

# REPORTS

## Bert Hellinger Workshops, Washington, DC.

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### Exiles From the Family Soul

Missing. Vanquished. Ignored. Unacknowledged. Forgotten. Lost. Exiled. These words take on new meaning as we watch the stories unfold in the temporary workshop communities that come together to work with Bert Hellinger.

As participants share their experiences, we inevitably take on the pain of the storyteller - the abandoned, the abused, and the victimized. But then Hellinger does the unthinkable: he asks who are really the abandoned, the abused, and the victimized. Is it solely this person who stands before us so sad, so burdened? Or is there someone else, or perhaps many?

Often the tragedy lies in the silence that follows when members of the family are banished, rather than in the acts themselves. Sometimes the casting out is aggressive, a righteous decision to bar a person from participating in the family. At other times, it is a quiet letting go of shared memories, so that eventually the family portrait simply no longer includes the uncle, or the biological parents, or the grandfather, or the great-grandmother, or the brother, or an entire generation of victims or perpetrators.

It appears that at some point in a family's evolution, the pain may become so unbearable that a subliminal deal is struck to deny those who are perceived as responsible for it. Perhaps to save the family as a whole, certain members must be disavowed, exiled from the group. But what emerges in this Hellinger work, time and again, is

that the family soul is disturbed by such denials and later generations pay for it. The soul of the family - or of any community - must account in some way for all of its parts. One part cannot be cut out without the whole being affected. When the right to belong to the family is denied in order to punish, or escape, even when the exile's behaviour is heinous, there is great danger. The family system will find a way to rebalance itself in whatever way it can, often at the expense of later family members.

The inheritance of later generations - one or two, or even more generations from the source, from the banishment - is a compelling need to compensate for the missing, or to carry on the role of the silenced person or persons. It seems that absence can be as strong a force as presence, and these later family members experience sadness or illness or addiction or lack of connection in its wake.

Of course, we know the pain of the storyteller - the abandoned, the abused, the victimized, don't we? We offer what we have: sympathy, interpretation, advice, or any number of responses meant to validate the story, to soothe the teller.

As Bert Hellinger works with a client, it can seem as though hours are passing. As the client closes his eyes, one can almost feel the levels of consciousness unfolding. It is actually years that are passing. The well-practiced narrative of the forever-victim begins to become dismantled as the two sit side by side, each waiting for the other. Hellinger patiently waits and then he prods just a bit here and there to check where the client has

landed. Perhaps he is still absorbed in his own tale. Perhaps he is still adrift in self-pity. Perhaps the time is right to try something new, something other than sympathy, interpretation, or advice.

For, those who have attended Hellinger's workshops over the years, the experience continues to be different and yet the same. The family constellations that have become the hallmark of his systemic phenomenological approach are quieter, less directive than in years past. His approach has always evolved out of what he has experienced through and with the clients. Evolution is certain. And as Hellinger taps into the absence in our lives, those places where a family's 'will' was exerted to deny or to seek change, the soul finds different ways to reveal itself. It may not be beckoned in a cathartic moment in a therapist's office. There are not twelve steps to its revelation. And it cannot find a voice when we blame our parents or lock them out.

The absent members of the family, the exiled, are represented in our normal lives by ongoing, seemingly inextricable entanglements, making us weak, and tired, and absolutely bound to them, to their fates. But in family constellations the missing are once again remembered as the family soul reveals itself, and in this context, where absence and presence join, the client may discover peace through humility and acknowledgment and move on in everyday life, lighter and freer.

Family constellations come in many shapes and sizes. Representatives may be chosen to step into the experience of family members. There may be two representatives or there may be a dozen. A client may participate directly in the constellation or a representative may stand in for them. Hellinger may work with the real family members represented in a constellation, or he may choose to work solely with internal imaging. He may decide not to work at all.

Because there is not a prescribed outcome, because it is not Hellinger's intention to fix the problem or to rescue the client, the exact way of working is intuitive, improvisational, rooted in experience and a certain audacity. Maybe

Hellinger simply offers to open a window for the client, but a decision has to be made as to which one it will be. Then Hellinger waits with the client to see whether the air will be cold or warm, whether there is light or darkness, the smell of flowers or of death, the sound of children laughing or of something dreadful in the distance. The movements of the soul also take their time.

As new information comes into the room, the client usually welcomes it before they understand it. It simply feels better when all family members are allowed in. As the client is in the family, the family is in the client, and if someone is missing, it distorts the individual as well as the group. The family soul exists whether or not members of the family act in accordance with it. But if there is discord, if certain members are exiled, then the legacy will turn in on itself again and again, with family members for generations to come, taking on the compensatory burden.

And as the client stands in the space ... or sits with Hellinger ... or falls to her knees before her mother ... or smiles at the stranger who embodies her father ... what was one person becomes a crowd. The seen and the unseen gather to tell us something we hadn't understood before.

There is mystery in the process, because people are mysterious. There is wonderment. There is an aching to explain what happens in these workshops, to put words to what is witnessed, to try to grasp intellectually our own experience. And there are words, and feelings to be named, and thoughts that come later, and explanations for specific phenomena, but in the moment when the truth of a family rises up and all of the family members are embraced across time, language suddenly seems a limited form of expression - and of reception.

## **August 2002**

### **Ready Or Not**

"Ready or not, here I come" is the chant from a traditional children's game. And these were the words that came into my mind as I sat down in the

cavernous auditorium in Washington, DC, waiting for the workshop to begin.

I had already heard that Bert's current work was causing some commotion not only among neophytes, but also among those who have followed it for some time. So, frankly, I was curious. What could rile even those already well acquainted with Bert's brand of controversy? As people slowly filed in with their notebooks and coffee, I wondered too about the expectations I was quietly harbouring that might cause me to be disappointed or disturbed by his recent exploration. I was sure they were there, even if I couldn't at the moment locate them.

Ah, these expectations came into focus more quickly than I had anticipated. Of course, Bert never wasted time. I had seen scores of constellations, had worked hard to understand how they were anchored by certain insights into the Orders of Love, had grown accustomed to tracking the relationships between current symptoms and past deeds, had settled into the neutrality of destiny, had started to find a vocabulary to describe the work - where was it all?

Those who sat next to Bert in this place at this time were facing a crossroads not only in their own growth but also in the evolution of the work itself. They were not necessarily going to be asked to select representatives for their family of origin or their current family. Perhaps they wouldn't even be asked to state an issue. Bert might have the client and another entity, say, a parent or a particular fate, face each other. Or he might sit silently, while the client moved through various stages with his or her partner, unimpeded by any apparent intervention. Simple, if not easy, statements might be left hanging in the air for what seemed like forever. The process, it seemed, had gone underground, and what we were left with were the small, bold gestures that remain on the surface.

As I walked back to the hotel on the first night, having become completely lost on what should have been a five-minute journey, the paintings of Robert Motherwell came to mind (perfect name, I laughed to myself). When I look at his paintings (or those of any of the abstract expressionists) I have the feeling that if I turned the painting over I

would see the rest of the landscape, the teeming life forces that the canvas just can't contain in an image. What seeps through - the painting that is shown to the world - is what the viewer can tolerate as the artist attempts to express something monumental. Somehow, this seemed relevant as I tried to find my way into the first day's experience.

I returned the next morning the trusting sceptic. For the next two days, quick, almost violent revelations; slow gentle unfoldings; generations desperate to break through; others still held by something more expedient than truth; people roughly dismissed, others sweetly welcomed. Bert Hellinger was a tough guide, unapologetic.

As clients walked into and out of the space, they seemed undifferentiated on some level. Not that there wasn't poignancy and dignity in each story, but with the drama of the constellations no longer visible, it was more difficult to name the experience of witnessing the work, nearly impossible to delineate steps.

As I watched, Motherwell came to mind again and again.

Perhaps as Bert moves deeper into his work (rather than away from it), he is, among many things, the artist. 'Soul work', as he calls what he is doing now, is the expression or revelation of something monumental. In the gesture, the sentence, the image, and the seepage - whether beautiful or ugly - there is the reflection of a monumental force. Sometimes a single stroke on the canvas is what we can tolerate of the artist's vision. The vision, of course, doesn't belong to the artist; he or she is a kind of channeller for the soul. And rather than a grand title, 'artist' is someone who is humble in a very deep sense, in constant awe of the canvas where only that which can be tolerated will be seen, providing just a hint of what is beyond - the soul in all of its madness and grace.

