Bert Hellinger | The Man :

Childhood, Time in South Africa, Religious Beliefs, and More

A Collection of Bert Hellinger Stories
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Article 1

The Development of Family Constellations

By Vivian Broughton, 2013

Extracted from her book “In the Presence of Many”

The Development of Family Constellations

By Vivian Broughton

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.

Article 2

Bert Hellinger in South Africa:

A story of the Zulu origins of Family Constellations

By Tanja Meyburgh, 2009

Once Upon a Time in South Africa:

Bert Hellinger in Natal

I've often wondered why Bert Hellinger is so shy to talk of his time spent in South Africa, or of the traditional African origins of family constellations. He has never been forthcoming with information about his time spent here and has vowed that he will never return. Why has he left it behind? Why would he not talk about a place where he lived for 16 years? What did he give to this place, and what did he take?

I first experienced constellations in 2002, and went on to train as a facilitator and co-found the first training here. I feel constantly engaged with the mystery of Hellinger's time here through an ongoing need to honor the origins of my work. I have always felt that family constellations connect me on a deeper level to South Africa and its traditional people and cultures. How strange that I had to travel to Germany to study what feels inherently African.

The connection was obvious to me: the ancestral presence and the placing of the elements in the same way as the bones are thrown by the Sangoma (a traditional African ancestral healer). However, I felt there was something more: something that would shed light on the healing effect of family constellations.

My search for understanding the historical origins in South Africa has taken me from an outer search in the midlands of Kwazulu Natal, to searching in the experience and ideas of the local people, and finally to looking inwards to my own experience and what family constellations means to me. As I slowly weave my thoughts over the past 7 years of working locally as a facilitator and trainer, I am finding a story to tell.

All the information contained in this article is true to by best knowledge, and is based on my own experiences. I have done my best to ask questions and present my findings with respect to Bert Hellinger's privacy and to honor his legacy. I am aware that I am walking the fine line, and that my personal perspective is forever changing.

On a Mission: Christianity and the African Ancestral Tradition Meet in the African Wilderness

It wasn't easy to find the actual place. In fact, there were three places over the 16 years. I literally stumbled into one, by following my intuition. Looking at the map & saying – let me start

here. The huge red brick building is old and looks strange amongst the rural hills dotted with round mud huts. The place is eerie and dilapidated, but has signs of dedicated labour in a time where resources in the Christian church are few. A skeleton staff remains. I ask myself: what it was all for? What did the missions achieve? What must it have been like to arrive in the wild lands of Africa to save the local people from their "non-religious" ways?

"Sawbona" – "I see you". I am greeted by a young black priest. He fills me in on their history: Trappist monks arriving in the 1800's, and later the missions that warned the locals to stay away from their own traditional beliefs in favor of the church. Today, but only since the 80's, he is proud to report that the missions support all forms of traditional beliefs that "promotes life" and healing. At the same time, every decision must still be passed through Rome, and "Rome takes a long time to decide". It feels like a part of the past is standing still here. Some advances are evident in the way the priest has decorated his private study: an eclectic mix of Catholic and African iconography, spears and shields, bibles, traditional African cloths, crosses, lions and pictures of the lily white virgin Mary.

Hellinger arrived in South Africa in the conservative 1950's. I met two grey-haired European priests who knew him. They don't say much: "He was a very gifted man", "A very wise man" says the other. But, I sense there is more that is not said. I hear that Hellinger was "quite in the limelight" in his day and highly thought of by the African priests. He was fluent in Zulu and did all the text translations of the liturgy, "bringing the faith to the people in their own images and language". He was responsible for building a church at his rural parish. He was considered a "white raven" – someone out of the ordinary. Someone special.

But not all reports are positive. He was "intolerant of old-fashioned ideas, which caused some difficulties within the hierarchy". He often spoke the "harsh truth", "and who is ready to hear the truth about yourselves", said a sister. There were also harsh words, woundedness, and piercing analysis about the family life from which he came.

I visit the seminary where Hellinger taught. It's inhabited, but feels deserted. Another huge red brick box on the top of the hill in the middle of no-where. Leading down from the looming façade is a little pathway into a magical overgrown garden. There, nestled amongst the African thorn bushes and flaming aloes, stands Mother Mary. Mary in the jungle. There are signs of life, but no-body. Disturbed, I leave again.

Finally, at the secondary school where Hellinger was allegedly principal for a brief period, I find animation – people going about their business. Steve Biko was schooled here during the 60's – and many other important figures in the black consciousness movement. Did they know Hellinger? I'm excited and brimming with questions: What was his role? When did he become headmaster? Who were his students?

I meet an old friend of his, who finds these questions unimportant, but shares his soul and the deep love of Hellinger as priest and as man. I hear about the strengths and the weaknesses. I get an image of the same split he has around him today – deeply loving and hating of one man at the same time. Honey and poison. Once his confession is over, we sit together on the veranda in the afternoon sun lost in our own thoughts until it is time to leave.

I feel a bit disappointed at the end of my journey that I did not find out more about the Zulu influences and origins from "the source", but do have a stronger "feeling" for Hellinger the man and controversy surrounding him wherever he goes. I decide I need more information from other sources and interview the African graduates of the facilitator training for clues.

To the horse's mouth: South African constellation graduates's thoughts on Family Constellations and Traditional African culture

After talking to the Zulu graduates, the two most obvious connections of Family Constellations to their Traditional African beliefs are confirmed. Firstly, the acknowledgement that our ancestors are vital for our wellbeing:

"The Zulu culture has a strong belief in Ancestors "Amadlozi" regarding connecting with them to appease or release or ask for certain things. They are regarded as our guides and are composed of people we know who have left this planet. Constellating an unresolved issue is similar to doing a ceremony, talking to ancestor/s asking for forgiveness or connecting those who have left the planet in conflict."

"Africa's sacred images are mainly ancestor spirits. God is the creator, the spirit force responsible for all life on earth, including the ancestors, but he is too remote to hear the prayers of ordinary mortals. Dead ancestors, being spirits, communicate with God, mediating between him and humanity"

"The belief in ancestors is rooted in the need or desire to preserve the memory of known past generations and known or unknown lineages. The emphasis of acknowledging the excluded is the foundation of the cure for various ailments, like bodily discomfort, spiritual discord or common need to wade off misfortune or a curse that will be seen to be projected by malevolent spirits. The good spirits are acknowledged and given gratitude through ceremonies or cleansing rituals. For example, a person will consult a traditional healer who will facilitate the session of finding a solution or a root cause of the trouble. This is often done through throwing the bones in order to constellate the wider family picture"

The other parallel drawn in the interviews is the use of divination by traditional African healers to receive the messages of the ancestors through "the throwing of the bones". The bones consist of symbolic elements for various family members as well as symbolic elements relating to a person's life: money, love, power, body organs, life force etc. Once the bones are cast, the healer considers the arrangements carefully, including how the bones are facing, the distance between the bones, configurations or patterns.

"The bones will fall to show the presence of spirits around the sick person, resentful ancestral spirits, offended nature or malevolent spirits. This gives the healer the picture of how the cause of the illness came about and what is needed as a remedy. Therapies can include animal sacrifices, rituals, massage, herbal teas, salves, snuffs, poultices, roots and herbs. African diviners play the role of spiritual leaders of ancient times and are diagnosers of both illness and mental problems."

Still after these interviews, I'm left with the feeling that there is a secret – something that I'm not being let in on. Could it be some kind of secret or sacred knowledge that is protected? Perhaps something that is feared to be shared? One of the students confirms this:

"I experience fear (with family constellations) that I am tampering with something that is very sacred by talking about my ancestors, selling out a secret when in fact ancestors as spirit is a medium that is meant to be out there and need reverence than be tempered with. Given the effect of respecting elders, and negative connotation of authority and the unseen, it becomes even more scary to tamper with that one cannot touch if one has not done healing work. This could be as a result of superstition that is rife in my cultural upbringing or the influence of Christianity that has tainted the ancestors as something one needs to abolish…"

This same student also considers that sources of the knowledge behind the development of constellations that are not being adequately acknowledged:

"I would think that there is an element of intellectual property that is ignored or not taken into account thus shielding the role African spiritualism might have impacted on this development"

I'm left wondering if perhaps the connection between the two has not been openly acknowledged on purpose, as a way of respecting the tradition and sacred customs from which it stems. What did Hellinger learn from local spiritual leaders at a time when he was expected to convert them to his own beliefs? Into what knowledge was he initiated? Was he requested to honor the secrets of African tradition?

