

# Fusion

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He who knows not and knows not that he knows not — is a fool. Shun him.  
He who knows not and knows that he knows not — is simple. Teach him.  
He who knows, but knows not that he knows — is asleep. Awaken him.  
He who knows and knows that he knows — is wise. Follow him.

*(Old Arabian proverb)*

**T**he process of *fusion* is central to the entire theory of family systems. One descriptive model is to picture two strong magnets, one held in each hand. The closer the hands are held to each other, the greater the magnetic pull and the greater the tendency for the magnets to unite. So it is with people. As two people get closer to each other, the intensity of emotional attraction (level of expectation, positive or negative) increases and the tendency for them to fuse or unite increases.

People seek a distance at which the emotional attraction is still felt but at which the effort at preventing union is within a comfortable range. This is not a static or fixed position. People move toward or away from each other in their search for that comfortable balance. The amount of distance will vary from family to family and within the same family around different issues, problems and stressful times in life. The amount of distance between people will also vary with the level of expectation for closeness — expectations that come from the extended family.

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In some families an entire continent may be physically placed between two members, to avoid fusion or a total emotional cutoff. Fusion leads to distance and people seek closeness without fusion.

This alternating phenomenon of distance and closeness is present to some degree as a problem in all families and relationships. It becomes labeled as a problem when the actual fusion, or the tendency to fuse, is so intense that the degree of closeness expected by one or more members of the family is impossible to attain. Complaints of loss of individuality ensue . . . "I don't know who I am. I have not been myself since I got married." Emotional disruption is common . . . "My feelings for my husband are dead. I only feel bitterness. I wish he would leave." . . . Distance ensues . . . "We haven't talked to each other in years. He is never home and I am just as happy." Feelings of emptiness creep into awareness . . . "I no longer have hope. There is nothing outside or inside of me."

Fusion can be described as a mixture — a blending, or coalescence of one person into the other. It is a process because it consists of a series of actions or operations that result in a flow of movement . . . an ebb and a tide. Clinically,

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these operations can be seen clearly in the openly conflictual family. One can ask father a question. While he is pausing to think about his answer, mother starts to answer for him. She is half way through the answer when son interrupts her to say that she is wrong. Father interrupts son angrily to tell him that he should not interrupt. By this time the therapist cannot remember the question. This example also illustrates the importance of rhythm as a part of fusion. The slow, careful person in effect issues an invitation to the impatient, rapid mover to fuse and take over. Nature abhors a vacuum.

Let us consider some of the elements in the process of fusion:

#### THE PROCESS OF FUSION

### 1. The Identification of Self

"The identity of self includes the endless list of elements that make up the individual person in his entirety. Because of this complexity, total awareness of self is impossible. Furthermore, every time one changes his context, a different aspect of self appears. Clinically we use this when we introduce children into sessions involving bitter marital disputes. Husband and wife will often listen to their children when they can't hear each other.

There is, then, no real self. There are infinite facets of self that the context helps to elicit. One of the most important aspects of self is the differentiation of thinking from feeling. Thinking is an attempt to perceive truth and is subject to the rules of evidence. Feelings are reactive experiences (either to the insides of one's own self or to others) and are subject to the rules of function. Fusion is an emotional process and not a thinking process. The closer one moves toward the emotional position, the greater the possibility for fusion. Two pure thinking beings would not fuse because they would never connect. The thinking part of self provides structure, while feelings provide the drive for closeness. One of the hallmarks of fusion is the lack of an inner balance between thought and feeling. One must seek to balance all the elements of self, and put an "equal sign" between them. To the extent that a person becomes more emotional and less thoughtful, he becomes highly reactive and susceptible to fusion. To the extent that he becomes more thoughtful and less emotional, he becomes structured and susceptible to distance.

### 2. The Identification of the Other Person

At the very heart of the idea of "people systems" is the fact that no man is an island unto himself. It is impossible to understand any person in isolation. No one can understand a car battery without mentioning other parts of the car. There is simply no purpose in a battery without a car. Similarly, fusion cannot be discussed without asking the question, "Fusing with what . . . or with whom?"