In the game of *Hide and Seek*, the seeker stands with eyes closed and waits, counting off the isolated seconds. After some time, he or she calls out: "Ready or not, here I come."

# **Looking Back at History: Family Constellations in Melbourne, Australia, February 2002**

**Otteline Lamet & Peter van Zuilekom**

Sitting in a group in Australia we see, apparently, the same kind of faces we know at home, in the Netherlands: primarily white, Western faces with some Asian features. Australia is a country where originally only the Aboriginal peoples lived. Later the convicts came from Britain, Ireland and Scotland. More recently immigrants came to the country from the rest of Europe, South America, Africa and Asia.

On the surface the Australian culture rules. The unspoken motto is: *"Everyone has a fair go. From now on we are all the same and have the same right to a place in life."* It also means: *"Present yourself only with your first name. Your surname is not important. Forget as soon as possible where you came from and look to the future. Forget that your ancestors might have been convicts. Above all forget that we built our nation on the blood of the Aboriginal peoples."*

The Aborigines in Australia were for a long time declared 'non-people'. This gave the white men a belief in their right to kill, murder and poison the Aborigines, put them into reservations, take away their children and place them into special 'children houses'. The white men wanted the Aboriginal people and their culture to disappear as soon as possible. We were flabbergasted to read that much of this was still common practice even in the late 1960s, while we in Europe were in the middle of the 'flower-power' movement. The white Australians stole the land. Since the 1960s the Aborigines have gained the right to vote, but the political situation in 2002 is still such that the government, supported by a very large part of the population, continues to deny the Aborigines their rightful ownership of the land. White Australians continue to take no responsibility for the acts of their predecessors.

As the workshop progressed we increasingly encountered the variety of cultures in the group. A small check on ethnic backgrounds in the group of thirty-seven, revealed people who had come from Britain, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, The Netherlands,

China, Japan, South Africa, Greece, Germany, Chile, Argentina, as well as Jewish people, and those with Aboriginal parents and grandparents - a real melting pot. Because of the predominance of this 'culture of migration', we paid extra attention to the parents and grandparents of clients, to the culture of their country of origin and also to the use of their mother tongue. Over and over again we have experienced how the use of the mother tongue creates a deep resonance in the soul. The heart opens up and love flows more freely.

We would like to give two examples of the work where the Aboriginal background was of crucial importance.

The first work was with a highly educated client who experienced difficulties in using his abilities and creativity. This was also true for his siblings. A little more than a year ago we had set up a first constellation with him, when his issue had been that he had very little contact with his siblings. After that constellation contact with them had improved. This time, while he talked about the land that his paternal grandfather had obtained to start his business - land that had belonged to an Aboriginal tribe - he was suddenly very moved. While he was talking about this he mentioned a pain in his left side. He told us that he did not know how his grandfather had originally got possession of the land and he was surprised by his distress, given that he had told this story many times before. For us, this genuine grief was a signal that there was enough openness to work with this issue. Initially we set up his family of origin: parents, grandparents and himself.

The grandmother reported that she felt angry with her husband. The others, except for the grandfather, reported restlessness and friction. They were all more or less directed towards the grandfather who was looking far away, making no contact with anyone. Not knowing how he had obtained the land, we brought two representatives

into the constellation - male and female - for the *Spirit of the Aboriginal Tribe*, those who once owned the land. The client's family had obviously benefited at their expense. Immediately the whole energy in the constellation changed dramatically and a deep silence and serenity came into the room. The grandmother said that her anger had disappeared. Except for the grandfather, everyone reported that the friction had gone and there was more peace. Feelings of gratitude started to emerge. The grandson (the client) reported that the pain in his left side had gone as well. But the grandfather showed no intention to look. However, after some insistence from us he started to do so and finally he also was able to express his gratitude and respect.

What we were able to see here – as before in other constellations – was that later generations are more able than the first generation, to make this movement of looking back and doing what needs to be done. And if they do, the first generation often follows, after a while.

Recently this client wrote to us:

*"Although I don't feel particularly different since, I notice that when I do creative things they seem to work more easily than before - and with less anxiety. There have been some good developments in my family too and these things are actually minor miracles. In addition I'll tell you that I call this constellation a 'core constellation'. I feel it went right to the core of me, to the core of much of what has defined me all of my life. I suspect there are many more things evolving as a result of this constellation. However, they are subtle and I am not prepared to say them out loud yet."*

The absolute serenity, which presented itself as a quality of being and moved us all very deeply, may have contributed to a similar experience two days later.

This involved an organisational constellation. A man explained that he was part of a group of volunteers who were engaged in a project about the protection of endangered species in Australia. The whole group agreed to present this case for a constellation. Their difficulty was that there was confusion in the group and they could not proceed in their work. Soon it became apparent that the group was actually holding two goals: to protect the endangered species, and to get the local

community interested. The key people were the initiator of the project, the government as the financial provider, and three project groups. We asked the client to set up someone for every goal and group, although the three project groups made do with just two representatives.

In the initial constellation the client placed the two goals opposite each other, half a metre apart, and the same for the two project groups, a metre apart. The representative for the initiator stood sideways behind one of the projects and the government finance stood to one side watching it all.

Both the goals reported feelings of insecurity and were very relieved when they were moved beside each other. The same was true for the two project groups. Standing beside one another was a better place for all the representatives of both the projects and the goals. The government finance representative was more or less alright, but we could not find a proper place for the initiator. He felt a pull to stand in a more distant space, but when he did so, one or other of the project groups started to feel insecure.

In this constellation, as with the last, the Aboriginal peoples had originally owned the land on which the village - the local community - had been built. Most of them had been murdered or driven away. So we also introduced the *Spirit of the Tribe* into the constellation. What happened then was intense and dramatic. Almost immediately the representative for the community started to cry in a heartbreaking way and collapsed. The initiator of the project sank slowly to his knees. The representative for the endangered species said that he felt more powerful. The other representatives felt awkward although very touched, and they were aware of a feeling of deep gravity. The representative of the spirit was focused on the community and wanted to support her. The right place for him was behind the community and the endangered species. The reaction of the initiator was such that it became evident that a personal issue was involved here, so we stopped the constellation at this point. It was clear that the project could not just focus on endangered species without looking at endangered human beings. The spirituality of the Aborigines has always been about oneness – oneness of the land, the animals, and the people, and of all that is.

Recently this client wrote to us:

*"Interestingly, a member of our group has recently made contact with one of the few remaining Dja Dja Wrung people to work on issues of acknowledgment and native title in regard to another project."*

The serenity as a pure quality of Being was present in both constellations. There was no sense of resentment or anger, just that it was appropriate to recognise the suffering of the Aboriginal people. It reminded us of an Aboriginal response that we heard when Bert Hellinger was considering going to Australia. A group of Aborigines were asked

how they felt about this. Their answer was:

*"We have no problems. The white men do. If they need help we'll give it."*

A beautiful lesson in humility for those who are prepared to listen.

We were very moved when at the end of the workshop someone said, speaking for many others:

*"I am beginning to sense the importance of looking back at our history."*

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## **A Sense of the Sacred**

### **Presented at the Learning Intensive in Family Constellations ZIST, Germany, May 2002**

#### **Francesca Mason Boring**

I would like to open by singing a Shoshone Woman's Power Song, *Hupia Waimpentsi*. This is a song for a medicine woman, or any woman who wants to call upon the strength of women. If I find myself walking on a road alone, or facing a challenge, this song can invoke all women to come to help me: all my female ancestors, bears, cougars and badgers, even the spirits of the female field mice. All the women hear the song, and they will come and stand by me.

#### **Song Woman**

*Song Woman, Shaking the rhythm of her song*  
HEYNA

*Song Woman. Shaking the rhythm of her song*  
Heyna

*Next to the river*

*Her cousin the water*

*Shaking the rhythm of her song, Heyna*

*Shaking the rhythm of her song, Heyna*

I am the granddaughter of Thomas Premo and Anna Frank Premo, the daughter of Naomi Premo Mason, and Ron Mason. On my mother's side, I come from the Shoshone, 'Newe' in our

language. The Bands of my grandparents are Doya Dupia and Duba Ducut. We are all children of the Coyote, and the Blue Stone Woman. On my father's side I am the great granddaughter of four immigrants to the United States.

What I am about to share is entirely personal, and in the tradition of my mother's family I will boldly share things that I know may be misunderstood by some, but for those who do understand, I am obliged to take the risk.

