

The Poetry of Loving: Family Therapy and the Bahá'í Faith

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Writing about the unification of mankind, Shoghi Effendi said:

This will indeed be the fitting climax of that process of integration which, starting with the family, the smallest unit in the scale of human organization, must, after having called successively into being the tribe, the city state and the nation, continue to operate until it culminates in the unification of the whole world, the final object and the crowning glory of human evolution on this planet.¹

Let us take a look at this smallest unit—the family—and at family therapy, a way of helping this unit when it is in difficulty.

The Family

The family is an archetypal pattern of human relationships; is deeply imprinted in us via all sensory modalities; is the most basic bio psycho social Tarot deck of one's life; is nucleus and pattern; is context (and behaviour is ambiguous out of context); is an internalized set of relationships;² is like a hologram in the memory and experience of each member of the family is represented the entire family and the ghosts of the previous generations; is a complex of always and only coexisting entities of which the existence of one generates the other—you do not have a husband without a wife, a son without a father, a sibling without another sibling;³ shares a shifting role with the child as the smallest unit of society—the child is in the family and the family is in the child; is the valve through which the generations of humanity flow from all mankind in the past to all mankind in the future; and is a metaphor for the whole human race and for the family of nations.

The family is a bio-psycho-social-spiritual unit. This makes relationships in one's immediate family stronger and more loaded than relationships in other groups. One of the greatest powers in the world is in the bonds of the nuclear family and the feelings generated there.

The family is an organism and has its own life. The brain has no one control centre controlling all the other centres. Bahá'ís know that the control is the "all-unifying agency" of the soul.⁴ I think the family functions in much the same way as the brain. It is very hard to identify a control centre. Overtly, one parent may seem to be in control. Covertly, the other parent may be in control. However, the control exerted by the helplessness of the infant is very strong. In like manner, one can think of the problems of the family as being offspring of the family and not the possession of any one member.

Family Therapy

The family and the individual are so much a part of each other that it is reasonable to talk of therapy for the family. The idea of therapy indicates the need for help from outside. You probably cannot be your own therapist any more than you can tickle yourself. While there is an emphasis in family therapy on seeing "the problem" as a *symptom* of pain in the family and not necessarily as an isolated disease in one person, there is also an emphasis on personal maturation which means that the therapist often helps by not helping, by not intruding, by not succumbing to the insistent urge "to help," which is often a form of interference to relieve the therapist's own anxiety. The therapist may do many things to facilitate change, but he should not try to help in the sense of stealing the other person's anxiety, which is that person's motivation and initiative for change.

Family therapy is in harmony with the teaching of the Bahá'í Faith that evil does not exist.⁵ In family therapy negative behaviours are often interpreted positively—they are often seen as acts of self-sacrifice designed to draw attention away from more painful issues and thereby to protect others. The assumption is that the family is at root healthy and that its behaviour is positively motivated.

While the rationale for family therapy is relatively obvious and vital, there are aspects of the family that are not so obvious. Firstly, the number of relationships between individuals in a family of four or more is much greater than the number of individuals in that family. Secondly, if you draw a picture of these relationships, the picture does

not show you which relationship is the most important. The most important is the husband-wife relationship, the mother father relationship, the marriage. This relationship is an axis around which the other relationships revolve.

Another fact not immediately apparent is that the number of roles and symbolic functions each person serves also adds up, for the whole family, to a number much larger than the number of individuals. With respect to the individuals in the family each being able to perform a number of simultaneous roles and symbolic functions, I think the following passage from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá offers an analogy:

All the organisms of material creation are limited to an image or form. That is to say, each created material being is possessed of a form; it cannot possess two forms at the same time. For example, a body may be spherical, triangular or square but it is impossible for it to be two of these shapes simultaneously. It may be triangular but if it is to become square it must first rid itself of the triangular shape. It is absolutely impossible for it to be both at the same time. Therefore it is evident in the reality of material organisms that different forms cannot be simultaneously possessed. In the spiritual reality of man, however, all geometrical figures can be simultaneously conceived; while in physical realities one image must be forsaken in order that another may be possible.⁶

“Family” in the Bahá’í Writings

I would like to review a few passages from the writings of the Bahá’í Faith to give some examples of how the word “family” is used and how family relationships are conceived.

