

Our families, our selves

Tijn Touber

This article appeared in Ode issue: **39**

Psychology and personal-growth movements are making a huge mistake, says German therapist Bert Hellinger, in focusing on the individual over the family

Spiritual growth and consciousness-raising have become nearly synonymous with individualism. Our isolated selves, not our families, are the focus of a flood of personal-growth workshops. The message is, "I'm okay, you're okay." But one man in a small Bavarian village thinks this misses the point. For Bert Hellinger, one of the most innovative psychotherapists of our time, happiness starts with the family. "Someone can only be happy if he's living in peace and love with his fellow human beings," he says. My trip to Hellinger's house takes on the feel of a pilgrimage, in which some sacrifice is necessary. The rain pounds ceaselessly on the roof of my tiny rental car and the heat refuses to work, causing the windows to fog constantly. On top of this, Hellinger's agents had warned me that he was almost certainly too busy for an interview.

All this enhanced my sense of satisfaction when I finally reached the tiny town of Mitterfelden along the German-Austrian border and received Hellinger's warm greeting. It's likely no one in Mitterfelden knows that one of its residents is a man who is singlehandedly affecting the course of psychotherapy with his "family constellation" therapy. The term "Hellingermania" has been coined to explain his influence. But not in Mitterfelden. Hellinger himself appears indifferent to his worldwide reputation. He has no particular plans or mission. He allows himself to be guided by what life throws his way. Currently, that involves traveling to Sweden, Japan, China, Russia, Korea, Thailand and other countries where his ideas are still unknown.

The former priest and one-time Gestalt therapist is young for his 76 years. He speaks with a noteworthy kindness and softness, without wasted words. It's as if he sees, hears and feels things that to many remain hidden. According to Hellinger, most people get entangled in everything around them. What is it that so often propels people down the road to disaster and destruction? he has always asked himself. What forces drive us to violence, depression and compulsive behaviour?

Hellinger has found the answers to these questions close to home: in the family. There, dynamics are at play that appear to subtly dominate family members. To make these forces visible, he designed the "family constellation," a role-playing process with people who represent family members and perform their parts as the client watches. As a therapist, Hellinger does little more than open himself up to what happens—he calls it "movements of the soul"—offering a helping hand here and there so that the game can unfold.

The fascinating thing is that the "players" are only substitutes for the real family members but in playing the role of grandmother, grandfather or granddaughter, they appear to have access to the feelings of those whose role they're playing. They think and behave in the spirit of the family member, prompting the family dynamic to come alive before the eyes of the person who is observing his or her own life as a spectator. Problems become visible, opening the door to healing. The fact that Grandpa was a Nazi collaborator during the war, for instance, is no longer kept under wraps: Grandpa is embraced and he once again belongs to the family. The effect on everyone is tangible and visible: The grandson no longer unconsciously feels he must pay for his grandfather's mistakes. Harmony is restored and everyone can rediscover his or her

natural place in the constellation. Afterward, the observer character feels liberated from the burden he or she has been carrying.

Hellinger explains his groundbreaking work this way: "The idea for the family constellations came about after I spent six years observing people's conscience. I discovered that people are most plagued by guilt if they've done something that threatens their association with the group. Their guilty conscience drives them to do everything they can to change the situation so they belong again. In this context, therefore, innocence is nothing more than the feeling that you're accepted by your group, that you belong. And guilt is the feeling that you've forfeited your membership in the group. This insight is the foundation of my work. "I saw a kind of conscience: a collective conscience. This unconscious conscience is often at odds with our individual conscience and becomes visible in the group dynamic of family constellations. The collective conscience does not discriminate between good and bad. For example, based on your individual conscience you can be excluded from a family if you have ... betrayed someone, robbed them or worse. However, the collective conscience won't tolerate shutting someone out of the family. So what happens is that a family member of a subsequent generation takes on the blame under the influence of the collective conscience and repeats the action. This family member strongly identifies him- or herself with the family member who was shut out, forgotten or rebuffed. Much of what leads to illness, suicide or serious accidents is the result of the fact that an innocent family member unconsciously takes the place of a guilty one and takes on his fate. It's really about an attempt to restore balance to the collective conscience.

"Unfortunately, it doesn't work. It resolves nothing. The only thing that happens is that the action continues to be repeated—from generation to generation. The family tragedies that result are due to a conflict between the individual and collective conscience. Looking at family constellations enables this area of tension to be resolved.

