

BERT HELLINGER AND FAMILY CONSTELLATIONS

*Who then devised the torment? Love.
Love is the unfamiliar Name
Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.
We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.*

T. S. Eliot

Bert Hellinger grew up in Germany at the time of the Nazi regime. He claims it was his parents' active faith that allowed him to see through the lie of the Nazi ideology. After the war he felt the vocation for a religious career in a Catholic order, and entered a life of a regular practice of contemplation and meditation. Eventually, he became a missionary to the Zulus in South Africa, an experience that led him to realize the relativity of cultural values. He could observe the similarities between Zulu culture and the spirituality that is present in the cult of the Mass. This was a first bridge to knowledge of reality of the soul. During this time he also worked with group dynamic facilitators and saw how their interventions could help in the reconciliation of opposites.¹

Upon leaving the Church he launched into an extensive exploration of the different techniques that have evolved from psychoanalysis. In the years following his training in psychoanalysis, he received many other trainings and integrated various elements from a long list of different approaches: the primal therapy of Janov, Gestalt therapy, transactional analysis, the family therapy approach of McClendon and Kadis, Milton Erickson's hypnotherapy, neuro-linguistic programming, and the holding therapy of Irena Precop.

Hellinger achieved an overall integration of these approaches and has no claim to any particularly new discoveries. In Janov he saw the validity of a body-based psychotherapy. Observing the manifestation of feelings in primal therapy allowed him to notice that the feelings that manifested themselves covered up the primary desire for love of the child toward the parents. Reestablishing this primary movement towards love became Hellinger's focus. From transactional analysis he realized the recurrence of "psychological scripts" carrying over from one generation to the next; some of the scripts an individual carries may belong to other members of the family. Through family therapy he was exposed to the concept of family constellations, and Jay Haley introduced him to the role of hierarchy in family dynamics. These exposures fully revealed the systemic dimension of psychotherapy—how personal destinies are influenced by the family system. Finally, from neuro-linguistic programming Hellinger adopted the focus on resources rather than on problems. He achieved this goal thanks to his keen faculties of observation that allowed him to "acknowledge what is"—one of his favorite expressions. His worldview can be truly defined as phenomenology at its best. The path that took its departure from psychoanalysis led him away from many of its basic tenets. As we will see, Hellinger's systemic psychotherapy is hardly analytical. It has an image-based flavor

that offers a whole new meaning to the word *psychotherapy*.

Hellinger and his Family Constellations have caused a real sensation in the world of psychotherapy. Not only do his ideas usher in a new outlook in the field, but Family Constellations has almost become a mass phenomenon in Europe. The new approach generates more interest than any other form of psychotherapy has in the last twenty years, and this trend is not likely to abate soon. It is obvious that his approach will raise a few eyebrows. Hellinger's background as a Catholic missionary, his personality, and the radical flavor of his views feed polemics. He adds to this by standing by ideas and statements that he says he derives from observation rather than speculation. However, he seems ready to admit that he has made mistakes and will alter his views when new elements of his observations push him in a different direction; hence the feeling sometimes arises that he may be inconsistent.

Family Constellations

It takes a lot of training, effort, and insight to simply see, and in that act perceive reality for what it is. Preformed ideas stand in the way. Truly seeing is one of Bert Hellinger's gifts. A pragmatist—much more than a theoretician—he can call himself a phenomenologist with good reason. To him, knowing how certain phenomena appear is much more important than any theory he could spin from them. Most importantly, he believes that phenomena, when rightly understood, show us the way and the tools that we can use. Hellinger describes what he has observed as “systemic psychotherapy” and “orders of love.” What differs from many other psychoanalytic approaches is Hellinger's purely imaginative approach. A second aspect is his primary interest in simply describing facts while staying away from their interpretation.

