

Book Review

"Becoming Your Best"
by Ron Richardson

Augsburg Books, 167 pages



Review by Margaret-Anne Speak

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Book Review: "Becoming Your Best" by Ron Richardson

REVIEW BY MARGARET-ANNE SPEAK

In his latest book 'Becoming Your Best', Ron Richardson puts an old spin on Murray Bowen's concept of differentiation. Richardson draws on the novels of the eighteenth century author Jane Austin, examines the 'development of character' in Austin's heroines, and equates that development with the development of emotional maturity as described in Bowen's theory.

Richardson introduces his argument with the assertion that Freud and the profession of psychotherapy were at least partially responsible for the denigration of the concepts of virtue, civility and character as understood before the twentieth century. He states:

"(Freud) believed that an overly severe superego (the conscience) could lead to neurotic and psychotic patterns through the repression of one's deepest urges and feelings. Thus a focus on the exploration and verbal expression of our underlying repressed urges and feelings and our emotional wants in relationship, rather than the development of character traits, became the focus of psychotherapy."

Critical of this new-age focus on feelings and the right to their raw expression, Richardson laments the decay of civility and the loss of honour and constancy as portrayed by Austin's protagonists as they strive to live lives of integrity.

Austin was writing long before the super-ego got its bad rap: a time when manners, morals and money were of significant import in the dating game and a woman's independence depended on snagging a man of means. Though trapped in the confines of the era, Austin's heroines engage in a voyage of self discovery, rejecting the 'games people play' for an examination of their own immaturity in their relationships. In her character development, Austin weaves a 'development of character' that Richardson utilizes (through extensive quotes and examples from his own clinical practice) to consider many of the tenets of Bowen's theory. The principle precept is the importance of knowing oneself in relation to others and recognizing that the difficulties in our relationships are at least partially driven by our own immaturity and the anxiety that fuels it. If we can get interested in the challenge of calming that anxiety and using emotion as information rather than a right of reactive passage, Richardson posits that we may be on our way to a subtle shift within the tapestry of our connections.

This is a fine book that will be of importance to anyone interested in the development of character. Richardson's concerns about a sententious reading of the text prove unwarranted and his knowledge of Bowen's theory and Austin's novels is equaled only by what Austin appeared to know about differentiation!

Margaret-Anne Speak is a Family Therapist on the North Shore. She writes a column for the North Shore News.

October 15 & 16, 2010 Conference

"STRESS & THE FAMILY: Widening the Lens"

with Dr. Bruce McEwen and Dr. Michael Kerr, SFU Harbour Centre, Vancouver, BC

This conference will explore how research on the stress response of the individual fits into the concept of the family as an emotional unit.

The conference will bring together Dr. Bruce McEwen, who Robert Sapolsky has called "the leading, living scholar of stress" and Dr. Michael Kerr, who is the leading, living expert on Bowen Family Systems theory.

Research on the stress response has centered on the physiology of the individual. Dr McEwen has pioneered extraordinarily important research showing what "allostatic load"—what might be called the wear and tear of life—has to do with disease. Dr. McEwen has made seminal contributions to the effects of stress on the brain and the immune system. He has also studied what emotions, coping, and socioeconomic status have to do with health.

According to Dr. Kerr, Bowen Family Systems theory is the first systematic explanation for chronic anxiety not based on the individual. Bowen theory focuses on the family as an emotional unit and describes the way in which the unit functions to determine the intensity and duration of the stress response for each member of the family. Dr Kerr has a special interest in the way chronic anxiety in the family unit can result in chronic physical illnesses in one or more members of the unit.

Mark you calendars for what should be a fascinating and important meeting. The conference brochure will be posted on the website in the near future, www.livingsystems.ca.