

DIALOGUE IN THE DARK

The Marianne Fry Memorial Lecture

Thank you for inviting me here to give this talk which is going to be quite personal. I'm delighted to be honouring Marianne Fry, whom I knew well, though only for the last dozen years of her life. I am sure that there are others here, who have their own special memories. She left behind many friends, grateful colleagues, students and clients. Since she died, she has remained surprisingly alive to me. I often, unbidden, hear her voice and imagine I am talking with her. I hear her laugh, and the jokes are always good. The theme of Gestalt and Spirituality was dear to her heart, and I think she would be glad I am going to be discussing something that is important to us both, and perhaps to all of us here. Marianne was interested in spirituality and explored it many different settings, whilst remaining clearly a Gestalt practitioner. Because of the broad nature of our theoretical framework, Gestalt continues to be enriched by the range of other perspectives it can integrate and include. The British Gestalt Journal has published a great range of papers doing just that – including wisdoms from attachment theory and intersubjectivity, for example.

Along with others like Marianne, I also have been on a journey to gather new perspectives, and until recently, I was actively devoted to that integrating process, partly through my work in the Journal and partly through having opportunities to teach. I want to say that the fact that I no longer work with the Journal or teach Gestalt students was a personal decision, not related to the capacity of Gestalt community to welcome new developments. I have now shifted so definitively into systemic work that my community has changed. But still, I remain a Gestaltist through and through – I wouldn't know how to relinquish those ways of understanding and being in the world, and nothing I have learned more recently contradicts that inner map. I'm grateful that you here, mostly committed Gestalt practitioners; may want to hear me share some of my additional maps. I believe this integrating process has a healthy future.

The additions I want to talk about relate to Bert Hellinger's systemic approach and to the Ridhwan teaching of the Diamond Heart School. This also connects me to Marianne, as she knew Bert Hellinger's work, and she was thinking she might join the Ridhwan School in the year before she died, so our journeys continue to connect.

This talk got its name, Dialogues in the Dark, before I had a very clear idea what I was going to say. I was in the dark, but we all hoped that dialogue might follow. Nearly a year ago there was a conversation in our little planning group that was to re-start the lectures, about what topic would honour Marianne's life and interests. We were remembering Marianne's decision in her fifties, to return to the Germany she escaped from as a refugee when she was fifteen years old, though obviously not the same Germany. It was a courageous action, and important for both her and those she met and worked with in Germany – two of whom are here in the room today. Living with the aftermath of the Nazi era was one of the defining issues for those growing up in post war Europe. What kind of relationship could exist between those who had been in the war and those who came later? What part could psychotherapy play in healing the relationship between the generations? In Germany, because of who Marianne was, a Jewish German from the generation that had been gassed and killed, she found herself attending to the bigger field within the context of the individuals she met. And as I said, she got to know Bert Hellinger's work quite early on. I remember talking with her about how it impacted her work, moving her into a therapeutic environment where blaming could give way to

respect, and where individuals might find peace with their past as well as shining a light on peace in a bigger context.

I must say that writing and lecturing are not my strengths. I have concentrated on being a practitioner and teacher, and when I have written, I have mainly done what I'm doing now, mediating the creativity of other people. In fact I looked recently at the collection of pieces of mine published in the British Gestalt Journal and every single piece has been about someone else – book reviews, obituaries and interviews. So, in the tradition of being the grateful magpie that I am, I shall continue to show you the bright colours in my nest and tell you about where the feathers came from.

Germany, is one answer, since that is where the Perls' came from as well as many other key contributors to Gestalt, like Lewin, and other seminal influences, like Buber. It is Bert Hellinger's home, and it is also where the original European Ridhwan retreats are held, the ones I attend. As a British Jew, I am glad that I have this connection with Germany. It hasn't all been easy but it has been a huge gift. It reminds me of those Sufi stories where you don't know whether something that has happened is good or bad in an absolute sense until you know the time frame. Germany's history, like ours and America's, has been both terrible and extraordinarily creative and wide reaching in what it has brought to the world.

I absorbed the outlooks created by these three giant approaches, in that order – first Gestalt, then the systemic and the spiritual. They overlap, cover the same territory, with each enriching the other. I hope today we can have a good conversation about their integration, their differences, and how this might contribute to a 'dialogue in the dark' that our world needs.

And I believe Marianne would be glad we are doing this. Just before she died, as many of you may remember, she resigned from GPTI, that institution she helped to found. The 'conscience' of GPTI (those rules of belonging and allegiance that push us to conform if we are to remain secure) required something of her that her own personal conscience did not allow and so she withdrew from it. It wasn't that she relinquished her Gestalt beliefs and practices. But had she wanted to continue to belong to GPTI she would have had to pay too high a price. It can take as much courage to leave a flock as to stay.

Marianne's life was rich in themes. I have taken on a bit of her mantle, and even some of her work, and I continue to explore some of those passions that were important to her – the relationship between a conscious psychological and a spiritual path, growing old gracefully (or disgracefully), the Jewish legacy, how to teach in a lively way, how to stay open and curious. And as I said, I also share with her the fact of having largely withdrawn from having an official position in the Gestalt community, with a similar feeling of affection, regret and respect.

Since this is a personal account I want to be more explicit about the ways I feel connected to Marianne. It comforted me that someone older than me knew some of my world, and I hers. Like her I have an assimilated Jewish background. Assimilated Jews, until the last war, hoped they would not stand out. My family succeeded in being safe and camouflaged in Britain, but all Jews stood out in Germany, whatever their beliefs or culture.

We have other German connections too. Lutz and Cleo, part of the same Ridhwan group I am in, learned their Gestalt with her back in the seventies in Germany and are here today. Hunter Beaumont (who lives in Munich) was friend and colleague to us, and someone

who has done more than anyone to integrate many other forms of knowledge into a Gestalt-compatible framework.

