

*Rabbi Larry Moldo attended the National Association of Jewish Chaplains' (NAJC) annual conference January 20-23, 2008. The overall theme of the conference was Family.*

*When Rabbi Moldo was a student, and taking his Clinical Pastoral Education units, he became a self-taught expert in Family Systems Theory and Genograms. He led several sessions on the subject for his peers, so when papers for the conference were solicited, Rabbi Moldo suggested that he lead "A Brief Introduction to Family Systems Theory and Genograms." It was designed to be a quick over view for people who knew the subject, and a way to help others from getting lost during the conference as one expert after another referred to topics within Family Systems Theory. The following is an approximate reconstruction of Rabbi Moldo's presentation.*

### Family Systems Theory: A brief review Rabbi Larry Moldo

Here is a brief overview of six concepts within Family Systems theory: homeostasis, emotional triangles, identified patient, differentiation, genograms and generational transmission of trauma.

#### **Homeostasis**

Most systems that include humans seem to be working very hard to keep a level bottom line. Whatever contortions might be visible from outside the system, the perspective within the system is that nothing special is going on. For example, take a triangle. We know that triangles in this world have 180 angle-degrees. No more, no less. Supposing that a point on the hypotenuse decides it would be more fun to be part of a square and proceeds to head towards the far corner. En route, the triangle doesn't look much like the same old triangle we used to know, since only one point on the hypotenuse wants to change. With extreme effort, the square is formed, and now the other two sides contort and maneuver, almost to the point that there is no area left to the triangle/square. When the triangle goes back to being a triangle, then homeostasis has been successful.

In a slightly different relationship, one Homework Parent wants to lessen the amount of attention that winds up being paid to Child's homework by the Homework Parent. There are times when a little improvement in the situation is made, but before any celebrations are scheduled, the other parent should be brought into the equation. While the child and one parent were spending so much energy on the homework, the other parent kept complaining about how much time the two of them spent together. As the homework parent divests from homework and into romantic couple lifestyle, the non-homework parent begins to send negative emotional energy towards the child, and at the same time create a distance between the two parents. At this point, there are two likely options for how the homework parent will respond that will end up with a new homeostatic balance. One possibility is that the homework parent will see the other parent's anger directed at the child, and in an attempt to keep the other parent from getting too angry will, at some point between the moment that the other parent gets angry and the moment that that anger is received by the child, take over the anger and be the delivery person. The child will express more anger at the

homework parent instead of the other parent, and the homework parent will also be the target of anger from the other parent. A second possibility is that the homework parent maintains non-anxious contact with both people.

In the first scenario, the level of acrimonious interactions may increase to a new level; in the second scenario the level of acrimonious interactions will probably decrease to a new level.

### **Emotional Triangles**

The specific actions and reactions within a system may have nothing to do with each other, even when one seems to have caused the other. Focusing on controlling specific reactions can make it easier to miss seeing the purpose of the reaction.

Let's take as a given that healthy relationships with other people are some form of I-Thou relationship, and as another given, there are very few healthy relationships.

One branch of less healthy relationships is that of the emotional triangle. A triangle is formed whenever one person approaches another person about a third person. This is not gossip in the usual sense – in gossip (which is also against Jewish principles) there is no need for either party to know the person about whom they are speaking. In creating or maintaining emotional triangles, it is essential that one of the people knows the other person involved. A triangle is formed when the system feels overloaded with anxiety and there needs to be a lightning rod to keep the system from explosion or implosion. When Reuben tells me something about Simon (just between us) and I retain that confidence, in addition to being a nice, upright, human being, I have helped maintain whatever relationship Reuben and Simon have at its current level. Until I de-triangulate myself by maintaining contact with both of them while I share with each of them what the other might have to say – always in a “oh, by the way” manner that is not meant to cause additional harm, - then I am keeping Reuben and Simon from developing their relationship any further, (at least in terms of any one item.)

Whatever secret I am told is usually not the real issue that the existence of the secret is meant to conceal.

To use a slightly different example: Mother focuses on the length of Son's hair. She'd really like it cut, and he isn't all that concerned about how long it looks on him. He tells Father a secret about Mother, and he can now handle all of Mother's rantings and ravings about hair length. One day, Father tells Mother the secret which Son had revealed, and Mother shares her concern that because Father's been at work so much, he's missed some problem behaviors that Son has been exhibiting. Father shares this concern with Son, and Mother has everybody get a haircut, with each person choosing their own length. Son does not get all huffy, neither does Son immediately react to either interaction, and the anxiety level of the system as a whole is reduced.

## **Identified Patient**

Anxiety is always present in a family system, and a healthy system will rotate the focus of the anxiety displacement process as well as the stated content. An unhealthy system will decide on one position within the triangle (which usually translates as one member, but not always) to receive all the anxiety. The advantage to the system is that nothing can be resolved until the problem with the Identified Patient is resolved; another advantage is that the Identified Patient's condition is used to excuse everybody's shortcomings while maintaining the Identified Patient in a dependent relationship. These advantages do not lead to an environment of growth, but do unite to maintain emotional homeostasis.

