

## Chapter 5

## BECOMING REAL

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"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become REAL."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."

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 "Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become, it takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand." [Williams, 1958, p. 17]

Long, long ago, in a land far away I was the rabbit who was afraid to be real, in many respects because I had learned that it might hurt, or people might think that I was ugly. This is the chronicle of my begin-

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In order to preserve the privacy of her family and to ensure confidentiality, the author is using a fictional name.

ning to become real, initially without my intention and only with the efforts and caring of a trustworthy Skin Horse.

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In 1975, I entered the extended family course with Paulina McCullough, M.S.W. at Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic, (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) with two goals in mind: to increase my skills as a family therapist by learning more about Bowen family systems theory, and to learn to cope more effectively in a conflictual relationship with my mother. The course met for one year in weekly two-hour sessions of a group of family therapists, who each presented their own families for consultation. In the succeeding two years, consultation sessions were held as individual members requested them. Although the issues which initially encouraged me to join the course involved the triangles of (1) my mother, my father, and me and (2) my parents, my in-laws, and me, my focus in the course rapidly turned to my marital relationship.

The same issue of "responsibility" that was so bothersome in my family of origin appeared in my nuclear family. Bowen (1974, p. 84) indicates that the "most productive route for change, for families who are motivated, is to work at defining self in the family of origin, and to specifically avoid focus on the emotional issues in the nuclear family." My personal experience, however, was that focusing on the nuclear family first can be more helpful. For me, the anxiety was less since the marital discomfort was great and I felt I had little to lose. I suspected that work on my family of origin might result in permanent cut-offs that would be less tolerable than a cut-off from my spouse. The beginning signs of success in the area of marriage then gave me courage to go on and tackle the more difficult task in my family of origin. I have yet to explore the issues dealt with in this paper in my broader extended family; that is my agenda for the future.

The term *real* has for me many elements of Bowen's differentiated position. It is being free to be oneself and acknowledge oneself as an individual with both positive and negative characteristics. Prior to the course, I had spent so much time and energy attempting to do the "right" things in relation to my parents and people in general that it was difficult to be sure of what I thought, felt, or believed; so much depended on what would be approved of and accepted. This often resulted in feeling like a hypocrite, since I was unable to freely risk being entirely myself—real. The differentiated person is able to be real and to feel unthreatened by someone else's reality.

(In order to preserve the fluidity of this chronicle of my work in the course, I shall not expound the theory that accompanies the steps I took, but will instead refer to the appropriate literature.)

## REDEFINING — "WHERE ARE THE CLOWNS?"

Who would not agree wholeheartedly that difficulties in a relationship are mutually contributed to? A statement such as this, though, intellectually acceptable, has the potential to create panic when its truth becomes apparent at a gut level, particularly to an individual who had essentially made it her life's goal to avoid being wrong, doing the wrong thing, or appearing silly. It was incomprehensible to me how one who seemed to think things through carefully, attempt to anticipate *responsibility* the outcomes of alternative modes of action, and carry tasks through to completion, in short, one who seemed to be dependable and trustworthy—could be involved in another's seeming carelessness, irresponsibility, undependability, and untrustworthiness. I had made many fumbling attempts (in my responsible way) to right things in my relationship with my husband, Adam, but generally my attempts all involved a new plan to get him to change, to "shape up," become more responsible. It was not until I began working in the extended family course that I was forced to look at how I needed to change the focus from my husband to my self. As I recollect, my initial reaction to group members' questioning me and seeming to be quite taken with my husband was to assume that they simply did not understand the situation. We were firmly entrenched in roles of "responsible and intelligent" versus "irresponsible and intellectually dull." Waterman's (1972, p. 114) statement that "most dilemmas cannot be solved in the context in which they are stated" described the situation accurately. I was feeling quite frustrated and hopeless without realizing that my definition of the situation made a solution impossible. Waterman continues (p. 115): "The quagmire has a base of emotions which is self-pity, a martyred feeling, pompous self-righteousness, helplessness, despair, panic, hatred—but none of these emotions give firm footing."