It is a lesson in humility to remember that objects cannot replace people, and that all of the elements in self exist in others. One of the problems in dealing with others is that they appear to be more complicated than they are. They are open to our faulty assumptions about them, and therefore to a greater chance for error. It is particularly easy for one to project his own understanding of himself, his motivations and values onto another person, and act as if that is what makes him tick. This is responsible for the development of the five-million or so psychiatric theories that we have today. For example, a man preoccupied with work may listen with only half an ear to what his wife is saying. She sees his preoccupation as rejection. She makes an assumption about her husband's "indifference." Assumptions of and about others are pervasive. If you come early for an appointment, you are anxious. If you come late, you are resistant. If you come on time you are compulsive!

People commonly make assumptions about others and accept them as completely true. These "truths" often verge on arrogance, as when someone assumes that something he did caused the death of another person. It is important to distinguish between knowing, guessing, and assuming. Knowing demands reasonable assurance and cannot be based on "my feeling about you." A guess is all right as long as it is clearly recognized as such. Assumptions cause trouble. An assumption usually says more about the person who makes the assumption than the person it is directed at. All therapists should remember that when they make an "interpretation." Understanding the other person requires the ability to *know*, and not to assume.

A digression at this point might be useful, to explore "what is knowing." There are roughly four forms of knowledge:

(a) *That which is known.* It is possible to know some things about self, and some small

part of one's own motivations. That which is truly known is based on fact, confirmed by experience, and is teachable to others.

(b) *The gap between what the other person says and what he does.* What one does, the moves he makes, the actions he takes, represents the end result of all the vector forces operational within him at that time. This action would include all the feelings, emotions and thoughts in that person both in and out of awareness. To the extent that one operates out of awareness, there will be a gap between what he says and what he does. This gap can be filled with images, projections, fantasy, fusion and distance. The gap will represent the parts of self that are operational but are out of awareness. The deficit in knowing represents deficits in both knowledge and experience as well as honest self-discipline. Awareness is required before it can be corrected.

(c) *That which is unknown.* This refers to a wide body of knowledge which is presently unknown to a person, but could be known. It is available to each of us to the extent that we are aware that we do not know it, but that the knowledge is available from some other person or place. It is the assumption that we already know or that the body of knowledge is unavailable that creates the absolute necessity for the therapist to teach a body of knowledge during the course of therapy. If members of a family could learn from each other, most of the problems in the family would disappear. The unknown would become known.

(d) *The unknowable.* This is a most important form of knowledge though it will never make anyone very significant. It is the body of data that is presently unavailable not only to an individual person but also to humanity. It is that body of data that keeps systems open. When a system knows everything, then it knows its own death. It cannot absorb the new or the different. The infinite multiplication of psychological theories explains the importance of understanding the person — and the impossibility of the task. The search for self in its totality looks for an answer that will include power, economics, love of self, love of neighbor, sex, and finally the generational notion that what we have is better than that which came before. All of these notions are valid, but they are also limited. Only a system that includes the future, even before it is known, can claim to know the unknowable. Systems thinkers use the "vacuum cleaner approach." They start self and others moving

in a system, and as people move around in their family, they learn, experience, change, experiment, test out, validate and invalidate. But even with all this effort, the self eludes us and remains ungettable." Maybe there is no real self.

The wise person begins to realize that the unknown is in truth as useful a form of knowledge as the "known." Those who can see this would add a fifth form of knowledge — a systematic way of looking at life. Systematic knowledge implies having an idea, setting up a test situation, and trying to validate it. With people, this is tested by taking a bit of knowledge, running it through the family system, making a prediction and then checking it out. So many people have felt that "I need someone" only to bloom when they were left alone — or to feel "no one can leave me" only to be left. *The fifth form of knowledge is willingness to take a personal risk and operate within the limits of human uncertainty.*

But to continue with the process of fusion:

### **3. The Differentiation of Self from Other**

Differentiation marks the outlines or boundaries of a person. It defines where *self* ends and *other* begins. It acknowledges that completion is impossible because there must always be a space between self and other. That space allows for closeness and prevents fusion. To the extent that self boundaries are unclear or porous, distance will be required to prevent self from blending into another person. Differentiation of self demands a keen appreciation and definition of "what I functionally get from myself," and what functionally belongs between people. A confusion between one and the other will either eliminate the space between people and lead to fusion or require such great distance to maintain self boundaries that closeness becomes impossible.

