

St. Ambrose's 2014 Lenten Program: A book study on A Failure of Nerve, Leadership in an Age of the Quick Fix by Edwin Friedman, led by the Rev. David Ota, Session 1: March 9, 2014

Why are we studying A Failure of Nerve, Leadership in an Age of the Quick-Fix

- i. We are all part of several relationships that sometimes can be frustrating
- ii. The usual way of understanding these relationships in a cause and effect way often don't work
- iii. We are all sometimes in a leadership position in relationships
- iv. Family systems theory has proven to be helpful in the practice of ministry and in working through difficulties in relationships and help to move people forward in their lives

Who was Edwin H. Friedman?

1. He was a rabbi of Bethesda Jewish Congregation and served with the White House as a Community Relations Consultant.
2. He was a former student of Murray Bowen who pioneered the application of systemic concepts to broader "families" such as religious congregations and their hierarchies, school, hospitals, professional partnership and businesses. He was a consultant on family systems theories for decades.
3. He was the author of the book, *Generation to Generation*, which was and may still be used in seminaries to teach seminarians how to understand the dynamics of emotional processes in people's lives.
4. The book, *A Failure of Nerve, Leadership in an Age of the Quick-Fix* was written posthumously by his colleagues and approved by his widow, and published by Seabury Books, New York, an Episcopal Church related publishing company.

Generation to Generation, Family Process in Church and Synagogue

1. What is family systems theory?
 - a. It is a way of understanding and mapping the dynamics in relationships focusing on the position of people and issues involved that are often not at first readily apparent, and includes patterns that are passed down from generation to generation
 - b. Instead of linear thinking, family systems theory focuses on the dynamics in a family system; it focuses less on the data or content and more on the process that governs the data; less on the cause and effect connections that link bits of information and more on the principles of organization that give data meaning.
 - c. A schematic presentation, page 16 of *Generation to Generation*



FIGURE 1-2. Linear causation.

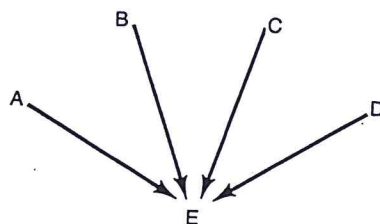


FIGURE 1-3. Multiple causation.

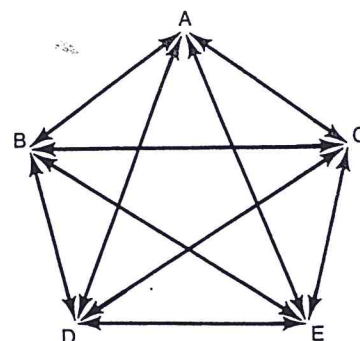


FIGURE 1-4. Systems thinking.

- d. Method of Family Systems Thinking, page 18 of Generation to Generation
- i. Focus on (emotional) process rather than symptomatic content.
 - ii. Seeing effects as integral parts of structure rather than as an end point in linear chains of cause
 - iii. Eliminating symptoms by modifying structure rather than by trying to change the dysfunctional part directly
 - iv. Predicting how a given part is likely to function not by analyzing its nature but by observing its position in the system. This has enormous ramification for approaches to premarital counseling that focus on the position of the bride and groom in their respective families of origin rather than concentrating on the fit of their own personalities.
- e. Five basic concepts of Family systems theory
- The **identified patient** is the family member with the obvious symptom is not to be seen as the “sick one” but as the one in whom the family’s stress or pathology has surfaced. The purpose of using the phrase identified patient is to avoid isolating the “problemated” family member from the overall relationship system of the family.
 - The **family**, and not the individual, is considered the “unit of treatment. In other words, it is the family that has a dysfunction that needs to be treated. The medical field has long realized that focusing on symptoms alone, or on a dysfunctional part in isolation from the rest of the body, will only have short-term relief. In a family emotional system, when an unresolved problem is isolated in one of its members and fixed there by diagnosis, it enables the rest of the family to “purify” itself by locating the source of the its “disease” in the disease of the identified patient. By keeping the focus on one of its members, the family, personal or congregational, can deny the very issues that contributed to making one of its members symptomatic, even if it harms the entire family. In other words the dysfunction has been displaced onto the identified patient who manifests the dysfunction personally.
 - **Family Projection Process** is what happens when a person takes on the burdens of the entire system and either over-functions or has symptoms. In other words, when the system isn’t working properly one of the members in the family system either over-functions or gets symptoms such as illness or acts out.
 - **Homeostasis** is the tendency of any set of relationships to strive perpetually, in self-corrective ways, to preserve the organizing principles of its existence. The family model conceptualizes a system’s problems in terms of an imbalance that must have occurred in the network of its various relationships, no matter what the nature of the individual personalities. The basic question is what has happened to the fit that was there among the various parts of the system? Why has the symptom surfaced now? The concept of homeostasis can help explain why a given relationship system, family or congregation, has become troubled. It sheds light on which family member becomes, or is likely to become, symptomatic (the identified patient). It clarifies the resistance families have to change. It guides in the creation of strategies for change. And it helps develop criteria for distinguishing real change from the recycling of a symptom. (Generation to Generation, pages 23-24)
 - The most important ramification of homeostasis for family systems theory is its emphasis on position rather than personality, when explaining the emergence of a symptom. The person who “picks up” most of the pressure in a system will wind up symptomatic, not necessarily the weakest one.
 - Someone in the system functions as the anxiety trap for their system to protect the others and serves as the identified patient.

