

Finding My Legacy: My Family Voyage Project

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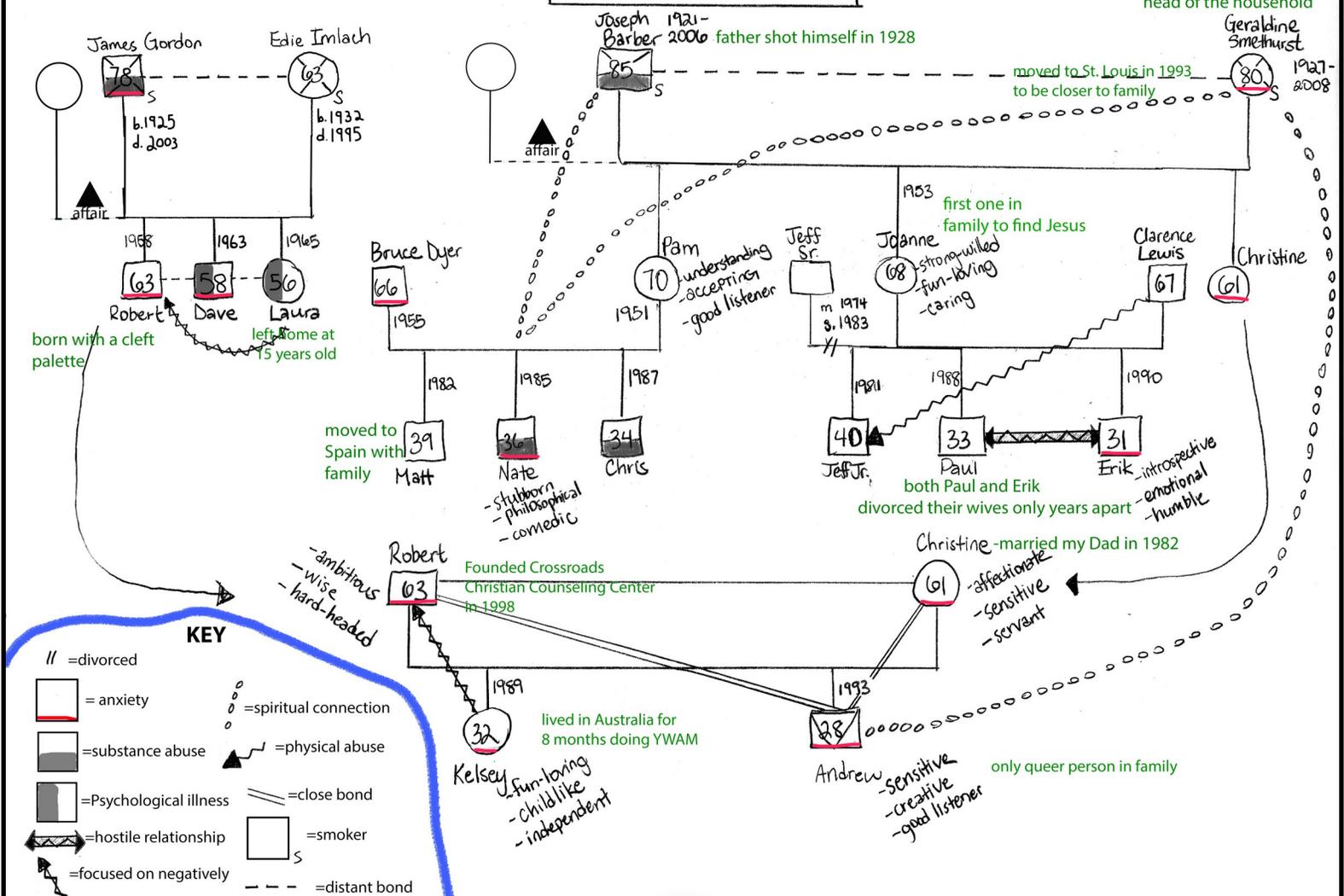
MFT508: Theoretical and Personal Foundations of MFT

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Andrew's Genogram



I couldn't believe it. I had just spoken to my mother for 3.5 hours—easily the longest conversation we had ever had. I was continually surprised and intrigued as I interviewed six

members on my mom's side of the family, or the Barber side. I decided to interview my mother, her two older sisters Pam and Jo-Ann, my two cousins Nate and Erik, and my own sister Kelsey. The process was long and at times arduous, but altogether rewarding. Although I found deficiencies and dysfunctional patterns in my family, this voyage has enabled me to view not only my family, but also my relationship *to* my family in a whole new way.