### **4. The Differentiation of Other From Self**

The process of differentiation demands that self have an "I" position. It also requires that others be allowed and encouraged (not merely tolerated) to have their own "I" positions. The knowledge of self and others is critical and highlights an appreciation of the value of differences and of being "knowable."

Openness about self, and the ability to listen to others avoids interpretations and assumptions.

One always starts from the premise that he really does not know the other person and wants to find out about him. A useful way of concreting this is to see a different face every time you look at the other person. Mind reading is frequently the handmaiden of fusion. All facets of the person are significant, not just the "important, factual" information.

Emotional problems are often the accumulation of thousands of little things. The first four components of fusion form an emotionally flowing continuum. There is awareness of self, differentiation of self from others, awareness of others and differentiation of others from self. What is in self is in continuous relationship to what is in others and what goes on between self and others. From a systems point of view, both the component (the self) and the relationship exist and must be dealt with. Non-systematic analysis of a problem is impossible.

To avoid fusion, there must always be a "space" between people. Emotional forces of "we-ness," togetherness and support tend to obliterate this space. As this space narrows, two people tend either to blend into each other positively (*i.e.* over-responsible and helpless, mind-reading and patient) or try to resist fusion by negative reactivity, *i.e.* patterns of anger and fear, pursuit and distance.

In either event, gross imbalances appear between one person and the other. The therapist can always intervene when he sees these gross imbalances in the family, even without knowing more about the people. The intervention is aimed at putting equal signs between members of the nuclear family and between both extended families. Imbalances in a family system mean either fusion or dysfunctional attempts to distance from fusion. One can immediately talk to the quiet one and ignore the talkative one.

## 5. The Emotional Climate

This refers to the emotional tone that is set up between people. It can be seen in the angry, conflictual family where charge is met with countercharge; or the polite family who solve problems in two visits but never accomplish anything; or the very intense family who really wants to learn but never moves. The emotional tone is usually evident but sometimes subtle and deceptive. The deceptive families (often the families of family therapists) go through the process of family therapy, succeed rapidly and fail just as rapidly.

The feeling tone may be defined as functional or dysfunctional. This distinction is not very clear. We know that a climate of consideration, patience, respect and humility is functional. Climates of right/wrong, self righteousness or egotism, are dysfunctional. The gray area between the two has to make any astute observer believe that we are missing some critical data. A woman who fends for her husband by putting up with his irresponsibilities "for the sake of the children" may appear to be very functional. By allowing and fostering his irresponsibilities, she may be fusing with him. Fusion always requires the active participation of both members. By definition, a functional emotional climate is one that encourages closeness without fusion, that fosters differentiation and identification and that preserves the space between people without distance. The closer one gets to that climate, the more it becomes experimental. This emotional climate is both part of the self and between selves. It flows from the personal dimensions of self into the space between self and other. The climate is always confused by the ghosts of other members of the family, memories, expectations and misperceptions. When it is very intense, it can surround and encompass each person in the field.

## 6. Islands of Sensitivity

These are emotionally loaded areas within and between people. They show up as a particular kind of look, a gesture, an attitude, a word, a topic, a tone of voice. Heavily invested emotional values are kicked off by touching one of these areas. As one walks across this emotional mine field without a map of the sensitivities, intense feelings are activated.

Over time these islands of sensitivity lead to a certain set of mind. An anticipation of what will happen, based on past experience, presumptions, error, and generalizations, serve only to exaggerate the exquisite sensitivities. We now have a hair trigger to an emotional explosion. We have all talked to people who are making sense until a particular topic is mentioned — perhaps religion, politics, or legality. Suddenly that person begins to ramble, hallucinate and spout delusions. A sensitivity has been hit. The number of topics in a capable-obsessive reaches to infinity. The word "mother-in-law" has become over time a somewhat humorous but nonetheless

real symbol of how a word can set off emotions. Therapy involves creating different emotional symbols and different meanings around the usual family words. Activated sensitivities carry along with them a whole picture and they explode and get out of control. A calm discussion in a family can touch on one of these islands, and before you know it the family is on an emotional roller coaster. One issue leads to the next, nothing is discussed to conclusion; charges lead to countercharges and attack to defense, feelings mount and chaos ensues. Some therapists feel that they are "really getting at the emotion" in a family. Alas, this angry uncontrolled scene has been replayed at home many times in the past. Repeating it in the doctor's office may teach the doctor something, but not the family. It is another episode and experience in the frustration of emotional fusion.

