

# **Congregational Life Dynamics and Conflict Management: An Application of Family Systems Theory**



## **Part 1: Systems Theory**

**New Congregation and Growth Resources  
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## Part 1: Systems Theory

### Purpose

The purpose of this text is to introduce the reader to a different way of thinking about congregational life. The main focus is on the emotional process of human relationships, with a particular focus on Unitarian Universalist congregations. As congregations are composed of people from and within families, family systems theory (hereafter referred to simply as systems theory) provides insights into church life. Systems theory is a way of thinking about families. Accordingly, each section concludes with "Questions to Ponder," which invite the reader to reflect on the dynamics of his or her own family and congregation.

### It's a Different Universe

Most of the time, most of us live quite comfortably in a Newtonian universe—that is, a universe where Sir Isaac Newton's laws provide a theory for understanding what's going on around us. The first law (conservation of energy), especially, is the one we draw on to explain why many things happen the way they do. It states:

Every object in a state of uniform motion tends to remain in that state of motion unless an external force is applied to it.

Here is a simple, well-used illustration: I strike a cue ball with the cue stick. The transfer of external force sets the ball in motion until it strikes another ball, say, the 6. The energy (with some loss to friction) is transferred now to 6, which then careens off the pool table bumper to encounter the 9 ball, at just the right angle to push the 9 into the side pocket. If I've judged well and applied proper pressure to the cue, you could say my push on the cue "caused" the 9 to fall into the pocket.

We explain all manner of things in this way. It is our theory of how things happen. Event A causes event B. B, in turn, causes other events C, D, and so on. A child on the playground accuses another of knocking her down "on purpose." The evening news declares that the stock market fell today due to bad weather in the Midwest. Whether we are discussing planetary orbits or why we've fallen in love, we automatically look for antecedent events to account for what we observe.

We do something similar in church life. For instance, we attribute membership growth (or decline) to the quality of the minister's sermons—oblivious to the changes occurring in the larger community. When something upsetting occurs in family or national life, we

go looking for someone to blame for having "caused" the trouble. We seem driven to find heroes or villains in keeping with our theory of why things happen.

Let's put this notion into a simple diagram. Our traditional, linear theory of causation looks something like this:

**A ==> B ==> C ==> D ==> E ==> F ==>**

where the letters are notation for events. For example: Pitcher A throws the ball B. Batter C swings bat D, striking the ball. The energy is transferred so that the ball arcs toward right field, where player E catches the ball, and so on. Of course, none of this explains why people play baseball in the first place, or why the batter and pitcher, though good friends, have an intense rivalry.

Therefore, even a cursory review demonstrates that the billiard-ball theory is inadequate. Life is simply far too complex for us ever to be able to say that one thing causes another. Even when we can rightly assign blame or credit, it still does not tell us what should happen next.

This is not to deny the laws of physics; they do explain a great deal. Newton's laws do successfully account for many observed events. Flooding in the Midwest may indeed account for investor nervousness on a particular day at the stock exchange. There can indeed be troublemakers in families and congregations.

Rather, we will do better—certainly in social situations—if we broaden our understanding of causality beyond linear thinking to a system of interrelated events, no one of which accounts for what happens. A multicausal model would need to be illustrated in four dimensions (including time). In an oversimplified diagram showing only two dimensions, a multicausal model might appear like this:

**<==> G <==> A <==> B <==>**

**<==> C <==> D <==> E <==>**

**<==> F <==> G <==> A <==>**

A systems approach to causality asks us to consider that many events contribute to the phenomena we observe that cannot be explained by referring to only one preceding cause. Who has not heard of families who "have everything," yet are a total mess? Consider as well that many congregations grow in spite of the minister's sermons! Still other congregations, with capable leadership and more than adequate resources and opportunities, fail to thrive.

What sense are we to make of this?

Systems theory argues that events are co-causal, reciprocal, and interdependent. When it comes to interpersonal relationships, there are many layers of causality and many reasons for things happening the way they do. Focusing on only the immediately apparent causes will not suffice to explain what we see or hear. Indeed, it will give us a faulty and false diagnosis and elicit often unproductive interventions, particularly with regard to conflict. Systems thinking calls for recognizing that everything is related to everything else, often in surprising ways. You can't just change one thing! The whole system will be affected by change in any one part (hence, the law of unintended consequences, where changing one thing has unimagined affects on other parts of the system).

This multicausal model is the basis for the distinction between technical and adaptive changes, which are discussed in the resource *Vision, Mission, and Covenant: Creating a Future Together* (refer to [UUA.org](http://UUA.org) by going to the Leaders' Library and by searching "Vision, Mission, Covenant,"\* and see the table of contents for coverage of this issue). Technical change can be accomplished neatly, as it tends to be finite in its effects (for example, the change that occurs in changing a lightbulb). In adaptive change, the whole system is touched; this kind of change requires adaptive work by the persons involved to successfully navigate the change. Some seemingly technical changes are really adaptive. Simply deciding to use a different kind of lightbulb can create the need for adaptive change. The people using the room where the bulb is located may no longer be able to see with the light given off by the new type of bulb, or the mood of the light may no longer be conducive to the functions the room serves.

The point is that if we are to grasp the dynamics of family and congregational life, the first thing we need to do is resist our usual explanations of how and why things happen as they do.

As we progress in our discussion here, we will consider the idea that to address a problem in one area of a relational system, we often are better off not doing so directly (see "Pushing Back" in Part 2, page 4). If the theory is correct, a change anywhere in a congregational or family system will lead to change everywhere, including the problem area. Hence this strange advice: If the choir sings off-key, clean the nursery. Or more practically, if the minister's sermons are too long, mount a clock on the sanctuary wall.

#### Questions to Ponder

- Attributing a motive to another's actions is a common reaction to another's behavior. Can you think of a time you did this and were totally wrong? Listen for times you said something like, "She only did this because . . . ."

- Can you recall a time when you or another individual said, in proposing a solution to a problem, "All we have to do is . . ." Did it work?
- How have you explained the following?
  - A child's unwillingness to do his or her homework.
  - Why the government fails to do "something" about poverty.
  - Your mother's repeated telling of how you disappointed her when you were younger.
- Recall the last time your congregation's board passed a seemingly modest policy, only to have the congregation in an uproar. What happened? Why?



### **Thinking about Systems: It's All Relative**

It is not too large a stretch to say that systems theory originated in the early part of the twentieth century with Albert Einstein's discovery of relativity. Stated most succinctly, Einstein argued that how an object is understood or perceived depends on the role of the observer. Others were surprised to learn that just the act of observing changes things (the so-called Hawthorne effect)!

Today, it is common for us to use the phrase it's all relative to indicate our sense that the things we know are not reality per se but the result of a complex interaction between the various components of a system, including how we look at those components. The nature of an object "depends" on how it is perceived by a perceiver. At the subatomic level, an electron will not "decide" to appear where it does until the observer "decides" to look.

In social relations, we experience this relativity all the time. Many of our most bitter conflicts, for example, pivot on "she said"—"he said" differences in how we see or hear things:

- A frustrated wife complains to her husband, "It's not what you said; it's how you said it." He replies, "Huh?"
- Our court system is increasingly rendered untrustworthy as testimony is reduced to a battle of dueling experts, with the defendant and the prosecutor scouring the land for authorities to bolster their case.
- In church conflicts, groups often polarize on an issue, with each group claiming it has the "right" interpretation of the facts. Truth becomes reduced to "Well, that's just your opinion."

This tendency, along with the habit of single-cause explanation, creates a ripe recipe for making ourselves and others “not okay” in violation of our Unitarian Universalist commitment to affirm one another’s worth and dignity.

Reading the history of any country reveals how often truth depends on who is in power. The United States still suffers because of laws and social policies that for centuries treated people of color, and other historically marginalized groups, as less than fully human. Their inferior status was a given “truth.” Of course, history is written by the powerful and victorious. Thus, many social critics raise an issue that now seems to be obvious: To account for social dynamics, one needs to be alert to how power is shaping what is “true.”

Philosopher Alfred North Whitehead argued—shockingly, in the light of quantum theory—that reality does not consist of things or objects per se but rather of the way they interact. That is to say, things or objects are not real! Rather, reality itself is an ever-changing process of relational events among substances.

The implications of this idea are still being worked out at the astronomical and subatomic levels (as noted earlier, Newton’s laws work just fine most of the time at our everyday level). For our purposes, a systems view of things puts process and relationship at the forefront of the conversation. Most certainly, individual members of a family or congregation matter. However, to think systemically is to let individuals recede into the background and bring the relational dynamic into the foreground—just the opposite of what we habitually do.

#### Questions to Ponder

- Is all truth relative? Or are there absolutes?
- How does one discern the difference between opinion and truth?
- Is it possible that two contradictory perspectives might both be true?
- Consider a recent discussion after a controversial sermon. How many “realities” can you identify? How would you go about deciding which one is correct?



