

The I's Have It Rev. Mark Stringer
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"Life is an endless series of no-win situations if what you mean by winning is making everyone else happy." —*Jeffrey A. Miller, Bowen family therapist and management consultant*

Introducing the Theme

Today, we are sharing in the eight edition of our annual Bowen Family Systems Theory service, or as at least one of you refers to it: the “kick me in the gut” service. It can be tough to think about our families and our roles in them, right? Anytime we can objectively consider our family interactions and our roles in them, we are going to have to face up to the ways in which our actions do not always match up with our intentions. We are going to have to acknowledge the consequences of our own choices. And we are going to have to reflect on who it is we really want to be, rather than just resign ourselves to who we have always been. These can be painful things to consider. For some of us there may be nothing that can feel more difficult, if not dangerous, than considering our family interactions and our roles in them. Even as our family relationships can be where we are most affirmed and unconditionally loved, they can also be where we are the most withdrawn, or anxious, or fearful. Even as our families can be the places where we learn the most about who we are and who we could be, they can also be ground zero for our most explosive flare-ups and the places where our identities and interests are most compromised.

Still, my intention is not to bring you pain today, but to invite you once again into a way of viewing our lives that could enable you to be more objective (and therefore, perhaps, calm, present and accounted for) as you navigate your family relationships and interactions.

Every year, as I have prepared this service, I have been given reason to reflect on my own roles and behaviors in the families of my life, and it isn't always pretty for me either. But I love this service every year for precisely that reason. For me, the most holy thing we could do together is to practice being honest with ourselves about who we are, collectively and individually. Not so we can beat ourselves up, or mourn how much we betray our best intentions, but so that we can grow and change (and laugh at ourselves!) as we reach toward becoming more connected and relationally responsible than we may have previously been. My theology is one of relationship, of a creative spirit, or God if you will, which is present in our open, humble, and truth-seeking approaches to the interactions of our lives, so perhaps it is not surprising that I find a theory that attempts to empirically acknowledge life as it truly lived and experienced and that encourages us to be present, accounted for, and responsible within our relationships to be more than just a therapeutic tool; it is a means by which I can more readily embrace and engage with my life.

You might also understand, then, why I have typically scheduled this annual Bowen weekend just before Thanksgiving. Whether or not we have the opportunity (or some would say “obligation”) to gather with our families during this season of holidays and holy days, our families, both nuclear and extended, tend to be in our minds and hearts, and even at times our knotted stomachs...both for what is life-enriching about them...and what feels life-depleting.

For today's service, I will share a Bowen theory perspective on our tendencies to try to change the behavior of other people rather than focusing on the one thing we can change—ourselves. We'll think together about over-functioning and under-functioning within our families and we'll reflect on how taking an “I-position”, which is another way to say focusing on our principles rather than on other people's personalities, can bring clarity and calm to even the most anxiety-producing family challenges (whether at home or at work).

For those of you new to Bowen theory, here's a brief introduction.

Murray Bowen was a psychiatrist who, before he died in 1990, spent over forty years developing a theory of human behavior that aimed to objectively describe human interaction not as it should or could be, but as it is. Bowen saw that the predominant way people tried to understand human behavior was based in human subjectivity—one person's experience

interpreted by that person...and sometimes by the person's therapist—an approach based in the belief that the basic unit of emotional functioning is the individual. If an individual has a problem, the traditional approach suggests, an individual is probably to blame: one's mother, or father, or sibling, or self. Most of us remain well versed in this traditional way of viewing the relationships of our lives. When we think of our own families, whether they be biological, adoptive, workplace, or even church families, we can almost certainly point to a person (or a few people) who “cause” most of the problems. “If this person could just straighten up...or clue in...or get with it,” we tell ourselves, “the family would improve.”

Bowen's observations indicated to him that focusing on one person or group as the toxic element or “the patient” actually contributes to the continuation of the experienced problems because the other family members can then avoid their own responsibility as contributors to the family process in exchange for their fascination with the so-called dysfunctional member. If a given problem is someone else's “fault”, then everyone else can resign themselves to being helpless. If someone is to blame, we think nothing can change until he or she does, which is rarely the case.