Overall, this project gave me the confidence to connect with my family and to play an instrumental role within my family. Growing up, it was hard for me to feel close to my cousins and extended family because I perceived I was seen as the annoying little baby. It's still easy for me to operate within that mindset, but doing this project helped me see that my family really does appreciate me. Because they value our connectedness, my interviewees saw this project as admirable and exciting. My cousin Erik even said to me after our interview, "I'm really excited to see what you're going to do for our family, Andrew." Taken aback, I asked him what he meant. He said, "I'm not quite sure, but I just think you're going to do some cool things for our family." I expressed to him how much this sentiment meant since growing up, I felt like my opinions didn't really matter. But he made me feel seen and appreciated, and that meant so much to me. His comment helped give me confidence that I have the ability to unite my family. Additionally, interviewing my family members helped boost my confidence in our relationships. Each interview was an incredible bonding experience that I will never forget.

I also appreciated that this project enabled me to deconstruct my perceived family facade that I always felt extrinsic to. As the youngest member of my family, I always felt like I existed on the outside of my family since all my cousins were closer in age and could relate to each other's experiences. I felt like I had to work extra hard to be seen and heard and taken seriously. But as I conducted my interviews, I realized that in a sense, all my family members have felt

isolated within the family in some regard. For instance, my cousin Nate always felt like he had different values from his immediate family and felt like the black sheep. As the “problem child,” my Aunt Jo-Ann always felt like she could never compare to her sisters and felt alone in this way. Her son Erik reported, “I feel like I was on my own a lot and had to figure things out on my own.” My own mother was so much younger than her sisters that she was literally alone much of the time. As I began to understand the feelings of isolation my family members had experienced, the more I realized that the family facade I perceived growing up wasn’t a concrete wall. It was more like a loose net with holes around a group of people. Growing up, my family felt impenetrable to me—it felt like I could never break through and be seen as an equal. But I now feel closer to my family unit, knowing we’ve had these similar experiences.

While there was nothing I disliked about the family voyage project itself, part of the process brought me frustration and sadness. When I contacted my great uncle’s daughter about interviewing my great uncle, I discovered that his health had rapidly taken a turn for the worst only a couple days prior to contacting her. Then on the 13th, he passed away. Since he is the only member alive in my grandma’s generation, it pains me that I didn’t get to interview him. Additionally, something I found taxing about this project was the interviews themselves. I loved connecting to members of my family, but it took a lot of focus and energy to write down everything they were saying in real time, and by the end of each interview, my fingers were sore and my brain was tired. In retrospect, I’m glad I took notes in real time as it made it easier to review the interviews and assimilate the information.

I learned one major family secret in this project, and then was surprised by other bits of information. I learned that my grandpa had a secret affair when he worked in New York City for a brief period as a cook. My mom recently learned this from her older sister who learned this

from their mother. When I asked my two aunts if there were any family secrets, my Aunt Jo-Ann said no, and Aunt Pam asked if she could skip the question. I understand why this issue would have been “hush-hush” when I was growing up and when my mom was growing up, but it surprised me that my aunts are still protective of this information to this day, especially since my grandfather died so many years ago. It also surprised me because my I know my aunts trust me a lot. Maybe they have secrets surrounding personal affairs themselves or have secrets related to my grandpa’s affair.

