# SELF AND LEADERSHIP

## A Summary of and Engagement with
## Edwin Friedman's
## *A Failure of Nerve*

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# Introduction

When I first read Edwin H. Friedman's *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, I wasn't expecting much. Having never had high expectations of books on the subject of leadership, I was surprised to discover that Friedman's book was brilliantly perceptive and widely relevant. Perhaps, in a culture where we are being brought so close together that it is increasingly difficult to retain any differentiation, it has never been more relevant.

This booklet started its life as a series of six blog posts, which summarized and briefly engaged with Friedman's book. It is best read alongside the book itself. The relevant pages of the book are typically placed in parentheses.

*Alastair J. Roberts*

# 1

## How Societies Become Imaginatively Gridlocked, and How This Can Be Overcome

Edwin H. Friedman's *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* is a provocative, stimulating, and eminently quotable book which challenges much popular wisdom along the way. It concerns itself with the crisis of leadership in America civilization, which he characterizes as a 'failure of nerve'. This crisis of leadership is found throughout American civilization, in national, state, and local politics, in the legal system, in schools, businesses, and in families, which receive particularly close attention.

This crisis is exacerbated by many of the ways in which we seek to tackle our social problems. For instance, data is valued over maturity, technique over stamina, and empathy over personal responsibility. In Friedman's understanding, the leadership crisis arises from a conceptual and emotional dimensions hindering progress and encouraging 'regression'.

Where many focus on the 'social science construction of reality' in their understanding of such issues, focusing on the personalities and psychologies of individuals, or on their sociological and anthropological 'niche' (gender, race, ethnicity, income, class, etc.), Friedman sees this approach as tending to contribute to, rather than alleviate our problems. For Friedman the crucial issues are things that all groups and their members share in common, in particular the tension between the 'forces for self and togetherness; the reciprocal, adaptive, compensatory functioning by the partners to any relationship; and the evolutionary consequences of self-differentiation for both that individual and other members of his or her community' (4).

Friedman's belief that universal emotional processes are the key to understanding leadership arises from his extensive experience with a broad range of different forms of leadership, communities, and relationships in different contexts, in families, religious and educational institutions, business, politics, etc.

Friedman attacks the manner in which organizations primarily adapt themselves to their most dependent, recalcitrant, and anxious members, rather than to 'the energetic, the visionary, the imaginative, and the motivated' (12). He argues that the devaluation of the important of self-differentiation as the key to leadership is the origin of many of our problems in the area, causing leaders to depend more upon their 'expertise' than on their capacity to be decisive. More technique and data

won't solve problems that arise from embedded emotional processes. A failure to understand the manner in which these processes operate causes us to believe that they can be resolved or regulated 'through reasonableness, love, insight, role-modeling, inculcation of values, and striving for consensus.'

In Friedman's extensive experience, the crucial factor that distinguished families that flourished through crisis and those who failed was the presence of a '*well-differentiated leader*'. Friedman seeks to show that strength lies in 'presence' rather than 'method', 'to enable leaders to avoid trying to instill insight into the unmotivated', show the unhelpfulness of leadership concepts such as 'role-modeling', 'emulation', and 'identification', and how self-differentiation 'can make the dependency of the unimaginative and the recalcitrant work for instead of against them' (26).

## Imaginative Gridlock

The first chapter of *A Failure of Nerve* presents the case of Europe at the end of the 15th century as an example of a society that was emotional regressed and struck in imaginative gridlock. However, the next half century witnessed a complete transformation, and a virtually unprecedented degree of change and progress, not a mere continuation of existing processes, but a quantum leap, or 'punctuated equilibrium'. While many attribute this cultural rebirth to a renewed interest in learning, Friedman questions this, arguing that it was primarily a shift in

emotional rather than cognitive processes that gave rise to the transformation: 'Imagination and indeed even curiosity are at root emotional, not cognitive, phenomena' (31). Friedman believes that it was the discovery of the New World, rather than learning, that awakened Europe's inventiveness and threw open its imaginative horizons.

Using this transformation of European culture as an allegory, Friedman aims to show that

> Any renaissance, anywhere, whether in a marriage or a business, depends primarily not only on new data and techniques, but on the capacity of leaders to separate themselves from the surrounding emotional climate so that they can break through the barriers that are keeping everyone from "going the other way." (33)

The imaginatively gridlocked system will be characterized by a continual treadmill of trying harder, 'driven by the assumption that failure is due to the fact that one did not try hard enough, use the right technique, or get enough information' (35). This overlooks the possibility that 'thinking processes themselves are stuck and imagination gridlocked, not because of cognitive strictures in the minds of those trying to solve a problem, but because of emotional processes within the wider relationship system.' This is illustrated by Europe's fixation on finding routes to the East (to the extent that the large land mass of America was perceived by many to be 'in the way'),

and its failure to see the great possibilities that were open to it on account of this treadmill.

The imaginatively gridlocked system is also characterized by a 'continual search for new answers to old questions rather than an effort to reframe the questions themselves' (37). 'Innovations are new answers to old questions; paradigm shifts reframe the question, change the information that is important, and generally eliminate previous dichotomies.' The concern to find the right answer to an unquestioned question results from and contributes to a fixed orientation and keeps one on the treadmill. For pre-1500 Europe, this can be illustrated by the 'locked-horns' relationship with the Moors that prevented Europe from realizing 'that by going in the opposite direction, it had found more than it was looking for' (39).

The third key characteristic of the imaginatively gridlocked system is 'either/or, black-or-white, all-or-nothing ways of thinking'. Friedman maintains that 'such intense polarizations also are always symptomatic of underlying emotional processes rather than of the subject matter of the polarizing issue.' The capacity of differences to polarize owes more to the emotional processes operative in a context than to the differences themselves. This 'either/or' way of thinking led to a European debate over whether it was 3000 or 10000 miles from Europe to Japan. The third possibility—that there was another piece of land in between—was missed by many, less on account of ignorance than on

account of the emotional processes that sustain such polarized thinking (40).

Friedman draws attention to the manner in which explorers of this era of Europe's history broke 'emotional barriers', barriers that had locked people into certain ways of imagining, thinking, and acting. The relationship between risk and reality is crucial to the reorientation process. He highlights 'three facets of the discovery process'. First, when the quest is an 'open-ended search' for novelty and adventure, rather than certainty and 'a driven pursuit of truth', mistakes cease to be such a problem. Second, there is a valuing, rather than a fear of chance and serendipity. The uncertain and unexpected is to be welcomed. Finally, there is a will to overcome emotional and imaginative barriers – beliefs 'born of mythology and kept in place by anxiety', which exert a primarily dissuasive force. The equator was one such barrier for 15th century Europeans.

Friedman identifies three emotional barriers that prevent true leadership in our own day: 1. the belief that data is more important to leadership than the capacity to be decisive; 2. the belief that empathy for others will make them more responsible; 3. the belief 'that selfishness is a greater danger to a community than the loss of integrity that comes from having no self' (49).

### *The Goal of the Work*

Friedman concludes by sketching the reorientation that he wishes to accomplish in our thinking through his book (50).

- Imagination is emotional, rather than cerebral
- Anxiety is between people, rather than in the mind
- The capacity to be decisive is more important than being as informed as possible
- We should foster 'responsibility for one's own being and destiny' over feelings, sensitivity, and rights
- Rather than being a selfishness that destroys community, a leader's well-defined self is essential to the integrity of the community
- Reality is about relationship, rather than the nature of things and we should focus on differentiating self, rather than motivating others
- Stress results from one's position in relational triangles, rather than hard work
- Crisis and sabotage can be signs of success
- The past resides in the present and isn't merely a prelude to it

Friedman's position is provocative and daring. It will ruffle the feathers of many, perhaps especially on the left of the political spectrum. It raises a number of questions, some of which Friedman addresses at later points in the book. Already one might be wondering,

for instance, to what extent Friedman's approach might commit him to a 'Great Man theory' of history, and might have questions about the history that underlies his extended allegory, and whether Friedman is in part projecting what he claims to find there. Several further questions will arise as we proceed. Nevertheless, I believe that the frequently profoundly insightful and challenging nature of Friedman's approach makes it worthy of attention and interaction, perhaps even if we demur on a number of the key aspects of his thesis.

# 2

## Understanding the Chronically Anxious Society

Friedman advances the thesis that contemporary America has a climate of chronic anxiety, leading to 'an emotional regression that is toxic to well-defined leadership' (53). He points out that 'one does not need dictators in order to create a totalitarian (that is, totalistic) society.'

An emotionally regressed society or institution will put its technology at the service of its regression. It can become obsessed with data and technique in a manner that leaves its leaders incapable of recognizing the priority of the leader's own self and the emotional processes of the group. While we tend to focus on the symptoms of regression (abuse, conflict, etc.), Friedman seeks to draw attention to the emotional processes that underlie them.

