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In the field of soul

**Hunter Beaumont Interviewed
By Judith Hemming**

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Editor's Note: Hunter Beaumont is a greatly respected Gestalt teacher, thinker and therapist in Germany and in Britain (which he has visited frequently over the last twelve years and where he has had a significant impact on numerous trainees and professionals). He was on the faculty and was President of the Los Angeles Gestalt Institute before moving to Germany in 1980, where he was a guest professor of psychology for three years. He has recently closed his large psychotherapeutic practice working with individuals, couples and families, and is concentrating on teaching in Munich and in other locations in Germany and beyond.

He has long been a proponent of what he has described as 'the integrative intention of the Gestalt therapy established by Paul Goodman and Fritz and Laura Perls'. Accordingly, in this complex and interesting interview, he discusses his need – in order to be clinically effective – to integrate other methods and concepts into his overall Gestalt-based perspective: notably, object relations, Masterson's work on borderline process, Ericksonian hypnotherapy, and most recently the innovative work of the family systems therapist and theorist, Bert Hellinger. Hunter Beaumont has translated and edited the first major book on Hellinger's work in English (Love's Hidden Symmetry by Bert Hellinger with Gunthard Weber and Hunter Beaumont, 1998, Zeig, Tucker & Co., Phoenix, Arizona, USA).

In this far-ranging interview, among many other topics, Hunter Beaumont describes his early experiences of Gestalt therapy; how he believes the 'soul' and its movements are essential for the therapist to attend to phenomenologically; and the revolutionary thinking of Hellinger's approach to working with the structures of the field – i.e. its in-built 'orders' – which constrain and permit the flow of love and energy between family members. He describes how working with family entanglements, sometimes across several generations, can be an additional focus of psychotherapeutic work which complements other approaches. We are delighted to publish this controversial interview with one of Gestalt therapy's most independent-minded and integrative thinkers.

Early Experiences of Gestalt Therapy

Judith: First, I would like to ask you about the past. I'm interested to know what ingredients went into your training as a therapist and how you found your way to Gestalt.

Hunter: My initial interest was dealing with my own pain. My parents were both in Jungian analysis, so that's what I did as well. My wife discovered Gestalt in graduate school, and eventually took me to see Jim Simkin give a public demonstration. It must have been about 1968. That first time I didn't like him much. He seemed like an authoritarian and uncaring person, and anyway, I was sure that the Jungians already knew everything worth knowing about psychotherapy. Nevertheless, something about the lecture-demonstration fascinated me, and I got curious about Gestalt in spite of my negative reaction to Jim. I began some personal Gestalt work with Bob Resnick and soon had to admit that Gestalt was better able to put into practice what the Jungians were talking about. I also met Jim and learned an important lesson about the limited validity of first impressions.

Judith: What in particular did you value in that first experience of Gestalt?

Hunter: It was a long time ago. I remember how frustrated I got in analysis when my analyst would say 'Well, that's very interesting. You're real stuck on that point. Let's just wait and see what your unconscious does with it.' Bob Resnick's message translated in my mind as 'Well, you're real stuck and we'd better wait and see what your organismic self-regulation is going to come up with. But while you're waiting you might want to try...' and then Bob would offer me an experiment or an exercise, perhaps a chance to talk to a part of myself or to allow a part of myself to speak. It has all become so self evident, but my excitement was enormous back then, to discover that there were methods to bring the voices of the unconscious into awareness. I was very impatient then and I liked being able to do something. Actually, I'm no longer so sure that was a good thing. It added to my confusion about what we can do with will, trying and ego-intentions, and what can only arise spontaneously out of the soul's re-organising itself. Still, it helped me to begin to understand the process of healing the split between our conscious intentions and what we actually find ourselves doing.

Judith: You are describing a complex relationship between what people consciously want and what they actually do...

Hunter: Yes. It's obvious that many of our decisions are made outside of awareness and are at variance with what we consciously believe about ourselves or intend. In Gestalt, we have correctly seen that taking responsibility for what we actually do – as opposed to our undone good intentions – facilitates healing, but what we do is not necessarily what we want. It isn't completely true to say, 'You really want to do what you're doing'. It's fascinating that we're capable of doing something we really don't want. Sometimes, it's as if the 'I' that wants, and the 'I' that acts, are different.