Something that surprised me was that my sister knew of my Aunt Jo-Ann’s resentment towards my mother as the “favorite child.” This was information I never knew, and I was surprised my sister knew since she seems to be more unaware of our family’s relational dynamics. I also learned from my mother that my McArthian grandpa once punched my Aunt Pam in the face when he thought she was supporting the communists! Neither my Aunt Jo-Ann nor my Aunt Pam reported this—perhaps it is a repressed memory or maybe my mom misunderstood the story? Either way, I found this intriguing. Additionally, my mom told me that when she was first married to my dad, she had a hard time expressing her emotions to him since growing up, “emotions were bad.” Unbeknownst to me, my mom said she sometimes punched walls when she’d explode! I was shocked to learn this, because I can only recall my mom expressing her anger in a very calm manner my whole life.

This project illuminated numerous patterns and themes that exist within my family. For instance, one unspoken rule throughout my family is that sex is taboo and not to be discussed. Almost all six people I interviewed reported that they didn’t remember their parents telling them about the “birds and the bees.” I think this unspoken family rule may have originated as a product of the times when mainstream culture did not celebrate sex, as well as my family’s

Catholic background. This has definitely trickled down into the way I view sex as something wild and a little scary. Something I found ironic was that my cousin Nate told me that his mom never gave him “The Talk.” But when I interviewed his mom, my Aunt Pam, she confided that she tried to tell her boys about sex, but they all were so uncomfortable that *they* refused to have the conversation with her! I then realized that perhaps this uncomfortability came from his parent’s lack of public affection. When I asked Nate about his parent’s marriage, he said, “I’ve never seen genuine raw love [between my parents].” He further divulged how his parents were very private with their affection. I gathered that because my cousins had never seen a model of affection between their parents, displays of affection, including topics of sex, were foreign, uncomfortable, and taboo.

I also uncovered the multi-generational pattern of dominant women being hard on their strong-willed daughters. I learned that my great-great grandma was distant from her daughter Harriet. Thus, Harriet was judgmental and non-affectionate with her one daughter, my grandma, who was then especially hard on my stubborn Aunt Jo-Ann. While my Aunt Jo-Ann never had daughters, her son Erik reported that his mom was never very affectionate with him and his brothers. Despite this pattern, I found that every person I interviewed reported feeling more emotionally connected and close to their mother in their adult lives. I think this is because every mother on my mom’s side of the family significantly softened over time as they either accepted Christ or simply got closer to Him. From what I’ve heard, my great-grandma Harriet became much less bossy and stubborn when she met Jesus in her older age. My grandma also became much more tender and affectionate when she retired and moved to St. Louis to be closer to her children. My Aunt Jo-Ann, who’s practically a re-incarnate of my grandma, has also become extremely sensitive, humble, and sweet as she’s grown closer to Jesus. While my own mom has

always been extremely affectionate, my sister has grown from an emotionally distant person to a sensitive, sweet woman as she's grown closer to the Lord, gotten married, and had a baby. While it seems that older age and the changing of hormones makes people softer, I think the most notable changes occurs from the deep heart change that is only possible through Jesus.

I also found that my immediate family has broken a multi-generation pattern of poor conflict management. From my various interviews, I learned that the "Barber way" of dealing with conflict is: "You deal immediately with conflict, even if it gets ugly and even if you're angry, and then you're expected to sweep it under the rug and move on." Both cousins reported that in their families, this was also the way conflict was dealt with. Erik even reported that as he's currently going through a major conflict with his brother, he feels the pressure from his parents to work it out "right now" and move on. My cousin Nate and Aunt Pam reported that in their family, there'd be big outbursts and loud fights and that "everything would be good" once the fighting had stopped. However, in my family, my Dad had a very different idea of conflict resolution—you first pray, and then you talk it out with honesty and a calm tone of voice. (My sister didn't often follow the "calm tone of voice" rule.) Thus, the Barber-way of conflict management was bypassed and we followed my Dad's model instead.

