

ON EMPTINESS AND CLOSENESS

PART I

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Distance

Family therapists increasingly are using the ideas and language of movement to describe the many complex, interwoven patterns and reactions that exist in all families. This language is useful in teaching people that there are options to just standing still; that they have the option of distancing — moving away from others, or of moving closer to others. Standing still represents the helpless position, and therapists have spent long frustrating hours trying to get helpless people to make a move — any kind of move — toward or away from others. Often though, the more the therapist tries the less the "patient" moves, and some thought might be given as to whether this problem lies in the therapist, the "patient" or both.

Getting distance in a family is difficult. It is not easy for the overconcerned mother to retreat from her child. A feeling in the child is like having the same feeling inside her own self. It is also difficult for a husband, obsessed with his wife and fearful of losing her, to pull back from her and give her room to define herself. It is difficult for the child, struggling with his own unsureness and wanting independence at the same time, to leave home without an emotional cutoff from his parents. But when each of these situations is studied, the move that must be made is clear. Distance is necessary.

One can always take advantage of the available physical forms of distance — turning on television, taking a walk, reading a newspaper, going shopping — anything to avoid being in the presence of the other person. Distancing does not have to be done gracefully. One can scowl inside himself, kick the dog while walking around the block, or swear at a shopkeeper. No one in the family need know about these reactions. There is enough time to cool down and control oneself. In other words, the expression of negative feelings from the distant position will not neutralize the effectiveness of the move.

Closeness

Movement toward closeness is another story. *Closeness* results when two people move toward each other and get as close as possible without fusing. To avoid fusing into one, there must always be some space between them so that each can know where his own individual self begins and where it ends, and what is inside himself, and what inside the other person.

Closeness requires a keen sense of self-identity and self-differentiation. To the extent that either or both of these elements are lacking, fusion will cause a blending of one self into the other. Such fusion results in distance, as two people try to redefine themselves by wrenching themselves apart. In contrast to distancing, the feelings *inside* a person and *between people* are critically important in developing closeness and preventing fusion.

Closeness and Structure

A great deal is known about the structure that is involved in the development of a personal relationship. In such a relationship, we know that each person must assume responsibility for his own feelings. He must avoid telling others what to do; avoid triangles; stop reading the minds of others, and many other things. These structural notions are conducive to closeness. They are necessary because they allow closeness to happen. But, by themselves structural concepts will not create closeness. Closeness is not a natural phenomenon. The desire for it is universal but one will never attain it by "doing what comes naturally." One cannot force it. To force closeness is to kill it off. Forced closeness is experienced as a tremendous emotional push, a sense of being suffocated by another self. People will tend to either openly conflict with, or try to tune out or run away from such an emotional push. *Unlike distancing from another person, closeness must be accomplished gracefully.*

In the long run, closeness can only be accomplished by two people who both want it, and who appreciate both the beauty of such a relationship and

the emotional price that one must pay to get it. It is precisely at this point in the development of a personal relationship that we see so many families fail. They have learned a great deal, have tried valiantly to follow the structural rules they have been taught, but their emotional sensitivities continue to intrude and the sense of feeling close remains elusive. Relationships can become more functional but continue to be tight. There is an absence of gracefully flowing emotionality and connectedness between people. Openness therefore remains limited. Disappointment in unmet expectations is controlled by will, but it has a way of sneaking out in direct or indirect fashion. Over time, the emptiness in such a relationship becomes increasingly apparent. What we find is toleration and pseudo-acceptance replacing enjoyment and enthusiasm.

Emptiness, Hurt and Emotional Upset

There is a simple and highly effective formula for the family therapist to keep in mind. It runs like this: stimulus —» emptiness —» hurt —» emotional upset (frequently in the form of anger or its equivalent) —» response. A stimulus is any agent, action or condition that will elicit emotional upset in the family or inside a person. It can be a thought, a feeling, a tone of voice, an assumption, an implication, a hooked question, a memory, etc. *In any emotional problem, the first reaction to this stimulus is a feeling of emptiness inside a person.* This feeling will be described in detail later in this paper. There follows a feeling of hurt — a wave of pain, suffering, injury or distress. Then comes the emotional upset or anger and the reaction.

It is the feelings of angry upset that lead to the common dysfunctional reactions we see at times in all families. People are complaining, blaming, accusing, attacking, defending, feeling guilty, etc. With careful clinical inquiry, it becomes clear that the emptiness and hurt come before the angry upset but are often quickly skipped over. Some people skip over them because they are not aware that they are there. Others skip over them to avoid exposing their most delicate emotions and sensitivities. They are really more interested in protecting their feelings than in getting closeness. They want to fill in their own emptiness from another person without exposing and risking their own most tender feelings. No matter what they say, protection and safety have been placed ahead of closeness. Closeness always demands taking a chance, a risk.