Let us look at how Family Constellations therapy works. The client sets up a certain constellation of the closest people in his or her family situation by placing certain people—the “representatives”—in a determined, given space. The representatives take the place of all of the significant members of the family constellation, including the client and even deceased family members. The important elements are the spatial relationships between members, in which direction and/or at whom each one of them looks, and the postures adopted by each participant. After setting up the constellation, the client becomes a spectator. The work is different from role-playing, because people are placed in a position of which they know only very few basic facts, such as partings, divorces, separations, and, generally speaking, other traumatic events. This is a very important element to which we will return later. The representatives are not asked to act out, but simply to register their feelings and observe the situation. It is as if they were in a place endowed with a certain power. They experience feelings and emotions that can be accompanied by physical sensations, such as shaky knees, difficulties standing up, or tight shoulders. At the next stage, the facilitator can ask the client to place in the constellation individuals from previous generations. During this process the facilitator will ask all the individuals in the constellation to convey their feelings and physical sensations, and will propose to them simple sentences that help to clarify the feelings experienced or offer a solution for tension. The sentences are short and to the point, for example, “I am angry with you,” or “I respect you.”

The work of a constellation evolves in three stages. In the first part, a client receives

an image of the present destructive family dynamics at work. In a second stage, the facilitator moves through a search for balance in the family system. The search is led according to the facilitator's intuition, and involves some trial and error. Only the client and the other participants can say if it feels right or not. The final stage is an image of what could be, an image that can help the individual evolve toward a new equilibrium. It may be the attainment of a resolution, but it can also simply be a next step on the way to balance. At this stage the client will be asked to take the place of his or her representative in order to experience the new situation. The facilitator needs to refrain from imposing a solution, only leading the soul to the next possible step. In fact, at times, he will have to stop a representation before coming to a resolution. It may be that this is the only attainable next step, or that crucial information is missing. Often, the latter may come to the surface later.

After experiencing the new state, the client and all participants are asked to refrain from discussing the experience or offering insights or interpretations. The images generated from family constellations work at a deeper level, in fact at the level of the soul, not of the mind. They have a lasting effect, but it may take some time before results are revealed to the individual. A single representation may be all that is needed, or various interventions—at wide intervals of time—may be staged in order to reach a progressively deeper level of understanding and resolution.

So what are the questions that Hellinger asks his clients? The following is a sample:

- Is there somebody in the family who died young?
- Have there been criminal or violent episodes?
- Have the parents had previous relationships?
- Are there shaming experiences: marginalization, handicap, extramarital births, people needing psychiatric care, jailing, homosexuality, or emigration?
- Are there unusual relationships within the generations: adoptions, abortions, or sexual abuse?
- Are there parents of different nationalities?

The more any of these facts is lived as a source of shame or a source of repressed pain, the more likely they are to deeply affect following generations.

Two systems are explored in Hellinger's work: the first is the family of origin, and the second is the present family. The question asked determines to which of the two the facilitator will direct himself. The more clearly and succinctly a question can be formulated, the more likely the work is to be effective.

And what are the effects of Family Constellation work? A first strong realization is often the experience of our interconnectedness. The world of the soul acquires a new graphic dimension when one cannot avoid seeing in one's life the concrete effect of a simple representation that would seem to have only symbolic power. People who expose themselves to the work, either as subjects or as representatives, become more conscious of the implications of their decisions. They learn to give more importance to personal needs in relationships and take responsibility for their actions. Taking responsibility for our actions occurs independently of the justifications that have guided them. In fact,

individuals may feel responsibility even for their intentions.

Representations may allow us to shed premature prejudice and acquire more compassion towards others. Many say that having the experience of bowing before another (for example, in offering forgiveness) is not an act of weakness. The reverse experience does not cause one to feel proud or superior.

Images guide our life. The old image of our family guided us unconsciously. The new image of a possible future constellation works without need of analysis, but has an influence on our lives, without depriving us of our freedom.

