

The Friendly Forest
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Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo
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Before the sermon came the story, “The Friendly Forest,” which tells of a happy place, where frolicked a lamb, and to which one day a tiger came to live. While the lamb had apprehensions about this newcomer, the other animals assured the lamb that they could tell the tiger how it must behave. Nevertheless, the lamb continued to feel threatened by the tiger’s presence, although the tiger “did not really spend all or even most of its time stalking the lamb.” Eventually the lamb announced it had to leave the forest, and the other animals insisted that whatever problem there was could be worked out if they sat down together to communicate. The lamb questioned how any compromise could be made. Finally, a “less subtle” animal blurted out that if the animals want a lamb and a tiger to live together in the same forest, they must put the bloody tiger in a cage.

Sermon

When I was new at ministry, I studied under Edwin H. Friedman, a Jewish rabbi and family systems therapist who had gained a reputation for providing great wisdom on troubles within families and congregations.

Friedman helped bring the understanding of family systems into the major focus which it has today. There are other experts and other approaches, and I don’t claim to be an expert in the field, but I have found Ed’s wisdom most helpful. So today I would like to focus on Friedman’s version of Family Systems Theory.

In his extensive work with leaders of all faiths, Friedman stressed that family and church dynamics are very much alike. He was speaking of you in your respective families and of us in this church family. Systems thinking requires a major shift from that of a person as a “self” or individual to that of a person as a part of systems. I think of it as the “interconnected web” in which we find ourselves. We all are what we are in relation to others. We must learn to pay attention to all the positions we hold in the networks of relationships that make up the systems of which we are a part. We have to learn to think systemically. To do so, it helps to become familiar with some of the concepts that distinguish the model of family systems theory.

First: When a system--a family or congregation--has a problem, that problem will often result in the stressed or inappropriate behaviors of a member of the system. Such behaviors could be such things as burnout or excessive drinking. One way or another, the group recognizes that this person has a problem, and this person then becomes the “identified patient”--the one with a problem. Systems thinking teaches that the one whom group members typically look upon as the “problem one,” is not an isolated problem, but the person carrying the problem of the system. (Generation to Generation, p.19)

Think about that. Burnout, for example, which is so common these days, is not an individual problem; it is a systemic issue. Such understanding is a radical shift in thinking. And the corollary is, of course, that to cure the patient, one must deal with the entire system.

Second: The system, be it a family or a congregation, strives to maintain itself just as it is in a dynamic called “homeostasis.” Systems exist to preserve themselves as they are, and resist change adamantly. Yes, it is normal and expected that both families and congregations will resist change. I’m thinking of UU congregations I have known that say they are determined to grow, and perhaps even commit to

making changes. Inevitably, whatever the changes may be, some sort of homeostasis rises up as the system does what it can to stop the changes. Sabotage occurs! Unexpected conflicts arise. Such dynamics are normal and should be expected. Knowing family systems theory helps us to understand and to deal with them.

Third: The key to growth and change is “self differentiation.” “Self-differentiation is the understanding that we are all responsible for our own behavior, and that we are not responsible for the behavior of others.” We humans, all of us parts of systems that are not about to change, have “the capacity for some awareness of our position in the relationship system... (We have) the capacity to define our own life goals and values apart from surrounding togetherness pressures... (We can) say ‘I’ when others are demanding ‘you’ and ‘we.’ (We have the capacity to) maintain a (relatively) nonanxious presence in the midst of anxious systems...” (p. 27)

You probably have been in situations where a person speaks with the assurance that he or she is voicing the group opinion, and the group goes along, so there is an emphasis on “We think...” or “We believe...” Under such circumstances, I want to respond, yes, but what do you, as an individual believe? My experience with Unitarian Universalists is that most of us are less likely to revert to “we thinking,”--we shy away from saying “we believe”-- and it may be a red flag when individuals attempt to speak for everyone. Most of us here have the capacity to differentiate our selves, and thus, when individuals choose to speak as an “I,” those persons, and perhaps the group have the capacity to change.

Fourth: Family systems emphasizes the ongoing and ever present importance of extended family relationships. How we related to long dead grandparents influences directly how we relate to our grandchildren. Now that I have grandchildren, I am becoming increasingly aware of the truth of this statement. Quite often, the dynamics among members in a congregation are directly related to the members’ place and role within their separate families, with issues playing out, sometimes in unexpected ways. We probably are not aware of the extent to which we relate to other people, say in the congregation, as we have learned to relate to members of our families of origin. Sometimes this is a good thing, and sometimes not. Not all families are happy functional units.

Fifth: “Friedman helped us understand the complexity of emotional relationships by teaching that the basic unit of relationship is the triangle.” (Remson) Life would be simple if every relationship were between just two people, let us say two in an ongoing relationship. But those two people have many relationships: with family members, friends, organizations, hobbies, dreams, and so on. Those two people have many people and issues that influence their relationship. Like all of us, they are caught up in multiple interconnected triangular webs.