A Personal Experience: Following the Calling of my South African and German Ancestors

Before I first encountered family constellations in 2002, I was told that I am called to become a "Sangoma", a traditional African healer. I had over the years since adolescence been plagued by repeated symptoms of chronic fatigue, heavy arms, and illnesses of unknown origin. In passing conversation someone mentioned that these afflictions could be the work of my ancestors to whom I was "not listening" and I should consult a traditional African healer to hear what my ancestors might want of me.

What followed was a huge conflict – to continue my studies as a psychologist, or to follow the calling to become a Sangoma through a cultural tradition that had very little to do with my own ancestors. When I discovered family constellations however, there was an instant "fit". I could do ancestral work, but remain true to the experiences and knowledge of both my South African and German ancestors.

What followed was seven years of intense training and working in family constellations, completing psychology qualifications, and an ongoing journey through African bone throwing, ritual and ceremony with my teacher and guide – a white African traditional healer. As I pull these strands together, my understanding of the origin of family constellation work in African culture has been deepened and enriched. I am "hearing my ancestors" through my work and am no longer required to be initiated in the traditional sense. Family constellations has been my initiation and I am healthy now.

I still debate with myself how much the healing effect of Family Constellations is spirit, and how much is science, but what I do know is that, with a skilled facilitator, it works. We can do the research and scientifically validate that it does work, but finding proof of "how" it works – by western or African explanations seems impossible. Perhaps this is the sacred knowledge that remains hidden in traditional initiations and mystery schools. Perhaps this is the protected knowledge that we can only "know" but not speak of or explain. Or perhaps it is access to the part of the soul that which we cannot know for sure, but can feel or intuit when we work with constellations. So, I try to find a simple summary for myself for the state of being that constellation supports and through this state can bring healing. When I remove the Christian religious, the traditional African, and the psychological systems of knowledge and thought, and distill it to the essence I perceive. In the end I am left with:

I am not alone.

I am part of something greater.

I am connected to my source through my ancestors.

I have (seen and unseen) resources that are always available to me.

For many people from individualized and western cultures this is a new discovery when they experience constellations for the first time. Beyond what the constellation can reveal, this is the first step towards healing and a feeling of wholeness. When I personally come to stillness in this place, I feel centered, supported and at peace.

Article 3

A Short Biography of Bert Hellinger

By Dan Booth Cohen, PhD ©

Seeingwithyourheart.com

with editing review by Bert Hellinger

A Short Biography of Bert Hellinger

By Dan Booth Cohen, PhD

By the age of 45, most innovators in the field of psychotherapy are well established in their careers. Freud was 45 when he wrote *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Jung was the same age when his opus *The Psychological Types* went to print (Ellenberger, 1970, pp. 540 and 674).

In contrast, age 45 is when Bert Hellinger first went to Vienna to begin his formal training in psychoanalysis (Hellinger, 2001, p. 435). If his approach to working with the unconscious is considered unorthodox by the broader professional community, perhaps a contributing factor has been that he did not follow a conventional career path. Conversely, having life experiences at such variance with the majority of psychologists may have contributed to his understanding.

Hellinger was born into a Catholic family in Germany in 1925. During Hellinger's early childhood, the German Weimar Republic disintegrated into economic and political disarray. In 1933, Adolph Hitler, the leader of the National Socialist (Nazi) party, came to power as Chancellor of Germany. Hellinger was eight years old. Hitler and the Nazis quickly consolidated their power. They rebuilt the army and initiated numerous foreign and domestic initiatives designed to elevate Germany to a dominant world power.

Central to Nazi ideology was the subordination of the individual to the state, the necessity of blind and unswerving obedience to a supreme charismatic leader, the claims of the racial and cultural superiority of the Germanic peoples, and the identification of Jews and those of Jewish extraction as the personification of cosmic evil. The Nazi regime emphasized the inequality of men and races and the right of the strong to rule over the weak. The State apparatus consolidated and exercised control over the population through mass propaganda and systematized terror.

Even as the Nazi regime tightened its grip on the population in pursuit of its extreme nationalistic vision, there remained in Germany the remnants of a diverse cultural and intellectual tradition. Hellinger's parents' "particular form of [Catholic] faith provided the entire family with immunity against believing the distortions of National Socialism" (Hellinger, Weber & Beaumont, 1998, p. 327). At age 10, he left his family to attend a Catholic monastery school run by the Order in which he was later ordained and that sent him to South Africa as a missionary.

The local Hitler Youth Organization tried without success to recruit the teenage Bert Hellinger. Members would frequently come to his apartment to take him to their meetings. He always tried to evade them. Hellinger says that as a result of his apparent reluctance, "The

Gestapo became suspicious of me. Once I was interrogated by a member of the Gestapo." This resulted in their classifying him in the category of 'Suspected of Being an Enemy of the People' (Hellinger, personal communication, May 15, 2004).

In 1942, Hellinger was conscripted into the regular German army, along with most other seventeen-year-olds. He was sent into combat on the Western front. Despite his misgivings about the regime and its pursuit of war, once armed and in uniform, Hellinger was relatively safe from interference from the Nazis. He was exposed to close combat (Hellinger, personal communication, May 15, 2004). In 1945, he was captured and imprisoned in an Allied P.O.W. camp in Belgium.

Hellinger's experience as a prisoner of war, and its ultimate impact on his views about perpetrators and victims, is a matter of speculation. He has steadfastly refrained from speaking about his war experiences, but historians have documented that upwards of one million former German soldiers perished after the war, many of them while imprisoned by the Allies (Bacque, 1999; Biddiscombe, 1998). Those close to him suggest that he endured harsh treatment. After one year, Hellinger escaped under dramatic circumstances. Beaumont reflected, "In addition to his experience in the Nazi times, he witnessed how vulnerable the victor is to behaving like the enemy. It is important to his ideas about conscience" (Beaumont, personal communication, May 16, 2004).

Hellinger made his way back to a Germany that lay in ruins. Nearly 7 million people, out of a pre-war population of 68 million, had perished. Eight million refugees were expelled from areas captured by the Soviet Union and its allies. Every major German city had been pounded to rubble by Allied bombing. The industrial and transportation infrastructure had ceased functioning. Food and fuel were in short supply, leading to illness and malnutrition. The German state itself ceased to exist.

The Nazis' master plan of creating a dominant global power led by a race of *Ubermenschen* had resulted in a devastating and catastrophic defeat. Furthermore, the surviving Germans carried responsibility for being the perpetrators of history's greatest crime against humanity, the extermination of more than 6 million Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and others in the Holocaust.

The brutality and destructiveness of the Nazi era is central to Hellinger's life's work. Sixty years after the cessation of warfare, with all the victims and perpetrators either dead or aged, Hellinger continues to focus on ways to acknowledge and reconcile the echoes and reverberations of this massive collective trauma. His aim is to interrupt the transmission of

suffering and guilt to successive generations.

Following his return to Germany, Hellinger entered a Catholic religious order and began a long process of monastic purification. He studied philosophy and theology at the University of Würzburg en route to his ordination as a priest. In the early 1950s, he was dispatched to South Africa where he was assigned to be a missionary to the Zulus. There he continued his studies at the University of Pietermaritzburg and the University of South Africa where he received a B.A. and a University Education Diploma, which entitled him to teach at public high schools.

