theological stance, is it not--widely interpreted, from how it comes across in Scripture (in Acts, "bringing them from darkness into light,"), to the American revivalist evangelical understanding of "salvation," to fundamentalist "propitiation" or "substitutionary atonement", to the Catholic Church's redemption theologies.

--IG

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

BFST and Church

Dear Israel,

<<...Further, the "church" of one type in a misguided way tries to force/demand a relationship between persons and God. A triangle of church, person and God is formed. The church in this case over functions to try to bring about resolution between people and God. The church in fact feels responsible for bring this about at whatever cost. While in some liberal traditions the church also forms a triangle. In this case God is the one in the outside position. God is the symptomatic one, the /problem(atic)/. They try to apologize for God and work real hard at fixing God up so that God can be acceptable to the people (e.g. God as woman, God as social justice, etc.).>>

Rick

Dear Rick,

I think you're on to something here, and I think I agree with what you're trying to say. Certainly I can think of many instances of triangling in God and overfunctioning on the part of the church. One favorite example of mine--only in that I use it often in presentations--is when I talk to groups of parents in Baptist churches about children's Baptism. I tell them that for all of Baptist's talk against infant baptism, we sure seem fond or practicing it--we routinely baptize young children (5 years old or younger at times) before any "age of accountability" or before they can make any (adult) decision about "believer's baptism."

I playfully say that I think this has more to do with parental anxiety and less about theology, that this is basically a faithless stance on the part of parents. Parents get anxious about their children's faith because they really do NOT believe that God has a real relationship with their children (they tell the child that God loves them, but their anxiety about the child's "eternal condition" proves them wrong). So, they get on that side of the triangle, meddling in the relationship between God and their child. Then they triangle in the church to relieve their anxiety by providing some kind of "evidence" to assuage their lack of faith that God is in their child's life. In the worst case, the rite of baptism, then, becomes a magic rite to bind God. ("See God, now you have to save my child/allow her in heaven, because we've baptized her."). While that sounds unfair, I have little doubt that this is many people's non-theological understanding.

And I blame us as church leaders as much as I blame the parents for this. First, because of our failure to educate our people theologically, and second, because we lack the backbone to deal with anxiety that results in unfortunate consequences to children's faith.

But, I rant....

--IG

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

On BFST and Jesus

Dear Israel,

Stupid question for the day: Has anyone written on how Family Systems Theory played out in Jesus' life and ministry with the disciples?

Rick

Dear Rick,

I've seen a few folks try to dance around with this. Lots of interesting wrinkles, everything from Jesus being the model of a self-differentiated person to questions about Jesus healing the emotional cut-off between God and man (Adam/garden), to questions as to whether Jesus overfunctioned in taking on the sins of the world.

I suspect that because of Jesus' uniqueness--being God/man, Creator, and all--the identified categories of emotional process as defined in systems theory is, ultimately, limited in application. Principles that are universally applied are universally applicable only in those areas/persons that are subject to the generally universal--and not to the unique and singular. Jesus (Christ) is unique and singular.

--IG



[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

On BFST and Religion

Dear Israel,

<<...Let me ask it this way. Does BFST provide a conceptual way of understanding the Bible, the Good news in a slightly different way than evangelicalism?...>>

Rick

Dear Rick,

Well, the obvious answer to that is, "yes." BFST is a theory, and theory helps conceptualize, and interpret, phenomena. And since BFST is distinct from Evangelicalism, then the conceptualization will be a "slightly different way." Although, perhaps more than "slightly."

<<...Again, I might be reaching here but it appears to me that the use of the words "love," "desire," "idolatry" for example take on a new light (that are consistent with BFST)when considered from a BFST perspective....>>

As I remind my students often, "Words don't have meaning, they have usage." So yes, you can use those familiar terms, and re-interpret them, nuance them, or redefine them, according to whatever theoretical frame of reference you're working from. You can, as is common, and preferred, practice, stick with "accepted normative definitions" of common interdisciplinary terms, but then explicate them in more elegant and sophisticated ways. Perhaps this is what you are getting in touch with?

<<...More bluntly is BFST and God's message basically the same (i.e., healthy, mature self). Just asking not stating. If so how do you see it so and if not what are the differences?...>>

Interesting question, Rick. I don't think it's accurate to say that BFST and God's message basically (is) the same (whatever one's interpretation of what "God's message" may be--the Bible? theology? doctrine? kerygma?). At the very least, that may be an overstatement, at worst, too simplistic, and ultimately, mistaken. To approach this from your question, the "difference" is that one is from a religious, moral, and directive, prescriptive stance ("confessional"), while the other (BFST) strives to come from an objective, descriptive, detached, amoral, observant stance ("scientific").

