

Rwanda

ACCOUNT OF A VISIT TEN YEARS AFTER THE GENOCIDE

THE HISTORY OF THE GENOCIDE

Rwanda is approximately the same size as Switzerland. It has a population of 8.3m and is the most densely populated country in Africa. Known as 'The Country of 1000 Hills', it has a mild, temperate climate with an average land height of 1100m. Its inhabitants are mainly farmers and small traders and as a result of a serious land shortage, the people often live in conditions of great poverty.

In pre-colonial times, Rwanda was a centrally-ruled kingdom with relatively autonomous governors in associated sub-regions. During ten years of German rule, the country was prepared for European led colonial administration. It became a Belgian colony in 1916 and remained so until its independence in 1962. Concurrently there was widespread conversion to Christianity, which had a lasting and weakening influence on pre-colonial spirituality with its profound sense of ancestral connections.

THE QUESTIONABLE ISSUE OF ETHNIC DIFFERENTIATION

Although ethnic differentiation between Hutus, Tutsis and Twa (approximately 1% of the population) has officially been abolished, it continues to be very real in the hearts and minds of the Rwandan people. There is no clear historical explanation for the varying origins of these three cultural groups. The known history of the region dates back 2,000 years, and the social differentiation between Hutus and Tutsis has only developed gradually over a long period of time. The Tutsis owned more cattle; as a result they were

Ten years ago in Rwanda, over a period of 100 days, beginning on April 7th 1994, between 800,000 and 1 million Tutsis (about 15% of the population) were killed by Hutus (approximately 85% of the population). Amongst those murdered, were also numerous Hutus who opposed the Genocide.

The after-effects of the Genocide have influenced all areas of life in this small, striving Central African country. There are the obvious signs, such as: extreme physical and psychological injury; buildings razed to the ground; many groups and initiatives with the addendum: 'Survivors of the Genocide' such as 'The Organisation of Students and Pupils; Survivors of the Genocide' and there is the less obvious but palpable echo of a still reverberating horror.

In December 2003, I was given the opportunity of visiting Rwanda, together with Yolande Mukagasana. Yolande, as she is known in her homeland, is a nurse and a Tutsi and lives in the capital city of Kigali (population 1.2m). She lost her husband, her three children and two of her three siblings during the Genocide.

She survived under extraordinary circumstances, has written two books about her experiences and now supports her fellow Rwandans, both victims and perpetrators in their search for reconciliation. She organises exhibitions and lecture tours and spoke at the 3rd International Conference on Systemic Constellations in Würzburg in 2003.

To begin, I shall give the reader some information on Rwanda, then I shall report on my own experiences and to conclude, I shall add my observations and thoughts from the point of view of systemic constellations.

universally considered to be wealthier and to have greater power and influence. The word 'Hutu' was originally used to define a class of subordinate farm workers. This group formed the majority of the population and lived mainly from farming. The Twa was a small group of forest-dwellers who lived by hunting. The latter has only limited relevance to this report and I shall, therefore, not take them into account any further.

In spite of their social differences, however, Hutus and Tutsis always had a great deal in common. They shared a language (Kinyarwanda),

spirituality and culture; even during the Genocide, both groups sang the same songs and said the same prayers, and mixed marriages were not uncommon.

The ethnic characteristics, which arose as a result of these historical and social differences, were, in part, connected to the attitudes and interests of the European colonialists. They believed that racial differences could be classed in terms of clearly and objectively defined physical characteristics, thereby scientifically determining superior or inferior social standing. It was in the European interest to make a clear, unequivocal distinction between the elite and the

lower classes, or servants. This simplified social scale sought to establish a clear hierarchy of co-operation, which benefited the colonial forces.

In order to put this plan into operation, the Belgians issued a questionnaire in the early 1930s, requesting people to define their ethnic background. Approximately 84% categorised themselves as Hutu, 15% as Tutsi and 1% as Twa. The information was registered under 'Identifying Characteristics' on all national identity cards. This declaration of ethnic origins became a horrific form of entrapment during the 1994 Genocide, as Hutus used the information to identify and murder persecuted Tutsis.

This simplified version of events is a powerful reminder that the notion of ethnic-racial differences is nothing but a mental construct, misused and turned into so-called 'objective' differences in human value and thereby justifying better or worse treatment.

When influenced by economic and political pressures, these ideas can appear so 'real' and so 'objectively true' that the link between our empathic and compassionate conscience and our natural tendency to doubt and question, can become severed. Ultimately, therefore, it becomes possible to act in accordance with a form of self-invented reality. Moreover, it appears to be extremely difficult to re-awaken our awareness that beneath the cultural, religious and political surface, all human beings are equal – as was experienced during the period following National Socialism. This is true in times of any collective catastrophe.

THE 1994 GENOCIDE

After a lengthy, complicated and controversial period of history, (it is not possible to elaborate due to constraints of space), the plane crash which killed President Juvenal Habyarimana on April 6th 1994 became the trigger for the start of a meticulously planned murder

campaign of Tutsis and moderate Hutus by the reigning Hutu government. Within a period of just over three months, almost one million people were killed in the most gruesome way imaginable with machetes, metal-laden clubs and firearms. Hitherto well-disposed neighbours killed one another, as did married couples; doctors murdered their patients and nine year old children, under threat of death, were forced to become murderers themselves. Tens of thousands sought refuge in churches and thus became easy prey for their persecutors. Horribly perfected radio propaganda played a crucial role and modelled itself shamefully on the methods used by Joseph Goebbels: the severe economic crisis evident in Rwanda since 1990 (including the collapse of the coffee market) was blamed on the so-called 'enemy Tutsis'. The Hutus began what was in fact a mirror image of their own campaign, accusing Tutsis of planning 'The mass destruction of all Hutus'. Tutsis were described as 'cockroaches' and there were urgent warnings of their malevolent and dangerous presence. The names of local Tutsis were published and deadlines for their annihilation were issued to forestall their allegedly evil plans. The intention was clear – to exterminate all Tutsis so that ultimately all that remained would be innocent, disencumbered perpetrators. There would be no survivors, no witnesses, no prosecutors and 'peace' could reign once more in Rwanda.