## Reciprocal Relationship: The Beginning of Systems Theory

The specific components of systems theory emerge from the work of the late Dr. Murray Bowen. The theory consists of eight differing elements, all interconnected, which we will consider below:

1. Differentiation of Self in Relationships. This component refers to the tremendous variation in how individuals function within their families and in the degree to which they are susceptible to “group think.” It also refers to how families or groups exert pressure to ensure conformity of individual members.
2. The Nuclear Family Emotional System. This component describes the patterns of marital discord, dysfunction within one spouse, the impairment of one or more of the children in a family, and the use of emotional distancing to manipulate behavior.
3. The Family Projection Process. This component describes the primary way parents transfer their emotional problems to a child.
4. The Multigenerational Transmission Process. This component addresses how small differences in levels of differentiation between parents and offspring may lead, over many generations, to marked differences in differentiation between the various branches of the family tree.
5. Emotional Cutoff. This component describes how people manage their unresolved emotional issues with parents, siblings, and other family members by reducing or totally cutting off emotional contact with them.
6. Triangles. Two-person relationships are by definition unstable. A triangle—the pulling in of a third party—naturally and inevitably forms whenever there is tension between two people.
7. Sibling Position. This component refers to the idea that people who grow up in the same sibling position within a family will predictably behave in similar ways. It also addresses, in part, why children from the same family will be so different.
8. Societal Emotional Process. This notion refers to the ways emotional systems govern behavior of individuals and groups at the societal level, promoting progressive or regressive periods in society.

Each of these components is based on the notion that there are two primary forces at work in relational systems: the desire to be a self and the desire to be together with others. These forces are seen as being dynamically in tension, leading to varying degrees of anxiety within individuals and groups.

Bowen was a Washington, D.C., researcher who studied families in the 1950s in an effort to come up with a theory of the family based on empirical observation. He began his career as a psychiatrist working with schizophrenia in children, a seriously debilitating and heart-breaking disease. Bowen was blessed to have the parents in residence at the hospital where the children were being treated. At this time, the Freudian model blamed frigid mothers for the child's condition. Because of the success of various medications, however, others argued that schizophrenia was a chemical brain disorder.

Bowen had a still different idea. He noted that whenever he worked with the parents on issues within their marriage or in their families of origin, the children had fewer delusions. Conversely, the more anxious the parents became over their troubled child, the worse the child seemed to fare. He was puzzled. Why should that be? How was it that the quality of the parents' marriage could affect the child's illness?

Bowen postulated that mental illness was, in part, a function of anxiety within the family. He began to see a reciprocal or teeter-totter quality to it, which has come to be known as reciprocal functioning. As one component improved, the other regressed, and vice versa; the family's overall functioning did not much change. Bowen learned, however, that if he could divert the parents' attention away from their seriously ill child and instead foster a more connected feeling within the marriage (which in turn meant facing issues from their own families), things just went better. This observation redirected the physician's attention away from trying to fix the identified patient toward working with the whole family system.

From this, Bowen put forth his core idea:

Health or illness in a family is a matter of not just how its individual members function but also how well they relate to one another.

This is to say, it is not any one member who is "well" or "ill," but the whole family (and for our purposes in this discussion, the congregation). Echoing Whitehead and others, Bowen argued that a science of the family would need a theory for capturing all the complex "objects" or members within a relational unit and studying the process of their interactions. In time, this core idea led to the eight components of the theory noted above.

### Questions to Ponder

- Have you ever noticed how your sense of well-being goes up or down in conjunction with the joys or sorrows of those close to you?
- Have you noticed how a bruised foot throws all of you out of kilter, or a flat tire on the way to work bugs you all day long?

- Newton’s third law says, “For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.” How does this law compare to the notion that families form a reciprocal balance so that change in one place produces a countervailing effect somewhere else?
- How does the wry observation, “For every action there is an equal and opposite criticism,” reflect Bowen’s notion of an overall system balance?



## **Two Forces That Shape Our Lives: Self and/or/versus Togetherness**

Theologian Paul Tillich once noted,

What is most characteristically human about us is the tension between the desire to be “free”—self-identifying and self-choosing—and to be “related”—to love and to be loved.

As time went on, Bowen noticed that a major variable in the health of a family is how well the members balance closeness and distance among themselves. He noted that there is a wide variety of configurations in how people find that balance. Some families

- Are extremely close, but tense and highly conflicted.
- Are close yet easygoing, managing to work out their differences without much fighting.
- Are conflicted and distant, filled with unspoken secrets and emotional issues between individuals that are denied or unaddressed for years, or even generations.
- Have little intimacy, lack vitality, and have apparently few issues to divide them.

All of this can be said of groups, including congregations, as well as it can be said of families.

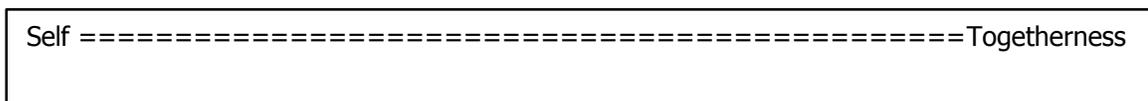
Bowen argued that this balancing act was a function of two forces at work in relational life. He named these forces the self-force and the togetherness force. Too much or too little of either force makes for an unpleasant life. The dynamic tension by which we balance these forces, said Bowen, characterizes all family and group life. (As the theory has evolved, these notions have been applied to all manner of animal life, as will be illustrated shortly.)

What is the togetherness force? It includes all the things people do to establish and maintain relationships with one another. It is present anytime we use the pronouns we, us, they, and them. The togetherness force is our need to belong and to be valued. It pulls us close and makes love, hate, and friendship possible. It has a bias toward favoring sameness, which leads to conflict over our differences. On the negative side, too much togetherness is stifling and destructive of personal autonomy.

By contrast, the self-force appears in the pronouns I, me, and you. It refers to all those qualities and actions that make us free individuals. The self force prizes uniqueness, autonomy, and diversity. It is what allows us to be separate—distinct from others. On the negative side, too much self is lonely and isolating, forestalling the establishment of intimacy or any meaningful belonging.

We may imagine these two forces, then, as a continuum of yearning. We want to be both free and connected, to belong and also to follow our unique destiny. The theory says that our humanity is found not in eliminating these tensions but in recognizing that both these forces are essential, although at times in conflict. These needs drive our actions as we seek to find and keep an ever-changing, proper balance.

Graphically, the continuum looks like this:



### Questions to Ponder

- What constitutes being a “person”?
- Can you be a self apart from relationships?
- Can you be a self within a relationship?
- How does Tillich’s observation alter Ralph Waldo Emerson’s emphasis on self-reliance for Unitarian Universalists?



### Balancing Closeness

Religious communities have a bias toward bringing people together. They tend to emphasize togetherness. Hymns, prayers, and scriptures all celebrate the diverse ways

people have of working, living, and playing together to fulfill their humanity as one big, happy family. Peace and goodness exist when we are all “one.”

Evil and immorality are defined in terms of their negative effect on our togetherness. Indeed, the classic definition of sin refers to being separate—remote from God or the holy, alienated from those we love, or at odds with the larger community. People around the world have rules and moral teachings whose primary ambition is to ensure that we stay together—with reward or punishment made known to keep members in line.

Systems theory argues that people are by nature inclined to come together. Joining up, helping out, connecting, and even squabbling with one another is instinctive. One does not have to work very hard to bring people together, because not being connected is hell. Note that pushing people out is our severest form of punishment: banishment, excommunication, and isolated confinement. It makes sense that the togetherness force would be so strong: It ensures the reproduction and continuance of a species.

Yet the self force is equally vital. Part of our inability to be at peace and comfortable in groups arises because people are not at the same place on the self-togetherness continuum at any particular time. We balance differently as a function of personal growth, family-of-origin expectations, and even social mores.

The togetherness force—our need to belong—is so great, however, that it often trumps the self force. It also extracts a high price in the loss of individuality. It is very difficult to be in a family or group and at the same time to be unique. Hence, a sizable body of romantic literature extols the virtues of the solo adventurer, the hero or standout star, and especially the noble rebel who stands up against the oppressive system. Unitarian Universalists prize self-reliance, and no one admires the party hack. “Don’t Tread on Me” was a motto of the American Revolution; for some today, it still is their primary outlook on society.

Many Unitarian Universalists frequently utter the paradox, “I am so glad to belong to a group where I can be myself, free to believe according to my own convictions, with people who think like me.” Tillich is right: We want to be free and related. We want to think freely, but we also want to do it in a group that, to a great extent, reflects our thinking. Few people subscribe to periodicals whose editorial policy is anathema to their own outlook.

The question is how to belong to a group and be an individual. What happens when we don’t think alike? Belonging to any group requires some curtailing of self. Many faith communities provide their members with a tremendous sense of belonging—a safe harbor in a world of chaos. Can a congregation provide that and at the same time

nurture and value the expression of self? Is conflict inevitable if we do not always agree?