Whatever the reason for avoiding the emptiness and hurt, once the process inside of and between people reaches the point of anger, it will lead to nothing that is productive and much that is destruc-

tive. The relationship is on a downhill course from that point. It will be followed by argument, disagreement, distance and emotional turmoil. If people could learn to step behind the angry emotional upset and get into the emptiness in themselves and in others, then they could begin to get close to each other. More progress and understanding is reached by talking about emptiness and hurt than by letting out anger. It is both possible and natural to empathize and sympathize with, and also to hear positively anyone's feelings of emptiness. Those who advocate "getting anger off your chest" foster distant, emotionally tuned out relationships.

What is Emptiness?

The state of emptiness is made up of many feelings. The following is an incomplete description of some of the more common elements which have been described to me by many people in my private practice. There is nothing new about these descriptions. Books and articles have been written about these feelings since the beginning of time.

Loneliness — "A sense of isolation in which all that I have is my work. A desperate desire for human contact. There is nobody that I can even talk to. I want to reach out to somebody and end the loneliness but there is no one to share anything with. There isn't much between me and my spouse or my children. I feel even more lonely in their presence. I know now that I could never solve the problem of loneliness by marriage or having a family. The problem is in me. There is something that I do that keeps people away. I get no support. Loneliness will be my whole future. I have no hope that I will ever connect with someone else. There is no relief from it. What if I were the only person in the world? It is not the solitude or the being alone that bothers me, it is the loneliness. When I come home and no one is there, that doesn't bother me. What gets me is that I could die there and no one would even know or care. That's the difference between being lonely and being alone. I know that if I could only have the courage to face my loneliness, I would not have to be alone."

A feeling of nothingness — "There is a sense that something is missing, that something has been lost. I can't put my finger on it, but it conveys the feeling that I can't have anything, that there is nothing to look forward to. I am a nobody. I feel bad and the bottom seems to be dropping out of everything. I start thinking about my own sanity. Am I going crazy? There is a loss of the sense of myself. It is hard to see myself as an individual without my

spouse or my children. I feel badly about myself since I am trying to change and I can't say what I think or feel. I feel depressed and can't get certain people out of my head. Something in me is bad. The badness is that I don't really care about others. I'm really down on myself. I know that I should be doing such and such but I don't feel like it. I think of suicide. I feel nothing. I am nothing. I am paralyzed. Into my emptiness fantasy creeps. Unreality and craziness. My mind tends to wander when there is nothing else for it to do. I'm not needed by anybody."

Confusion—"The tendency to question all that I thought I knew. All the 'should's and ought-to's'! What do I know? There are no answers. There is a continuous process of circular reasoning. Circular recyclings of the past, unworkable adaptations. I don't make decisions about my life anymore. I have him/her on my mind all the time. Everything is unpredictable. I can't count on anything. I can't do anything right. The desire for sureness creates more worry and indecision and boxes me into my loneliness."

Hopelessness and helplessness — "I really don't care. What is the sense of trying? What I hoped for will never be. What is the sense of it all? What is life for? Nothing works out. It will always be this way. I tried so hard but the more I seem to gain the more I seem to lose. (Despair) Why fight it? Give up. Can I go on? Can I survive?"

Belonging — "I don't belong anywhere. I'm just tagging along. I don't feel that I am really a part of something. I am not really in my family. I am so sorry that I threw out my family traditions and my heritage. Now I don't belong any place or anywhere. I feel useless; no one needs me. I don't have much in common with those close to me anymore."

Sadness — "I feel like crying all the time. I am keenly disappointed with myself and my life. There is regret over my past. I have a strong urge to look up my old friends and neighborhood."

Uncared for — "I have a strong desire to be taken care of and to stop taking care of others. I wish someone really cared about me — just me, the way I am. Not what I do. I don't care about anything or anybody, not even about myself. Nobody cares about me. I yearn to be touched. I'm not special to anybody. If my spouse wants sex, it's not really with me. It could be anybody. There are such gaps and empty spaces in the family. I'm unimportant."

Shame — I have a feeling of embarrassment and

a sense of disgrace about certain characteristics of mine. I am more honestly aware of them now, and I feel guilty, that I am at fault. Before, I was not honest with myself. I admitted small or non-existent flaws but not those I really felt badly about. What a shame. I have been avoiding redefining the "should's and ought-to's" that came from the family I grew up in. I feel confused, guilty and badly about myself."

Failure — "All I do is try and fail. There is such a gap between what I expected of myself and others, and where I am. I will never get anywhere. I thought I knew where I was going. I am a failure because no one lives up to the expectations that I had. It is this level of expectation that makes me important, that would have made me have some meaning. I have a terrifying sense of inadequacy."