Hellinger lived in South Africa for 16 years. During these years he served as a parish priest, teacher and, finally, as headmaster of a large school for African students. He also had administrative responsibility for the entire diocesan district containing 150 schools. He became fluent in the Zulu language, participated in their rituals, and gained an appreciation for their distinct worldview.

Although he makes no claim to be an interpreter or promulgator of Zulu culture, it is clear that his immersion in their lives had a profound impact on him. Of particular importance is the difference between Zulu attitudes toward parents and ancestors and those typically held by Europeans. The Hitler Youth Organization was notorious for encouraging children to betray their parents' confidence. In Zulu culture, Hellinger says, "I never heard anyone speak disrespectfully about their parents. That would have been inconceivable" (Hellinger, 2001, p. 443).

His choice to leave the Catholic priesthood occurred during the 1960s, but it is unclear exactly what factors influenced his decision. His participation in a series of interracial, ecumenical trainings in group dynamics led by Anglican clergy in South Africa laid the groundwork. The trainers worked from a phenomenological orientation. They were concerned with recognizing what is essential out of all the diversity present, without intention, without fear, without preconceptions, relying purely on what appears (Hellinger, 2003). He was deeply impressed by the way their methods showed it was possible for opposites to become reconciled through mutual respect.

The beginning of his interest in phenomenology coincided with the unfolding dissolution of his vows to the priesthood. Hellinger tells how one of the trainers asked the group, "What is more important to you, your ideals or people? Which would you sacrifice for the other?" A sleepless night followed as Hellinger wrestled with the implications of this question. As a German, he had participated in the destruction of his country. As a priest, he was sworn to adhere to a particular creed, to a specific set of values and beliefs, and to accept the infallibility of the interpreter of God's will, the Pope. This was not merely a philosophical riddle to him. He

was acutely sensitive to how the Nazi regime sacrificed human beings in service of ideals. He says, "In a sense, the question changed my life. A fundamental orientation toward people has shaped all my work since" (Hellinger et al., 1998, p. 328).

Hellinger's rejection of Nazi attitudes about racial superiority and his years spent living and teaching among the Zulus set him in opposition to the South African policy of Apartheid. He was able to use these insights immediately with the African students and white teachers in his school.

This newfound orientation toward looking for what is essential in a broadly perceived reality without intention, fear, or preconceived answers, proved incompatible with his responsibilities to the priesthood. He could not adhere to a strictly defined creed nor bow to rigid institutional hierarchy and simultaneously be open to spontaneous, emergent reality. He decided to give up the collar and, with it, his position as a respected teacher, headmaster, and school district administrator. He met his first wife, Herta, and was married, shortly after returning to Germany.

He spent several years in the early 1970s in Vienna training in a classical course in psychoanalysis at the Wiener Arbeitskreis für Tiefenpsychologie (Viennese Association for Depth Psychology). Near the completion of his studies one of his training analysts gave him a copy of Arthur Janov's *Primal Scream* (1970), which he actually had not read himself. Janov presented a radical psychotherapeutic procedure where patients were encouraged to say the phrase, "Mommy, Daddy" repeatedly until they became overtaken by an explosion of cathartic feelings, which left them writhing on the floor, crying, screaming, and nearly convulsive. Janov reported that patients would experience instantaneous and enduring benefit from this ego-shattering intervention.

The directness with which Janov addressed central feelings made a deep impression on Hellinger. Without permission from the faculty, he experimented with the method with students in his group dynamics course. The results were powerful (Hellinger, 2001, pp. 435-36). Encouraged by these experiences, he presented a lecture to the faculty and students, in which he praised Janov's methods. The scholars in Vienna were accustomed to defending the orthodoxy from radical challenges and they were quick to discredit Hellinger's talk (Franke, 2003, p. 89). Once again, Hellinger was at a crossroad, where he had to choose between maintaining allegiance to a proscribed set of practices or forsake them in favor of what felt to him to be more humanistic. Once again, he chose to break ties with the institution that supported him in favor of pursuing an unmarked path.

He completed his training at the Münchner Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Psychoanalyse (Munich Psychoanalytic Training Institute) and was accepted as a practicing member of their professional association. In 1973, he left Germany for a second time and traveled to the United States to pursue training from Janov in California. Hellinger studied directly with Janov and his first assistant for nine months. Afterwards, he returned to Germany and entered into private practice as a psychoanalyst from his house in a small town near the German–Austrian border. He set up client living quarters and a custom-designed Primal therapy room. Initially, he conducted intensive Primal treatment with a single client at a time. The client would move into the living quarters for a period of three months.

After several rounds of this method of treatment, Hellinger came to recognize the weaknesses in this approach. For the next several years, he alternated between treating small numbers of clients out of his home and traveling internationally to train in new methods.

There were many important influences that shaped his approach during this period. One of the most significant was Eric Berne and Transactional Analysis. Berne proposed that dysfunctional behavior results from self-limiting decisions made in childhood. Such decisions culminate in what Berne called the "life script," the pre-conscious life plan that governs the way life is lived out. Changing the life script is the aim of Transactional Analysis (International Transactional Analysis Association, 2003).

Hellinger immersed himself in learning to understand the embedded patterns by working with stories, fairy tales, novels and films that have special meaning to an individual. His work with clients validated Berne's key premise that there is an underlying, unconscious structure that shapes and drives people's responses to external stimuli.

He continued to operate from a phenomenological, rather than a theoretical, stance. The effect is that he was always willing to discard or modify a theory when his experiences with clients contradicted the theory's hypothesis. In the case of Transactional Analysis, Hellinger says, "Berne believed that these scripts are often based on early parental messages, but I discovered that this isn't the whole truth" (Hellinger, 2001, p. 433).

It became clear to him that some of the scripts come from other sources. One example came from working with clients who chose the story of Rumpelstiltskin as their signature fairy tale. This is a story of a motherless child whose father gives her away. Hellinger asked, "Who has been given away?" In many cases, someone in the grandparent's generation really had been sent away and the client's life script came from this source. He concluded, "Whether we're aware of it or not, a great deal of our suffering is not caused by what we have personally experienced, but what others in our system have experienced or suffered" (Hellinger, 2001, p.

434).

The implications of this insight were particularly significant in post-war Germany because of the extreme variance of experience between generations. Beginning in 1948, Germany instituted a series of currency and economic reforms that, when combined with financing provided by the U.S. Marshall Plan, ushered in an unprecedented 30-year period of economic growth, social stability, and widespread prosperity known as the German Economic Miracle (Peterson, 1988).

A typical 25-year old German in 1980 had been born and raised in an environment wholly untouched by the ravages and upheavals that plagued Hellinger's generation. Despite this, many of these young people exhibited symptoms that conventional psychoanalytic theories would ascribe to early childhood traumas. Hellinger saw that some unconscious mechanism was transferring the psychic scars from grandparents to their newborn grandchildren.

The insight that a client's current suffering could be entangled with events that occurred two or more generations earlier led Hellinger back to the United States to study emerging trends in family therapy. In 1979, he spent one month training with Ruth McClendon and Leslie Kadis. This was his introduction to the Family Sculpture method pioneered by Virginia Satir. Shortly afterwards, he participated in two training courses on the use of family constellations led by Thea Schoenfelder in Hamburg.

Another major influence in his work during this period was the hypnotherapy of Milton Erickson. He trained with Jeffrey K. Zeig, Stephen Lankton, Barabara Steen, and Beverly Stoy. He was particularly drawn to Erickson's use of "teaching stories." He was not able to employ these methods immediately, but several years later during a group session he composed one spontaneously. Hellinger offers clients a healing story when he senses they might resist the story's message if it were delivered directly. "One of the major advantages of stories is that they work indirectly. That gives people a lot of freedom to decide whether or not it is useful to them" (Hellinger, 2001, pp. 441-442).