Judith: So how did your Gestalt therapy connect with the rest of your training?

Hunter: As I said, I started out quite young in Jungian analysis, then I worked with Bob Resnick in the early days when he was sharing a practice with Jim Simkin. In graduate school I learned behaviour therapy, Rogerian client centred therapy, and psychosynthesis. I can still remember the struggle trying to integrate psychosynthesis with Gestalt. We would practice Assagioli's sentences, such as 'I am not my body. I have a body. I'm not my anger or my grief. I have anger or grief.' Those exercises of disidentification had a profoundly calming effect on the soul. And then I'd go to the Gestalt training and practice the opposite, saying 'I don't have emotions; I am my emotions. I don't have a body; I am my body. I don't have hate; I am hate....'. Those exercises of identification, of taking responsibility, also had a profoundly healing effect. At that time I couldn't understand how such contradictory structures could each have a healing effect. It took months before something in my mind relaxed enough to realise that both were true in different ways, that paradox and contradiction exist quite comfortably in the soul. It's only the linear rational mind that has problems with contradiction. I learned at that time to pay attention to the criteria of the actual effect on my inner experience, the realm of what I call the soul. Learning how to hold contradictions until integration emerges was the foundation for a lot of the work that came later.

Judith: You were already drawing on different psychotherapy traditions.

Hunter: Yes, that was something important that I learned during that period: cross fertilisation of ideas. Gestalt changed my understanding of Assagioli, just as Assagioli changed my understanding of Gestalt. I still use a modified form of his sentences. Rather than, 'I have a pain, but I'm not my pain', I say, 'I'm not identical with my pain; I'm something in addition to it'. That allows our attention to move to what we are, in addition to our momentary experience, to remember it. And the Gestalt sentences weren't quite right either. It's not true that 'I am my body.' It is actually more like, 'I and body are part of the same whole'; or 'I am not separate from the body. Body suffers from what I do just as 'I' suffer from what body does; they share a space'. Body and soul co-exist because they are different dimensions of a single reality.

Gestalt and The Soul

Judith: What do you mean when you use the word 'soul'?

Hunter: The Jungians have always used 'soul', and recently Thomas Moore's book, *Care of the Soul* (1994) has brought the word into popular consciousness again. As I use it, the word is not a theological word at all; it's a phenomenological word. Primarily I use it to describe a certain realm of experience that is different from other realms of experience. For example, let's say I'm thinking about a shopping list, or I'm solving a mathematical problem. Those are clearly activities of the mind. They are thoughts. If on the other hand, I break my leg, get sunburn or cut myself, I feel pain in the tissue, in the physical body.

Mental and somatic are two major dimensions of human experience: the mind – clearly the rational; and the body – clearly the somatic. Then there's the realm in between – experiences like yearning, joy, hope or strength. When I'm feeling something like yearning, it's more than just a thought. Yearning has weight and substance that I actually perceive: it can be described phenomenologically. And yet it is not something that's

identical to the pain or the heat or the cold that the physical body registers. Yearning has elements of both mental and somatic experience, yet it is something different than either of them alone, and it is different than the sum of their parts.

Some people like to use the word 'emotions' to describe such experiences, but the word 'emotions' is less beautiful than the word soul, and it has very different connotations. Emotions are something I create or that arise in me. But when I say, 'I'm in love', or 'I'm in despair,' or 'I'm in a funk', there's a poetry there that describes a different quality of experience. They're not only in me, I'm also in them. To be soulful is to attend to this dimension of our experience and to care for it. On the other hand, to be emotional has a different flavour. When I talk about 'having an emotion' or 'having a hormonal reaction' joy and hope and sadness are reduced to being physiological experiences, or chemical epiphenomena. Emotions certainly are hormonally mediated, but at the phenomenological level, 'soul' more accurately describes my actual experience. I use 'soul' in this phenomenological way to direct attention to this realm and quality of experience.

By the way, Kurt Lewin noticed that everything that has effects is real. In this sense, soul is very real. Soul is a very big topic.

Judith: Does that make a difference for your work? Could you describe how you focus on the soul in your work?