Compare the nations of the world to the members of a family. A family is a nation in miniature. Simply enlarge the circle of the household, and you have the nation. Enlarge the circle of nations, and you have all humanity. The conditions surrounding the family surround the nation. The happenings in the family are the happenings in the life of the nation. Would it add to the progress and advancement of a family if dissensions should arise among its members, all fighting, pillaging each other, jealous and revengeful of injury, seeking selfish advantage? Nay, this would be the cause of the effacement of progress and advancement. So it is in the great family of nations, for nations are but an aggregate of families. Therefore, as strife and dissension destroy a family and prevent its progress, so nations are destroyed and advancement hindered.⁷

...man cannot live singly and alone...he is in need of cooperation and mutual help. The mystery of this phenomenon, the cause thereof is this, that mankind has been created from one single origin, has branched off from one family. Thus in reality all mankind represents one family. God has not created any difference. He has created all as one that thus this family might live in perfect happiness and well-being....Although the body politic is one family yet because of lack of harmonious relations some members are comfortable and some in direst misery, some members are satisfied and some are hungry, some members are clothed in most costly garments and some families are in need of food and shelter. Why? Because this family lacks the necessary reciprocity and symmetry. This household is not well arranged. This household is not living under a perfect law. All the laws which are legislated do not ensure happiness. Therefore a law must be given to this family by means of which all the members of this family will enjoy equal well-being and happiness.⁸

...each of the creatures is a sign of God, and it was by the grace of the Lord and His power that each did step into the world; therefore they are not strangers, but in the family; not aliens, but friends, and to be treated as such.⁹

Be the son of thy father and be the fruit of that tree. Be a son that hath been born of his soul and heart and not only of water and clay. A real son is such one as hath branched from the spiritual part of man.¹⁰

When you love a member of your family or a compatriot, let it be with a ray of the Infinite Love Let it be in God, and for God.¹¹

According to the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh, the family being a human unit must be educated according to the rules of sanctity. All the virtues must be taught the family. The integrity of the family bond must be constantly considered and the rights of the individual members must not be transgressed. The rights of the son, the father, the mother, none of them must be transgressed, none of them must be arbitrary. Just as the

son has certain obligations to his father, the father likewise has certain obligations to his son. The mother, the sister and other members of the household have their certain prerogatives. All these rights and prerogatives must be conserved, yet the unity of the family must be sustained. The injury of one shall be considered the injury of all; the comfort of each the comfort of all; the honor of one the honor of all.¹²

...the House of Justice points out that the unity of your family should take priority over any other consideration. Bahá'u'lláh came to bring unity to the world, and a fundamental unity is that of the family. Therefore, we must believe that the Faith is intended to strengthen the family, not weaken it. For example, service to the Cause should not produce neglect of the family. It is important for you to arrange your time so that your family life is harmonious and your household receives the attention it requires...Family consultation employing full and frank discussion, and animated by awareness of the need for moderation and balance, can be the panacea for domestic conflict.¹³

Poetry

Carl Whitaker, noted family therapist, was once asked about how should family therapy be looking ahead, with what should it be concerned. He said, "Can we get away from all this talk about technique and instead get to the poetry of loving?" C.S. Lewis wrote that the best definition of poetry he had heard was that *poetry is the same in the other*. Most simply, this is rhyming—the same sound in a different word. But it is also metaphor, simile, illustration, homology, correspondence, reciprocity, symmetry, and many other phenomena. Magicians say that it's all done with mirrors. There is more to that statement than we realize. This reflective quality of seeing the same in the other is responsible for much of what goes on between people.