Love's Hidden Symmetry²

So what is it that Hellinger sees? In a family unit, certain events leave scars on the soul. These are mostly dramatic or tragic events: anything from sudden death, suicide, and homicide to abortions, stillbirths, adoptions, incest, and so on. Resulting traumas come from the individuals' response to these events. A family member may be excluded because of a shameful act, or institutionalized and forgotten because of a mental, developmental, or other handicap. Each individual in the family always has a choice: accept the pain and own it, or deny it and suffer from the hidden consequences of this denial. Accepting all family members and ties means recognizing the reality that the soul always knows. Rejecting family ties through anger keeps one tied to all the family members at a deeper level, no matter how far one is from them geographically. The only lawful exception may be one of members having committed crimes or murders; they do indeed need to be excluded, at least for a time.

A family is a group of people brought together by destiny. Fate seeks its completion no matter what we may think, feel, or do about it. When we divert it through some drastic decision, it intervenes in some other way in the family unit. These are the phenomena observed by Hellinger, the ones he groups under the name *systemic laws*, applying in most cases within three generations of family links. These laws hold true regardless of space and time, all the more so when consciousness and the ability to love are dimmed. They operate across space; family members affect the system no matter where they are. They also work across time boundaries—the deceased affect the living, and vice versa.

A family group has a consciousness. Children are a particularly sensitive link in the family unit. They will suffer with their parents in order to show their love, because they express love in a primary, blind fashion. In the case of divorce, they often emulate the parent who appears worse off. They feel incomplete if they are forced to exclude one of the parents from their picture of the family. However, it isn't only the parents who play an important role in the family dynamics. Any member of an extended family unit has a right to membership. Wrong decisions made by any individual must be condemned without excluding him or her. Excluding or ostracizing can lead to serious physical and psychological illnesses among children or other family members.

Hellinger alerts us to the reality of destiny or fate in the family unit. He expresses it in another way via the concept of family hierarchy. This hierarchy flows through the parents to the children, from the firstborn to the younger siblings. That is why it is important for parents to share deep commitments to each other first, then to their children. Children should not be drawn into adult concerns or problems by their parents.

More recent relationships have precedence over older ones. If a parent has a child

from a second partner, it is this union that acquires priority over the previous one. An “ideal” family situation is represented in an archetypal way in a family constellation. The oldest child stands close to the parents and the others are arranged around them clockwise in descending order of age.

Love, at least in the common use of the term, covers a wide gradation of feelings and emotions. Above we have described the apparently unconditional kind of love that is a child’s love. A child will blindly follow his parents, no matter their fate. This is not a true relationship, but what Hellinger calls an *entanglement*. By sharing the destiny of the parent, the child is estranged from his or her own destiny. At an unconscious level, the child feels important, but this feeling is born out of presumption, not out of any deeper reality. Within the context of hospice, it has been noticed that dying children often hang on to life, because they feel protective of their parents; this is especially so in the case of single parents or in difficult stepfamilies.³

Growing into a mature, adult love implies a painful separation between child and parent, generally associated with a feeling of guilt from the son or daughter. The necessity of the guilt and the pain associated with breaking the nature of the childhood bond is often resisted in adult life, resulting in the individual carrying an unbalanced love or attachment to the paternal/maternal figures.

What Hellinger calls the “hidden symmetry of love” concerns the balance of give and take that colors every relationship, especially in couples. The exchange of giving and receiving needs to be balanced, not from a mathematical, but from a soul perspective; the wider the exchange, the deeper the resulting growth and joy. The partner who receives too much will end up feeling oppressed, and therefore unable to give. The same is true in case of a partner causing harm to another. Too quick or superficial forgiveness deprives the need that the offending party has for offering compensation. A magnanimous forgiveness—often a superficial one—deprives the needed outlet for guilt.

The Soul’s Perspective

Family Constellations work offers us a brand new perspective on the dynamics of a family. It also invites us to revisit important social issues from the perspective of the reality of the soul. Thus, when we consider such matters as abortion, artificial insemination, adoption, and incest, we often do so primarily from the perspective of human rights. This is a justified approach inasmuch as it honors the dimension of human freedom and justice. However, it is only a partial view of things—it does not fully address the soul’s perspective. Let us look precisely at how these matters are also issues of destiny.