Hunter: It can be very powerful to track body sensations, thoughts, fantasies or expectations when you work with someone. In a similar way, you can also track soul. For example, I suppose we've all had the experience of doing something we thought was OK and noticing in dismay that our soul closed down and shrivelled up. Or of doing something the super-ego forbade and noticing that our soul opened up – as, say, a powerful experience of release. You can feel the movement of the soul closing or opening, and you can track that and notice what is happening that allows your soul to open so that you feel yourself expanding, becoming alive, becoming vulnerable perhaps, or showing yourself – they are movements of the soul. It's not an idea or a fantasy, it's an actual experience. And if you track that as a therapist, asking of your client, is he or she opened or closed? strong or weak? you come to very different conclusions about what's going on than if you ask if such and such is logically true or what's happening in the physical body. It points the therapy in a different direction.

So soul is what we actually experience opening and closing. If I ask people who come to me if they have ever had the experience of just shutting down, or hearing someone say something and just opening up, they know exactly what I'm talking about.

Judith: And is the phenomenology of the movement of the soul what guides you towards gestalt completions?

Hunter: Soul recognises whether certain gestalts are open or closed in a way that's different from how the mind recognises it. The therapy that tracks the movements of the soul comes to different conclusions from the therapy that tracks the opening and closing of the gestalts of the mind.

The Autonomous Criterion

Judith: It sounds as if you've got a different view of gestalt completion and have left behind the idea of being guided by what Perls et al. called the autonomous criterion.

Hunter: Perls, Hefferline and Goodman didn't quite convince me with their idea of autonomous criteria. They were hoping that the criterion of the goodness of a gestalt could offer an autonomous criterion about the goodness of contact, but the goodness of a gestalt doesn't take us very far in assessing the goodness of an action. For example, most atrocities are committed by people with clear gestalts. And most people doing evil – Nazis or Stalinists or racists for example – believe that they are doing good. The great perpetrators have very pregnant gestalts with clear foreground/background differentiation and lots of energy. If you were to ask of someone, 'is your soul open or closed?' or 'are you looking at your victim? Do you see a human being? Are you guilty?' their answers would most certainly be different than the perpetrators'. These questions are essential to determine the goodness of an action, but they are not autonomous criteria. They require judgements and depend on social consensus.

I do think there are autonomous criteria for truth that allow us to break out of the confines of social conditioning, but I'm not convinced that the goodness of the gestalt provides them. We can break out of our perceptual and moral biases under special conditions, but we usually need someone we trust to confront our prejudices. There have always been perpetrators who came to regret their actions and to feel genuine remorse. That's what repentance is, re-opening your soul. Maybe, if they had been feeling their soul in the first place, they probably wouldn't have been able to do what they did.

If we want to grow beyond our own limitations, we need to find trustworthy sources of feedback that shock us into wider awareness, because until our contact with our soul is well developed, we may not notice if it is open or closed. One source of feedback for me is my wife. She can show me if I'm shaping the world to fit a concept, or whether I'm actually perceiving what's there. Because I trust her, I allow her to penetrate my belief about myself and the world. I allow her to rekindle my curiosity. When I'm in that lost space dominated by object relations, believing I already know how things are, I'm no longer curious.

Integrating Other Ideas into Gestalt

Judith: I know that many therapeutic approaches have fed into your own, including Ericksonian, Jungian, and object relations theory. Yet you have remained a Gestalt practitioner. What do you see as Gestalt theory's distinctive quality.

Hunter: I know there's great interest right now in defining the orthodoxy of the Gestalt approach, what is 'true' Gestalt and what isn't. The Gestalt approach I value loves truth, looking at what really IS, and it's willing to sacrifice concepts, preconceptions, beliefs, in order to honour the perception of novelty. Fritz, as difficult as he was, had the wonderful sentence, 'There is no end to integration'. The old man, until the end of his life, was interested in what IS. He was open to being surprised. Orthodoxy kills the spirit of inquiry and integration. I continue actively to practice Gestalt as an integrating

approach as best I am able. I have a deep appreciation for many different aspects of Gestalt psychotherapy. However, it has been a long time since I've read a Gestalt paper that excited me and opened up a new area of understanding. I find that sad.

Judith: Could you give an example of what you have found to be important new information that Gestaltists need to integrate into the main core of the Gestalt approach?