One simple way to approach triangles is to consider that Michael has a problem with George. Instead of talking with George, Michael seeks out Bill to tell about the problem. There you have it: instant triangle!

When a person tries to change the relationship between two others, he or she ‘triangles’ into that relationship (and often stabilizes the very situation that person is trying to change). (pp. 36-37) As Friedman says, “It may be that, in the history of our species, no family member upon trying to correct the perception of another family member about a third has ever received the response, ‘You’re right honey. I didn’t know why I didn’t see it that way myself.’” (p. 37)

Friedman adds: “We can only change a relationship to which we belong. Therefore, the way to bring change to the relationship of two others (and no one said it is easy) is to try to maintain a well-defined relationship with each, and to avoid the responsibility for their relationship with one another. To the

extent that we can maintain a ‘nonanxious presence’ in a triangle, such a stance has the potential to modify the anxiety in the others. The (challenge) is to be both nonanxious and present.” (p. 39) It is a huge challenge, but Friedman does offer some tips to how we can move ahead.

First, for all of us, use playfulness whenever possible. Friedman points out that “...seriousness is more than an attitude; it is a total orientation, a way of thinking embedded in constant chronic anxiety.” (p. 50) When stress is building and anxiety grows, we need a moment to rest. We need that change of focus and intensity to step back and consider what is going on.

Second, be aware of the importance and quality of leadership that exists. Friedman emphasizes “that the overall health and functioning of any organization depend primarily on one or two people at the top.” (p. 221)

Most approaches to leadership focus on two concepts: charisma and consensus, and the continuum that may lie between these two extremes. Charisma is that special something that some people have that attracts other people to follow. Mother Teresa had it; Martin Luther King, Jr. had it; Adolph Hitler had it. Yes, people follow, but then what? Cult leaders have it; that’s how cults are made. They define themselves in opposition to other groups, and they foster a high degree of emotional interdependency among their followers. Those followers lose individualism as they adopt the beliefs and practices of their leader. That is not a good model of leadership if we wish to encourage growth and maturity in our groups.

Consensus is an approach to leadership that takes more time and effort, as groups struggle to find agreement. The function of the leader becomes more that of a resource person. What then is a leaderless group may have a more difficult time with anxiety, lacking anyone with the ability to take a strong stand.

Friedman is very clear in advocating the need for strong and clear leadership in any group, family or congregation. He emphasizes that the alternative to both charisma and consensus is self-differentiation. He says, “The basic concept of leadership through self-differentiation is this: If a leader will take primary responsibility for his or her own position as ‘head’ and work to define his or her own goals and self, while staying in touch with the rest of the organism, there is a more than reasonable chance the body will follow.” (p. 229) A key phrase here is “staying in touch,” being connected while maintaining self definition. Friedman notes: “The second central component (of leadership) is the capacity and willingness of the leader to take nonreactive, clearly conceived, and clearly defined positions.” (p. 229) All this, in the midst of dealing with the many triangles that exist, and, inevitably, the sabotage that will occur from less well differentiated members of the group--who are doing what comes naturally as they attempt to maintain homeostasis.

Wow! And you may have thought it was easy being a parent, or chairing that committee, or leading a board--or being a minister! We are all a parts of systems, and we are what we are as we live out our parts within these systems.

Now, back to the Friendly Forest. Today’s story “The Friendly Forest,” came from Ed’s book Friedman’s Fables. Ed taught by example, and his fables are examples of his playfulness. Each fable has a moral; the moral of The Friendly Forest, according to Ed, is: Reasonableness is the natural manure of terrorism. He then lists questions for our consideration, some of which, he says, are “purposely intended to be ironic, fantastic, mischievous, or outrageous.” (From Friedman’s Fables Discussion Questions, p. 1) All questions are put forward to expand the listener’s range and to make progress towards solving real problems. So I’ll end my presentation this morning with questions, some from Ed Friedman, and some from me, with the hope that they might lead to your consideration now

and perhaps discussion after today's service.

1. Would the animals ever ask the Tiger to leave?
2. If the Tiger eats the Lamb, whose fault will it be?
3. In what way could the Tiger be seen as the symptomatic member-- "identified patient"-- of a group?
4. How much of what you now know about family systems can you apply to the current situation at Penn State?
5. Should the intrusive party ever have equal rights?
6. In what way does a consensus orientation always give strength to the extremists? (Remember, if a consensus is required, the person who refuses to agree is the most powerful person in the group.... But also note that Occupy Wall Street activists have adopted "modified consensus," wherein approval of just nine out of ten participants is needed.)
7. Would the "less subtle" animal who finally speaks up be a good leader?
8. What would you do if you found yourself in the Friendly Forest?

Sources

Friedman, Edwin H., *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, The Guilford Press, 1985

Friedman, Edwin H. *Friedman's Fables*, The Guildford Press, 1990.

"Emotional Triangles: Short Introduction Top Systems Theory" by Michael M. Remson, internet