Islands of sensitivity are like an allergy that has to be taken care of gradually. Increasing doses of the sensitive areas are given to the "patient" over time. Knowledge of *self* and *other*, areas of sensitivity and the set of mind that triggers off trouble have to be identified and exposed. That is the value of the seemingly irrelevant, repeated therapeutic question. It gnaws away at a certain set of mind. Assumptions, truths, and "what is generally known about John," are exposed to the rules of evidence. We would all like to believe that we are reasonable, but at best we are probably only 10 per cent reasonable and 90 per cent emotional. Emotional systems are so influential that reasonable change can become impossible. Crisis intervention in the middle of emotional turmoil looks good on paper but is a real unreality like divorce therapy. When things are calm and people are functioning, when sensitivities are defused, the opportunity for change is greatest, and the motivation least. Those who explode with an explosion look good but accomplish little.

Fusion is an evolving process that encompasses feelings in self or in others, the loss of self boundaries and the accumulated deficit of unworkable emotional climates based on exquisite sensitivities. It has to do with the arrogance of the importance of one's own self. Feelings freely and spontaneously diffuse from self into other and from other into self. Entire sets of behavior, attitudes, and assumptions get started and take on the ring of truth, often totally out of aware-

ness. Emotional viewpoints designed to relieve self of pain and suffering are presented as "the reasonable position." From that point on, emotional systems go out of control, become driven, destructive, spontaneous, reactive, predictable, limiting, without freedom, undefined — and fused. There is an undefined element in the human being that makes such behavior attractive. But intrinsically, such fusion is always destructive to one's self and others.

## 7. Triangles

Two--persons systems are very complicated and yet the easiest to explain. Family systems are built on multiple, interrelated, interdependent triangles. When two people get exhausted emotionally, upset and confused by the twosome, they triangle onto a third person or object for pure relief. When any twosome repeatedly fuses and distances, they get tired. The answer is to triangle a third party into the process. The shape of the triangle is infinite. The complications are also infinite since the addition of one person to a relationship system increases the complications exponentially. Triangles are attempts to stabilize distance and fusion but they prevent the development of a personal relationship.

## 8. The Undifferentiated Family Ego Mass (Murray Bowen)

This means an emotional oneness between members of the family, a loss of objectivity about self, an inability to preserve self and relate to the family system without distance, and loss of the ability to take a lonely, uncomfortable "I" position when called for. This mass is the end result of all the steps of fusion already described and involves more than two people. There is a loss of self (who am I?), a loss of other (I can't understand her), a loss of self boundaries (Why won't someone help me?) a loss of boundaries of other (I must be responsible for her), a deterioration of the emotional climate (We always argue when we are alone), the development of sensitivities, (I can't stand the tone of his voice), the development of triangles (His mother is the problem.) There is a mass of self with no one taking a clear "I" position.

Clinically, people interrupt each other, one answers for the other, faulty assumptions are frequent, and episode follows episode without moving toward any conclusion. "I think" and "I feel" are used interchangeably and "we" re-

places "I." Mind reading, particularly about the motivation of the other is rampant, and responsibility for one lies in the hands of the other. The emotional climate is often angry and always uncomfortable and painful. Confusion reigns.