In the context of Unitarian Universalist congregational life and the fact that togetherness comes instinctively whereas self needs to be asserted, one might argue from a systems perspective that the work of a congregation is not so much to nurture closeness but distinctiveness—to create a relatedness in which, and out of which, a self may more fully arise. At the same time, one can argue from a systems perspective that to the extent that one is a healthy and free self in relationship to other also healthy and free selves, the more successfully (that is, with the least amount of destructive conflict) a person will be able to enter into satisfying relationships.

### Questions to Ponder

- Unitarian Universalists pride themselves on being noncreedal. This stance leads to much confusion about any shared convictions. Where on the continuum of self/togetherness do we mostly settle, compared with other religious groups?
- Is it possible to be a group with rules, moral guides, and mores that strengthen both social cohesion and personal autonomy?
- Congregational conflict often arises after some unspoken rule has been broken. Do covenants of right relations that protect togetherness further or inhibit the development of self?



### **Biology's Big Bang, or When Two Became One**

Before proceeding, we must first consider this cautionary tale:

For years, researchers in many fields had noticed a wide variation in proximity among species. Some animals live very close together (fish schools), whereas others rarely see one another (panthers). Ways were devised to measure an average distance of closeness between members of various species. An interesting finding was that primates—the apes, and particularly humans—appear to want or need the greatest degree of relative closeness in order to thrive.

In the early 1970s, some French researchers, studying the effects of closeness on single-celled bacteria, made an alarming discovery: Getting too close to another can be very dangerous. In their experiment, the researchers placed two single-celled bacteria

in a petri dish. The experiment was simply to see what would happen as the two organisms got closer together. The two bacteria were of the same kind, different only in that one was slightly larger than the other.

The researchers moved them ever closer together. To their great alarm, at some measurable point, a threshold was crossed. Suddenly and surprisingly, the smaller of the two dis-integrated. It quite literally fell apart!

What happened next was equally disturbing: All the protoplasm of the smaller organism slowly migrated across the space and was absorbed by the other organism. It was not that the bigger of the two organisms did anything. They were, after all, passive life forms. It was just that getting too close led to the destruction of the smaller one.

Why should this be so? What is it, they wondered, about mere closeness that could cause something to lose itself? Does something similar happen among all species? Is this why lovers often have a spat just after making love, to gain some distance and reestablish a proper balance of closeness? Is this why some Unitarian Universalists are fearful of authority in their congregation? Is this why creeds ultimately lead to schism among the faithful?

Beyond the science involved in understanding the mechanism for this falling apart, theological questions arise:

Is there something about relationships that makes them potentially dangerous for our very being?

Yet, is not being connected with one another the very thing that distinguishes us from inert matter?

Perhaps, in this experiment, we find some accounting for the aphorism, "We can't live with one another and we can't live without one another." Could it be that living beings are ever in a back-and-forth dance, yearning to get close yet not too close, to be free but not too much so? As the joke has it, how do porcupines make love? Very carefully, lest they poke one another.

This dilemma is profoundly important to our understanding of what makes for healthy and safe congregations. It suggests that

Closeness itself may be a source of our conflicts.

Have you ever thought or said, "I get upset when you are trying to make me too much like you—to absorb my being into yours"? If ill health is a function of too much

closeness, how can we discern how much closeness and separateness leads to good health? As suggested before, perhaps it is a bit of a dance, a coming together and a going apart.

The bacteria in the experiment mentioned above were prokaryotes, the simplest of life forms. Many of them reproduce by cloning, a simple cell division that replicates identical cells. Approximately three billion years ago, in biology's equivalent of the "big bang," a new life form appeared, now called eukaryotes. The major difference is that eukaryotes have a nucleus or center to their being. They have a self. (By inference, prokaryotes, not being distinctive, or unique, have no self, only togetherness.)

Equally important is the fact that these particular eukaryotes do not clone. To reproduce they must share genetic information. They have to give something of themselves (a copy of their chromosomal makeup) in order to create something new. They have to get close to one another while maintaining their distinctive selves.

The good news for evolution is that this sharing of genetic information allows for variation and adaptation to situational stress. However, coming into a close relationship and sharing part of one's self (DNA) with another is a much more cumbersome form of reproduction than cloning. New adaptations may emerge, but so do unsuccessful mutations.

Moreover, it introduces difference into relationships: Offspring are both like and unlike their parents. More self leads to more diversity. Of course, more self increases the tension with the togetherness force. Being or becoming a self creates problems for any relationship. As the male praying mantis will tell you, finding a balance proves to be a dicey proposition. You get too close, you lose your head; if you don't get close, then you won't reproduce.

Bowen, desiring to have a science of the family, borrowed several times from biology to explain family phenomena. In this simple experiment, then, we have a biological basis for thinking about self and togetherness. Systems theory argues that it is the balancing act itself that especially merits our closest attention.

### Questions to Ponder

- In what ways do we give away self in order to connect with others?
- When we are intimate, do I absorb part of you, and you part of me?
- Is closeness quantifiable, or is it some kind of quality?
- How does the phrase congregational life include the concept of individual autonomy?



## **Ambivalence: I Be You, You Be Me—Or I Be Me, You Be You!**

Tension between the two forces—self and togetherness—is inescapable. The word for this tension is anxiety. As one force gains strength, anxiety within a person and between persons increases as well. As my self grows, I get anxious that I may lose you. As togetherness increases, I fear losing me. Anytime the balance between the forces departs from what we think it should be, we will feel anxious. One might even say that feeling anxious is not only chronic but an inevitable condition of being alive.

This is all very confusing. Often, I lose track of where I end and you begin. I can't always tell whether it is self or togetherness that I want or need more of. Hence goes the push and pull of all our relationships. Over and again people ask:

- Can I be me if I am with you, or will you try to clone me into a mirror image of you?
- Do I have to conform (re-form?) myself into your shape to be acceptable?
- Worse, will I have to give away my very being to join you?
- Likewise, will I lose your connection to me if you choose to be different from me?

These are not idle questions. They drive our emotions when a child graduates from school to life, when a partner takes on a new interest or job, when two singles try to form a couple, when a new church guest wonders about joining the church, when a person of color (or a person from another historically marginalized group) joins a conversation after church at coffee hour, and when church leaders consider expanding to two services. These worries are always present in every interaction, large or small. This anxiety can be high for people whose culture differs from that of the majority group, such as persons from historically marginalized groups.

A delightful way to keep the self/togetherness dynamic clearly in mind is to recall Hugh Lofting's pushmi-pullyu. Lofting was a captain in the Irish Guards during the First World War. Eager to stay connected to his children from the battlefield yet not alarm them with the dangers he faced, he wrote them a series of letters that later became the Dr. Doolittle stories. The pushmi-pullyu, one of Lofting's more charming creations, is a fanciful animal that looks like a llama with two heads trying to go in opposing directions at once.



## **A Pushmi-pullyu**

It is an apt metaphor for understanding our point: We pull together to create new life—literally in reproduction, and figuratively in all our shared activities. We give of ourselves for a greater good. We sacrifice our wants and needs for those we love. We also find out who we are because we are in relationship to others.

Equally, we need to follow our own star. We need to separate from our relationships to find or to be ourselves. We pull away from our relationships from time to time—by reading a book, going for a walk, even traveling around the world. When we heed the call to be apart, we are held back by our wanting to belong. It seems that becoming a distinctive self threatens the "us." Even more, were we to follow that star, we become anxious lest we end up all alone. As Tillich put it, "we want to go both ways."

This back and forth is more often something we do out of our awareness. An automatic quality seems to have its own power over us. Sometimes, no matter how much I want to get along with my family, I still end up in a squabble. Or no matter how much I want your affection, you cannot give it to me. Likewise, in congregational life, sometimes no matter how well we understand our group dynamics, our procedures, and our rules, or how much we invoke our highest principles of love and respect, we still cannot get along. It is just very hard to balance this closeness/apartness dynamic, because we are coming and going at the same time.

How can you be you and I be me and we be we, all at once? It's a classic approach-avoidance dilemma. It is an age-old question. It is the very nature of our existence, or so argues systems theory. How we manage this dilemma shapes all we do. It is ever present in congregational life, in both the joy and sorrow of our shared ministries.

## Questions to Ponder

- Have you ever wanted to run away from home? Or from other responsibilities?
- How do you feel when your lover fails to call before you go to bed?
- Why do we say to our children, "Oh, you don't want to go out with those people"?
- What is going on when some church members complain, "There are several people who think as I do on this"—without ever naming who those several may be?



### **At Play in the Emotional Force Field**

Once people come together to form a relationship, something truly new does come into being. We weave our lives together to create a living process. Relationships that "take" take on their own reality.