The impact of the holocaust continues, especially between the descendents of the Germans and Jews from that time. Marianne grew up in Dresden, where she had to remain silent about her Jewishness. But the question of what are you allowed to say was one that was also alive for me, growing up in a family that was successful and had a public face but where there was a lot that was not to be spoken of. Marianne wrote, 'the theme of silence, fearfully kept, and the urge to break it, have accompanied me ever since'. I knew that theme too. Silence and secrets deeply distort family life. The process of unearthing a bigger truth and speaking out is also a great gift and one that can support growth. Even though Marianne left GPTI just before she died, she memorably wrote the following to her colleagues, 'I want to part from you with love, appreciation and gratitude for our past connection and the transforming work that has flowed between us.' Having been persecuted in her youth it cast a long shadow of victimhood, but wrestling with the complaint at the end of her life somehow cleared away its remaining impact. It seems that when a parting is done well, all that need remain is appreciation.

As many of you know, Marianne explored many wisdom traditions, and was drawn to many teachers and teachings – Mother Meera, Findhorn, Emmanuel's channelling. She had a special connection to the spaciousness and non-attachment of Buddhism and was the first Gestalt therapist to have been invited to work with the monks and nuns in one of the Thai monasteries here, work I took over when she died and which I love. They feel especially at home with Gestalt, but now they also love constellation work and several have joined the Ridhwan School.

Marianne began her career within the Jungian tradition, though she found that psychodynamic approach too cramping - she couldn't include enough of herself. In the interview I did with her she spoke about her delight in being authentic and creative once she encountered and experienced Gestalt. For her, it was Ischa Bloomberg who inspired her and her friends Ursula Fausset and Dolores Bate - they all trained together. They had met in the early 1970s at Quaesitor– one of the London growth Centres – which helped to bring over the new humanistic approaches from America including Gestalt. Those who missed out on that really did miss something! Despite the poor sexual boundaries and bashing of cushions, there was a lot of passion and vitality – different from the necessarily careful and responsible form that Gestalt now takes. I think of my teachers: Ursula, Dolores and Marianne as both part of the old way and the new.

Old and new don't find getting together always easy. For example, in the early days of my engaging with Hellinger's work I ran several workshops with Malcolm Parlett on the connection between Gestalt and the systemic approach because we both saw so much compatibility in how each understood the field, the power of dialogue and the phenomenological basis of the work. I think there has been a good relationship between the two approaches that has developed over time, but there certainly were some challenging periods where it didn't seem easy to belong to both those thought worlds, let alone two communities. I remember engaging, about ten years ago, in a GPTI debate with some who felt strongly antagonistic, and who saw the differences more than the similarities. They found it difficult to accept the process of a constellation, to work with the idea of orders that lie beyond the conscious mind. They were not happy about all this talk of the soul. Here were two big approaches, two ways of living even, and they inspired conflicts of loyalty and belonging.

Schools of therapy are a bit like religions – there are creators, followers, lineages, and specific disciplines. We have to narrow our field of vision if we are to belong, to deny or reject ideas that don't conform. Each school tends to be critical of others. There is orthodoxy, creed and practice, with institutes set up to safeguard the doctrines and expel those who deviate. As with religions there is a long apprenticeship, tests of dedication, rites of initiation and opportunities for advancement into places of influence and power. If we question things we risk censure, or maybe even expulsion. This seems to be an inevitable way of maintaining loyalty and boundaries. I understand and respect the process more now, armed with what I learned about loyalty and conscience from Bert Hellinger. I am also impressed by how welcoming of diversity is the Gestalt world I know. Most of my colleagues in the Hellinger Institute of Britain have a Gestalt background, and many Gestalt colleagues and friends have joined Ridhwan's path of study.

As far as I can see, therapy and spiritual practice do search for the same thing – the healing of the soul, the whole person, though the forms they take will change. I see them as complementing each other – therapy helps us get our egos working well enough for living and the spiritual path helps us see it for what it is, just a fixed set of ideas, not the real thing I'm still feeling into their similarities and differences. Perhaps with my therapist hat I am committed to self-improvement, catching up on deficits, having an impact on everyday life for the better. I deal with matters of inner security, solutions to life problems, self-manipulations, shoring up a sense of self that threatens to dissolve under pressure. But most spiritual practices take suffering as the human condition - they are not concerned with the impossible task of eradicating its cause in the world. Their focus is on the inevitable suffering that comes from all attachment to desires, and on the natural instability of the ego. Their promise is that there could be somewhere else to live – somewhere far more spacious.

I remember interviewing Hunter Beaumont seven or eight years ago, for the *British Gestalt Journal*. Hunter described an interesting dilemma, back from his own early studies, of how his Gestalt training encouraged him to identify with his body or his feelings, whereas other approaches asked the opposite of him, to dis-identify, and how both felt true and valuable. I think this nicely expresses a tension I also feel, between the spiritual and the therapeutic path.

Despite, or maybe because I am a therapist, I remain addicted to poking about in myself, trying to be a better person, although what I do never works for long. And yet when I stop I often feel frighteningly empty and disorientated. So I vacillate between the familiar ways and the lightness. However, I am beginning to be able to stay in the empty spaciousness for longer. I believe in my case that is largely to do with my being a student of the Diamond Heart School of Ridhwan, a spiritual teaching created by Hameed Ali, known as A.H.Almaas, one that is now becoming quite well known in Britain. (Perhaps some of you here are students in the English group.) It's hard to summarise or explain a deep and complex teaching that, even though I have been a student for nearly ten years, feels only fractionally revealed to me. In great depth it illuminates the path from individual consciousness to the ultimate nature of existence. It helps its students make contact with essential states that create a different basis for living: compassion, peacefulness, impeccability and acceptance. It outlines, step by step, what Almaas calls the 'inner journey home'.