"An example: Imagine that Grandma dies in childbirth. This often creates so much suffering and fear in the family that its members would rather forget her. Two or three generations later, a family member—such as a granddaughter—may develop an uncontrollable urge to commit suicide. When I do a family constellation for this woman, I ask her to intuitively position a number of people in the room. By doing this, without thinking too much about it, she is connecting to a much bigger field, the collective conscience. What you often see is that everyone is looking in the same direction. I know from experience that they're looking towards someone who is missing, to a family member who was shut out. When I put someone in that space, it provides a tremendous sense of relief. Particularly among those who want to kill themselves. The woman feels a strong pull towards her grandmother, a bond of love, and embraces her. I then ask her to make it clear to "Grandma," in her own words, that she is accepted. This allows the grandmother to take back her place in the family so her granddaughter no longer has to, and thus restores the balance. I then ask the deceased grandmother to bless her granddaughter and tell her that it's good that she lives on and that she can take her own place in the family. This breaks the entanglement and sets both free."

Is it really so simple? Don't strong emotions like these need to be experienced rather than just observed? Shouldn't the case be thoroughly analyzed and understood? Shouldn't there be lots of crying? Hellinger thinks not. Healing takes place—beyond reason and emotion—on the level of the soul. All the personal details are on another level and are therefore less important. In fact, Hellinger isn't interested in his client's feelings at all. It's not out of a lack of concern. He doesn't want to cloud the issue. Hellinger only wants the facts: How many brothers and sisters do you have? Has anyone in the family died? Are there particular secrets: abortions, alcoholism, accidents or other tragedies?

"To me it's about the larger context; I want to be able to see the entire constellation. I also see those who

are not present. The less emotional information I have, the better. It makes me more open to what presents itself. Only if I remain unbiased can I say what I see, with no fear of consequences. The only thing I do is to remain quiet and attentive. Even the intention of wanting to help gets in the way. It's only about attention—standing still without moving, staying fully with yourself. It means you can be carried by the forces of the field. It requires complete reserve on the part of the therapist. No desire to solve, nor intervene. This attention brings you in touch with the movements of the soul. You see it in the constellations: The substitutes make movements and say things they can't control."

Hellinger calls himself a phenomenologist. He doesn't speak of theories and proof. He only verifies that family constellations work. Is this something like synchronicity, morphogenetic fields or quantum theory? He shrugs his shoulders. It's not that he hasn't thought about it, but he doesn't want to turn his therapy into a doctrine. No dogmas; no school. He describes what he sees and the effects it has. End of story.

"I can imagine that particular types of therapy are needed to enable people to unload their feelings. But when someone is caught in the fate of others, that's not enough. I see time and time again that someone is bound by something larger that comes to light during the family constellations. And when I say 'family' I don't just mean blood relations, but everyone who falls into the collective conscience. That could include relations by marriage or people who have made room for current family members, such as our parents' former partners. Also included are people who the family may have trampled on during their climb to the top. In America you see it with the slaves. When they are not honoured, they continue to have an influence on the family.

"Time and time again we see that the guilt perpetrators feel is much heavier than their victims' pain. In Mexico I once did a constellation with children of war casualties. They felt tremendous anger towards the perpetrators, who said during the constellation: 'If you stay angry at us, we become stronger and stronger and nothing can change.' When the children showed empathy towards the perpetrators, they became very soft. They turned towards the victims and became, as it were, one with them. Good and evil, perpetrator and victim no longer existed."

For Hellinger, this process of making things whole is very different from fulfilling individualized needs or desires. He is not interested in spiritual seekers who abandon their families to seek enlightenment on a mountaintop in India. "The individual is only himself when a place has been found within him for those who belong to him. That starts with the parents. Anyone who rejects his parents can't ever come to terms with himself. How can he be happy when he's excluding a huge part of himself? We are our parents. We can take great pains to develop ourselves but if we can't embrace our parents in our hearts and honour them, there's no room in our hearts and we become depressed. And that's just the beginning. Not only do you need to give your 'family' a place in your heart, but also the members of past generations—including the ones who were despised, cursed or forgotten, like children who died young or were aborted.

"Only when all of them have a place do we feel complete. Only when you can embrace others in your heart are you free of them. Not a moment sooner. Otherwise they will not let you rest and will constantly get in your way. In this context, the big spiritual word 'completeness' takes on a very simple meaning. I am complete when I have given everyone a place. When we are able to allow others into our heart—that is true spirituality—then we feel equal to them. Not higher or better, not lower or less. Complete equality. This breaks through the limits of the personal and collective conscience. Jews, Christians, Muslims... it no longer matters. All different, all equal. This is reconciliation and only then can there be peace."