Our word choices reveal this something new. At some discernible moment of closeness, the pronouns we and us appear. Indeed, words like family or congregation are premised on the notion that they are something far greater than the mere sum of their parts. A family may be composed of persons, but it has its own reality. A congregation's "personality" is palpable, but it cannot be defined merely by referring to its mission statement or by describing the many personalities of its members.

Extrapolating this notion further, the "we" can be any of the following:

- A team to which one belongs (why else do people buy all sorts of sports paraphernalia?).
- A club or gang (Elks, Bay Street Boys).
- One's tribe (Palestinians, Poles, Russians, Romanians).
- One's class or race.
- One's nation, as in "we Americans" or "we Chinese."
- All humanity, as in "we earthlings."

Each shared sense of togetherness is as real as each individual self.

After the "us" comes into being, something most interesting follows: Part of my sense of who "I" am depends on that "we." I gain a sense of identity. I belong to my family,

my sorority, my congregation, my country, and so on. I even have a secret handshake, a special food and drink, or T-shirts to prove it!

With time and events that strengthen belonging—no doubt due to our long childhood dependence—I cannot even think of my self outside of our togetherness. “I am a Mortensen!” I will alter or sacrifice my desires and ambitions to further this sense of mutual connection. Loyalty and being a team player are highly valued in human society. We prize mutuality and work hard to obtain and nurture it. “One for all; all for one!” is not just a romantic slogan; it is the very essence of our humanity. When we have it, life is good; when we don’t, “life is hell.”

As long as the things “we” do together satisfy my sense of “me,” there is no problem. However, as noted previously, it is an ambivalent proposition. The pull of being a separate self is often at odds with the desire to belong. What “I” want is rarely exactly the same as what “you” want, nor even what the “we” declares is important. Then conflict appears: “Get off my back!” we shout, in resistance to being absorbed into the other. “Just leave me alone,” whines the unhappy teenager. Too much togetherness is no fun.

As this tension appears, the pushmi-pullyu, go-away-a-little-closer dance begins. I try to get away from you, only to come rushing back. I encourage you to pursue your goals, only to sabotage your effort when that takes you away from me. I want to stay connected to you but then resist mightily any demands you make of me. All the ways you and I are different remind me of this drama. As tension or anxiety grows, you and I become (automatically!) increasingly reactive to one another. As the intensity of our reactivity increases, so does our fear and the need to control one another’s actions. Recall if you can, by way of illustration, the wonderful moment in the movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* when the father, lamenting and disapproving of his daughter’s marrying “out” to a non-Greek man, cries, “How can you do this to me!”

The insight that systems theory brings to these observations is that the power of the relationship itself determines each person’s actions and sense of self. Relationships that endure (not all do) create around them a balance or an emotional field that, once formed, determines individual action more than anyone realizes. Conflict is always a function of any disturbance in this emotional field, as we shall see.

In an emotional field, our personal autonomy is compromised by the power of our belonging. We know this is true by the way just a few synonyms for we sometimes characterize families or groups. Consider these generalizations, for instance:

- Italians are passionate; Norwegians are stoic.
- The Bransoms next door are neat-freaks.
- You can never count on the Connors to pay a bill on time!
- Liberals are soft on crime.

- Conservatives have no heart.
- The poor are lazy.
- Women care more for children than do men.

If you belong to those groups, their traits will be yours! Your self is a function of your togetherness. It will be difficult for you to be or act otherwise within the emotional field. (Prejudice, by the way, is almost always about the stereotypical member of an emotional field—seldom about a given individual.)

Some people do this with religious groups as well:

- Episcopalians—or is it Unitarian Universalists?—are God's frozen people.
- Jews are money grabbers.
- Quakers are tolerant.
- Fundamentalists are closed-minded.

We might ask here, To what extent does a typically negative label applied to a group other than our own—particularly a group that has been historically marginalized by the dominant group in society—reflect our fear of difference and our captivity to the togetherness force? We might ask further, Is intolerance of another's self a disturbance in our own emotional field where the "us" has defined narrowly how to be a human being?

With that said, a systems perspective then warns of the following: It is a mistake to look at what a person does and conclude she or he acts that way because of some kind of self-referencing rational and volitional choice. Systems theory argues that much of what we observe about human behavior is a phenomenon of the emotional field. People do what they do because of the dynamics within a relationship. The constellation of behaviors and attitudes we see is the manner in which people resolve or cope with the tension between too much closeness and too much apartness. Attributing willful motive to an individual's action, even if true, is irrelevant from a systems perspective. Most of what we do arises outside our awareness. We are just not as free as we like to think we are.

This implied determinism of an emotional field can be understood with a comparison to gravity. Consider this example: When the planets that make up our solar system came together, a balance of their gravitational fields arose over time and set the course of their orbits around the sun. It is correct to say that the gravitational field determines the functioning of each planet more than anything in the substance or "will" of the planet. Gravity alone defines the solar system of relationships. It radically limits and determines what a planet can do.

Bowen argued that the same thing takes place in families. Once family members enter into one another's orbits, the emotional field takes over, both permitting and forbidding

certain behaviors. The field creates a balance in the self-togetherness tension and binds the anxiety inherent in the closeness-separateness dance.

Although up close our actions may appear and feel to be freely volitional, viewed from afar, each member in a relationship functions in predictable and circumscribed ways. Again, our word choices are revealing: "That's just how I am." "I've always been this way." "He was born shy." "She has always been the difficult kid." These phrasings reflect our embeddedness in the relational process rather than in the being of our individual substance.

Whenever a disturbance occurs in that field, countervailing forces pull everyone back into place. This is why people turn down career opportunities or fail to marry their one true love. To repeat: The self is embedded in, defined by, and controlled by the togetherness force.

Some profound implications arise:

- My will, or freedom to choose, is limited to what the emotional field will allow.
- My position in the relationship system is relatively fixed and determines what roles I may fulfill and what behaviors I can take (see "How You Stand Depends on Where You Sit: Sibling Position in Family Relations," page 32).
- Even more: If I want to change my life course, the system will restrain me and pull me back into line.
- The very forces that hold "us" together are the same forces that define "me" in such a way that makes it difficult for me to grow and change.

In families, this process goes on for many generations, and genuine change comes slowly and often painfully (see "The Beat Goes On: Multiple Generational Process I" and "Learning from the Past: Multiple Generational Process II," pages 28 and 30 respectively).

When real change occurs, it feels like things are falling or flying apart.

The idea of emotional force fields explains why we often feel, "I cannot do other than I have always done" or "My freedom is severely limited by my relationships. Acorns fall next to oak trees and cannot grow up to be maples. However different they may seem, children are more like than unlike their parents.

Over time, the same is true for entire families, congregations, and communities (how else would we be able to make the generalizations we do?). Antoine de Saint-Exupéry said it this way: "One generation hands down and another takes up the heritage of mind and heart." Other theories call this predictable set of actions a script to suggest how difficult it is to do other than what our family pattern or drama demands.

The other thing to be said here is that once an emotional field comes into being, it seeks always to stay in its current balance. Bowen borrowed the term homeostasis from biology to describe this idea. Once things settle down, there is a natural tendency for them to stay the way they are. As Newton's first law reminds us, an object at rest or motion "prefers" to stay that way. That is why it is so hard to change behavior—your own or another's. Resistance to change is built into the very nature of the emotional field. Any attempt—no matter how noble or good—to change the delicate balance will yield conflict somewhere in the relational system. Recall what was said earlier about reciprocal functioning. Like a teeter-totter, as one side goes up, the other must go down. The overall balance remains unchanged.

An emotional field provides a sense of continuity, predictability, and safety in an oftentimes chaotic world. Faith communities provide members a sense of belonging to something independent of the ebb and flow of cultural change. In this way, a congregation is a "stay agent." It is a home, sanctuary, or safe harbor for the individual who might feel lost otherwise.

Yet the religious life invites people to grow and change. It challenges society to improve. It is countercultural and an active voice for change. In this sense, a congregation is a "change agent." Like the pushmi-pullyu, congregations are often conflicted as they try to go both directions at once.

#### Questions to Ponder

- Can you think of other kinds of fields, such as magnetic or electrical, and how they function?
- If an emotional field provides stability, what does it take to change that field?
- Are there times when an emotional field is more likely to change? Or to resist?
- What happens to fields that do not adapt to changing environments?



## Degrees of Self: The Scale of Differentiation

The last decade or two have brought forth astonishing new understandings of how cells work. No longer seen as simple things, even cells are a system of relationships. Critical to eukaryotic cells and this discussion are two notions: the idea of a nucleus and a boundary wall.

Again drawing from biology, systems theory argues that to be a self is an existential given concept for any living being. The idea of self includes the notion of a clear boundary between what is and is not self, as well as the ability to share self with other selves.

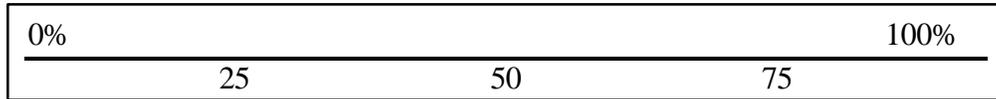
The question arises: Just what is self?