### *Chronic Anxiety*

To understand these emotional processes, Friedman employs the family therapy theories of Dr Murray Bowen. Rather than trying to understand families in terms of their cultural, ethnic, or socio-economic distinctions, Bowen focused instead on the underlying processes that families share in common with all other groups or societies. From this perspective the most critical thing for any society or family is how well they are able 'to handle the natural tension between individuality and togetherness, their ability to maintain their identity during crisis, and their capacity to produce well-differentiated leadership' (56).

In larger societies, as in families, the ability to cope can be lost as 'anxiety escalates as society is overwhelmed by the quantity and speed of change' and as 'the institutions or individuals (whether scapegoat or symptomatic) traditionally used to absorb or bind off society's anxiety are no longer available to absorb it' (57). In a family, physical and mental symptoms can begin to surface a few months after a destabilizing event. In a nation, the loss of a scapegoat community can lead to a crisis of anxiety, as the society loses its means of dealing with it. In such an anxiety-driven context, family life shrivels into an emotional regression. Society becomes increasingly undifferentiated, unimaginative, unwilling to undertake risk and hyper-reactive.

This chronic anxiety is to be distinguished from communal nervousness, existential angst, or the

'anxiety' occasioned by the economy or the threat of war. 'Chronic anxiety might be compared to the volatile atmosphere of a room filled with gas fumes, where any sparking incident could set off a conflagration, and where people would then blame the person who struck the match rather than trying to disperse the fumes' (58). The focus of chronic anxiety thus should not be confused with its cause.

This is one reason why those offering technical solutions to problems that families come to them with often fail to make lasting difference: address the manifestation of anxiety surrounding money, for instance, and it will merely relocate around sex, or children. The failure of quick-fix attitudes is that of neglecting to modify the emotional processes that underlie everything else. If technique is all that is required, the being of the consultant and their own emotional processes are unimportant, which is one reason why such an approach is so seductive. These same principles apply in business and society more generally: mere technical responses to a business' problems will generally fail to address any deeper malaise in its corporate culture.

This chronic anxiety is self-reinforcing: the greater the chronic anxiety in any community, the more oriented it will become to its symptoms, and the more likely it is to export its troubles into the wider society through violence, litigiousness, or other means. The only way out of this chronic anxiety is through a stage of acutely painful withdrawal, which is why many perpetuate the withering symptoms, rather than addressing them directly.

### *The Five Characteristics of Chronically Anxious Societies*

Chronically anxious families and societies have five key characteristics, which lead to a 'regression' that runs counter to the evolutionary principles that should guide society.

#### *Reactivity*

Instead of self-regulation, the regressed society is characterized by *reactivity*, caught in a 'vicious cycle of intense reactions of each member to events and to one another' (53). Such societies are bound together in a sort of 'feeling plasma', and each person finds their nervous system 'constantly bombarded by the emissions of everyone else's' (62). In a reactive family, communication is more characterized 'you' statements ('you are so pig-headed!', 'you are just like her!' etc., etc. – just think of the last time you caught a family argument on a tabloid talk show while flipping channels), than by self-defining 'I' statements ('this is what I believe', 'this is what I will do', etc.). In the reactive family, 'the more aggressive members are in a perpetually argumentative stance, and the more passive are in a constant state of flinch' (63). Anxiety and emotional processes spread between parties like wildfire, as there is no differentiation: 'highly reactive families are a panic in search of a trigger' (the trigger frequently being provided by the children that they become fixated upon – chronically anxious families are often child-focused families).

Such a family is almost invariably characterized by the family's inability to produce or support a leader, and by a complete loss of playfulness, as all becomes deadly earnest. Friedman sees this same reactivity within American society, where people constantly interfere with others' self-expression, react to them on a hair-trigger, take disagreement far too seriously, and 'brand the opposition with *ad hominem* personal epithets (chauvinist, ethnocentric, homophobic, and so on)' (64). Their members lack the ability to create the distance and objectivity necessary in order to be proactive.

*Herding*

Closely related to the reactive tendency, the regressive society exhibits a *herding* tendency. It will tend to 'reverse the direction of adaption toward strength, and it winds up organizing its existence around the least mature, the most dependent, or the most dysfunctional members of the "colony"' (67). In such a society people are emotionally fused in an 'undifferentiated togetherness'. In such a society, there will be a constant pressure, through threats or inducements, upon people to adapt. The alternative to this approach is *not* compromise and consensus, but the sort of healthy self-differentiation that will promote a greater degree of toleration for the differentiation of other persons. In the 'homogenized togetherness' of the regressive society, one must surrender one's self to the family's self to survive. The goal of much family counselling should be 'to help

people separate so that they do not have to "separate"' (68).

An emotionally regressive family will tend to adopt an appeasement strategy with disruptive members in order to be 'inclusive', while sabotaging those who would stand up to them. It will bend over backwards to accommodate people who are focused on their rights, rather than responsibilities, and attack the person who seeks to take an unaccommodating and self-defined position, presenting them as cruel, selfish, or insensitive. This is so predictable that being called such names is usually a sign that you are moving in the right direction.

This herding tendency cripples the leader who seeks to be decisive, which involves being willing to give things up. The rightness or wrongness of our decisions largely depends on what we do after them. However, in the emotionally regressive society the potential leader is unlikely to be able stand firm when they make a decision, so they don't tend to make them.

The adaptation of groups to their most demanding and dysfunctional members is visible in numerous areas of American society, and the preparedness to engage in appeasement and compromise with those to whom no ground should be given. This can particularly be seen in the activities of those who 'tyrannize others, especially leaders, with their "sensitivity"' (71), acting as if they were 'helplessly violated by another person's opinion'. Friedman remarks:

It has been my impression that at any gathering, whether it be public or private, those who are quickest to inject words like *sensitivity*, *empathy*, *consensus*, *trust*, *confidentiality*, and *togetherness* into their arguments have perverted these humanitarian words into power tools to get others to adapt to them.

Friedman draws attention to the manner in which this allows the chronically offended reactive members of a population to hijack the agenda of the whole society, as people rally to soothe them, rather than keeping them in line and stopping their invasiveness, a problem that is especially powerful in the context of identity politics.

*Blame Displacement*

The chronically anxious family seems to lack an immune response, and so becomes wholly focused on the outside agent, as it lacks the ability to limit its invasiveness. One aspect of this is the encouragement of blaming, rather than 'owning it'. This is seen in the focus on 'you' statements mentioned earlier: such statements displace the problem by blaming the other party and generally illustrate the anxiety, helplessness, and perhaps even 'emptiness' of the person expressing them (76). Such families will constantly blame some internal or external party or issue rather than 'own' themselves and their relationships.

This blame displacement leads to a constant focus 'on pathology rather than strength', and an inability to harness inner strengths to address weakness. Such families fail to recognize that trauma often has less to do with the crisis or 'impacting agent' than it does with the emotional processes that organize the family's life and shape its response. The mature family can grow through trauma, and broaden their repertoire of responses.

Blame displacement can be seen in such things as the anti-incumbency attitude that exists in America – the tendency to resist whoever holds office. It is 'a reactive response to the voter's own inner emptiness, personal frustration, general unhappiness, loss of hope, and feelings of helplessness' (79-80). It is also seen in the revisionist histories that rejoice to tear down the heroes of yesteryear.

Friedman questions the idea that it requires two persons working on a marriage to change it. In a marriage, a shift can occur and divorce can be avoided as one partner recognizes how their reactivity has compounded problems, stops shifting the blame, and takes responsibility for their responses. It is important to shift the criterion of counselling from 'who has/is the problem?' to 'who has the motivation to focus on strength, not weakness, and on leadership, not pathology?' (81).

### The Quick-Fix Mentality

The chronically anxious family is impatient and puts its trust in technique over maturity, believing that its

problems can be solved in a linear fashion. They have a low threshold for pain, arising from their lack of motivation to get on with life, a low threshold that drives them into the arms of people offering quick fixes. To the extent that we are motivated, our threshold for pain increases. This is important for dealing with others: 'raising our own threshold for the pain another is experiencing can often motivate the other to take more responsibility for his or her life' (85). Increased sensitivity to the feelings of others is not the solution that it is commonly presented to be. If our threshold for other people's pain is too low, we can cause their threshold for it to lower as well (counsellors' low threshold for the pain of couples can increase the possibility of their marriages failing).

Chronically anxious families need by almost invariably lack a leader who won't give into their demands. When such a leader arises, they will be unstinting in undercutting the leader's resolve. People can seldom become more mature than their leaders or mentors.

The obsession with technique and method is an aspect of our addiction to the quick-fix. This obsession has the tendency to transform professionals into hacks.

## Poorly Defined Leadership

All of the characteristics of the chronically anxious family already mentioned lead to create the poorly defined leader. The poorly defined leader is led

around by crisis, lacks the distance to gain clear vision, and is reluctant to take a clear stand. In the chronically anxious society, the leaders chosen will tend to be immature, without the capacity to resist sabotage, reactivity, and dysfunction.

Friedman remarks that, the 'single most important factor' that he has noticed in his extensive experience distinguishing families that recover from crisis from those that don't was the presence of a well-defined leader. By 'leader' he doesn't refer to someone who dictates to others, but to 'someone who can maintain the kind of non-anxious, well-principled presence' that he has described (89).