The teaching of Ridhwan works with psychological processes, and exists within a western framework of thought. It's a spiritual path of being 'in the world' rather than withdrawing from it, seeing psychological and spiritual work as necessary for each other. This approach to spiritual work deconstructs the personality so we don't take it as real. And the

deconstruction process is awesomely detailed and thorough, deep and relentless, lasting many years. I believe that Ridhwan's thoroughness sets it apart from most other traditions, and takes its students to an appreciation of the intrinsic narcissism of the personality, to the emptiness it hides, and eventually into an appreciation of qualities that do not depend on the personality. Matter turns out to be mostly space or emptiness, according to modern particle physics; its solidity, like the solidity of the personality, is an illusion. In my explorations I have exactly and endlessly explored what it feels like to be imprisoned in the labyrinth of my own ego structure, feeling the staleness of my stories, my fixed convictions, and the way that my past seems to recreate itself and recreate me, and how I can't escape from this by devising a better version. I have been taking a magnifying lens to this now over many years, to what in Gestalt we think of as fixed patterns of alienation and identification. It's a sobering process, discovering the small suitcases I thought we lived in don't actually exist!

Actually I didn't join the Ridhwan School with a preformed passion for this kind of investigation. Like many therapists who have been working for a long time, my need was not so much about how to develop my work but how to continue to develop myself. However valuable what we offer others, we would eventually wither without being on a similar journey. I guess that is one of the reasons we may wish to search outside our community – so we can find people further ahead to guide us, people not connected to our institutional life. Even if we can guide our clients well, we too need guidance. I didn't realise the size and power of the journey I was starting on, one that was going to change my whole inner and outer landscape. After a decade I still feel I am at the start, and that another ten years wouldn't complete it either. But I love it. I am supported by the teachers, who really do embody what they teach, and by the teaching, which is open and personal and compatible with my western mind and life style, and I am supported by doing the work in a stable ongoing community. The journey is extremely personal. I travel at my own pace, focus on what arises for me, and find my own way, or non-way.

And I appreciate how familiar a lot of the processes are – Ridhwan's style of enquiry is not so different from a Gestalt practice. Very simply, it consists of learning to be fully present and embodied, enquiring into what turns up, and not stopping in the belief that there is an ultimate resting place. That's hardly rocket science, to get interested in your own experience. You learn to unwrap in layers, going deeper through the structures of the ego. It can be very painful, so the environment of possibility and compassion created by the teachers is critically important. Everyone needs a teacher who is further ahead on the path, so that the process isn't injurious.

The biggest obstacles to an ongoing exploration of reality are introjects, the voices of our inner critics - that whole complex of the superego with its attendant imagery and its inherent 'keep-us-in-line' cruelty. Overriding introjects always brings up anxiety. There is fearfulness associated with the possibility of losing our hopes of belonging, our inner security, if we deviate from those old ways of seeing the world. It doesn't matter whether you call them introjects, in the Gestalt terminology, or superego, in the tradition of Object Relations, or Conscience, in the Hellinger frame. By any name I appreciate their power and am still learning more about how they run my life, and what strength I need to live without them.

From following the Ridhwan path I have discovered the power of going into what I haven't got rather than focusing on what I have, which might perhaps be a more familiar route for a Gestalt practitioner. Facing deficiency, if honestly done, opens up spaces, whereas strengthening the ego seems to have the opposite effect. It is through getting to know the falsity of my usual versions of will, love, happiness, kindness or power, seeing them largely

as ideas and images, that I have begun to meet their beautiful and truer versions, the more essential qualities. The framework is both very personal – relating to each person's specific history – and also not personal at all. After all, everyone falls from grace as they come into the world. We all grow a compensating ego, a narcissistic shell, and it turns out to be in one of only a certain number of patterned ways, despite our personal histories. I have found it helpful to study these ways via the use of the enneagram, an ancient personality inventory that helps us see our particular ways of getting lost and the relevant healing journey for each kind of patterned 'sleepiness of the soul'.

Obviously, you have to be present to enquire since enquiry only happens in the present. You have to show up, be there. Most of us are only sometimes at home. In the Diamond Approach, as I also did in Gestalt, I have had a lot of support to witness with real curiosity, to feel all my exquisite nuances of experience at a somatic level, to persevere, to be interested in everything. In the Ridhwan tradition we mainly work in ever changing groups of two or three, taking turns to investigate an aspect of experience without interruption, or ask repeating questions. That's a very different process from being in long term dialogue with a therapist. I think it has helped me to be more independent from the response of the other. Over time, along with the practice of meditating and listening to the teaching, it has had a powerful impact. Instead of believing that my resources were mine alone, I am beginning to know, at least in flashes, the immense and benign resources of the universe. I am learning to taste the qualities of basic trust, of nourishment, love, attunement (my own) and the exquisite guidance I can experience if I settle into what is real. We also explore what the implications of this knowledge are for how we live every aspect of our daily lives. It's a delicate and subtle exploration - and difficult to talk about.

As far as I can see, the big question in all traditions has always been about the connection between the individual soul, the world of others, and Being (or God). Most traditions respond with a doctrine. Ridhwan's teaching resonates with those traditional spiritual outlooks but it does not depend on any of them. It's more a way of investigating than any kind of creed. Buddhists, for example, teach the non-existence of the separate self, but in Ridhwan we are invited to explore and experience directly. Like Gestalt it is based on open-ended enquiry, and the practice of suspending identification with the content of thoughts, as pure experiment. You could call it a scientific enquiry into consciousness, with reference to your actual lived experience. You develop a psychological understanding of the mental structures and veils of identifications without any attempt to change or improve anything but simply to understand them and thereby be less identified with them. This perseverance seems to grow a love of the truth of reality itself. We only make use of personal experience. There is no state or level of awareness postulated as the goal of the practice – in fact it challenges the whole process of goal seeking, as Gestalt does too, but which therapy clients often badly want. I have found it valuable simply to learn the precise ways I prevent awareness through my identifications, and the patterns of and on the soul. It's good to be exactly where I am and to know that is where I am meant to be. If I know that deeply I can share that belief with clients too.