My maternal grandmother, Anna Premo, was a Dreamer, and was raised by her aunt, a Bowegant, or Medicine Person. My grandmother lived beyond one hundred years and was present to help me as I discovered that I had inherited her relationship with dream. In the Shoshone Tribe, as with numerous other Native American tribes and indigenous peoples world wide, dreams provide a benevolent vehicle for our ancestors to advise, encourage, and correct us. For us, the world of dream provides one ancient and contemporary path to the 'knowing field'.

Dream, for the Dreamer in the Shoshone

community is not a metaphor. The 'field of dream' provides us with empirical data.

For clarification, I should explain that for the Shoshone, a Dreamer is not awarded any particular status. It is a given that the information provided by a dream is for the benefit of a person in the community, or the community as a whole. But, the information, just as everything else, comes from the creator and the ancestors. Often, Dreamers come from one particular family. Interestingly, Dr. Karen Jaenke, in her research on indigenous aspects of dream has documented that most Dreamers have had a grandparent who was also a Dreamer. No particular virtue is ascribed to a Dreamer, and unlike the status or separation introduced by Christianity to clergy or people of vision, the Dreamer is simply a mailman, required to deliver the mail to the appropriate recipient, and happy to have a job in the community.

Family Systems Constellations and the 'knowing field' as introduced to me by the work of Bert Hellinger, have prompted me to observe the differences and similarities between traditional indigenous knowledge, the 'indigenous field', and the principles presented in constellations. Here, I must clarify. Naturally, my first comparisons were ethnocentric as I referred to the small body of information I had acquired through a number of family members, as well as persons I had worked with and known from a variety of Native American tribes. However, I was quickly drawn to look more widely at the 'knowing field' of Mexican Corianders, or Brujas, Hawaiian Kahunas, and the Australian Aboriginal people. I legitimately wondered about the existence of European persons who were also connected to the 'knowing field', and who were faced with a fear of Christianity and witch burning. At this point of my investigation, I had begun to re-define the 'indigenous field' as a more universal term. Indeed, I concluded that despite the varied cultural definitions of it, there could only be one field. And if there were only one field then it would be appropriate to seek contributions from those communities in which the 'knowing field' is nothing new.

Two Native American colleagues, a husband and wife, and I attended a Hellinger Conference. The husband had an urgent sense that something needed to be addressed and after spending time together, I put my concern for this man in my heart. That night, in my dream I prayed for him,

and asked: "What about this man?" In my dream, an Elder told me: "This man (in the dream he was referred to by name) should catch some fish, and this man should eat some fish, and this man should share some fish with the old man." In the morning, when I shared the dream with the couple, the wife stated that her tribe had an indigenous tradition of giving food to the deceased as a gesture of honouring and she immediately suggested that perhaps the old man in the dream was her husband's deceased grandfather.

Later in the day, he set up his constellation and it became evident that the one he had excluded from his family soul, in terms of his own identity, was indeed his grandfather. So, the 'knowing field of the dream world', the 'indigenous knowing field' of one woman's tribal people, and the 'knowing field of the constellation', all held the same information.

Working with Native American people in Constellations, I have noted that an awareness of cultural norms and history is vital. It is beautiful to see that the *Systemic Solutions Bulletin* is providing a platform for sharing information about cultural differences and their implications. There is an excellent article in *Number 2: A Report on Cross-Cultural Issues*, which resulted from contributions from representatives of different cultures and countries attending the ZIST Learning in Family Constellations, May 2001.

The issue of eye contact is a good example to highlight cultural differences. In many Native American cultures direct eye contact is considered rude whereas in Constellations it is used as an important tool to discourage dissociation. If a member of the dominant culture were to insist that a Native American make eye contact, it would be considered to be essentially dominating - ignoring, or over-riding the cultural norms of the indigenous culture. The Native American tradition is one that nurtures awareness of 'field'. Most indigenous languages contain very few words in comparison to Northern European languages and non-verbal communication is the dominant component of exchange. Indeed, the connectedness of persons in indigenous traditions is so intimate in nature that the added invasion of eye contact prohibits any sense of separation of Self.

The level of acculturation determines an individual person's exposure to the dominant society norms.

For tribes that are geographically isolated the issue of eye contact is great. However, for a full-blood Native American adopted into a dominant society-family, and not raised in the traditional community, sustained eye contact is not an issue.

Native American tribes in the United States are essentially nations. Languages are different, customs are different, creation stories and specific beliefs are different. For example, for several south-western tribes the owl is a symbol of power and a source of comfort, but for the Shoshone, the owl is the messenger of death. When someone is about to die, or a relative has died in another location, the owl will come in a dream, or a particular 'spirit owl' will be sighted in some unusual way or place, and the Shoshone will know that it is time to prepare for a burial. Naturally, the reason for the owl's appearance is to focus upon preparation. It is a benevolent act for us, even if it represents impending grief.

The majority of tribal families have a connection to the ancestors. In my family, when someone dies, all the family gathers and we visit each other for several days. The family stays with the dead. Someone tends the fire throughout the night and people sit with the dead as long as they like. There is time. We eat together and gifts are given for the person to take to the other side - tobacco to trade, water to drink on the way, even money to spend. There is singing and traditional story telling. These things are family, and family is an expansive organism. It includes cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, nephews, nieces, and occasionally someone who is so close that they are also called 'auntie' or 'grandmother'.

We bury the dead and then everyone in the family comes back to the house. An Elder opens the east door (although modern construction requires some flexibility), and a prayer is said as all the family walks the spirit out of the door. In our hearts we tell the deceased that he is dead, that he has died, and it is time to go. For us the stars that are twinkling are the 'old ones' who have gone dancing. We tell the dead that it is time to go dancing. The mother, brother, wife, all stand together for the sake of the dead, to be sure that there is no misunderstanding, and in that setting, each living relative has the support of all their relations to let go.

We are doing the movement of the soul that we have done for thousands of years. It is for the love

of the dead, and for the love of the family.

Last year, when I was fortunate enough to attend the International Conference on Systems Constellations in Wuerzburg, there was one event that awakened me to the need to extend my definition of the 'indigenous field'.

There was a European woman at the Conference. One evening, for some time, it was apparent that she had an interest in speaking with me, but each of us continued to find the other already engaged in conversation and we did not get a chance for an exchange.

I took the woman's concern to my heart and prayed that I would know if there was anything I could share with her. Usually, my Shoshone ancestors, and the Elders of other native people visit my own indigenous dreams, but in my dream that night, other people came. As I dreamed out of concern for her, I found her ancestors telling me that she should come to 'this place'. They walked me into a structure, appearing to be some sort of circular stone tunnel, leading to a very old village. I had never in my own experience seen such a structure. There was stone on the ground, as well as on all the walls. The Elder told me that the woman needed to come here. I asked if she needed instruction and the reply was: "Yes." I asked if I could help her, and the ancestor said I could not.

The following day, as we all gathered in the morning, the woman and I found each other face-to-face in the crowd. I told her that I had seen that she wanted to speak with me, I told her my dream, and shared that I was in some confusion, because the place I was seeing was like nothing I had ever seen in my own experience. She immediately assured me that there were many such structures in Germany. She shared that she had been aware that she had always experienced the 'knowing field' but had lived in a community where historically there was no credible place for her abilities. As I inquired about her family ancestry, she indicated that two women in her family system had been burned as witches. As in a constellation, when one feels as if a wind has blown the system clean, I had a knowing that she was gifted like the women that she came from - the two women who had been burned.

It will be such a challenge for the Constellations movement, coming out of the dominant society,



not to discredit or demonise traditional applications of the 'knowing field'. As this beautiful language of the Movements of the Soul evolves, one would hope that it does not hide under the definition of 'phenomenon'.

For virtually all traditional people who learn to walk in the 'knowing field' at the same time as they are learning to walk, there is a sense of *the sacred*. The Elders caution us against using the field unwisely. Tradition teaches that one who walks in the field unwisely may become ill, hurt others, or even cause injury to the earth.