If Son, with his hair length, becomes the Identified Patient, then one or both parents might find an Expert in hair length who can then be triangled in. When two experts are triangled in, the system is almost unstoppable.

## **Differentiation**

Sidebar: There is a concept called the Social Mirror. The Social Mirror is a construct that a person bringing their toddler to services might use to decide that little Ahuvah must be kept quiet in the row because Mrs. Grimsby does not like wandering toddlers interrupting her concentration during prayers, and the parents of wandering toddlers must be incompetent and should never show up themselves. Mrs. Grimsby is never consulted to see what her opinion really is, and it works even better if Mrs. Grimsby is another visitor to a service that neither will ever attend again.

Back to the subject: When a couple exhibits appropriate differentiation, then each of them could state, "I am I and you are you. Sometimes we do things together." A slightly less differentiated couple would state, "What we do together defines who each of us is." An undifferentiated couple would each have their own complementary statements. One person would state (or think and say), "I'm cold, so you must be cold, so you'd better wear that sweater." The other person's reaction is, "I feel warm, but you told me that I'm cold, so I guess I don't even know what warm and cold really feel like, so I better ask before doing anything to see what I'm really feeling."

We tend to become partners with people who have similar levels of differentiation. It has been shown that our levels of differentiation are correlated in a specific pattern to the levels of differentiation of our parents. If I am triangulated and dumped on in my family, my level of differentiation will be about 10 points lower than the parent who did most of the dumping; if I am more or less left to my own devices in a non-abusive way, then I will wind up about 10 points higher than the parent who did the best job of letting me become my own person.

Within a differentiation scale from 0 to 100, with 0 being a hard core schizophrenic and 100 being the non-existent person who is perfectly differentiated all the time, we find that there is little clinical data concerning people who rank between 80 and 100. They rarely feel the need to be seen for

long term psychological issues. People are liable to peer pressure between 50 and 80; between 25 and 50 people are very concerned about social mirror effects. Indeed, their whole life revolves around being liked. Between 0 and 25 we find the family systems that simply want to be comforted while they maintain homeostasis. They will not remain in a situation that would demand growth.

### Genograms

A genogram is a type of family tree. A genogram can be used to symbolically indicate the various stages of commitment; it can be used to indicate how people relate to one another; it can be used to indicate whatever information is being looked at. Some people have looked at their own genograms to trace alcoholism, types of work people have done and other things that are important to them. One use of genograms is as a pre-marital tool. When each member of the potential couple has finished developing their family tree, there are many times when patterns are found. For example, it might be that the second daughter in the last five generations has only been married once for five days. The prospective bride is the second daughter, and this might be something she would want to explore further. It might be that the two families have vastly different timings for when children have arrived. Knowing this could help keep the two branches from being thoroughly frustrated with each other when the children arrive at a different schedule than “normal.”

Patterns often transmit through generations, and in terms of emotional reactions, both extremes of any one behavior show the same connection to the system. If a great grandmother had sixteen children from casual affairs and another person has never gone with anybody, both sets of actions show the same emotional connection to the family system.

One example of Generational Trauma Transmission is shown in these tables:

Relationship to focus person	Marriages	Children	Miscarriages? & other notes	Grandchildren	Great grandchildren	Great great grandchildren
Maternal Grandparents	1	2	Several between 1926 and 1942	7	14	1
Mother	2	2 by each	0	5 (2 adopted)		
Paternal Grandparents	1	3	Both orphans	9	13	Some
Adoptive father	2	3 in first, adopted two in second, 2 from second		10	2 to 4	

Table 1: Generational Trauma transmission: towards a genetic dead end

<b>Member of focus person's generation</b>	<b>Marital and descendant status</b>
Oldest child of adoptive father (daughter)	Became a born again Christian after birth of only child
Second child of adoptive father (son)	Had one child from an annulled marriage; second child in a divorced marriage; a third relationship that was scuttled by her children; some grandchildren
Third child of adoptive father (daughter)	Two children from first marriage, no children from second marriage, started affair with second husband before marriage to first was over
Focus person (son)	One adopted child – foreign, many miscarriages
Focus person's only full sibling (son)	One adopted child – foreign, adopted just before wife died of cancer
First child of second marriage (son)	Married with one child and a current pregnancy
Second child of second marriage (daughter)	First serious relationship resulted in a miscarriage/stillbirth but no marriage, second relationship resulted in an abusive marriage, third relationship has resulted in marriage to a gentile – they have two children

Table 2: How the various traumas affecting a blended family have played out in a single generation.

This just touches the surface of Family Systems theory and the practical applications of genograms.