So you can see there are many connections between Gestalt and Ridhwan. Much of what we practice in Gestalt forms the building blocks of a spiritual practice. The challenge for me has been to know those practices deeply enough to live them in my life beyond the clinical context, and that is what I gain from Ridhwan, since with them I am on a well organised path of study, not dependent only on what happens to be figural for me. But nevertheless it was those Gestalt practices that set me off on this journey. In Gestalt, for example, we have a wonderful understanding of the value of middle mode functioning and creative indifference. We encourage curiosity and fearlessness in the face of reality. We work with paradoxical theory of change, the understanding that self-manipulation

merely ties our inner knots tighter. All of that supports mindfulness – developing a capacity to be present without judgement. It is the route into what Perls called the fertile void, the place where everything gets disorganised and from where the new arrives, where we are ever dying and being reborn.

Gestaltists also address projections and introjects, and understand the stuff of which the personality is made, that 'verbal replica' of the self, which, unlike the personality, is more process than thing, more fluid and field dependent. We enquire phenomenologically, aim to really 'meet' people, stay in the present, value authenticity, and the novel over the patterned. So Gestalt practice is naturally expansive for the practitioner. It wants to move and travel, it is guided by the same energies as life itself. It is based on awareness and curiosity about what life is like for us, ever changing, always in relation to another, whether real or imagined.

It is a wonderful basis for the spiritual journey. However, Gestalt does not claim to be a spiritual community. We have been, quite properly I think, focusing on establishing our place in the world. And we have been plugging away to the world with a field-based understanding of the self and its relationship to others, self as a boundary phenomenon. I have always found this perspective both rich and radical, compared to the only partially relational theoretical basis for a lot of psychotherapy. So even though we may work mostly with individuals, since one on one therapy is our culture's dominant mode, we are well suited to work with field energies, to support the health of groups. Gestalt in organisations has been well developed, drawing on pioneers like Ed Nevis and Carolyn Lukensmeyer as well as by people here in this room.

However, through my immersion in systemic work, my lenses have shifted further even than Gestalt's radical understanding of the self, where the features of the field - its structures, memories and somatic impact, can be raised to awareness through the rather remarkable amplification process of the constellation. I have found that working with just what a client and therapist can be aware of is limiting. It seems that we sometimes operate in ways that we simply don't have any way of making sense of. It has excited me to understand better the ways we called into service by the systems we belong to, often playing a part that damages both others and ourselves, but always because of our deep system participation, our loyalties on behalf of the group we depend on. Gordon Wheeler touched on this with his phrase, 'the structures of ground'. Through constellations, these structures can be investigated – both the universal aspects that Bert Hellinger calls 'orders', and the particular way balance is achieved for specific individuals and their systems. I'll return to this in more detail.

But I want to reiterate that, both in the understanding of the field, and in the process of healing, what both the Diamond approach and systemic work offers is not so different from what we work with in Gestalt – it comes from finding the support to make clear, respectful contact with reality. Systemic work just illuminates aspects of reality we usually can't see. You can't remain identified with someone in your system when you see how much it does not help. And you can't remain victimised by someone if you see the hapless entanglements that have encircled everyone. And if you can see the essential love in yourself and others, even when the essence has been distorted, you can begin to stretch out into a larger space.

I notice I keep using the word 'see', which is not just an idle metaphor. There is a powerful effect arising from being able to take something in of huge complexity but all in one fell swoop, the way you can when you see a picture, take in a visual representation in a constellation, compared to our usual, linear ways of organising experience. I guess there

are special re-organising properties of right brain activity. They re-organise and enlarge the hearts of all who are doing the seeing: client, group and therapist. So the work is also a training in clarity and compassion for the practitioner.

Gordon Wheeler did a fine job in alerting us to how biased our Gestalt understanding of contact could be, with one end of each polarity tending to be valued more highly than the other – differentiation over confluence, expression over retroreflection and so on. He took us back to seeing that all is contact and that all styles have their valued place in the field. He reminded us not to import distorting values into the theory. I don't know if I would call them values, but since I started practicing as a constellator, I am looking again at some of these drives, not as importations but as facts of human life, needs that always come first, that really do shape what is possible in communal and individual life, and not just for humans. Hellinger summarises these key needs as bonding and attachment, exchange, and social organisation, and he shows what supports us in meeting these key needs, either in a blind and destructive way, or in a way that supports love and growth. Perhaps eventually we lose our earlier needs to belong, and especially if we follow a path where belonging is so thoroughly deconstructed. But we all need to understand the power of these needs, the ones that emerge from our biology and evolution. These orders that Hellinger has found stress the way that our membership of the group comes before our more fragile sense of ourselves as an individual. Perhaps they tell of 'before individualism', just as Wheeler emphasises 'beyond individualism'. But in any case they make interconnectedness absolutely central to our process.

Everyone talks about interconnectedness now, because we can all see how things spread – AIDS, terrorism, climate changes, coca cola - evidence everywhere of our participation in a unified field, and the dangers of not seeing it clearly enough, or knowing how to respond. Our survival depends on our participation in bigger systems, but on what basis?

