

Human Agency and Freedom From Labels

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Fortunately for most of us, not only have a large number of quantum physicists and neuro scientists but also many in the helping professions have broken free of a Newtonian worldview and, consequently, have freed their clients from labels and now see them as whole persons with vast potential for improvement.

One such person was Edwin Friedman.¹

Friedman maintained that the primary cause of our chronically anxious society and its production of irresponsible people are, in large part, due to the still dominant Newtonian based, “social science construction of reality.” The concepts of their Newtonian worldview failed to adequately describe reality or enable people to become healthier. Their concepts of reality, Friedman says, unfortunately focus our attention “*on classifications such as the psychological diagnosis of individuals or their personality profiles and on their social or anthropological niches (culture, class, gender, race, age, creed, etc.)*.”² Such categories run the risk of putting people in boxes and thus thwart people from taking full personal responsibility for their choices.³

From my coaching people, I have personally experienced that these boxes also inhibit people from becoming aware of the universality of human interpretive thought processes and their universally similar physiological effect on us,⁴ and therefore from dialoguing and comprehending each other regardless of race, creed, gender, or age. This ultimately inhibits our celebrating our potential to learn, heal and grow together.

And even if Friedman was unable to provide the hard scientific data and theoretical grounding that quantum mechanics and neurobiological research now provide,⁵ he did develop a procedural framework to help people. Friedman’s empirical work with people led him to realize that people who were held responsible for their words and actions were more likely to create appropriate boundaries on themselves and hence live far more peaceful and respectful

¹ Murray Bowen was Friedman’s source for his thinking. However, as Friedman’s works have been utilized and adapted at both the secular and faith-based institutions, he has been selected for this consideration.

² Edwin Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve, Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, the Edwin Friedman Estate/Trust, Bethesda, Maryland, 1999, p. 3.

³ This is a theme that runs throughout Friedman’s work.

⁴ An interesting empirical work that refines the limits while proposing the universality of the emotional process is the work of Paul Ekman. *The Nature of Emotions, Fundamental Question*, Ed. Paul Ekman and Richard J. Davidson, Oxford Press, New York, 1994; pp. 144, 148, 172-176. *What the Face Reveals, Basic and Applied Studies of Spontaneous Expression Using the Facial Action Coding System*, Ed. Paul Ekman and Erika Rosenberg, Oxford Press, New York, 1997, pp. 300-320.

⁵ Friedman was aware of the shift that quantum physics and quantum theory had created in thinking about reality. Edwin Friedman, 51st minute in his video taped conference, *Family Process and Process Theology*, The Alban Institute. [Now available on DVD from The Alban Institute.]

lives.⁶ Clinically, Friedman discovered that this was true whatever one's family of origin might have been or however difficult their current situation might be.⁷

This is good news, very good news. This means that even if one does not fully understand the implications of quantum physics or neurobiology and, irrespective of one's family of origin and current situation, one can be assured—based on Friedman's empirical work—that they can produce healthier and more satisfying relationships with others by taking 100% responsibility for their own thoughts, their own communication (verbal and body language) and their own external behaviors. Friedman concludes that those who blame no one for their lives and take responsibility are the healthy people.⁸

In fact, Friedman's thinking about helping people become healthier and happier by taking up 100% responsibility for their lives—no matter what their situation might be—is well represented in this Question and Answer extracted from his conference on *Family Process and Process Theology*:

Question: I am a little bit concerned about the moralistic possibilities of emphasizing *responsibility over understanding*, especially, for example, in the analogy between pathology and theodicies [the question of evil if God is good]. I am afraid of a re-moralizing of illness, a kind of blame the victim: "There is something wrong with this person morally; they are ill [because] they are not regulating themselves properly."

Friedman: That is a question that is raised a lot. ... I hear what you are saying. You're saying: "If we keep focusing on responsibility for one's own condition, there is the danger that people will feel too guilty for what they have got." The best that I can do with it is to say that I have been doing this work for twenty years and I have always been emphasizing to people that they take responsibility for their state and I have never had anybody feel guilty as a result of it.

I don't know what I do that is different and I do not know how to explain the difference. But there is a way of presenting to people the notion that the dilemmas they have, have to do with their response to their environment and that their own future health, happiness and everything depends on them becoming more aware of their relationship with their environment and how they respond to it. And what I have found is that all but the most immature people can handle that notion.

For example, if a couple comes in to see me and she starts out and says to me, "my husband is always putting me down," I will immediately respond to her and say, "how come your husband has so much power

⁶ Friedman, *ibid.*, 194th minute in the video taped conference.

⁷ *A Failure of Nerve*, pp. 7-8. Also

⁸ *A Failure of Nerve*, pp. 96,99,101.

to determine your view of you?” There is no way I am going to try to change him, to stop him from putting her down, because he won’t. I have never seen anybody change an abuser.⁹ I have never seen anyone change a pathogen. Pathogens only stop being invasive when the host refuses to permit it. And when you can get that notion across to people, they do not feel guilty; they move toward a sense of power.¹⁰

In fact, in his book, *From Generation to Generation*, Friedman emphatically states: “In family relationship, as long as individuals focus primarily on the toxicity of their relatives’ behavior instead of what makes them[selves] vulnerable, they will fail to realize that it is a far healthier response to work on their own “cells” [“themselves”] as a way of immunizing themselves against “insult” [“the attack of their relatives”]. Actually, such responses [better managing themselves] accomplish more than self-protection; they tend to modify the insulting behavior.”¹¹

I find that in the convergent affinities of insights coming from quantum physics, neurobiology, and Friedman’s clinical experience are useful in developing human agency. The end dictum would be: “If you hold a person responsible for all their words and actions, you help them realize their full human potential and build healthier societies.”¹² I would add that, if you are able, make them ever more self aware of their self-talk and equip them to re-engineer their thinking along the lines of LTH training.

I would conclude by saying that, given our chronically anxious society, given the cultural war to capture the minds of people, given the number of well-educated people trapped in Newtonian categories hence unable to aspire to be all they were created to be and given the past pigeon-holing effect of Newtonian based psychologies and sociologies, the breakthroughs of quantum physics and neurobiology and Friedman’s [Bowen’s] work are a breath of fresh air to our ways of thinking scientifically and clinically about human beings. In this context, it would seem that part of the human mission of being 100% responsible is to make these findings known to ever more people, starting with one’s family and friends, starting with our own “aspiring to be all that we were created to be”.

⁹ Steven Stosny’s work has shown that it is possible to make abusers aware of their own profound worth and based on that to train themselves not to abuse. His success rate is about 77% which is unheard of in such work.

¹⁰ Edwin Friedman, *Family Process and Process Theology*, The Alban Institute minutes 145-148 on the DVD.

¹¹ Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, The Gilford Press, New York, 1985, p. 64.

¹² Go to the link “Increasing the Odds in Your Favor” to learn a highly effective approach developed by LTH to help you envision and change your unwanted habits so as to live a healthier and more productive life.