The Genocide was finally brought to an end in July 1994 by the RPF – 'The Rwandan Patriotic Front'. This army in exile, established by Tutsis in Uganda, was led by Paul Kagame who has been President of Rwanda since that time. He leads a predominantly Tutsi government with some Hutu ministers, and with more than half its administration composed of women, Rwanda currently has the world's highest ratio of women in government.

In the interim period, it has become a well-known fact that France, Britain, the United States and the

United Nations were all aware of the systematic preparations for the Genocide and yet they chose not to intervene. US diplomats were specifically instructed by their government to refrain from using the word 'genocide'; they were to speak instead of 'tribal war'. The UN has now accepted responsibility for failing to intervene in order to prevent or significantly reduce the extent of the Genocide. In 2000, President Clinton and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan apologised to the Rwandan people and Kofi Annan made the following statement: "We will not deny that the world failed the Rwandan People in their hour of greatest need." Recently, the UN declared April 7th as 'The International Day of Reflection on the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda'.

THE CURRENT SITUATION IN RWANDA FOLLOWING THE GENOCIDE

Compared to the Genocide ten years ago, the following groups exist in Rwanda today: Genocide survivors and their relatives; approximately 120,000 prisoners in custody who are known or suspected perpetrators; as well as other unrecognised perpetrators living in freedom with their families. Many relatives of Hutus fled in their hundreds of thousands to neighbouring countries and to Europe. Amongst these Rwandan exiles, there is presumed to be a large number of perpetrators.

There are many thousands of semi or fully orphaned children who live together in independently organised families (in 1998, 65,000 orphans were categorised as being the 'Head of the Family'). There are also large numbers of widows who have played a crucial role in the reconstruction of the country. Many people in Rwanda, whether classed as victims or perpetrators, have been severely traumatised. It is quite possible that when a perpetrator is released from prison, he will return to live in the same village as his victim; they may even become neighbours. For economic and

geographical reasons, there are insufficient opportunities for them to live elsewhere. In some areas, acts of violence and revenge continue and due to the lack of a functioning criminal prosecution system, these crimes remain unpunished.

The Rwandan Health Service, together with a number of NGOs has been endeavouring to set up decentralised services in order to help people cope with the long-term effects of trauma. It has also emphasised the urgent need for qualified personnel, above all in the fields of education and supervision.

MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AS A GUEST IN RWANDA

The effects of the Genocide are felt all over Rwanda. I stayed in the capital city of Kigali with Yolande's 'Family' – eighteen orphaned children aged between six and twenty-two. During Yolande's frequent absences, they organise themselves, according to age and abilities and are surprisingly well disciplined in their distribution of duties.

The children and young people, who live in very close proximity to one another, appeared warm-hearted, cheerful, well disposed to each other and they exuded a sense of great solidarity; sometimes, however, they were quiet, reserved or extremely timid and introspective. Some, I was told, suffer occasional breakdowns and relive their experiences. These crises can last for varying lengths of time. I spoke at length with a young woman, a survivor of rape, who considered herself to be tarnished for life. I am unsure whether I was able to give her any sense of relief; without being explicit, I tried both with her and with others, to hold an image of the perpetrator in my mind and to see him as a human being. At times, this was extremely difficult to do and was only possible as a result of my long experience of constellation work.

Yolande's house was levelled to the ground in 1994. It has been rebuilt

over a number of years with a great deal of effort and very few resources. Six years after the Genocide, Yolande discovered a mass grave just five minutes' walk from her home. Together with neighbours, she laid out the skeletons and sought to identify them. Then they buried the remains. Her house has become a place where people come and talk, if only for short periods of time. On one occasion, a woman arrived who had never spoken of her experiences before and wished to do so. In the meantime, B. had re-appeared. He was severely traumatised, often under the influence of alcohol and suffering from AIDS. For over an hour, he marched the young children up and down, yelling military commands at them. Everyone appeared to be fully at ease with this rather disturbing 'parade'. During the course of this particular day, I was struck by how this and other incidents seemed to combine a carefree sensitivity with a subtly permeating, melancholic grief.

HOW RWANDA HAS DEALT WITH THE GENOCIDE

'No Hutus, No Tutsis – only Rwandans'; this has been the official government motto in response to the country's collective trauma. This well-intentioned aspiration is, however, barely experienced or acted upon by the people of Rwanda. Even if it is not immediately obvious which tribe an individual belongs to, (the Tutsis are regarded to be tall and slim, the Hutus short and stocky), everyone knows, even 'smells' immediately who belongs to which group. The jury is out as to whether this sense of group belonging which has developed over centuries, can ever be extinguished, following such atrocities, or whether it might one day be possible to extend the original identifying characteristics to include greater scope for enriching identities such as '...and Rwandans',... 'and Africans' or perhaps, as a student once suggested during a discussion '...and above all: human beings'.

Nonetheless, it is an almost unbelievable accomplishment that following such unimaginable chaos the Rwandan people and their government have managed to take seriously the motto: 'only Rwandans' to the extent that an amazingly well-functioning community has been established in Rwanda.

MEMORIALS: THE DEAD OF THE GENOCIDE

For the vast majority of Rwandans, the memory of those murdered during the Genocide is associated with feelings of horror, unbearable guilt, profound sadness and debilitating depression as well as rage and a desire for revenge. At the memorial place of Murambi, following a massacre in which more than 50,000 people were killed, 200 bodies had been taken to an abandoned school building, coated in white lime and displayed, frozen in the throes of death, with agonised gestures, cries and desperate attempts at self-defence. Such memorials have an overwhelmingly powerful effect which makes it difficult for the living or even the dead, in my experience, to find peace.