The theory he developed, then, took the emphasis off the individual, and focused instead on the entire family as an emotional unit, as a system where each individual member holds a functioning position and contributes to the working of the whole.

Bowen believed that even if a problem or symptom is evident in only one person, an emphasis on “fixing” or “helping” that person alone would always be misguided, for the whole system—meaning the entire multi-generational family itself and not just a single individual—has inevitably contributed to and/or enabled any symptom that emerges. In other words, in order for the symptom to be alleviated, the system itself must function differently.

Taking a systems-view of family relationships and interactions can be a radical shift for many of us. We are often so experienced in diagnosing the so-called problem members of our families, and then allowing that diagnosis to govern our interactions, that to attempt to take a larger, more objective view of the entire family as a system, can seem like an unnecessary detour. We can be so certain that we know who needs to shape up that, even if we accept the idea of the family as an emotional unit, we are still left to wonder how we can possibly change the system without assigning blame and without trying to fix other people. Bowen theory has a simple (though certainly challenging) suggestion for us: Rather than focusing our energy on getting others to be who we think they should be, we can work on improving our own individual functioning within the system. In other words, we can give up trying to change other people and work instead on changing ourselves towards becoming more autonomous (or independent...or in Bowen theory terms, differentiated), yet still connected, members of the system. Even the most subtle changes in our own functioning toward becoming a more solid, differentiated self in the system, the theory says, can open up entirely new possibilities, both for ourselves...and for our families. My hope is that today's service will encourage us to be thoughtful about and maybe even alter our own functioning within the families of our lives...no matter how unlikely or impossible it may seem. But first, let's take some time to center ourselves in this community...to bring our whole selves to this place...and to begin to reflect together on the unique collections of people we call our families.

Let's pause in meditation, reflection or prayer.

Meditation

O, spirit of life, creative, imperfect, foundation of all families...those complicated relationship systems from which we all came, and from whose roots we cannot fully remove ourselves... those powerful systems that can pull us together and push us apart.

We know you, spirit of our living, when our family connections are a source of joy, when the loving support of our parents, children or siblings has kept us afloat in turbulent waters...and when we have reached out to support family members ourselves, and have been met with gratitude.

We also know you when these same connections bind us up inside with anger, disappointment, resentment...when we might wish we have never known this strange bunch of people we call our family.

Sometimes we look at our families and wish for happier times, times that once were and can no longer be,

Or maybe times that never were but that we long for anyway. We look at our families, whether in person or in our mind's eye, And we yearn for peace, forgiveness, and redemption, even as we may tell ourselves it's a lost cause.

Will we ever know why families can be so maddening? Is it possible to be grateful for them, to learn from them, to grow with them even in our disappointment...even in our frustration?

Thank you, spirit of life, possibility in action,

For the opportunity to live one more day with these people who drive us crazy, even as they lift us up...these people who challenge us to be authentically ourselves, even as they work consciously and unconsciously against our attempts to do so.

And teach us, in all the families of our lives, to see beyond the flare-ups and the failures, the maladies and the meltdowns, and to find the peaceful stillness beneath the surface...the stillness from which we came and to which we will all one day return.

Amen.

Sermon

What if I told you that I had a magic necklace which, when worn, would enable you to influence the behavior of nearly everyone else around you? You wouldn't be able to control their movements, or what they say, but you would be able, with the power of this magic necklace engaged, to effectively invite everyone to understand and be respectful of, if not motivated by, your perspectives and intentions. No longer would you be left to try to figure out why another person is doing things and strategize your response according to your assumptions about what they want or need. In fact, what motivates others or keeps them happy would no longer be your primary focus, as now, with your magic necklace engaged, all you would have to do is be yourself in their presence, and they would be more apt to be open and responsive to your way of being.