Adoption may be seen as a generous and altruistic idea, and it often is. However, at the level of the soul, it is overshadowed by another important choice. Adopting is often the refusal of a trial of destiny: the acceptance of a partner’s sterility. If this is not clear, then adoption carried for the wrong motive can lead to divorce, illness, or more serious issues. Adoption challenges us to accept our overall destiny and the destiny triggered by the impact of a foreign family constellation. In other words, in adopting we don’t just accept a child, but also, at the soul level, the destiny of the members of the child’s family system. In the case of adoption, immediate family members, including grandparents, aunts, and uncles, are best suited for successful results. Understanding of the element of

destiny is carried even further in the case of artificial insemination. It may be difficult to understand the importance of whether the sperm comes from the husband or from another source. Here, as in adoption, it makes a difference whether or not the issues of two family constellations are compounded.

A polar opposite of adoption is abortion. Regardless of the issue of freedom that goes with abortion, couples intuitively know that aborting is often psychologically worse than accepting a challenging baby. The pain of abortion has to be confronted consciously by the couple through the necessary grieving in order to lessen the psychological consequences.

Another often-neglected aspect of family reality is the role of ex-partners. From a destiny perspective, it should be made clear that their role is fundamental. Without their stepping aside, there would be no new relationship. They are all linked by this simple fact of life. Family constellations look at this issue closely. One of the surprising revelations of Hellinger's work is the reality of physical intercourse. This leads him to issue the challenging remark that "sexuality is stronger than love," if we give to love the meaning applied by everyday standards. Sexuality creates real links that will invariably appear in family constellations, no matter how fleeting an episode a person may consider any sexual encounter. These conclusions strongly confirm the results of spiritual investigation, even if they may stand at odds with what goes as common sense. They offer us a concrete example of why Hellinger can falsely be interpreted as holding on to archaic ideas, to his Catholic background, or to a neoconservative ideology. This view ignores the fact that everything he says is something that he has come to observe first and foremost as a phenomenon through his work.

Where the divergence between legal issues and destiny issues is the greatest is in the case of incest. As Hellinger sees it, incest is often the result of an unconscious collaboration, where the man plays the active role and the woman the passive one. Often the perpetrator is a man who marries a woman with one or more daughters, and the situation presents an emotional and sexual imbalance. The woman often compensates for this imbalance by unconsciously offering the daughter, who also ends up offering herself, illustrating the blind love of children. Incest thus becomes an issue of love that does not find its true and healthy expression. Clearly, the major responsibility lies with the man, and judicial action is appropriate. However, incest is not resolved by revenge. It is a human situation that needs to be resolved by acknowledging both the parents' fault and the reality of the bonds of love, however misplaced their expression may be. This is important because when a person has been denied or excluded from a family unit, their burden may be taken on by a child or other family member. This individual will carry feelings not their own, and will often display emotions and behaviors that are inappropriate or exaggerated within a given context. Hellinger calls this an *entanglement* or *identification*—the polar opposite of a relationship, a bond based on compulsion rather than freedom. Personal destiny that has been blocked acts blindly out of inner necessity, trying to find entry where it has been denied access.

Entanglement is not of an automatic nature. The information received through systemic psychotherapy is not universal or equal for all. Rather, it depends on context. This is most visible when two siblings set up the same family configurations for therapeutic work. One of the two may be very entangled, for example, with the mother's

side of the family, whereas the other may demonstrate little response to the traumatic event coming from that side and react more favorably toward the father's side of the family.

It appears that Hellinger's systemic psychotherapy is an imaginative way to make visible the family's forces of destiny. The process attempts to bring consciousness and a loving response from a mood of reverence and acceptance. We must first remember and honor anything that we have done or have been part of, before we can rightfully forget. This does not mean condoning faults or crimes. Standing by the excluded or vilified in order to give them back their rightful place within the family system is the task of the facilitator, according to Hellinger. His is a deeply moral work—when skillfully conducted—that allows destiny its due.

The final image of constellation work is there for the individual to simply behold. From it the soul can draw nourishment. Progress will occur according to the soul's needs and rhythms— for some, within months, for others, years. No interpretation is necessary and the person's freedom remains whole. However, for progressively deeper effects, it may be useful to conduct several constellations, leaving ample time between them.

