

The Distancer and the Pursuer

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FAMILY therapy has moved ahead rapidly in recent years. Certain theoretical ideas are so clear that they have been subtly incorporated into the general body of knowledge and used universally. Much of the credit for this belongs to Murray Bowen and Philip J. Guerin, Jr. Today, everyone (in this field) will use the three/four generational genogram, and everyone will look for the key triangle or the generational triangles. We all work, in our own way, to get that triangle detriangulated so that people go one-on-one, or try to establish a personal relationship. The importance of these understandings to the general knowledge of the human phenomena cannot be underestimated. The extension of this work in the family to work systems, inner systems, and networks of all kinds offers infinite possibilities.

Once the process is detriangulated we try to have people go one-on-one, to work on the development of a personal relationship. In the process of dealing with every significant twosome in the family, we simultaneously deal with the *insides* of each person. The inner system of a person is defined in the context of the personal relationship. It is impossible to define self without the experimental field of the other. This becomes the format for dealing with all emotional problems, but not all problems.

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It is a basic assumption of systems theory that all people want *closeness*. They want to belong somewhere, to fit in, to be cared about, to be accepted, even with their faults. Two people move toward each other, not realizing that closeness must be worked at, and that it is an inconstant state, here and then gone. Such intensity often leads to *fusion* followed by *distance*. One moves toward the other, and the other distances. The closer one gets to loving the other, the greater are his expectations, the desire for completion, the great hope of fulfillment. As closeness increases, fusion becomes more likely. One tends to become the distancer and the other the pursuer. In this fashion, the twosome continues to exist but the distance between them remains fixed.

There are few alternatives. If one is to avoid the nothingness inside self, he must pursue to fill self from others. Otherwise he feels that he would die inside. If one is to protect his space from the intrusions of others, he must distance and live with his loneliness.

Personal Pictures

To the pursuer, every minute is an hour of love lost, a day is a year and the loss of a smile can never be replaced. The absent person is either idealized without fault or condemned without plausible explanation. When one hates the distant person, comfort with him and ease of conversation are removed, and are done simply from toleration and hunger. The pursuer is addicted to

pursuit, and hope inspires a garden of roses. When the roses are found, the thorns hurt, the bleeding goes to the heart and kills even the successful pursuit. To get what one wants is the death of a dream. The thirst is the poison. The inability to allow oneself the time to be dry is the very measure that prevents the pleasure of drinking. Expectations that are met give way to boredom, and hunger to satiety. Most things that succeed are sweeter in the expectation of what they will bring than in the enjoyment of them. The process of being is more purposeful than the accomplishment. The pursuer wants it all done yesterday.

The distancer believes that the bird in hand is better than two birds in the bush. He is enchanted by absence and loves his mother after she is dead. He believes in friendship but does not miss it until after it has flown away. Loss shows more value than tenderness and presence. He sees beauty and sadness from afar; criticism and pimples from close by. From distance, everything is soft and graceful but into that empty space comes his pervading sense of death. His reserve is a foretaste of coldness and loneliness. He is wise only in his isolation. He confuses self-understanding with preservation, and a house with a home. Reliability replaces devotion and connectedness. He is in continual conflict with the social parts of his person and denies the time when he wanted to sing, laugh, and be merry. Mention that, and he might have a "sneaky smile." Over time, he wants to create the imagination that others will believe he has more talent than he really has, but inside he knows it is a fraud. He has the pessimistic foreboding that it will not work. Things become worse and the cure becomes the disease, but how to admit that one has a disease? In time the rough points become sanded off, the blunt points melted down and he wants to be remembered for something. He says, "Hey, I too have a depth! Was there not a beauty in me? Was I merely a shadow, a mist, or was I a lovely landscape in the flow of nature? I am here! Please see me, though life is passing me by."

Caveats

To understand the concept of distancers and pursuers, one must approach it with some warnings. No one is a pure breed and the terms are used to describe the general trend of the person.