We are told in the Bahá'í writings that what we ultimately must reflect is the Love of God. This whole process of reflection, of poetry, of the same in the other occurs in the family. In fact, we are told that the human spirit, "the reality of man,"¹⁴ is his thought or reflective faculty. There is only one Source of light; all the rest is reflection. Our love of God is Self-referential because it is returning love to its Source.

Many different kinds of mirroring go on in the family. "He looks just like you, John." "Mary, she looks like your mother." "It's my turn to go first, you went first last time." Reflection such as this makes one think of reciprocity and symmetry, those qualities that 'Abdu'l-Bahá says are too much lacking in the family of man. He also says, "Let your hearts be like two pure mirrors reflecting the stars of the heaven of love and beauty."¹⁵

In family therapy, the therapist can model some of the qualities of mature individuation such as the ability to join and separate. He can model his ability to see people as whole people and not as problems, to see people as beings and not as their diagnoses. The family can then begin to reflect what the therapist models.

Models

Because we function symbolically and linguistically, we have models of the world as represented in our symbols and words. Health involves model building. It is very important for people to construct their own models of reality so that they can play with them, discover their models' shortcomings, and compare them with other models and with their experience in order to get a palpable way of experiencing their own assumptions. It is important to have more than one kind of model so that you do not become stuck in one model and mistake it for reality. The medical model is a poor model of persons. It is like talking about the outside model of the inside, or the plant model of the animal. The same is true of the person model of families. The family is more than a sum of persons.

Much of therapy deals with trying to help people correct their models, as reflected in their language and behaviour. Language is a great servant and a poor master. The sun does not "rise" and "set."¹⁶ You do not go "out of your mind" or "off the deep end" or "round the bend." Usually your nerves do not "break down."

We also tend to project our models onto others. This creates an interesting interaction between perception and projection. Hence the need to be self-aware, self-observing, so that you became aware of what your internal models are, what your projections are, and can start to subtract them from the "external" reality.

It is clear to thine Eminence that all the variations which the wayfarer in the stages of his journey beholdeth in the realms of being, proceed from his own vision.¹⁷

We need to think both abstractly and concretely. Over and over again Bahá'u'lláh mixes the two together, concrete image switching to abstraction in the same phrase—"the wine of certitude," "the breezes of the All-Glorious," "the rose gardens of immortality."

He is linking the so-called two halves of our brain. It is important for a therapist to be able to read both halves simultaneously, in other words, consciously to straddle the corpus callosum, to be literal and abstract at the same time.¹⁸

Normal Family

Whitaker has listed a number of characteristics of the normal family. The normal family is healthy, growth-inducing, syntropic (the opposite of entropic), has a sense of esteem for itself, is openly coordinated with its subgroups, is focused on its own being in time present, is alive, has an atmosphere of play, has freedom for reasonable aggression, has flexible rules which include secrecy rights, is comfortable with an irrational component, has a sense of the absurd, has a freedom to admit non-members, has a strong sense of community, allows role changes—children may play at being parents, parents may act like children for fun or growth input, and mother and father are primarily individuals and secondarily parents. The family has a sense of itself as a whole.

There is a separation of the generations—children know they are children and the parents know they are adults. There is a three or four generation intrapsychic family. Mother and father talk about the old days; the children talk about their future families. Father is supportive and excitedly involved with mother throughout her pregnancy, post delivery, and with early rearing of the child. Consequently, mother does not resent father for lack of emotional support; resentment is then not passed on to male offspring, and a unity of love is assured to continuing generations of families.¹⁹

The family has a life cycle and the individuals in the family have their own growth and development and cycles. The individuals' cycles are like smaller wheels turning in the large wheel of the family life cycle.

As described by Milton Erickson, the family life cycle begins with courtship, goes on to marriage, child-birth and child rearing, the growth of children and the aging of parents, the weaning of parents and children from each other, and finally the changes of old age ending with the death of each parent.²⁰

Triangulation

The phenomenon of triangulation is related to backbiting. In “love minus zero/no limit” Bob Dylan says, “in ceremonies of the horsemen even the pawn must hold a grudge.”²¹ The battles between the superpowers are often fought out in Third World countries; the conflicts between the parents are often mirrored in the children. These are examples of triangulation.