- Some relationships have too much togetherness, and there isn't much differentiation between the two and can be compared to a serial electrical system. (Figure 1-5, Generation to Generation page 26)

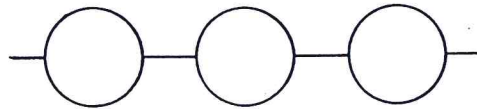


FIGURE 1-5.
Serial electrical system.

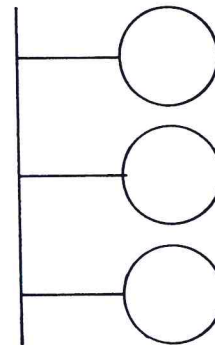
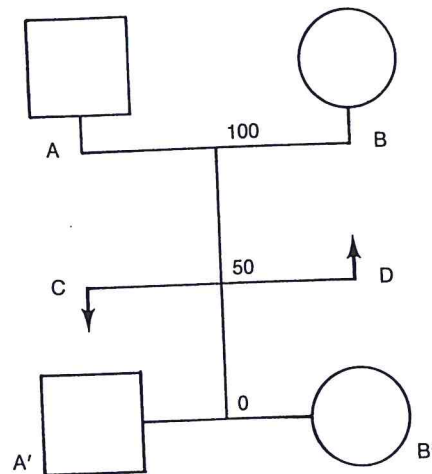


FIGURE 1-6.
Parallel electrical system.

- Other relationships are able to have members self-differentiated enough, so they may relate more like a parallel electrical system.
- Clergy in congregations are one non-family system which behaves with the emotional stress of a family.
- **Differentiation of self** is “the capacity of a family member to define his or her own life’s goals and values apart from surrounding togetherness pressures, to say ‘I’ when others are demanding ‘you’ and ‘we.’ It includes the capacity to maintain a (relatively) non-anxious presence in the midst of anxious systems, to take maximum responsibility for one’s own destiny and emotional being. It can be measured somewhat by the breadth of one’s repertoire of responses when confronted with a crisis. The concept should not be confused with autonomy or narcissism, however. Differentiation means the capacity to be an ‘I’ while remaining connected.” (Generation to Generation, page 27)
- There is a **scale of differentiation** according to Bowen. All members of the human family are placed on a continuum. Where one falls on the scale, according to the theory, is determined in large part by where our parents, their parents, etc., were on the scale, with various children in each generation being slightly more or less mature than their parents and tending to marry individuals with similar ranges. Families composed of individuals toward the bottom of the scale are far less equipped to deal with crisis and would respond more quickly to redress the balance if the homeostasis of the family were disturbed, particularly if the disturbance were caused by another member trying to achieve a higher level of differentiation (maturity). The highly differentiated persons in a relationship have a wide range of options, whereas the non-differentiated persons in a relationship can only think of “we”, and not “I.” Figure 1-7, Scale of differentiation (page 28, Generation to Generation.)

FIGURE 1-7. Scale of differentiation.



