

Operating Principles--Part III Facts and Feelings

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To be understandable, people have to learn how to talk openly. They can never become knowable by simply giving conclusions. Some people talk about themselves as if they were writing the last chapter in a mystery novel. You know who committed the crime, but you know nothing else about the story, not even what the crime was. In math exams, people turn in the rough work with the final exam. The teacher can be aware that they know what they are doing even if they make a mistake with the figures. People have to turn in their rough work too. They have to create a story when they are talking. If they can paint a picture, others can get to know them, their reasoning, doubts, thoughts and feelings. A conclusion that comes from that background is clear. Every feeling, be it anger or depression, is always a little bit different. If people paint a picture, tell stories about it, give "for instances," one can start to understand.

To understand, one must be able to observe himself, to know factually what is happening, to feel in such a way that the experience and the reality go hand in hand. Facts are subject to the rule of evidence. One can ask, "What is your proof?" A feeling is an experience which simply is. Wishes, fantasies, hopes and daydreams can

be so strong that they are used as a measure of reality. They are often confused with fact. The more one talks about and focuses on feelings, the more these experiences can become confused with reality. Feelings can translate themselves into emotionality and then into the body. Once into the body, emotionality can become so fixed that the problem has to be seen from a medical viewpoint. Ulcerative colitis, hypertension, peptic ulcers reflect that translation. Personal responsibility for life, for *my* life, becomes lost in the physical issue of life and death. One has to watch the readings that people take on situations and on others. Do they use right and wrong like a moralist? Do they confuse feeling for fact like the classic hysteric? Do they disguise feelings in fact like a true obsessive? All people make evaluations and judgments. The standards they use tell us very much about the person.

Feelings are funny things. One can have feelings that are reactive to others—"I get angry when you don't answer me." One can have feelings about self—"I get angry when I gain weight." One can have thoughts about feelings in self—"I wonder why I always felt I should be a nurse." One can have feelings about feelings—"I feel so bad when I feel that I don't love anybody."

To further complicate matters, there are feelings and *emotions*. Feelings are reactions to a stimulus in others, or in self. The reaction is in me, either about others or about myself. Emotions are different in the sense that they represent

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the baggage I carry around about myself only. They tell me how I feel about myself, even if I never knew anyone else. They are the bedrock of my insides, my guts. *Guilt* is a feeling; *shame* is an emotion. People talk about guilt but rarely shame. Emotions are hidden and protected. Most families and their members present issues in such a way that reactive feelings appear to be episodes. Beneath the issues, beneath the episodes, are hidden emotions of emptiness, disguised as a fact or an event—something which has to be solved. These factual events can be recited indefinitely, in many shapes, and have reality. They are never the real issue. Even a triangle becomes a structural problem but never the gut issue. Most of what we hear from families represents attempts at solution and an avoidance of the problem. Emotional problems require the therapist to go beyond facts and feelings. Restructuring and openness are a good start but not much more than that. People in families must realize that everyone is largely the same—that we are all in the same boat.

In all emotional problems, there are large elements of fusion which can take many forms. A common form is—"I know what you are thinking and feeling without asking. I know you." This statement may be accidentally on target—or off. No one really knows the emotionality of the other until told by the other. An open mind requires one to avoid going beyond facts, to stick with what has been said. Until a question has been asked and answered, everything is a guess or an assumption. One can often ask questions by personalizing the context and the content. Tell others how you think and feel first. If I can experience my own emotionality and emptiness, then I can universalize and relate them to others. I can read behind the content and negativity into the hurt, pain and fear in others. As a fellow human being he can begin to hear his own insides and not take it personally. Eventually he may be able to take it back into his own extended family and resonate with that story.

Change

Change is an inevitable part of life. Even so, all people avoid change because it is so uncomfortable. Because of this avoidance, one cannot expect others in his family system to appreciate his efforts to change. If I change, there will be pressure on you to change. It is a very lonely business! No matter how much you know, finally it must be done by yourself, with your own self.

When one embarks on the process of changing, there is the faint hope that other members of the family will appreciate it; that the people I want to get to will give the desired response. This hope of change in the other removes the focus from self and makes changing self into a job, or a duty. In such a context it is difficult to see change as an *opportunity* and not a responsibility. A big opportunity!