In this project, I also uncovered a multi-leveled pattern of assuming a childish naïveté to shield oneself from the hardships of life. Speaking of my grandpa, my aunt Pam said, "Dad was in many ways like a big kid who never fully grew up." Not only did my grandpa grow up in poverty, but when he was seven years old, he heard his father's suicidal gunshot. I think this caused him to shut down emotionally as a child which inhibited him from developing emotionally as an adult. It's almost like he trapped himself in a childish state and always remained 7-year-old Joseph Barber. As an adult, he didn't know how to have meaningful, deep

conversations with his kids, and he was very much dependent on my grandma for fulfilling his needs. For instance, he didn't get his license until he was in his 50's, so my grandma would have to drive him to and from work on top of her already arduous schedule. Throughout his life, it seems that he was more focused on his own needs than those of his wife and children and was quick to expect his wife to nurse his physical ailments.

I think this childish naïveté was then cultivated in my mom as she suffered as a child and saw the way her father reacted to his pain. As a severely depressed child and teenager, it seems that my mom put up some self-protective walls which inhibited her from having intimate relationships and pursuing normal teenage interests like sleepovers and crushes and fashion. While my mom is not co-dependent like her father was, I have observed how she's still naive about many common-knowledge topics. Up until recently, I didn't feel like I could have deep conversations with my mom, because while I knew she could empathize with me, it seemed like she just didn't understand my world. She would also frequently ask me for advice, and I often felt like she treated me as her parent. But thankfully, she has recently grown exponentially after leaving a toxic friendship with a woman who I think perpetuated her feelings of insufficiency. It also seems like my mother did everything she could to protect my sister and I from the big bad world. To my Dad's chagrin, my Mom put my sister and I in private Christian schools so we wouldn't be bullied in the same way she was. It makes me sad, because I know she was only trying to protect us from experiencing the kind of pain she dealt with as a child.

I also see the pattern of childish naïveté manifesting in my sister and me. My sister stated that growing up, "I was...happy and clueless." In her adult life, I've observed that my sister usually doesn't seem to know what's going on in the world around her by choice. It seems to me like she heavily censors what she lets into her life to keep everything positive. She even

mentioned to me, "Growing up, ignorance was bliss." However, I think she still unknowingly lives by this mantra sometimes. In a similar vein, I hate to admit that I am inclined to put my needs above others and feel as though I have a low pain tolerance physically and emotionally.

I also recognized the dysfunctional pattern of emotional manipulation in my family. Throughout my childhood, both my sister and I knew that we could get what we wanted by manipulating my mother. As I look back now, this seems so twisted to me, because my sister and I innately knew that my mom would always respond to our cries of distress because she hated to see us suffer. But what surprised me was that when I asked my mom, "Who was the controlling child?" She responded with, "Aunt Jo-Ann, but also I could be controlling in a whiny, manipulative way." That was the first time I had ever heard my mom say that could be manipulative as a child. Throughout my life, I never saw my mother being manipulative. Then what surprised me even more was that my Aunt Pam told me that my grandpa "had a side of him that liked to make me cry... telling me sad stories on purpose so I would cry." I had a big internal "whoa" moment upon hearing this, because throughout my life, I've enjoyed using art and music to evoke emotion in myself others. But just like my grandpa, I part of me enjoys pulling on people's heartstrings. To my parent's exasperation, I would frequently jump out and scare them growing up because I found their reactions hilarious (I may or may not also scare my roommates as an adult.) Since I was young, I've enjoyed editing videos and using music to aid in the emotional journey in the storytelling. Maybe I feel a sense of power having control over people's emotions? That sounds so twisted! But I think there's something there. As a therapist and believer, I need to be careful of this tendency and need to work towards being an empath while not abusing my emotional power.