Emotional death — "I realize now that I can't run from the problems around and inside of me. I feel apathetic, without interest in anything. It's the same thing every day. I have no enthusiasm for anything. I used to get zest for living from others or even provide it myself, but that no longer works. I am bored, and I feel like my self is dying. I find it hard to concentrate and need a good fight to survive. I have a sense that I am getting older and that so little time is left. The more I think about it, the more depressing it gets. I feel lifeless, a tired feeling like I never had before. This whole situation is a constant drain. It will always be this way. It will never change. I find myself thinking of suicide and those people who have already died. There is an acute sense of loss that permeates my life."

Paranoia — "I feel inhibited, uncomfortable and so hurt inside. It's like a pain inside and I can't fill it up or get away from it. Closeness only brings out my anger and not my hurt. This only makes my emptiness bigger. As the emptiness and loneliness increase, I go more and more into myself. All I can do is go into my insides. That is all I have and there is nothing there. A feeling of mistrust enters my mind about people outside of me."

Why the Word Emptiness?

Talking about "emptiness" is not new or different. Many people have written about it for many years under different labels. Then why call it emptiness? The word fits in with the language of time and space that I have grown accustomed to use. It is a spatial term consistent with such language as — position, movement, closeness, distance, direction of

movement toward or away, rhythm, speed, amplitude of movement, triangles, and time. The word is general enough to encompass all the descriptive feelings that people report when they run into emotional problems. Finally, it is a simple word that is heard and recognized by people. It is easy for people to identify with the word "emptiness." It rings a bell with almost everyone. People readily acknowledge that they have been in that state at one or many points in their life, or at least have sensed the feeling before running.

The word "emptiness" is also a word that has implications. It is not purely descriptive, but carries implications and directions and questions along with it. What is missing? How can one fill it? With what? Was something lost and if so where?

One might ask, "Why call it emptiness when it is so full of such feelings as loneliness, fear, inadequacy, etc?" These emotional states reflect real feelings, but insofar as they are problematic, they represent the *absence* of certain feelings. And it is these feelings that are necessary for functioning in this real world. The word "emptiness" emphasizes the importance of the presence of courage in place of fear, optimism in place of pessimism, experienced success in place of inadequacy, etc. Emptiness covers all these feelings, the absent ones, and the negative ones that move in to replace them. The word is relative in the sense that it represents common characteristics in all individuals. Yet the details of the feelings are unique in each and every person. For example, when someone reports that he is lonely, he is giving us a conclusion. We do not know what he means until we have him paint a picture of *his* loneliness in detail.

Adaptations to Emptiness

Going into a state of emotional emptiness in varying degrees is the price that one must pay for change. The price is large, but necessary. Anything short of this feeling of emptiness is considered an adaptation. Such adaptations are fine if that is what a person wants, but he should be aware that this is all it is — an adjustment that remains vulnerable to environmental stress and emotional strain. With the price of change so high, it is no wonder that people avoid change; that change is less common than adaptation; that homeostatic mechanisms in the family are so resistant.

Some people avoid the real experience of emptiness by *muddling around* in it most of their lives.

They don't avoid it or do anything with it. They just exist in it. They wander around inside themselves, giving others no feedback, not talking much and not thinking out loud. They keep a real understanding of their problems to themselves beyond repetitious statements such as "I feel depressed." No details are given. Problems are seen as isolated events inside themselves, as their fate in life. No understanding is possible since they never put themselves in a context with others.

Another form of muddling is to continually ask, "Why do I do such and such? The motivational question "why?" is continually taken inside self and serves to foster an obsession with oneself. One could avoid muddling if he took every "why" question back into his extended family and looked at the process back there, the flow of movement. The process of getting emotionally connected with one's parents is more important than getting the answer to the question "why?" The muddler is not really in a state of emptiness. He only appears to be. He has adopted it as a part of his person, as part of his life. He would be lost without it. He does not really experience the despair of hopelessness which comes when one desperately wants something that he can't get. The muddler wants nothing from himself.

Muddling around also avoids emptiness since such a person is usually attached to someone who is over-responsible, someone who will do things for him so he can survive. The over-responsible person fills in the emptiness of the helpless muddler and at the same time has the opportunity to avoid his own depressions and emptiness. They do this by *focusing on the problems of others*. This is another common way of avoiding emptiness. You can marry someone who is an obvious scoundrel, is "sick" or has some gross character disorder — whose emptiness is apparent. You can devote your life to changing or treating him. This will work until the scoundrel disintegrates to the point where the system is in danger of breaking up or until the scoundrel changes into an angel. In either event, the over-responsible person will have nothing to do but try to reverse the changes or go into his own emptiness. Such inevitable changes explain the shift of symptoms within every family.

Another way to minimize exposure to emptiness is to *avoid closeness*. The closer one person gets to another, the more the emotional investment that is required, the greater the chance of gain or loss, the greater the risk of feeling hurt and empty. People who try to protect themselves from hurt and empti-

ness can avoid this by getting somewhat connected but keeping the connection impersonal and distant. A certain privacy is maintained about their inner self and others are kept at a certain distance from self. They try to do a cautious balancing act between connectedness and isolation. A little of one and some of the other. They stay at the periphery of the crowd.