Imagine wearing your necklace to the Thanksgiving table. Your sister, who after once again rushing to trump your perspective with her own, notices your clenched jaw and flushed face, and now wants to know how you see things, and actually listens when you tell her. Your uncle, who begins to preach yet another sermon based on the gospel of Glenn Beck (or Keith Olbermann, as the case may be), catches your silent eye-rolling, decides that you probably don't want to hear it, and changes the conversation to something other than politics or religion. Your adult daughter, who never helps with the dinner preparation or cleanup, hears your sighs which you have offered for years in a passive attempt to show everyone how disappointed you are to have to do all the work yourself, and walks over to the sink to start doing dishes without being asked.

Amazed by these changes in behavior, all apparently resulting from the necklace, since you haven't really changed your behavior, you begin to believe it is now possible that you can be honest and direct about the way you think about things and that people will not just hear you, they will listen to you. You have no need to try to hide your principles with apologies or attempts to suggest that your best thinking doesn't really matter (even though it does), and you don't succumb to defensive blaming, name-calling or eye-rolling because the necklace will insure that all will hear your perspectives and assume good intentions, even if their points of view differ from yours. Knowing that you will be heard lowers your own anxiety, so you become more tolerant of difference. You stop taking the emotional reactivity of your family personally and begin to view family interactions less as duels and more as opportunities for dialogue. You still have some heated discussions with your family; after all, you and your uncle are still very different people with very different views on some sensitive issues. But now the stakes of your interactions seem lower because you are focusing more on the facts of your conversations and

less on the clash of personalities. It's like a whole new world has opened up. Things aren't necessarily easier for you. After all, it takes courage to communicate your perspective, especially because you may have spent a lifetime not doing so. And sometimes the immediate results don't seem all that positive. Your family has to adjust to your new way of being, and so is often initially confrontational about how you respond differently to things you have always just done or gone along with in the past. But, over time, it seems, you are feeling less anxious and so is the family.

The impact of your necklace so impresses you, that you decide to wear it to work, where you have been regularly working overtime dealing with everyone else's shortcomings. It's not that you have wanted to do everyone else's job, it's just that, well, your co-workers have proven themselves to be so incompetent, that someone has to step it up. This is the same position you have found yourself in throughout your life. Things always fall to you and you are sick of it! But now, believing in the power of your necklace, you take a step back. You decide to solely focus only on your own job, not everyone else's. At first, your co-workers begin to panic. They come to you wondering why you aren't doing the things you have always done. You tell them that you will be focusing on your own job from now on, and that you are confident that they will be able to focus on theirs. You'll be glad to offer support where you can, but it will be mostly up to them. The anxiety at the office has now risen off the charts and all the focus of that anxiety seems to be on you. People come at you with all kinds of loaded questions: *Why aren't you being a team player? What did we do to deserve this? You obviously don't care about this company any more, do you?* Clearly, your co-workers are not comfortable with the way things are moving and want the system to return to the way it was. It may not have been a productive or pleasant workplace, but at least it was familiar!

The necklace keeps you calm, though. You know that you have focused on facts and principles rather than feelings and personalities, and, therefore, you haven't said anything you regret. For example, you haven't stooped to calling your co-workers out for being lazy or incompetent, as you have sometimes done, and which has usually just made for an even more anxious and unproductive workplace. Also, you have decided to stop phoning your friend Kathy in marketing to complain about your coworker Bill's behavior, which never did anything to change his behavior anyway. Instead, you have focused on your own performance, reminding yourself that your responsibility is to accomplish the tasks in your job description, not worry about other people, give unsolicited advice, or take over someone else's tasks without being asked. And, especially with the employees you supervise, you have centered your work-related comments and concerns on the performance objectives of their roles, and not on their feelings (for example their self-confidence, happiness, or handling of interpersonal interactions that have nothing to do with their jobs), as if you were their therapist, spiritual director, or life coach, which thankfully, you now begin to realize, you are not.