Is self some kind of quantity? That interpretation would make sense of the statement, "She has more self than does he." When we say, "I'm just not myself today," what are we saying? Are we being someone else's self? Can you lose track of your self?

What is the self that changes as phrases are attached to it, as in the following:

Self-assured	Self-confident	Self-doubt
Self-possessed	Self-contained	Self-controlled
Self-sufficient	Self-centered	Self-absorbed
Self-rule	Self-determined	Self-preserving
Self-respect	Self-valuing	Self-important
Self-improvement	Self-development	Self-promoting
Self-fulfillment	Self-indulgent	Selfish
Self-aware	Self-conscious	Self-centered
Self-appreciation	Self-aggrandizing	Self-delusion
Self-revealing	Self-accusation	self-betraying
Self-contempt	Self-humiliation	Self-destroying
Self-imposed	Self-evident	Self-explanatory
Self-forgetful	Self-denying	Self-neglect

With the caveat noted earlier that there is no such thing as a self independent of togetherness, systems theory puts forward the idea that some people are born with more or less self. The scale of differentiation captures this notion:



The scale of differentiation is one of the defining components of systems theory. The scale goes from 0 to 100. Presumably, at 0 a person has no self; he or she is, in other words, dead. Such an individual would not be a person in any meaningful use of the term. (Were self easy to measure, it would be clearer what to do with persons sadly in the so-called persistent vegetative state, a rough synonym for a person with no self.) On the other end of the scale, a person who is 100% percent differentiated would be fully actualized or individuated. Such a person would be totally free of anxiety arising from the tension of self/togetherness.

(A warning is necessary here: The scale is a morally neutral metaphor for describing how persons function in relationships; it is most definitely not a value measurement device. Individuals “higher” on the scale are not “better” people; they are just less likely to be thrown off their life course by the homeostatic power of togetherness.)

The word differentiation is another term borrowed from biology. It refers to that stage when cells in tissues change to take on specific functions. At the outset, all the cells in a zygote are identical. Then, due to their position in the cell cluster, they begin to take on differing functions. Some cells become heart parts, others elbows, and so on. As used here, differentiation refers to the capacity of a self to function differently than other parts of the relational system. As noted above, one’s position in the emotional field both permits and restricts what functions or actions one takes. For example, if too little differentiation is the norm in a relationship, then a self will depend highly upon the others in the relationship to determine his or her actions.

After observing families for a long time, Bowen noted that some families do indeed have a better ability to manage anxiety and life’s mishaps than others. This capacity can be described as a function of how much self one possesses (here self seems to be a quantity). That is to say, in some families, the emotional field is more constraining on its members and is more easily perturbed by outside forces. Better-differentiated families are less easily thrown into conflict or off course by changes in and around the emotional field.

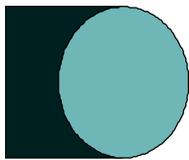
The number or percentage placement of one’s differentiation on the scale is a comparative statement with regard to how well-integrated a person is in terms of self-

awareness and other-awareness. It also denotes awareness of, and the flexibility of, one's boundaries. The word differentiation, then, refers to a capacity or a way of being in the emotional field.

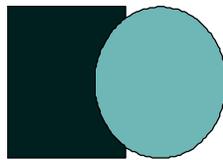
The further up the scale one goes, the clearer will be the center of one's being. Boundaries of self will be permeable, yet clear as to where one begins and ends. The concept is akin to maturity and interdependent autonomy. A more differentiated person is proportionately less likely to lose self in his or her relationships with others than one who is less so.

A theoretical issue that is as yet unresolved is whether and to what extent our degree of differentiation changes as we mature. Is there a core value that provides a range of adaptation given the stressors in our lives, or can we intentionally "increase" our position on the scale?

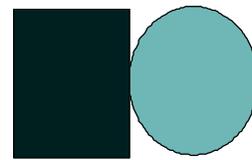
As no one is 100 percent differentiated, systems theory says people will borrow or give away some of their self in relationships to maintain the homeostasis of the emotional field. This idea may be illustrated as follows:



A Less Well Differentiated Couple



A Well-Differentiated Couple



An Exceptionally Differentiated Couple

Less well differentiated people will overlap boundaries of self more often and more intensely. They literally intrude upon and invade each other. The life course of each is more defined by the other's actions and his or her reactivity to the other. There is more giving away and borrowing of self to have a sense of being a whole person. More broadly, for families that do not keep clear boundaries, external events have greater impact on their shared and individual functioning.

For those persons whose boundaries are better defined and are more clearly known, the overlap will be less. Well-differentiated people will give away or borrow less self to the relationship. Correspondingly, they will be less controlled by external events and the opinions of others. Each member will have more capacity to be in the relationship with less reactivity to the emotional field.

Theoretically, an ideal relationship would be one in which people touch and connect with one another without borrowing or giving away self. The reality, though, is that we all confuse our boundaries to a greater or lesser extent.

In biology, some cells are described as “leaky.” Persons with “lax cell walls” are vulnerable on two accounts: First, they tend to be intrusive into the lives of others. Second, because they are less able to distinguish self from not-self, they are easily invaded. Thus, poorly differentiated people worry overly much about what others are doing and thinking, or they are continually looking over their shoulder for approval or disapproval from other family members. They more readily confuse what is their business and what isn’t. For instance, consider the mother who says to her daughter, “Honey, I’m cold; go put a sweater on.” Or the gossipy congregation member who just has to remark on what clothes people wear to worship.

It follows that poorly defined people are more threatened by differences. Conformity becomes a prized value. Wives bite their lips as their husbands order dinner for them. Club leaders become indignant when a member arrives without the appropriate club attire. Anxious congregation members begin speeches with, “I know we’re all of one mind on this.” Tyrants shut down all dissent.

This insight gives us yet another clue to understanding congregational conflict: Often issues become issues not because of what they are in and of themselves but because they represent a deviation from the expected norm. As less well defined persons are more threatened than persons who are more defined, we can expect the intensity of their reactions to be directly correlated with the sense that the “where-I-end-and-you-begin” boundary is about to shift. For example, there is nothing inherently superior to holding worship at 11:00 a.m. Yet for some people, changing worship to 10:00 a.m. will evoke intense feelings of dislocation and anger.

The theory suggests that given our long childhood dependency, few individuals ever get better than 70 percent on the scale of differentiation. Generally, it can be said that most middle-of-the-road, generally well-functioning families hover in 40s and low 50s. This is just another way of saying that our need to be bound together makes it very hard to differentiate ourselves from others—to be and become grownups in our families. We all leak—give away or borrow self—to a greater or lesser extent.

Other students of family theory have attempted to describe the kinds of traits that are characteristic of families at various levels. Such exploration is beyond our goal here, but we may briefly generalize: People with less self

- Tend to be more rigid and highly reactive to others.
- Tend to think narrowly, in black-and-white stereotypes and in either/or terms.
- Tend, also, to act along a limited range of responses to problems.
- Often fear and resist change and more easily dissolve or lose self in the relationship system.
- Are less able to declare their values or articulate their wants and needs.
- Are more inclined to escalate conflict into violence.

People with more self demonstrate a greater repertoire of actions when confronting life problems. They

- Tend to be more at ease with difference and change.
- Tend to manifest a greater tolerance for ambiguity and nuance, even as they work on being persons of clear integrity.
- Tend to prize diversity over conformity.
- Are better able to take stands, to say yes or no in terms of their values.

To tie this to the notion of the emotional field: The more well differentiated a person is, the more ably he or she can stay connected to the relationship system while at the same time pursuing personal ambitions; he or she will be concerned about, but less reactive to, the approval or disapproval of others in the relationship system.

A definition of healthy functioning thus arises:

To be a person with more self is to be influenced by, but not determined by, the emotional field itself.

The less one is able to function this way, the more his or her life course will be determined by others and the more his or her emotional well-being will be dependent upon the need for the approval and affection of others.

This definition of healthy functioning does not provide us with a clear course for preventing or resolving conflict. It does say that the more insecure and immature a person is, the more likely that he or she will make a conflict worse. At all times, however, working on being a self in relationship, while remaining connected to the emotional field, is a major component toward managing the inevitable tensions that arise.

#### Questions to Ponder

- Think of a family member with whom you have a long-standing conflict. Can you avoid being reminded of that conflict when she or he comes into the room?
- Do you ever find yourself mind reading?
- Do you look across the room to a person significant to you before you express your opinion on a controversial matter?
- Recall a time you took a stand on a matter. Whose reaction surprised you the most?
- How comfortable are you reading periodical articles by individuals whose religious or political conviction is at odds with yours?
- Is it possible to apply the scale of differentiation to religious communities? Would communities that prize strong agreement about the sharing of values, ideas, and

practices be more or less differentiated than communities that are less insistent on agreement or more open to diverse expression?



