

## **If Dealing with the Resistance is the Key to the Kingdom, What is the Kingdom?**

A summary of a recent workshop presentation by Lawrence Matthews

"Leaders endure two different kinds of crises. One has little to do with their own functioning ... The second type of crisis, however, is precipitated by the leader's own leadership - it is not due to failure or incompetence but to his or her success at self-differentiation. ... It is simply not possible to succeed at the effort of leadership through self-differentiation without triggering reactivity ... the capacity of a leader to be prepared for, to be aware of, and to learn how to skillfully deal with this type of crisis ... may be the most important aspect of leadership. It is literally the key to the kingdom. " (Edwin Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, pp. 246, 247).

I remember hearing Ed Friedman use this phrase on a number of occasions: "Dealing with the resistance is the key to the kingdom." When I first heard it, I was reminded of the biblical concept of the kingdom of God, but Ed often insisted that he was not a theologian. Thinking theory instead of theology, did he mean by 'the kingdom' any particular goal toward which a leader was moving? Although I never asked him to define 'kingdom', his frequent use of this metaphor underlined for me its importance in his thinking. When I found it repeated in two different places in *A Failure of Nerve* (pp.186, 247), his book on leadership published after his death, I became even more interested in searching for its possible meaning.

I began my search by focusing upon the core concept of his mentor, Murray Bowen: the process of differentiating a self. In his Epilogue to Michael Kerr's book, *Family Evaluation*, Bowen includes this statement: "The concept of 'differentiation of self' and its companion concept, 'the emotional system' are essential in family systems theory" (p. 342). Friedman often underscored the centrality of this key Bowen Family Systems Theory (BFST) concept in his thinking by saying, "In every situation I'm encouraging differentiation. It's an all purpose anti-biotic." He defined differentiation as "... the capacity to become oneself out of one's self with minimum reactivity to the positions or reactivity of others (i.e., while staying connected to the others)." (*Failure of Nerve*, p.183)

Bowen was a psychiatrist and his teaching about differentiation of self was usually within the context of his therapeutic work with individuals and families. But he also related it to leadership when he referred to the 'family leader.' In his Epilogue to *Family Evaluation*, he writes: "Operationally, ideal family treatment begins when one can find a family leader with the courage to define self, ..." (p.342). He applied the concept also to his own leadership functioning during his years at the Georgetown University Medical Center's Department of Psychiatry. "The focus was always on self instead of the other. This was used constantly in all

administrative systems. When there was conflict or disharmony in the work system at Georgetown, it simply meant that self had played a part, and if self modified his part, the others would automatically change their part" (p.373).

A major focus of Friedman's writing and teaching was the application of the concept of differentiation to leadership. He coined the term 'leadership through self-differentiation' to describe his way of understanding leadership when viewed through the lens of Bowen Theory. He taught that there are four characteristics of such leadership: (1) self-regulation and (2) self-definition while (3) staying connected and (4) dealing with the resistance. According to him, all four dimensions are essential to this understanding. Persons in the leader ('L') position in any setting (any 'emotional system') need to regulate their own anxiety and feelings so as not to be determined by them. They need to know what their beliefs and values are, as well as their leadership goals. They then need to express these clearly, as necessary dimensions of their self-definition not attempts to coerce or manipulate others. They need to stay connected if they are to affect their system. And, ultimately, they will have to deal with the resistance; the reactivity created by their more self-differentiated functioning. **Resistance** surfaces as either easily recognizable **sabotage** or the often unrecognized - but powerful because it feels so good - **seduction**. He taught that this fourth task is the ultimate test of anyone who attempts to lead through self-differentiation - often by using the phrase, "Dealing with the resistance is the key to the kingdom."

I think I understand Friedman's emphasis upon the need to deal with ('respond to rather than react to') the resistance. But the question remains: what did he mean by 'the kingdom'? I make no claim to have the final answer, but I have come to understand it as his attempt to lead us to an even deeper understanding of leadership through self-differentiation. Leadership, understood this way, really is about "self": the self of the leader. **Dealing with the resistance is the ultimate reality check for the leader because it is the resistance that threatens the leader's process of differentiation.**

I no longer think the 'kingdom' metaphor refers to the so-called success or failure that is a by-product of a leader's functioning. I don't think it's about the leader reaching his or her goals for the system or defeating the opposition or winning the vote or keeping the job or any other external achievement. For the leader who understands leadership in this way, the life-long journey of differentiating a self **is** the 'kingdom'. And dealing with the resistance the leader encounters along the way, without compromising or abandoning this basic goal, is the key that unlocks the door. Leadership, understood in this way, is about presence. And presence is

about 'self' – an understanding that I believe has an important theological dimension that is a subject for another time.

To summarize: in my opinion, Ed Friedman's unique and lasting contribution is simply his profound application of Bowen's core concept of differentiation of self to the functioning position within systems that we call 'leadership.'