The name most associated with developing the concept of triangulation is Murray Bowen. Bowen says:

A two person emotional system is unstable in that it forms itself into a three person system under stress. A system larger than three persons becomes a series of interlocking triangles. The following are some of the characteristics of the functioning of a single triangle. As tension mounts in a two-person system, it is usual for one to be more uncomfortable than the other, and for the uncomfortable one to “triangle in” a third person by telling the second person about the triangle one. This relieves the tension between the first two, and shifts the tension between the second and third. A triangle in a state of calm consists of a comfortable twosome and an outsider. The favored position is to be a member of the twosome. If tension arises in the outsider, his next predictable move is to form a twosome with one of the original members of the twosome, leaving the other one as outsider. So the forces within the triangle shift and move from moment to moment and over longer periods. When the triangle is in a state of tension, the outside position is the preferred position, in a posture that says, “You two fight and leave me out of it.” Add this extra dimension of gaining closeness or escaping tension, and it provides an even more graphic notion of the shifting forces, each one constantly moving to gain a little more close comfort or to withdraw from tension, with each move by one requiring a compensatory move by another. In a state of tension, when it is not possible for the triangle to conveniently shift the forces within the triangle, two members of the original twosome will find another convenient third person (triangle in another person) and now the emotional forces will run to circuits in this new triangle. The circuits in the former triangle are then quiet but available for reuse at any time. In periods of very high tension, a system will triangle in more and more outsiders. A common example is a family in great stress that uses the triangle system to involve neighbors, schools, police, clinics, and a spectrum of outside people as participants in the family problem. The family thus reduces the tension within the inner family, and it can actually create the situation in which the family tension is being fought out by outside people.²²

Triangles are created and function in other ways than simply backbiting. Parents can escape the tension in their marriage by over-focusing on a child, such as too much concern with the child's health, or education, or play,

or lessons. You can escape interpersonal tension by triangulating in a part of your own body and thereby creating a psychosomatic complaint. You can triangulate in the rest of the world—the two of us against the world.

Backbiting, gossip, and triangulation are destructive of an invisible betweenness, the relationship between people. An act of backbiting by two people about a third is destructive of three relationships: the relationship between the backbiters, and the relationships between each of the backbiters and the person talked about. Backbiting makes everyone defensive and resistant to change.

It is a paradox that triangulation, which is a unit of strength in the physical world is so destructive in the realm of human relationships. Perhaps this is because it produces rigidity in the human kingdom, where, instead, we are supposed to be flexible and versatile. If we are triangulated, then the motions available to us are reduced. If I am taking the tensions from my relationship with Bob and putting them into my relationship with Bill as a substitute for Bob, then I am not dealing with reality.

One way to avoid being triangulated is not to transmit signals that say you are too sensitive or too vulnerable to be confronted with what the other person has to say to you. We passively triangulate other people into our lives by not taking care of our own business.

A Model of Therapy

Any observed triangle is always part of a tetrahedron, because the observer is the fourth point and four points make a tetrahedron. The therapy of triangulation is a two stage process of first tetrahedronization and then detetrahedronization. The step of tetrahedronization is the recognition of the triangles that operate in the family. Detetrahedronization is a process of freeing the individuals so that they are not so bound and limited in dealing with others and themselves.

The mature, or individuated person, has all degrees of freedom available to him, including the freedom to join and the freedom to leave. The dyadic, or two person system, has the constraint (or loss of a degree of freedom) of the fixedness of the relationship between the two. When those two escape their tension by triangling in a third person, each of the three is limited in two degrees of freedom—the constraints of the relationships with the other two people. Tetrahedronization freezes the whole system with the additional constraints created by perceiving the triangle and making it self-aware. Each person is now bound by the relationships connecting him with the other three.