In closing I would like to share a Native American Prophecy from the Hopi Nation, which seems to have a beautiful application to Family Constellations:

*"To my fellow swimmers:  
There is a river flowing now very fast,  
It is so great and swift that there are those who  
will be afraid.  
They will try to hold onto the shore,  
They are being torn apart and will suffer greatly.  
Know that the river has its destination.  
The Elders say we must let go of the shore,  
Push off into the middle of the river,  
Keep our heads above water.  
And I say:  
See who is there with you and celebrate.  
At this time in history, we are to take nothing  
personally, least of all  
ourselves,  
For the moment that we do, our spiritual growth  
and journey come to a halt.  
The time of the lone wolf is over.  
Gather yourselves,  
Banish the word 'struggle' from your attitude and  
vocabulary.  
All that we do now must be done in a sacred  
manner and in celebration.  
We are the ones we have been waiting for."*

## POSTSCRIPT

Having been fortunate enough to attend the Learning Intensive in Family Constellations I have come away enriched and relieved. Before I arrived at ZIST I had a great concern about the connection between Family Constellations and the field that had been accessed by indigenous people for millennia. With all traditions that have accessed the 'knowing field' there has always

been a sense of the sacred, a sense of reverence, that was part and parcel of walking in that place. While it is true that there are numerous therapists who would naturally approach every client with reverence, my concern was that because of the sacred place that Constellation work goes to, this should not be simply an issue of professional personality or preference. The essence of *the holy* is what indigenous people have always opened the field with: it is a requirement of walking in the field.

Being a beginner in the work, and not heavily grounded in Psychotherapy, I kept my concern to myself. Now, having attended the Learning Intensive, I can return home with a sense of joy. At every turn, the faculty, the participants, and even the constellations themselves, allayed my fears. One cannot mandate a sense of quiet or peace, introspection or unconditional love, but it appears that the field itself draws students to these places. Without sounding clichéd, few words can convey the depth of beauty I sensed in this experience, but I now know that it is the field itself that will teach us about *the sense of the sacred*.

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# CONSTELLATIONS

## Child of the Prophet

Karen Hedley

A young man came to one of my constellation workshops. His father had recently been executed after volunteering to appear in court as a witness for a friend. When he turned up to give evidence he was instantly arrested and told that the authorities had been looking for him for six years for some alleged offence he had committed. He was hanged without trial. The family are members of a faith that is heavily persecuted and suppressed in their country of origin and their beliefs are based on the teachings of a prophet.

The young man had been living in exile for seventeen years in order to escape persecution. However, just before his father's execution he was granted permission to visit his homeland. He spent a few minutes with his father just before he died. During their brief meeting the father did not look at his son and they both seemed resigned to his fate.

Eight months later he came to the workshop on the recommendation of a friend who was concerned about his apparent total absence of feeling about his father's death.

Initially we set up a constellation placing representatives for his father, mother and himself. Immediately it became obvious that the father wanted to leave the family. As I asked him to follow his inner movement he moved forward and away from his family, with his eyes looking up towards the heavens. I then placed a representative for the Prophet opposite the father. With this the father became unbelievably happy, and said to the Prophet: *"I want to be with you. I would die for you again, and again, and again."* It did not matter to him that the Prophet did not require him to die; he was determined to martyr

himself. No-one could stand in his way.

Throughout the constellation the representative for the son was standing next to his mother and he said that he wished to be more deeply connected to her. However, when he went towards her and she put her arms around him, she said: *"I can't reach him."*

From my observations of the son I suggested that he also wanted to die a martyr, whereupon the young man's representative smiled and nodded his head. At that point I brought the client into the constellation, and placing him before the Prophet I asked him to say: *"I am coming, too. I too will die for you."* When I asked the Prophet to respond in his own words he said: *"I do not want your life! I want your love, but not your life. Your love gives me life, but your death is a burden to me."*

Following my intuition I asked the young man to say to the Prophet: *"I am not your child, (and pointing at his father), this is my real father"*, whereupon the young man burst into tears and fell into his father's arms sobbing freely while his father held him tenderly. When they were looking at each other I offered the following words to the young man: *"Father, I will live."* He responded that this would be hard to say, but I asked him to try and he agreed to speak the words. His father accepted that this was as it should be. I then took the young man to his mother and asked him to say the same words to her.

After the constellation the young man told me that at a very early age his father had told him that he was not his child, but rather that he was the child of the Prophet.

# War Story: A Participant Remembers

Ian Longstaff

I'll never forget that constellation: the numbness, the grief that ripped through my body, the delight of re-awakening. It was Armistice Sunday, 1999. I was attending an Orders of Love workshop as an observer. A few weeks earlier, a friend, with a hunch that I needed to see this work, had showed me one of Bert Hellinger's videos and about three minutes in, I knew she was correct. I immediately booked a place.

I guess you need to know that, back then, I was someone who I would now call 'an emotional flat liner'. For years I had clamped down so tightly on my feelings that there were no longer any genuine highs, or deep lows, just functioning on autopilot somewhere in the middle. It was therefore with some trepidation that I arrived on the first morning. Would I be any good at this? If I got chosen, would I actually be able to feel anything at all? Would I ruin the whole process? About sixty seconds into my first role as a representative on the Saturday, I realised that such doubts and fears were totally groundless. I spent the rest of the day experiencing feelings - love, rejection, closeness, longing, irritation, contempt, wholeness - fabulous stuff, even if they were someone else's emotions. I was also astounded by the magnetic pull that I experienced either towards, or away from, other representatives. It was unlike anything I had ever experienced and the whole journey, from heart-rending entanglement to joyful resolution was simply magical.

As I made my way home on the Saturday night, I began to wonder what my own constellation might look like. What hidden trauma or family secret might it throw up? Still, I was only along as an observer and probably wouldn't get a chance to do my own piece of work. Such a shame, I thought, that I'd have to wait another couple of months to see that one played out.

The next morning the first thing I remember was one of the group asking if we could observe the minute's silence for Armistice Sunday at eleven o'clock. I remember rolling my eyes at this request. We were here to deal with current issues, not faff around with stupid distractions. As it was,

the facilitator noted the request, but added that as we didn't know where we might be at that time, we might have to let it go. I sat watching the first constellation that morning with some relief, thankful I hadn't been chosen as a representative, since I was still tired from the previous day's exertions.

When the energy in the constellation started to falter, the facilitator began to experiment with what needed to happen next. She beckoned to me to stand up and asked me if I would represent the grandfather in the family, placing me next to my wife.

I duly obliged, and after a few minutes began to wonder if all of yesterday's magic had actually happened at all. I couldn't feel a thing, not even a flicker. I just wasn't getting anything at all - no emotions, no pulling one way or another, no connection with my wife or son, nothing.

After offering this numbness up to the group, the facilitator asked the man who had set up the constellation what had happened in his grandfather's life that might explain this shutting down. He replied that he didn't know any specifics but he had returned home from The Great War as an alcoholic. Testing this out, the facilitator asked three men to stand in a line and represent the grandfather's fallen comrades - friends who had never returned. Suddenly, everything changed, the whole of the constellation had shifted towards me and I was alive again.

I was transfixed by the soldier in the middle of the row and could not move my eyes away from his. We were urged to follow our movements and as I walked towards him I could feel the emotion building up. I remember collapsing into his arms in a fit of sobbing, which, with a little encouragement to breathe through my mouth, turned into a roar of grief that travelled from my toes to my throat. It felt like the doors to every cell in my body were wide open and the pain was just pouring out. In my own life, I had never experienced anything like it.

It was becoming clear that this person was no

ordinary comrade; he felt more like a brother or a best friend who had taken a bullet for me. I didn't want to let go of him; he was sobbing too and we just seemed to be clinging to each other, frozen in time and space. I had an overwhelming sense of guilt that I was alive when he had not made it. My memory is a little hazy about what happened after the facilitator managed to separate us. I recall being asked to tell him how much I missed him, how guilty I felt for living. Then the three soldiers were asked to lie down on the floor so that they could finally die. The other two seemed at rest, but he was still sobbing; he just couldn't stop looking at me.

I was asked to say several different things to him but still he would not die. I thanked him for his sacrifice, his gift of life, but still he looked at me. The line that finally brought him relief was: "*I would have died instead of you if I could have done.*" After that the sobbing subsided and he finally came to rest in peace. With that, I was able to turn back to my family and I was amazed to find that the feelings were now flowing where the numbness had once been. I felt a real respect for my wife and was taking in my grandchildren, as if for the first time.

The facilitator then asked my son to come in front of me and make a bowing movement. He came with each of his children and repeated the gesture in what I suppose was an honouring

ceremony. Standing in his shoes, I felt this was good for the grandfather, as if someone was finally acknowledging what he had been through.

