



Alastair's Adversaria

flotsam, jetsam, messages in bottles

Summary of Edwin Friedman's 'A Failure of Nerve': Part 2

Posted on [January 10, 2012](#)

Other Posts in Series: [Part 1](#), [Part 3](#), [Part 4](#), [Part 5](#), [Part 6](#)

Friedman advances the thesis that contemporary America has a climate of chronic anxiety, leading to 'an emotional regression that is toxic to well-defined leadership' (53). He points out that 'one does not need dictators in order to create a totalitarian (that is, totalistic) society.'

An emotionally regressed society or institution will put its technology at the service of its regression. It can become obsessed with data and technique in a manner that leaves its leaders incapable of recognizing the priority of the leader's own self and the emotional processes of the group. While we tend to focus on the symptoms of regression (abuse, conflict, etc.), Friedman seeks to draw attention to the emotional processes that underlie them.

Chronic Anxiety

To understand these emotional processes, Friedman employs the family therapy theories of Dr Murray Bowen. Rather than trying to understand families in terms of their cultural, ethnic, or socio-economic distinctions, Bowen focused instead on the underlying processes that families share in common with all other groups or societies. From this perspective the most critical thing for any society or family is how well they are able 'to handle the natural tension between individuality and togetherness, their ability to maintain their identity during crisis, and their capacity to produce well-differentiated leadership' (56).

In larger societies, as in families, the ability to cope can be lost as 'anxiety escalates as society is overwhelmed by the quantity and speed of change' and as 'the institutions or individuals (whether scapegoat or symptomatic) traditionally used to absorb or bind off society's anxiety are no longer available to absorb it' (57). In a family, physical and mental symptoms can begin to surface a few months after a destabilizing event. In a nation, the loss of a scapegoat community can lead to a crisis of anxiety, as the society loses its means of dealing with it. In such an anxiety-driven context, family life shrivels into an emotional regression. Society becomes increasingly undifferentiated, unimaginative, unwilling to undertake risk and hyper-reactive.

This chronic anxiety is to be distinguished from communal nervousness, existential angst, or the 'anxiety' occasioned by the economy or the threat of war. 'Chronic anxiety might be compared to the volatile atmosphere of a room filled with gas fumes, where any sparking incident could set off a conflagration, and where people would then blame the person who struck the match rather than trying to disperse the fumes' (58). The focus of chronic anxiety thus should not be confused with its cause.

This is one reason why those offering technical solutions to problems that families come to them with often fail to make lasting difference: address the manifestation of anxiety surrounding money, for instance, and it will merely relocate around sex, or children. The failure of quick-fix attitudes is that of neglecting to modify the emotional processes that underlie everything else. If technique is all that is required, the being of the consultant and their

principles apply in business and society more generally: mere technical responses to a business' problems will generally fail to address any deeper malaise in its corporate culture.

This chronic anxiety is self-reinforcing: the greater the chronic anxiety in any community, the more oriented it will become to its symptoms, and the more likely it is to export its troubles into the wider society through violence, litigiousness, or other means. The only way out of this chronic anxiety is through a stage of acutely painful withdrawal, which is why many perpetuate the withering symptoms, rather than addressing them directly.

The Five Characteristics of Chronically Anxious Societies

Chronically anxious families and societies have five key characteristics, which lead to a 'regression' that runs counter to the evolutionary principles that should guide society.

Reactivity

Instead of self-regulation, the regressed society is characterized by *reactivity*, caught in a 'vicious cycle of intense reactions of each member to events and to one another' (53). Such societies are bound together in a sort of 'feeling plasma', and each person finds their nervous system 'constantly bombarded by the emissions of everyone else's' (62). In a reactive family, communication is more characterized 'you' statements ('you are so pig-headed!', 'you are just like her!' etc., etc. – just think of the last time you caught a family argument on a tabloid talk show while flipping channels), than by self-defining 'I' statements ('this is what I believe', 'this is what I will do', etc.). In the reactive family, 'the more aggressive members are in a perpetually argumentative stance, and the more passive are in a constant state of flinch' (63). Anxiety and emotional processes spread between parties like wildfire, as there is no differentiation: 'highly reactive families are a panic in search of a trigger' (the trigger frequently being provided by the children that they become fixated upon – chronically anxious families are often child-focused families).

Such a family is almost invariably characterized by the family's inability to produce or support a leader, and by a complete loss of playfulness, as all becomes deadly earnest. Friedman sees this same reactivity within American society, where people constantly interfere with others' self-expression, react to them on a hair-trigger, take disagreement far too seriously, and 'brand the opposition with *ad hominem* personal epithets (chauvinist, ethnocentric, homophobic, and so on)' (64). Their members lack the ability to create the distance and objectivity necessary in order to be proactive.