Working with Departed Souls

Family constellations have shown that a certain memory lives within a family system. It lives in the soul or the so-called greater soul. The individual brain is merely the instrument that transmits it; it does not create it. The soul lives beyond space and time. That is why it is equally at home among the living as the dead.

Family Constellation work indicates that the living need to stop clinging to their beloved dead ones. After a normal period of mourning, such attachments hamper the departed souls' further progress. Heinz Stark confirms the importance of the moment of death, and particularly the thoughts we carry at that time. He observes that the souls of the dead can be in quite a few different states—either at peace or in a restless state. In extreme cases, such as with those who have been murdered, he notices that the soul can be caught in an in-between realm, as if cut off from everyone else and from life itself. This happens particularly when the perpetrators carry no remorse or empathy toward the victims. At the other end of the spectrum are the souls who have made the most progress after death. "The latest phase of the dying process of such a soul aspect, which has so far been observed with the help of constellations, seems to be the dissolution and union with (or in) those who have lived before, maybe encompassing ever larger areas of an ever larger soul,"⁴ concludes Heinz Stark. This is probably why in the majority of cases family constellations concern themselves with the third generation only. In most cases, after that time, the soul has dissolved and become part of the greater soul.

Family constellations know no boundaries as far as the soul is concerned. They help the living as well as the dead. Departed souls are free to participate. They can achieve clarity or resist change just as we do. Therefore, central to this working together in both worlds is an attitude of respect toward the dead. Attention may be turned to them before going to sleep, during the night preceding work on a constellation. People who have done this have sometimes received guidance through dreams.

In some ways Family Constellation work renders visible the reality of destiny within the family unit. It also makes obvious the limits of a purely individual approach in

psychoanalysis. Hellinger's work is successful precisely because it calls on the participation—at the soul level—of all parts involved. The lack of analytical interpretation honors the needs of different souls and the individuals' freedom.

The Knowing Field

What is at work behind systemic psychotherapy—and most precisely at work in a Family Constellation setup—is the *knowing field*, the name given to this elusive reality by Albrecht Mahr. It is in many ways, but not completely, an objective field. The reactions that emerge from representatives have little to do with their personal history. Different representatives placed in the same role experience the same or very similar feelings, down to specific physical conditions. Experience with constellation work often renders representatives more attuned to this hidden reality, and allows them to perceive the same phenomena more clearly over time. The representations are a form of inventory of the unconscious energies present in family dynamics. They bring awareness on one side and healing on another.

Not surprisingly, family constellations can bring to light new elements of reality. The case given by Bertold Ulsamer of a representative, during constellation work, becoming certain of who her child's father is, is a good example in this connection.⁵ However, even if this is true in some instances, family constellations cannot and should not be used to retrieve information. Ulsamer offers the example of a representative bringing to the surface a history of abuse of a certain woman. When tallied with the family history it became clear that the abuse had been perpetrated on the subject's sister. The “abuse energy” was present in the system and played a role in it. However, the conclusion first attained was erroneous. Even if these cases are relatively rare, the example ultimately leads Ulsamer to draw the conclusion that one should corroborate a representation with reality and not vice versa. According to him, Family Constellations work rests upon three pillars: energy, order (systemic laws), and reality. In his approach, as in that of many other practitioners, the energetic approach has priority. Order, which can only serve as a general point of reference, is a relative notion, and exceptions to the “lawfulness” of order are too numerous for this criterion to offer a guiding hand. Also, relying on the principles of order would offer a facilitator the treacherous comfort of expected outcomes and resolutions.

At this point we might ask what the knowing field has to do with the new scientific idea of the “morphogenetic field,” as Heinz Stark asked himself. It seems more likely that what we have to do with in Family Constellations is similar to what appears in work with hypnosis. However, the difference with hypnosis lies in Family Constellations' greater precision. Here, the system is expressed by representatives in a state of normal consciousness; the facilitator's consciousness does not dominate over the dimmed consciousness of a client or representative.