I was unaware of the important purpose Adam served in being the repository of all the disowned parts of myself. As I reflect on this responsible, logical, intelligent, efficient role I was playing, it becomes apparent how out of character as a younger of two sisters was my behavior according to the prototypes Toman (1969) describes. Likewise,

Adam, as the oldest of three brothers was functioning more like a youngest. I remember, in my bitterest moments, feeling as though my husband's entire family had deceived me. They all knew these many secrets about Adam's defective functioning, and had purposely hidden them so as to have him off their hands! It was not until recently that I realized that I had been looking for someone to take care of me (not so out of character for a youngest), and had felt cheated and foiled when the "oldest" I chose refused to fit the plan. I berated his immaturity—his not having grown up to take care of me (I shudder to think where I would be if I had managed to hook up with an individual who would have agreed to make my decisions, handle things for me, and take care of me.) Rather than differentiating from my extended family, I seemed to be attempting to transfer that lack of differentiation into the relationship with Adam, to attempt to fuse with him—and he re-fused.

The marital system, of course, was homeostatic. The more cautious I was with money, the more foolhardy Adam seemed to be in his spending, and vice versa. The tidier I attempted to be, the sloppier he became. The more responsible I was, the more irresponsible he seemed to be. I could see no way out. Although I had attempted, on numerous occasions, to be less tidy or less responsible, the motivating force was anger and revenge, with no clear understanding of the part my behavior played in keeping the system going. I feared that unbalancing the system would create a runaway. If I were to spend money more freely, along with Adam, we would be ruined financially. I did not understand balance, homeostasis, or deviation amplifications (Hoffman 1971). As I view it now, Adam and I both had our doubts about our capabilities of handling our lives on our own. As he gave indication of his self-doubts (something I was not free enough to do openly), my own self-doubts would begin. I would work extremely hard and efficiently to counter my own doubts, but only succeeded in further stimulating Adam's doubts about his capabilities and, at the same time, stimulated feelings in myself of being overworked and abused. In my anger and resentment, I would chide Adam for his lack of hard work, which created the necessity for my overwork. He would then further doubt his own capabilities, as well as become angry at my nagging and, of course, behave even less responsibly. I would work harder and more efficiently, and so on. We continued to trigger emotions in each other and to reinforce, unwittingly, behaviors we objected to (see Fig. 5-1).

When the tension in this whole sequence would become too great,

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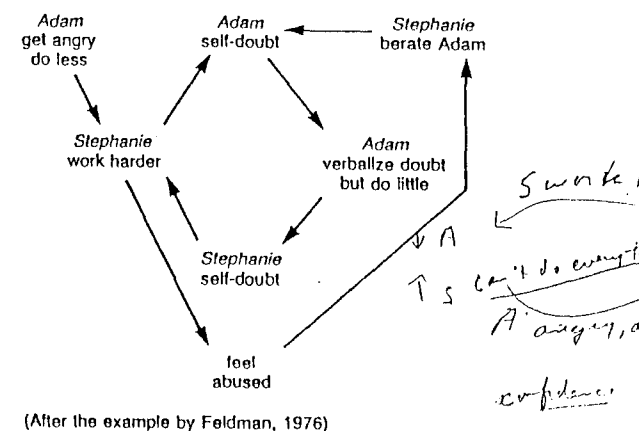


Figure 5-1. Performance of the clowns.

or stress external to the marriage impinged, Adam would often suffer a breakdown of some physiological system—he was even less able to carry on his responsibilities, and I would attempt to pick up more of his functions. In these cases, however, much of the affect involved went underground, since, after all, Adam *was* suffering physically and even I am loath to berate under such circumstances. It reminds me of Stephen Sondheim's "Send in the Clowns."\*

Isn't it rich?  
 Are we a pair?  
 Me here at last on the ground  
 You in mid-air.

Where are the clowns?  
 Isn't it bliss?  
 Don't you approve?  
 One who keeps tearing around  
 One who can't move.

Where are the clowns?  
 Send in the clowns.