JUSTICE – DEALING WITH THE PERPETRATORS

There are currently about 120,000 known and suspected perpetrators still doing time in hopelessly overcrowded prisons. It would require well over 100 years for the Rwandan courts to complete their legal procedures. For this reason, the traditional, pre-colonial jurisdiction system of the Gacaca ('the lawn', the village meeting place) has been revived and re-defined. 'Personnes intègres' are chosen to preside over the open-air public meetings. These are innocent people who have been specifically trained in the skills of impartiality and neutrality. The perpetrators (dressed in the pale-pink uniform of Rwandan prisoners), victims, witnesses, family members and observers all gather together. The aim – alongside the necessity of imposing appropriate penalties – is to bring the truth to light; to encourage the perpetrators

to acknowledge their crimes, to accept their guilt and express their remorse. This, in turn, empowers the victims with a renewed sense of their own dignity, thereby enabling them to forgive their perpetrators. As we have seen in South Africa, sincere forgiveness is an important step towards enabling a perpetrator to regain a sense of his own humanity, to re-access his compassion and become fully aware of the pain his actions have caused.

The perpetrators are judged according to the severity of their crimes and according to their willingness to speak the truth and show remorse.

Compensation for the victims is an important consideration and is recovered whenever possible. Each case, which comes before the Gacaca lasts several hours and is concluded only after a number of sessions. Its main aim is reconciliation and re-integration of the perpetrators; it is not a prosecuting judiciary. As a rule, the Rwandan courts accept the decisions taken by the Gacaca. In 2001, a probationary period was introduced with the intention of establishing 11,000 Gacaca sites nationwide by April 2004, the 10th anniversary of the Genocide.

Understandably, the Gacacas struggle with major problems. The 'personnes intègres' are often insufficiently skilled and are overwhelmed by the requirement to be absolutely impartial. The ideal situation – the discovery of the truth, which in turn leads to genuine reconciliation, appears to be successful in only a minority of cases. Witnesses choose to remain silent for fear of retribution and traumas are frequently re-activated. Children are required to testify against their parents, a heart-rending experience, which I witnessed at one Gacaca.

However, there is no alternative and despite its inadequacies, the Gacaca is a procedure which offers everyone the opportunity of dealing with their shared trauma. This is in contrast to what occurred during the period

following National Socialism in Germany, when the search for a common truth was extinguished in the collective silence.

EXPERIENCE WITH CONSTELLATIONS

During my short visit to Rwanda, a group of students expressed an interest in learning about constellations. This was not something I had anticipated and I was sceptical and extremely wary. The entire group, including the representatives, were themselves severely traumatised and were required to represent acutely traumatised individuals. During the constellation the representatives often stepped far away from each other or even left the room, in order to cope with their rising pain in solitude. They were returned to the constellation and fluctuated between recalling their own traumas and experiencing those of the people whom they were representing. What was particularly striking, however, was that the representatives were able to demonstrate extraordinary clarity when required to do so. For example, when Patrick (not his real name) wanted to step towards his mother, whose rape and murder he had witnessed as a ten year old boy, the representative for his dead mother, otherwise woven into both her own and the represented trauma, suddenly became very lucid and stated unequivocally, "I don't want this. I want you to live!" She repeated this sentence several times and with great maternal authority. Patrick was shocked and a sustained state of healing was activated within him. This mother would also have sufficient strength and dignity to face her perpetrator. This would be a possible step in the future, but at this particular time, was premature.

Intensive and specific trauma-related work would obviously be very beneficial for a group such as this one. I sense, however, that modified constellation work, which is able to demonstrate great patience and an ability to hold the trauma in a sufficiently supportive manner, could also achieve this goal.

"ORDERS OF EVIL?" OBSERVATIONS AND THOUGHTS FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF SYSTEMIC CONSTELLATIONS

Ten years after the Genocide, the perception of being a victim continues to be a central part of the self-image and identity of survivors. Only very few appear ready to see the self-imprisonment caused by staying connected to the image of victim for a long period of time after the trauma. Until recently, there were few opportunities available for dealing with trauma, such as the carefully measured expression and release of traumatic energies as developed by Peter Levine in his Somatic Experiencing. It seems to me that one specific problem is the overwhelming sense of hate which stems from experiencing such atrocious and humiliating helplessness and which can fan the flames of revenge and a renewed cycle of killing.

Connected to this, certain lasting negative images of the dead relatives are held. Thus Patrick saw his murdered mother as miserable, profoundly weak and also aggressive. Similarly, the collective image of the Dead at the Murambi memorial is predominantly a negative or even persecutory one.

At the same time, many perpetrators seem to experience feelings of such inexplicable and overwhelming guilt, that they incline towards emotional paralysis and self-denial, instead of seeing this as an opportunity for a transformational encounter with one of their emotionally damaged victims.

From my own experience of the Gacaca, I made a further observation concerning the perpetrators. They did not deny their guilt merely in order to avoid their own conscience and social condemnation. My sense was that they wished to understand the forces, which had seized them and caused them to take part in such murder and mayhem. This made them appear clumsily helpless and of course, this could easily be

misconstrued as a cheap attempt at self-exoneration. These forces reach far beyond their understanding and ability to rationalise. They cannot be understood in terms of the simple statement of fact: 'I obeyed orders' or: 'Everyone was doing it and I was under threat of death myself'. They cannot be sufficiently explained in terms of historical-political-sociological-economic issues or even in terms of a personal-biographical inclination towards committing collective and frenzied murder.

This groping search for something absolute, something beyond rational explanation, moved me and struck me as deeply thought-provoking, because it immediately touched the question of the forces which have been behind the eruption of every genocide in history. In retrospect, these forces can only ever be partially grasped or explained. And it seems that so far all our well-meant preventative measures and intentions have made little impact on these large scale collective energies.

In Rwanda, we are reminded of the fact that we have yet to develop appropriate images, ideas and concepts relating to evil, conceding it a place of equal value alongside love and kindness. I suspect that there are autonomous 'orders of evil' – a kind of dark matter – which exist in or alongside the orders of love. In order to have a more complete sense of reality, we need to challenge ourselves to become acquainted with the possibility of these 'orders of evil'.