For a further analysis of the forces at work during Family Constellations, similar phenomena are seen at work in J. L. Moreno's Psychodrama and other similar techniques using drama as a foundation. People who assume a certain role, although they role-play, often get in touch with elements of reality of which they had no previous knowledge.⁶

Other scientific studies support Hellinger's work, offering useful hypotheses—

particularly so the pioneering work in the field of psycho-genealogy conducted by French psychologist Anne Ancelin Schützenberger.⁷ Her work aims to recognize the influence, at the psychological level, that previous generations have over their offspring. In one of her examples, a client had a daughter, born on April 26, who was plagued since birth by asthma and panic attacks. A brother of the client's grandfather had died in war on April 26 in an attack in which lethal gases had been used. After elucidating these facts, the daughter recovered from both her cough and panic attacks. The client herself continued to suffer from shortness of breath. It was further discovered that her grandfather was present during the attacks in Verdun. After these discoveries her breathing improved. However, she still had odd habits: taking her hands to her neck, wearing a short red necklace, often feeling cold. Historical inquiries brought to light that five of her ancestors had died at the guillotine in 1793. One of them had died on January 9, 1793. The client's brother, François, was born on January 9, 1963. After these discoveries the feeling of choking and her related habits disappeared.

Another example from Ulsamer's research concerns the 1993 death of actor Brandon Lee, who died during the shooting of the film *The Crow*, killed by a pistol that should have been loaded with blanks. Twenty years before, to the date, his father, Bruce Lee, had died during the shooting of *Game of Death* in precisely the same way. Hellinger quotes the case of a family where, over one hundred years, three members of successive generations died or committed suicide at age twenty-seven on December 31. The oldest man—the first husband of the great-grandmother—was probably poisoned by the wife and her later husband on December 31.⁸ The observations reported above bring us to a crossroad of influences playing across family generations but also, possibly, the consequences of phobias carried from previous lives.

Family Constellation work stands at a turning point. Many of its aspects need to be better known and explored, now that its effects can be observed after many years of practice. It may be that family constellations will continue to evolve and create new forms. What is beyond doubt, reflected by the growing interest in Hellinger's work, is its revolutionary, groundbreaking effect—its pioneering edge into the realm of the soul and its destiny in a manner that strives to combine objectivity with the value of the image, rather than the old school of interpretation.

Overall, Family Constellations work illustrates the reality of the modern ideas of destiny that we have introduced, especially in chapters 2 and 4. At a first level, it demystifies the idea that family links are due to a random genetic lottery. The corollary of that thought—that we can free ourselves from these links at will—proves itself an empty proposition when tested by experience. Moreover, by integrating our relationships with the departed souls, systemic psychotherapy confirms how tenuous the boundary between the physical and spiritual worlds is at present, as we saw in the exploration of ADCs.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1) For Hellinger's biography and influences on his work see: www.hellinger.com. See also Bert Hellinger and Johannes Neuhauser, *Supporting Love: How Love Works in Couple Relationships* (Phoenix, AZ: Zeig, Tucker and Theisen Inc., 2001).

- 2) Bert Hellinger with Gunthard Weber and Hunter Beaumont, *Love's Hidden Symmetry: What Makes Love Work in Relationships* (Phoenix, AZ: Zeig, Tucker and Theisen Inc., 1998).
- 3) Marilyn Webb, *The Good Death: The New American Search to Reshape the End of Life* (New York: Bantam Books, 1997), 230.
- 4) Heinz Stark, "Return of the Shaman," in *Derselbe Wind läßt viele Drachen steigen*, ed. Gunthard Weber (Heidelberg: Carl-Auer-Systeme Verlag, 2001), 9.
- 5) Bertold Ulsamer, *Senza radici non si vola: la terapia sistemica di Bert Hellinger*, (Spigno Saturnia (LT), Italy: Edizioni Crisalide, 1999), 83–84.
- 6) *Ibid.*, 82.
- 7) *Ibid.*, 51–52.
- 8) *Ibid.*, 52–53.