> What is always absent from chronically anxious, regressed families is a member who can get himself or herself outside of its reactive, herding, blaming, quick-fix processes sufficiently to take stands. It has to be someone who is not so much in need of approval that being called "cruel," "cold," "unfeeling," "uncooperative," "insensitive," "selfish," "strong-willed," or "hard-headed" immediately subverts their individuality.

There are many things that I would love to explore in more depth here. The relationship between the regressive society and the operation of [Girardian mimetic desire and the scapegoat mechanism](#) is definitely worth some closer attention. The same themes crop up: the scapegoat, a lack of differentiation, hyperconductivity of tension/anxiety, etc. Friedman is showing just how tightly these

Girardian themes are bound into the lives of families and societies and the means by which to overcome them (a point where Girard doesn't always paint the clearest picture).

His points about the chronically anxious and emotionally regressive character of discourse in society, and the manner in which society adapts to the most dysfunctional, pathological, and disruptive members of society raise troubling questions for liberals, given the degree to which liberal and identity politics so often exhibits or encourages the herding and blame displacement characteristics, shutting down challenge, engaging in *ad hominem*, and tyrannizing with sensitivities. Conversely, I believe that liberals have important questions to ask of Friedman. For instance, isn't Friedman's approach at risk of being blind to real questions of social justice and lack of empowerment? Also the degree to which we have the capacity to be responsible and self-defined owes a lot to forces outside of ourselves. We are not born as self-defined individuals, but become them as an achievement (and in many respects as a *social* more than as a personal achievement), one which can owe much to social factors such as education, personal space, home environment, economic independence, etc.

Finally, I think that several of the observations about regressive societies could be applied to various Christian contexts and churches, for instance. Many churches exhibit an undifferentiated togetherness, which provides a hyperconductive context for anxiety and a hyperreactive posture. The emotional process

of anxiety can be traced in the evangelical obsession with the spiritual quick fix, the obsession with theological certitude, etc.

# 3

## The Data Addiction and How to Kick the Habit

### *The Addiction to Data*

For Friedman, one of the greatest problems with modern leadership is to be found in its over-reliance upon data. Leaders who rely too heavily upon data will always end up feeling perpetually inadequate, unable to catch up or keep up to date. This 'social science construction of reality' confuses information with expertise, know-how with wisdom, change with almost anything new, and complexity with profundity' (96). Leaders can only overcome this as they appreciate that not all data is useful, and develop criteria for determining what is.

The focus on information is a product of social regression. In an age of adventure, curiosity, and discovery thinking processes aren't driven by such a fixated quest for certainty, or by such a consistent focus upon pathology. The ability of leaders to overcome the lure of data largely depends upon their

capacity to resist the anxiety of society. Friedman regards our obsession with data as a sort of substance abuse, involving all of the usual problems that come with addiction: 'self-doubt, denial, temptation, relapse, and withdrawal' (98). All forms of addiction are related to the key themes of his book: 'anxiety, lack of nerve, and poorly differentiated self' (114). Leaders are simultaneously 'overwhelmed and seduced' by data, and feel guilt that they have not used enough.

There are two facets to the myth of data and technique. The first is that, if we just knew more, we would be able to fix anything. The second is that, if we fail, it is because we didn't use the right technique.

Central to Friedman's case against data-driven leadership is the fact that emotional processes are crucial and inextricable from our thinking. He points to a few key areas where the character and effects of data and technique driven leadership can be observed.

*Medicine*

Not only does a focus upon information and data dominate medical training, data also proliferates through intake forms and their questions and on insurance forms. This focus on refined data isn't merely a reflection of the increased sophistication of scientific knowledge, but is a way of organizing one's mind 'solely in terms of data categories that omit the emotional variables that might influence a patient's

response' (101). This blinds physicians to the healing power of their own presence.

Perhaps more importantly, it directly affects the 'nerve' of patients. The data obsession focuses on pathology, inviting people to anxiety. It focuses on the body, to the exclusion of the place of the mind and will. The focus upon data, information, statistics, and probability, also encourages the assumption that health conditions are just some 'roulette game played by life', failing to factor in the degree to which the patient's own response is bound up with the course of many illnesses. This can encourage data to take a sort of 'morbidly deterministic quality' (102).

Friedman observes the absence of questions that would assess a patient's capacity for recovery, and questions that would 'challenge patients to be more responsible for their own condition.'

> Once one begins to include emotional variables in the overall data, such as current emotional binds, past tendencies in crisis, the ability to differentiate self from the emotional reactivity of relatives, and the capacity to maintain resolve, then it becomes possible to realize that the same procedure is never the same procedure, even if it is technically identical. The focus on data to the exclusion of emotional variables leaves the patient to hope that he or she "falls" into the right category. (103)

The media overwhelms us with 'scientific studies' that are confusing, contradictory, and which leave us

paranoid, or feeling as powerless victims of fate, uncertain of how to proceed. The data-driven approach focuses upon pathology, and doesn't pay enough attention to the exceptions, wherein lies the 'basis for a self-differentiating approach to the determinism of data' (107). All of these things conspire to make it even harder for patients to be decisive and non-anxious about their health.

Shorn of emotional variables, the glut of data risks creates 'data junkyards' of valueless information, lacking any criteria of meaning.

*Mental Health*

Even in an area where people should be paying the most attention to relational and emotional variables, a data obsession that eliminates or ignores them is manifested. Limited attention is paid to the people who continue to function effectively in society with mental disorders. There is a 'moving fashion show of symptoms and cures' in therapy (109). The rapidly shifting focus merely reveals that most of the issues are just symptoms of something deeper, and only serve as temporary foci of social anxiety.

Friedman makes the controversial claim that 'the notion that one has to be able to understand the background of people in order to help them is *ad hominem* thinking in reverse' (110). He argues that this approach fails to highlight the fact that patients 'cannot rise above the maturity (or anxiety) level of their counselor' (also excusing the counsellor from focusing upon his or her own personal growth).

Focusing on the cultural or other background of patients excuses them from taking responsibility for their own behaviour and responses.

Friedman is here referring to the sort of cultural stereotypes whose imposition we submit to, or which we impose upon ourselves (e.g. English people are reserved). 'Even if we knew all the ethnic and other sociological factors in a given family's background, we still could not predict the emotional health of that family or of any given member' (111). Culture does not cause family processes, but rather 'stains' it and makes it visible (he remarks upon the way that cultural stereotypes serve as a sort of palette from which we select those that most fit us and which we employ in a fashion that prevents change). Whatever the culture, it is the position of persons within the 'triangles of their family's emotional processes' that makes the real difference.

*Parenting*

Friedman observes that there is no evidence that the most successful parents are the ones with the most knowledge of the latest 'data' and 'techniques' of child-rearing.

> Parenting is no different from any other kind of "managing." The crucial issues in raising children have far less to do with proper technique than with the nature of the parents' presence and the type of emotional processes they engender. (113)

Friedman observes the manner in which these emotional processes are intergenerational. It is extremely rare that a mother with a good relationship with her own mother will have trouble with her daughter. Likewise, a 'highly reactive or hypercritical father' will almost invariably be distant from his own family of origin. In order to address or avoid problems with their children, parents need to address their own troubled relationships, as relational problems with children almost invariably arise in those areas of the parent's own traumatization. It also requires counsellors to do the same thing.

### Rethinking Thinking

Friedman wants us to rethink the way that we think about our thinking. The brain is not primarily about the intellect. 'Emotions do not simply modify thinking, reasoning, or decision-making processes; they are part and parcel of the *process* of reasoning' (117). Thinking 'always involves the self of the entire organism' (119). Emotional processes – not to be confused with 'emotional intelligence' – are crucial to the formation of sound judgments. He challenges those who would put a lot of weight on differences between right and left brain thinkers, or between men and women in this area. The ability to self-differentiate and have healthy emotional processes transcends these distinctions, and is far more fundamental.

Friedman tries to elaborate on his position using Paul McLean's outdated theory about the 'Triune Brain', arguing that '*when anxiety reaches certain thresholds* the instinctual, reptilian systems can take over the other set of controls and override the steering of the cortex', even though the cortex still believes that it is in control (121). He points to the example of certain highly intelligent yet dysfunctional families, whose brilliance actually seems to intensify and reinforce unhealthy ways of relating. 'Madness has more to do with how people function in a relationship system than with products of their intellect.'

Pathological emotional processes can hijack our reasoning processes. Rather than merely focusing upon stated beliefs and values in order to assess the saneness of other parties, leaders should focus upon the way that they function in relational systems. Even seemingly rational positions can be revealed to be driven by an underlying madness. Friedman gives three key symptoms of this emotional regression (which he associates with the supposed 'reptilian brain'): 1) interfering in other's relationships; 2) unceasing attempts to convert people to their position; 3) an inability to relate to people who differ with them. This evidence of 'madness' is universal and is not limited to one particular cultural context.