Still another way to avoid emptiness is to have *unexplained depressions*. In these types of accidental depressions, people enter the equivalent of emptiness and somehow or other, sooner or later, leave it. They learn nothing from it and have no explanation for it. They often live in dread of its potential unpredictable recurrence. It will often be seen and treated as some sort of physical phenomena. The real impact of the emptiness gets buried under the blanket of "I had a depression." If one sees them clinically in a deep depression, it is a mistake to talk to them about emptiness. They can neither understand nor tolerate such feelings. They have to be brought out of it by any means (drugs, hospitalization, etc.) and then later put back into it gradually so that they can learn something about emptiness. Out of fear, many may refuse to do this.

To some extent, all people (some more than others) avoid emptiness by the *self deception of filling in and replacement*. The emptiness inside of self and between self and others is vaguely sensed and acknowledged. Solutions are sought by filling it in from something similar, or in other activities and places, rather than exposing one's self to it directly. A lonely wife may fill emptiness by getting over-involved with the children; a lonely husband by over-involvement with work. One can try to fill the emptiness with such things as drink, food, books, television. Over-invested causes such as birth control, political issues, social injustice, may represent, in part, attempts to fill personal emptiness. Still others try to avoid facing this feeling state by getting involved in *furios activity, increasing the rhythm of their life*, organizing and filling their schedule so there is no time to think and introspect. Periodically, they become exhausted and retreat to vacations or any change of pace, only to eventually return to their furious schedule. Such replacement processes will work until they are over done or the family emotional system is hit with an unexpected stress such as the birth of another child, job loss, the death of a member, etc.

Another common avoidance-adaptive technique is *to skip over, to skitter out of* the emptiness. Ask many people what it feels like inside themselves to feel empty, and they will tell you what they do about it. The answer is directed at how they avoid it and

not what it is like. At best they will describe it as "horrible, I can't stand it." They move right over the feeling of misery, hurt and emptiness, and into the area of emotional upset and their response to it. The emotional upset is often anger and this takes the person either into sullen withdrawal or angry confrontation with other people. It quickly removes the focus from oneself, from one's own emptiness and onto the other person. Clinically, one must directly focus on the emptiness and continually push to get behind the emotional upset. Unless the therapist does this, the process will continue to avoid the emptiness in the person and in the family and will automatically focus discussion on the adaptive techniques of avoiding the emptiness. It is a difficult message to convey; it is a painful message to hear. There are no easy solutions if one really wants change.

The Voluntary Depression

In a sense, it is unreal to talk of a voluntary plunge into emptiness. The emotions associated with such a move are so extremely uncomfortable that no one will enter them voluntarily the first time. People will experience them only when forced to do so by the course of events — the real or threatened loss of someone, failures, etc. After this initial experience, after one has learned that he can survive, after one knows it to be a genuine learning experience, then he can begin to think about voluntary emptiness.

Change demands that one be able to plunge into this extremely uncomfortable situation. People must learn to take certain actions, fully aware that they are precipitating their own feelings of emptiness. This is the only way that they can avoid running from their feelings and believe that they can survive the experience. This voluntary step is quite different from waking up depressed in the morning. This is seen as an accident. If someone can get into this state voluntarily, know that he can build bridges to others, know that he can get out of it, then he no longer has to run from himself.

Symptoms come from attempts to avoid being in this feeling state. In the "accidental" depression that comes and goes, or in the depression that one comes out of because his spouse threatens to leave him — in both of these, the emptiness is not faced or understood. In neither does the person determine his own course. Things either happen or others

cause them. After the initial experience of emptiness forced on us by events, *periods of emptiness should be planned for oneself whenever and wherever there is an emotional problem that one is involved in.* It may seem like a crazy notion but it is less crazy than the perpetual, impossible chase after "feeling happy." It is especially difficult for the hard-working, over-responsible person to give up and enter the empty state. He has to learn that part of the solution to certain problems is to give up working on them, to give up, to just sit in emptiness. If one can afford to disintegrate into emptiness, then he will experience relief from the unnecessary shackles of trying the impossible and his life can be relatively more full.

The voluntary pursuit of being able to live with emptiness is not a pull-back designed to protect oneself. It is very different from the defensive distance that results from guilt or self-protection. Defense presumes attack and actually invites it. To be protective is to surround oneself with a wall that denies the embarrassing qualities of stupidity, foolishness, inadequacy, dependency, fears of what others will think, etc. Going into emptiness is to expose oneself to the opportunity to learn what real courage is. It is neither defensive nor protective.