There are now two choices available to the individuals. One is a collusive enmeshment in which four people try to act as one and tacitly agree not to change the system. On the therapist's part, this may occur because he becomes too much a part of the family, or because the family's panic triggers such a panic in him that he opts for anything that will relieve the panic as quickly as possible without resulting in any real change.

The second is the growth choice: detetrahedronization. There are several factors that encourage this choice. One is that the members of the triangle, prior to the triangle's being recognized, still experienced a number of degrees of freedom that allowed them to escape the tension of the triangle. Getting "caught in the act"—the triangle being recognized by the therapist—freezes the system resulting in a massive panic on the part of the members.

The therapist, with his own life outside this therapy situation, does not want to be trapped with this system and will be motivated to growth. This will leave the other members of the tetrahedron stripped of a collusive partner and with a model of mature, responsible behaviour by the therapist from which they can then derive courage and imitate. Or the initiative for growth can come from one of the members of the original triangle.

Therefore, this theory says that a precursor and prerequisite for change is an increase in the anxiety of all the members. "To bear those ills we have" having become unacceptably painful, the members then have more motivation to change and with an example of courage from the therapist, to face themselves more honestly and to bear their own pain, anxiety, and loneliness, a change which leads not to the end of the world but to the discovery of inner resources and growth.

This "righteous act" of taking responsibility for one's own discomfort, having "the power to restore the force which hath spent itself and vanished"²³ releases that new power within the individual of which we are assured when we are told that God will never "task a soul beyond its power."²⁴ This is distress being converted to eustress.²⁵

The tetrahedron does not really disappear. It remains in the memories of the individuals as a transitional phenomenon²⁶ that has helped them grow, and is, therefore, an "adversity" for which to be "thankful."²⁷ It thereby switches from being a source of limitation of the individual's freedom to being, as the tetrahedron truly is, the essence of stability.

Other Aspects of the Family Therapist's Work

All healing comes from God.²⁸ It comes from prayer, obedience to Bahá'í institutions, and from the obedient act of seeking out competent physicians and following their advice.

Therapy is creating a situation that allows the family's own growth tendencies to function. It is out-manipulating a person's self-sabotaging manipulation. Aspects of therapy include increasing the patient's awareness of options; assisting patients to do their own thinking rather than having them let their words do their thinking for them; waiting—allowing time for things to change; helping people first to recognize the ways they triangulate and are triangulated, and then to detriangulate themselves; and correcting flat earth concepts of the world and the mind.

Family therapy is like a mixture of homeopathy, surgery, and ethology. It is like homeopathy in the sense that sometimes we prescribe actions that intensify the symptom. If a person is rocking back in his chair and you nudge him back a little farther he will go off balance, correct himself and sit up straight.

Family therapy is like surgery in that one has to make quick decisions and be incisive—such as deciding whether to proceed with sessions when key persons are missing.

Family therapy is like ethology in that it involves reading events rather than relying on verbal reports. Sometimes there will be a very perceptive spokesman in the family, often one of the children, who can explain very clearly what is going on in the family. In many cases, however, this is not the case, and the therapist must learn to read the family's behaviour as a language.

In therapy we learn to play with language so that we can be freed from getting caught in the picture language creates. One aspect of therapy is creating a sense of the whole through drawing and discussing family trees, discovering covertly shared feelings and anxieties, and pointing out the shared family name and family myth.

Children grow up learning about objects and things. To learn about the reality of invisible relationships they must have the invisible made visible for them. This is teaching them about nature, "...nature is...those inherent properties and necessary relations derived from the realities of things."²⁹

Therapy makes use of poetry; it makes use of the same in the other. It makes use of the same through metaphor. A therapist treated a child with a bed-wetting problem by never talking about the child's bedwetting, bladder, or urethra, but by talking about the muscle that surrounds the pupil of the eye controlling its size. He was able to do this in such a way that the patient gained control over another circular muscle, one which controls the outflow from the bladder. Family therapy makes use of the poetry of similarity by prescribing the symptom. Therapy is poetic in the attempt to use the patient's way of talking about the world and not the therapist's. As with autistic children, we will attempt to reciprocate behaviours and not intrude, until eventually there is a reciprocity of initiative in the relationship.