The process of getting to know systems through constellations has revealed to me the power of something I hadn't seen as so central, that of conscience – our inner organ that takes care of belonging. I understand more clearly why it is so difficult to expand our sense of belonging. Expansion always triggers conscience, and if we carry on, we are bound to feel some guilt or loneliness. If we halt, we may continue to feel innocent. These ideas: of conscience, guilt and innocence, are now central to how I see the world.

One little parable I once heard Bert Hellinger tell relates to mountains and little villages at their base. Imagine being born into a village tucked into the valley of a mountain range. You are close to everyone in that somewhat isolated spot. You belong to a small but complete world. It is safe and also limited, despite the sweet innocence of belonging. At some point perhaps you decide to climb the mountain. As you ascend the slopes you get your first view of the village you grew up in. It is suddenly smaller than you had realised. With each step it also looks different, set against more of the surrounding terrain. You keep climbing, seeing other villages perhaps, with the scope of your vision ever widening. Once you have seen the size of the landscape and experienced the thin and bracing air up there, the village of home may now be too small to return to. You feel lonely, but grateful to be able to see.

I've always connected Bert's parable with the story of the expulsion from Eden. It's as if First Man and Woman also feel that loneliness and loss of innocence, as well as the immense gains. There is no turning back to Eden or the village, not to the easy confidence that it once offered. The Fall is painful, and we sometimes search for re-admittance.

There is a natural loss of innocence in growing up and leaving home, both literally and metaphorically. Over and over, it costs us loneliness and guilt. It was something Bert Hellinger knew a lot about, since he left many 'villages' behind in his life – that of National Socialism, of the Catholic Church, of psychoanalysis too. They each demanded allegiance he could once give but as he grew, what he saw up there meant he couldn't go back. I was touched when I heard him speaking about thought worlds he was no longer part of, because he was always respectful. He wasn't fighting or wanting to change anyone else. He just grew out of where he was. I understand he has done this again - moved on from his own teachings – beyond the orders of love, beyond the movements of the soul, into something very simple and philosophical, about the spirit and living well. Growth doesn't have to mean devaluing what you leave behind. The past remains somehow present.

What I have valued in Hellinger's philosophy is this central concern with belonging, as children and adults, both personally and on behalf of our systems. It challenges me to see all moral points of view as the price of belonging to our various villages. There just isn't a place of independence to speak about good and bad. Suicide bombers feel innocent doing things that would make us feel guilty, and who is to say which religious or cultural outlook has value over another? We can look at this question in terms of the impact of an outlook, but not of its intrinsic rightness. It also helps me understand why so many attitudes are state specific. At a personal level we have as many consciences operating as we have groups or systems to which we belong, and we are always moving like chameleons between one conscience group and the next, even from moment to moment. Because of this multiple system participation, guilt is just inevitable. It's a sign of growth, a risky but strengthening experience. You can't climb the mountain without feeling guilty, you can't join with another in love without leaving behind your old ways of doing things, and you can't leave a person or organisation or belief without guilt. Only fundamentalists are completely innocent and in their name many terrible acts are committed.

Hellinger, now eighty years old, has already had a profound impact worldwide. Probably most of you know something about him, but here is a short summary of the ingredients he brought to this still evolving approach. He prefers to describe himself as a philosopher rather than a psychotherapist, influenced more by Heidegger and Rilke and St John of the Cross than by his forbears in psychotherapy. The impact of his years with the Zulus in South Africa and his life as a priest are also evident. But constellations grew out of psychotherapeutic concerns and approaches that already existed. The theme of hidden loyalties and dynamics, intergenerational scripts, sculpting, balancing, giving and receiving, reaching out, phenomenology, respect and order – these all predate him. Just as Fritz Perls and Goodman created a new gestalt from many sources in Europe and America, Hellinger too has made an extraordinary synthesis. As Rupert Sheldrake once noted, his work brings together biology, consciousness, social reality, personal development, religion, purpose, creativity and healing. It is having an extraordinary impact. The conferences inspired by his work have sometimes had two or three thousand participants, aided by new forms of communication and travel, not to mention new levels of world distress. It has already, within not much more than a decade, created a whole industry – of translators, teachers, videos, websites, journals and institutes. Hellinger travels and demonstrates worldwide. He continues to expose himself to public scrutiny. His work has travelled into a host of related fields, organisational, educational, prison, law and social.

My immersion in the work has taken me from doing therapy with individuals about issues of intimacy, to working at an organisational level, working with collective issues: in education, social action, government and business. That has been enriching for me after my quieter years of individual work when I needed to be at home for my children. It's

enabled me to discover how differently things work when there are large numbers, and when multiple system participation is an issue.

I knew something about personal growth, but much less about larger systems and what helped them heal or develop. There is an understandable tendency to believe that what works for the individual within the small tribe of the family may also work for bigger issues. In fact those actions turn out not to help at all. This is particularly true with regard to some key experiences that fuel conflict, notably revenge, accusation, confession and even forgiveness. I'll say more about that in a minute. If we take on the power of systems, it seems they have a way of looking after their completeness, even in ways that are full of suffering. But completeness can be achieved in more than one way. A more enlightened kind of healing requires us to include in our hearts all those who belong in our systems so that they really are complete, to see everyone in their context, including all those who have perpetrated against others. We have to take history into account in a precise kind of way as part of our karma. History lives in the present, as we glimpse at in relation to the climate, the rise of terrorism and our colonial past, those events we hope are over but which clearly live on.

But to find this unity, we have to move way beyond ideas of good and evil, towards surrender to the greater forces at work. That's why, if you care about peace or growth you have to transcend conscience. Perhaps this sounds rather ordinary, but I think of it as a demanding spiritual path. It is certainly a humbling process.