When one tries to deal with his own emptiness in an emotional system, he will have to fight the system too. Emptiness in a system tends to perpetuate itself. Each member in the system has his own emptiness and both try to avoid it. One muddles around in it and the other focuses on the muddler. This is a common pattern of the distancer and the pursuer. When the pursuer gets tired, he will disintegrate and go into his own emptiness. Without a pursuer after him, the distancer really begins to experience his own real emptiness. He can no longer focus his efforts on moving away from the pursuer. These observations represent a natural system and are easily read and understood by people. They can understand the ideas of emptiness, adaptation, change and avoidance.

Why Go Into Emptiness?

The best reason for going into emptiness is that it *exists in all people* and must be understood as a part of your self. Life has enough stress in it to assure that you will experience it directly or indirectly at some time, and that running from it will only increase your difficulties. Another facet of emptiness that people find upsetting is the feeling of confusion.

Having given up on what they thought or felt they knew because it was not working, they now suffer through a gap of uncertainty before they come up with a different viewpoint, a different way of looking at things. So the first stage of knowledge is confusion. One must have an open mind to allow new information to enter. One way to make some sense out of going into emptiness is to use it as an *opportunity to learn.* One of the unfortunate stories that one hears over and over in his office, is from the person who has had multiple bouts of "depression" in the past, came out of them and learned nothing from them. He cannot explain, he cannot understand, he cannot use it. He does not know what it was about, what caused it, or what made it better. He suffered all the misery and got nothing from it. If confusion can be seen as the necessary "between step" in going from that which does not work to the development of functional principles, then it can be seen as a step forward. It takes confusion to clear out one's head.

Emptiness also scares people because it confronts them with their own failure, that many of their ideas and values are either faulty or did not work. There is a keen sense of not being appreciated. But there is real value in developing the ability to fail. This is especially a good lesson for the perfectionist to learn. His problem is that he tries too hard, that he tries the impossible, that he has trouble separating the possible from the impossible. In a life filled with so many imperfections in all of us, trying to be better is a worthwhile goal. It brings a sense of relief to *know and acknowledge openly that you are going to fail* sometimes — to accept that about yourself. This is one of the problems that parents run into. So many books have been written which say, between the lines, that "If you only knew how, you could raise perfect children." Generally, a parent will do a better job when he gives up on being a parent, lowers his level of expectation, expects failures, and concentrates on being a person who happens to be a parent. That will automatically increase his effectiveness many-fold. What a sense of relief ensues!

Another reason for going into emptiness has to do with the universal urge to get close to others. Therapists and people are very good at introducing distance into relationships. This can be done physically, by activities or by keeping quiet. Less is known about closeness. Much has been defined about the structure of getting close. We know enough to avoid triangles, to take responsibility for self and not others, to avoid telling others what to do, etc. But beyond the structural arrangement, closeness re-

mains elusive. It is a unique, somewhat indefinable, highly personal experience. People can use emptiness to tap into these unique aspects of closeness. It is useful to remember that closeness was once there in every blood or marriage relationship. Often this has to be reactivated. If one can go into the state of emptiness without blaming, accusing or making other attempts to avoid it, then he can be understood in a compassionate, sympathetic way by others. By going into his own emptiness and hurt, he gets behind the anger and turns people on rather than turning them off. He gets under the layers of crud, issues, bitterness and sour memories that have buried the positive aspects of the relationship over time. The exposure of one's vulnerability and hurt are intrinsic to the process of closeness. The very exposure of the hurt and emptiness removes much of the anger. The experience of acknowledging one's hurt actually increases one's emotional muscles, one's self mass, his person, what he is and how he can use himself. It creates an environment wherein each person is aware of the other, lends significance to the other, touches and wants to be touched, is interested and interesting. In such a climate, people want to be together and do not simply feel they "should be" together. Closeness becomes not a responsibility or a duty. People really desire private time for each other.

There is a group of ministers in New York who go down to the Bowery one night a month. They visit bars, give small change to people who will probably use it for drink and get involved in family problems that the most capable therapists in the world could not influence in twenty years. They are not fools and they realize that they will get little or no change. One wonders why they pursue such seemingly impossible problems. On minister said, "When you walk into the Bowery by yourself you can literally touch the bitterness and loneliness of every person there. Into their embittered lives, we at least bring five or ten minutes of connectedness and I think that makes it worthwhile."