By 1985, Hellinger, then 60 years old, had completed a 15-year cycle of education and training. He had integrated what he had learned from psychoanalysis, Primal therapy, Transactional therapy, Ericksonian hypnotherapy, and the family systems insights of Virgina Satir and Ivan Bozsormeyni-Nagy into an approach that drew from these sources but was, in several key respects, radically different. He continued to lead groups and offer lectures to a limited audience of professionals from his home base in southern Germany.

Hellinger would likely have remained an obscure figure, practicing an esoteric method of intervention, had it not been for his encounter with a prominent German psychiatrist, Gunthard Weber. Weber was the director of an in-patient clinic at the University of Heidelberg Hospital for people suffering from anorexia nervosa. He had attended three Hellinger workshops on group dynamics in the 1970s and they had left an indelible mark. Weber recalls, "I experienced something that continued to move me years later, to work in me, bringing me back into balance, guiding me back to myself when I became confused" (Hellinger et al., 1998, p. vi).

Anorexia remains a perplexing and treatment-resistant illness in psychiatry, with one of the highest morbidity rates. The American Psychiatric Association's *Practice Guideline for the Treatment of Patients with Eating Disorders* (2000) recommends behaviorally formulated interventions but notes that "no controlled studies have reported whether cognitive behavior psychotherapy or other specific psychotherapeutic interventions are effective for nutritional recovery" (American Psychiatric Association, 2000, p.37). Weber's hospital was considered one of the most advanced in Germany, but despite the extensive resources applied to treatment, many patients failed to respond favorably.

In 1988, Hellinger and Weber led separate workshops at a training conference for psychotherapists. They had been out of touch for nearly a decade, but Weber still recalled with clarity the profound impact of Hellinger's work. Weber made a point of sitting in at the session where Hellinger demonstrated his work. "It was amazing for me," he recalls. "I knew it was something new" (G. Weber, personal communication, February 12, 2004).

Following the conference, Weber and Hellinger renewed their friendship and professional relationship. Weber arranged for a series of workshops for patients from his clinic diagnosed with anorexia and bulimia. He found the immediate results remarkable, though Hellinger refused to allow formal research to confirm the longitudinal outcomes. As a physician in a psychiatric hospitals for many years, Weber was particularly impressed with the responses of other patients who suffered from the most daunting symptoms, such as schizophrenia, psychosis, and persistent suicidal urges (G. Weber, personal communication, February 12, 2004).

Weber urged that the two begin collaboration on writing a book. Hellinger was reluctant, explaining, "The best can't be said. The next best will be misunderstood" (Hellinger et al., 1998, p. vi). However, having reached the retirement age of 65, he had neither documented his insights and approach nor trained students to carry on his methods. He agreed for Weber to record and edit a series of workshop transcripts. Weber published the book himself in 1993 under the title *Zweieerlei Gluck* [*Capricious Good Fortune*; aka *Second Chance*]. He hoped to sell two thousand copies within the community of German psychotherapists interested in alternative approaches. To everyone's surprise, the book was received with acclaim and quickly became a

national best-seller, selling two hundred thousand copies. At about the same time, Hellinger was invited to participate at the ZIST Congress for Humanistic Medicine at Garmisch, Germany. The turnout for his session was much greater than expected. This forced him for the first time to work with a large group (H. Beaumont, personal communication).

At the age of 70, Bert Hellinger experienced a rapid transformation from being an obscure practitioner to an international best-selling author. During the next 10 years, he authored or co-authored 30 books. Those translated in English include: *Love's Hidden Symmetry: What Makes Love Work in Relationships* (1998); *Acknowledging What Is: Conversations with Bert Hellinger* (1999); *Love's Own Truths: Bonding and Balancing in Close Relationships* (2001); and *Insights: Lectures and Stories* (2002); *On Life & Other Paradoxes* (2002a). Expanding from his base in Germany, Hellinger traveled widely, delivering lectures, workshops and training courses throughout Europe, in the United States, South America, China, and Japan. He made numerous trips to Israel, where his work often dealt with issues relating to the Nazi Holocaust.

Nearing age 80, Hellinger went through yet another metamorphosis. He divorced, remarried, and removed himself as the central figure in the community of Constellation facilitators who had followed his footsteps. His methods of working with people continued to evolve and change, becoming more minimalist and austere. Eventually, he concluded, "there are some issues which cannot be solved with Family Constellations" (Hellinger, 2006, p. 69). This led him to further refine his approach into what he calls "Gehen mit dem Geist [Moving with the Spirit or Moving with the Spirit-Mind]."

Around this time, he stirred further controversy in Germany when an unexpected construction delay on his new house led him to temporarily rent an apartment that Adolph Hitler had occasionally used in the 1930s. This association generated a firestorm of negative publicity. Hellinger's response was non-apologetic, emphasizing that the evils of Nazism should not be ascribed to an aberrant individual, but seen as a manifestation of extreme tendencies that are present in most human beings. His refusal to vilify Hitler on demand fueled further criticism, which became quite vocal and intense.

The effect of these events was to distance some practitioners from the method's founding figure. In 2004, a group of 200 Constellation facilitators issued a formal declaration that "Constellation work 'beyond Hellinger' should be developed further as a therapeutic instrument" (Society for Systemic Constellation Work, 2004, p. 1). These critics represented a portion of those who had trained in his methods; many others continued their association, integrating the further developments into their own practices.

At the 2007 Congress on Systemic Constellations in Cologne, Germany, “the hole left by Bert Hellinger’s absence was tangible” (Maier, 2007, p.10). Speaking at the introductory plenary, Heinrich Breuer, the Congress organizer addressed these concerns: “I would have liked to have Bert with us so that he himself could have presented the Movements of the Spirit… At the same time, I have the impression that the scene has grown up and it has developed to such an extent that Bert would never have thought of” (quoted in Maier, 2007, p.1).

Moving in a new circle, Hellinger and his wife Marie-Sophie Hellinger remain active as practitioners and teachers in their ever-evolving practice, operating under the name *Sciencia*. Now in his 80s, he remains an articulate, controversial, and compelling figure who continues to publish, travel internationally and offer professional training programs to “whoever truly wants to succeed and experience deeper insights into this ‘new’ style and method of Family Constellations” (Hellinger personal communication, 2007, T. Mellet, Trans.).

Influences on the development of Hellinger's work

Hellinger, B, Weber, G &
Beaumont, H. (1998) *Love's Hidden Symmetry*. Phoenix: Zeig, Tucker & Co., Inc.
p 327-330.

Hellinger, B, Weber, G & Beaumont, H. (1998)

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Bert Hellinger considers his parents and his childhood home to be the first major influence on his later work. Their particular form of faith provided the entire family with an immunity against believing the distortions of National Socialism. Because of his repeated absences from the required meetings of the Hitler Youth Organization and his participation in an illegal Catholic youth organization, he was eventually classified by the Gestapo as "Suspected of Being an Enemy of the People." His escape from the Gestapo was paradoxically made possible when he got drafted. Just 17 years old, he became a soldier and experienced the realities of combat, capture, defeat, and life in a prisoner-of-war camp in Belgium with the allies.

The second major influence was certainly his childhood wish to become a priest. At the age of 20, immediately after getting out of the prisoner-of-war camp, he entered a Catholic religious order and began the long process of the purification of body, mind, and spirit in silence, study, contemplation and meditation.

His 16 years in South Africa as a missionary to the Zulu also deeply shaped his later work. There he directed a large school, taught, and acted as parish priest simultaneously. He tells with satisfaction that 13 percent of all black Africans attending the university in South Africa at that time had been students at this one mission school. He learned the Zulu language well enough to teach and minister, but he tells amusing anecdotes about the courteous dignity of the Zulu people when he inadvertently said something rude rather than what he intended. With time, he came to feel as much at home with them as is possible for a European. The process of leaving one culture to live in another sharpened his awareness oft he relativity of many cultural values.