Herding

Closely related to the reactive tendency, the regressive society exhibits a *herding* tendency. It will tend to 'reverse the direction of adaption toward strength, and it winds up organizing its existence around the least mature, the most dependent, or the most dysfunctional members of the "colony"' (67). In such a society people are emotionally fused in an 'undifferentiated togetherness'. In such a society, there will be a constant pressure, through threats or inducements, upon people to adapt. The alternative to this approach is *not* compromise and consensus, but the sort of healthy self-differentiation that will promote a greater degree of toleration for the differentiation of other persons. In the 'homogenized togetherness' of the regressive society, one must surrender one's self to the family's self to survive. The goal of much family counselling should be 'to help people separate so that they do not have to "separate"' (68).

be 'inclusive', while sabotaging those who would stand up to them. It will bend over backwards to accommodate people who are focused on their rights, rather than responsibilities, and attack the person who seeks to take an unaccommodating and self-defined position, presenting them as cruel, selfish, or insensitive. This is so predictable that being called such names is usually a sign that you are moving in the right direction.

This herding tendency cripples the leader who seeks to be decisive, which involves being willing to give things up. The rightness or wrongness of our decisions largely depends on what we do after them. However, in the emotionally regressive society the potential leader is unlikely to be able stand firm when they make a decision, so they don't tend to make them.

The adaptation of groups to their most demanding and dysfunctional members is visible in numerous areas of American society, and the preparedness to engage in appeasement and compromise with those to whom no ground should be given. This can particularly be seen in the activities of those who 'tyrannize others, especially leaders, with their "sensitivity"' (71), acting as if they were 'helplessly violated by another person's opinion'. Friedman remarks:

It has been my impression that at any gathering, whether it be public or private, those who are quickest to inject words like *sensitivity*, *empathy*, *consensus*, *trust*, *confidentiality*, and *togetherness* into their arguments have perverted these humanitarian words into power tools to get others to adapt to them.

Friedman draws attention to the manner in which this allows the chronically offended reactive members of a population to hijack the agenda of the whole society, as people rally to soothe them, rather than keeping them in line and stopping their invasiveness, a problem that is especially powerful in the context of identity politics.

Blame Displacement

The chronically anxious family seems to lack an immune response, and so becomes wholly focused on the outside agent, as it lacks the ability to limit its invasiveness. One aspect of this is the encouragement of blaming, rather than 'owning it'. This is seen in the focus on 'you' statements mentioned earlier: such statements displace the problem by blaming the other party and generally illustrate the anxiety, helplessness, and perhaps even 'emptiness' of the person expressing them (76). Such families will constantly blame some internal or external party or issue rather than 'own' themselves and their relationships.

This blame displacement leads to a constant focus 'on pathology rather than strength', and an inability to harness inner strengths to address weakness. Such families fail to recognize that trauma often has less to do with the crisis or 'impacting agent' than it does with the emotional processes that organize the family's life and shape its response. The mature family can grow through trauma, and broaden their repertoire of responses.

Blame displacement can be seen in such things as the anti-incumbency attitude that exists in America – the tendency to resist whoever holds office. It is 'a reactive response to the voter's own inner emptiness, personal frustration, general unhappiness, loss of hope, and feelings of helplessness' (79-80). It is also seen in the revisionist histories that rejoice to tear down the heroes of yesteryear.

Friedman questions the idea that it requires two persons working on a marriage to change it. In a marriage, a shift can occur and divorce can be avoided as one partner recognizes how their reactivity has compounded problems,

counselling from ‘who has/is the problem?’ to ‘who has the motivation to focus on strength, not weakness, and on leadership, not pathology?’ (81).

The Quick-Fix Mentality

The chronically anxious family is impatient and puts its trust in technique over maturity, believing that its problems can be solved in a linear fashion. They have a low threshold for pain, arising from their lack of motivation to get on with life, a low threshold that drives them into the arms of people offering quick fixes. To the extent that we are motivated, our threshold for pain increases. This is important for dealing with others: ‘raising our own threshold for the pain another is experiencing can often motivate the other to take more responsibility for his or her life’ (85). Increased sensitivity to the feelings of others is not the solution that it is commonly presented to be. If our threshold for other people’s pain is too low, we can cause their threshold for it to lower as well (counsellors’ low threshold for the pain of couples can increase the possibility of their marriages failing).

Chronically anxious families almost invariably lack a leader who won’t give into their demands. When such a leader arises, they will be unstinting in undercutting the leader’s resolve. People can seldom become more mature than their leaders or mentors.

The obsession with technique and method is an aspect of our addiction to the quick-fix. This obsession has the tendency to transform professionals into hacks.