Most people don't change, they adapt. There is a problem—and the problem seemed to go away, or be modified in intensity. They learn to handle problems faster and major explosions are avoided. Real difficulties, underlying emotional currents, attitudes and apologies are avoided. To apologize to others is one of the best ways to get to others. Therapists must learn to take readings which separate adaptation from change. How fast are people moving? Where are they at? Is there a limit to movement in this particular family and generation? People can change only so much in one lifetime. To follow the movement in any family, one must follow the action, what people are doing. One must be aware of the mood, the emotional climate, but not be determined by it. To accomplish this, people use "systems." Systems theory helps the therapist and members of the family to be sure to avoid manipulations, to go beyond the superficial content and into the underlying process. The purpose of systems thinking is to open the mind, to view the family and the person with a different set of glasses, to increase function. To change others is not the purpose.

Change is a difficult process. Often one cannot communicate to others what he is up to. The working assumption is that "I have to do it by myself and everybody will fight and resist it." The system will be uncooperative. Thus, one does not tell others what he is trying to do. He views feelings and emotions as phenomena which do not have to be proved. They do not require evidence. Any feeling, whether about sex, sleep, hunger or anger, is simply there and experienced. But feelings can't be directly approached as a problem to be solved. The surest way to be unhappy is to try to be happy. One must think about feelings, initiate movement toward a goal, and feelings will eventually change in the light of new experience. Emotional unrest must be seen as an opportunity to learn and change, not as a problem or a sickness to be solved. In that spirit, one must investigate and question every-

thing. Things that work and things that don't work.

Change is a part of life, but not everything requires change. Changing for the sake of change is another way of doing nothing—a continuous flurry of activity about nothing. If something is not working, that is another matter. An example of a workable principle is that the first rule in any family must be elimination of physical violence. Acute fear for one's survival prevents any change, or even the possibility. Change *must* be introduced into the context of physical violence. On the other hand, "things could be better" is not a sufficient reason or focus for change. Anything could be better.

Another problem with changing is the tendency to plan too far ahead. The price for change becomes unrealistically high, the process infinitely complicated, the overview lost in detail and too much is hoped for too soon. Keep it simple, stick to the overview and take it one step at a time. Be patient. The fear of loneliness projected into the future, forever, can scare many people from changing. One in the hand, even though miserable, is better than two in the bush. Many therapies today promise adaptation as the magic bullet. Adaptations do not bring changes in attitude and are doomed to fail. One cannot avoid the fear of going crazy, or losing control, of a nervous breakdown, of facing one's own helplessness. Trust implies risk—and then you learn to pray.

If one changes to please others, he may be liked but he won't be respected. It is more important to be respected. If you try to change others, you do not accept them, and you do suffocate them. Just because the other person says something negative about you is not a useful reason for changing. Just because the other person says something positive about you is not a useful reason for remaining the same. The only reason for changing is because "I believe in doing it." That is the only motivation which will sustain itself over time. Others can give feedback and influence me, but in the long run, I have to be convinced that it is useful for me to change.

There are basically only three moves that one can make in life. He can pursue others; he can stand still and accept the present position as his lot in life; or he can distance from others. If one can't or will not change, then he must accept the present as a script for his future. One way to avoid change is to focus on the motivational "why?"—on past. One can use extensive

explorations of the past to avoid learning—muddling around in the imaginary cathexis of feelings. (Feelings are like a leaky basement full of water. You can pump the basement out but it soon fills up again.) Cathexis allows one to feel better temporarily. It prevents change by promising a sense of feeling better as an adequate substitute for change. Change always requires that one feel worse before he will feel better. The cathexis of feelings maintains the status quo.

Another way to avoid change is to take "anti" positions. These are stands against what others believe in, and they allow me to avoid determining what I believe in. During the student rioting on campuses years ago, a reporter asked one militant student what he would do if he were president of the university. The student looked perplexed and replied "No one ever asked me that question!" Anti positions are distancing tricks designed to give the semblance of a position. These anti-positions in families are handled by advising the pursuer to learn to be patient; to avoid taking a position until the distancer takes a position. That way the distancer must commit himself first and has no belief to be against.