\*From *A Little Night Music*. Copyright © 1973, 1987 Riltling Music, Inc., and Revelation Music Publishing Corp. International copyright secured. A Tommy Valando Publication.

Now it seems incredible to me that I was unable to see the similarity of my behavior to that of my mother (also a youngest), which I had resented for many years. In fact, the issue that initially encouraged me to join the family course was on my own difficulty with my mother's accusations that I showed little responsibility and love toward her and my father. Having joined the extended family group and presented my family system, the tremendous desperation, depression, and anger I had felt about the issues with my mother seemed miraculously to dissipate, while at the same time the ongoing conflict in my marriage heightened. Of course, I felt there was no relationship between the two; the shift of feelings was coincidental.

### MARITAL MOVES — "GETTING MY HAIR LOVED OFF"

Since the tension was high in the marital relationship, my work began there. With the support of the extended family group, I was able again to attempt to stop filling the role of the person to worry about bills, see that things borrowed were returned, take care of obligations for gifts and letters to grandparents and parents, attempt to keep the house organized, and generally be practical. This time I was committed to maintaining this new stance for however long was necessary, not out of revenge, but in order to get in touch with these aspects of myself as well as allow room for the responsible, logical, practical characteristics of Adam to show themselves. The steps I took involved changes that individually seemed inconsequential, but which en masse began to get the message across that I simply wouldn't—rather, couldn't—handle all these functions any longer. For me, to present the image of being unable to cope, and really get in touch with my inadequacies initially caused feelings of panic and shame (the latter rampant in our family). In time, however, and not too long at that, I felt as though a great weight had been lifted from me—a real freeing up—a certain relaxation, of which I was actually proud. It had never occurred to me that I would one day find pleasure in my own "frailties." During an argument with Adam I began to let go and act berserk, which I had often felt the impulse to do, but had been unable to fit in between my logical arguments. I ran up and down our hall, slamming my fists into the wall and crying hysterically. The anger seemed to be as much at myself as at the situation, for somehow, in that argument, something "clicked" for me in a new way, and I became aware in one overwhelming rush of how I had contributed to the state of our marriage and, much more,

how I had treated Adam and what type of person I had been. From that point on, the changes came somewhat more easily.

I needed to establish myself as an individual differentiated from Adam and to detriangle myself from all the attempts of others to get me to be responsible for him. I informed Adam's parents that I no longer was able to handle letter writing and that, although I enjoyed their letters, they would receive no more from Pittsburgh unless they could encourage Adam to write. I ordered some lamps I had wanted for a long time, bought myself a few things without consulting Adam (something he never demanded or wanted anyway), and began to look into the cost of going on a vacation by myself (Adam was unemployed at the time—a furloughed pilot for a small charter company). I began to let dishes and dust pile up, doing them when I felt like it, and taking more time just to enjoy myself (Bowen 1971).

As messages began to come in from family members, particularly Adam's parents, about things I should remind Adam about or things I should see that he got done, I declined, saying that I realized my mental health was failing and since I was having a difficult enough time coping with myself, it was "every man for himself." Adam's parents were startled, even mildly annoyed, but very concerned about me, and quickly redirected their messages to him. In accord with their style, though, there was little reaction if he failed to follow through on tasks he offered to complete, information he planned to obtain for them, letters he promised to write. They humorously mentioned such things, but there was no discord, no shame, as I had been used to in my family. My inner reaction was anger, for their part in creating such an irresponsible person (plus envy for having parents who always treat one with respect). My overt response was to write to Adam's mother, expressing admiration for her ability to stay off Adam's back, lamenting my own nagging behavior, and requesting advice on how to be more like her. The message filtered down to Adam's youngest brother (aided by a letter I wrote telling him of my difficulty in coping lately), who wrote him a letter urging him to look more vigorously for a job (something I had *not* been worried about!). This same brother wrote to the middle brother, chiding him for not being more responsible in visiting his parents, a battle cry which Adam quickly picked up, putting him in the role of keeping someone else responsible! When I *did* feel like writing letters to Adam's grandmothers, I did so for me with news only about me. Initially, I planned rather illogical, impractical, irresponsible things to do, but once I freed up those aspects of myself, planning was quite unnecessary. I knew I had made progress when

Adam told me one day—in no uncertain terms—how stupid some action of mine was, and we both stopped short and dissolved in laughter (Bowen 1971). Being me, being real, was not shameful and not devastating.