When one begins to feel that he is nothing, he begins to realize that each person can only give what he has. He sees that his interpersonal relationships have often taken the form of two half empty glasses trying to fill and be filled by each other. The emptiness in each glass can only be filled by fusing two glasses into one (e.g. marriage is a union) or by leaving one glass empty (with symptoms). This desire for union and fusion and completeness and all the beliefs that go with them can only be given up by a rather *severe wrenching apart process*. This intensity of an emotional system between people and process is very uncomfortable but very useful. The

emotional bonding between a person and his beliefs is simply fantastic. As one tries to differentiate from another person and sort out his beliefs, issues of expectation, death, depression, personal re-evaluation and emptiness arise. A feeling that perhaps nothing is important, including self and others, helps a person to separate himself from these beliefs by inducing a state of hopelessness. The effort to change can be fruitful only if one can persist beyond the point of hopelessness, giving up hope that the other person will ever change. He is then able to move into a re-evaluation of his own life, his self, the past, present and future, the values, and goals etc. As long as there is hope, one will feel like something. The wrenching apart and the feelings of nothingness are appropriate and necessary for real change to occur. If one has spent much of his life trying to accumulate self from others he will feel like nothing if he gives up the attempt. *Marriages and other relationships often must die before they can be reborn*. Part of the emotional death is the feeling of nothingness. From the state of nothingness, one can then rebuild and begin to realize that the only true value is one that can survive death. One can try to avoid this feeling of being nothing but then must accept the consequences of such action. Change will not be possible.

Real death, similar to emotional death, is an issue in all families. It has been said that those who have been legally dead (e.g. heart stopped beating during an operation and brought back to "life") are not afraid of dying again. Emotional death is an experience similar to that. The feelings of emptiness and humility remove the shackles from one's body and the blinders from his eyes. The spectre of real death is no longer so terrifying. Emotional death opens the door to a profound re-evaluation of the significant-insignificance of each of us.

Emptiness has a great deal to do with fracturing the image that people put between themselves and the world. This image is a partial, screened projection and is used to hide behind and protect oneself from emotional injury. Once the image becomes consistent, a gap results between what one is and what one purports to be. The emphasis then is on perpetuating the image and protecting real self. In effect, the emphasis is not on self. It is on what one would like to be and what others will think of me. As one pulls back the emotional push toward other people, stops running and goes into his own emptiness, he feels depressed, more here-and-now oriented,

more time conscious, and less demanding of others. He looks more and more into himself and his loneliness becomes more apparent. Getting into emptiness forces a person to get something from himself and to get less from the outside. Paradoxically, the less he tries to get from outside himself, the more he gets. This keen sense of focusing on self plus the realization that all one has in life is his own self, eventually brings about a sense of detachment, an ability to look at oneself in the state of relative objectivity. All of this is done in the context of a profound appreciation of the value of correctedness. When one goes through the wringer of emptiness, he finally comes to an "I" position that is not as broad as it was before, but firmer. He knows less but what he knows is more surely known.

A Personal Re-Evaluation

If one is going to make use of it, going into the state of emptiness leads to a personal re-evaluation. In this process, one is at first confused as he gives up what he assumed he knew. There is a time gap before this is replaced with a different picture. Eventually he knows less but is more sure of what he knows. As his "I know" area gets smaller and smaller, the gray areas of life increase in size. This is a lesson in humility and perspective. That time gap, filled with confusion, has to be used to get a different picture of self and life. This is the time and place for a personal re-evaluation. The discomfort of going into emptiness is necessary because people want to be sure, to know and to avoid uncertainty. Yet if they have determined what should be, they will never re-evaluate. After all, they already "know." Only when they reach an extreme degree of discomfort, when things clearly aren't working, will they ask, "Is this really what should be?" Then the mind is open. After one has given up hope of getting from others, he can redefine self in terms of what he can get from himself. It takes the inner feeling of confusion, uncertainty, depression and discomfort to wrench himself apart from his fantasy and unworkable expectations. From this despair, in a strange way, comes a sense of self esteem and self respect. This is the point of change.

A personal re-evaluation involves taking a different look at all the "should's" in one's life from the position of feeling empty. One asks, "What was the level of my expectation growing up? How did I get to believe in what I believe in? What is life all about? What is really important? When, where, and with whom did I feel empty in my extended family? What part did I play in that? What do I do that contributes to the disconnectedness and emptiness?" The inevitability of impending

death becomes more real. There is a realization that the notion of being cared about, of being something, must be redefined. There is a deep realization that the emotional bonding between people must be trusted and put at risk. There is a dawning appreciation that, in the final analysis, one's own family is a source of answers, of knowledge, of love, of insight. They are the best arena for useful change. There is a growing realization that one can survive, that emotional bonding in the family can absorb change and can last, and one reaches peaceful acceptance without depression, a more functional value system and sense of self. A sense of relief ensues from the freedom of knowing that others will also have to lower their expectations. There is a reordering and redefinition of what I can get from myself and what really comes from and works between people. There is a new picture of self identity and self differentiation.