Given a certain stress, he will tend to move in this direction. One can be a distancer around issue *X* and a pursuer around issue *Y*. A father can believe that it is fine for his daughter to be lonely but enraged because she fails in math. A mother can enjoy her daughter's popularity but be enraged if she becomes pregnant. It is all relative; these words describe tendencies and not fixed personality characteristics. What is distance in one family might be pursuit in another family. There is no value judgment and one position is not better than the other. Nor are we talking about a developmental stage. To be a distancer or a pursuer is neither dynamic nor descriptive of personalities. Being neither normal nor abnormal, we are simply looking at people who have different capacities in themselves. All people are more effectively looked at as having a *persona* that is made up of many tiny rivulets, thousands of them, flowing into many rivers and oceans. The metaphor of the mighty river is not only grandiose but misses the point. So Freud talked about anger and sex, Adler about power, Erickson about intimacy. All missed the point of the infinite complexity of the human being, that labels deny selfhood, that nothing is dynamic.

Everything then is evolutionary. Everything is historical. Everybody has parts of the distancer and the pursuer inside himself. Since these are not developmental or personality characteristics, they are not fixed qualities of a person. Their activity depends strongly on the context. This has important therapeutic implications. A person may be the pursuer with his spouse, and the distancer with the therapist. A man who moves away from his wife may be the one who opens up in the session. The wife who loves her therapist may hate her husband. Since the initial work in family therapy is with the pursuer, this rule refers to the member of the family who is moving toward the therapist. The pursuer is more anxious and ordinarily will change first. The distancer is less uncomfortable and will evolve, not change actively.

The origin of the distancer and the pursuer in the extended family is not clear but the influence is undoubtedly there. A man may distance from both his extended family and nuclear family, or distance from one and pursue the other. There is no consistent correlation between the positions in both families. Perhaps this is explained by what happens as therapy goes on.

Over time it becomes clear that inside of every distancer is a pursuer, and inside every pursuer is a distancer. The label is an exaggeration and represents more the superficial image of a person — the way he usually behaves. It is not a statement about the totality of self. The distant husband tends to move toward his wife, and pursue her as she pulls away. The pursuing wife finds that she "has no feelings" for her husband as he moves in. These different characteristics of self emerge as the context changes. They have nothing to do with sexual roles, though women tend to be pursuers and men tend to be distancers. These tendencies are culturally determined. The proof of that may be that women tend to be more like men as they become more "liberated."

Movement

There are two movement dimensions in the person — movement toward objects and movement toward people. At any given time in history, one is regarded as more important than the other, but both must be respected. We live in an age and time when movement toward people, the personal relationship, is in great demand and short supply. The pursuer values movement towards people, and the distancer movement towards objects. The pursuer tends to move in, believing that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. They treasure honesty and truth and often become cruel and ineffective. In the sensitive areas of human relationships, the shortest distance is rarely a straight line. It is often patient, circuitous and political. The pursuer enters relationships believing in togetherness, a sense of unity and "weness" and a desire to share. She has the false hope that completion lies outside self, if only one could get to that other person. When frustrated in this hope with her spouse, she turns to the children and becomes more mother than wife.

The distancer tends to move away and out of. He regards the personal relationship as desirable but dangerous. Emotionality puzzles and scares him. He is devious, indirect and vague. The safest line between two points is the longest. He will duck the straight answer and select the longest route. He will often answer a question with a question. He is careful and protective of his space. Distancers enter relationships hoping for togetherness but as a sometimes thing — when they want it. He encourages his wife to have things to do for herself as long as they do not take away from him. He desires to be Number

One but, deep in his bones, believes that people are out to subtract his life, to do him in. At the extreme, he is a paranoid loner. Frustrated in this hope for partial, careful completion, he turns away from everybody into himself. Life then confirms his convictions that nothing would ever really work anyhow. He retreats into despair, individuality and a life that is half dead. He must preserve his "I" at any cost.