Just like dark matter, they are not clearly discernible; the effects, however, are very apparent. By effects, I refer to the continual acts of enormous destruction which have taken place throughout the history of mankind and which have been experienced particularly acutely during the twentieth century. I do not believe that these acts can be properly understood as the result of a failure of love and its orders, or that through determined effort alone, they can be avoided in principle. They are too elemental, too

inconceivably powerful, too independent and too evenly matched with love and kindness; it would be impossible to rank one higher than the other.

As Bertold Brecht remarked:
'War is like love,
it always finds a way'.

Should there, therefore, be an independent set of orders, rules or laws, which relate to the orders of evil? This question, if it can be answered at all, needs a period of lengthy and careful observation, indeed of a collective experience of attempting to understand events such as those which have occurred in Rwanda.

Are they the collective expression of what Freud referred to as the 'death drive', which is as instinctive to the dissolution of life as its counterpart, Eros, is to love and commitment? Can we move closer to the phenomenon of collective annihilation in its most profound immoral and amoral form, through the ambiguous concept of 'Ordnungen des Vergehens'?¹ These questions strike me as anything but academic reveries and I believe that moves towards peace and reconciliation can only benefit from a substantial answer to these questions in the future.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONSTELLATION WORK IN COUNTRIES SUCH AS RWANDA

In view of these considerations, the following points strike me as important:

- 1) Following the insights gained from our 'Research Group on Political Constellations', which was founded 2½ years ago, we need to clarify our own motives for wishing to offer help in these situations. We should also consider the ability and the willingness of the recipient countries to accept that help. If these points are clear, constellations can be very beneficial. If, however, a subtle

'systemic neo-colonialism' is combined with a concealed sense of humiliation on the recipient's side, no beneficial results are to be expected.

- 2) Traditional, pre-colonial culture, especially with regard to the role of the ancestors, the dead and the spiritual significance of traumatic experiences all need to be carefully studied and slowly re-introduced. This traditional knowledge, which has gradually been recognised by the Rwandan Health Service, could in itself become a source of invaluable support.
- 3) We need to find a way to cooperate with unorthodox representatives of both mainstream religions in Rwanda – the Christian Church and Islam (currently attracting growing numbers of people).

The following help could be offered:

- 1) Modified trauma-oriented constellation work, possibly combined with individual trauma work; including the orientation on 'post-traumatic growth' (see References), which conceives of traumatic experiences in the long run as an opportunity for developing qualities of compassion and social understanding to support community development.
- 2) Training and supervision in constellation work for the counselling and helping professions such as social workers and NGOs working both with victims and perpetrators.
- 3) A step by step, very mindful and compassionate support for perceiving the dead as less threatening and more as benevolent, life-supporting forces.
- 4) The eventual inclusion of perpetrators into constellation work, in line with the tolerance levels of individuals; and only

after a thorough and successful process between victims and perpetrators in the Gacacas. At best, this work would ultimately lead to:

- a significant number of perpetrators being able to speak the truth
- face to face contact between victims and perpetrators
- a gradual lessening of the overwhelming desire for revenge and atonement in the collective consciousness.

Finally, alongside all our endeavour and effort, we should also keep the following in our hearts and minds.

After talking to a Rwandan about the Genocide and its consequences he eventually smiled and said:

"Yes, that's all true. And look, Rwanda is also so beautiful – the late sun and then the hills in dusk, when the day turns quiet. And the beautiful vastness of the lakes – can you also see that? Our country is also so beautiful."

Rwanda certainly has great importance beyond its own national development for many regions of the world dealing with the after-effects and the prevention of collective trauma. Therefore I am endeavouring to deepen the contact with government and university institutions, with organisations of

social workers and students, with committed individuals and with NGOs – in the first place in order to learn. Then, if appropriate and if it is possible to adapt it to meet the very specific needs of the Rwandan people I am happy to offer possibilities for insight and beneficial change as developed by constellation work.

'Footnote: 'Ordnungen des Vergehens' translates both as 'orders of misconduct' and 'orders of impermanence'

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Trauma Work: Complementing and Enhancing Family Constellations

Through years of facilitating family constellations, I have come to realise that how I feel when working with difficult issues depends on when they occurred. I am quite capable of dealing with horrific events that occurred in former generations, such as murders within the family, Holocaust issues or war crimes. However, I find the work much more difficult if the horrors occurred more recently. I remember, for example, how shocked I felt while working in a prison setting with a client who had murdered her boyfriend and I am utterly overwhelmed by the idea of working with a person who has experienced torture. This shows me that there are still parts of my psyche and emotions that have not been cleared by the constellation work, which I have to approach in other ways and which have made Peter Levine's trauma work so important to me. At first I assumed I was taking the trauma training for my own benefit but as my understanding deepens I realise the many ways in which it connects with constellations work. This new learning continues to influence and enrich my work with constellations and here I would like to share some of my insights.

WHAT IS TRAUMA?

The term 'trauma' is no longer reserved for clinical discussions and has recently been well publicised and discussed. The following description is based on the body-oriented trauma work developed by Peter Levine, who began his work in collaboration with Anngwyn St. Just. His work is now known as Somatic Experiencing, a specific

Despite all my enthusiasm for family constellations, I have always been aware that this approach addresses only a certain area of problems, namely those that are rooted within our families. Although this is an important area, not all our issues stem from this root: many problems result from life experiences unrelated to our families and therefore cannot be resolved with family constellations. I perceive constellations work as one wing of the bird. In order to fly we need the second wing and I see the body-oriented trauma work developed by Peter Levine as a way of providing this second wing. But most of us with some experience of constellation work are well aware that trauma plays a large part in creating entanglements and so is central to much of systemic work. Here, I compare how trauma is approached in constellations and in body-oriented trauma work and discuss how the insights and techniques developed by Levine may profitably be applied in constellations.

approach that goes beyond previous concepts of trauma work. It is distinguished by Levine's emphasis on the biological roots of trauma. Animals have three basic reactions to threat, all directed by basic biological impulses: first, if the animal can match the perceived threat it will fight; second, if the threat seems overwhelming it will flee; or third, it may freeze and become immobilised.