A positive pattern I found is a childlike curiosity that enables us to find beauty and joy in seemingly insignificant things. This is something I so appreciate and love about Kelsey, Erik, my mother, and my grandpa. I deeply resonated with my sister when she said, "I think no matter what your job is or who you're married to, one of the big keys to having a happy life is finding the joy in the little things, because especially in our culture, you get into the same rhythm and routine and forget to look around sometimes." When I asked Erik something that makes him happy in life, without fail, he stated, "Trees." I almost laughed because of the convicted way he said this, but I can totally relate. To this day, when I go home and visit my parents, I can spend hours sitting on my bed, looking at the beautiful trees outside. My mom said of her father, "Poppy was very sensitive and would be moved to tears with beauty." I can remember how he would cry as he listened to a moving song and how my mother always tears up while worshipping. I think about a time when my sister and I spent hours in nature together excitedly pointing out details. We'd laugh and find the smallest things hilarious or curious or exciting. Whether it's stopping to notice a strange leaf on a tree or smelling flowers, I agree with my sister that joy comes from having curiosity and excitement in God's creation. I've also recognized how this mindset cultivates gratitude and joy in life.

An interview that really touched me was the one with my mother. I even started to get emotional just re-reading my Mom's answers. I feel a really strong kindred bond with her because we are so similar. Her pain is my pain in a lot of ways. And I also feel a lot of sadness for her. I think she had so many talents that were just squashed as a child, and that so pains me to see, because I see how she and my dad encouraged me and helped cultivate my talents, allowing me to artistically soar. It makes me wonder if she had grown up with parents that celebrated her, maybe she wouldn't have felt so unappreciated and repressed.

Although my mom suffered as a child, something beautiful has come out of her experience—the way she’s mothered her children. At one point in our interview, my mom’s voice became slightly trembly and softer, and so I gently asked, “How are you feeling right now?” My mom burst into tears and said, “It makes me sad. You know, things were a little backwards in my family. You know, Poppy wasn’t a strong leader. And it makes me sad because I feel like I wasn’t heard.” Cut to my interview with my sister. When asking Kelsey, “In general, what was it like for you growing up in your family?” My sister replied, “Um, I felt like, very heard and very loved. I felt enjoyed and wanted and it was really fun. I just have a lot of positive memories.” This both filled me with joy and hurt my heart a little bit. I knew that my mom was so expressive of her love for us growing up because of the way she did not receive affection from her parents.

While I shared tears in my interviews, I also belly-laughed. My sister has such irreverence mixed with confidence when telling stories, even as she botches facts. My mom, who was severely depressed as a child, would come home every day from school and cry for two hours. Her parents worked all the time, so her physical isolation exacerbated her depression. But when telling me about all this, my sister said, “She [my mom] was like super depressed and cried in class like, all the time.” Although I knew my mom never cried in school because of her depression, my sister’s deep conviction that this was fact made me laugh. When talking about my dad, who was born with a cleft palate and had many surgeries as a young child, my sister reported, “Oh, he was a premie who had like 10,000 surgeries on his face.” I burst out laughing with this one—my dad was most definitely not a premie, and 10,000 surgeries is obviously a gross exaggeration—nevertheless, my sister’s morbid sense of humor had me shaking in laughter.

As I want to continue this voyage beyond this class, a certain story I heard comes to mind. When my aunts were little and my mother wasn't born yet, Poppy Joe would pack a picnic lunch and take his two daughters across the street to a small wooded area with a big rock. The three of them would climb up the boulder, set up their little lunch there, and my grandpa would then tell them made-up stories as they ate their lunches. I was amazed when not only my two aunts recalled this as one of their favorite childhood memories, but even my Mom and cousin Nate mentioned how this was something Poppy Joe would do. It seems as though this experience created a sort of legacy in my family—an ideal of what a good time looks like. It's simple, pure, and there is artistry involved. This story makes me realize that my family really does appreciate artistry, especially in the form of story-telling as my grandpa established. As I continue my voyage by interviewing more family members and bringing people together, I think what will speak most to my family is paying homage to this original legacy. I don't know exactly how yet, but I think that connecting my artistry to my newfound role as a bridge-maker will really speak to my family and create space for deeper relationships. As someone who always felt like I lived on the outskirts of my family, I now see myself as playing an integral role in my family's legacy. While this voyage is done, my journey has just begun.

