

The Development of Family Constellations by Bert Hellinger

Vivian Broughton ~ *In the Presence of Many*

Family Constellations, as the work was originally called, is the development of Bert Hellinger, a family and group therapist and self-described empiricist and philosopher. Hellinger's childhood and adolescence were against a background of National Socialism and subsequent war in Nazi Germany, which he survived in part as a rebellious teenager, avoiding the Hitler Youth meetings, instead attending the then illegal Catholic Youth organizations, and then as a 17-year old drafted soldier in the German army, captured by the allies and held in a prisoner of war camp in Belgium for the rest of the war.

His later life includes some 16 years as a Catholic priest and committed missionary in South Africa working and living with the Zulu tribes, during which he engaged in an extensive training in interracial and ecumenical group dynamics. During his time with the Zulu peoples he learned from their traditional culture respect for one's ancestors, viewing them as having influence on the present, providing strength, support and wisdom that could be drawn on. He also learned the value of ritual from both the church and the tribal traditions of the Zulus, as providing ways of giving understanding, validation and acceptance.

Subsequently he explored psychoanalysis, gestalt therapy, transactional analysis, primal therapy, hypnotherapy, NLP and family therapy, eventually leaving his ministry in the church. In the early 80's Hellinger began to combine his group and family therapy experience with the family re-construction work of Virginia Satir, who at the time was working in Germany and Austria. Satir's method of setting up families using group members seems to have been catalytic in Hellinger's move toward the work he eventually called Family Constellations.

In the process of setting up group members as role-play representatives for a person's family (which had also been done by others in the field apart from Satir, most notably Jakob Moreno, who developed Psychodrama, and the German psychiatrist, Thea Schonfelder), Hellinger seems to have begun listening to what the representatives were saying from a more existential and phenomenological base. By insisting on the representatives having little information about the person they represented, and that they refrain from taking up any sort of pose to indicate a certain attitude, Hellinger demonstrated a different approach from Moreno's psychodrama, and even Satir's family re-construction work. Hellinger thought that this helped the representatives in the constellation connect with deeper and more hidden dynamics and existential dilemmas.

From his close observation of the subtle body and facial movements, impulses and other reported experiences of the representatives, he developed an understanding of what he later called the Orders of Love: that, as in all things, there is a certain order to relationships and living processes, particularly in closely bonded systems such as families, and disturbance to this order, disruption or non-observance of the principles of this order, have effects on system members, sometimes over many generations. This is not dissimilar to our understanding that if we go against the natural order in the environment, there will

probably be consequences that may, over time, become devastating. We see this currently in our struggle with global warming, over-use of chemicals, exploitation of the great forests of the world, contamination of water sources and so on.