Therapy is a process of language contamination, of contaminating the primary process or symbolic image world of people. This is skillfully done by family therapist Carl Whitaker. My image of this process is that people very carefully bring their fossilized problems to him. They carefully open the sedimentary slates surrounding the fossil and say, "This is what is bothering me." Then in a sympathetic way, Whitaker will place some foreign object between the slates by something he says or does so that the patient can never again close his slates tightly together to keep his fossilized problem intact. This small change can then lead to a chain reaction of other changes.

Another aspect of good therapists, in my opinion, is that they do not get set in one way of working. I sat with therapist Milton Erickson during a workshop in which he was demonstrating hypnosis and problem solving. He conducted many demonstrations for the group of observers. Sometimes a demonstration did not work; he just went on to something else. I once watched Whitaker working with a psychotic fifteen-year-old boy in play therapy. He went through the whole first half of the session attempting in different non-intruding ways to reciprocate with the boy. Only after forty-five minutes did he establish a connection. The therapist too imbued with rigid rules will not have this versatility. The good therapist learns from failures.

An aspect of therapy is the phenomenon of reframing, which goes along with the Bahá'í teaching that there is no evil.³⁰ Often reframing reinterprets the negative behaviour as being an act of sacrifice of the individual in defense of the family. Whatever he is doing is to prevent or distract the family from facing something even more painful than the negative behaviour.

Therapy attempts to create the environment for other's learning. This is sometimes criticized as being manipulation. Was 'Abdu'l-Bahá manipulating people by praising them for attributes they most evidently did not appear to have? Actually this is out manipulating the person's maladaptive manipulation of himself. It is breaking a few bonds of the straitjacket and allowing him the freedom of experience.

Another aspect of family therapy is the use of a second therapist or co-therapist. This allows the therapists to model mature behaviour such as consulting on differences of opinion, being parental, and joining and leaving the family.

The realization of the importance of biological parents, and their importance to the fantasy and symbolic life of the person is yet another aspect of family therapy. As one adopted person who was unable to trace her biological parents said, "Just the attempt made me appreciate them for having created me."

Therapy helps us to realize the reality of unity in diversity and thereby to surrender our subconscious need to be in control. As Buckminster Fuller says, “If there is one unit, or one building block, or one norm, then I can identify myself with it and attempt to monopolize it.”³¹ He is talking about why people have such a hard time accepting plurality and the change of the old order. The Bahá’í idea of unity says that there is unity in diversity. To be unified there must be a minimum of two things unified. There is no one building block. There is diversity. Therefore, I cannot monopolize it.” Therefore, I am not in control, and, unless one has a deep and abiding faith, not being in control is terrifying.

The Eternal and Internal Psychotic Sea

Aside from the difficulties we find in the family, there is a matrix of psychoses within which we all live. This psychotic sea is the product of confusion about a number of betweenesses—the betweenesses of structure and three betweenesses that characterize human relations: economics, communication, and law.

The psychosis in structure is that we have a very Euclidean, cube based, single building block unit, right angled, flat earth view of the world.³² In economics the psychosis is in the convictions that money is wealth³³ and that money functions best at maximums rather than at optimums.³⁴ In communication the psychosis includes pathological double binds and all the ways we let words do our thinking for us. In law the psychosis is that might makes right, that it makes sense to have international anarchy, and that most of the real crime is visible crime.

I think that it will take us a number of generations to escape from these psychoses. That is a major reason for obedience to our Bahá’í Institutions. They are a matrix of sanity in the midst of a chaos of misinformation, misperception, and mistaken thought that assault us.

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