



# A View From the Trenches

By Lawrence Matthews

(A paper presented at the "Reunion On the Road Ahead" conference held November 29-30, 2006 at Washington National Cathedral honoring the work of Rabbi Edwin Friedman on the tenth anniversary of his death)

**W**hy am I standing up here today? I think that is an appropriate question for any of you to ask. At least it is an important one for me to answer. One of my grandsons attends a school for children who are dependent upon wheel chairs for mobility. Since he has great difficulty getting his muscles to do what his excellent brain tells them to do, speech is a special challenge for him. During a visit to his school one day, he was leading me down a hall and introducing me to some of his teachers. One teacher asked me did I know that Tucker was introducing the morning announcements over the school's PA system. I must admit that I was pleased and surprised and asked Tucker what he said. His response: "I say, good morning. It's Tucker."

So taking a clue from my grandson: good morning, it's Larry, husband of Jean, father of two daughters and two sons and grandfather of one granddaughter and seven grandsons. I'm not a pastoral counselor. I'm not a Bowenian therapist. In fact, I'm not even a therapist. Until I retired from pastoral ministry 8 years ago, I had spent 42 years as (to use Ed's phrase) a 'garden variety' pastor of congregations. This is my background and, I admit, my bias. Like many of you, I first learned about Murray Bowen and his theory because of the writing and teaching of Ed Friedman - as is the case for multiple thousands all over our nation and world. I respect, appreciate & work closely with all the other professions represented in this room, but pastoral ministry is what I love and know best and where I am coming from in this presentation.

I'm presenting today because of two people: Larry Foster, who invited me to speak, and Ed Friedman, the rabbi who 'ordained' me, a Christian minister, to a ministry I never anticipated or sought out. (I hope you realize that we Baptists have a much looser understanding of ordination than many other Christians!) For the past 16 years I have attempted as best I can to faithfully live into that 'ordination' - which I do understand as God's call to me through Ed Friedman.

Following my first ordination to ministry in 1956, I pastored small rural churches, a small town 'first church' and, for 32 years, a suburban congregation across the Potomac River in Northern Virginia. It was my practice for 30 plus years to over function like a good first born banner bearer is supposed to do. But about every 4 to 6 years as I teetered on the edge of burnout and before the practice of sabbaticals was widespread, I would undertake some kind of personal renewal effort that would recharge my battery and prepare me to go back into the fray. At different times I trained in small group leadership, attended sessions of the Institute of Theology at Princeton Seminary and Reuel Howe's Advanced Pastoral Studies Institute, studied with a local Pastoral Counseling service, did a summer exchange with an English pastor and completed a Princeton Doctor of Ministry program.

In 1987, about the time I was sensing the need for another renewal experience, I read a book by a rabbi who lived just around the beltway in Maryland. Generation to Generation turned on light bulbs for me like nothing I had ever read. I realized right off that there were direct connections between family process thinking and my personal life and my ministry - - but I didn't really understand what I was reading. I was stuck in linear thinking, unable to grasp either systems thinking or the basic concepts of emotional process. But I knew there was truth in this book that I needed to hear.



I learned from a colleague in my local support group that Rabbi Friedman led small group supervision for local clergy. I phoned him and in September 1988 began a four year journey as a participant in one of his supervisory groups and eight years in the monthly Friedman Fridays he led for all the clergy, therapists and consultants he supervised. During that time he was my coach as I pursued my family of origin work and he was, most of the time, only a phone call away. At the close of one of our supervisory sessions in the fall of 1990, Ed asked me to remain behind for a few minutes. He told me that his Post Graduate Seminars for clergy were expanding and he asked me to join his faculty. I don't know what went through Peggy Treadwell's mind when she received the same invitation that year, but I remember what I said: "Ed, I have no idea what you are asking me to do." His reply was: "I want you to teach other ministers to do what you are doing."

My 'ordination' to my new ministry took about one minute and that December I began to walk the path to which Ed had invited me. As is usually the case with 'ordinations' I had no idea what I was getting into. And, sure enough, this path has led me to some surprising places. I arrived at one of them during my first year. I observed that, with the exception of a few local clergy, there were very few leaders from smaller congregations in Ed's program. It was expensive and they were not able to afford it. I knew what the program was meaning to me. Ed's coaching was enabling me to connect with my family of origin in ways that were transforming my life. I needed this resource as I attempted to "defect in place" in the same congregation where I had been over functioning for 25 years. Learning to "see" the triangles that give visibility to emotional process provided me with new eyes for my life and ministry. So I decided that the next task in my new ministry was to make this kind of training available to religious leaders who were unable to afford Ed's program.

