

# FAMILY

# CONSTELLATIONS

## *A Brief History of Bert Hellinger's Family Constellations*

**Barbara Stones**

Depending on one's philosophy of life one might see it as a pure coincidence, an act of grace from above, or a synchronistic development emerging from the evolving morphogenetic field. Irrespective of the interpretation, had not the German psychiatrist Gunthard Weber met with Bert Hellinger at a Conference in 1988 and had he not persuaded him to publish some material about his work, then Hellinger would have followed his plans to retire. He would now be remembered only by a limited number of people whose lives he directly impacted on in his various roles as priest and missionary, teacher, and devoted psychotherapist working in southern Germany. As it is, the book *Zweierlei Glück*, edited by Gunthard Weber and published in 1993, was a major breakthrough in getting his work more widely known, and in his seventies Hellinger very quickly rose to eminence in Germany and Austria, increasingly working with larger and larger groups in public settings. He received much media attention and also became a prolific author.

If Gunthard Weber was the catalyst for the phenomenal spread of constellation work in the German speaking world, it was Hunter Beaumont, an American psychotherapist living in Germany, who was instrumental in bringing it onto the wider international scene. In 1991 Beaumont first presented constellations to the English speaking world at a training session for senior therapists at the Gestalt Centre in London. Thereafter he started a six-year collaboration with Hellinger and together they presented public workshops in Britain and the U.S.A., the first being held near London in 1996. Beaumont also translated and re-worked the original *Zweierlei Glück* book and in 1998 *Love's Hidden Symmetry* was published in English followed by many other translations. Since then Hellinger has held workshops across the world, and there are now few countries that have not had some degree of exposure to constellation work. A whole 'industry' of practitioners, workshops, professional trainings, Institutes, books and videos, journals and websites has developed, and in 2000 the English language journal *Systemic Solutions Bulletin* was launched in London for an international readership. Conferences have been held in Germany, Holland, Spain, Mexico, U.S.A. and recently for the first time in Britain.

## **Influences on Bert Hellinger**

An ardent student, Hellinger brings together an impressive number of theoretical stands to the work that has become variously called: Orders of Love, Family Constellations and Movements of the Soul. Ursula Franke looks at the most important influences in his professional development, and traces his experience of group therapy while still working as a priest in S. Africa, then his training in psychoanalysis and Janov's Primal therapy. Other important influences which he integrated into his method included Moreno's psychodrama, NLP, and Virginia Satir's family reconstruction. There are parallels between Hellinger's observations and Boszormenyi-Nagy's work on the unconscious systemic patterns and 'invisible loyalties' operating in families and we see the hand of Milton Erickson's hypnotherapy in his use of stories that speak to the client's unconscious, and Eric Berne's Transactional Analysis in his inter-generational 'life scripts'.

Although informed by these many strands, Hellinger's approach in working with family systems is uniquely his own and it stands alone as a separate discipline characterised by the use of constellations. And although heavily influenced by psychotherapeutic methods, Hellinger himself maintains that he is at heart an 'applied philosopher' rather than a therapist. Indeed, he frequently takes a radical and critical approach to what he calls the 'therapeutic relationship' which he claims often serves the interests of the therapist rather than the client. No doubt his study of theology and philosophy, and his work as a missionary among the Zulus in Africa, has underpinned his phenomenological stance and his humanistic and transpersonal orientation. His work is a unique combination of in-depth psychotherapy and soul work, of European philosophy and the wisdom of the

more traditional rituals of honouring and healing the ancestors.

## **Methodology**

Hellinger's approach is phenomenological and looks to reveal the truth of 'what is.' His primary tool in working with family systems is the constellation. In a group setting a facilitator helps a client to set up a family of origin or the present family using representatives for family members. This spatial representation, together with observations from the representatives, provides a remarkably clear diagnostic tool for an insight into the hidden dynamics operating within a system.