## 9. Dysfunctional Operating Principles

Action occurs fast and furious in every family, and there is not time to analyze each situation. People develop simple rules of behavior and belief that they apply to most situations. These may be in or out of awareness and are often not subjected to scrutiny. They are often based on lack of knowledge, various theories propagated by "experts," reluctance to change, fear of differences, or the unknown, and theories from the extended family that are either duplicated or reacted against. Generally, they are based on emotion and what "should" be rather than what is. They confuse function and truth. These dysfunctional feelings and principles foster fusion and distance. Common examples include: (1) Get everything off your chest (forgetting that it goes into the chest of others). (2) Adults have it or they are immature. (3) I expect you to know how I feel. (4) Parents should unite and present a common front to the children. (5) Never argue in front of the children. (6) Women have more feelings than men. These dysfunctional principles fix fusion into the daily life of people and must be directly challenged by the therapist if differentiation is to occur.

### KEY ELEMENTS IN FUSION

1. *Thinking and feeling both represent a process.* They are different ways of arriving at what one knows, believes in and stands for. Both define the "I" of a person. Thinking tries to stay within the available information, carefully labeling something as a fact, an assumption, an hypothesis, an unknown or an unknowable. It can be taught and learned and keeps us in contact with reality. Emotions are experiences and cannot be taught. They are learned by experience and changed by new experience over time. They respond to the test of function and are there whether we want them or not.

Thinking and feeling usually accompany each other in any episode, but the distribution is important. Neither is irresistible. If there is a thinking problem there is a problem with reality. Learning theory and education will correct this.

Emotional problems are problems of fusion and distance. Without emotions, there would be a craving for closeness and no fusion. Fusion is always an emotional process. The function of thinking is to gain self identification and differentiation. Without thinking there is fusion. Without emotion, there is no connectedness. Therapists who try to foster emotional experiences in the family foster fusion. Therapists who proceed purely on thinking foster distance.

2. *Movement.* Fusion implies movement because it is a process. If one really understands fusion, then he can see that distance implies fusion or the potential for fusion. Fusion and distance become different moves around the same issues. Fusion is a dynamic process. One is not "fused" permanently unless he is psychotic. There are tendencies toward fusion, over-closeness, fusion and distance. These are all points along the spectrum.

3. *Time.* As soon as one talks about movement, he must talk about time since movement takes time. At its most intense, fusion seems like a timeless event. We would all like to believe that we know why we are doing whatever we are doing. But myths from the past, experiences unremembered, perceptions miscalculated, all conspire to make us more emotional than reasonable. Fusion involves the past (what I have learned), the present (what I am experiencing), and the future (what I dream about and hope for.) In thinking about fusion, one must be careful to define what time period he is working in. Bringing roses home to the wife two years ago may have meant something different than bringing them home today. One may get, "What have you really done for me lately?" Clinically, people often fuse because their mind is in a different time frame. Bitterness tied into the past will not be relieved by roses today. But it might be relieved by an apology.

4. *A minimum of two people.* Fusion is a process that ordinarily takes place between two people. Sometimes one person may be replaced by an object such as alcohol or heroin; then the fusion is more severe since the object is perfectly willing to be fused with. There is also a process of inner fusion in which a person fuses with an hallucination (psychosis) or a projection (psychosomatic symptoms.) Fusion involving more than two people becomes an undifferentiated ego mass.

5. *The active cooperation of both parties.* If one tries to fuse with another person, it represents a tendency toward fusion. Two people cannot actually fuse without the active cooperation and participation of both parties. No one can take responsibility for me unless I allow it. As a consequence, there is no such thing as an emotional problem in one person.

6. *A continuum.* Fusion lies at one end of a continuum that proceeds to a tendency toward fusion, over-closeness, a balanced position, and distance. A tendency toward fusion exists when one feels an urge inside himself to fuse but either resists it or the other person resists it. Over-closeness and distance are relative positions. They have to be figured out in each family. If we know that a triangle exists then there are usually two people in the over-close position, and one distant. These are not absolute standards but relate to that particular triangle. This is so, no matter what amount of space there is between people. Somewhere in between is the balanced position that maintains space between self and other, does not fuse, and does not use distance to solve problems.

7. *Permeability of self boundaries.* This emphasizes the importance of self boundaries. If boundaries are not permeable, the person will be distant, disconnected and self-centered. If the boundaries of self are too permeable, a feeling in other will invade self and take it over. A feeling in you is like a feeling in me. There is no differentiation. Clear boundaries never allow self to overlap with other. They preserve the space between self and other. They register feelings in self and in other but always clearly define whose feeling it is and who is responsible for it.