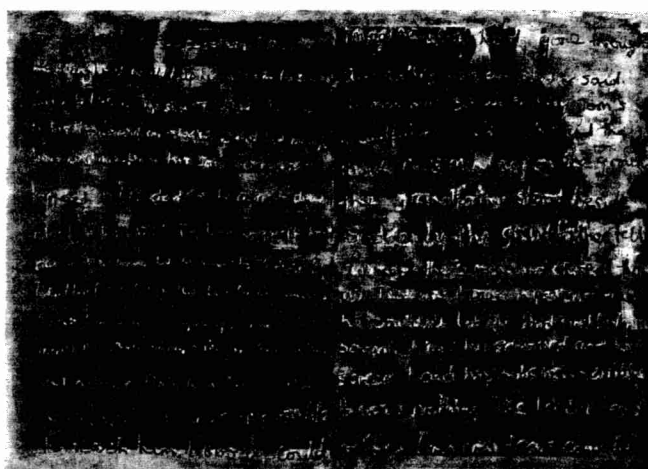
I can't remember the actual conclusion of the constellation; I don't think there was much more to it after that. But I don't think anyone present in that room will ever forget what happened next. It seemed to unfold in a slow motion sequence – the leader thanked us for participating in the constellation, we sat down in a kind of bruised silence and then, somewhere in the distance, a single church bell began to toll for eleven o'clock.

As I listened, I knew deep inside that I had just been involved in something much greater than I could possibly have imagined. There was the healing on offer for the family in the constellation itself. There was the resonance with my own issue of long-held grief and my being put in touch with a depth of emotion I would later revisit in healing that experience.

And, somehow, as if directed by those forgotten soldiers, we were working to heal and honour that whole generation of young men who fought and fell in "*the War to end all Wars*". Even now, nearly three years later, I have tears dropping onto my keyboard as I am typing these words. I am still totally in awe of what happened that day. I don't think it will ever leave me.

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## Eye Witness: Libby Shearon



I was one of the group members at the workshop on Armistice Sunday, part of the holding circle. It was the most extraordinary thing I've ever been part of. It was the agony of it, God, the awful agony. I don't think there's a day goes by when I don't think about it and it moves me always. It was like watching a film really. It was so moving and so dramatic that it drew everyone in. I couldn't stop crying, and I know that most people around me couldn't either. I think it spoke to us all because it was about the extraordinary bonding between these men, the subsequent silence, and that terrible, terrible loss that can never be spoken of.

A lot of my artistic work is about secrets and I felt that I had to write this one down and build a painting around it. **Eye Witness** is the canvas I felt I had to paint. The image behind the text is from a photo I took of a war memorial. On each side there are the boots and the bayonets of two soldiers. It is my personal memorial to those men and to that constellation.

# Sarah's Story

## Constellating an Archetypal Myth

Vivian Broughton

This is an account of an unusual constellation that was set up on September 9<sup>th</sup> 2001, on the last day of a residential workshop, the final module of training in Family Systems Therapy with Albrecht Mahr. It took place in a lovely green and peaceful landscape. Two days later a group of men of Arab descent flew two passenger airliners into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre, symbols to them of Zionist and Christian 'achievement', killing over three thousand people.

This is a personal account. I have spent many months trying to work out how to write about this constellation, and eventually I could find no other feasible way than to write it as Sarah's story. I represented Sarah in the constellation.

The story may be written differently from the perspective of Abraham's representative, or Ishmael's, Isaac's, Hagar's, or from the perspective of Bernard who courageously facilitated the constellation, or from Albrecht's, or any other of the group members present. But I was the one who wanted to write the story. Somehow I think this is no accident; the Biblical story of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac is always known as the story of Abraham, but this constellation was Sarah's story.

This is how it came about. Daniel, one of the members of our group was an Israeli living in London and deeply troubled by events in the Middle East. Bernard, another member was interested in the possibility of using constellations as a way of exploring national archetypal myths and legends, stories that seem in some way to portray something deep in the soul of groups of people. For all his life Daniel had been fascinated by the story of Abraham. He was brought up with this narrative, and for him it seemed to permeate everything around him to do with being an Israeli and a Jew. Together Bernard and Daniel proposed to the group that we set up a constellation of the story of Abraham.

Bernard and Daniel sat together and Daniel said: *"I want to constellate what I regard as my*

*inherited myth, the story of Abraham, his wife Sarah and her son Isaac, Sarah's Egyptian slave Hagar and her son Ishmael. In our myth Sarah's descendants are the Jews (the Israelites) and Hagar's descendants are the Arabs. The story has been alive in me since I started to be involved in the Hellinger work."*

The story as told by Daniel was that Abraham had a wife called Sarah, who was infertile and she said to Abraham: *"Why don't you sleep with my slave girl Hagar, so that she can have a child for me?"* Abraham agreed and slept with Hagar and she became pregnant. Once Hagar had been intimate with Abraham, she despised Sarah, and Sarah seeing this, wanted to be rid of her. Sarah appealed to Abraham but he told her that Hagar was her slave and she should do with her as she wished. So Sarah banished Hagar to the desert.

In the desert an angel came to Hagar and told her to go back and that her unborn son would have many descendants and they would be a very angry people. So she went back and gave birth to a son whom she called Ishmael.

Later the angel came to Sarah when she was ninety years old, and promised her a child. Sarah laughed and said it was impossible because she was so old, but a year later she gave birth to her son Isaac.

One day Ishmael and Isaac were playing together and when Sarah saw them she again went to Abraham and this time told him to send Ishmael and his mother away so that Isaac would inherit everything from Abraham. He did as she said.

At the beginning of the constellation Bernard, the facilitator, told Daniel to place Abraham, Sarah and Hagar. Daniel had also chosen people to represent Isaac, Ishmael, and Canaan the Promised Land. As the representative for Sarah I found I needed to push up close behind Abraham, hiding behind him and glued to him. If he had moved I would have moved with him, as if I were physically joined to him. I just had my eyes

over the top of his right shoulder looking in the same direction as he, at Hagar. As I looked at Hagar I felt hatred towards her. I felt as though I was trying to kill her with my eyes.

Hagar reported being aware of Sarah's look and confirmed what Sarah said. She felt the hatred. Abraham said he wanted to move away from Sarah, not feeling that involved or interested, but increasingly uncomfortable. He tried to move but Sarah followed, sticking to him like glue. Eventually Abraham moved right away and left Sarah standing opposite Hagar. As Sarah I felt naked, deserted and abandoned with my growing feelings of hatred and violence totally fixed on Hagar. My eyes never left her.

At this point Bernard brought in the representative for Canaan and placed her at the other end of the room. Hagar moved to Canaan and said that she felt more comfortable and at ease near her. Abraham meanwhile turned and looked away from the constellation. He said that he didn't want to be involved in what was going on; it had nothing to do with him.

As Sarah I began to feel desperate, there would be no solution for me, and there was no-one I could turn to. I couldn't rely on Abraham as he had removed himself. I felt a growing tension in my body, a feeling of fear that something awful was going to happen, that I would not be able to contain the tumult within. I appealed to Bernard as the facilitator, but he was talking to Abraham and Hagar and didn't respond. A little later he asked me how I was and I tried to say what was happening, but I struggled to speak. What was going on in me felt beyond words. I felt scared and I managed to say that. But then he went and talked to Abraham again. After a bit I looked around to see if there was somewhere I could move where I might feel safer and I saw the person who had been chosen to represent Isaac, not actually positioned yet, but sitting on a chair next to the person chosen to be Ishmael. I felt drawn to him. He was my son and I thought I might find some solid ground near him. I moved over and stood behind him, my back against the wall, wedged in between the wall and the chair Isaac was sitting on. I started to play with his hair; I was able to breathe a little more easily.