In essence, the message from my family had been: "You cannot be a good person if you do not do everything right. If you do anything wrong, you shall feel very ashamed." Adam's family, on the other hand, promoted the view that "no matter what you do, you are a good person; it doesn't matter that there is a lot you probably can't handle—do not distress yourself; you (we) can't handle distress."

There are many signposts by which I measure the changes in my functioning and the reverberations in my relationship. Things improved, I became pregnant, and I was able during the pregnancy to let myself be taken care of (at least a little). I was able to trust and depend on Adam as my Lamaze coach during the difficult delivery of our son. Adam and I are both involved in the care of our son, Jed, as well as household and financial management, without which I would not be able to coordinate my career, our home, and parenting. In fact, we work together as a team in a more satisfying and effective manner than I had imagined possible. In the fall of 1977 I made the decision, monumental for me, to cut back to part-time employment. It meant that I would be the one throwing a crimp in our budget and that I would depend largely on Adam for our financial support (he changed jobs frequently and had been unemployed for a total of 16 months during recent years). In addition, as I began the second draft of this very chapter, Adam was asked to resign from his job because of financial cutbacks by his employer. When a friend questioned whether I would return to a full-time schedule and I realized the thought had never even occurred to me, I knew I had come a long way.

### EXTENDED FAMILY — "THE ORIGINS OF IT ALL"

The work in my extended family has been much more difficult for me (see Fig. 5-2). The issue of responsibility that emerged in my marriage needed, predictably, to be traced to its origins in my extended family, where the distinction was never clearly made between being responsible to others and being responsible for others. In my family, being "responsible" often meant taking on the responsibility (whether or not it was requested) for doing another's thinking, feeling, speaking, and decision-making rather than being defined as meeting one's own

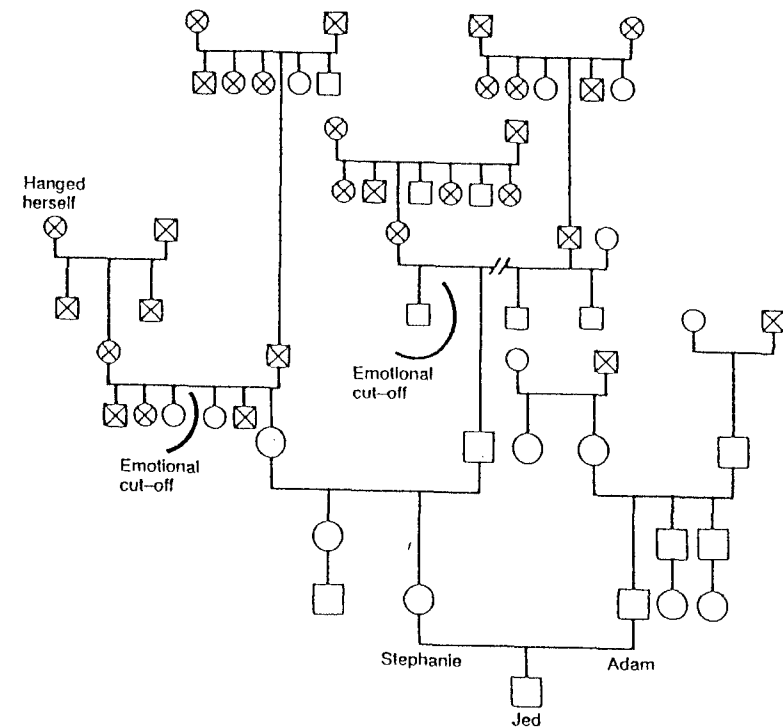


Figure 5-2. Family diagram.