- The extended family field** refers to our family of origin, that is, our original nuclear family (parents and siblings) plus our other relatives (grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc.) Family theory sees the entire network of the extended family system as important, and the influence of that network is considered to be significant in the here and now as well. In addition, the concept suggests that parents themselves are someone's children, even when they are adults, and that they are still part of their own sibling systems, even after marriage....Gaining a better understanding of the emotional processes still at work with regard to our family of origin, and modifying our response to them, can aid significantly in the resolution of emotional problems in our immediate family (marriage or parenting) or of leadership problems in a church or synagogue. In addition, specific patterns of behavior as well as specific issues have an uncanny way of reappearing. When family members are able to see beyond the horizons of their own nuclear family area of trouble and observe the transmission of such issues from generation to generation, they often can obtain more distance from their immediate problems, and as a result, become freer to make changes. (pages 31-32, Generation to Generation)
- Differentiation and Family of Origin** are interconnected. The position we occupy in our families of origin is the only thing we can never share or give up to another while we are still alive. It is the source of our uniqueness, and, hence, the basic parameter for our emotional potential as well as our difficulties.... The more we can understand that position, therefore, and the more we can learn to occupy it with grace and 'savvy,' rather than fleeing from it or unwittingly allowing it to program our destiny, the more effectively we can function in any other area of life. The family systems model enables individuals to seek relationships with their family of origin; the problem with parents, after all, is that they had parents.
- An **Emotional Triangle** is formed by any three persons or issues. The basic law of emotional triangles is that when any two parts of a system become uncomfortable with one another, they will 'triangle in' or focus upon a third person, or issue, as a way of stabilizing their own relationship with one another. A person may be said to be 'tri-angled' if he or she gets caught in the middle as the focus of such an unresolved issue. Conversely, when individuals try to change the relationship of two others (people, or a person and his or her symptom or belief), they 'triangle' themselves into that relationship (and often stabilize the very situation they are trying to change.)

- The seven laws of an emotional triangle are equally applicable to all families of the human species.
 - The relationship of any two members of an emotional triangle is kept in balance by the way a third party relates to each of them or to their relationship. When a given relationship is stuck, therefore, there is probably a third person or issue that is part of the homeostasis.
 - If one is the third party in an emotional triangle it is generally not possible to bring change (for more than a week) to the relationship of the other two parts by trying to change their relationship directly.
 - Attempts to change the relationship of their other two sides of an emotional triangle not only are generally ineffective, but also, homeostatic forces often convert these efforts to the opposite intent. Trying to bring two people closer or another party and his or her symptom together will generally maintain or increase the distance between them. On the other hand, repeated efforts to separate a person and his or her symptom or any two parties, or anyone and his or her cherished beliefs increases the possibility that they will 'blindly in love' with one another.
 - To the extent a third party to an emotional triangle tries unsuccessfully to change the relationship of the other two, the more likely it is that the third party will wind up with the stress for the other two. This helps explain why the dysfunctional member in many families is often not the weakest person in the system, but on the contrary, often the one taking responsibility for the entire system. The concept of an emotional triangle thus creates an interrelational rather than a merely quantitative view of stress. On the other hand, the concept of triangulation permits a style of leadership that is healthier for both the leader and follower in both personal and congregational families.
 - The various triangles in an emotional system interlock so that efforts to bring change to any one of them are often resisted by homeostatic forces in the others or in the system itself.
 - One side of an emotional triangle tends to be more conflicted than the others. In healthier families, conflict will tend to swing round the compass, so to speak, showing up in different persons or different relationships at different times. In relationship systems that are not as healthy, the conflict tends to be located on one particular side of the triangle (the identified patient or relationship). It is often the distribution and fluidity of conflict in a family that is crucial to its health rather than the quantity or the kind of issues that arise. Systems in which the triangles are more fluid can tolerate more conflict (and therefore more creativity) because of that capacity for distribution.
 - We can only change a relationship to which we belong. Therefore, the way to bring change to the relationship of two others is to try to maintain a well-defined relationship with each, and to avoid the responsibility with one another. To the extent we can maintain a 'non-anxious presence' in a triangle, such a stance has the potential to modify the anxiety in the others. The challenge is to be both 'non-anxious' and present....The most triangle position in any set of relationships is always the most vulnerable; when the laws of emotional triangles are understood, however, it tends to become the most powerful.