## **The Beat Goes On: Multiple Generational Process I**

The scale of differentiation helps us understand why people function at differing levels. The notion that differentiation is transmitted down the family tree over the generations accounts for variations of differentiation within families.

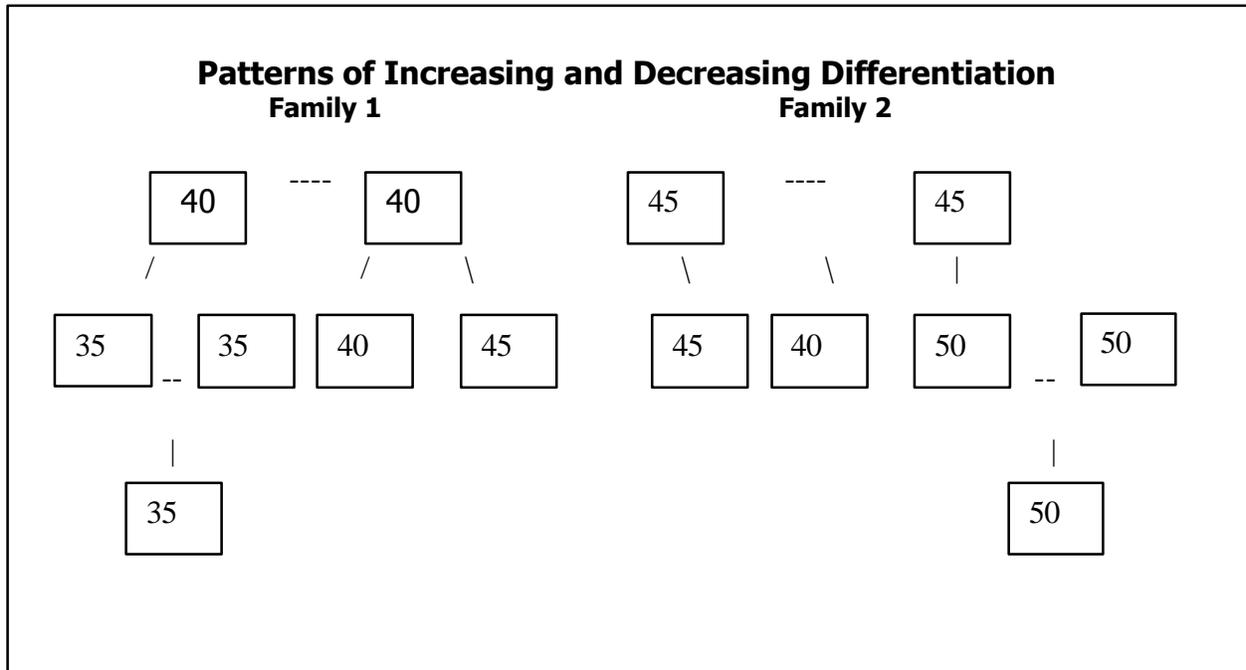
Systems theory considers the attraction of one person to another to be a function of differentiation. That is, on the scale of differentiation, 30s will find 30s, 60s will join up with 60s, and so on. In theory, a 60 could link up with a 30, but the 30 would be too threatened and no doubt the 60 too bored to stay in the relationship for very long.

Thus, if a partner's differentiation is markedly different, it is unlikely that the relationship will "take." Similarly, when the differentiation level is similar, the odds improve that two people will be attracted to one another. Why might this be? In part, it might be because each will borrow and give away similar proportions of self to the togetherness force. In this way, we may say it is true: Likes attract likes.

This idea may be applied to congregational life: Peace and harmony among congregants may be more a function of differentiation than a matter of religious principles. Also, congregational growth will tend to attract only individuals who are already like the current membership, thereby thwarting the leadership's efforts to promote efforts toward diversity (such as the Welcoming Congregation program or antiracism-multiculturalism programs).

Continuing this line of analysis, the schema below presents an overly simplified illustration of how the branches of a family tree may diverge with time so that even first cousins have little in common with one another. Looking at the diagram, called "Patterns of Increasing and Decreasing Differentiation," we begin on the left with family 1 the couple that are both 40s (not in age, but on the scale of differentiation), who marry and have three children. Each child differentiates uniquely (again, we are simplifying and exaggerating—actual differences between them would be much smaller). The family average remains at 40, although the oldest child (the 45) and the youngest (the 35) are markedly different.

The younger 35 finds a partner, who is also a 35. Their only child is a 35. Similarly, the better-defined 45s, in family 2, have a grandchild who is a 50. For theoretical purposes, we could extend this typology further to show even more divergence at the level of second and third cousins.



Actually, life is muddier than the illustration, and the variance in a few generations is not likely to be this great. However, oversimplifying puts in bold relief why one side of a family is more resilient and copes better with life's strains than another.

In simple terms, systems theory says that children are more like than unlike their parents. It also says that offspring are not simply clones of their parents. Each child also has to work out a satisfactory balance of the self force and the togetherness force.

The bad news is that the sins of fathers and mothers often are passed on to the children. Consider the prevalence of alcoholism as a family illness, or why your physician takes a family history with regard to incidence of illness. More positively, this thinking helps us understand why some families cluster vocationally.

The good news is that offspring can break away from the family pattern, for good or ill. Acute phenomena within a family ease over time. For instance, "Father & Sons" businesses are commonplace. By the third or fourth generation, however, the founder's passion is not as strong in the grandchildren, at which point the business closes or is sold. Similarly, a pathogenic force, such as cancer, is typically more severe in its first instance. The first child is at greater risk than the grandchild, and so on. Although

disease can last for generations, it, like success, will burn out over time. We might compare this easing, or diminishing, of traits to making a copy of a copy, and then copying the copy several times; each time the resolution will become less clear.

### Questions to Ponder

- Take an issue within your community. Read the letters to the editor and ask, How does one letter reflect more or less differentiation than another?
- Does the church need to minister differently to less well differentiated and more well differentiated members? If so, in what ways?
- Can a congregation's collective identity be placed on a continuum of less to more well differentiated? If so, how would you go about discerning where it would be placed? What qualities or traits might make up a "healthier" congregation?
- What are some of the "blessings" and "sins" that are passed down in your congregation over the generations?



### **Learning from the Past: Multiple Generational Process II**

Technology has moved along, but at one time if you had a computer disk formatted to operate on Apple's operating system, it would not run on Microsoft's, and vice versa. Once a disk was formatted, it could only do what it was formatted to do.

A similar thing can and needs to be said of families and organizational life. Once the emotional field is in place, the relationship system permits or provides room for a limited range of actions. In systems theory, the multiple generational process describes the transmission of health and ill health down the generations. Family traits (both good and bad), as well as values and practices, are quite literally passed on from one generation to the next.

In congregations and other complex relational systems, then, it is important to pay attention to how the system has been "formatted." An alert researcher will pay special attention to the spirit and values of the founders:

- Why did they organize themselves in the first place?
- What special problem or opportunity did they seek to address?
- What things are included and excluded from serious consideration?
- How does the family's or congregation's life reveal the spirit and values of the founder?

Similarly, the researcher will look for times when the system is out of balance: major crises, the departure of major principals and the arrival of new leadership, stressors from the changing environment on the system, and so forth. In families, one looks at nodal points such as marriage, births, and deaths, as well as for the incidence of disease patterns within the family.

Systems tend to perpetuate themselves. The more things change, the more they remain the same. Nodal points of change are important because they perturb the system. When the system is disturbed, new ways of relating (both opportunities and dangers) are more likely to enter the emotional field as new balances of self and togetherness are worked out.

Similarly, to change a system, one has to instigate an imbalance of some substance to make any real difference. In other words, to change the multigenerational process is to invite conflict.

The important point to remember here is that people who ignore history will repeat it—and so will people who pay attention to it.

#### Questions to Ponder.

- Interview grandparents, asking them how their grandchildren have fulfilled the prophecies they made about their own children.
- Take a look at holidays in your family. What customs must be honored? How did they begin? Why are they important? What would happen if you stopped honoring them?
- Reread your congregation's history. What patterns tend to repeat themselves? How often? When has change occurred? When has it been resisted?
- The United States is one of few countries whose constitution forbids titles, such as king, lord, duchess, or marquis. What does this say about the forces that shaped our nation's beginning? What does it say about our expectations today?
- Many Unitarian Universalist "fellowships" were organized in the 1950s at a time of religious growth and cultural conformity. How does the very name fellowship inhibit current efforts to grow our congregations in a culture where church is the generic term for a religious community?



## **How You Stand Depends on Where You Sit: Sibling Position in Family Relations**

In family life, the multigenerational process and your position in the family both determine how you function. Each of us is assigned a set of roles in our family life that we play out all our days. We are free to move beyond those roles, but not easily nor far. The family script can be a blessing or a curse, but it is real. We deviate from our roles at our peril, for exercising our freedom disturbs the family homeostasis. As anxiety then increases, we risk ostracism (rejection) or pressure to conform (criticism). The togetherness force keeps us in line and the system in balance.

