

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 become 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 judgement 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.