The assessment of which course to take is instinctive, occurring within a split second of the threat. The cat that turns a corner to face a dog will 'decide' in an instant whether it can match the threat, in which case it will posture and hiss; if not, it will turn to race up the nearest tree. If the animal's life is threatened, as when a mouse is caught by a cat, it freezes. The fight or flight mechanism also forms the basic stress pattern in humans and in it lies the foundation of trauma. Encountering a sudden shock, an overwhelming threat and the lack of

options to fight or flee, the body freezes.

Among animals, dissolving a frozen state is another natural process that occurs when the danger has passed. The animal 're-awakens', often shakes itself or shivers to release the frozen energies and goes on with its life. The effects differ depending on the depth of the trauma reaction. For example, if a bird flies into my room and I catch it, it is likely to freeze. Once I release it outside it will re-orient itself within a few moments and fly away. If I catch the bird a second time, the frozen state will last longer and the bird will need more time to re-orient itself. Caught again, the frozen state will last even longer, the bird may start pecking aggressively at its surroundings, while trying to return to its senses. And if I continue to catch it, it will finally die of a heart attack.

Humans have forgotten how to recover naturally from the frozen state and re-enter the flow of life. Without help we often do not fully return from the trauma; although we continue with our lives, part of

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our energy stays tied up in the body, particularly in the nervous system, where it remains unresolved, creating symptoms such as: anxiety, depression, confusion and stress. (I will not elaborate on the important effects of trauma on the nervous system, and hence on the whole body, here). It is important to clarify that for individuals, the experience of trauma is always one of being overwhelmed. So the question arises, "How is it possible that one person experiences a situation as dangerous and threatening while another person does not?" Three important factors create the differences:

- A person's constitution, which is partly based on biological make-up, greatly influences the way that events are experienced: those with a sensitive nature will be much more easily overwhelmed than the sturdier characters; how much input and threat a person can bear before becoming overwhelmed, varies with the individual.
- A person's previous experience of trauma plays a large role: the greater the number of traumatic situations someone has lived through, the faster they become overwhelmed and re-enter the frozen state, as with the example of the bird discussed above.
- A person's family history also contributes: for those familiar with constellation work, it is no news that children take on unresolved traumatic energies from former generations; for example, if the parents were exiled from their country of origin during a war, the child is likely to carry some of the feelings involved. Even minor events experienced by this child that resemble the events suffered by the parents, or that trigger similar feelings, may cause dispro-

portional shock. Trauma therapists have also observed that unresolved traumatic experiences can be carried over into future generations.

Events that frequently cause traumatic reactions include:

- Accidents and catastrophes of all kinds: car accidents, train crashes, earthquakes, and death or suffering induced by wars or torture.
- The so-called developmental trauma suffered by children, such as: difficult births, early separation from parents or being abused.
- 'Secondary trauma' experienced by helpers and therapists who step in to support victims of disasters and may themselves be overwhelmed by what occurred.

The victim of any traumatising event experiences the setting-in of a deep anxiety centring around the fear that the event will repeat itself, either in reality or through recall. If this happens, the original shock will be re-experienced as 're-traumatisation', which strengthens both the traumatic reaction and the original trauma. However, the biological urge is for the organism to release the stuck energies of the traumatic event and return to its natural uninhibited flow. This may be why victims are attracted to situations that resemble the traumatising event; for example, someone who had a car accident may find himself frequently in dangerous traffic situations. But the body does not know how to react any differently than it did in the initial experience, so the danger of a similar shock and overwhelm, and therefore of re-traumatisation, is high.

HOW IS TRAUMA ADDRESSED IN CONSTELLATION WORK?

Although the term trauma is barely used in constellation work, we are constantly dealing with traumatic events. We encounter them in former generations in the experience of war, exile and imprisonment; in current situations in the form of stillborn children, early or accidental deaths, or children who have suffered abuse and violence. And beyond the realm of families, our work often includes the dynamics of victims and perpetrators in constellations, such as the profound examples in Bert Hellinger's book *Wo Ohnmacht Frieden Stifet (The Peace that comes from Powerlessness)*, describing two constellations involving victim and perpetrator, one in a rape during war and the other in a torture session.

In constellation work, representatives stand for the people who are most affected by the situation: the one who died and the one who survived in an early death issue or the victim and the perpetrator in an abuse issue. We wait for the representatives to establish contact and perceive each other and then we work with the emerging themes, such as guilt and responsibility. Frequently we discover themes of love and connection, and find that the ritual sentences developed by Bert Hellinger prove very helpful for dissolving tensions and stuck energy patterns.

In trauma work, the attempt to resolve trauma inherently carries the danger of re-traumatisation. Can this also happen in constellations work? Can a constellation bring up

such intense memories and sensations that the client again becomes overwhelmed by the events and returns to his/her previous state of shock? Can this also happen to the people who represent the traumatised client or other victims of trauma in the client's family system? Annwyn St. Just, a trauma specialist, has told me that she has frequently observed both clients and representatives enter frozen trauma states without the facilitator noticing. Some other German therapists, myself included, have also observed this and Franz Ruppert mentions it in his books.

So, family constellation work seems to involve the risk of re-traumatisation, creating a responsibility for facilitators to learn to recognise such states of shock and to become aware of them as they develop. Signs of a trauma state to watch for include: sudden paleness, speechlessness and lack of movement; the client or representative staring into the distance and not being present in his/her body. Complete loss of control and 'freaking out' may also indicate a trauma reaction.

Although most constellation facilitators seem unaware of this dimension of their work, they avoid re-traumatisation intuitively. Some procedures used in constellations protect clients and representatives from becoming overwhelmed. The following procedures are tools that belong in every facilitator's toolbox, which are constantly used without anyone ever mentioning the word trauma:

Clients are protected by the use of representatives and by respecting the issue and its limits.

The use of representatives

Clients see their representatives from the outside, allowing them to dissociate from the experience to some degree and so protecting them from directly reliving the traumatic event. The more immediate and direct the hardship is or was, the more protection the client needs. Although we usually bring the client into the constellation towards the end of the work, this should not be done with clients who are in danger of re-traumatisation. It is more important for them to keep a sufficient distance from the events.