8. *Emptiness is the basis for fusion.* In each self there are feelings of emptiness partly caused by the confusion between self and other and partly due to the natural incompleteness of the self and the self system. The desire and hope for completion by union and togetherness lies deep within the human being and creates the natural tendency to fuse. Closeness is a naturally occurring desire but not a naturally occurring process. One has to work to get it.

9. *Fusion in childhood.* When a child is born, he is literally helpless, dependent on his parents for survival. This is not fusion since the child cannot do much for himself. If this relationship persists into adulthood, then it would be

fusion. If one does things for the other either because the other is incapable of it (infancy, mental retardation, psychosis) or out of consideration, knowing full well that the other could do it for himself (getting someone a cup of coffee), then that is not fusion. If one does something for the other that he feels the other is incapable of doing (though he is in fact capable), that is fusion.

10. *The omnipresence of fusion.* Fusion exists in all families and all relationships. The only question is to what degree. Fortunately, the human being has to function at about 33 per cent of his full effectiveness to be relatively mature. When fusion becomes fixed around certain issues, and is consistently present and predictable, it becomes a severe problem.

#### CLINICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF FUSION

Fusion manifests itself in an infinite variety of ways. Following are some of the significant areas that tend to cause people to fuse:

1. *Getting "into the head" of the other person.* This means that one assumes that he knows what is going on inside the head of the other person without asking him, or that one expects the other to know what is going on inside his head. Being unknowable creates a vacuum inside of me and invites speculation, interpretation and assumptions. This "unknowability" can be accomplished by denial, not talking, not answering questions, giving conclusions instead of the process of thinking, or by saying too rapidly, "I don't know." In the presence of such a vacuum, self tends to project aspects of himself onto the other. One clear, malignant example of this process is mind-reading. This seems to represent some kind of human obsession with the answer to the "motivational why" question. Without asking, without evidence, people tend to supply the motives "why" another person does something.

Motivation is infinitely complex, never completely understood and usually ends up as some acceptable, plausible explanation. It becomes very important to listen intently and feed back what one has heard until the other person agrees that that is what he said. Reading into implications that go beyond what has been said are often due to past experiences and sensitivities within the listener and lead to projections — which lead to a tendency to fuse.

There are other difficulties commonly seen. These include confusion between motivation (reason why) and purpose (goal directed toward); an emotional form of craziness that states "what I feel is reality," a subtle form of excluding knowledge by excluding the extended family as if "I am what I am and no more," and writing off a person under a label such as "bum," "impossible," etc.

2. *Determination.* A subtle sense of fusion, or the tendency toward it, can be estimated by the sense of who determines what, or who is pursuing whom about what. It is one thing to be sensitive to the desires of another person, and quite another to be determined by them. Where there is pursuit by one and distance by the other, there has been fusion.

3. *Judgement.* Judgement implies a critical, discerning faculty to perceive relationships and alternatives. When we see it this way, it is easy to see how judgement can lead to knowing the other person and proceeding toward fusion based on that "knowledge." This includes the patients you see in your office. Their "I" is as worthy of being heard as your own.

4. *Attack-Defense-Counterattack.* This represents alternating pursuit and distance in a critical fashion also described as a "two-step" (Bowen). People skip from one argument to the other without resolving anything. Attempts at getting connected create moments of fusion followed by anger and distance.

5. *Comparisons.* When one compares self or the other, he picks the qualities of self to be used as a standard and the standard that self is compared with. One can then determine if he is going to compare up or down. The person being compared ends up as a no-self, being always "compared with" and losing his own uniqueness. Comparisons invariably invite trouble and lead to fusion or distance.

6. *Time.* Time involves the past, present and future. When people communicate to each other in different frames, they tend to fuse and distance. One can be in the past and the other in the future. Listen to this conversation: "Where would you like to go this summer? (future) "Why should you ask, you never took me anywhere before." (past) "See, I can't even talk with you." (present) "You have never tried to talk with me and you never will." (past and future).