Therapists can facilitate the process of changing by establishing their own "I" positions clearly, at the same time they respect the positions of their clients. People learn from this. It gives them signposts, and shows that differences do not have to destroy connectedness. That becomes an experience for the patient. Since feelings change by structured experience, one may start a change by behavioral modification and will power. Permanence demands more than that. It requires a change in attitudes. At the onset, changes are partial and it is difficult for others to accept anything less than they had expected—total change. But something is better than nothing. Often changes represent over-corrections which are overdone in a pendulum-like fashion. Extremes of change are more easily accomplished, but like revolutions, they tend to go too far. It is easier to stop smoking completely, than to cut down. To complicate matters, there are apt to be reactive changes in other people as one changes himself. Husband improves himself, and wife speaks of divorce. It is the task of the therapist to recognize and support genuine efforts at change through this lonely valley. As one tries to change himself, others in the family system will predictably try to undo, belittle and critique him negatively.

Self change is something that I do to me and is not directed against others. There is simply no sense in ever trying to change others directly. If one works on his own self and uses the family as a field to validate and verify, this movement will be conducive to others changing, but not determinative of that change. There is always a personal element of responsibility in each of us which determines our own course. We are never purely determined by any system, including the family system. Everyone *always* has alternatives to change, including distance and substitution. The goal of changing has to be self development. What is it about myself that I am dissatisfied with? What changes in me will benefit me? That change cannot be a direct change in my feeling state. Just as one does not change to get a reaction from others, he does not change to get a reaction from himself.

The field of family therapy has gone too far into relationship therapy, to change or fix the relationship. Relationships do not exist of and by themselves. They represent the connectedness that occurs both within each person and between them. Relationship therapy often means giving intrinsic life to the relationship so that it becomes the third leg of a triangle. It can prevent connectedness and closeness. Family systems therapy means that one uses the context of the family relationship to evaluate and differentiate himself as he makes moves and experiences his insides. He learns that there are consequences to whatever he does in a system. One changes himself by putting himself on the line in his family system. He stands behind his positions. He takes these positions, not by talking about them, but by putting himself and his feelings on the line.

Any change starts out being work—and only later becomes real, natural, and spontaneous. One cannot do something new and expect it to feel natural. It will be, by its nature, awkward and artificial. Those who say, "But I am not being true to my real feelings" will never accomplish anything. Change is always full of pain, suffering and fear. A change without an emotional price is no change at all. That is why things get worse before they get better. "Magic bullet" therapies promise results by clever maneuver; they lack respect for people. One needs an emotional concrete plan to avoid being engulfed in a feeling swamp. Without such a plan, he will lose his sense of direction, tend to respond to negative feedback, and will place the nature of the movement before the direction of the movement. All too often one will hear, "My wife is moving

toward me but I don't like the way she is moving." In a strange way, if you can pay the price for change, the hurt persists but the price is less. You become punch drunk. Hurt with a smile. The anticipation is often worse than the event.

Change and time cannot be separated. Change always occurs in the present. The future will be the same as the past if there is no change in the present. "Why" takes one into the past and is the last question to be asked. The "Why?" of any process is most clearly seen after change has been made. If one cannot look to the past, is he inevitably bound by time into accepting the present? It is never too late and one is never too old for change to begin. Clinical experience demonstrates clearly that people in their seventies and eighties can move differently. There is no time to start or end. There is no real start and no real end. It is a lifelong process which does not require therapy or lifetime therapy. Therapy is only there to give people, when necessary, the tools to engage in this process on their own, forever.

In a sense, there is no such thing as change, only the process of changing—changing for the rest of a lifetime. You never make it. Childhood has been defined as the most significant portion of life where directions start and often become fixed. This is not only an incomplete story, but it is inaccurate. There is much reason to believe that the late teen and early twenties are perhaps more significant. This is the time when people make important decisions about their life, taking on responsibilities and directions, which strongly influence their future. Ask people when things were "good" and when they went "bad." They will more often than not refer to the late teens and twenties. Much less often they will refer to childhood. Problems cannot be defined systematically by a look at childhood. This view denies time. Childhood neither explains nor fixes problems.