Seeing a New Face

Going into a depression voluntarily brings a feeling that one's level of expectation of others will never be met. It is a wrenching separation from hoped-for expectations and its purpose is to allow a new relationship with self and others to come about, based on different expectations. Emptiness occurs when there is a dawning realization that those closest are not really close, that the bond is one based on the content of what we talk about or the things that we do together. There is a realization that the information exchanged has become so familiar and the content of the emotional bonding is so well known that there is little to say. Why ask when you already know what the other's views are? There is a realization that production (doing things together) is very similar to a business relationship. The personal element, the fascination, the interest, the *significance* of self to others and others to self has been allowed to slip away through neglect, familiarity and preoccupation with cares, tasks, worries, stresses and strains of everyday life. The personal element is gone. To renew the personal element, *one should be able to look at a person at different times during the day, and each and every time see a different face.* Each person should be aware of this constantly renewable physical perception. The significance of people to people must be certified on both sides or it can't really be there.

To see a new face every time one looks at a member of the family is really possible but it demands that one concentrate on the other person and

really look. To do this you must realize that you can't generalize about anybody since everyone is partly unique. You must concentrate on the person and not the content alone. After all, it is the person that makes most of what is said in the world worthy of any attention. If someone takes the trouble to say anything, it is significant because they took the trouble to say it. That is what makes people interesting. When you know somebody, the relationship is ready for burial. If you know somebody, you lose interest in them and become more self centered or look elsewhere for interest and enthusiasm. I think the way to change any "past fixes" that we have on a person is to always look at them as if you never saw them before. Open your mind up to them and your interest will automatically increase. The physical act of looking is an excellent reminder of what you are trying to accomplish. To get close, one must remove the fix you have on a person, realizing that you don't know, and never will know them. This interest can act as a stimulant to the development of continual closeness.

What to do About Emptiness

People will enter emptiness initially only because they have to — the situation will be acute and desperate and will force them to it. A child will be in trouble and unapproachable, or a marriage will be breaking up, or someone will have died. Later, as one becomes more familiar with it, he can enter the feeling state, still feeling hurt, but knowing that it will end, that it will be a productive experience and that he will emerge less empty. A very small minority of people will enter it initially without a desperate situation. The first step to take is to see emptiness as a necessary step in self development. Do not try to feel better. Any effort to feel better represents running away from the emptiness. If one runs away, he loses the opportunity to learn and re-evaluate. The therapist can tell people that the emptiness is inevitable since the situation is already producing it. With all the misery and hurt that is already present in the life of the family, they might as well get something useful from it. They might as well learn where they have been coming from. There is often a strong tendency in the therapist to treat the empty feeling state and fill it up. This is a mistake.

On the other hand, it is useless to muddle around in emptiness. It is inevitable that one will feel sorry for himself but this carries the risk of leading to endless bemoaning. If the emptiness becomes overwhelming, it can be put aside temporarily. One does not have to stay in it day after day. There is no point in becoming overwhelmed by an emotion. One must be able to do what is necessary for everyday

living, while going through emptiness. The living system that one is involved in continues to exist despite the emotionality of any individual. The delicate balance of continuing to exist while dying emotionally must be maintained. Yet it is important to stay in emptiness long enough and consistently enough so that one feels hopeless about many things, depressed, believing that other people will never change. It is only after giving up hope completely that self, and others in an emotional system will really change. This is where family therapists fail in their efforts with their own families. They become experts in behavior modification and deceive themselves. They make certain adaptations in themselves but are always looking out of the corner of their eyes to see if the other person is reactively changing. As soon as they see the other person change, they drop their own changes. Their efforts are really a covert and subtle attempt to change the other person. Up to the point of giving up totally on the hope that others will ever change, any effort is an adaptation, an indirect effort at changing others, no matter what one says. After the point of hopelessness there is a genuine opportunity for self change and acceptance of others. Emptiness is the emotional price for any substantial change. Out of the hopelessness is born the conviction that only change in self is possible.

One must be able to put himself into those spots in his family where he can be hurt. Hurt must be accepted as an inevitable part of life. The price of protecting one's feelings is too high. Protection limits a person and sharply delimits what he can do with himself in life. He must acknowledge the stupidity, fears, panic, shame and embarrassment in his own person. One can't hide this or ask others to fill in the emptiness created by such feelings. This makes change a very lonely business. It is important to be able to endure the emptiness by oneself, to suffer inside without blaming, accusing or "bitching" at the other. If one does open up to others in this complaining fashion, he runs from his emptiness and alienates others. They will tune him out and his loneliness will increase. Any way you cut it, change is truly a lonely, hurtful business.

Loneliness is probably the most universal emotion experienced both in emptiness and in the process of change. This does not mean that one cannot communicate his feelings of emptiness. When initially in emptiness it probably is not possible to talk about it in a useful fashion and it may be better to be quiet. Later one can communicate it to others provided that it is presented (1) as his own emptiness, (2) as something that he alone has to deal with, (3) other people are not responsible for it.