Friedman takes the relationship between the head and the body as an analogy for the understanding of leadership. He points out that the communication between the brain and the body is far deeper than commonly conceived, the brain has a 'widespread

"presence" … in the body' (125). He argues that the brain's communication with the body is 'more a systemic process than a mere matter of communication relays.'

Out of this analogy (and Friedman's analogies are fairly strong, more akin to thick 'typologies' than they are to illustrative parallels) arises a few points. First, a 'head' must be present in the body that it leads, but that presence 'does not have to be communicated by a chain of command' (126). Secondly, this presence is felt chiefly through its 'impact', rather than through its 'messages'. Leadership is not about conveying information, but about 'energy', the making of an impact. Thirdly, if the head/body relation is more organic than hierarchical, proximity or contiguity may not be as important as commonly presumed. He illustrates this with the example of historical leaders who conveyed their presence to hundreds of thousands of men simultaneously.

> This understanding of the connection between the brain and the body shows that, through his or her own self-definition, self-regulation, non-reactivity, and capacity to remain connected, a leader can make a critical difference. He or she can transmit a presence that has every bit as much capacity to regulate the various "members" of the organism it is leading through the substances it is transmitting and through the way it responds to the substances it is receiving.

Fourth, this approach might also suggest 'biofeedback' approaches to leadership, 'rather than a dispensing of cures' (127).

## The Brain and other Bodies

Our recognition of the intimate connection between the brain and the body needs to be followed up with a greater leap of imagination, which recognizes that all persons within a family or institution are 'connected by the emotional processes between them, and the relationship system is understood to be a self-organizing unit.' We need to focus more upon relationship processes, and less upon discrete personalities.

Friedman challenges the common belief that leadership is primarily about the communication of ideas. Rather, he maintains, communication is an 'emotional phenomenon' and the key variables are the interrelational variables of 'direction, distance, and anxiety' (128).

Others can only hear you when they are moving toward you, no matter how eloquently you phrase the message. In other words, as long as you are in the pursuing, rescuing, or coercive position, your message, no matter how eloquently broadcast, will never catch up. And as for anxiety, it is the static in any communication system and can distort or scramble any message. It cannot be eliminated simply by turning up the volume, since that invariably also turns up the static.

A further example of the effect of relational systems upon their members is seen in the manner in which the presence of secrets can produce paranoia in an individual, in a manner that is not dependent upon their personality.

In a society driven by chronic anxiety, even its approaches to and the content of its leader training will become infected. Detached from healthy emotional processes and in service of data and technique, even our most esteemed academic institutions can be acting under the influence of a sort of 'madness' and should not necessarily be looked to for solutions.

A new way of seeing things within a family or society need not originate from outside. Novel thoughts can arise within such a society, but in order for this to occur, someone must first 'get "outside" of its emotional processes even while remaining physically inside' (130). Without overcoming the reactivity of a society, or escaping the automatic regulation of our thinking and acting by the emotional processes of the system, nothing will change.

### Some thoughts

In conclusion, here are a few areas where I thought that it would be interesting to think about the possible relevance or implications of Friedman's thought as outlined in this chapter.

First, doesn't contemporary evangelicalism, especially in America, exhibit precisely the sort of technique and data-driven character that Friedman describes? I think, for instance, of the role that the Barna Group has played in evangelical thinking, or of the obsession with marketing and business techniques in evangelism and ecclesiology.

Second, the de-differentiating and de-selfing character of statistics and data-driven mindsets can be seen in much of our society's thinking on issues of marriage and sexual behaviour. For instance, we are repeatedly reminded of the large percentage of professing Christians who divorce, or of the percentage of young people who have pre-marital sex. These data can be treated as if they were basic facts of life, to which we must simply resign ourselves, and act to minimize their damage. A greater focus upon the differentiating factors and emotional variables that enable teens to be sexually abstinent, or married couples to restore their marriages is crucial in such a context, if we are to resist the passivity and fatalism that can creep in through the de-selfing focus upon statistics.

Third, Friedman's list of symptoms of madness are important: 1) interfering in other's relationships; 2) unceasing attempts to convert people to their position; 3) an inability to relate to people who differ with them. It seems to me that these precise characteristics frequently characterize churches. Evangelism, rather than being driven by love, concern, and a desire to share good news, comes to be driven by an invasive 'madness', that has a

psychological need to impose our views upon others and cannot differentiate enough to abide proximity with people who believe differently.

Finally, it seems to me that the idea of the leader as one making an impact through self-regulation of emotional processes and maintaining a non-anxious presence is important for models of church leadership, which can often be overly hierarchical. Also challenging is the idea that leadership is not primarily about the conveying of information. If this is truly the case, then what are we to say about the role that preaching plays in our understanding of leadership? Are we relying upon preaching to accomplish many things that can only be achieved through the preacher's 'presence', rather than his words alone?

# 4

## Why Empathy Doesn't Work

### *The Fallacy of Empathy*

Friedman now proceeds to take aim at the 'fallacy of empathy'. He observes the way in which the political rhetoric of sensitivity can hijack agendas. We should not be held responsible for the feelings of others who lack the ability to distinguish between feelings and opinions and between a sense of offense and actual harm. 'Dialogue is only possible when we can learn to distinguish feelings from opinions and recognize that the background or personality of a person is totally irrelevant to the validity of what he or she is saying' (133).

Empathy is a concept that seems laudable and desirable. However, Friedman believes that it commonly serves as 'a disguise for anxiety, a rationalization for the failure to define a position, and a power tool in the hands of the "sensitive".' Those who are most inclined to use the concept of empathy are people who feel powerless, and want to 'use the togetherness force of a regressed society to get those

whom they perceive to have power to adapt to them.' Much of the power of this approach results from the failure of nerve among leaders. However, the focus on 'understanding' or feeling with other people can be no less invasive than more coercive approaches. We should rather be focusing upon responsibility over empathy.

In any relational system, disintegrating and un-self-regulating forces or elements are invariably unresponsive to empathy. By their very nature they are all take and no give. In trying to show empathy in such a context, we are making much the same mistake as Chamberlain made with Hitler: one should not try to be reasonable with a virus. In a similar manner, we should not allow our societies or families to become adapted to their least mature or most dysfunctional members. In the face of such persons, the 'self-regulation' of the leader, whereby they focus on their own needs and those of the group that they lead, should enable them to resist the temptation to meet such persons halfway (and are such un-self-regulated persons ever satisfied with that?). Feeling for others is quite a liability in such cases, causing leaders to lose their nerve.

The alternative to the empathy approach is one of 'promoting responsibility for self in another through challenge' (135). By focusing upon showing empathy for others rather than being responsible for our own integrity, we can actually decrease other people's pain thresholds, 'helping them to avoid challenge and compromising the mobilization of their "nerve".' The

more empathic we are, the more that we discourage responsibility and growth to maturity.

Friedman believes that the increased popularity of empathy in recent decades is in large measure a symptom of the 'herding/togetherness force characteristic of an anxious society' (136). While feeling for, caring for, and identifying with others are essential components in the leader's relationship to others, these things will not themselves encourage people to become more self-aware, responsible, self-regulating, or mature. Empathy is in many respects a 'luxury afforded only to those who do not have to make tough decisions' (137). Tough decisions are almost invariably decisions whose consequences are painful to others (which should not be confused with their being *harmful* to others), decisions that are made with the recognition that what people need is not to be confused with what they want or feel that they need. Empathy can only be afforded when leaders have successfully resisted the invasive character of factions that would derail necessary change, and have regulated systemic anxiety. 'The kind of "sensitivity" that leaders most require is a sensitivity to the degree of chronic anxiety and the lack of self-differentiation in the system that surrounds them.'

### Destructive Entities

The key feature that all entities that are destructive to other entities share in common is their inability to self-regulate. Un-self-regulating entities will

constantly be invading the space of others. They lack the capacity to learn from experience.

Friedman illustrates his point using the examples of viruses and malignant cells. Viruses can change, but they cannot 'evolve'. They have no 'self'. Malignant cells do not properly self-differentiate, they form un-self-regulating colonies, they are unconnected with and uninfluenced by others, they reproduce uncontrollable, without subordinating reproduction to a higher purpose, and they don't know when to quit. The 'selfishness' of such cells has to do with a lack of self.

Certain human beings and factions in society can function in the same way. Lacking self-regulation and a 'nucleus' they act in a purely reactive, rather than 'inner-directed' fashion (142). They are incapable of modifying their behaviour and are purely parasitic, drawing energy from others, rather than their own resources, unable or unprepared to form mutualistic arrangements. Unless such persons are resisted, they will contaminate the entire organism in which they exist.

Applying this to the case of parenting, Friedman suggests that, faced with the unregulated child, parents are far better off resisting the urge to focus on techniques (e.g. empathy, tough love) to modify the child, and concern themselves more with developing an immune response, concentrating on their own integrity, and not allowing the unruly child to set the agenda. As long as a parent is focused on modifying the unruly child, it will sap their stamina.

However, when parents refocus upon their own welfare, their stamina will increase.