If people want to communicate, it is impor-

tant for them to consider all the time frames and to get into the same time frame at the same moment. When this does not happen, negative feelings get activated, fusion ensues, followed by distance. Other clinical examples of time problems include interruptions, obsession with the past, disregard of consequences and explaining the present by the past.

7. *Togetherness.* The forces of togetherness often represents fusion in the socially acceptable way. One should support the other: parents should never disagree in front of the children; marriage is a union, etc. Every person has his own "I" and yet wants to be close to another "I" without losing himself. Togetherness carried to an extreme demands that one person become a non-person or indirectly sabotage the efforts of the other. Father leaves for work in the morning issuing a series of orders to mother as he leaves. She agrees but does not put them into effect since she never really did agree. They are one, but then he explodes when he returns to find nothing done. "We-ness" is an attempt to get a two or three person system going at the expense of the one, the "I."

8. *Responsibility.* Who is responsible for what is a large part of the problem of living. If one assumes responsibility for the actions, thoughts or feelings of another person, he will tend to fuse with that person. One can only be responsible *toward* another but not *for* another. "You make me angry" is a fused statement with the feeling in one and the cause in another. A non-fused statement would read, "you do such and such and my reaction is to get angry." Common fused patterns are helplessness/over-responsibility, patience/impatience, and the separation of authority and responsibility.

9. *The Truth.* On an emotional plane, truth has to do with function and how one perceives the sincerity and genuineness of the other person. On an intellectual plane, it involves the perception of fact. To some it means agreement in the perception of reality, or conformity to some general standards or a sense of exactness. Truth remains a serious issue in many families and often activates negative feelings that lead to mind-reading, anger, fusion and distance. Over-clear statements of truth leave no room for the other to engage. Statements like, "Now tell the truth," close conversations.

10. *Decision Making.* One of the most important facets of fusion is for one person to tell



the other what to do. It is one thing to have an "I" position but when that begins to slip over into trying to convert the other to my viewpoint, then it is tending toward fusion. Fusion comes closer as pressure for the other to conform or obey grows. A real "I" position allows for the other to have one too.

11. *The Physical/Material.* The first rule of family systems theory is to remove physical violence, since it can be used to control, and change can become impossible in the presence of acute fear. Other physical forces include sexual preoccupation with the search for unity, and physical fusion with money, alcohol, heroin, tranquilizers, etc. People who tend to fuse physically describe physical closeness as a need and not a want.

12. *Individual Thinking.* This way of viewing the world tends to place problems in an either-or framework and ends up placing them in one person. This makes one look bad and the other good, a form of fusion in which one looks better at the expense of the other — self-robbing. Thus the rule: there is no such thing as an emotional problem in one person, no matter how it looks.

13. *Change vs Acceptance.* Any attempt to change the position of the other person directly or indirectly represents an attempt at fusion. It seems an attempt to invade the space of the other and take over his capacities. Except in the case of small children, influence should never violate the position of the other person. Subtle forms of change include therapy, behavior modification and the use of reversals and paradoxes. They will end up as a manipulation, denying acceptance and respect to the other person.

14. *Imbalance.* These represent a lack of equal signs between members of the family system. Any gross imbalance is a sign of fusion or distance somewhere in the system. We have the talker and the quiet one, the enthusiastic person and the depressed one, the perfectionist and the scoundrel, the introvert and the extrovert. Fusion/distance processes tend to end up either as a unity or in counter-positions. This is a desperate attempt on the part of the system to maintain equilibrium. Prominent examples include the self-centered person who ends up with the "other focused" individual. The self-centered person has been "hurt" by life, holds others responsible for his feelings, is preoccupied with what he is doing, and takes everything personally. He is

unable to differentiate between lack of consideration and a personal vendetta. The personal relationship and connectedness are secondary to himself. Others are taken for granted. The only way to relate to him is to fuse into his self.

15. *Right and Wrong.* The proper use of an emotional or thinking system is to be able to experiment within and get feedback. The person who is always right or wrong is often dealing with unresolved issues of pride, humility, shame and perpetuation of an image to keep between himself and the other person. The righteous person likes to appear like a big "I" but often is disguising a sense of smallness. Right and wrong disguise emotional processes, and heat instead of calm, and lead to loss of self or destruction of other.