I realized that I had better talk that over with Ed. So, with higher anxiety than usual, I invited him to lunch. After we had eaten I shared my new vision. I remember every word of his response. He paused a minute and then said, "Oh?" Just "Oh" with a question mark. His next encouraging question was, "And how are you going to do that?" I told him I wasn't really sure. I talked about how much I had learned from him and his training program. I said, "I know I can't afford you. Our church has a retreat center in West Virginia that we can use. All of our case study and genogram work will be done in small groups and two of my colleagues from the supervision group will join me as faculty coaches and teachers of the theory." I don't remember Ed's response. He probably just thanked me for lunch, but he promised to supervise my 'research project'.

I ran my proposal up the flag pole by contacting every minister I knew about the opening session of the new venture, which I had planned for May, 1992. The result: only 4 saluted - - so it didn't happen. However, claiming the tenacity I had discovered in both my mother's and dad's families, I ran it up the flag pole again that summer and 8 people signed on for a fall workshop session. Suddenly I was not only pastor of a suburban Washington, DC congregation and a faculty coach in Ed's training program but also the coordinator of Leadership In Ministry Workshops.

This month the registration for the workshop's 16th year has begun. During 2006 another 100+ congregational leaders (lay leaders, clergy & rabbis) from all over the USA & Canada participated in residential spring and fall workshop sessions in Virginia, West Virginia, Colorado Springs and Boston. They spent 80% of their time in small groups of 4 or 5 led by 15 faculty coaches where they related the theory and their theology to their family of origin work and case studies from their ministry or workplace.

What does the view from the ministry trenches I've shared with hundreds of congregational leaders these past 18 years in both Ed's program and the workshops look like? If that's where you work, you already know much of what I see out there. The societal regression Bowen began to observe in the early 60's is now an ever deepening reality, rapidly spreading across our world. I can't name one major institution in our culture that is functioning well - - not one. Life in the clergy trenches today is characterized by what Ernest Hall calls "the cycle of escalating anxiety and topic-focused argument." Ed understood how especially vulnerable religious institutions are in such times. It is the nature of religious institutions to accept responsibility for producing results that we don't have the power to produce. We can't connect people to God or keep their kids off drugs or guarantee that their marriages will succeed. Ed understood that all such helping institutions and professions are readily available binders for the anxiety in our culture, so his focus was upon the kind of leadership they needed if they were to become part of the answer and not just part of the problem.

Roberta Gilbert recently wrote: "Can high level leadership make a difference in a time of regression? Specifically, can



ministerial leadership make a difference?” This was her answer: “In the downward spiral of society in which we find ourselves at present, the clergy may be the only professional group that can, together with their congregations, make a difference.” But then the question becomes HOW? How can protestant clergy, rabbis and priests - - and, yes, Muslim Imams - - step up to the kind of leadership our crisis demands?

An era of special interest to Ed was the American Civil War period. In his insightful book, Broken Churches, Broken Nation, Clarence Goen, then a Church History professor at Wesley Seminary here in D.C., maintained that: “... the division of the churches and their subsequent behavior reinforced a growing sectionalism that led eventually to political rupture and armed conflict.” Apparently the failure of presidential leadership (so clearly explained by Ed) was not the only leadership failure that helped precipitate the Civil War. Does this mean that the polarization and division in our religious communities is not only symptom but also permission giver for the growing polarization that increasingly characterizes our nation and our world? And I don’t have only Shia and Sunni in mind when I ask that question. Welcome to the congregational trench warfare of churches & denominations USA; where even leaders who read books by Friedman, Richardson, Steinke, Galindo and others of our tribe live with frustration, fear and burn out. They are good people, smart people who care, who were trained to believe that their purpose is to serve others without any concern for self and they struggle to understand and embrace what they read: the seemingly irrational concept that focus upon the functioning of self, not others, is the source of effective leadership. Bowen expressed the basic truth in his down home Tennessee way: “You can’t make a bean plant grow by pulling on it.”

Barbara Brown Taylor is well known among American church leadership and one of my favorite preachers. Her latest book is titled Leaving Church. It’s her story about burning out as the priest of what was, at least before she arrived, a small parish in northeast Georgia she had wanted very much to serve, and then leaving not only pastoral ministry but many of her former beliefs as well. I quote her from a recent interview on the weekly television news program, Religion & Ethics: “In my wish to do well for that congregation I wasn’t doing well for myself or my friends or my family, and I even found that the work for God was taking me away from God. ... I became so attentive to the souls of other people that I was not as attentive as I might have been to my own. And that’s not my predicament; that’s the predicament, I would say, of anyone in a caring profession, anyone whose duty is partly to look out for other people.” It might be easy to recognize her problem through Bowenian lenses. As one of our workshop participants recently said to me: “When I read her book, I wanted to send her a workshop brochure”. If it were only that simple!