At the end of his first workshop in Israel, Hellinger spoke, 'I have a vision in which we all return...and look deeply in each others eyes, weep together over what we have suffered at one another's hands, salute one another with dignity, and reconciled, leave the past behind.' Only a German who doesn't *only* belong to his German past can have that vision, and only with a people who can find a way of being more than their particular past.

Systemic work has also developed a very striking way of understanding the place of the dead in the lives of the living. Hellinger, at the same workshop, also said 'peace only comes when the dead lie together as equals.' I thought about this when we were asked to have two minutes of silence for the people who died in the London bombings. I happened to be running a group that day and we used the silence to grieve for the dead on all sides. It gave a completely different feel to the silence.

This vision isn't just a new age personal construct. It is supported by repeated empirical experiences of what happens in constellations when the bigger cast, including the dead, emerge and are given freedom to move. We glimpse into the many different parts that the dead play in the lives of the living, despite cultural variations.

As a therapist or consultant, not to mention as a human being, it is challenging to feel respect for war as well as peace. Hellinger has often said that war is the father of peace, of everything. I spent a while last year researching whether there had ever been a peaceful society on earth, even when the community was safe from outside pressures and economically stable. I discovered not one single group, not one system that hasn't needed to create an antagonism between 'them' and 'us'. Our current level of world weaponry makes this fact awesome, but not new. It is part of being human, part of the thrust for growth. And to the extent that we can agree to it, say 'yes' at a deep level, we can also find where peace and reconciliation is possible. I remember someone quoting the Dalai Lama after September 11, when he said, 'if you want peace, be peaceful.' It is because we are connected at such a profound level that this sentence makes sense, connecting us all back to a path of soul.

At a collective level revenge fuels some terrible atrocities, and it never does what is hoped for; it does not appease the dead. Of course revenge is understandable, because the alternative is so costly - to feel grief and express it un-reactively. Grief often needs more support than a therapist can provide alone. The best support comes from contact with the whole field, being able to see everyone more clearly, and from redirecting love and loyalty in ways that have a better effect. In a constellation, as in a person's heart, when the dead or the rejected are properly seen by the living they move into the background. They seem comforted most of all if they see we who come later making good use of our lives.

Revenge and retaliation do serve connection at a personal level because they help people share their guilt. They are part of a natural impulse to give and receive, even in the negative. But at the wider societal level when numbers are big, retaliating is endless and can't create what it seeks. As I understand it, it is grief that brings things to an end, or at least moves things on. (As I was writing about this the news covered the Japanese commemoration of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima sixty years ago. I was tremendously touched by their collective emphasis on the honouring of the dead. It reminded me of when Willy Brandt fell to his knees some years ago at the Jewish holocaust memorial in Poland. They are profound gestures, with small but good effect.)

But to take on this view would create a huge shift in our basic ways of understanding the world. It is not just politicians and freedom fighters that think differently. Along with most religions, Christianity stresses the goodness of taking on the burdens of another. It is seen as a high calling of atonement and sacrifice. Jesus spoke much about forgiveness. Yet by focusing on the *consequences* of these noble qualities, things don't look so hopeful. As Hellinger says 'what I forgive I pack in my rucksack.'

And then there is outrage, another energy fuelling political action in the world. Hellinger wrote, 'A third party who is outraged takes away something from those who have actually suffered. They feel they have the right to do evil things in response without feeling guilty.' Outrage is a feeling I used to admire in others, a noble energy, highly committed, morally clear. People I knew who had lots of it were deeply tied to their causes, even as they, paradoxically, got to seem rather similar to the people who outraged them. (Another of Bert's condensed teachings lies in the sentence, 'those whom you condemn, you imitate.') Accusation burdens the accuser. It is hard to find a position that doesn't keep people entangled. Hellinger had the courage to tell the group in Israel with whom he spent some days doing constellations, that he saw perpetrators continuing to be represented in their systems, but now by the Jews themselves, because they had so deeply excluded the Nazis. The most aggressive members of the family systems were the ones most identified with their aggressors, and who carried the aggression on, shifting the target but continuing the process. It helps make sense of how many Israelis view the Palestinians, uprooted people like themselves. Hellinger wrote, 'A perpetrator can only change if he is loved'. What a big idea. Perhaps more than that is also needed, but love is central. This is because, when someone kills, even in war, they join the system of their victims. Excluding them means they are represented by those who come later. That's not how we usually view perpetrators. If we genuinely want peace there is no avoiding this narrow and sometimes excruciating path of inclusion.

I have spent years getting used to this perspective as it is so demanding on my biases. In learning to constellate, I discovered that the only position that carried the respect of all the representatives was one where I was far enough back from the situation, whatever it was, to be on everyone's side. On the side of abusers, adulterers, murderers even - of all perpetrators. I have probably been given more than I have delivered by making this

demand on myself, to see all as equal, all taken into service of some kind, all acting from some kind of loyalty and need to belong, to make sense of how people have been cast out, rejected or despised. Naturally, it's not a stance that I manage in all of my life, but the more I have it the more peace I feel. Peace with the Nazi culture's history and imperatives, even with al Quaida. Everyone still has to carry the consequences of what they have done, no matter how entangled or innocent they feel. But as a stance it changes the moral climate for exploring possibilities.

And when I engage in systemic work I am given strength to hold this peaceful position. Constellations naturally generate a special atmosphere of archetypal and collective experience. We get to look at real essentials: life, death, loss, sex, war, guilt, innocence, love, and bonding. That naturally invites an expanded outlook, where past, present and future co-exist, where love shines out of people's stories, and gratitude flows. The energy generated often makes it possible for people to take courageous and difficult steps, so that they can come into an easier relationship to what they have done or failed to do with their lives. A bigger outlook, one that doesn't feed off blame and resentment and criticism, can then replace the stale old stories. Often there is depth and lightness in the new pictures. Participants celebrate ordinary, everyday actions that give people weight, like having children or staying put, not only heroic and special moments. The work keeps us focused on strengths rather than injuries.