Meanwhile things were happening in the group. They were discussing something about God; Abraham was staring away and saying something

like: *"I'm just following God's will."* As Sarah I still felt ignored and desperate. I began to feel that I was central and that there was something about my experience, and me that was crucial to the constellation. I was obviously feeling a lot. I had tried to say so, but somehow no-one seemed to be taking any notice. The feelings seemed to be collecting in my belly. I felt this horrible tension and queasiness. I started to feel restricted in my chest again, hot in my head; my legs felt shaky and I had to cling to the chair to stay standing. I tried to attract Bernard's attention. I said something like: *"I think the issue is here, I think you have to do something here."* Still I felt unheard, ignored and unseen. I tried again: *"Something has to happen here... please, something needs to happen here..."* Bernard came over and as far as I can remember suggested that I come out from behind Isaac's chair. I wouldn't. I felt like I couldn't. He seemed insistent. *"No, I can't."* I don't remember where he wanted me to go, but I couldn't move. I wouldn't move; nothing, no one would make me move from where I was. *"No,"* I said. *"No, no, no, I can't..."*

Bernard was still there and seemed very close so that I felt hemmed in between him, the wall and Isaac's chair. I felt increasing panic and rage. The overwhelming feelings were of being trapped, unseen for who I really was, not taken seriously. I tried to tell Bernard to go away. I couldn't bear his proximity and his lack of understanding about the level of rage and turmoil that was growing in me. I didn't know what was happening. I just knew that if something didn't change soon I was going to explode. I had no idea what that meant. I just felt like I was a fragile container for a huge and massively destructive evil energy. He didn't move. I tried again: *"Go away."* He didn't move. *"GO AWAY."* He looked uncertain but held his ground. *"GO AWAY!!!"* I was yelling by this stage... and then I erupted. I howled. I don't know where it came from... but I howled like a wild animal. The roaring and howling came from my belly. I lost sight of the room; I had this image of multitudes of people coming from my belly, an outflow of humans into the future. I felt as if I were giving birth to centuries of hatred, rage, persecution, violence and evil. I disgorged pain and torment. I saw the generations that came from my belly suffering and hating and killing. I felt as though I were giving birth to the Holocaust. I was lost in the experience. I have never in my life felt less available to myself as Vivian. I felt almost wholly

something else, completely immersed. At this point Bernard asked Albrecht for help and he brought me back to myself. I felt held. The group was talking about what had happened and discussing what to do. Still clinging onto Isaac, I felt a bit calmer and more able to think. They were making suggestions as to what movements might be possible. I looked at Hagar and I no longer felt the hate. I saw her sitting on the floor at the feet of Canaan and she looked so comfortable, beautiful and strong that I too began to feel more solid and strong.

Albrecht asked Daniel what would be a good outcome for him. He thought and then said it would be that Ishmael and Isaac could play again. Suddenly as he said that I knew what I had to do. I had to get to Hagar. I didn't feel I could go alone, but if I could take Isaac and Ishmael with me - perhaps we could go to her. I moved and taking Isaac by the hand I said: "You come too." And we went over to Hagar and she smiled at me. I felt so drawn to her now as I knelt down and quite slowly put my arms around her and then lay down in her lap as she held me. I felt I had come home, and then realised I felt forgiven.

Two days later, as I watched on television the second plane fly into the World Trade Centre I thought of Sarah. I couldn't believe what was happening, as I imagine few of us could, but it matched my experience of Sarah's feelings of horror and destruction. Four days later, as the world tried to make sense of what was happening a phrase popped into my head: *"The small, quiet voice of guilt."* I didn't know what it meant. I didn't make any connection, but it stayed with me. Five days later it hit me: Sarah's guilt. I realised that beneath all the tempestuous feelings I had felt as Sarah there had been the small, quiet voice of guilt. Too quiet to be heard, even by me as Sarah. As I thought more about it I came up with the following: Sarah gave her handmaiden to Abraham to make love to and to conceive a child by. She was responsible for that. Then when Hagar did conceive, Sarah couldn't bear it and so she banished Hagar and her child to the desert. Later when Sarah gave birth to Isaac, and Ishmael and Isaac played together, Sarah felt jealous and asked Abraham to banish Hagar and Ishmael again so that Isaac would be the sole inheritor of his father's wealth. Sarah was doubly guilty.

Guilt needs to be heard. We know from our work with Hellinger and constellations that the guilty need to be allowed to stand with their guilt, to be given their place and honoured for the fact that they acknowledge their actions and accept the consequences. I have often seen how once a representative owns their guilt and is seen and accepted by others in the constellation, then they grow taller, become more solid, and the feeling changes. The guilty must have their place with their guilt. A couple of weeks after the Twin Towers and still working to understand all these events, I was talking to a colleague who told me that once in a workshop she had attended, an angry woman in a constellation was asked to say to the object of her hate: *"What have I done to you that I am so angry with you?"* She understood what I was saying.

Sarah's rage covered and masked her guilt and shame, but it also came from the frustration of not having the space to own it. In our culture, to be guilty is in itself shameful. When we are guilty we are punished, and if we own our guilt we are not honoured for doing so. Outside of a constellation we don't understand that to feel guilt and to fully carry this burden is in itself strengthening to the individual and that it serves to even out the imbalance between the perpetrator and the victim. This gives birth to true forgiveness and peace. As we know, the perpetrator needs to be loved by someone in the constellation, to be given the space to be seen, and then they can lay their guilt at the victim's feet. Then both can find peace.

We found a good resolution for Sarah and Hagar in the constellation. We found a place for them both to recognise and acknowledge the offending act. When this does not happen, when a person cannot be heard in their guilt, then the resulting frustration and masking rage ensure that the violence, devastation and horror will continue down through the generations.

In the weeks after September 11<sup>th</sup> I heard a story on the news about a group of Palestinian and Israeli women who were working together for peace. Perhaps, if we could create a little space and time, Sarah and Hagar could come together and Sarah could stand with her guilt and she and Hagar could become strong together.

## POSTSCRIPT

Two days after I finished writing this article 'Time Magazine' came out with a cover story entitled: 'The Legacy of Abraham' by David van Biema. It followed the publication of a new book by Bruce Feiler called: 'Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths'. Feiler sets out to understand the historical origins of the animosity between the three great religions of Islam, Judaism and Christianity.

In the article David van Biema summarises the individual versions of the story of Abraham as told by each religion, and makes it obvious how each religion uses the story to uphold its claims. For

instance in Islam, Ishmael is the son that Abraham nearly sacrifices on the mountain, not Isaac as in the Judaic and Christian traditions. Van Biema also focuses attention on the extraordinary inheritance of the two sons from their father Abraham. He writes:

*"If Abraham is indeed the father of three faiths, then he is like a father who left a bitterly disputed will."*

## Reference

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## **'The Lost May Sometimes Be Found Again'** **A Personal Account**

**Alannah Tandy Pilbrow**

I was in the audience at Bert Hellinger's first three-day seminar in England, held in 1994. The second night I was wide awake, in turmoil from all that I had witnessed over the past two days. So many links and connections to my own family life which, in seven years of individual therapy, had not emerged or seemed significant, now came into view. I do not wish to discredit psychotherapy or the valuable work done there, but rather to highlight this broader and usually more complex perspective that is afforded by the Family Constellations work. In watching events unfold in other family systems, they were speaking to me about my own.

My first baby had been premature and stillborn twenty years earlier. At the time I had been devastated but simultaneously brave and stoical. My husband and I were not able to grieve our loss together. If parents are not able to fully grieve, there are consequences for those who come later, usually subsequent children. This was made apparent to me as I watched someone else's work. In another constellation I saw the importance of those who have come first, such as a first wife or husband, or fiancée. They need to be acknowledged humbly by the second wife or

husband, as opposed to being judged or seen as inferior, as often happens. It can be that one of the children of a second union will be recruited by the system to remember a forgotten or excluded person. The recruited person may be unaware of this, but will often live out aspects of the excluded or forgotten person's life in their own lives. This burden may not leave the growing child free to develop in its own way. Sometimes their fate may even parallel those unacknowledged persons. In this way the family system seeks to bring about balance.

In my first piece of work with Bert we set up my family constellation. I placed representatives for my former husband, our two daughters and myself. When a man from the audience was taken to represent our stillborn son I experienced overwhelming feelings of grief. Our son was then given his place with his two sisters standing next to him, in their order of birth. As I took my place and looked, seeing this new unfamiliar picture, the impact was very strong for me. It felt correct, as if a previously unrecognised void was now filled by the person whose rightful place it was; he belonged there. How could I have not given him his place in my heart? From now on I would carry



this new snapshot with me. My husband and I had divorced eleven years later, and I heard Bert say during this constellation, that often a woman will lose her husband when a couple has not grieved their loss together.