> Nurturing growth always follows two principles. One is: Stay out of its way; you cannot "grow" another by will or technique. But the second is: Do not let it "overgrow" you. (144)

When parents learn to self-differentiate from their children in such a manner, the children themselves learn to self-differentiate. Until the parent learns to self-differentiate, the child is unlikely to.

### *Malignant Members of Institutions*

Friedman lists some of the characteristics of 'malignant' members of institutions. They are 'injustice-collectors' who are 'given to victim attitudes' (he suggests that it is 'as if they had no outer membrane to ensure their integrity'). They 'idolize' or 'crucify' their leaders. They do not see themselves as destructive, in fact they can articulate their position in the most compelling and moving of terms; their destructivity is 'rather a byproduct of their doing what comes naturally' (145). They have a primitive and binary 'repertoire of responses', which is unable to tolerate difference or dissent. They focus on procedure and the content of issues in a manner blind to the underlying emotional processes. Light and truth is toxic to them: they thrive in the 'darkness of conspiracy'. They are highly reactive, narrowly responsive, and deadly serious. Lacking self-

regulation, they 'ooze into', interfere, infect, or invade relationships between others. They easily fuse into an undifferentiated mass. They are relentless. It is not the presence of a characteristic that makes them so relentless, but the absence of self-regulation, which is why battles of will will generally be fought in vain. They never mature or grow, they only get larger.

Such persons, however, 'only have power in the face of a failed immune response in the body politic' (146). Empathy won't change them. They must be taught that, if they want to be part of the community, they must adapt to it, rather than it adapting to them. They need to learn to be self-regulating and accountable, and our attempts to be empathic achieve little in this regard. This isn't about dictatorial imposition of opinions, but about expecting a 'conformity of behavior to the democratic process' (147).

The totalitarian nation exhibits these characteristics on a larger level. It invades the space of its citizens, and the space of other nations. These two things are connected by the absence of self-regulation, and self-differentiation. One should not believe that either reason or empathy will stop a nation constitutionally incapable of self-regulation. History repeatedly illustrates that sensitive and understanding approaches fail to stave off war with such nations.

Democracies and the peace-loving often allow such forces to get their way as they cannot muster the will and stamina to resist them. The same can be seen in many families and institutions, where persistent

troublemakers, disruptive, or invasive elements start to set the agenda, because no one has the capacity to stand up to them. It is crucial that we remember that such elements are incapable of creating pathology on their own: there also must be a lack of self-regulation on the part of the host.

### Surviving in a Hostile Environment

The task of the leader is to be the immune system within the institution, through their 'non-anxious, self-defined presence' (151). This is not about mere 'self-defense or hawkish retaliation': the leader ensures the integrity of the institution against attack. When it comes to a crisis situation, chances of survival are far greater when we have imaginative horizons that go far beyond our immediate ones. In fact, our very perception of being in crisis may often be in large measure dependent upon the breadth of our imaginative horizons. In any crisis situation, the three key factors are the physical reality, dumb luck, and the response of the organism, which can often affect the level of influence of the other two (154). When anxiety is high, whether in an individual or a society, almost all attention will become fixed on the first two factors and the possibility of addressing problems by modifying the organism's own response will be neglected.

There are a number of ways in which an organism's (whether a natural system, a person, a society, or institution) response can avert or overcome such a crisis situation. First, the organism

can mobilize its resources of resiliency, hope, determination, and self-regulation. Second, the organism can transform itself to increase its capacity to deal with crisis. Third, the organism can modify the 'toxicity of the environment' by, for instance, lowering the levels of anxiety through a non-reactive, self-regulating response.

However, changes to the environment alone are unlikely to produce lasting changes without a change in the response of organisms. In society this means that equal rights and opportunities, or allocation of resources alone cannot be the solution to social ills. Of themselves they are not sufficient to produce maturity. We should also recognize the possibility that an entire system may be adapting for the better, even though the 'toxicity of the environment' may temporarily be increasing.

Leaders need to stay in touch with reactive groups, without allowing the issues of such groups to throw them off course. Their increased differentiation can be the means to get others to adapt to their self-regulation, helping the entire group to grow. When we focus primarily upon empathy, pathology, and pain, such possibilities aren't adequately recognized. Empathic approaches are unable 'to help people to mature and make more responsibility for their own emotional being and destiny' (157).

*Comments*

The following are a few thoughts that arise from my reading of this section of Friedman.

First, it seems to me that Friedman's work has considerably relevance to the area of discourse between people of differing theological parties and to dialogue between Christians and non-Christians. If Christians can often be characterized by a pathological reactivity and invasiveness in their discourse with those that differ from them, the solution is not necessarily to be found in greater empathy with opposing opinions, or in a capitulation to sensitivities that close down all challenging discourse. Rather, our approach should be one of self-differentiation and self-regulation, in which we take responsibility for our own feelings and develop thicker skins. It must also involve a far higher pain threshold for the offense of others, and refusing to give ground to those who want to reorganize public discourse around people's sensitivities (whether those sensitivities belong to Christians or non-Christians). This is the only way that the 'integrity' of our discourse (in the fullest sense of that term) can be maintained.

While some characterize this in terms of our right to 'insult' and be insulted, this is a serious misnomer. Insulting others – taking direct aim at their sensitivities – is a reactive form of behaviour, a behaviour in which self-differentiated people do not typically engage. Self-differentiated persons, while seeking to speak the truth, will not do so in a manner

that is invasive. They do not seek to offend, even though they sometimes will, but to speak the truth (the reactive person, although they may claim that this is true of them, will always tend to 'speak the truth' offensively as they cannot abide the proximity of difference). Their discourse is not reactive, locked with the feelings of the other party, whether through excessive empathy or through a blind and mimetic antagonism. Through their separation of their feelings from those of the other party, the anxiety levels in discourse decrease significantly and debates don't become heated in the same way (when is the last time that you changed someone's mind through an argument?). Strong ideological differences no longer function as, and are no longer experienced as a personal attack.

Secondly, if evangelical approaches to evangelism and relationships with the world tend to risk being reactive and invasive, liberal and post-evangelical approaches in this area are frequently characterized by a dangerous sensitivity. This sensitivity produces a loss of theological nerve and a compromising of orthodoxy to make it more palatable to people who would never 'adapt' to it. The false assumption is that people will come around to the gospel the more that it adapts to them. Of course, if people ever do 'come around' under such circumstances, it tends to be to a gospel that hardly means anything any longer. Rather than being a non-anxious presence in society, facing the world with the challenge of the call of Christ, the Church adapts to its context, and nothing changes. A primary focus upon reasoning or empathizing with

the world will always tend towards a compromising the integrity of the Church and its message. On account of its low threshold for the pain and offense of others, liberal Christianity has always struggled to maintain integrity in its faith, and has always been vulnerable to the false guilt-manipulation and rights-driven discourse that encourages the spread of un-self-regulated parties.

Thirdly, it is worth remembering how frequently a high threshold for the pain and offense of others is treated as a qualifying mark of biblical leadership. God's criticisms of poor leaders often focuses on their low pain threshold for the sensitivities, offense, and suffering of others when decisive action needed to be taken for the sake of the integrity of the nation. We can think of Eli's failure to discipline his sons, Saul's failure to kill Agag, Aaron's failure to stand up to the nation in the golden calf incident, etc. Conversely, the actions by which people were set apart or marked out for rule were frequently ones where they exhibited a high pain threshold for the suffering or offense of others when decisive action was needed to maintain the integrity of the people of God (Phinehas killing the Midianite and the Israelite, the Levites slaying 3,000 of their Israelite brethren, Moses killing the Egyptian, etc.). Such leaders were not devoid of pity and concern for the people of God – quite the opposite! – but they had very high pain thresholds when decisive action was required for their health.

Finally, I believe that Friedman presents us with important insights for helping people in need in our communities and elsewhere. While his approach

might sound cold and callous, I don't believe that it is. Friedman believes that sensitivity to others and concern for them is very important. His point, however, is that this cannot stop malignant and invasive elements, nor can they produce maturity in others. Consequently, well-meaning approaches driven primarily by empathy risk sustaining and metastasizing the very problems that they seek to address.

Many approaches to poverty encourage the spread of the characteristics of the un-self-regulated mindset mentioned above. Such approaches are focused upon pathology and weakness. Dysfunctional persons, driven purely by a sense of entitlement, expect society to adapt to them. Sensitive liberals, who have an extremely low pain threshold for people suffering the consequences of their actions, produce a leadership without nerve. Consequently, rather than empowering and encouraging responsibility, and taking an uncompromising line with pathological, parasitic, and malignant elements of society, irresponsibility, dependency, and blame displacement are encouraged. It isn't hard to see, if you are looking, that, far from fostering responsibility and maturity, such methods lead to its opposite and destroy the immune system and self-regulating capacity of portions of society that most rely upon it (this is why I am always heartened to hear of churches that provide alternatives to welfare, which are geared to empower people to become self-regulating, rather than dependent upon the state).