There is a value as well as a beauty in simplicity. Unless one allows some things to be temporarily shelved, life will look so fearful and complicated that it will be impossible to start. Set a hierarchy of importance. Survival before taste. It is more important to curb a drunken-driving son than to get him to pick up his shoes from the floor. When dealing with a family, or your own family, try to go in one direction at a time. Go forward into the children or backward into the extended family, or horizontally into the

spouse. Going in two different directions at one time defies the rule of simplification. If one must pull back from his mother and away from his son, it can become confusing.

When changing, the therapist and the patient should try to be able to predict what might happen. Ask, "What might happen when you make this particular move?" The evolving plan and the realization that there are choices and options give a sense of mastery and belief that one can change himself. The sense of awareness and option often make it unnecessary to use the plan. To be on guard is to be less often caught off guard. If the therapist can make predictions, his leverage on the family, the way they believe him, rises sharply. The therapist and the family must use this knowledge cautiously. Never make a plan to hurt any member of the family. Don't change anything that works, or the culture you come from, arbitrarily. Wait for a good reason to do it or something more functional to go on. Otherwise, changing will tend to be reactive. This is a careful procedure; it takes time, long periods of time. The changing process can only be evaluated historically over time. When you see a change, ask, "How come you are making that change now? Why not five years before or five years later? How come now?"

The ways to avoid change are too many to count. One can shift an emotional process into an obsession, avoid the issue and focus on the concreteness of the obsession. One can convert a depression into an eating problem. One can focus on explanation as an answer. "If I knew why I wanted to smoke, I would be able to stop smoking." One can scatter and try everything inconsistently and gain nothing. One can avoid the extended family and believe he has no ghosts. One can keep everything private and not talk. The great Irish sins—pride, privacy and shame. Or, one can say, "I will change if you...." Conditional change is no change. Once one gets into more fixed problems, such as psychosomatic families, the symptoms may be so severe that stress overwhelms the family. It cannot be absorbed. The same is true of schizophrenia. Both may require medical help to survive. In isolated families or individuals, there may be no network to help absorb the stress. Families are the most important unit, a unique unit, but all families need a network to surround them. In the presence of such isolation, no new information from the therapist will be absorbed.

Life and families and people are strange

phenomena! Symptoms almost take on a life of their own and fight for their own existence. Symptoms could be seen as a living presence, as if they had existence. Marriage, loneliness, ulcers, schizophrenic delusions. These symptoms fight for their own life and have to be seen as a part of the family puzzle, a part of the homeostasis. To avoid being lost in that puzzle, one must never desert the plan, never desert that which is working.

When facing a family or individual who is fighting change, don't push (unless you can get away with it.) Conversions are fine and do happen. But eventually, conversion and therapy move toward changing the other to your viewpoint. Then they tend to become problematic. One should not try to fight a dysfunctional family theory. There are alternatives. Run their theory into the ground by telling them to do more of it and do it better. People will not become undifferentiated any more easily than they will differentiate. Everybody searches for that comfortable spot without too much fusion or distance. Give people lots of room and see that each person has his own rhythm, his own speed, his own dance, on his own time. Keep options open like a good politician, and don't close them off by planning too far ahead. Don't try to change those things that you see as irresponsible. Simply refuse to have a part of it—refuse to support the irresponsible. In such a climate of acceptance, changing is more apt to occur. Unfortunately, people who work on their extended family often try to remake a relationship by trying to change or blame others. It never works. Who wants to be blamed?

Changing is always difficult. Emotional readings are misleading; friends in your network will try to help you run from the emptiness inside of you. So, one must forget the feedback from the network—unless you are lucky enough to know people who will allow you to be empty, who will listen and not try to fix everything.

Changing can be seen. If the change is in the inner system, a mood or an attitude can be talked about so that others know you are wheeling and dealing with it. They can hear it but feel no responsibility for taking care of it. They know it. One must be able to claim his insides as his own before he lets others know. Too much talk can dissipate feelings, give the semblance of change, and keep people in the same spot.