There are additional gifts for me as a therapist, to do with getting disciplined practice in not doing, in standing aside and letting the field of the constellation reveal itself and move in ways I could never think of on my own. That, repeatedly, teaches me trust. It gives me a friendly yet separate place to stand, and endless practice in agreeing to the world as it is, with good and bad completely tied together.

Everyone here in this room has had a long journey in therapy or they wouldn't be here. I shan't go into any detail about my own, but I do want to say that Hellinger's systemic approach really did feel as if it was taking me somewhere new, touching issues that up until then I had barely been able to give a name to. I first went into therapy at the age of seventeen, trying whatever was available back in the sixties. It was haphazard. You can imagine my first experience in a Gestalt group was a revelation – of experiencing vibrant contact, taking risks, coming alive. But there wasn't much emphasis on my family history. Somehow the individual and group therapy experiences I had didn't touch much of the *me-in-my-bigger-context*. I had no way of seeing how entangled I was in quite serious family issues. I suffered from feelings that no amount of individual therapy had addressed. My actions often continued to be confused and my intimate relationships unsettled.

It was a revelation to look at these issues through a systemic lens. The lives and actions of all those who had gone before me in my family turned out to be critically influential. Through the constellations I did, I learned how to 'separate our fates with love'. That's not just a phrase: I am blessed these days, as never before, by being in loving contact with everyone in my family, both alive and dead. I have only been given a few constellations but each one has slowly filtered into my soul, impacting and settling me. I marvel at the power of those few interventions, each of less than an hour, compared to my long years of regular therapy. (It seems important at a political and economic level, to engage in making provision for something brief and relatively cheap.) Obviously, such challenging work benefits from preparation and follow up, but it does go straight to the point and it attends to what the individual focus can't – those hidden identifications, disorders of love, lack of facing the consequences of actions – those sorry sentences that as children we are called to utter by how we live – let me carry or share that, follow you, have this burden instead of

you, put this right that you could not – even if I don't know who you are. Even if it will never bring relief, and even if it damages love.

As you know, Hellinger and his colleagues have demonstrated constellations in many war-affected countries, from working with the legacy of the last war in Germany, to Israel and Rwanda. I too have had some opportunities to work with these themes. I see both personal and organisational problems that have arisen out of a systemic entanglement with past events – carried by them even when they may have had little or no knowledge of it. And I am sometimes able to work with organisations that have been attempting to do good but have been inadvertently making matters worse.

I would like to describe an incident from my work last year. By chance perhaps, it relates to finding a good relationship with the Muslim community in America. Resolution arrived through becoming humbler and accepting the fate of others.

I was invited to consult to an American political activist in Maine who ran a support agency for refugees from the Sudan. He wanted help because the take-up was low for what his agency was offering, and lowest of all was the use made of it by the Muslim woman refugees whom he deemed the most in need. He wanted to know what he could do to increase their take up. I offered to set up a constellation.

Like many political activists he felt righteously angry about certain features of the landscape he focused on. He was incandescent that the US government was financially supporting the Sudanese civil war by its arms sales. He himself took sides in the war. He was indignant that the Sudanese men seemed to be stopping the women from coming to his centre and receiving help.

I asked him to set up representatives for himself, for the men and woman refugees, several people to represent the situation back in the Sudan, and someone to be the spirit of the American government. What unfolded shocked him. There was no one in the constellation that appeared to want to have anything to do with him, and the women least of all.

I won't go into describing all the stages of the constellation. It unfolded very slowly, and often I had no idea where the next impetus for movement might come. I just had to wait, and then something would open up somewhere in the constellation. I could not initiate without support from the representatives. However, eventually the representative of my client was able to start aligning himself differently. He bowed to the spirit of America that had given a home to fleeing people from all over the world, respecting its power and its outlook. He faced the war and all its victims in the Sudan, without taking a partisan position. And, hardest of all for him, his representative bowed to the particular cultural way of being in America that these refugees felt right about, with all its gender discrimination. As his representative enacted each humbling movement my client watched the constellation relax and unfold, melting tight positions on all sides. Spontaneously, the women stepped out from behind the men and smiled at him, as did the representative of the dead in the Sudan. The representative for the American foreign policy also reported feeling more generous and flexible.

This was not the outcome he expected at all, and it winded him for a while. There was a long silence, as there often is after a constellation. His friends and colleagues who were present felt equally affected – they began wondering if their ideological positions were part of the problem rather than the solution. But how could they possibly give them up? It was precisely those beliefs that defined their community.

Fortunately this brave man continued to explore these questions with his consultant who had been in the room too, reviewing the cost of his adherence to his particular positions and passions. I left it with them.

We are all part of history that carries big and complex legacies: our colonial and industrial past, slavery, communism, two world wars. The relevant history, the bigger truths, emerge in constellations. Then representatives can subject themselves to the natural forces in the situation that lead, however slowly, towards peace and reconciliation. They demonstrate the power of respect and inclusion. Simple words but very demanding feelings. But the representatives show us the way.

(Last year I also worked with a group of primary school teachers in Wiltshire as part of a research project run by the **nowhere** foundation on the value of the systemic approach in the classroom. We introduced the basic philosophy and gave them some experience of resolving issues using constellations, and they took the ideas back and developed them with their children, using support from us at the foundation. Here is a little quote from the final report of this project, also relating to a Muslim question.

Child A, a Muslim girl aged 11, was struggling with aspects of socialising and learning in school. She had not been allowed to take part in the year six residential trip to Cornwall – the only child not allowed to go. In addition there were several parts of the curriculum not available to her on grounds of her religious beliefs. The teacher carried sadness and frustration that this child could not take a full part in the classroom activities.