Poorly Defined Leadership

All of the characteristics of the chronically anxious family already mentioned lead to create the poorly defined leader. The poorly defined leader is led around by crisis, lacks the distance to gain clear vision, and is reluctant to take a clear stand. In the chronically anxious society, the leaders chosen will tend to be immature, without the capacity to resist sabotage, reactivity, and dysfunction.

Friedman remarks that, the ‘single most important factor’ that he has noticed in his extensive experience distinguishing families that recover from crisis from those that don’t was the presence of a well-defined leader. By ‘leader’ he doesn’t refer to someone who dictates to others, but to ‘someone who can maintain the kind of non-anxious, well-principled presence’ that he has described (89).

What is always absent from chronically anxious, regressed families is a member who can get himself or herself outside of its reactive, herding, blaming, quick-fix processes sufficiently to take stands. It has to be someone who is not so much in need of approval that being called “cruel,” “cold,” “unfeeling,” “uncooperative,” “insensitive,” “selfish,” “strong-willed,” or “hard-headed” immediately subverts their individuality.

Comments

There are many things that I would love to explore in more depth here. The relationship between the regressive society and the operation of [Girardian mimetic desire and the scapegoat mechanism](#) is definitely worth some closer attention. The same themes crop up: the scapegoat, a lack of differentiation, hyperconductivity of tension/anxiety, etc. Friedman is showing just how tightly these Girardian themes are bound into the lives of



clearest picture).

His points about the chronically anxious and emotionally regressive character of discourse in society, and the manner in which society adapts to the most dysfunctional, pathological, and disruptive members of society raise troubling questions for liberals, given the degree to which liberal and identity politics so often exhibits or encourages the herding and blame displacement characteristics, shutting down challenge, engaging in *ad hominem*, and tyrannizing with sensitivities. Conversely, I believe that liberals have important questions to ask of Friedman. For instance, isn't Friedman's approach at risk of being blind to real questions of social justice and lack of empowerment? Also the degree to which we have the capacity to be responsible and self-defined owes a lot to forces outside of ourselves. We are not born as self-defined individuals, but become them as an achievement (and in many respects as a *social* more than as a personal achievement), one which can owe much to social factors such as education, personal space, home environment, economic independence, etc.

Finally, I think that several of the observations about regressive societies could be applied to various Christian contexts and churches, for instance. Many churches exhibit an undifferentiated togetherness, which provides a hyperconductive context for anxiety and a hyperreactive posture. The emotional process of anxiety can be traced in the evangelical obsession with the spiritual quick fix, the obsession with theological certitude, etc.

I would be interested to hear any further thoughts that people might have in the comments.

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**About Alastair Roberts**

Alastair Roberts (PhD, Durham University) writes in the areas of biblical theology and ethics, but frequently trespasses beyond these bounds. He participates in the weekly Mere Fidelity podcast, blogs at Alastair's Adversaria, and tweets at @zugzwanged.

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21 Responses to *Summary of Edwin Friedman's 'A Failure of Nerve': Part 2*

Pingback: [Summary of Edwin Friedman's 'A Failure of Nerve': Part 1 | Alastair's Adversaria](#)



Luke says:



edit: Chronically anxious families need by almost invariably lack a leader who won't give into their demands. (?)

[Reply](#)



[alastairroberts](#) says:

January 12, 2012 at 9:06 am

Thanks for alerting me to the error!

[Reply](#)



Luke says:

January 12, 2012 at 3:15 pm

You're welcome! I realize that it'd be really nice if I could give feedback on what you write, but I don't have a way with words (yet?). I do read it all, and like to think on the ideas you bring out.

This particular series is interesting. My impression from the Part 1 wasn't to agree with many of his statements about leadership. While decisiveness is a very desirable trait in a leader, I feel like acknowledging emotions, attitudes, etc.. while not letting them rule decision making, is a means of garnering respect as a leader. My University degree is actually in Organizational Leadership, so my interests and thoughts on the matter aren't completely unbased (though I think they're somewhat basic).

This second part has more on psychology of home leadership, and relates to a lot of counseling advice. There's a lot of good insight here and, with some reservation, agree with the author's points. Food for thought



[alastairroberts](#) says:

January 12, 2012 at 3:40 pm

Thanks for the comment, Luke. I would be interested in any further thoughts that you might have at a later point. Especially given the background of your studies, your insight would be valuable. The value that I find in Friedman's thought is that it so radically challenges much conventional wisdom on the subject, forcing us to reassess a number of our positions.

I think that Friedman is correct to focus primarily on the dynamics of relational systems, rather than individual psychology. The positions outlined at the end of the first post will be elaborated upon in later posts. I think that, in the final analysis, he isn't denying the value of acknowledging emotions, etc., but rethinking the place that they ought to have in our systems of and approaches to leadership, which often seem to allow people's emotions, feelings, and sensitivities to hold groups hostage. Friedman's alternative is not ignoring or cutting oneself off from other people's feelings (which he argues can cause leadership to fail as people will completely oppose such a leader), but maintaining a strongly self-differentiated *presence*.