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

Certainly those two may focus on or give their attention to the same subject--people, family, relationships, human emotional systems, the human condition---but by nature and consequence, they will speak a different language, provide a different interpretation, perhaps speak to different aims and ends. However, that does not mean that each cannot enlighten the other. Neither, I think, does it mean that they cannot speak to each other; but I don't think it is "necessary" that they do so.

What do you think?

--IG



[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

On Dealing With a Teenager

Dear Israel,

<<... I know that it should come from a principled life but I am not always cleared what that is for me. For example, I have communicated to Ricky that he should not lie to us and yet he does so. What do I do? I've grounded him and such with not result. His lying seems to be around his school work and he says that he doesn't tell us the truth because he wants to avoid our outbursts. He calls them outburst but I disagree. I have attempted to explain to him why it is important and how I feel he waste time in computers and talking to his friends that he could use for studying. We agree on consequences for poor grades and when I follow through with them we have our blow outs....>>

Rick

Dear Rick,

Here's my take on this (not that I'm right, just that it's my thinking on this issue as I've seen it work out). First, I think it's helpful to separate the issues here, of which there are two: (1) the lying, and (2) the schoolwork. Getting them confused by thinking that they are the same can lead us to ineffective postures.

Of these two, I think the issue of lying is the most important. I'd work on that one, and frankly, just ignore the schooling for now. Here's why: the lying piece has to do with Ricky's relationship with you, and potentially, with his future relationship with others as an adult. Regardless of the reasons WHY he is lying, you need to focus on YOUR functioning based on your principles and values (as I say, "Don't question motives; focus on functioning." In this case, I'd deal with the fact that Ricky is lying, I really don't care WHY and will not get caught in that trap. But I have to give the kid credit, what a brilliant answer: "I lie because of YOU, Dad." He masterfully has made you responsible for his behavior! Brilliant!)

There's only one way I know of to "cure" kids of lying. If you're frustrated enough, it can be fun---if you're wimpy, it won't work, because this is going to make things a lot worse before it gets better. Remember that we are talking about the nature of relationships---the one you currently are experiencing with Ricky and, from the parental concern, what you want to "teach" your son about the nature of his relationship with others.

Here's the brutal part of it: lying is a breach of trust in the relationship, and once trust is lost, it is almost impossible to regain. That's an important insight and life lesson that needs to be learned. So, here's the only thing I've seen work: the parents have to get their act together and admit that the lying is a problem. They need to commit to presenting a united front on this issue for the sake of the family and for the kid. They need to commit to paying the price it will take. Then, you sit down with the kid and explain the facts of life: "Lying is a breach of trust in our relationship. The problem with you lying to us is that we now can never be sure whether you are telling us the truth or lying to us. So here's the deal: from now on, we're going to assume that anything you tell us is a lie. If you tell us this, we're going to assume that the opposite is the truth." Then, you do

[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

that. No matter what he tells you, you must assume and act on it as if it were a lie.

It will be miserable for the kid, but again, if YOU've been miserable enough, this can be fun for you. When the kid gets to the point of saying, "What can I DO to convince you that I'm telling you the truth?" You remind him of the brutal consequences of his actions: "When trust is lost, it's almost impossible to regain. You've lost the trust of your parents. It sucks, doesn't it?"

<<...This is another area "school work." I hear you saying in the book that we should let them fail the class. I could go along with this but shouldn't I be doing something else to emphasize that school work is important (e.g., loss of computer usage, cell phone)? Or is failing the course sufficient? Am I over reacting about his school work? If I don't have consequences does he get the message that it okay to do what I want because dad is not going to do anything?...>>

This is always a tough one, because we tend to think that the kid's (choice to) failure is in some bizarre way OUR failure. Don't you think that Ricky well knows that school is important? Hasn't he heard this all his life? Haven't his parents modeled the value of education in their own lives? Second, you ARE doing something: you are telling the kid: "I've decided that I'm not going to expend anxiety and energy on this school issue. This is your responsibility, not mine. You're smart enough to know the consequences of your failure in school---good luck slinging hash; you'll never lack employment, McDonald's is always hiring. This is your life, I give it to you. If you choose to be responsible in the choices that you make for yourself, I'll be a resource to you and will always be happy to help." (And don't forget to add the part about using up all the energy you used to put into HIS schoolwork on working on your marriage from now on.).

--IG



[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)

E-Mails From Rick: A Bowen Family Systems Conversation
By Israel Galindo

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[Click here to return to Table of Contents](#)