

How To Teach a Pig to Sing

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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Montgomery

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This morning I take on one of those eternal, unbidden questions that haunts us all, how do you teach a pig to sing? That's how one member of the congregation at my intern site in New Madison, Ohio, population 818, asks the question, how do you change the behavior of someone who doesn't want to change?

The short answer is that we can't change other people's behavior. We are powerless over other people, places, and things. Yet, powerlessness is not the same as helplessness.

This morning, I am going to describe a different way of thinking about families called family systems theory. I introduced this topic two weeks ago when I made some observations based on family systems theory about the first three generations of the Biblical patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Like any major theory, family systems has its differing schools of thought, each with its own founders. In my sermon two weeks ago, I was borrowing heavily from the work of Virginia Satir. Today, I turn to Edwin Friedman, a Rabbi and a psychologist who specializes, if you will, in family systems thinking for clergy and congregations. Today's sermon covers much of the same ground I covered two weeks ago, but with different language, imagery and illustrations. So, for those who missed that sermon, you're not at any disadvantage. For those who were here, this sermon I hope will add some more meaning and perspective and reinforce some key points.

I begin with our principles and purposes. Our first principle affirms the inherent worth and dignity of every person and our seventh principle affirms our respect for the interdependent web of existence, of which we are a part. Although there is nothing contradictory between these two principles, they reflect the tension that exists in all human beings between autonomy and relationship. This tension is captured in the paradox that each of us is like no other human being on the earth and each of us is like every human being on the earth.

We see this tension most clearly in teenagers because we have some emotional and objective distance from those years. Of course, some of us have more distance than others. Mine seems to be growing exponentially. At one extreme, we see teens so eager to belong, to "be cool", to be accepted that they completely lose their identity and individuality. At the other end, we see teenagers so eager and anxious to find an identity that they cut themselves off from family and friends. What we are less likely to see, because it is so hard to see our own behavior as an outsider sees it, is that we never leave that tension behind. Whenever one member of a couple struggles with the decision to accept a transfer or to leave work or home to go back to school, or more sadly, to leave the relationship, the coupleship is playing out this tension between autonomy and relationship.

Our principles don't make these kinds of decisions any easier. In fact, they challenge us in ways other faith traditions don't. It would be easy if we assumed that the tie breaking vote in

all relationships belongs to the man. That error is compounded by its assumption that there always is a man and only one man in a relationship.

If, as our principles tell us, every human being has inherent worth and dignity and that every human being is connected to the same web of life to which each of us is connected, what do we do, when, through ignorance or oppression or physical or mental disorder, either we or others in our family web act out in unhealthy or dysfunctional ways? That's where family systems theory may help us.

Family systems theory was developed by Dr. Murray Bowen while he was working with people with schizophrenia and their families at the National Institute of Mental Health in Bethesda, Maryland in the 1950s. He postulated the theory that individual emotional behavior was not just the function of an individual, but the product of the nuclear family, which itself reflects multi-generational dynamics. Yet, this is not a "blame the parents" theory because the parents themselves are acting out family emotional patterns established in their childhood homes.

Friedman distinguishes the family systems model from individual therapy using five basic concepts. I'm going to briefly identify these concepts, then make some observations about them. I don't expect you to absorb all of this upon hearing it once. Each of you may remember or connect to different ideas here, and that's just fine.

The first concept is that of the identified patient. That's the easy one. The identified patient is the one that everyone thinks is the problem. Yet, quoting Friedman, "the family member with the obvious symptom is to be seen not as the "sick one" but as the one in whom the family's stress or pathology has surfaced." Let me repeat that, "the family member with the obvious symptom is to be seen not as the "sick one" but as the one in whom the family's stress or pathology has surfaced." When a doctor sees that someone's skin color is not right, the doctor likely will suspect the problem is with liver function, which itself may be the product of other problems with a person's overall health. The doctor doesn't treat the skin color, she or he treats the whole patient. That's how Friedman wants us to think about dysfunctional behavior in families—the so-called identified patient is just the most obvious symptom of the emotional functioning of the whole family.

The implication of this theory is that you don't always focus your efforts at treating the person with the outward problems. Sometimes, the most effective response is to treat the person with the greatest capacity to change the system. Instead of working with the weakest link, you work with the strongest links in the family—which may very well be you. Just hold that thought for a moment.

Friedman's second concept is homeostasis, or balance. We all recognize this, too. When a family has been dysfunctional for years and years, it is because everyone has adapted to the dysfunction. This applies to constant petty arguments or arguments every year about attending family events as well as to the more overt problems of addiction, chronic unemployment or even chronic ill-health. This concept reminds us that family members may be threatened by the recovery of another member and may consciously or unconsciously sabotage that person's recovery. Usually, someone in the family assumes the role of caretaker for a family member that

is having problems. This may be an older sibling watching out for a younger one. It may be the spouse who calls in sick for the other spouse when the other spouse has a hangover. In any case, that person's role in the family may be defined by that care giving. As the troubled person begins to recover, the caregiver will need to redefine his or her role in the family, and, if he or she doesn't do that, it will sabotage the recovery of the so-called identified patient.