Through years of observation, Hellinger identified how in a family there is a certain loyalty, a fellowship of fate that is transmitted down the generations through the operation of an unconscious family conscience. In the first stage of the constellation the facilitator uses the representatives' contributions to identify how the 'family soul' has become entangled and how the flow of love and nourishment has been interrupted. Hellinger has identified a number of key features or 'orders' that help the flow of love in a system. When these are transgressed or the system is affected by a trauma, then family members suffer. Often two or three generations after the rupture a child's 'blind love' manifests itself in its willingness to sacrifice itself on behalf of others in the system. The child's soul (often in an adult's body) attempts to intervene in the destiny of others and to alleviate their suffering.

Hellinger observed these trans-generational effects manifesting in a number of ways and he used a poetic form to describe them. So, in the case of a seriously sick child, it is as if her soul is saying to her grandmother who died while giving birth to the child's mother, 'I will follow you into death.' Or 'I will go instead of you' when a daughter is anorexic and moves towards death as if she can stop her sick father from dying of cancer and can go in his place. The child's soul also

takes on the burden of guilt of previous generations 'I will atone for your sins', something Hellinger clearly identified in post-war Germany in the children and grandchildren of SS officers.

Hellinger also recognized how, through the process of bonding, the family conscience also recruits the child to identify with those who have been excluded from the family soul. In this identification the child lives its life as if it is the forgotten one in a loyalty to those who have been excluded, whether that be a child who was stillborn, an aunt who was hidden away in a mental institution, or a murderer who has been excommunicated from the family. He conceived these movements as unconscious manifestations of an archaic conscience that seeks balance and compensation in the system and are driven by bonding and a blind and innocent child's love.

Hellinger has identified that love flows in a system when:

- Everybody in a family system is honoured and given their rightful place.
- Those who come later take from those who came earlier (whatever the price). This order of precedence must be honoured.
- Parents give; children take. Parents are 'big', children are 'small'.
- In a relationship between parents, the giving and taking needs to be constantly moving towards a state of equilibrium.
- Guilt and merit belong to those who have earned them and cannot be assumed by anyone else.

The entanglements - that is, the interruptions to this flow of love - are brought to light in the first part of a constellation. Once they have been identified the second stage of a constellation is a search for a resolution that honours the 'orders of love' and opens up the heart to more compassion and understanding - and eventually to

appropriate action. When unconscious movements are brought into the conscious mind, then they start to lose their power, freeing the child's soul to mature. This maturation exposes the futility as well as the beauty of the blind love and allows it to be accepted with humility and compassion; the young soul's love that wants to take away the suffering of others develops into a mature love that learns to accept the fate of those it loves and releases them into their own destinies.

The words of the entanglement 'I will follow you' may now be spoken in a more complete and dedifferentiated movement, such as 'Dear mother, you have died and I live. In time I too will die. While I am here I take the gift of life you gave me and I will use it well'. Or 'I will go instead of you' may become 'I stand in humility in front of your heavy fate. I am but a child and you are my parent. Please take me as your child and I will take you as my mother/father.' Or the blind love that makes the child take on the sins of the fathers may become 'I leave this with you. Please forgive me for even wanting to take it from you. It was presumptuous of me - a loving child's presumptuousness. Now I will look at my own guilt and deal with it as best I can. Please give me your blessing in this task'. The more mature love can now look with gentle compassion and without judgement at 'the other' that has been excluded from the family soul and it can also feel itself looked **upon** by 'the other'. When a relationship between the two is established then the unconscious identification starts to fade. Instead, the forgotten can now be remembered and held in the heart and the child is freer to live its own life.

## Evaluation

It is clear that constellations can be a powerful and very moving experience for many who set up their systems, and that they often give an insight into the family dynamic that offers a

resolution to what previously have seemed intractable problems. There are many examples reported where the whole dynamic in a family starts to change. So for example, a woman who 'reconciled' with her mother in a constellation in London received a totally unexpected phone call from her mother in Germany after many years of silence. A man recovering from alcohol addiction wrote after his participation in a constellation workshop:

'What was to follow I can only describe as an awakening. I felt I was seeing things as they really are and not what I'd like them to be – specifically regarding my ex-wife. I can't fully remember the conclusion of the constellation, other than to say that what I experienced was something far greater than I imagined. When I look back, as I often do, it is as if another small window opened, allowing me to deal with yet another issue marked 'Unresolved'.