Over time, the pursuer becomes tired of effort without reward in her endless chase of the distancer. She will either accept this as "the way life is, or my burden" and emotionally close down, or stage a revolt. The revolt may be in the nature of a divorce, an emotional cut-off from a parent or angry argument and sullen distance from a child. All alone, she feels unappreciated, a misfit, hopeless and helpless, worthless and empty. As her hopes in these people die, she dies inside, or runs to others who might make her feel alive and vibrant. Tired of over-responsibility, tired of giving and expecting, she gives up and begins to move away, to become a distancer in those unfulfilled relationships. As things deteriorate, the distancer sinks deeper and deeper into his depressions, his negativism about life, and in his efforts to avoid everything, his angry outbursts become blacker. His set of glasses becomes more and more colored by a profound pessimism as he turns more and more inward and has only his own thoughts for comfort. After all, life will be what it has been, economics will go down and taxes up. One must give up on life and expect nothing. Prepare for the worst. In such a time of stress, one must turn towards objects and away from people. Defend self and operate on principle and logic and thought. Under-responsibility toward others becomes the flag that the distancer will fly, a reasonable withholding that carries with it zero connectedness, zero giving and the despairing hope that someone, somewhere would want that product.

The distancer and the pursuer end up neutralizing each other. They dance the Bowen two-step, back and forth, with the distance between them remaining the same. Tired and weary, the pursuer tries to actively change, making plans, reading everything written, trying new therapies. Inside she feels taken for granted. The distancer, tired even before he rises in the morning, becomes more and more self-centered and inconsiderate. He avoids therapy, advice, and wants to believe

that every idea in the world comes from his own head. He never changes but sometimes evolves. He develops and emerges like weeds in the lawn. To his way of thinking, change happens naturally but is never planned. He tends to move in physically with sex, or emotionally with anger. He is exquisitely sensitive to being pushed and likes to believe that he can form his own plans for the world. Everything comes from inside his head and he is a hard person to get to know.

Time

The pursuer tends to be impatient and wants everything yesterday. She moves fast, thinks about today and tends to be a family therapist. The distancer waits, often to the point of paralysis, moves slowly and carefully, thinks into the future and will become an analyst, a model of paralysis. Pursuers like to take a chance, to try the new, to actively program change. Sometimes they like change for its own sake. The new is better than the old. The new therapy, the magic bullet is always better. They bubble with endless and unrealistic hope. They tend to have no sense of time although that might vary markedly from situation to situation. Late is as good as early but "the way I feel now" is what really matters. That determines the sense of time. The viewpoint of time is short range, barely going past the present. This stems from their profound emotionality and feeling which takes them immediately into the here and now. They are enthusiastic and bubble-headed. Distancers want to be sure, to stay with what they know. What they know is always defined as what is in their head at that moment. The old is better than the new and thought better than emotionality since one can ask for evidence. They can be so predictable and dependable that they are boring. To the distancer, time is crucial and carefully defined for whatever purpose. The bottom line is to use time in their own way. Principles tried by time take on a hallowed existence even when they do not work. Principle rises above function. They are often against someone or something but not so sure of what they are for. They tend to have a long-range viewpoint, forever and into a future that never comes. The death inside of them lies in their neglect of the present, their pessimism and the absence of people. Their loneliness groans out loud. The wait is forever.

Rhythm

Pursuers have periods of high excitement followed by periods of the deepest blues and depression. It is the spike and wave phenomena. Over time, the peaks of excitement are harder to get to and the pits of blackness last longer and become deeper. They tend to generate life and enthusiasm or deep problems worthy of endless analysis, continuous worry and profound concern about anything and everything. Pursuers shoot from the hip and pride themselves on their honesty and openness. At times this honesty deteriorates into cruelty. The very intensity of the emotional movement can lead to anger, hysteria or liveliness. The way to drive a pursuer up the wall is to turn your back on her. To her, the worst result is to get no reaction. Often they will provoke simply to verify that the other person is alive. This tendency to confront leads to the analysis of others and the avoidance of "what I feel about me."