I hope that much of this should become clearer later on.

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Dan says:



“Chronically anxious families almost invariably lack a leader who won’t give into their demands.”

Or possess a sociopathic leader whose demands are random, contradictory and bizarre?

[Reply](#)



[alastairroberts](#) says:

January 15, 2012 at 9:27 am

Under Friedman’s understanding, such a person isn’t truly a ‘leader’, but just another reactive member who can’t self-differentiate.

[Reply](#)



Dan says:

January 16, 2012 at 4:20 am

I was wondering if that might be his position. But people like that actually do the leading in many situations even if they aren’t a real ‘leader’ – it sounds a little like the “no true Scotsman” fallacy.

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Travis Beck says:

June 13, 2012 at 6:19 am

I enjoy your comments on Friedman’s ideas—great food for thought as I read the book.

A couple thoughts: I disagree that Friedman’s ideas risk being blind to social justice and empowerment. If I’m understanding your objection correctly (and if I understand Friedman correctly), I’d say that Friedman’s idea of the “regressive society” isn’t that society adapts to the oppressed and marginalized but that it adapts to the “squeaky wheel,” those people who complain the loudest out of their hyper-sensitivity to a given issue. Friedman’s solution is, in fact, empowering, because leaders who stay connected but refuse to give in to immature demands force those people (if they choose to do so) to grow and mature through their short-term pain. The leader listens and engages them with compassion but doesn’t get sucked into the drama or allow the whole group to be hijacked by an immature few.

Second, I disagree with your position that self-definition depends much on external forces. Certainly our capacity to mature is limited by the leaders whose company we keep—we can only mature to the extent that those around us can function maturely. However, self-differentiation is never something one “achieves,” as if one simply arrived at the destination and could stop working on it. It is a life-long process that is not a function of one’s education or environment per se but rather a function of one’s own emotional being and integrity: the ability to define oneself, especially in the face of opposition, and to regulate oneself, especially in the face of other anxious people. The only barriers to one’s self-differentiation are self-imposed.

Just my interpretation; perhaps I misunderstood what you were getting at in your comments.

[Reply](#)



[alastairroberts](#) says:



While I agree that Friedman's approach can be very helpful for dealing with and changing many 'squeaky wheels', he does not provide us with any clear distinction between such 'squeaky wheels' and the expression of need from the poor, oppressed, disenfranchised, and marginalized. Nor does he seem to have much to say about how such 'squeaky wheels' may be produced by those same negative social forces. Without such discernment, implementing such an approach could be profoundly dangerous. Some people, while not being dysfunctional elements of a society, are simply unable to fall in line and 'adapt to strength', so as Christians we are called to adapt to them (Romans 15:1; 1 Corinthians 9:22).

In response to your second point, I do not believe that self-differentiation is ever a completed process, but it is an (ongoing) achievement. I disagree that self-differentiation is something that we can truly achieve by ourselves. The capacity to self-differentiate is not something innately present in every human being, but is an latent aptitude that must be developed and fed through training, example, education, influence, etc. The processes of self-differentiation are learned through good education, as we gain the ability to differentiate ourselves from subject matter in a manner that allows us to think clearly and non-reactively. It is developed through participation in institutions, through healthy forms of leadership, etc. Many people have lacked such privileges in their upbringing, and are placed in systems that encourage and foster reactive and dependent mindsets and attitudes. It is very hard to break out of such a thing on your own. Many people cannot be held wholly responsible for their lack of self-differentiation, as they haven't really been granted the means with which to develop one. Rather, we must provide them with support, and the training and example necessary to grow into it.

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Marti says:

June 14, 2014 at 6:28 am

What's upp mates, its wondewrful article concerning teachingand fully explained, keep it uup all the time.

[Reply](#)



April Fiet says:

February 1, 2015 at 2:15 am

A perfect illustration of Friedman's anxious society is Twitter. And, I'm heartened that I have started to hear many writers talking about withdrawing from the anxious and reactionary. The hope is to ruminate more personally, emotionally, imaginatively, and deeply, rather than responding to the constantly-ebbing tides of controversies and spectacles. I hope to see that happen. it's precisely what we need.

[Reply](#)



Alastair Roberts says:

February 1, 2015 at 2:35 am

It really can be. One of the things that Friedman has opened my eyes to is the manner in which our online social media are not merely neutral tools, but can facilitate more or less 'differentiated' and successful interactions. This is a theme to which I have returned on several occasions (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#), for instance). Unless we



them.

Conversely, mindfulness to the *structural* characteristics of productive and successful discourse and societies will enable us to form interactions and communities that achieve results that benefit everyone. Proactively working to establish such conversations is a growing concern of mine.

[Reply](#).

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