Respecting the issue and its limits

Sometimes the presenting issue is fairly superficial, such as a work-related issue, although clearly there are serious and difficult problems present in the family system. The facilitator may discuss what exactly should be addressed in the constellation, but it is important that the client's wishes are respected and not over-ruled. Even the best intentions do not give facilitators the right to open up deeper and more painful issues than the client is ready to deal with. The facilitator who disregards the client's wish and 'goes for it' also disregards the protection inherent in the client's knowing what he/she can deal with, and so may inflict harm.

Representatives are protected from entering trauma states by the following:

Distance

When difficult feelings are encountered during a constellation, we often observe that representatives are unable to look at someone or something. The tension is too intense and they need more space. Simply allowing them to move as far away as they need to, can make them

feel safe enough to look. Space and distance protect them from the intensity.

Contact

Facilitators need to stay in contact with the representative, particularly when constellations deal with heavy and tense situations. Simply asking, "How are you doing?" creates a connection with a representative who is holding difficult feelings and prevents these feelings from taking over.

Language

Assisting a representative who is holding a burden to name the problem in well-chosen sentences helps him or her to create a small inner distance from it. For example, a father who survived war and imprisonment may create an important distance by stating, "It was too much."

De-roling

Facilitators need to be trained to recognise when a representative is in danger of being overwhelmed. The question, "Can you hold it?" can clarify the situation. If the answer is not a clear "Yes," the representative needs to be released from the role immediately and the facilitator must ensure that he/she comes fully out of the role and back into the present.

Physical contact

Whenever a representative is in danger of being overwhelmed and is either freezing or 'freaking out', the facilitator may establish some physical contact. I often stand behind the representative and put my hand on his/her back, not to give comfort but to lend strength and support so that the representative may stay present with difficult feelings.

HOW DOES BODY-ORIENTED TRAUMA WORK ADDRESS TRAUMA?

Body-oriented trauma work is based on concepts and procedures that may prove very useful additions to constellations work. I will describe five basic principles of Somatic Experiencing that I consider most relevant:

Titration – drop by drop

Trauma is dangerous if accessed fast and directly but it can be dissolved using a drop by drop approach. Using an example from chemistry, if hydrochloric acid (HCl) is added rapidly to caustic soda, an explosion will occur; however, if the HCl is added drop by drop to caustic soda, they mix well. This process is known as titration. Similarly in trauma work you can look at a trauma drop by drop so that the body does not 'explode'. When the trauma occurred, too much happened too fast and with too much intensity. Slowing it down, taking breaks and stretching time are therefore important therapeutic tools for processing trauma safely, as they enable the traumatic experience to be integrated with other positive experiences in the client's life, as well as with the sense of safety created in the present context (group or 1:1 session).

The natural pendulation of the organism

As the opposing states of threat and overwhelm on the one hand and resourcefulness and security on the other, appear during titration, a natural movement back and forth between them begins, which we call pendulation. The therapist carefully watches for the movements, which may be minimal, that indicate the next change of direction and support the natural pendulation.

A trauma-work session generally begins by establishing a resourceful, positive state, before carefully approaching the outermost level of the traumatic experience. Once the client begins to connect with difficult events or feelings, the therapist ensures that he/she approaches only as much of this material as can be handled and supports the naturally occurring pendulation as soon as the body initiates it. This allows the client to slowly let go of frozen energies and is often accompanied by physical signs such as small shivers or hot or cold flashes that indicate to the therapist that the trauma is being released.

The client then needs time to return to the present and establish a positive connection in the here-and-now before making another movement into the traumatic state. When this natural movement occurs, the therapist supports the client as he/she re-enters the trauma state – this time at a deeper level than before. Several pendulations are needed to fully access an experience, the number depending on the intensity of the original experience and how deeply it is embedded in the psyche. For example, I was out jogging after dark and collided with someone on a bicycle that had no lights. Although the accident had only minor physical consequences, it took two sessions of an hour and seven pendulations before I could remember the actual course of events, moment by moment without any sign of becoming overwhelmed.

Trauma resolution mainly occurs on the physical level

Because traumatic shock creates frozen energies that settle as rigidity in the body, bringing these energies back into motion and re-establishing

a natural flow requires the trauma therapist to carefully observe the client's body signals. All release happens physically through small, unconscious body movements that inform the facilitator how the body is moving towards release. Most often we observe fight or flight behaviours. The first instinctive reaction to an intense threat is normally flight: as we attempt to create distance – both externally and internally – we often make small movements with our feet. Once we have established enough distance and feel sufficiently safe, the next level of reaction may surface in the form of uncontrolled aggression. Just as the bird picked at anything or anybody within its reach, we tend to unleash our aggression on to our environment. Only then can we move to an even deeper level of the experience, where we will probably discover pain and sorrow. This cycle may repeat itself several times before a trauma state is released and resolved.

I have learned to value the flight response as a necessary step for unravelling frozen energies: if we stay too close to the cause of the trauma, we will remain frozen. This is not a question of will power – we need to create the necessary distance in order to experience the tremendous relief of finally being safe. It is important to note that we can move through this process without having to remember the traumatic events: some clients remember their experiences and others do not. It suffices to follow the body's movements as it finds its way to release and return to its natural equilibrium.

Awareness

Observing and understanding body movements requires awareness. Many of our body movements have

become unconscious and we need to focus and slow down to perceive them. We may need to repeat a movement several times, consciously sensing into it, before we understand what this movement is expressing. For example, while talking about something, a client makes small defensive hand movements without being aware of them. The trauma therapist focuses on the movement, asks the client to slow it down, repeat it and look for its full expression or meaning. This process can release energies that have become frozen and make them available again.