The distancer leads a life with a flat rhythm. The flatness is made up of zero contribution socially in life, zero expectation of life with the hope that there is a pursuer out there somewhere who will fill him up. He is dead even before he is born. Over time, the "pits" become a way of living. The distancer does not think out loud. He gives you the last paragraph in the novel, the conclusion of what is going on inside of his head. At times he is totally unaware of his own feelings and thoughts. His cruelty is to promise so much and deliver so little of his own personhood to others. His very logic and control provokes the outbursts of emotionality in the other — outbursts that he finds so difficult to deal with. Without the other, he would be lost. He comes alive only when he fears losing the pursuer. The avoidance of confrontation, or the arrogance that covers it leads to the half-dead existence. Full of fears and obsessions, such people withdraw into themselves. As a result, the rhythm of the distancer tends to be flat, not much up and not much down, but terribly reasonable. For the ups and downs and excitements of life, he depends on being in association with an enthusiastic pursuer. Is it any wonder that the spike and wave of the pursuer meets the flatness of the distancer?

Purpose, Nature and Space

The pursuer tries to get something from other that functionally comes from self. She ex-

presses feelings of love which are reactive since they do not allow the other space in which to live. These feelings suffocate. Or she expresses bitterness about not receiving that love from the other person. She avoids the emotional emptiness that lies deep within her soul. She is full of feelings about others, but ask her about the emotions she has about herself if the other person never existed, and she will draw a blank. Hope lies outside herself and her open-mindedness and "feeling talk" have great appeal to the omnipotence of the therapist. The hope is that self can be gained from others. This solution is so simple that with a single-minded purpose it can be pursued forever in therapy.

Distancers protect their own space, semi-acutely aware of their own emptiness but never really experiencing it since they are surrounded by pursuers. They wallow in these feelings and expect little or nothing of their life. Muddling around inside in their depression, they still have hope that a pursuer will save them, if only the pursuer would do what she should. They are closed-minded, have the truth, want to have things their way in a direct or passive obstructive way, and are stubborn. In therapy, if you compliment them on how far they have moved, they will deny that they have changed since they did not will to change. They determine what is change and what is not change.

Distancers seek for pacification, peace at any price, and tend to go into analysis where they meet another distancer. Analysis is better than movement, even for twenty years. Their sense of shame is deeply rooted. "No one loves me. I am a nothing but I can't let anybody know." Pursuers seek and love solutions. There is no problem without an ultimate solution. Any reaction is better than none at all. To have a fight is better than to be ignored. They are active and want solutions immediately. They are open, appealing, attractive and impossible to live with. They say, "When I give up on you, I will leave." They really mean, "When I give up on you, then I can begin to love you."

Clinical Considerations

Distance and pursuit have clinical relevance because they are terms that involve movement. They go beyond insight and indicate who has to move toward or away from what. If one is pursuing and it does not work, then he must distance.

If a husband is pursuing a problem child or a distancing spouse, then he must learn to distance from them. This will *reverse* the flow of movement in the family system. The nature of the distance will depend on the specific characteristics of pursuit and distance in those unworkable family inter-relationships. Such reversal movements are also applicable to distance, when that is not working.

At the onset of therapy, these descriptive labels are used globally to describe the main tendencies of individuals in the family, but a pure distancer or pure pursuer is a rare bird. With further definition, it becomes clear that one is a distancer around issue *A*, and a pursuer around issue *B*. Women tend to be verbal pursuers and men tend to be sexual pursuers. A father may be distant and disregard the significance of his son being socially isolated, but pursue and be upset when son flunks in school. As therapy proceeds and change begins to occur, it becomes clear that each person has the superficial characteristics of distancer or pursuer but the opposite characteristic inside of himself. Inside of every distancer is a pursuer, and inside of every pursuer is a distancer. A pursuing wife may finally get her husband to move toward her by distancing from him. When he does move toward her, the distancer in her frequently emerges. She disapproves of the way he is moving in and may "lose her feelings for him." As he becomes a pursuer, she distances.