His peculiar ability to perceive systems in relationships and his interest in the human commonalty underlying cultural diversity became apparent during those years. He saw that many Zulu rituals and customs had a structure and function similar to elements of the Catholic Mass, pointing to common human experiences, and he experimented with integrating Zulu music and rituals into the Mass. He is committed to the goodness of cultural and human variety, and to the validity of doing things in different ways. The Sacred is present everywhere.

The next major influence was his participation in an interracial, ecumenical training in group dynamics led by Anglican clergy. They had brought from the United States a form of working with groups that valued dialog, phenomenology, and individual human experience. He experienced, for the first time, a new dimension of caring for souls. He tells how one of the trainers once asked the group, "What's more important to you, your ideals or people? Which would you sacrifice for the other?" A sleepless night followed, as the implications of the question were profound. Hellinger says, "I'm very grateful to that minister for asking that. In a sense, the question changed my life. That fundamental orientation toward people has shaped all my work since. A good question is worth a lot."

His decision to leave the religious order after 25 years was amicable. He describes how he gradually became clear that being a priest no longer was an appropriate expression of his inner growth. With characteristic impeccability and consequent action, he gave up the life he had known so long. He returned to Germany, began a psychoanalytic training in Vienna, met his future wife, Herta, and they married soon after. They have no children.

Psychoanalysis was to be the next major influence. As with everything he did, he threw himself into his psychoanalytic training, eventually reading the complete works of Freud, and much of the other relevant literature as well. But with an equally typical love of inquiry, when his training analyst gave him a copy of Janov's *Primal Scream* shortly before he completed his training, (a book the training analyst had not himself read), Hellinger immediately wanted to know more. He visited Janov in the United States, eventually completing a nine-month training with him and his former chief assistant in Los Angeles and Denver.

The psychoanalytic community in Vienna was less enthusiastic than he was about this way of including body-based experience in the therapeutic process, and he again confronted the issue of what was more important—loyalty to a group or love of truth and inquiry. Love of free inquiry won out, and a separation from psychoanalysis became unavoidable. His skill in body-based psychotherapy, however, remained an essential element in his work long after his association with Janov had ceased to be fruitful.

Several other therapeutic schools have had a major influence on his work: in addition to the phenomenological/dialogical orientation of the group dynamics from the Anglicans, the fundamental need for humans to align themselves with the forces of nature that he learned from the Zulu in South Africa, the psychoanalysis he learned in Vienna, and the body work he learned in America.

He developed an interest in Gestalt Therapy through Ruth Cohen and Hilarion Petzold and trained with them both. He met Fanita English during this period, and through her was introduced to Transactional Analysis and the work of Eric Bern. With his wife, Herta, he integrated what he had already learned of group dynamics and psychoanalysis with Gestalt Therapy, Primal Therapy, and Transactional Analysis. His work with the analysis of scripts led to the discovery that some scripts function across generations and in family relationship systems. The dynamics of identification also gradually became clear during this period. Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy's book *Invisible Bonds* and his recognition of hidden loyalties and the need for a balance between giving and taking in families also were important.

He trained in family therapy with Ruth McClendon and Leslie Kadis, where he first encountered family constellations. "I was very impressed by their work, but I couldn't understand it. Nevertheless, I decided that I wanted to work systemically. Then I got to thinking about the work I'd already been doing and realized, 'It's good too. I'm not going to give that up before I really understand systemic family therapy.' So I just kept on doing what I'd been doing. After a year, I thought about it again, and I was surprised to discover that I was working systemically." His reading of Jay Haley's article about the "perverse triangle" led to the discovery of the importance of hierarchy in families. Additional work in family therapy with Thea Schonfelder followed, as did training in Milton Erickson's Hypnotherapy and Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). Frank Farelly's Provocative Therapy has been an important influence, as has been the Holding Therapy developed by Irena Precop. The most important element he took from NLP was its emphasis on working with resources rather than with problems. His use of stories in therapy, of course, pays tribute to Milton Erickson. The first story he told in therapy was "Two Measures of Happiness."

Those familiar with the full range of psychotherapy will recognize that Hellinger's contribution is his unique integration of diverse elements. He makes no claim that he has discovered something new, but there's no question but that he has made a new integration. He has the natural ability to throw himself into a new situation, to immerse himself in it, and when he has learned what there is to learn, to move on. Certainly, his early experiences taught him indelibly the importance and skill of listening to the authority of one's own soul—for although it isn't foolproof, it's the only real protection we have against seduction by false authorities. His insistence on seeing what is as opposed to blindly accepting what we're told, combined with the unwavering loyalty and trust in one's own soul, is the fundamental basis upon which this work has been built.

In a sense, he's the ultimate empiricist.

Through all of this, his philosophical companion has been Martin Heidegger, himself no stranger to the dangers of false authority—although Heidegger's profound quest for the true words that resonate in the soul must have commonality with those sentences clients speak in the constellations heralding change for the better, signaling the renewed flow of love.

One last influence—or perhaps better, companion—must be mentioned: Hellinger's archetypally German love of music. Yes, opera; and yes again, especially Wagner.

The Life of Bert Hellinger

The Man Bert Hellinger :

Q & A Interview

By Heinrich Breuer, Theo Roos, and Wilfried Nelles

For those interested in getting to know Bert Hellinger a little better, Heinrich Breuer, Theo Roos and Wilfried Nelles held an interview in which he shares pieces of his life.

The Man Bert Hellinger : *Q & A Interview*

By Heinrich Breuer, Theo Roos, and Wilfried Nelles

Interviewer: Is there for you a place that you associate with the term "homeland"?

BH: Especially important for me is the place where I come from, Leimen near Heidelberg. My grandparents lived there, both my parents are from the town. But our family moved away from there to Cologne at an early age. For me, Leimen is a place that feels like home. Whenever I drive past there, I experience that.

My mother's father worked in the cement factory of Leimen. It was hard physical work. The workers lived in settlements that belonged to the factory. And every family got a piece of land from the factory. That was the time of transition from farming to industry, the workers were still working their fields. My grandfather too. He had a pig and chickens and fields. The men and women worked from morning to night. By the time I was born, my grandfather was no longer at the factory. I witnessed him and the people and life in the settlement. There was something warm there, and something upright. That has influenced me all my life. I have a heart for this simple life, for the simple things.

Before I went to school, I spent a long time with my grandparents. During this time I grew up in this environment and experienced the life of the simple people. The families had many children, and the children were naturally together a lot. We were able to enter the different families as if we belonged to them. Basically, it was like an extended family.

Interviewer: Why did your parents leave you with your grandparents for a while?

BH: The grandparents wanted me to stay with them for a while. Maybe I should sweeten their farewell to the family, who had already moved to Cologne when I was younger. But I was very happy to be with them. I returned to Cologne when my school days began. I spent the first four years of elementary school in Cologne. The secondary school time began in a boarding school in Lohr am Main, a Catholic boarding school run by the Mariannhill missionaries, the missionaries I went to later.

The School and Boarding School Days of Bert (Anton) Hellinger

Interviewer: Was this boarding school already something like a preparation for the priesthood?

BH: That was the idea. We lived in a boarding school and went to the state high school, the Order did not have its own school. I felt very comfortable in the boarding school. That was a great time for me, a very wonderful time.

The time in the boarding school fell into the Nazi period. I came to the boarding school in 1936. In a big election, which took place at that time when Austria was annexed to Germany, some of the nuns who looked after us had voted with "no". And because there were obviously no secret elections at that time, this became known. In the night the SA went up in front of the boarding school. They broke the windows and wrote on the walls: "Traitors live here." Later the boarding school was closed. The war had already begun and the boarding school was turned into a military hospital. Then I returned to my family, who meanwhile were living in Kassel, where my father had got a new job. There I continued to go to high school for another two years.

Interviewer: Did you graduate from high-school there?

BH: With us there was no high school graduation, we were drafted before the high school graduation. After the seventh grade - I was 17 years old at that time - I was sent to work for three months and then to the army as a radio operator in the infantry. Our unit was transferred to the Western Front in France. There I witnessed the invasion and the retreat. Near Aachen I fell into American captivity.