. The listener must not try to fill it in. It is especially necessary for the therapist to remember that other people should be allowed to have their problems and hurts. Emptiness must be seen as a desirable stage in the process of change and not as a "sickness." Thus, the suffering must be endured quietly though it is not within human capacity to endure it gracefully. Often other people both within and outside the family will read the emptiness as a sickness. This is to be expected. One must be careful to evaluate and disregard much of the feedback he receives from others, including therapists. They will try to fill him in, make him feel better, or make him feel bad so that he will resume his old position. Advice and help from other members of the system will conspire to get him out of the empty position. The system fears that emptiness in one member will activate it in others.

The primary key to doing something effective with emptiness is to *take it back to the extended family*. In my experience, one can identify the emptiness that is in a person at any given time and then ask them if they ever experienced the same feelings growing up. The vast majority will immediately answer "yes." Some will give a quick "no" partly because they did not take time to consider the question, or their mind was full of some immediate difficulty, or they were accidentally or on purpose out of touch with their inner feelings. On consideration, these people will often make the connection. A very small minority will stick with a "no" and these represent people who have been focused on in their extended families while growing up, so much that they experienced only being the center of attention. They were unprepared for the inevitable empty moments that would enter their life.

For example, a father and mother who are very distant often maintain their connectedness by focusing on their child. They may take the child with them everywhere, or communicate through him. Naturally, this child will not know emptiness directly. Nor will he be prepared for the real world when he leaves home. Overdose parents don't prepare their children for that which awaits them in the world outside home. The overdose parent prepares the child he is over-invested in for a fantasy world. Thus, the most useful thing that one can do with his emptiness is to take his feelings back to his extended family, not to blame them but to establish connectedness with them. He will find that his folks had their share of emptiness too. Establishing connectedness with the family (not the therapist) is important because understanding without movement is insight without change. As one moves his emptiness back to the previous generation, he understands that he

brought his own emptiness to his nuclear family.

When one takes these feelings back into the extended family, he must evaluate how he got to the position he finds himself in at the present — his difficulties, goals, expectations, wants and needs. There are certain key words around which to do this evaluation. They include father, mother, son, daughter, brother, sister, husband, wife, marriage, etc. One must redefine what these words mean. This is done by contrasting current experience in the nuclear family with the way people saw things in the extended family. One's view of the extended family is often the limited view of a child. It is remarkable how people find it difficult to see their parents as having been children at one time. It is remarkable how often someone tells how badly his parents treated him, and how seldom he will question what he did for his parents. It is so often seen as a one-way street. It is by this redefinition and re-looking at the extended family that one comes to learn about himself and what he is doing to perpetuate his own emptiness. As one lowers his level of expectation in the nuclear family to a more realistic level, he questions how he arrived at these other expectations, wishful thinking, fantasy, distortions, sidings with one parent against the other. Such new contrasts of the present with the past often give revealing insights and pictures of repetitive patterns over the generations.

Emptiness in self should be shared with others. This fractures previous emotional expectations and images and increases interest between people. It is often amazing to one partner to hear that the other feels the same emptiness. This emphasizes that self does not really know others. Boredom and a negative fix on the other person can give way to the old feeling of caring about them from courtship days. The emptiness coming from childhood helps to de-personalize the negative feelings in each person by shooting these feelings back into the extended family, and rolls the generational emotional push further back. Negativity is further removed from the present scene. This fosters a positive resonance between people.

One trick to try to take the blame and accusation out of talking about emptiness as it is being shared with others, is to communicate emptiness felt about members of the nuclear family to members of the extended family and *vice versa*. Then no one can hear blame. Do not undervalue this communication. There is a form of magic in it.

emptiness as a pathological symptom. Psychology and Emptiness. He who has a why to live, can bear almost any how. Nietzsche.Â inner experience of emptiness and is employed as a means of counteract-. ing the experience in some way. Kohut also posits that young adulthood and.Â push other people away while longing for closeness at the same time. Our. holes create deep anxiety and our life becomes a constant unconscious com Itâ€™s the emptiness of a full house which makes you lonely. I think closeness is overrated. Nobody but the people closest to you can make you feel the loneliest. Aanchal Jain.Â Welcome to a place where words matter. On Medium, smart voices and original ideas take center stage - with no ads in sight. Watch. Make Medium yours. Follow all the topics you care about, and weâ€™ll deliver the best stories for you to your homepage and inbox. Explore. Become a member. Get unlimited access to the best stories on Medium â€” and support writers while youâ€™re at it. The term emptiness can describe different states depending on our perspectiveâ€•whether spiritual, philosophical, or psychological. Each personâ€™s encounter is unique.Â Both loneliness and emptiness are aspects of the same basic anxiety [4], which is often felt as we near the discomfort of these states. Itâ€™s the fear of experiencing emptiness that manifests as existential anxietyâ€•an ever present, anxious dread that even lurks beneath happiness, according to the first existentialist Soren.Â The emptiness and grief triggered by my motherâ€™s death was compounded by our lack of closeness, de-scribed in a poem I penned at 14, â€œThe Loneliness of Man.â€