A few days after the workshop my middle son who had not spoken to me for over a year came up to me in the street, totally out of the blue, and said: 'Hallo Dad.'

Such stories abound in the constellation world. In addition many people report how a constellation they have witnessed or facilitated, or in which they have served as a representative, has had a lasting influence on them. A woman who represented a donor for someone waiting for a kidney transplant reported on how it impacted on her in the weeks following the constellation as she started to release the trauma of a road accident she had been involved in twenty five years before:

'I think of the man who was waiting for his transplant. In choosing me to represent his donor he gave me a gift. He helped me towards letting go of the past, another release. During the constellation I felt nothing

for him, but now I feel a connection to him and I hope that he too may have found some succour for his soul.'

In contrast, of course, there is also a body of opinion that is critical of constellation work. Like any radical new way it has been greeted with a degree of suspicion by some and outright hostility by others in the psychotherapy world. In addition, in Germany Hellinger has received much media attention, and while in the early days it was rather adulatory, latterly it has become more critical, sometimes vitriolic. Within the constellating community itself there is also much lively debate about a number of topics: concerns that as the work spreads there will be some who will copy the Hellinger style without his brilliance as a clinician; questions about Hellinger's style itself; the need for more research into the long-term benefits of constellations; the appropriateness of working with people in a public setting in workshops format with no prior knowledge of the client and with no follow-up; the legitimacy of using constellations with certain vulnerable clients and the danger of re-traumatisation, and much more. These discussions are in my view a healthy development in constellation work and represent a more mature and expansive phase of the growth of this discipline.

It is only thirteen years since the first book about Hellinger's work was published in 1993 and within this short time his method has become internationally known and is fast moving from being a stand alone methodology on the fringes of the psychotherapeutic world, to becoming increasingly integrated into many branches of psychotherapy. Alongside those running constellation workshops there is a growing number of therapists who have integrated Hellinger into their own orientation and are quietly using it in their practice with individuals and couples. At the other end of the spectrum the ground-breaking work of Franz

Ruppert using constellations with people who have had psychotic or schizophrenic episodes, may offer new hope for a client group that has often been dismissed as too disturbed for conventional psychotherapeutic treatment. But its application goes well beyond the confines of conventional therapy as it is increasingly used in creative ways in practical settings such as organisational consultation and coaching, in education, the prison service and in law. Hellinger's radical insight into the relationship between victim and perpetrator also makes the method very attractive as a possible tool for those working towards peace and resolution in large-scale conflicts. For some it is used in conjunction with traditional shamanic practice while for many others it offers a deep and intense contact with the soul and spirituality.

In Acknowledging What Is the master himself makes some comments on the 'Twists of Fate':

'Fate is what is destined for a person, without being able to define it exactly. An individual feels called to involvement, taken into service. ..When you realise that you are called into service and when you submit to that, you go down a path that you never could have thought of as your own'.

In this brief survey of the extent to which his work has infiltrated so many different avenues, it is remarkable to think that had it not been for a coincidental - or fateful - meeting between Weber and Hellinger, his life's work and this great resource we have been given might have been confined to obscurity.

### Further Reading

- Hellinger, B., Weber, G. & Beaumont, H. (1998) *Loves Hidden Symmetry: What makes love work in relationships*. Phoenix. Zeig, Tucker & Co.
- Hellinger, B. (2003) *Peace Begins In the Soul*. Heidelberg. Carl-Auer Systeme.
- Hellinger, B. (1999) *Acknowledging What Is*. Phoenix. Zeig, Tucker & Co.
- Franke, U. (2002) *The River Never Looks Back; Historical and Practical Foundations of Bert Hellinger's Family Constellations*. Heidelberg. Carl-Auer Systeme.
- Ulsamer, B. (2003) *The Art and Practice of Family Constellations*. Heidelberg. Carl-Auer Systeme.
- The **Systemic Solutions Bulletin** 2000-2004, re-named **The Knowing Field** in 2005, has numerous articles on the subjects discussed in this article. Available by contacting the editor, Barbara Morgan on [Barbara@ordersoflove.co.uk](mailto:Barbara@ordersoflove.co.uk)

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