Authors and playwrights are good at noting the various roles that appear in families:

- There's the standard bearer, who must defend the family honor or perpetuate the family business.
- There's the charmer, who drives everyone batty, only to win them over in the end.
- There's the caretaker, who just must ensure that everyone is happy all the time.
- Then there's the black sheep, who just refused to go along with the game and keeps everyone stirred up with one acting out after another.

Leo Tolstoy captured this tendency toward stereotypical behavior when he began *Anna Karenina* as follows: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

One of the more troubling notions in systems theory is that who we are depends on where we are in the relational system, particularly as it relates to our birth order. Based on the research of Walter Toman in *Family Constellation* (New York: Springer, 1961) and the work of others, the theory provides several generalizations that can be made if you know something about how the family tree is laid out.

Toman's work is quite exhaustive in its breadth and depth. It includes compelling descriptions of the "first born son of the third born daughter of an only father" or the "fourth born girl of a second born father and first born mother, both of whom were only children in their families." Toman's descriptions are eerie and at times read like an astrology chart. His work implies that we have no freedom to be other than what our placement in family relations reveals. (Remember the intuitive claim "That's just how I am.") We will not argue the point save to say that knowledge of sibling position can be helpful as we try to understand how people act in groups. Suffice it, then, to offer here three generalizations of how an oldest child, a middle child, and a youngest child will behave. We will ignore gender differences to economize the presentation.

Two caveats: First, only children are a unique set. Not having siblings with whom one has to compete for parental attention or with whom one can share parental anxiety,

onlys mimic oldests, only more intensely. Second, sibling theory considers a seven-year gap sufficiently long to create a unique emotional field for subsequent children; such younger children quite literally belong to a different family than do their older siblings.

What might be said of the oldest child in a family?

- Typically (exceptions always abound), we can say the firstborn child will become the family standard bearer.
- That is, she or he will be responsible for ensuring that the family's values are adhered to.
- Firstborns tend to be more compliant and serious than their younger siblings. They are "good" kids.
- They tend to have high approval needs.
- They are valued for being responsible, bright, attentive, and capable.
- They migrate to positions of responsibility and are looked to in a crisis.
- They can be insufferably overbearing with others.
- They suffer more from stress-related illnesses.
- For the firstborn, the sense of self arises out of the position of being first in the family system and out of the multigenerational process of that family.

A similar series of generalizations (again, there are exceptions) can be made with regard to the youngest member of a family:

- Accustomed to having older siblings to both look after them and guide them, youngests are freer to deviate from the family pattern.
- Not responsible for the family name, as it were, they are often less serious, more fun, and in many ways more creative and risk taking than the older.
- Youngests tend to get into more trouble with authority figures, often with a knowing wink from the parents.
- They also tend to defer to those older than they.
- Youngests tend to be less anxious overall.
- On the down side, they often have difficulty knowing how to handle a crisis insofar as they expect someone else to take the lead.

Turning next to middle children, or middlers, we find they are just that: caught in the middle, in one way a younger to an older and, in the other direction, an older to a younger.

- Middle children often end up in the referee's position, being the family peacemaker because they can identify easily with both ends of the birth order.
- Thus, middlers are good negotiators.
- When not playing the referee, middle children know how to disappear when conflict arises in groups.
- Middlers are good at playing others against one another, manipulating people with a mixture of tattletale guilt and beguiling innocence.

- Middlers are unclear on what they want and value for themselves and tend not to be assertive with others.

It is the system that sets the course; it does not matter whether a child complies with or rebels against a family system, or how a parent functions as a parent. Whenever we encounter others, it helps to understand that much of their way of being human is driven by the rules of their position within the family of origin (which often is outside their awareness).

In a diverse and complex world, this idea can be truly confusing because you and I are also embedded in our field of expectations. We naively expect that somehow everyone will see the world the same way we do. When we encounter others whose family constellation calls for actions different from ours, we wonder how they can possibly think and act as they do. We think them strange and perhaps even put them down for being different. If our self is weak and boundaries unclear, we will sometimes attack people who are different from us if they don't conform to our expectations.

In congregational life, many family constellations overlap. Thus, the ways you and I are "supposed" to act not only diverge but can mismatch painfully and set the stage for conflict, injecting tension, reactivity, and hard feelings into the "us" of shared congregational workings.

Parallels can now be suggested about congregational leadership. A congregation is a collection of families. In it there will be people replicating their family systems (or attempting to). Some will function as oldests, some as middlers, and still others as youngests, very much according to the stereotypical descriptions associated with birth order theory. This implies that otherwise co-equal members will relate to one another as they did to their own siblings, sometimes at the expense of respect for one another as unique human beings, and often in contradiction to the values ostensibly espoused by religious faith.

Here is a simple application of the theory. Consider the relationship between a congregational president or board chair and the minister:

- If you have an older female with younger brothers as board chair and a minister who is also an older female with younger brothers, the two family "queens" might compete, each seeking to be in charge. They might even compete for the attention and affection of the younger men on the board as issues come and go.
- Contrast this with the same board chair and a minister who is the youngest brother of an older sister. In this example there would be less competition and tension, with the minister more at ease receiving direction from the board chair. Of course, those female board members with older brothers may wonder why the minister is such a wimp.

Similar to a family, the congregation has its set of role expectations, along with its multigenerational script:

- In some congregations, the minister is a best friend; in others, the minister is the CEO, primary fund-raiser, and community conscience all rolled into one.
- Similarly, a congregation could have a strong "oldest matriarch" in the collective consciousness of the "women's group," to which the minister must defer.
- Or perhaps it goes without saying that every member of the finance committee will be male, and heaven help the upstart female who thinks she has something to offer in that realm.
- Some congregations require "good kids" for their leaders; others enjoy having the "black sheep" take charge.
- Some congregations prize orderly decision making and adhering to covenants of right relations; others are filled with rebels who defy the board or minister at every turn.

Again, the theory offers us a way of thinking about conflict: To the extent members of a congregation fail to fulfill their attributed roles or upset the status quo, conflict will emerge over something. As has been said, what the issue actually is matters less than that it will arise to become an issue. Managing the conflict will require attending to both the issue and the relationship system.

Unless you can step back and view the system's dance from the balcony (in other words, see the big picture), such variability will be baffling. It's not malevolence, nor even conscious choice, that drives such arrangements. It is simply that relationship systems tend to stay in their orbits, prizing the harmony of today's togetherness more than the challenge and promise of new ways of being for tomorrow.

## Questions to Ponder

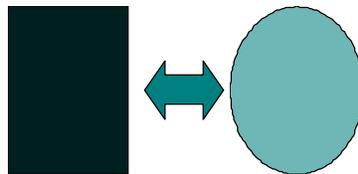
- How do gender roles in your congregation reflect the multigenerational process, as well as the birth position of the founder or founders?
- Interview your congregational board to determine birth order. Attend a few meetings to assess whether there are predictable patterns of interaction based on birth order.
- Consider your relationship to a person in authority. How are your feelings toward that person similar or dissimilar to how you relate to your own parents or siblings?
- Imagine a congregational meeting as a group of children on a playground. Who are the ringleaders and followers? Who are wallflowers, troublemakers, and peacemakers?



### **I'm Outta Here: Emotional Cutoff as a Solution to Family Tension**

In this section and the next one, we look at ways people manage tension in their relationships. The first is called emotional cutoff.

A previous illustration depicted two people borrowing and giving away self with their boundaries overlapping. This, typically, is called fusion. With cutoff, tensions within the family remain fused but are managed by family members by getting as far away from one another as possible. Often this separation is literally a physical one—moving across the country—or it may involve going silent or, more simply, withdrawing into a book. Each of these manners of emotional withdrawal contains tension simply by not engaging the other. We may draw it in this fashion:



A Fused Cutoff Couple

Emotional cutoff is an automatic and reactive way to avoid losing self. It's a strategy of conflict avoidance, of peace at some or any price, to avoid upset. The anxious husband vows, "Well, I just won't ask for sex any longer," after his partner rebuffs his advances.

"I hate you!" screams the unhappy teenager as she slams the door in her father's face, who in turns goes off to pour himself a drink and sulk. A disgruntled congregant says to another, "No, I'm not coming to church much anymore; the direction the minister is taking us put me off."

We might compare a relationship with cutoff to a pipe. There is no give and take. The members can neither go away from one another nor get close to one another. The relationship is simply stuck and rigid. By contrast, healthier relationships are more like rubber bands, with considerable flexibility in the coming and going but always confidence in the connection.