Interviewer: When you think back to the time when many young people supported the ideology of the Nazis and could identify themselves with it. How was that for you?

BH: In boarding school we were in a completely different field than the other young people. We did not go to the Young People or the Hitler Youth and therefore had little contact with them. Later, in Kassel, I joined a small Catholic youth group, which was of course forbidden. But we met regularly in secret.

Members of the HY often came by our house and wanted to pick me up for HY service. My mother would say, "He's not here right now." But you could only do that for a time, then it wouldn't work anymore, it would have threatened the family too much. That's why my parents wanted me to play the violin in an HY orchestra every two weeks.

Interviewer: The family was also a safe field when you look back?

BH: Family was a safe field, especially my mother. My mother was so solid in her faith that the ideology of National Socialism could not touch her.

Interviewer: Wasn't your father forced to be in the party?

BH: A lot of pressure was put on him to join the party, but he did not do so. He stayed strictly out of it. That was a particular sign of courage in those days.

Interviewer: This means the collapse was not a personal disaster for anyone of the family, as it was for many families?

BH: Of course, the death of my older brother, who fell in Russia, was very difficult. My brother was considered missing for a long time. I only learned about his death a few years ago in Leimen. My cousin Albert's wife told me at that time: "Albert met someone today in the cemetery who told me that he was in the prison camp together with a man called Hellinger from Leimen." That was my brother. I visited the

man, and he confirmed that he was present when my brother died. They were in a huge prison camp from which only about twenty survived, including him. The others almost all died of dysentery. That is how we heard about my brother's death.

The collapse of the Third Reich was no disaster for us. On the contrary. If Germany had won, my fate would have been sealed. Of course our family was deeply affected by my brother's death. The house we lived in Kassel was also very much affected by the war. But the loss of relatives and belongings was normal at that time, and most families experienced that at that time.

Interviewer: As someone who was born shortly after the war and grew up in the post-war period, I remember well these men with the empty sleeves and the limping ones with the prosthetic legs. The aftermath of the war was evident to me in these people.

BH: Wartime was a great time of dying for everyone. It was quite natural, another one had fallen, another one there. I think half of my class died. In wartime it was natural. You didn't walk around sad, that was part of it. It was war, and people died. From the outside, you can no longer imagine what it was like.

Interviewer: I realize how strange this is to me. Death then, seems to be an everyday occurrence.

BH: Exactly, exactly.

Interviewer: Then the bombings and the civilian deaths.

BH: At that time it was a natural part of life.

Interviewer: Is it the effect of the experiences from that time that you work with war and death, and that you can deal with it so fearlessly because of that time as well?

BH: That has something to do with it. Horst Eberhard Richter once gave a lecture at the Psychotherapy Weeks in Lindau, in which he said something like this: "Sometimes we expect - he was talking about his generation - that the youth should be like us. But that is not possible. By our twentieth year we had learned that half of our comrades were dead. What others only experience at the age of sixty or seventy as their peers die away, we have already experienced at twenty." Of course we are shaped by this. It is part of our lived life.

Interviewer: When you look back on your time as a soldier, are there any particularly powerful experiences? With people who have died beside you, comrades you have lost yourself? It is always impressive how you can talk about the community of soldiers. I suspect that this is based on your own experiences.

BH: You were dependent on each other, and you needed and respected each other. And, of course, loved each other. One stood up for the other. There were great experiences of comradeship, and above all, there were no differences in status. All were equal. I remember I was in a unit with only two high school students. I didn't know that there were groups where there weren't many high school students, I had never experienced that. There was such a wealth of different experiences and previous experiences from life

before the war. For me it was a great experience to see how each of the people was different.

Of course the war itself is an experience in itself. You were a soldier in a unit that was not so big at that time. It consisted of about sixty or seventy soldiers. After eight days in action, there were maybe twenty of them left. The rest were wounded or fallen or captured. Then a new unit was formed and sent back into action, and after eight days there were only twenty of them left again. These are deep experiences.

Interviewer: How do you overcome something like this, what kind of mourning does this require?

BH: No mourning at all. It was a time of dying. Death was everywhere, and it doesn't make you afraid anymore that it's so present. Everything is concentrated on the moment, you have no illusions whether you will escape, whether you will escape at all, you are at the mercy of it. And if it went well, you gave a sigh of relief. That's all. It wasn't only like that at the front, death was just as present at home.

Interviewer: Does this still play a role, when you look at death today and question the meaning of death as something bad and terrible?

BH: Yes, it does play a role, because it is familiar to me, it is still very close.

Interviewer: Is this somehow related to a posture that consents to one's own death?

BH: It was very clear in the war. Death was simply by your side. It was beside you all the time, because you could have been shot at any time, and then you would have been dead. That was normal life.

Interviewer: Did death make life more intense?

BH: Yeah, I guess. I was eighteen, nineteen years old at the time! My God!

Interviewer: And after the war, what happened then?

BH: I was first in captivity, in Charleroi, Belgium, for a year. I escaped from the prison camp. This escape, this running away, gave me a year and a half of independent living. After the escape I went straight to the Mariannhillers. A few weeks after I came home, I joined the Order and began my studies. I studied philosophy and theology in Würzburg.

Interviewer: After graduating you probably received your ordination to the priesthood, around the mid-fifties?

BH: 1952, I think. I can't remember exactly, it was so long ago.

Interviewer: Have you ever had doubts whether you should follow the priest's path?

BH: No, I didn't, I never doubted it. I decided when I was five years old.

Interviewer: Already at five? I was also carrying this question when I was a boy too. The priest told me then that you would have something like a calling experience when God called you. I always waited for the voice of God, but it did not come. How was that with you?

BH: The idea to become a priest came just like that. I never had any other idea.

Interviewer: Later I could never understand that the young men wanted to renounce a life with women. At the age of five that is not an issue, but at fifteen this question arises quite massively, I can imagine. Was there no debate about celibacy and the issues involved?

BH: At the age of five there is no such thing.

Interviewer: But later, at the age of 15 is it a decision not only for a certain life form, but also against another life form?

BH: You can't treat it like that. It is not about these things, but about a reference to God. It is subordinate to this reference to God. You have to see it on the level of the relationship to God. It has to do with God, of course with God in my imagination at that time.

Interviewer: Was then later, when you had thoughts of leaving in the sixties, the subject of celibacy a factor? You got married then, too.

BH: The decision to give up the priesthood had nothing to do with a possible marriage. This decision was also subordinated to the relationship with God. I suddenly saw that much of what was important to me in Christianity was covered up by other things in the Church. Suddenly I was to get involved in something that contradicted my idea of God. Suddenly it was clear to me that I could no longer go along with it. Not because I had become a disbeliever, but rather because I was still a believer.

Interviewer: Faith was too precious to you?

BH: It was too precious to me. That's why I had to leave the order. The other things came later.

Bert Hellinger as Teacher in South Africa

Interviewer: When did you go to South Africa?

BH: It was 1953, I suppose. I went to South Africa to study for another degree, for a teaching career. Then I went to a school to teach there. While I was teaching in the school, I took a distance study course to obtain the University Education Diploma in Educational Sciences. This gave me the teaching license for teaching at secondary schools. After that I had to take over the administration of this school in

addition. But I had overworked myself by taking over this position and the additional distance learning. I got a nervous breakdown. It was a curative disease, so to speak, because it got me out of school.

Interviewer: Did you have an exhaustive depression, or what would you call it?

BH: I couldn't sleep anymore, it was a terrible period. I was at the end of my rope. I went to a missionary station to a Dutch brother and just wandered around with him when he was doing his work. As a result I slowly recovered within two months. I then went to a mission station and worked in pastoral care. That was much more satisfying for me.

Interviewer: And after the missionary station, came the return to Germany?