I believe that an alternative approach would focus more upon the strengths of those in need in society, rather than their pathologies, and upon their capacity for self-differentiating and self-regulating action. It seems to me that this is a wonderful example of the sort of approach that Friedman's insights would encourage. Rather than underwriting pathologies, resources would be channelled towards the strengths whereby communities will be able to address and overcome their pathologies. In many respects the greatest challenge of such an approach would be that of maintaining society's nerve in the face of malignant elements, which refuse to be self-regulating. The goal would be that of creating a society in which self-regulation and responsibility would be an attainable prospect for everyone within it, in which no one lacks the means by which to take charge of their life (this most definitely would not do away with the need for a social safety net).

# 5

## The Imperative of Self-Differentiation

### *The Importance of Self*

There is a constant struggle in life between the forces that seek to play it safe and merely reproduce the *status quo*, and the forces of creativity and the preservation of individuality. Unfortunately, in contemporary society self has become associated with 'autocracy and narcissism rather than with integrity and individuality' (161). This association leads many people to characterize leaders with a well-differentiated self in negative terms, sabotaging their decisive leadership in the name of safety and togetherness. Friedman contrasts aggressive leadership (in the sense of leadership driven by a strong imaginative rather than hostile intent) with 'aggressionistic' leadership, which is by nature hostile and invasive.

   The well-defined self of the leader, far from being a threat to the community, is that characteristic that

is most likely to enable the preservation of the self of the members of the community. 'The twin problems confronting leadership in our society today, the failure of nerve and the desire for a quick fix, are not the result of overly strong self but of weak or no self' (163). While autocratic leadership is definitely unhealthy, 'democratic institutions have far more to fear from lack of self in their leaders and the license this gives to factionalism (which is not the same as dissent).'

Friedman illustrates some of his principles using the structure of American government, and the manner in which it brings the 'togetherness advantages' of a larger organism, while maintaining the 'integrity' of the individual states. He argues that this illuminates an underlying principle: 'For life to continue to evolve, all newly developed forms of togetherness ultimately must be in the service of a more enriched individuality, and not the other way around' (169). He also relates his concept of self to the evolution of organisms in nature such as, for instance, the differentiated cell, which can preserve its own individuality and integrity through producing other cells with the same function, and through being able to mount a defence against 'not-self', other entities that would invade or parasitize it (168).

### Understanding Self

The struggle between individuality and togetherness exists in every relationship system, and is a far more basic issue for compatibility in

relationships than any other (social science) difference. (172)

One does not need to have authoritarian rulers to destroy the integrity of a populace: all that is required is a ramping up of the togetherness instinct to a degree that undermines all individuality and presents it as something to be regarded with suspicion. While team-building and togetherness have their place, they are not the most pressing needs in our society.

After the barrier of data and the barrier of empathy, the pathologizing of self is the third great emotional barrier that leaders need to overcome. Only as leaders value self can they begin to recognize how self-definition is more important than feeling for others, and 'emphasize the response of the organism rather than the conditions of the environment' (174). To focus on enabling others and teambuilding merely dodges the issue that someone still has to go first and take the lead. Leadership is about having and embodying a vision of where to go and, most crucially, taking the first step (179).

The concept of self is profoundly ambiguous and ambivalent, being associated with both positive (e.g. self-assured, self-possessed, self-control, self-determined) and negative values (e.g. self-centred, self-justifying, self-seeking, self-serving). One of the difficulties that we face is that the togetherness force is often simplistically equated with morality, despite the numerous problems that it causes in dysfunctional families and societies. While some sort

of balance is desirable, the togetherness force seems to be blinder to the importance of individuality than the impetus towards individuality is to the value of the togetherness force.

Friedman believes that a newer understanding of the immune system, less as that which provides a series of defences against invaders, and more as the source of an organism's integrity is crucial to our understanding of self. The immune system makes possible the idea of self by enabling the distinction between self and non-self. It is something that grows in response to challenge, is necessary for healthy proximity and love, and can be perverted to attack its host. In these respects it provides a powerful illustration of Friedman's conception of the self.

The importance of self, understood as an immune system, for love should be recognized. A clearly defined self grants us protection against the relational problem of emotional fusing. A clearly defined self prevents us from invading the emotional space of others in a manner that would create a dysfunctional system, and cause the other person's self to disintegrate.

'Self is not merely *analogous* to immunity; it *is* immunity' (181). The leader is the immune system of the institution or organization of which he or she is the head.

### Differentiation

Differentiation is the lifelong process of striving to keep one's being in balance through the reciprocal

external and internal processes of self-definition and self-regulation. It is a concept that can sometimes be difficult to focus on objectively, for *differentiation* means the capacity to become oneself out of one's self, with minimum reactivity to the positions or reactivity of others. (183)

Differentiation 'is the capacity to take a stand in an intense emotional system.' It enables us to resist polarizing forces and maintain a non-anxious presence in an anxious system, and not allow ourselves to become one the system's 'emotional dominoes'. It enables us to recognize where we end and others begin, and to have clearly defined personal values, boundaries, and goals. Differentiation is that which enables us to take the maximum amount of responsibility for our being and destiny.

Differentiation should not be confused with 'similar-sounding ideas such as individuation, autonomy, or independence' (184). Differentiation is about our emotional being, not primarily our behaviour. It does not involve cutting ourselves off from others, but maintaining a particular form of presence and connection. It is about preserving the integrity of our being. Differentiation is only meaningful when there is a capacity to connect.

The concept of differentiation gives us a variable that helps to explains the non-determinism of social and family systems. It points out that the crucial factor distinguishing factor between persons who are swept along with the system and those who escape or

limit its influence is to be found, not in the regular categories of sociology or psychodynamics, but in the individual's capacity to act in a differentiated manner. This means that a space is always preserved for the individual's responsibility. It also means that social and family systems cannot be made to take all the responsibility for the actions of people within them.

Friedman argues that his model of leadership will show 'that morality has more to do with space than with values, with dependency than with power' (186). The presence of a well-differentiated leader will stir up an anxious response in others. The crucial task of the leader is that of remaining connected in a non-anxious manner.

## *A New Paradigm*

At this point, Friedman reviews much of the ground that has been covered, and explores the significance of the conceptual shift that it involves. 'In the final analysis, the relationship between risk and reality is about leadership' (187). Overcoming the emotional anxiety of pre-1500 Europe required the nerve of individuals who were prepared to go first. The characteristics that marked these men out were their ability to 'get outside the emotional climate of the day,' their willingness to be exposed and to proceed without a safety net, their persistence in the face of resistance and rejection, their stamina in the face of sabotage, and their willingness to value their goals over consensus and teambuilding. These attributes are universal, not depending on personality, cultural,

or gender traits, and are relevant in any family, society, or institution. They concern the ability to maintain one's orientation and non-anxiety in a disoriented and anxious world.

Friedman contends that 'the conventions through which we try to understand human relationships today may be as misoriented as was the medieval view of heaven and earth' (193). He regards his approach as one which can overcome the barriers or superstitions of our imaginations that hold us captive. In fact, even if such a radically new position turns out to be wrong 'it can lead to ways of functioning that serendipitously stumble on the unimaginable.'

For Friedman, the importance of the family systems model that he employs is to be seen in the way that it can 'shift the unity of observation from a person to a network, and to focus on the network principles that [are] universal rather than specific to culture' (195). The difference between families and other institutions or societies is more in degree or intensity than in kind.

### Systems

'The term emotional system refers to any group of people who have developed interdependencies to the point where the resulting system through which they are connected (administratively, physically, or emotionally) has evolved its own principles of organization' (197). Within such a system the system exerts far more of an influence upon the functioning

of its members than the members do upon the system.

> The essential characteristic of systems thinking is that the functioning of any part of the network is due to its position in the network rather than to its own nature. Nature may determine the range of possible functioning and response, but not what specifically it will express.

While most thinking about institutions focuses on the personalities and psychodynamics of those within them, Friedman argues that within institutions 'individuals function not out of their own personalities or past, but express that part of their nature that is regulated by the emotional processes in the present system' (198). There are two key dimensions to these forces: the forces transmitted from generation to generation, and the forces resulting from people's position in 'relational triangles' (which we shall look at more closely in the next, and final, post). These self-organizing and multigenerational forces cannot be reduced to the level of individual psychology. 'Relationships are not simply the product of the personalities involved, but are constantly evolving structures that take shape from the adaptation of each member to the adaptations other make to them in response' (199).

Within such a context, leadership 'begins with freedom from a given institution's emotional field; leaders neither react to it nor withdraw from it.' In contrast to most conventional models, such a model

recognizes '*the past as a continuous process* that goes well beyond the impact of the previous generation.' Each generation will, to some extent or other, 'continually format the shape' of those that follow. 'This continuous view of time enables one to see that the nature of relationships in the present has more to do with emotional processes that have been successively reinforced for many generations than with the logic of their contemporary connection.' Institutions will tend to 'institutionalize the pathology, or the genius, of the founding families.' To change the shape of an institution requires a particular strength of leadership.