Emotional cutoff arises as one seeks to separate from the family of origin. Becoming a self requires breaking the fusion a child has with its parents. In healthy, well-differentiated families, this difficult transition involves a gradual, yet steady, letting go on the part of the parents and a willingness on the part of the child to assume more personal responsibility. When parents refuse to let go (as a function of their anxiety about their offspring), the child has to wrest himself or herself free with some degree of defiance, rebellion, or simply running away. "I'm outta here" is easier than negotiating changing roles and expectations. For some, it becomes a lifetime strategy for dealing with conflict.

If the parents make the opposite mistake and don't offer sufficient guidance and encouragement, the reluctant child may simply never leave home until pushed. Some people never quite succeed. Examples are the so-called Momma's boy or the daughter who calls her mother at 5:05 p.m. every day just to touch base—and then complains to her mother about how unfair her husband, boss, or children are.

There is no shame in finding the passage difficult. However, to the extent a person chooses to be cut off from his or her family, he or she will replicate that strategy again and again in adult life. The more intense the unresolved issues with the parents, the more likely the person will play them out in other situations—in marriage and parenting, work settings, and ways of being in the congregation. As the old saying has it, you can take the boy out of the farm, but you can't take the farm out of the boy.

The loss or lessening of connection with one's family of origin is very much a part of the societal emotional process of contemporary American society. Among Unitarian Universalists there are many who are cut off from their families and faith of origin and who live as psychological or spiritual orphans. Such persons are often reluctant to commit to relationships for fear of losing self all over again.

Whether they abandon the family or the family abandons them (rejection), individuals who try to find self apart from their family will often find the church disappointing. This is because the human family is much the same everywhere. The irritations and

difficulties we have with our own families no doubt will be found in congregational life. Unresolved issues with parents will appear in conflicts with authority and other parental figures (with ministers especially). Likewise, the inability to get along with siblings also will play itself out with persons at church who fill the family-like positions akin to those of one's sisters and brothers.

Running away is not a particularly effective method for resolving tensions within the family. It is also not particularly helpful in congregational life. As congregants contend with one another, anxiety will increase all the more whenever people deal with conflict by threatening to withdraw (also known as passive-aggressive behavior). Anxious-to-please members will worry about what they can do to placate an unhappy member. Untold energy is spent by church leadership trying to figure out how to satisfy members who withdraw. To the extent a congregation is captive to togetherness, it will be readily manipulated by people who use cutoff as their major strategy for getting what they want. This dynamic is particularly complicated when high pledgers use cutoff.

A systems perspective alerts us to how withdrawal changes the emotional field and thereby increases anxiety. If leadership can be clear about boundaries, they might say, "We would hate to see you go, but if you're not happy among us or if you're unwilling to work with us, then we wish you well elsewhere."

Another implication is that the congregation's ministry ought to invite people to do the hard work of reconnecting to their families of origin and their roots of their prior faith constellations. Encouraging people to work on defining themselves in the context of their past will help them do a better job within the congregation as well. Programs such as the Haunting Church, Building Your Own Theology, and credo or covenant groups are some ways to do this. Indeed, systems theory asserts that a person cannot heal without working on unresolved issues from childhood.

### Questions to Ponder

- Think of someone either in your family or congregation who makes you anxious and whom you avoid. What would it take for you to go closer to that person rather than away from him or her? Is there anything that would actually make it fun to be with those who irritate or intimidate you?
- Make a list of all the religious words or practices you disdain. Pick five or so. Look up their dictionary meanings. Talk to several people about these words. Is your dislike shared? What words bug others that don't bug you? Why might that be?
- For one week, notice all the times you fail to engage someone with whom you disagree. What does that remind you of in your family of origin?



## Let's You and Her Fight: Triangulation

The last element of systems theory we consider is the triangle, sometimes described as the basic molecule of an emotional system. Triangles (three-sided relationships) arise because all two-person relationships are unstable (as is a two-legged stool). The quickest way to calm the anxiety between two people is to pull in another. This is the purpose of a triangle—to bind anxiety.

The basic rule is this:

Whenever two parts of a system become uncomfortable with one another, they will turn their focus to a third person or issue as a way to stabilize their own relationship with one another.

You cannot begin to understand systems theory until you think in threes in this manner.

How do you identify a triangle? A triangle can involve people, things, events, or issues—anything with emotional intensity. You are in a triangle anytime you feel the urge to push something. The following are some illustrations:

- A mother and child are having a difficult day together. Mom says, "Just wait until your father gets home, young man." The child, feeling excluded by his mother, outfoxes her. As Daddy comes in the door, the child runs and leaps into the father's arms and begins to cry, muttering, "Mommy is so mean." The husband and father is caught in the middle, now carrying some of the mother-son tension as he tries to figure out what's going on.
- Two neighbors are discussing politics over the backyard fence. They both agree that the president is a great man, noting in passing that the neighbor to the east must be an idiot for disagreeing.
- A congregation is coping with growth and considering adding staff. Several groups form, one arguing for a second minister, another for a full-time music director, and a third for the launching of a capital campaign to build a new sanctuary. After several months, the district executive gets called in to deescalate the growing fight. She does so, and after several meetings returns home with a terrible headache.

Triangles are automatic. They are inescapable. They are neither good nor bad—just inevitable. They are a product of our lack of differentiation. Every person triangles

others in (by alliance formation, as did the child and the neighbor friends above) or out (by factionalization, as in the church example). Every person triangles and gets triangled several times a day. Here is the simple test to know you're in a triangle: Are you and your partner talking about a third party who is not in the conversation? The sense of relief we feel anytime we do this reveals how powerful this dynamic of human relations is.

From time to time, people talk about staying out of triangles. This idea represents a misunderstanding of the concept. Even to say it that way reveals you are in a triangle. The issue is not that triangles can be or should be avoided. More, it is a matter knowing when you're in a triangle and managing your anxiety about the relationship.

That said, triangles can be pernicious and destructive. Talking (complaining) about others without their knowledge is both unkind and unjust. Moreover, when we talk about another, not only are we trying to get closer to the person we're with; we are also shaping forever their perceptions of the third party. For instance, to say to your partner that the schoolteacher next door has a drinking problem will affect how he interacts with the schoolteacher at the next block party. To the extent we use triangles to scapegoat others or not take responsible steps toward problem solving, triangles can be extremely hurtful.

Triangles relieve tension and thus become a means of conflict management. True, they can become a way of perpetuating conflict by keeping issues from coming to the floor. At other times, just bellyaching to another about a child, spouse, co-worker, or church issue is sufficient to let us move onto something more productive. Sometimes, complaining about others enables us to get useful feedback so we can move toward a less whiney, more productive engagement with whoever is irritating to us. In short, triangles are productive ways to calm things down. To the extent they give us breathing space to be less reactive to others, to think more calmly, and to take responsibility for getting our wants and needs fairly met, they are an important part of conflict management.

The triangle concept explains why we call upon counselors or consultants to help deal with conflicts. As they are not part of our system, they simply are less anxious and thus more able to see what's going on among group members.

As has been noted, triangles form around persons and issues. Healthy families often have many triangles going at once. This situation serves to keep any one relationship from having to carry too much of the energy in the system. Conversely, individuals with few relationships extending beyond the family tend to be more intense within their family. At the congregational level, smaller groups tend to be far more reactive to issues of disagreement than larger ones, because there are correspondingly fewer

places to triangle energy in or out. To link this concept back to cutoff, people who are not broadly connected are just that much more vulnerable to changes external to them.

Another way to notice triangles is to watch how energy flows among people. Watch how people take sides on an issue, literally moving closer to those with whom they agree and away from those who differ. The simplest triangle involves three people. Larger triangles create alliances or coalitions that may involve hundreds. Indeed, much political strategy involves intentionally creating such triangles defining who is "in" and who is "out" in order to move issues along.

This list suggests some rules as to how triangles function:

1. When two people are in a stable relationship, bringing in a third will destabilize things. For many young couples, their first real crisis is the birth of the first child. Changing careers or having an affair does the same thing. In church life, adding new members or staff will disturb existing balances.
2. When two are stable, a third leaving also destabilizes things. Consider the anxiety around weddings as a child exits his family, or how a congregation becomes tense if the beloved minister announces her retirement. Similar things can be said of presidential assassinations or the sudden death of the family matriarch.
3. The most identifiable pattern is that when two are unstable, they can stabilize things by bringing in a third. One example already mentioned is the use of consultants. Another is the young, conflicted couple who gives birth to a child and discovers a new peace in the household.
4. Again, when two people are anxious together, they can stabilize by pushing a third party out. Listen for all the times people talk about getting rid of "troublemakers" or taking delight in exposing the secrets of gossips.

#### Questions to Ponder

- How does gossip within your congregation serve to calm things or to keep anxiety going?
- Try to hold a steady conversation with another and not mention a third party. How long can you go?
- In what ways do your family members avoid conflict by talking about one another?
- How do international treaties demonstrate triangles at work?

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**\*Important note for searching UUA.org:** All UUA resources mentioned are available in the Leaders section of the web site, in the Leaders' Library. Please use quotes around the title when you search to bring up the resource or item you seek.