But when the teacher considered this child's conscience group she could see that her primary loyalty was to her family and culture and that the child could understand and accept the situation. The teacher was able to honour her cultural attachment and support her to uphold them.

At the end of term performance, the child sang an unaccompanied song beautifully. Her father, who hardly ever visits the school because of time pressures at work, had slipped into the hall to hear her. She saw him and turned to her teacher to ask if she could sing an extra song just for her father. Again unaccompanied, she sang a Turkish song exquisitely to her father. The whole row of parents were moved and touched by her powerful performance, which was a public declaration of her culture, language and loyalty.)

I have watched Bert Hellinger bring simplicity and wisdom to people who can't see their way forward, whether they are suffering from physical, psychological, spiritual or organisational symptoms. His approach has captured a generation, and his work keeps evolving. I would like to indicate some of the distinctive qualities of the approach, because I have found in them a 'bigger' framework - ordinary truths but with an affinity, as in Gestalt, to many spiritual paths. The approach actively emphasises respect, acknowledgement, gratitude, and agreement with fate – that which has happened and can't be changed, but which can be a source of strength if seen and honoured.

It sees love as a central motivating force. Perhaps all therapy deals with love, but here it is seen as the only leverage for change.

All therapy deals with the tension between the individual and the collective, between civilisation and its discontents. Systemic work emphasises our biological prioritising of the collective. The group comes before the individual.

Many spiritual paths see sex as problematic. Hellinger described it once as the highest spiritual act, since nothing more serves life nor establishes a bond.

All therapy helps people get to know and express their feelings and fantasies, but this work focuses more strongly on actions and their consequences.

Postmodernism stresses that what we see is as much a function of the way we have created our lenses than to do with anything 'out there' we could call 'reality', but this work rests on features of life, of Being even, that are far bigger than what we have the freedom to create and change. They are what Hellinger calls 'the orders of love', those universal forces that can bring joy and peace when we align ourselves to them. It took a while to engage with this perspective, brought up as I was in that thought-world where it seemed we were able to make things the way we wanted to see them. I understood about some orders like gravity, or even the law of gestalt, that universal tendency to move towards completion. It takes energy to oppose these orders that both enable and limit our freedom, and often someone else pays for what we deny. At their simplest, the orders of love show us that everyone in a system has an equal right to belong, and that love is served when those who come before give to those who come after. They sound simple but their ramifications are immense. It means that we can't sustain any solution that harms others within our system. And we can only deal with issues that are ours, not take on those that belong to those who came before us.

I always thought of health, in Gestalt terms, as to do with flow and energy and creativity. I now think of it also as to do with being in one's right place and at the right time. From that, all the rest flows and follows. It sounds rather conservative. But somehow it frames everything properly.

From having now done thousands of constellations I have a changed view about what it means to be an individual, and where memory and knowledge must be stored – certainly not in the individual brain. How is it that my experience can surface in the body of another representative? And change as something else in the field shifts? How do we know what we don't know that we know? We truly are connected by countless invisible threads, and belong together. Scientific knowledge may help us answer this question eventually but for now it remains mysterious.

And it isn't just people that are connected – the fact is that you can constellate anything and everything. You can include the component aspects of a homeopathic remedy, the stock exchange, the spirit of a nation, dogs and horses, or the supply chain of a global corporation. If your need for knowledge and insight is real, representatives can embody what is relevant. It seems that whatever exists in space or time can take form.

Doing systemic work I also have a different way of experimenting if I compare it to how I have worked as a Gestalt therapist. Using representatives, and guided by their responses, it feels more like the setting up a kind of field conversation, between the many voices of the wider system. The therapist can offer hypotheses, establish more reality or use the orders, but the forces of the field carry an imperative. Dialogue that heals is with the key people from the system, not with the therapist alone. It is a different style of connecting, one that needs more distance from my clients so that I can speak freely with them about what I see. It has made me wary about doing long-term therapy, where these practices are almost impossible to maintain. Over time, we all lose our distance, we get drawn into the system, and we learn what we must not say. A more detached stance could feel hard for clients, but it is countered by the deep intimacy that the constellations generate, the heart opening energies that emerge from seeing people in a bigger context.

I am left with a very big question, which is, what supports the movement – any movement - that would help us identify with a larger group, the one that also includes our enemy? Can anything make the idea of humanity, or the world, carry the sort of sacrificial energy as does a family or a religion? What would give us a connection with this kind of vertical movement of identification, one that included the other? Are there experiences and rituals that would make a difference? Rupert Sheldrake thinks of this shift in terms more in terms of spirit than soul, because soul takes us back to past patterns whereas spirit, our innate creativity, takes us beyond and into something larger. If soul brings us order and form, then spirit goes into the realm of the unpredictable, the new, and the mysterious. It is not so easy any more for us humans to be following old patterns in the modern world. Many old patterns have been disrupted, huge forces of change are at work, and so the creative role of spirit may be all the more pressing. Perhaps we will find new levels of creativity in the great world emergencies of life today. Hellinger says, 'don't look for completion. Be happy if things are unfinished. Everything creative never comes to an end. There is never a final truth or achievement. It's always new and changing'.

I believe that the strengths we need come from such openness of soul and spirit. Marianne was open in this way. She never stuck to the usual boundaries. And as I hold these different perspectives within me, I wonder whether any boundaries have more than a specific and temporary reality. The self, the other, the field – they are indivisible. But at any moment we shine a light on only parts. I look forward to hearing how the discussants here will respond and add to this unfinished journey between Gestalt, the systemic and the spiritual that I have begun.

September 10 2005
Judith Hemming
(*Final revision, as given on the day*)