Containment

We go through a similar journey when encountering our emotions. The key word here is containment. When our emotions overwhelm us – no matter whether pain, rage or bliss – we cannot contain them, and we look for ways to cope. Regression, catharsis and acting out are clear indicators of uncontained emotions. As with unconscious body movements, emotions need to be re-entered and contained bit by bit by bringing more and more awareness to them. Much as in the practice of meditation we are looking to gain a deeper level of consciousness. If, for instance, the client quickly and without conscious awareness, hits the table with his fist, the therapist can ask him to repeat the movement very slowly three or four times. The client starts to feel the aggression contained in the movement and simply feeling it brings a release. After repeating the movement several more times, the aggression disappears; the slow movement has had a relaxing, healing effect.

WHAT ASPECTS OF TRAUMA WORK APPLY TO FAMILY CONSTELLATIONS?

Rather than contradicting or challenging the principles of the constellations approach, insights gained through trauma work indicate that we need to proceed more carefully in constellations when dealing with traumatic events. I believe it would be very helpful to introduce facilitators of family constellations to the process of titration – the drop by drop procedure, so that they confront clients with only as much as they are able to absorb safely. Most facilitators instinctively avoid overwhelming clients and no-one wants this to happen. However, I believe it does occur frequently and could be avoided if facilitators asked themselves, “How much can this client integrate at this time?”

There are steps the facilitator can take to avoid the client becoming overwhelmed. If the original experience was heavy, slow the process down. I have moved away from the idea that a traumatic experience can be resolved in a single constellation, instead using several constellations over whatever time span the client needs, to be able to resolve the issue safely. This allows the client to progressively discover deeper levels of connections as he/she faces both the love and the darkness inherent in every family system.

Since I have been paying more attention to how much my clients can bear, my work has changed. Before I encountered trauma work I was more inclined to confront a client who was not looking at a person or an issue and encourage them to face it. I remember one of Bert Hellinger's sentences: “Flight is no escape.” I now see that while

flight is no escape, it may be a necessary first step towards a solution. Today I focus more on how much a client can integrate.

Let me give an example: *A woman reported that a family friend had sexually abused her for about three years during her childhood. During the constellation, the child's representative felt extremely abandoned by everyone and particularly by her mother. When facing the perpetrator she experienced pain and shock but was eventually able to leave all guilt with him and turn away from him to face her family. At this point I brought the client into her place in the constellation. She broke down in tears and was unable to look at anybody. I immediately turned her away from the constellation but her tears continued to flow uncontrollably. I joined her and we distanced ourselves from the constellation, her tears still flowing even when we left the room. We waited next door until she calmed down and I asked her whether I should finish the constellation or if she would like to meet anyone in this constellation. She replied that she would like to look at her two sisters. So I returned to the constellation and released the representatives of the father, mother and perpetrator from their roles. The client returned to make a brief loving connection to her sisters and we ended with this moment.*

In my opinion, the client's needs override all rules and ideas of how a constellation should be done. I orient my work around these needs and I am willing to interrupt, make distance or take a break to avoid overwhelming someone. I stay in close contact with my client and let him/her decide how much he/she can handle. This keeps my

constellations in the service of my clients. I may even encourage an abused client or his/her representative to stand at a distance from a perpetrator before looking at him/her and to raise a hand as soon as he/she starts to feel overwhelmed. Once I see the raised hand I immediately halt the constellation.

When dealing with traumatic events, the facilitator must be aware of the client even while working with the constellation. Because my goal is not to 'pull a constellation through' or even to reach a positive solution, I feel free to interrupt whenever my client seems absent or negatively affected. Consider this example: *A woman was dealing with the consequences of a 'medical mistake', as a result of which she had lost one arm. The constellation moved well and the representatives were heading to a solution, when I noticed that the client was looking away from the constellation. I stopped the constellation, enquired how she was feeling and realised that she was in an overwhelmed and frozen state. Together we backed away from the constellation to create distance. From there I dissolved the constellation and worked with her on her current state.*

The following example illustrates how distance can help:

In an advanced training group I decided to demonstrate the use of wooden figures for working with individual clients. The man who volunteered brought a difficult issue: when he was six months old, his parents had left him with his aunt, because they had to go to Germany to earn money. They did not re-unite until he was three years old. I suspected that this was an issue of 'interrupted movement' (a term used both in trauma work and by Bert Hellinger to describe the trauma

experienced by a young child separated from or rejected by his/her parents; see article by Barbara Morgan 2003) and though I doubted that this was suitable for exploring with wooden figures I decided to go ahead. We put up figures for father, mother and child, and worked with the constellation for about half an hour until the client imagined that his mother was smiling at him. At this point I decided to leave it. Later, during a feedback circle, the client reported that he felt relieved. He had been extremely nervous about approaching this issue, because he was unsure if he could bear to re-experience the situation through representatives. The use of wooden figures had made it easier, as it created more distance. We had made a small first step towards resolving this interrupted movement.

Examples such as these have taught me to be more humble in certain situations. Rather than hoping that major liberations will result from a single constellation, I now try to advance at the client's speed.

Understanding how trauma states resolve themselves has brought me some other new perspectives in my work. Here is another example:

A client was working on feeling estranged from her family. She suspected that she had been abused by her father but had no memories before the age of 14. In the constellation, the child's representative was afraid of the father and wanted to move away from the family. As we had no facts, I avoided naming anything and just followed the energies present in the constellation. When the client replaced her representative in the constellation, she could not bear to be near her family and felt relieved when she backed off and finally turned away from them. She

reported a sense of liberation and relief and I ended the constellation. As the seminar continued I observed that this normally quiet, reserved woman became increasingly discontented. She behaved with increasing aggression towards me and requested 'some more' on our last day. When I suggested a second constellation, she declined and was still angry in our final feedback circle.

This could be viewed as my failure as the facilitator but from the perspective of a trauma therapist I see it differently. The retreat from her family, the distancing and turning away were necessary as a kind of flight, giving her enough distance to re-orient herself, recover and gather strength. As the energies unravel, the flight reaction is followed by rage, and the deeper the hurt, the wilder the rage. In the same way the bird pecked at whatever was nearby as it awakened from its shock, her rage was directed at the people who were present. As the facilitator, and possibly also as a 'father figure', I became the target. This rage had little to do with me personally, but was a necessary part of her solution. Although I do not know how my client integrated the experience after the seminar, she had clearly stepped into a place where she could access her strength and power. The best I could do to support her process was to bear her rage without reacting or replying in anger.