This approach reveals just how similar the principles of life's processes and organization are on all levels of existence, from the smallest cell, to the largest nation. It shows that the principles of leadership 'extend across the board to all forms of contemporary institutional life' (200).

### Comments

First, as Christians our concept of self (as the de-centred self in Christ) is not a conventional one. However, it still retains and is the source of much of the ambiguity and ambivalence of our cultural conceptions of the self. Likewise our concepts of leadership should be ones of service, rather than domination. In reading someone like Friedman, I believe that it is crucial that we relate what he is saying to and test what he is saying by our particular Christian understandings of self and leadership.

On this front, I believe that Friedman's position, while not exhaustively congruent with Christian convictions, provides us with important insight. The 'self' of the Christian leader ought to be defined differently from the self of the non-Christian leader. However, in both cases a well-defined self is crucial to leadership. The integrity of the Church and the people of God arises from Christ as their head. Consequently, all leadership must be founded upon a well-defined sense of the identity of Christ, and the distinction between what is Christ-ian and what is of the world. The Church's sense of self is orthodoxy. In maintaining this distinction through the establishment and inculcation of orthodoxy and the exercise of Church discipline, Christian leaders function as the immune system of the Church.

Second, the failure to differentiate from the world through a strong sense of identity and the Church's selfhood renders the Church anxious and prone to polarizing forces. Lacking means of differentiation, the Church may constantly feel vulnerable to the loss of its identity and may become more invasive and interfering in its relationships with other groups in society. In such a context, rather than providing the Church with a truly differentiated identity, 'orthodoxy' functions reactively. While, as a self-defining immune system, orthodoxy should act to resist the non-Christian forces that seek to compromise or invade it, it should not fixate upon those forces.

True differentiation, rather than being defined by its reactive character, has the capacity to become

itself out of its own self. For the Church, this means that we become the Church by focusing on Christ and his identity, not by merely reacting against the world. As Stanley Hauerwas and others have remarked, the primary political act of the Church is that of being the Church and our primary political context is that of the assembly gathered in worship and the celebration of the Eucharist. Christian identity won't ultimately be secured by changing the toxic environment of our nations, but by creating a robust and differentiated Church that has an immune system that is capable of dealing with its environment. Without a true and secure immune system of orthodoxy, the Church either becomes reactive, polarized, invasive, and interfering, or gradually loses all distinction from the world around it.

Third, if the principles of organization and leadership of all relational systems from the cellular to the international level are really so similar, then we will be more inclined to recognize true leadership as a transferable skill from one context to another. In particular, I believe that this helps us to see the wisdom of the biblical principle whereby the leadership ability of an elder should be recognizable in the context of the family (1 Timothy 3:4-5), and those who lack such ability are disqualified for eldership. If someone is reactive and un-self-regulated in family leadership, why should we expect him to be any different in his leadership of the Church?

# 6

## The Perverse Operations of Emotional Triangles and Dealing with Sabotage

### *Emotional Triangles*

An 'emotional triangle' refers to 'the manner in which the relationship between any two people, or a given individual and his or her symptoms, can be a function of an often unseen third person, relationship, or issue between them' (205). Indeed, there 'may be no such thing as a two-person relationship.' Emotional triangles are the building blocks of relationship systems and 'function predictably, irrespective of the gender, class, race, culture, background, or psychological profile of the people involved, and also irrespective of the relational context, family or business, the kind of business, or the nature or severity of the problem.'

Emotional triangles follow a few straightforward rules:

- They form out of people's discomfort with each other.
- They are self-preserving and resist all attempts to change them.
- They interlock with and reinforce other emotional triangles.
- They make it hard for people to alter their patterns of thought and behaviour.
- 'They transmit a system's stress to its most responsible or most focused member' (206).

Once we understand the logic of emotional triangles, we will have a means by which to make emotional processes more directly observable. These emotional triangles support the claim that one's position rather than one's nature is the most determinative factor within a relational system. They also help to explain why self-differentiation can be so effective.

'Almost every issue of leadership and the difficulties that accompany it can be framed in terms of emotional triangles, including motivation, clarity, decision-making, resistance to change, imaginative gridlock, and a failure of nerve.' As leaders learn to recognize and analyse triangles, they will be better able to understand the connections between people and issues and the precise structure of difficulties, and be better equipped to overcome them.

Friedman gives dozens of examples of possible emotional triangles. Within the family it could involve the spouses and any third person (child, lover,

relative, in-law, boss, friend, etc., etc.), or the spouses and a symptom (drinking, smoking, health, job, spending, gambling, etc.), or the parent, child, and a third party (teacher, sibling, grandparent, friend, etc.), or the parent and their child and their behaviour. Emotional triangles can also exist in workplaces and in any other relational context.

## The Laws of Emotional Triangles

### How they form

Emotional triangles form 'because of the inherent instability of two-person relationships' (209). Between partners with a lack of differentiation, no clear leadership, and in a context of anxiety, it won't be long until a third person or issue becomes their focus. A and B, by triangling a third party, C, *into* their relationship (by a shared hatred or support for), or out of their relationship (through secrets and exclusion), grants stability to the relationship between A and B, who can now organize their relationship in terms of that third axis.

In the context of adultery, the triangle is formed, not primarily by the sex, but by the secrecy. Within a family, the most common emotional triangle involves two parents and a child. A single child is almost invariably in such an emotional triangle. Such an emotionally triangled child will often tend to either extreme achievement or dysfunction. Trying to help such a child to overcome their dysfunction without addressing the triangle itself is generally futile. The only way that such a situation can usually be

addressed is by one parent taking the lead 'against the resistance of the other' (210). Understanding the logic of emotional triangles can help us to understand why children in the same family can grow up so differently.

Emotional triangles also exist in society. Friedman illustrates this in terms of race relations in America: 'from the beginning the black population of America has served as a displacement focus for the problems of whites with one another, particularly the normal differences between classes' (211). He suggests that this displacement focus is one reason why America has never experienced the intensity of class struggles that one finds in other nations (it might also suggest that, as race issues are addressed, a greater class struggle would emerge). Emotional triangles help to form alliances and are often shrewdly employed by weaker parties.

*How they operate*

'Once formed, emotional triangles (1) are self-organizing; (2) are perpetuated by distance; and (3) tend to be perverse' (213). Emotional triangles are *self-organizing* in the sense that they establish stability in relationships that would otherwise be unstable. When one of the axes is removed or significantly changed, the relationship becomes unstable again. The emotional triangle tends to resist such change. In most triangles one side is more conflictual. However, if that relationship is calmed, trouble will tend to emerge in one of the other sides.

Friedman argues that most in-law struggles involve displacement issues with, for instance, the daughter-in-law displacing issues with her own mother, and the mother-in-law displacing issues from her marriage. Such struggles can be seemingly magically transformed when the daughter-in-law works on her relationship with her mother, or on her relationship with her own daughter.

Emotional triangles are perpetuated by *distance*. 'Distance' can involve secrets and gossip that keep people in the dark, or criticism in the form of 'you statements', which pushes people away. It could also involve excessive levels of privacy. If a leader wants to succeed in a context, it is important to close these distances. When these distances are closed, polarization is less likely to occur.

Emotional triangles are *perverse*. The more that one of the parties in an emotional triangle works to change the relationship between the other two, the more likely that their relationship will become even stronger. Understanding this helps us to account for the failure of many attempts at coercion and therapy, and also for why the presence of a leader can be so effective.

The general rule is this: One can only change a relationship of which one is directly a part. For example, if a child gets in trouble with teachers or friends because of particular behavior patterns, a parent will not be successful in trying to modify those patterns. The very act of making the attempt

creates a stabilizing triangle that makes change impossible. (215)

## *Interlocking Emotional Triangles*

Different emotional triangles can share sides. These interlocking triangles can form vast structures in society, families, institutions, and other relational systems. 'The side that is shared by two triangles is the key to the transmission of emotional processes from one triangle to another' (217).

Triangles can be with the past. For instance, the way that our parents related to certain aspects of our behaviour can shape the way that we relate to our children's behaviour. We might need to revisit that old triangle in order to address the problems in the new one. Interlocking triangles are especially obvious in blended families. '[T]he guaranteed way to break up the marriage is for either partner to try to rearrange the partner's established relationships with his or her children.'

Friedman sees a further example of a common interlocking triangle in that between an entrepreneur's relationship to his business and its problems and his position as a 'standard bearer' of his family of origin, with a mandate to achieve (219).

## *Stress in Emotional Triangles*

There is an inverse relationship between effective leadership and stress: 'the type of leadership which creates the least stress also happens to be the type of leadership that is most effective.' To the extent that

you become 'enmeshed' in the relationship that exists between two other persons (either as you take responsibility for it, or as they triangle you out), 'you will wind up with the stress for their relationship' (220).

Stress is not just about hard work, but is about the place that we occupy in emotional triangles. '[T]he same amount of hard work will be more or less stressful depending on the position from which one approaches or becomes involved with work.' The stress that leaders experience primarily arises from the manner in which they come to occupy a position of responsibility for the relationships of other parties. These other parties 'could be two persons ... or any person or system plus a problem or goal.' 'The way out is to make the two persons responsible for their own relationship, or the other person responsible for his or her problem, *while all still remain connected*.' This last part is crucial: one stays in the triangle, but one does not allow oneself to become triangled. This is very different from quitting, abdicating, or resigning.