needs, setting one's own goals, and accepting the consequences of one's own actions or lack of action. Conflicts between individuals, in which one appeared to be the one who is "doing the right thing" (i.e. responsible) and the other appeared to be the "neglectful, selfish" one (i.e., irresponsible) were frequent in my family. These conflicts were overtly between my mother and one of her children or between my mother and one of either her or my father's sibs, and they centered on responsibility toward one's mother. There was no overt discord between my parents—as there was in my marriage—around the issue of responsibility, despite the fact that my mother is, as I was, "responsible." The operating principle in my parents' marriage was "Never present your spouse in anything but a very positive light, particularly with the children." It is apparent that for my parents the arena for conflict was with sibs and offspring, not spouse; while I seemed to react in

the direction of preserving the relationship with sibs and offspring (this, until recently, in fantasy), opting for marital discord and spouse dysfunction (Bowen 1971). It occurs to me that the mode of dealing with one's immaturity may demonstrate predictable shifts from one generation to the next in reaction to the effects of the mode used in the previous generation. I have not yet explored this issue back to my grandparents' generation in my plodding efforts to differentiate.

Both of my parents were the sibs in their generation most devoted to the theme "Do not abandon your mother." In the early years of their marriage, both mothers-in-law took up residence with my parents. The exact details of these decisions are unclear, but I understand the major aspects to be: (1) other sibs of my parents were not eager to have their mother live with them; (2) my parents each felt responsible to have their mother live with them; (3) my parents each felt responsible to their spouse's mother, and (4) "one does not abandon one's mother." This theme seems likely, in my mother's family, to have had some relation to my maternal grandmother, for as a child of preschool age she had discovered her mother after she had hanged herself. I don't recall my grandmother's discussing this experience, but its impact may be assumed to have been great. My mother and father lived with my maternal grandparents for a time early in their marriage, and next door for another period; they often took my grandparents with them when they went out. When my grandfather died, my grandmother came to live with my parents, at my mother's request. My grandfather had often commented that upon his death, my grandmother *would* live with my parents.

My paternal grandfather was a colonel in the U.S. Army, and was transferred frequently. My father, therefore, moved often as a child, and while my grandfather went on ahead to his new position, my grandmother and her sons (my father was the middle child) stayed behind and fended for themselves. The message I always heard clearly about those days from my father was that my grandmother depended on "the boys" quite a bit to handle things; further, his older brother was not too dependable in this regard, leaving my father as the next oldest and therefore responsible for managing things. An anecdote I often heard concerned my grandmother calling the three boys for some help, with one running right, one running left, and my father remaining standing in the middle and thus the one who inevitably ended up doing whatever was to be done. My paternal grandmother came to live with us when finances became difficult for her some years after my grandparents became divorced. An interesting side-light here is that

my paternal grandparents were divorced for several months without informing their children. My father, in high school at the time, was enlightened when he went to visit his father for the summer. (I discovered this in gathering information for my extended family work.)

There were years of bitter arguing between my mother and both her and my father's sibs (while my father largely observed) over the care of their mothers. The arguing seemed to consist mostly of my mother's attempting to berate the sibs' lack of responsibility and effort, and her own feelings of being overworked and abused. There were three total family cut-offs and one partial cut-off that eventually resulted at least in part, from this issue (see family diagram, Fig. 5-2). My mother's oldest sister and her only brother, as well as my father's older brother, dissociated themselves from my family completely. My father's younger brother continued to argue and occasionally distance himself, but has remained affiliated with the family. I now see a strong need to reconnect with these cut-off relatives; however, my first efforts were in my relationships with my parents.