A few months later, I was sharing some of my constellation experiences with my mother. I illustrated what I was saying by referring to a friend's family situation where there was an unacknowledged half-brother, followed in the next generation by an unacknowledged half-sister. Imagine my surprise when my mother looked at me, and said: *"You have a half-brother too, actually."*

I was forty-eight years old when this unspoken truth just popped out. I had done years of therapy and thought I had unearthed all family secrets! Now the story unfolded. My father was dead, but my mother told me his story. He had fathered a son prior to meeting her. At the time he was a bachelor living and working in a remote part of the world and his son's mother was married. She stayed with her husband and the boy was raised believing that this man was his father. From time to time in the ensuing years she and her husband would send a Christmas card. One Christmas, eighteen years after my parents had married, a card arrived with a letter for my father. She had written to let him know that their son had just graduated from Oxford University. This was the moment when, for the first time, my father told his wife, my mother, of his son's existence. My hunch is that his heart was bursting with pride and he could contain his secret no longer. I was stunned by this new piece of family information.

Six months later, in a constellation I did with Hunter Beaumont, I placed representatives for my father, mother, siblings, half-brother and myself. My half-brother's mother and her husband were also represented. I was brought into the constellation to stand in my place and see this new view. A few minutes later my half-brother's mother asked if she could report how she was feeling. As she began to speak, completely unexpectedly I had the most overwhelming experience. It arose suddenly from the very depths of my belly. As I listened to her words it was as if I were speaking them, and I was overcome with wracking sobs; she and I were one. I collapsed onto her shoulders, my arms around her neck and cried deeply. As this was happening I could hear Hunter saying to the observing circle:

*"There is the identification."*

Unconscious identifications happen across the generations and between missing or excluded members of a family. Everyone who belongs to a family system needs to have his or her place in it. Otherwise another, who comes later, will be recruited unawares by the system to remember the excluded person. I now had my own incredibly powerful experience of this phenomenon.

I was my former husband's second wife; he had separated from his first wife several years before I met him. After the experience in my own constellation I subsequently made sure that I did the personal work of recognising and acknowledging her place in the system. I did this on behalf of my children's well-being and with the new understanding that those that come later, might be freed to live more of their own lives, rather than a predecessor's life. It seemed to me in the weeks that followed this second constellation, that the earlier inclusion of a denied male in my family, i.e. my stillborn baby, had enabled the arrival of another unrecognised male, my half-brother, and that this, in turn, had brought to light my identification with his mother.

What I have recounted so far was a big revelation for me, and for several months afterwards I needed to give space inside to allow it all to settle. I didn't become preoccupied with all the new information; neither did I forget its significance. I can liken it to being familiar with the family photo album that one has looked at for years, and then realising there were important parts that were missing. I was just giving room to those new pictures.

Three years later, in 1997, I was attending Bert Hellinger's second workshop in England, and was fortunate to work with him on 'another piece of my pie'. The issue concerned my youngest daughter who had been struggling with depression for a long time. I wondered if she was carrying some of these feelings on behalf of somebody else in the system. Representatives for my parents, siblings, half-brother and his parents were placed in the constellation. There were quite a few exchanges between them as the entanglements came to light, and new introductions were made. I recall the representative for my half-brother's mother saying that she wanted to 'bore' her way into me, to make sure I didn't forget, thus confirming the

identification that had come to light in the constellation two and a half years earlier. Towards the end of the work, Bert brought me in to stand in my place, and shortly afterwards picked a representative for my youngest daughter, and someone for her father. With her father behind her he placed her standing a short distance away, facing everybody else. Then he said: *"When there are such entanglements on the mother's side it may be safer for a child to be in her father's sphere of influence."* My natural movement was to move towards them and the tears flowed as I embraced the representatives for my child and her father. We all hugged, and there was a lot of tenderness in these moments. The constellation ended here.

I had brought one of Bert's books to this workshop, and the next day I asked him to sign it for me. I did not immediately look to see what he had written. When I got home later I read: *"The lost may sometimes be found again."* I spun into a whirl of confusion. To whom or what was he referring?

Nearly three years later, at a time when my youngest daughter was going to live on the other side of the world for the foreseeable future, her father wrote her a very beautiful letter acknowledging how well she had done, and how proud he was of her. At the end of his letter he also wrote that he regretted the dreadful mistake he had made sixteen years earlier when he left the children and me. He was eternally sorry about this and the pain it had caused. She insisted that I look at the letter, and when I read what he had written it penetrated and opened up the scars. It went beyond into my deepest adult wound and I was deeply moved.

I reflected very carefully over the next couple of weeks. How did I feel and what should I do, if anything? Feeling pretty nervous I telephoned him and told him that I had read his letter and was very moved by it and maybe it would be an idea to meet and complete some unsaid things. He agreed. We met for a drink several weeks after this. I felt extremely nervous as we both perched anxiously on the edge of our seats like two teenagers. We had lunch from time to time after this and risked talking about many things that had not been aired in our previous life together. It has been a slow, challenging and exciting journey over the last two years or so, turbulent at times, deeply touching at others. There have been many

times when it has all seemed too difficult and I have wanted to run away. However, much healing has come about. We see each other more regularly now, and are enjoying meeting each other again, twenty years on. We are attending to difficulties that arise between us in a way that was not possible when we were in our twenties. This is a new movement and a new place to stand.

Recently in May 2002, at the *Learning Intensive in Family Systems* in ZIST, Germany, I did another personal piece of work. Unexpectedly, as is so often the way when exploring family systems, my half-brother emerged again. I had now known of this situation for five years, but had been very tentative about 'doing' anything about finding him and giving him the information my mother had told me. Did I have the right to just land in his life and tell him? I could not know whether this was the correct thing to do. However, borne out of what emerged in the constellation in Germany, I decided I would find him. It took a while to find where he lived, but fate was on my side, with some lucky coincidences. I wrote the letter three times before sending the final version. He responded by e-mail just two hours after receiving my letter. The following were his opening sentences to me:

*"As you can imagine, my first reaction to your letter received this morning was total shock. Second was a feeling that it was not a complete surprise. All my life I have felt guilty that I never really felt for 'my father' as I did for my mother."*

I shrieked with joy and at the same time wept with relief. Over the last two months we have had much correspondence, culminating in my meeting him for the first time this last weekend. It was very exciting, a little unreal at times, but also very warm-hearted. I really liked him, and we had many questions for each other over the course of the weekend. It was strange but reassuring how different aspects of him reminded me so much of our father, the father he had never met.

The following words of the poet Rumi most eloquently and simply encapsulate this work for me:

*"Out beyond ideas of right doing and wrong doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there."*

## Bert Hellinger: The Alpha

One evening I found myself at the airport feeling a bit lost. I was heading for the Omega Institute to run a workshop. While I was waiting for my luggage I saw a strange looking man. I thought he was familiar but I was too shy to speak to him. Then it occurred to me that he might be Jesus and I asked him: "What are you looking for?" And he replied: "I am looking for the Alpha." Then my luggage arrived and I lost sight of him. When I looked for him again he had disappeared. But for the rest of the night I thought about the Alpha. What is the Alpha?

The Alpha is the beginning, the source. What I have been looking for in my work is exactly that, the Alpha, the source of everything, the spring of all things. In my own individual work, and in my work with people, I am always looking to see where is the beginning, where is the original strength.

All therapy, as I understand it, has to go back to this source. For each one of us the first connection to the source is through our parents. If we are connected to our parents we are connected to our source. Anyone who is separated or detached from their parents is separated from their source. Whoever our parents are, however they behaved, they are the source of life for us. So the main thing for us is to be connected to them so that, what comes from them, can flow freely to us.

I have an internal image of the source. I think of a river. It begins at its source. It wells up from the earth and once it has welled up, it does not have to look for its way. It finds it automatically because it always stays low. The progress of the river is to go to the bottom, to stay low. Its flow always goes down, never upwards. At the end it finds the ocean where it dissolves.

Much spiritual striving wants to go to the peak – to the peak experiences. But at the peak we are no longer connected to the source. I think that staying low is the way to be in tune with what is.

Now, I stand in front of my parents. I have a certain feeling when I stand up straight in front of them. If I go down on my knees, I have a different feeling. And if I lie down flat on my belly in front of them, in reverence, I have another feeling. And that is the true feeling, at the ground. Once we lie prostrate and with reverence in front of our parents, then everything comes from them and can reach us freely. There is no resistance on our part anymore.

It does not matter how our parents are. It makes no difference. Life, and all that comes with life, comes to us through them. But they too stand in a long line. What comes to us through them comes from far away. And it goes downwards. All the time it goes down. If we really see this, if we look at the origin, the source of life itself, and we watch it flowing down the generations, we can be open to that which is given to us. Then there are no more accusations, no more blaming. We just take what is given and we can turn and let the flow of life pass through us onto the next generation, to our children, or if we have no children, to the community, to mankind as a whole. Then we are in true harmony.