After some time passes, you find that you are less anxious than you were before, because you aren't denying your own principles in exchange for keeping everyone happy or trying to fix people. In fact, you are finding that your co-workers are actually starting to step it up after all, now that you have stepped it down. Well, everyone except Nancy, who really was incompetent, and who was fired for it, once you stopped doing her job! Bill, on the other hand, is still not always easy to work with, but he is getting his job done, and he's doing it rather well. You don't have as much to talk to Kathy about anymore, now that you've stopped calling her to complain about Bill, but you are learning to adjust. Overall, your experience of work has changed for the better and so, it seems, have you.

You look down lovingly at your magic jewelry. Where has this necklace been your whole life? How would things have been different had you put it on years ago?

Of course, this necklace story is a total fantasy, right? Any of us who have sought changes in the dynamics of our families or workplaces by attempting to convince other people that they are wrong or to manipulate them into doing things our way, have not only failed but have also typically made difficult-to-manage relationships even more difficult. We know from experience that we can't control the behaviors of other people. Sure, sometimes it seems like we can. We can put a lot of energy into creative strategies of manipulation and game playing to try to get

our way. We can try intimidation, through blaming or name-calling or threats of withholding respect or family privileges, but, in the end, people will be people, and our families will be our families, and there's nothing we can do about it.

Or is there?

The first part of the necklace story, in which family members just picked up on the non-verbal cues and changed their behavior accordingly is almost certainly a fairy tale. That's not to say that our non-verbal behaviors don't influence others, because they can, and do. However, we can't really expect changes in the family as a whole if we aren't willing to change our own behaviors in those family relationships. There is no magic necklace that will do that for us. For example, our sister will probably not suddenly want to know our opinion when she rarely has before just because she sees us getting upset. If that were true, it would have happened long ago. Nor will our uncle refrain from the chance to try to get our political goat because we have rolled our eyes, or chosen silence or aggressive debate. In fact, the eye rolling, silence, or heated response in the past has only egged him on. And we all know, don't we, that our under-functioning family members, like the daughter who won't help with the dinner or the clean-up, will never step it up without seeing a change in our behavior, namely if we will stop over-functioning! After all, why would she help if we are always willing to do it all?

But as the necklace story progresses, we see that the supposed "power" of the imaginary necklace is not what is driving the positive changes. Rather, as we begin to claim our own perspectives in the midst of an anxious system, or in other words, take "I" positions, the more likely it is that we could see changes in our role in the family and improvement in the functioning of the system as a whole. In the families of our lives, when we are over-functioning, meaning we are taking too much interest in and/or responsibility for the behaviors or feelings of others, we typically seek to change the behavior of those who we think are under-functioning. We often try to do this through encounters where we tell them they need to shape up, which rarely produce the results we desire, or we silently, passively, and/or begrudgingly keep filling in the gaps that their under-functioning leaves behind. However, mostly we refuse to make the one change that we truly have the power to make: attempting to control our own over-functioning! Bowen theory suggests that when we feel we must come to someone's rescue, we would do better to rescue ourselves, by trying to manage our own anxiety.

In a similar way, when we are dealing with an over-functioner, we often resist the only thing that could really help the situation. For example if a family member is taking too much responsibility for our circumstances or a supervisor is micro-managing our performance, we will often shut down, give up, give in, or gripe about how other people need to fix the situation. None of these approaches will change the dynamics of the system much, if at all. But we can choose a different response. We can choose to change our own behavior: we can stop under-functioning, meaning we can stop avoiding decisions or refusing to take initiative on the things that matter to us, we can stop letting others have their way without acknowledging our own needs or preferences, and we can stop believing that other people are responsible for how we feel. The way to do this is to take an "I" position, meaning we can decide, communicate, and act on what we think about the problem we are facing, rather than overly focusing (if not obsessing about) the personalities of the people involved. We may under-function when we believe that pleasing people is more important than communicating a clear statement of what we know or believe or intend to do. As the quote at the top of our order of service suggests: "Life is an endless series of no-win situations if what you mean by winning is making everyone else happy."