Stress has a toll on our bodies. Each one of us is in a triangle between our bodies and our minds. The challenge that we face is that of putting them together 'through the integrating effects of self-differentiation' (221). Symptoms of stress and burnout can be mental or physical depending in part on the way that we negotiate this triangle, something that can depend on our genes, family background, etc. Leaders are most likely to suffer the effects of stress if they have failed in the task of self-differentiation.

Leaders who feel responsible for holding an entire system together are most vulnerable to the harmful effects of stress. Emotional triangles are very effective at channelling stress toward a single individual. The 'togetherness position' can be lethal to the leader who allows him or herself to be triangled. Leaders should learn to treat their physical, mental, and behavioural symptoms 'as early warning signs that they are in an emotional triangle that is pulling, if not tearing, them apart' (223). These symptoms can function as a sort of feedback from the environment and, rather than trying to ignore and battle through them, leaders should see them as signs that they are approaching things in the wrong manner. Such symptoms, if we attend to them, can help us to become more effective leaders.

### Crisis and Sabotage

While the experienced sailor appreciates that engaging in a battle of wills with the forces of wind, tide, and sea is generally futile and that it is far more effective to position oneself in relation to these forces so that their natural operations enable you to achieve your purpose, most leaders believe that, if they just have enough will, they can overcome all of the forces that operate against them. At the heart of virtually every deeply disturbed or failing relationship system is a conflict of will. When leaders are experiencing little or no success, it is almost certain that they are swimming against a tide.

The key dimension of positioning oneself so as to take advantage of the forces at work in such a context is to be found in the leader's self-differentiation, 'his or her capacity to be a non-anxious presence, a challenging presence, a well-defined presence, and a paradoxical presence' (230). Even when leaders have great power invested in them by virtue of their office, the true strength of the leader is ultimately rooted in the 'nature of their presence' (231).

Friedman contrasts poorly differentiated with well-differentiated leadership. Well-differentiated leadership focuses on strength rather than pathology, is concerned with its own growth rather than being obsessed with technique, and works with motivated people rather than symptomatic people. Well-differentiated leadership seeks to mature the system, rather than 'better the condition' and enduring change, rather than mere relief of symptoms. It is avoids the treadmill of just trying harder and focuses on its own issues, rather than on diagnosing others. It is not put off by reactivity, but recognizes that 'reactivity and sabotage are evidence of one's effectiveness.' It has a wide and non-reductionist perspective (for instance, seeking understanding in relational systems, rather than in the individual psychology of system members). It recognizes that 'problems' are generally the symptoms of anxiety rather than the cause. It adapts towards strength, rather than towards weakness. Instead of seeking empathy with 'helpless victims', it has a challenging approach designed to produce responsibility in

others. It is more likely to create intimate relationships, rather than dependent relationships.

In sum, the well-differentiated leader modifies the relationships by which he or she is surrounded 'through its presence rather than its forcefulness' (232). Our full appreciation of this fact entails a conceptual leap from action-oriented understandings of leadership to presence-oriented understandings. Friedman compares the well-differentiated leader to a step-down transformer which functions to decrease anxiety levels 'in such a way that you let the current go through you without zapping you or fusing you to the rest of the circuit.'

> This is not a matter of "breaking a circuit"; it requires staying in touch without getting "zapped." Anyone can remain non-anxious if they also try to be non-present. The trick is to be both non-anxious and present simultaneously. (233)

Leadership is not an easy task. It can involve the pain of isolation, of the losing of friends, and of suffering personal attacks.

### Friedman's Own Experience
Friedman relates all of this to his personal experience as a patient facing surgery. He observes the way in which he had to manage information, and the fact that information and expertise 'does not take the place of making decisions' (239). Important as being informed is, it should not be overrated.

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Experts are also often unclear in their communication of the exact character of the information that they have: is it a fact, a hypothesis, or a finding based merely on one particular research method? Are prognoses based upon on a person's condition, or on statistical averages, without full account being taken of a person's capacity for self-differentiating response?

There comes a point where you have to decide that you have enough information, and you need to be decisive. Friedman's approach was to stop when the same question asked to various experts on several occasions produced no new information. He approached the physicians as if they were his cabinet and he was the president. The cabinet members have far more specialized knowledge and the president needs to consult them, but ultimately the president is the one elected to be responsibility for the territory (241).

He also points to the importance of physicians' own relational networks with him and with each other. When physicians fail their patients there is frequently some relational problem in some other area of their lives.

Managing anxiety and managing one's own self overlap. It is important to keep our presence 'loose', so that we can be present in triangles, without getting locked into them. As Friedman observed earlier in the book, reactive societies take everything in deathly seriousness. Injecting light humour into situations is an important way in which things can be kept loose.

He articulates a number of principles that are important in times of crisis. We must keep up our functioning, refusing to 'let crisis become the axis around which your world revolves' (245). We need a wide support system, to stay focused on long-term goals, to practice means of calming, and to listen to our bodies. We need to be attentive to triangles and keep everything loose with humour. We also need to recognize the possibility that the crisis may have been occasioned by our own prior forms of functioning, and seek to address and change these.

In crisis situations, leaders must maintain a balance between different poles of behaviour (e.g. leaning on others/staying accountable, getting information/being decisive, appreciating loneliness/not cutting off), going different ways as the situation demands, but without 'triggering a counterbalancing reaction' (246).

### Sabotage

Crisis can also result in a manner that is 'precipitated by the leader's own leadership'. Such a crisis 'is not due to failure or incompetence but to his or her success at self-differentiation.' Self-differentiation triggers reactivity, and the way that leaders respond to this is a 'make or break' moment, 'part and parcel of the leadership process itself' (247).

'Self-differentiation always triggers sabotage.' It is in the face of sabotage that leaders are tempted to unwork their differentiation and adapt to the dysfunctionality of the system again. Sabotage is

unavoidable in the process of effective leadership. 'It is only after having first brought about a change and then subsequently endured the resultant sabotage that the leader can feel truly successful.'

### *The Presence of the Past*

While most approaches to understanding relationship appreciate the importance of the past, most think of the past's relationship to the presence as akin to the collision of billiard balls, and only focus on the impact of the immediately previous generation. Friedman argues that 'the nature of connections in the present can have more to do with what has been transmitted successively for many generations than with the logic of their contemporary relationship' (249). In seeking to change the way that a family, organization, or institution operates, structural changes alone will prove insufficient, unless they are 'accompanied by changes in an institution's multigenerational emotional processes.'

Friedman gives the example of churches that have the reputation for being 'pills' and others that have the reputation for being 'plums'. While 'plums' often only have only 'three or four clergy in a century … pills spit them out after a few years' (250). 'Pills' can make new leaders look very ineffective, while 'plums' can make them appear highly effective, as they benefit from the 'effective functioning of the congregation' (251). Without well-differentiated leadership the character of such institutions will not change, generation after generation. The leader who

understands this can be effective in situations where others may not be.

## Comments

First, it would be interesting to explore the relationship between emotional triangles and church unity (and further to relate this to Girardian scapegoat mechanisms). How often does the unity of churches depend upon 'triangling', which channels the stress of the system onto particular persons (e.g. pastors, older faithful members, especially single people who lack a partner to help them in their differentiation)? Alternatively, how often is church unity achieved through the systematic exclusion or isolation of certain parties? When church unity breaks down, it can be worth exploring whether it was previously held together by such a perverse triangling unity, which has since been rendered inoperative.

Second, it seems to me that the relationship between sin and triangles could prove an immensely important and fruitful matter for study. If what Friedman has said about triangles is correct, then a direct attack upon the sins in our lives may prove ineffective. In fact, it may even strengthen them. Even if it does prove effective in eradicating a particular area of sin, problems are likely to emerge elsewhere. Sins are symptoms of broader relationship dysfunction (something which should equip us in understanding the concept of systemic evil). In order to tackle sin effectively, sometimes perhaps our focus

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should not really be on tackling sin directly, but on dealing with the dysfunctional relationships that it symptomizes.

Theologically, it might help to illuminate the problem of the Law, which can lead to us being in a perverse triangle with our sin and the Law. The more that we will to change, the more ineffective we can be. It is only through the work of Christ, who enters into this triangle and reconfigures it, and our relationship with sin and the Law, that sin no longer holds us in bondage. Christ enables us to self-differentiate from our sin and through free forgiveness heals the broken relationships that produce the anxiety that fuels our sin. I don't know, perhaps there is something worth exploring here.

Third, it might be helpful to explore the gospel in terms of *good humour*, that which loosens the bonds of the destructive triangles that fetter us to dysfunctional behaviours and relationships. The gospel injects pure joy into the world, something that is alien to all reactive and triangled relationships, which are characterized by a grim seriousness (even in their supposed humour).

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