BH: Not for a long time yet. More than ten years passed. During this time I also became head of St. Francis College in Mariannhill. There was an elite school. At that time a high percentage of the indigenous university students came from that one school, it had an excellent reputation throughout South Africa. The school was also a boarding school. All students also lived in the boarding school. That was a beautiful and fruitful time for me. There was a very close cooperation between me as the director and another priest who was at my side. One cannot run such a large school and boarding school alone.

Basically, the school had two boarding schools, one for the girls and one for the boys. Sisters were responsible for the girls and we two priests for the boys. We organized the school and the boarding school in the sense of a far-reaching self-administration. Each class elected a spokesperson, in addition, all together from the final class elected five representatives to the school board of directors, the student parliament. This body settled most issues among itself. We were surprised how well it worked. It was an important experience for me.

Interviewer: How long did you remain in South Africa?

BH: For sixteen years.

Interviewer: What were the reasons you left? Was it because you wanted to leave the priesthood?

BH: The reasons were elsewhere. I represented a somewhat progressive, modern theology, for which I was known. Suddenly I was suspected of having views in religious education at school that were incompatible with the teachings of the Church.

At that time I was supposed to represent my bishop at the Bishops' Conference. The bishop called me to his office to discuss with me what his concerns were there. After the conversation he pulled out a letter in which someone accused me of heresy. The bishop asked me to comment on it and advised me to be a little more careful in the future. I told him: "If I do not have confidence in this matter, I cannot represent you at the Bishops' Conference. Nor can I carry out my duties." I resigned from all my positions, I was very radical about it. Afterwards it was clear that I would return to Germany.

Interviewer: People often come…to a crossroads and stop in front of it and do not move. But you have always continued there with great fearlessness. Or was it almost a lack of a way out? To be able to continue to exist for you, you had to take this step?

BH: Whenever I notice that somewhere I can't go on, I go another way and do something new.

Interviewer: What happened next?

BH: In the meantime it had become known in Germany that I had resigned from my offices in South Africa. The Order immediately demanded my return from the diocese there, because I had long been supposed to take over the rector's office of the Mariannhiller seminary in Würzburg.

But before that something important had happened in South Africa, namely the contact with the group dynamics. At a conference I met a Benedictine monk who told me: "There is something there that is very interesting, you have to participate in it." He put me in touch with a group of Anglican priests who had introduced group dynamics in South Africa. They offered ecumenical and interracial courses, so they were very progressive in that respect. I went to them for group dynamics training. In this first course I had a crucial experience. The facilitator asked only general questions in the group: "What is more important to you, ideals or people? What do you sacrifice to whom? The people of an ideal or the ideal to people." That affected me deeply, I could not sleep the night after. It was a turning point in my life.

Interviewer: You realized it had to be about people?

BH: All of a sudden, people were in the spotlight for me. I did several other trainings with them and I also applied the group dynamics in the school I was at. With this knowledge and skills I returned to Germany. When I had already been here for two months, Professor Däumling from Bonn (one of the founders of group dynamics in Germany, H.B.), gave a lecture on group dynamics in Würzburg. Of course I went there and told him that I knew about group dynamics from my work in South Africa. In Germany, group dynamics was still new, whereas in South Africa it was already established. Mr. Thumb then invited me to a training in Bonn as an assistant trainer. Through this invitation I got a place in the group dynamics scene in Germany, as someone who already knew something.

Interviewer: But that was back in the early seventies?

BH: That was 1970. I had returned from South Africa at the end of 1969. With group dynamics I had a new foothold in Germany right away. I immediately applied the group dynamics work in this seminary. I also offered courses in group dynamics and became known as a trainer for group dynamics. But I knew that I was still missing a lot. That is why I started a psychoanalysis in Würzburg right after my return.

In the meantime, I had slowly become inwardly estranged from my order. More and more often I had to experience that in important decisions issues of self-preservation were more important than religious and human issues.

With this inner conflict I went to the first group dynamic congress in Cologne and met Ruth Cohn

there. The congress took place at the end of the 68s, the time of the hippies and radical students. They also invaded this congress and disturbed the events. Ruth Cohn saved the congress with incredible skill by winning over the students. I was very impressed by that. Shortly afterwards I went to her in a course. It was the first course she offered in Germany.

In that course she told me something about Gestalt therapy. She had known Fritz Perls well and was therefore familiar with Gestalt Therapy. In Germany Gestalt Therapy was still completely unknown. She offered a demonstration of Gestalt Therapy in the group and asked who would be the first to volunteer to sit on the so-called hot chair. I volunteered. While she worked with me, I looked into the distance. Suddenly I saw that I had a different future. No longer in the Order. The key sentence at the end of that session was, "I'm leaving." Then I had to stand in front of each participant in turn and say: "I'm leaving". It was an incredible experience, a key experience.

It was now clear to me that my remaining in the Order was only a matter of time. But first I went back to Würzburg. At the same time I decided to do a training analysis. A friend of mine, Professor Hermann Stenger, also a group dynamist, got me a place in Vienna for a training analysis. Although I knew that I would leave the Order and had already made provisions for this. But the time was not yet ripe, I was waiting for the right time. During a group dynamic training that I offered in Rome, during a conversation with an American, it suddenly "clicked", I knew: "Now was the time." A few days later I communicated my decision to my superiors in Rome. Afterwards everything necessary went off without any difficulties. I stood fully behind this decision. My religious superiors noticed this and made no attempt to change my mind.

I had made provisions for life outside the Order. I stood on my own feet because I was a respected group dynamic facilitator. I immediately moved to Vienna and began the teaching analysis.

The Influences of Different Therapeutic Schools on Bert Hellinger

Interviewer: And then came relatively quickly Arthur Janov with Primal Therapy?

BH: That had another prelude. I had taken all the exams for the degree as a psychoanalyst and joined the psychoanalytical working group in Salzburg. I was asked to give a lecture there. My topic was Janov's book: "The Primal Scream." It was not well received. I was expelled from the study group and refused to graduate. I would have had to do twenty hours of analysis, that's all. I had brought this as a condition from Vienna. I then went to Janov and one of his leading students in the USA for nine months and did Primal Therapy. That was a great experience for me.

Interviewer: But these were also very negative experiences? Like an abuse of power?

BH: It made me feel sad. But on the other hand, of course you get an incredible freedom in such a moment.

Interviewer: That you can suddenly go in a new direction? That one can escape the rules and rituals that a therapeutic school entails?

BH: Yes. You don't have any inner obligations either. Later I made a second attempt. I wanted to be a transactional analyst. They turned me down too.

Interviewer: Why?

BH: I was told that I had not gone through the normal training, although Rüdiger Rogoll was my supporter and a respected teacher of Transactional Analysis. This was my last attempt to belong somewhere. It was painful, but healing, and above all incredibly liberating.

The strange thing was that later the tables turned again. I had a certain reputation through script analysis, which I had offered for many years. The Munich Working Group for Psychoanalysis wanted me to offer Script Analysis for their training candidates, because they still have to learn something in two other procedures. This working group then recognized me as a psychoanalyst as well. I also got a license as an analyst from the Bavarian Medical Association.

Interviewer: After the episode of psychoanalysis came family therapy? How did the professional training continue?

BH: We both started family therapy together in Snowmass in the USA. Then hypnotherapy and NLP joined in. These further trainings are closely connected with you, because you later brought important hypnotherapists and NLP therapists from the US to Germany. What emerged with Erickson's work and NLP, I immediately adopted and integrated. These were and are valuable experiences for me. The further training in Snowmass in family therapy with Ruth McClendon and Les Kadis and the Reddingtons, those were beautiful and fruitful times.

Interviewer: When you look back which people you have met in the field of psychotherapy have impressed you the most?

BH: Ruth Cohn certainly, then in Snowmass Ruth McClendon and Les Kadis. Of the hypnotherapists, Jeff Zeig, Stephen Lankton and also Stephan Gilligan were important to me. From Transactional Analysis it was Fanita English, before that also Hilarion Petzold. And of course in the beginning the group dynamics facilitators in South Africa, whom I have already spoken about. With regard to Family Constellation, Thea Schönfelder was also important. With her I had my first experience as a representative.