So if we can accept that changing our own behavior is the key to making a positive change in the system, how do we do it, especially without the help of our magic necklace? Bowen theory suggests that when anxiety is being passed (as it nearly always is), we can practice "pocketing the hot potato"¹: we can do our best to get as calm as we can by noticing the difference between our thoughts and our emotions posing as thoughts. Our thoughts are our objective observations of what is happening and are those perceptions focused on facts and issues,

¹ Jeffrey A. Miller, *The Anxious Organization* (Facts on Demand Press, 2008), pp. 57-58.

whereas our emotions posing as thoughts are carriers of anxiety and are focused on feelings and other people. Some examples of these emotion-laden thoughts include fixations on who's right and wrong, assumptions about who may be on our side and who isn't, and fantasies about how things will be better if only others will change. An essential component of focusing on our thinking rather than our emotions is a willingness to take a balcony view of our interactions, paying attention to where we experience our emotional buttons being pushed so that we can focus our energy on being calm in those moments the best we can. The goal is to try to view the system from a distance, as we might study the behavior of an animal family on a nature program. I don't want to suggest that this is easy to do. In fact, it is extraordinarily difficult, which is why when Bowen therapists are being trained, they have to spend a significant amount of time focusing on their own families. It's tough for anyone to be objective about their own families. But that's the only way for us to begin to leave behind our tendencies to fixate on what is truly out of our control (namely the behavior of other people), in exchange for what we can manage, which is ourselves. Bowen theory contends that learning to better control our anxiety in our family relationships will have positive ripple effects in all the relationships of our lives.

Once we have calmed ourselves down enough to begin to see the system objectively, we can articulate where we stand about a given circumstance, issue, or identified problem by taking an "I" position. When we articulate an "I" position we are not ignoring the needs of others, nor are we being controlled by the needs of others. Taking an "I" position isn't about being stubborn or unwilling to work with people. It is an expression of our best attempt to state our objective understandings and to take responsibility for what we believe and are willing to do. Taking an "I" position is not simply about being assertive, or slapping the word "I" onto an emotionally charged statement, like "I want us to pull together" or "I'm counting on you to support me" or "I won't work with Bill." An I position is not about anyone but ourselves, "what we know, believe or intend to do about the facts and issues at hand without trying to manipulate the responses of others."² An I-position can stand on its own, and is offered in full understanding that it may not make other people happy, but, to the best of our understanding, it is true, for us, anyway.

It is through the calming and collecting of ourselves that enables us to clearly articulate an I-position, which then, in turn, can eventually decrease anxiety in the system, even if it raises anxiety in the short term. The system often doesn't want us to take an I-position because then it has to deal with us as individuals rather than just as cogs in the family machine.

Most of us will only be able to nudge ourselves over time towards a merely slightly improved ability to do remain calm and articulate "I" positions than our parents were able to muster, who probably exhibited a slight improvement in differentiation over their parents. The move to more differentiated (or autonomous, independent, and I-focused rather than we-focused) selves takes place over many generations.

This work is not easy. And it takes a great deal of courage.

Courage to open to new understandings and to question easy answers.

Courage to stand for one's values, even when they may be unpopular.

Courage to know that every change we make in our own functioning will be met with at least an equal counter-reaction.

Courage to pocket the potato and learn deal with our own anxiety, which can be significant, and therefore challenging.

Courage to keep communicating, even with people who are not good at managing anxiety, (especially with them...)

Courage to take responsibility for ourselves and our own behavior first.

Courage to learn to laugh at the human comedy of foibles and frailties that we share.

And finally the courage to know that, when anxiety is running high, and our families are being reactive, defensive, or even aggressive, focusing our energy on "we", "they" or "you" will maintain the status quo, whereas paying attention to "I" could be the first step to changing everything, because it puts our primary focus on the only person we can truly change—

² Ibid., p. 172.

ourselves.

And that's why, in the end, the "I"s have it more than any magic necklace ever could.