Ed would say: “Emotional shifts come only as we work in our family of origin - - because relationships are more important than ideas in effecting change.” I know you have probably read it many times, but listen again and really hear his very last paragraph in Generation to Generation: “To the extent that we can learn to define ourselves within the triangles of our families of origin, to that same extent will we have the increased capacity to do this in any of our other relationships. And in the process of doing so, our position in that set of interlocking triangles will become converted from a source of stress to a source of strength and survival. It is at this point, also, that we can see most clearly how leadership can become a more fundamental healing modality than expertise, both for others and for ourselves. This is true for any leader, of course, but for members of the clergy, because of the special entree’ afforded by virtue of our community position, such effect on our followers is a ‘natural process’.”

On more than one occasion, I heard Ed respond to a question by saying: “I’m not here to teach you technique; I’m here to change the way you think.” He understood our institutional religious crisis in emotional process terms. So he wrote books about it; he traveled and lectured about it. And he established his Post Graduate Seminars in Family Emotional Process to train religious leaders to think differently.

The last time I heard Ed speak in public was the spring before his death. He spoke that evening at Virginia Theological Seminary, an Episcopal seminary in Alexandria, Virginia. After he finished, I walked down front to say hello. We exchanged greetings and he asked his usual question: “What are you doing here; you’ve heard all of this”. Then as he stepped down from the platform he lifted from a table the stack of application forms for the Post Graduate Seminars he had brought with him, flipped through them and said, in a rather quiet voice: “Only two or three were picked up. That’s usually the way it is. But nobody learns this by attending seminars. It takes 4 to 6 years.”

One of the highlights of our 2006 workshops for me was a presentation by a pastor of a congregation in the valley of Virginia who has been in the workshops from their beginning. He unpacked an attempt by a small group in his church to



force his resignation. (A great illustration of how working on the theory for 15 years is effective in mobilizing the resistance in a congregation!) With honesty and insight Mike talked about his own functioning, staying connected to his extended family as well as to those who wanted him to leave, the ways that “thinking the theory” helped him to be aware of the emotional process instead of focusing upon content and his learnings from the experience (including the ‘secret’ that in years gone by two other pastors had been asked to leave). It was no “success story”; rather it was an example of a leader functioning in ways that opened the possibility of change and renewal where there might have been only hostility and hurt lasting for generations.

I remember quite vividly the Theory Day when Ed said: “There are some things we can only learn through apprenticeship - - discipleship.” Then Rabbi Friedman talked about Rabbi Jesus and his disciples. He paused for a minute, and said, “While Jesus was alive they were his disciples”. Then he smiled and said, “After he was no longer with them, they all became apostles.” Ed is no longer with us. But as Ted Beale reminded us yesterday, his gifts are. He faithfully and creatively did his work and taught ‘the Theory’ to his ‘disciples’ (or ‘apprentices’, if you prefer that word, but ‘disciples’ was Ed’s word).

This room is filled with disciples and apostles and disciples of apostles. We have already been given the tools for shaping the kind of leadership necessary for the time of crisis through which we are living. How we use them for ourselves, how we pass them on to others - if we pass them on - is now up to us, to every one of us. I can’t even imagine the multiplicity of ways this can happen. I’m trying to be true to Ed’s gifts to me. Many of you are responding in your own creative ways. You are teaching this where you work and mentoring congregational leaders. (Is Norman Jones, a member of our workshop faculty, back with us today? There he is! Thank you Norman for being the only African American in this august gathering. Where are our African American and Hispanic brothers and sisters in our community of Bowen/Friedman disciples?) Some of you are leading excellent training programs. You are routinely continuing your personal work in peer groups in your community or, like Voyagers, in a much larger community. Every training program and peer group I know about is at our web site with links to their site or a contact person. Let me know of any that should be there and I’ll include them. Good books are being written. We may not be able to ‘get it’ from books alone, but they can point the way and challenge persons to make the journey. Generation to Generation was my first introduction, Bowen and Kerr’s writings have guided my journey and, thanks to Peggy Treadwell and Ted Beal Failure of Nerve is back in an affordable format.

As is true in every other area of our society, there is tremendous need in the religious community for leaders who have this new understanding of themselves and our situation. The road ahead is a challenging one. But Ed always emphasized the importance of challenge for growth. **We have gathered here to honor Ed on the tenth anniversary of his death. I believe we truly honor Ed’s life and work by continuing to follow the paths he pioneered.**