Becoming aware of the larger healing movement that occurs through the pendulation between resource and hardship creates a new perspective of the overall effect of family constellation work. The image of rightful order that often concludes the first constellation can serve as a resource of strength and

healing, which the client needs to integrate before engaging with the deeper levels of entanglement that might have been invisible before. When I first set up my family, I received a simple, healing image that felt right and extremely good. Several years later, in another constellation, very different energies emerged: I was confronted with intense feelings of isolation, insanity and horror. The pendulum had swung the other way and I have no idea how many more movements may still be to come.

Understanding this process takes pressure off the facilitator to find positive solutions and to bring constellations to a good end. Where there is an organic pendulation that continually moves between resourcefulness and hardship and thereby brings about healing, the facilitator can relax and simply accompany the client, supporting the unravelling of this process. It would be fascinating to explore whether the same pendulation process can be observed in Hellinger's 'movements of the soul' work.

WHEN TRAUMA AND FAMILY ENTANGLEMENTS GO TOGETHER

Of course trauma and family issues often overlap. Here is an example that illustrates how a traumatic experience can directly affect another member of a family:

A tall young man in his early twenties wished to do a constellation on his many years of drug addiction. He was friendly and well-mannered but people meeting him in the street tended to avoid him because of his shaved head and the tattoos all over his arms and shoulders. The constellation revealed that his mother could not look properly at her child because she was afraid of

him. In a constellation this normally means that she is confusing the child with somebody else. I asked for any family history that might help us understand this observation but he knew of none. As it seemed obvious that it was not the child whom the mother feared, I placed a man next to the boy's representative and named him 'the one who is really feared'. The mother's attention immediately shifted to him and she was visibly frightened of him. The child showed great relief and the mother could at last see him just as her child. A strange attraction between the mother and this man led me to suspect that he might represent her first boyfriend, who may have been violent or even raped her.

The client's mother had been to some of my workshops and when I met her again I asked her who she thought this 'one who is really feared' might be. Thinking about it, she said that she had heard that one of her grandfathers could be violent and we left it at that. The next day she returned and reminded me of a constellation we had done several years before. When she was 12 years old two men had kidnapped her, tied her up, tortured her and sexually abused her until, after nearly 12 hours, she had managed to escape. In her constellation, the older man had presented as particularly brutal and violent, making statements such as, "I like it when you are terrified." The person representing her as a child had vacillated between terror of and boundless love for this man. (Trauma research has confirmed that such connections between perpetrator and victim are common; and they also appear in constellation work). Thinking about her son's work, the mother concluded that she saw this perpetrator when she looked at her son, who, in turn, had taken on a part of the perpetrator's role. Again

in constellation work we often see that murderers become represented in the families of victims; in this case the child had taken on the murderous energy of the perpetrator.

Talking further with the mother, I learned how different therapeutic approaches had worked well together for her: when she first began working on this kidnapping experience, she found hypnotherapy most helpful; her next big step was meeting the perpetrator in her constellation. However, she still felt the effects of the trauma living in her body and had decided to begin trauma work.

HOW DO TRAUMA AND CONSTELLATION WORK DIFFER AND WHAT DO THEY HAVE IN COMMON?

Trauma and constellation work address different layers of our being. Constellations connect us with our roots as social beings by demonstrating how we are connected to our family system, whereas trauma work focuses directly on the body and its reactions. Constellations make it clear that we belong to our family system and will remain a part of it. When we encounter a perpetrator outside our family system in a constellation, we discover a human being who carries a burden of guilt. Even if we turn away from this person, we can do so with respect for the fate of another, which brings about healing of our relationship both with others and with a part of ourselves.

Trauma work, in contrast, addresses the physical level of our nature and heals at that level. Once frozen energies have been resolved we can return to undisturbed interactions with our environment and our fellow humans. As many of our impulses are instinctive, (being inherited from the animal kingdom),

understanding how the energies released by these impulses move within our bodies is a great benefit for constellation facilitators. However, the boundaries between the two approaches are not always so clear-cut. To quote Peter Levine (1997):

"Looking at trauma we are looking at loss of connection: connection to ourselves, our families and our surroundings."

In trauma work, therefore, the connection between the client and the therapist, as another human being, becomes a central theme. This connection – continually re-established and re-affirmed – creates a pole that opposes the pull of the trauma. Writing about our ability to create relationships later in life, the trauma therapist Babette Rothschild (2000) says:

"A traumatised child is not necessarily doomed to a life of dysfunction. Many people who did not have opportunities to create safe relationships during their childhood were able to correct that later in life and make positive connections."

She includes connections with friends, teachers, neighbours and partners, as well as psychotherapists.

These same issues of bonding, connection and relationship are the core concerns of family constellation work. In constellations, we frequently discover a deep, connecting flow of love in seemingly dysfunctional families; the experience that this connection has always been there creates a new sense of belonging, which can be felt as a healing. So the two approaches, constellations and trauma work, are like two circles that overlap in some places and stand alone in others. Maybe half the issues brought by our clients could be addressed with either approach. In the other half, one approach will be more appropriate than the other.

I am planning a workshop for severely traumatised clients that combines both approaches. In the mornings, we will work in a group setting doing constellations, while the afternoons will be reserved for individual Somatic Experiencing sessions. I cannot wait to see how the two approaches work together and what results can be achieved. The question of healing and growth is not a matter of either trauma work or constellations, but how we can combine the two on our journey to more vitality, love and life force.

In this process, I am clear that I can take people only as far as I have gone myself. In other words, the constellations I lead will uncover both positive and negative aspects of life only to the degree that I am able to accept and contain them. To be better facilitators, we will need to stretch our abilities to meet and accept the hardships in our own experience. I believe trauma work to be a good tool for such an expansion.

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