New Beginnings in the Late Eighties: Bert Hellinger Writes Books and the First Major Events Take Place

Interviewer: There was a time in the late 1980s when people sat in your classes and said, "Bert, why don't you write a book?" Scripts were passed around with quotations of what had been picked up in courses. Some of them had collected them later. What you had developed suddenly became a huge movement.

BH: But I had already finished, so to speak.

Interviewer: You were in retreat. I was under the impression that you were going to go into your quiet retirement life in Ainring. Suddenly you were experienced as if you were going to take off again, and you did.

BH: First of all it was important that Gunthard Weber published the book "Love's hidden Symmetry". That opened up the field into the wide world. It was not yet the time for me to do that myself back then. That Gunthard did that was a great achievement. Then it was suddenly clear: "Now I'll do something too." I began to write the book "Orders of Love". You know how I did that?

Interviewer: We had sent you the videos of the course in Cologne, which you held for me in 1992 at the university in Cologne. We recorded the whole course on tape, because we wanted to have a look at your work afterwards.

BH: I sat down and transcribed the videos, which was very difficult because the sound was very bad. What came out was the first part of the book "Orders of Love".

A little later von was invited to a course for family therapists, which was also recorded. This video became the basis for the second part of "Orders of Love." Shortly afterwards there was a congress in Garmisch, which Wolf Büntig had organized. I gave the lecture "Of Heaven that makes sick, and Earth that heals". At this congress I also offered a course and said: "I'll take up to 35 participants." But 350 registered. What should I do now? I said, "Then I'll give the course with everyone." Earlier, a woman came up to me and asked, "Do you mind if I record this course?" This video became the basis for the third part of "Orders of Love," which was also the breakthrough to the major events. Everything happened as if by coincidence.

Interviewer: It wasn't something you planned?

BH: It happened, and suddenly it was a challenge.

The Critics and their Ties to the Group

Interviewer: Can I go back to belonging to groups? The psychotherapists who attack you, especially the systemic therapists, defend their field and, when they attack you, they are completely at peace with their

conscience. In your case you were able to leave the field of the Order and the Church. Instead of remaining in the community of the Order and the Church, you went further, but did not let yourself be bound by them. What made you so independent? Is it something like a need to follow an inner movement?

BH: That is more complex. I had the advantage that I also learned other professions. In South Africa I took the teacher's exam and had an alternative there. I felt that I had a completely different kind of independence as a result, and the others felt the same. Therefore they could not intimidate me. This alternative was something very valuable for me.

Now imagine those who only learned one profession, or those who finally became psychoanalysts after ten years of learning. They may realize later that there is something else, but they can't get out of what they have developed for themselves. They are then in a similar situation as many priests. They have no alternative, because in their group an alternative is not tolerated. As soon as they strive for something else, they are excluded from this group. They then represent the positions of their group to the outside world also in the sense of a struggle for survival. A lot of criticism of Family Constellation must be considered from this point of view. Their criticism often has little to do with Family Constellation itself. Family Constellation is not even looked at or examined more closely. One immediately rejects it, because one instinctively feels that it can be a danger for one's own group and its survival.

Interviewer: Many expect you to take a stand on such criticism. I understand that some expect you to be different.

BH: Yes, exactly. I generally withdraw when someone wants to gain power over me. I am accused of not accepting criticism. I do accept criticism, but not a claim to power over me. Behind many criticisms is the demand: "You have to leave your position and follow me. Why don't you do it the way I want?"

If it's criticism in the sense of: Let's take a look together at what works there and what is helpful here - then the other person speaks of an experience and seeks an experience, and I speak of an experience and seek an experience. Through the different experiences we enrich each other. Each one has given something to the other despite criticism - which actually only means here, despite other experiences. For me, this is a valuable exchange in which I can grow and develop. But if someone says: "You have to listen to me and follow my arguments, they are better and more correct than yours" - what do they want then? They want to gain power over me. I withdraw from that.

Interviewer: This withdrawal reminds me a lot of your father. When I imagine how he escaped party membership, it must have been something like that. He simply wasn't available, he withdrew.

BH: That's right, I never thought of it that way. Maybe I learned it from him. I can feel a good connection with him there.

Bert Hellinger's Faith and Religious Movement

Interviewer: How would you describe your faith?

BH: In the meantime I have no faith anymore. On the one hand, faith means that I follow an idea of God or what is said about God or as a revelation from or about God. That I believe this to be true and arrange my life accordingly. But even without a faith of this kind, there is a spiritual movement towards something greater. This movement is the actual true religiousness, the movement towards something hidden and greater. This movement can be found both with many believers, wherever they are, and with many others who have no definite faith. They go into this movement towards something and look in it beyond the narrow, the obvious. For many people the religion is bound to certain images of God. But it also exists detached from such images. The movement towards something greater is the same in all religions, independent of certain images of God. That is why it also exists outside the religions.

The question is whether the many images of God are compatible with this religious movement, or whether after some time they oppose this movement, perhaps even lead it into the absurd.

In what is proclaimed as religious, there are for me a lot of contradictions. I have investigated this. If you take the sentence seriously: "Everything is moved" - from where is it moved? From something outside of us. This movement is creative because it causes something. But according to my conception, there must be an original movement or an original force from which every movement comes. Whether this original force can be called God, I do not know. There might be something in between, but that does not matter to me. What is important is that every movement, whatever it is, is seen as being controlled by something beyond it, by something creative. This creativity is directed towards the movement and its direction, it must be, because it cannot be a movement that is directed against itself at the same time.

If you take this seriously, everything that happens, even the so-called evil or terrible or violent, is moved by the same cause. This creates a different horizon. The distinction between good and evil can then no longer be maintained. Questions like: "How can God allow this to happen?" become irrelevant here. For me, it's about agreeing with this perceptible movement as it is. For me, this is religious. In that sense, I am very religious. This consent does not need an image or a belief. Everyone can experience this directly in their soul.

Good and Evil, Hitler

Interviewer: The pairs of opposites "good and evil" were created at some point as an orientation. In our minds they are fixed values.

BH: I must face good and evil with the same posture, because the same force is at work in both. When I do this, this difference no longer exists. If you can endure it not only in your mind but also in practice, it is an incredible purification and achievement at the same time.

Interviewer: The controversy arises from the practical application. As long as you philosophize about it, it wouldn't matter. After all, it is not a new realization that good and evil ultimately lead to unity. But if you apply that to any person in practice, for example a serial killer, SS-officer, or Hitler, everything resists.

BH: Hitler is a test. Many who are against him look at Hitler, and their own souls often follow the rejected very secretly. I look behind him and beyond him and see that he too is confronted with an inevitable fate. To take this seriously, that is religion for me.

Criticism versus Dialogue

Interviewer: Is there a parallel between retreating when all the lines of criticism are directed at you, and retreating before the claims of the Nazis in your youth and later the claims of the Order or therapeutic schools?

BH: There are certain similarities. But because I see how important the field in which a group is moving is for the group, I can't condemn others who are in another field or say "They're worse or better." They're just in a different field. Nowadays I view this as neutral in terms of value.

Interviewer: Sometimes it hits you when people treat you that way. Or are you so far away from it? Some of them are people who have come close to you personally, who have profited a lot from you and Family Constellation, and who are against you today.

BH: I also see them as part of a field and do not experience it as a personal attack. I can leave it like this.

Interviewer: Mostly or always?

BH: Allow me to remain human here. This perfection would be terrible for me. But to face it in this serene way is a constant achievement, a constant challenge. I have to adjust to it again and again. But that does not exclude the possibility that I will face a conflict as well.

Interviewer: That also means to respect the opponent and take them seriously.

BH: That's part of it. War is the father of all things. It is also the father of peace.

Interviewer: Can Hellinger also be a warrior?

BH: I've shown this a few times in my life, and I'm staying on that path.

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