One of the major operating principles in the study of movement is the one that states, "Never pursue a distancer." Generally the one who pursues in the family will be the one who pursues or moves toward the therapist. Occasionally, the distancer in the family will be the one who pursues the therapist. The therapist always works with the one who is pursuing him. So, a frequent question we are asked in supervision is "How can I get this husband to come in?" This shows a fundamental lack of understanding and appreciation of the concept of distance and pursuit. The answer is always the same. Don't try to get him to come in. Therapy works out best when the pursuer in the family and in therapy are the same person. When the pursuer in therapy is the distancer in the family, therapy continues but movement is slow and tortuous. Extreme degrees of patience are required.

The initial move in the therapy of the two-some is to pull the pursuer back from whatever

or whomever he/she is pursuing. As the pursuer pulls back from the object of her love, suffocation or conquest, she goes into a state of emptiness inside herself. She has feelings by being unloved, unwanted, unnecessary and not fitting in. Systems readings of family process indicate that she has not pulled back enough *until* these reactions occur. As she pulls back, the distancer feels relief, and eventually a sense of missing her. If that does not occur, either the pull-back is not enough, or consistent enough, or the emotional system between the twosome is operationally dead. With the onset of such movement, tension mounts in the family system with disruptions between husband and wife, parent and child. According to the principle of homeostasis, efforts are made to restore the previous dysfunctional balance and triangles reappear all over the place. Children act up and marital problems are distracted into triangular child-centered problems. One of the useful functions of the therapist is to be able to predict these events to the family, put them in perspective, label them as the natural and not pathological evolution of change, and hold the family through them. Finally, as the pursuer pulls back, she must be directed toward someone. This direction is into her insides and back toward the parent she was more distant from. If that parent is not alive then she is directed to the parent she was over-close to, with the goal of separating that relationship out.

A distancer is dealt with differently. He is encouraged to participate in the sessions, one pays polite attention to him, and he is listened to when he chooses to speak. Inconsistent attendance is disregarded, "I" positions are respected, and no direct effort is made to change him. He will evolve and does not actively change. He grows, like weeds, almost accidentally and of his own will. If he does not change, no big deal is made of it, and it may not even be mentioned, only noted. He will tend to deny change since he feels all change comes from his head anyway. One does

not ask him for a progress report on himself since he will deny progress or the need for it. One observes but comments little. He will evolve spontaneously as the pursuer changes. During the process of therapy, the distancer will tend to like this approach but the pursuer will get angry at the therapist. Most people have the peculiar notion that the one who is spoken to, the one who is worked with, is the one who has the problem, who is the "patient." This represents an iatrogenic psychiatric problem. Family therapists work with the strength in the family and this can and should be explained to them. Well carried out, the distancer will begin to feel more comfortable and gradually enter into the process. We know how to get along with pursuers. We know how to get along with the distancer. We have the same problem the two of them have, getting along with both of them simultaneously.

To prevent such movement from deteriorating into a game or a manipulation, one must focus on the insides of each member of the twosome as they move toward and away from each other. The distancer must learn to talk about his fears, his difficulty in giving, his hopelessness that others really will give to him. He is terribly disappointed in the parent he felt close to, or wanted to feel close to. The pursuer must learn to lower expectations of others, to give without getting. Both must learn that they are two peas in a pod though it does not appear to be that way. They are both empty and should leave each other alone to be themselves.

Distancers find it easy to stay out of triangles. They love peace though some will wage war for it. Their natural inclination is to let everything alone. They see clearly but do not move. Pursuers love to put their nose into everything and love the conflict of triangles. They jump into every empty space and fill it with their emotionality. Therapists must never pursue a distancer and never give a pursuer one extra inch of space.