16. *Trust/Mistrust.* Suspicion and playing the detective lead to fusion. "He who knows little suspects much." Suspicion tends to lead to assumptions, and assumptions to "truth." Trust is a mark of differentiation since it says one can take a risk, put his money on his own nose and is willing to be hurt if necessary. It recognizes the limitations of control and the empty victory that comes from controlling others.

17. *Perceptive Processes.* It is easy to confuse fantasy, wishful thinking, imagination and reality. This difficulty in seeing what is leads to myths, magical thinking, values, shoulds and ought-to-be's. In this confusion, self boundaries are lost and fusion ensues.

18. *Sickness and Health.* The sick person demands and gets pushed into being on the receiving end of services from "those who have it." He becomes the receiver of the projections of others. In this process, he loses self and gives that self to others. This refers mainly to emotional problems. This is a classic example of fusion.

19. *Blame and Fault.* Here a fix is put on oneself or the other as being responsible for all the ills in a family or a person. In systems thinking, no one is at fault; there is no answer to the question of blame. The idea is considered irrelevant. No one is really so important that he can cause the ills of the world. It is akin to the arrogance of feeling to blame for the suicide of another. Fault and blame take the focus off of functions, off of self, and lead to the counter forces of fusion and distance.

20. *Communications.* Although listening is probably twice as important as talking, the obligation lies on the narrator to make sure his message has been heard. He can do this by insisting that the other person repeat what he has said before taking another position. Unless one is heard, nothing is accomplished and confusion ensues. Emotional confusion is always a sign of fusion.

21. *Open and Closed Systems.* A closed person is either out of touch with his feelings or does not want to talk about them for a variety of reasons. He talks about what he does about situations, or about how he does not feel. He invariably gets connected with the "open" person who believes in getting it off his chest, not realizing that these feelings go into the family system and will be returned with interest. It always turns out that the open person is not so open. He shoots out a wealth of emotionality but not those that touch on his sensitivities. Fusion is fostered because the closed one takes the open one too seriously, as if he really meant what was said. The open one often pursues and creates assumptions about the closed person.

22. *Agreement and Disagreement.* Those who agree with agreement really mean that everybody should agree with them. Unsure of their own precepts, they would like to have it confirmed from the outside. They deny the uniqueness of each individual. The counterpart is the person who defines himself as being "different" or opposed to others. This person is more certain of what he is against than what he is for. Neither have a balanced "I" position, usually get into business with each other, and never make it. Push leads to shove which leads to fusion.

23. *Taking Things Personally.* The sensitive person views everything that happens as having something to do with him. If a tree falls or a nasty word is said, he had something to

do with it or it was directed at him. "It's me." This leads to frustration, misunderstanding, and giving up on the part of the rest of the family. Malignant explanations replace a sympathetic understanding of the sensitive person, and finally all turn him off. He is very lonely. From sympathy grows bitterness, and finally a write-off. Fusion leads to distance.

24. *The Conglomerate.* People often associate to accumulate, by a merger or unification. The shy person marries the socializer. The hope is to get something from the other by union or acquisition. The reality is a union of "two times zero." From the fusion comes disappointment, fault, bitterness and estrangement. This is the sure sign of the distance that follows fusion.

25. *Justification.* Here, the anger, frustration and hurt of emotional fusion comes to a head. Unable to get what I want because I am fused, I resort to emotional blackmail; the arguments of a sympathetic therapist, the book I just read, to prove that the other person is wrong and should change. It is the last desperate refuge of the person who wants to fuse, to get the other to blend into his way of living, to give him what he wants. After this point, children are put out of the house and lawyers are called into a marital relationship. And all of this is "right."

## Summary

I would like to conclude with two quotations. I was once teaching a class with Harry Mendelsohn when he said with a half smile: "I know fusion is wrong but it is so nice when it works." And Robert Soucy once said: "Man is a dupable animal. Quacks in medicine, quacks in religion, and quacks in politics know this and act upon that knowledge. There is scarcely anyone who may not, like a trout, be taken by tickling." Ah so!