Crises arose in my extended family when I attempted to make what appeared to be fairly typical moves, such as deciding to go to college, accepting an offer to live free of charge on campus as a college senior, considering reconfirmation in my husband's church, and making plans for allotting time with in-laws on trips home. As I attempted to make each of these "crisis" moves, I always wanted—and expected—my parents to be pleased with my decisions. They never were, at least overtly. I was always subjected to a harangue from my mother, while my father quietly listened, never disagreeing with her. His philosophy was that she knew what was best for "you girls," clearly leaving her responsible for us. My mother labeled each decision as a direct move against her, which indicated my lack of concern for her. I always reacted to this, initially by trying to explain logically to her how her perceptions were inaccurate, and then with quickly rising anger to match her emotionality. She made absurd statements and accusations, which I found intolerable. When the extended family group questioned why statements had to be true and logical, I couldn't answer. What else was there? She periodically threatened to forbid me ever to return home and generally stated she would "never forgive" me. I never thought to question what that meant. My mother did, however, become the recipient of the resentment of my sister and myself, since she was the disciplinarian and the tier of the apron strings as we tried to separate. I never perceived that she was representing my father as well as herself, and that some of the bitterness I felt belonged

to him for giving all such responsibility to her and for not helping tone her down when her "responsibility" nearly overwhelmed me.

### THE PARENTAL TRIANGLE – MOVING IN TO MOVE OUT

All along I had felt so stuck, so unable to do freely what I thought best in my life. I was well into my extended family work when I realized that although I felt so "in" I would never get out, my parents viewed me as so "out" they would never be able to get me back in. It had not occurred to me that in spite of the harassment involved with most moves I wanted to make, I had always made them. How would my mother know I had always heard her? She didn't, and she spoke more frequently and more intensely with each new decision I made. I needed to (1) reverse the process and do less of the adamant proclaiming of my separateness from her and (2) establish more extensive individual relationships with each of my parents rather than have my mother be the hub of communication (Bowen 1974).

Among my first steps were attempts to stand back and observe the sequence of interactions, program some neutral statements to help me through generally emotionally reactive times, and get out of the bind of needing to be logical. Although I had feared the predictable reaction from my parents, "You're not much of a psychologist; you need one yourself," I was much less reactive than I thought I would be, particularly following my self-awareness in the marital work I had done. (Evidently my message of not being able to cope was getting across. There were no expressions of concern from my parents—just accusations.)

I began to ask my mother advice more often, let her know more of the internal emotional turmoil I experienced, and attempted to draw my father into discussions in a more active way.

### FAMILY FLOW – BIRTH AND DEATH

In the two following years there occurred major events that provided opportunities to continue the above-mentioned efforts:

Spring 1975	Issue of reconfirmation raised—attempt to put the issue of religious differences back between my parents
March 1976	Announcement of my pregnancy

April 1976	Father's first heart attack
October 1977	Birth of first child (Jed)
March 1977	Father's second heart attack
May 1977	Father's death

When the issue of my reconfirmation in my husband's church emerged, my mother saw my in-laws as having won some ground in the competition for "best-liked in-laws." She saw the reconfirmation as a move against her and her church, and began making comments and asking questions about how Adam's mother would react if she were "treated" similarly. I detriangled here (Bowen 1974) by passing the questions along to my mother-in-law and requesting she answer them, since I was at a loss to do so (and wanted to be out of the position of being responsible for answering for everyone). I passed on to my husband all the accusations my mother made about his tearing me away from her and controlling my life. These were the sorts of statements I would formerly have kept to myself, hoping that others would not be aware of how illogical my mother could be. I was no longer responsible for her behavior. She was busily trying to convince me that I was not responsible for my own—Adam, or the church, or friends were controlling my mind. I did not reconfirm, hoping that for once my mother would become aware of her influence on me. I admitted my gullibility and admired her ability to "see things so clearly." I requested she not try to cut the apron strings from me too fast.

As for the issue of religious differences, I decided to put it back with my parents, where it belonged. My father, a disenchanting Catholic, and my mother, a part-time overtly practicing Lutheran, never resolved the issue of religious differences between themselves. My father left the church and declared himself an atheist, and my mother sent my sister and me to Lutheran Sunday school. Whenever I approached my father about his religious beliefs, he would respond briefly and factually, and my mother would write to tell me to let him alone, since he wished not to talk about religion; then she would go on to tell me what God and she wanted for my life. I remember remarking in an extended family group session, that I had convened for some help in dealing with this issue, that my father would rather have a heart attack than deal with my mother on an important issue such as this. A few weeks later, I announced my pregnancy and he had his first heart attack. I am not relating these as causal connections, but I am noting that they coincide.