The next concept is self-differentiation. Arguably this is the cornerstone and most complex concept in the system. Differentiation refers to our ability to maintain our core basic self regardless of the external environment. It's being able to be present without being taken over. People who take on the emotions of their environment have low self-differentiation. When someone close—a spouse, parent, child or sibling for example-- becomes very despondent or angry or happy, the person with a lower degree of self-differentiation will become despondent or angry or happy, as the case may be. The person with a higher degree of self-differentiation retains a greater capacity to choose how he or she will respond. When one spouse becomes anxious, for example, about his job security, and the other spouse takes on that anxiety and is just as anxious, family theory says they are fused—there is little or no differentiation. At the other end of the scale, the people who don't panic when all around them are panicking *may* have a higher degree of differentiation. If you think you're one of those people, don't pat yourself on the back just yet. It depends on whether the people who never panic are truly able to stay connected with the others and separate their emotions from the event or whether they are staying calm because they are distancing themselves from the others and staying disconnected. That's just as unhealthy as being fused.

Another important concept is that of the extended family field, which is something to which I've already alluded. In this case, family means the family of origin—your parents, sibling, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. Individual therapy tends to focus only on the parents, but family theory recognizes that the entire extended family shapes our basic self. It's easy to say that a brother or aunt or uncle that you see only on holidays is not really a factor in your immediate family's dynamics. Yet, why that is so may be an important clue in understanding how you and your immediate family are operating. When looking for the sources of patterns of emotional behavior in your family, don't stop with your immediate family.

The final concept is that of the emotional triangle. This was hard for me to grasp because I always thought of triangling as a bad thing, and it can be. Yet, family systems theory suggest that it can be a very good thing. Here's what Friedman says: "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."

An example of good triangling is when the member of a coupleship can be with another person—a best friend or family member—who can check the person's judgment and defuse the member's tension. This becomes an example of a bad triangle when one person uses another person to avoid dealing with a partner altogether or puts the other person in the middle of the situation and expects the other person to resolve the issue.

Well, I've given you a lot of information. As I noted earlier, most of you may remember only one thing that resonated with you, maybe more. In any case, I encourage you to learn more

about this yourself and to resist the notion to diagnose everyone in your family based on this sermon.

It's important to bring all this back to our principles. We live in a paradox. We are created in goodness; yet, we live in a world and maybe even in a family, where there may be little apparent goodness. Our principles teach us that each of us belongs here. As we say in 12-step rooms, God doesn't make junk. That should serve as an affirmation for ourselves and a challenge as well to accept that everybody else belongs here as well. We all struggle with the desire both to be accepted for all the qualities that make us unique and to find a certain "sameness" that reassures us that we are like everyone else. I described this tension as the tension between autonomy and relationship.

The answer to resolving that tension is differentiation. Here's the distinction I want you to take with you today. Autonomy can be achieved through separation—leaving home, leaving a marriage, avoiding a family, etc. You can be independent without being close to anyone in your life—and what a sad life that would be. Differentiation though is all about maintaining yourself within a family system. By now, I'm sure you've figured out that a family system may just as easily be your co-workers, your social club, or even a congregation. Differentiation is about staying connected and staying whole at the same time. In terms of our principles, it is how we honor our own inherent worth and dignity while remaining part of the interconnected web to which we belong.

I'm not naïve about this stuff. There are times when the hardest--and right--thing to do is to separate ourselves from a toxic family system and to connect with a healthier family. Loving people is not easy, but it is worth the effort.

The most important change in your thinking that I want you to take away today is that the identified patient is not "the sick one" but the one in whom the family stress has surfaced. The best way to help that person may be to work on your own differentiation—to be able to be with that person and be a part of that person's struggle without taking on the emotions of that person or the anxiety of the issue at hand. That process starts with your emotional health, which itself may start with your understanding of your extended emotional family field. The process may continue by helping the healthiest people first.

So, as we might say in New Madison, if you want to teach a pig to sing, first, you learn to sing. Then you teach all of the cows and sheep to sing, and then the pig will want to sing. It may not make sense now, but that's an incredibly profound statement, if I do say so myself. I close with this reminder, though. We are powerless over other people, but we are not helpless. Family systems theory does not come with guarantees, but it has helped a lot of people. This is tough stuff. Family issues are heartbreaking. That's in part why we gather each week, to affirm one another, to give each a pat on the back. That's why we light candles of joy and sorrow. Please don't ever forget that, though we have our own shortcomings, we aspire first and foremost to be a caring, loving community covenanted to helping one another.

May it always be so.