Family constellations actually help us find this connection. This is the work. This is my aim. If I have reached this, then I have reached the Alpha – and the Omega.

## **Bert Hellinger: The Omega**

*I want to say something about spirituality. There is much searching for spiritual achievement. I want to say something about it from my point of view and from my experience.*

*I have already indicated something about this when I spoke of the bottom as contrasted to the peak. Much looking for spiritual enlightenment is actually a wish to reach the peak. The peak is a lonely place, a very lonely place. Few people can stand it for long. Once they have reached the peak, they are afraid to return to the bottom because they think to themselves: "It was such a great effort to reach the peak, what shall I do when I am down at the bottom again?" So, they often remain halfway between the peak and the bottom. They reap no benefit from either.*

*Now, the greatest spiritual achievement is the most humble one. Sometimes I draw a comparison between those who meditate for long periods, waiting for enlightenment, and those who just go about their everyday lives and I ask myself: "What are they actually contributing to mankind? Nothing."*

*Once I was surprised. I spoke to a Zen-master in Germany who regularly went to Kyoto in Japan and participated in Zen sessions. They went on a retreat for ten days, meditating every day for ten hours or more, sometimes for sixteen hours a day. He said they were full of energy afterwards. I asked: "What do they do with all their energy?" He replied: "Well, they go to town and enjoy themselves with some Geishas." To which I responded: "Is that all the achievement of a retreat?" Strange, very strange.*

*In the past Zen was designed for warriors to learn how to fight successfully. It had a purpose. But without action, meditation has no meaning.*

*If I look at a mother who raises five children and I compare her achievement with that of a monk who spends his whole life meditating, I ask: "Who has more strength?" Motherhood is spiritual and it is at the bottom, on the ground, all the time.*

*Now, very often when people speak about spirituality, I see that what they actually want to reach is – I hesitate to say it so openly – their mother. Very often the longing for spiritual achievement is exactly that – a deep longing for the mother.*

*If you look at Buddha for example, what happened to him? He lost his mother at his birth. That is what happened. Later this fact was covered over by all kinds of stories. When he actually saw a dead person for the first time, he changed his whole life. He left his wife and son. But the first dead person he knew about deep down in his heart was his mother who died at his birth. If you have this in mind, you can understand his teaching about the escape from suffering. This is the teaching of a child who lost his mother at birth.*

*Now I don't say that the teachings of Buddha should be disregarded because of this. Buddhism is a very great movement and has a great effect on mankind. I don't question that in any way. Nevertheless, if you look at it from this other point of view, you see it is also ordinary, an ordinary human movement.*

*What I have very often observed is, that when people take a spiritual path and become esoteric, they have refused to care for a child, or have abandoned their wife. They have refused to stand*

up to ordinary human achievements and responsibilities that cost something. Instead, they have lifted themselves off the ground to a so-called spiritual level. But in reality, they are self-centred. They may speak about losing their ego, but what are they meditating on? On their ego, of course. And what about their wish for enlightenment? What do they want it for? For their ego, of course. There is a great deception in this.

Now, there is another spiritual path - 'the dark night of the soul'. St. John of the Cross taught about the dark night of the soul. This is a spiritual training and it takes a long time. You can't exercise this 'dark night'; it happens to you. When it happens, you no longer know where to go. Everything is dark, and you feel desolate with no direction whatever. But if you are strong enough to stay with it, then you can experience 'the dark night of the soul'.

This dark night has two parts. Firstly, there is the dark night of the senses. Here you no longer look for what pleases the eye, or the ear, or any other sense. Not because you despise sensations in any way. If you despise them, then you would be on a different level. No, this 'dark night' is because you are connected to something deeper - something very still, very quiet. When you are at this level, you don't need to look outside, or to listen to things so much. You are at a very big place. This is a cleansing. The spiritual path needs a cleansing, especially a cleansing from all intentions of higher achievements. The path remains at the bottom all the time.

The second part is a very difficult one. It is the 'dark night of the spirit'. This means you forgo your wish 'to know'. You don't ask questions: "Why?" "What is this?" "What happens next?" You remain quite separate from this. This is an achievement, going through a long training of letting go of the wish to know more.

There is yet another aspect to it - the 'dark night of the will'. Here, you no longer want to achieve something. If you have a plan - for instance, you want to learn about family constellations and you attend many courses - then this is good, in a way. But if you plan to change the world with it, or something like this, then you are cut off from the real source. If you don't want anything anymore, if you don't want to heal somebody, if you don't want to better the world, then the world becomes a better place. If you just stay with yourself, then you will sometimes have an impulse to take a step, and this one step is much more than all you could achieve with your personal planning because you are suddenly in connection with something else. You are tuned into something greater, to what I spoke of previously - the Alpha.

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## OPINIONS

### **Rupert Sheldrake and Hunter Beaumont In Conversation on the subject of Practical Research.**

**Sheldrake:** There is a need for practical research - a need for simple, follow-up research and better documentation. I think there's a problem with all psychotherapy in that people carry out therapies but don't have follow-up

studies to see how they have worked. It's also the case with conventional medicine. Basically, people go to the doctor, they are given pills, they go home and most of them probably get better, and that's that. We don't know if they would have got

better more quickly with a different pill, or whether they would have got better anyway, without any pills. The modern emphasis on evidence-based medicine is trying to quantify these things, usually in a rather crass way because statisticians and accountants now drive it. Nevertheless, it raises an important question of evaluating what's going on. In the case of Hellinger's systemic family therapy, how does this compare in effectiveness with regular individual psychotherapy, or with more conventional family therapy without a systemic approach, or with other forms of therapy, including chemical medication?

Bert Hellinger often emphasises that his principal decisive factor in his work is: *"What is useful, what helps, what heals? Does it work?"* So, it would be interesting to know whether it does, or not. Clearly, many people at workshops gain important insights. Clearly, many people are moved by what they see. But that, in itself, is not necessarily a predictor of a change in them, or of a long-term healing effect on their families. After all, people watch TV chat shows, like Oprah Winfrey, where people bare their souls – and seeing other people lay bare their problems is the stuff of the biggest mass media entertainment there is. Sometimes at a Hellinger workshop I wonder if I am watching a much more sophisticated version of Oprah Winfrey. More sophisticated, deeper, but still there's an element of drama in it. There's a sense in which a family constellation is good theatre, and in addition good participatory theatre.

There is no doubt that systemic family work has many things going for it, but this still doesn't answer the question of how effective it is. The simplest way to find out would be to conduct follow-up studies with people who have constellated their issues. For example, after a workshop, participants could be written to, say in three months' time, and they could be asked for feedback on what has happened to them since and what changes they have noticed in themselves, or their family.

Even better would be a personal interview, most easily by telephone. People could be asked: *"What happened for you after the workshop? Did your relationships improve? Can you name any insight that came to you because of the workshop? Have you noticed any long-term effects?"*

In addition, it would be important to ask about what other kinds of therapy people have had and

any reflections they might have on how these therapies have contributed to this process, and also something about how systemic family work compares with other therapies they have had. There would be valuable comparative information there.

There are some other important questions about how this therapy works. Basically, individuals or couples are going to workshops to deal with issues that also concern other people who are not there. Through systemic family therapy any changes in the person participating will also affect the family field. But because it's an interactive process, the family field will, in turn, affect the person. Many people persist in their habits. Habit is the very nature of life, in my opinion. It's not just a perversity of human nature; it's the nature of things. So, if both members of a couple are present or participating in the work and the dynamic has to do with the couple relationship, then is there a greater chance of it being a real transformation?

My personal interest in any follow-up, since I'm interested in the telepathic dimension, would be to ask if any members of the family seem to have reacted in a way that indicates some change, even though they would not have known what had happened in the constellation by any normal means. This would be a fascinating question. It would also be interesting to interview other members of their family to see what changes they have noticed, if any.

**Beaumont:** You are raising an extraordinarily important point for psychotherapy. In a way, morphic fields and morphic resonance maintain the problem in a family, and when a new experience comes in the form of constructive change, it's almost as if the specific gravity of the family field pulls it back into the problem.

We are talking about two different kinds of change. One is making new experiences available to the family, the other is dissolving the shaping power of old patterns. The first kind of change is easier to achieve, but the second requires changing the baseline of a family structure. It's quite different and requires different methods and interventions.

*This discussion is an excerpt from a longer interview.*

**Readers are invited to make short contributions to the Opinions column.**