The pregnancy was a time during which I had many opportunities

to move into my family of origin. My feeling was that my pregnancy was more difficult for my father to accept than for my mother, and that he saw it as an indication of my increasing separation from *him*, in particular, and of my decreasing need for him. When my father heard of my pregnancy, he had little to say. My mother questioned him about his silence, and he said he wasn't eager to be a grandfather; but he would not elaborate. My parents arrived to "celebrate" the next day, and my father's greeting was to hug me and smilingly (?) say, "You traitor." It was then that I recalled his continuous "joking" as I dated, questioning why I would want to marry when I could stay home with him. He had shown he loved and enjoyed my husband throughout our courtship and our seven years of marriage. I felt that perhaps the baby signified physical separation from him and uniting with another male, and this would be too difficult for him to accept. I began a campaign during my pregnancy of letting my father know how much I still needed him—admitting my ambivalence about being pregnant and my fears about parenting, opening up the topic of "how does one define being a 'good parent'." My father, predictably, did not answer my letters, but evidently he had my mother read them (as she always shared with him my letters to her), for she generally responded to the issues raised. One year later, as my father and I were dealing with his impending death following his second heart attack, we had the opportunity to compare notes of his fathering, his regrets and my perceptions.

As other family members were busily talking with my father about how he *was* going to recover, my learning to be less responsible to others and more to myself, allowed me to speak directly to him about the possibility of dying, my fears about how I would manage without him, and my sadness. Arranging time alone with him was a major challenge, not only because of the policy of the intensive care unit, which allowed only fifteen minutes of family visitation once every three hours, but also because it made my mother very anxious. She had difficulty tolerating not being privy to our conversations and seemed threatened by my irresponsibility in not saying "the right things" to my father. I was able to arrange time alone with him, however, through letters, telephone calls, early-morning trips to the hospital while other family members were still sleeping, and a "God-send" of a trip to visit by myself.

A few weeks after my father's second heart attack (and six months after the birth of my son), I was overwhelmed by a last attempt at maintaining my position of responsibility. I felt as though I were doing nothing well, not having enough time for my son, or my husband, or

our first "child" (a German shepherd); not doing my job or my house-keeping and homemaking well—there just was not enough time. None of these victims complained, though, and that bothered me too. A consultation about my family helped me put my feeling of lack of time back where it belonged, with my father. I accepted the advice given me to go back home, minus husband and child, to spend time with him. My father died one week later. In the past I would never have done such an "irresponsible" thing, making a trip without planning ahead, with no connections, creating further trouble with our budget, and leaving an "undependable" husband to care for the baby for a week-end. (It is interesting to note here that my solitary arrival, unannounced, late at night, evoked fantasies in my father that I had separated from Adam and "come home." His response was to be glad that he still had the house, with a room for me.)

## FAMILY CONFLICT: AN ILLUSTRATION

The specific circumstance that prompted my interest in extended family work illustrates most of the issues mentioned and the differentiating techniques used over the course of my work.

There were, for years, annual Christmas battles between my mother and me over the allotment of time spent with each set of in-laws. Despite all our neurotic efforts to see that all were fairly treated, often involving over-compensating by giving my mother more time, my husband and I were generally accused by my mother of not thinking enough of her feelings, not doing enough with both my parents, and, finally, with giving Adam's parents "prime time" (better hours)! Generally, the questions would begin some weeks before Christmas: "Where are you going to sleep when you come home?"; "how many nights with 'them'?"; "where will you eat meals?"; "who will you go to church with?," etc. On one plane trip home with both families meeting our plane, my mother looked at me, almost demanding "who will you hug first—her or me?" The issue "whose car will you ride in from the airport to the house" was blatantly discussed. In all the situations, my mother would raise the issues and argue the points while my father listened, saying essentially nothing, my in-laws making it known that whatever we did, they would support. No matter what we planned, my mother would find something that displeased her, and on Christmas Eve she would snifle in the kitchen over how we had "hurt" her,



would get quite cold toward us, or comment on our behavior, to which I would react with rage.

The issue of church attendance was particularly troublesome for me. My mother, who seldom attended church while I was growing up, berated my husband and me for attending church with my in-laws rather than with her on Christmas Eve. She would have no one to go to church with, since my father would not attend. Rather than dealing with him about this, the responsibility (which I always "shirked") fell to me to accompany her. My sister was spared this, since she chose never to arrive in town until Christmas morning. I did not want to lay on someone else the guilt my mother laid on me (and I certainly did not want to recreate the cut-offs with sibs that occurred in my mother's family); thus I never tried to enlist my sister in taking some of the heat. Directly approaching the issue of my father accompanying my mother generally resulted in further harangues from my mother concerning my lack of respect and her policy of never forcing my father to do anything against his wishes. Somehow, I could not simply do what I thought best and ignore her reaction. I responded not with guilt, but with anger that her attitude destroyed any Christmas spirit I arrived with. I experienced little anger with my father for not helping me out in all this. On a few occasions, when I tried to get him to take a stand, he would noncommittally say both "you have to do what you think best" and "your mother knows what is best for you, girls." On some occasions he would make a more pointed remark, such as, "If they don't want to come around, I wouldn't coax them."

Having learned about triangles in the extended family course, I tried a number of techniques to extricate myself from this triangle. I suggested to both mothers that they get together to plan our schedule, since we seemed to do such a poor job of it. My mother declined, indicating this was my responsibility, not hers. Adam's mother was confused, since she thought we were managing our time adequately. Adam became anxious with this suggestion. He had picked up my concern about how illogical my mother is in discussion of such things and wanted to protect his mother, since "she wasn't complaining" anyway. One Christmas I did nothing about the scheduling and let Adam handle all of it. I redirected to Adam any question, from either family, concerning arrangements. Adam's family, again, was confused, but was becoming accustomed to my taking responsibility no-longer and said little. My mother, of course, saw this as further evidence of my lack of concern for her, since I was not going to "fight for her side." I wrote a letter requesting advice from my father on how to stay out of

the middle and how to improve my success in getting others to make plans. Of course, he didn't respond. I, like my in-laws with my husband, would make humorous responses about his not following through, but put no pressure on him. I knew I was making some progress, when two years later (Christmas of 1976) Adam and my mother were the "Christmas Eve arguers" while I stayed upstairs. When my mother attempted to pull me into the argument (asking why I was not supporting her and how I could let my husband say "such things" to her), I directed her back to Adam, pointing out that I did not control his behavior.

That was to be my father's last Christmas, and for the first time I experienced real annoyance with him for having such a "humbug" attitude and dampening Christmas spirit. I never realized in my push for "spirit" that he was, perhaps, dealing with his own approaching death. In spite of the similar efforts I was involved in, I did not expect his death to occur so soon. The overriding emotion I experienced with regard to that Christmas was sadness, not anger, as I finally recognized that I had been trying year after year to fit my parents into my expectations, and they were never going to fit. I entered the first Christmas without my father, with few expectations other than that it would be sad without him. I was determined not to be concerned about Christmas spirit, to deal with whatever occurred, and of course, the holiday progressed with ease. My mother made few comments about our behavior, and I was not reactive to those she did make. Although my mother and in-laws spent all of Christmas day together, I did not feel drawn into my usual position of helping my mother feel and appear comfortable in the presence of my overconfident mother-in-law.

## CLOSING REMARKS — THE BEAT GOES ON

There have been changes in my extended family system. Most notably, the tension between my mother and myself has lessened. I have put much thought into trying to understand the relationship between the work in my nuclear family and that in my family of origin. It seems to me that I grew up with the threat that any acknowledgment of irresponsibility towards one's mother (abandonment of her) could result in abandonment by her and, therefore, I learned very early on not to acknowledge or accept irresponsible aspects of myself. It is not difficult to conceive of this as projection through two generations of the theme of "abandonment of and by mothers" relating to my maternal great-