Hunter: I'll give several. Very early in my therapeutic career I was having difficulty with certain patients. I got supervision from some of the most prominent Gestalt therapists of that time, and what they told me to do didn't work. They finally said, 'Well, the patients don't want to change'. But that wasn't what I felt. I was picking up something that said, 'These people are desperate to change, and there's something about how I'm working with them that isn't working.' Eventually, I found James Masterson's book, *Individual Psychotherapy with the Adult Borderline* that had just been published in the early 1970s. I read about forty pages and what he described gave me a key. I got what I needed from Masterson and with that information I suddenly could work with those patients. Instead of finding them impossible people, I found we could form a profound alliance. They taught me immeasurable, invaluable amounts. I think about some of them to this day. They are present in my heart. That's one example.

Another example is Milton Erickson's hypnotherapy. A lot of what he does violates the so-called Gestalt rules but it works. Like many other Gestaltists, I had some prejudice about hypnotherapy. I thought it was manipulative, that the interventions came from the therapist and so on. What I found when I trained in Ericksonian hypnotherapy was such a refined dialogic approach, that I was suddenly able to see how manipulative the Gestalt approach can be. That was a real eye opener.

A third example is the systemic family therapy of Bert Hellinger. Again, I've worked with clients on issues and themes that just wouldn't move with the methods that I had available. Hellinger's approach opened the way for many people to profound, sometimes miraculous, healing and I had to understand why and how it worked, and again criticism has been abundant. But the implications of the observations I've made while applying his approach have changed my entire belief system about reality.

Judith: In an earlier paper you wrote for this Journal (1992), you have similarly addressed the issues of working with people whose relational processes can threaten their capacity for self-cohesion, people who might be labelled borderline or narcissistic. You criticised Gestalt's original concept of self-regulation as an inadequate way of understanding their self-process, preferring the concept of *self-organisation*. I imagine that those formulations emerged from your reflections on working with those early clients you remember.

Hunter: Once I read Masterson and got healed of my prejudice about psychoanalysis, I moved on to Kernberg, Kohut, Winnicott, Klein, Guntrip, Mahler and Horowitz as the next steps in trying to understand the borderline and object relations phenomena. The object relations theorists understand that much of what we contact is not the environmental field but our mental constructs. That means, we don't usually contact the actual environment, but rather our mental representations become our environment. Much of what Gestaltists call contact is in fact nothing more than an object relation.

Judith: As I read how you are mostly understood by students of Gestalt here in Britain, there are two central ideas of yours that are often quoted. Firstly, Gestalt has tended to be too figure-bound, and secondly, that we need to be able to co-ordinate our 'selfing process' so we can take account of all that we are rather than identifying with a momentary figure of contact or self.

Hunter: If that's how I've been understood, I'm touched. My concern is that in Gestalt therapy we've tended to ignore the background, our larger context. That includes our own background as well as the client's. What is the environment? What is the ground of our Being, in all its complexity? We need to be clear about the assumptions that inform our work and our view of reality. For example, we make assumptions about people's stuckness. I remember in my training that I could watch some people actually go through the 'layers' that Perls talked about, from phoney, through to the impasse, implosion and explosion. But I also saw that some people would just implode and never go to the explosion. At that time, we thought they were interrupting a gestalt completion, so we worked with frustrating their interruption. When they still didn't explode, we thought they didn't want to change, that they were sabotaging, and so on.

After I'd found Harry Guntrip and also Stephen Johnson (Characterological Transformation, the Hard Word Miracle, 1985) the whole idea of the schizoid position suddenly became a tool to understand why some people didn't explode. Their observations made clear why certain popular Gestalt techniques – being ironic, pushing, frustrating the avoidance, getting dialogically confluent – just didn't work. For some people, it isn't a question of blocking the completion of a gestalt, there's a real deficit. They have unstable self-organisation. Once you see the actual phenomenology involved, it isn't difficult to put the observations into a Gestalt language, but it was Guntrip and Johnson who taught me to recognise the fragility of self-organisation. My Gestalt assumptions were working in the background to prevent me from seeing the deficits for what they were.

I wrote a paper (in German) on diagnosis (Beaumont 1988) in which I tried to outline what therapy can do and what it can't do. There has always been a strong objection in Gestalt circles to labelling people, and I agree with that. It is an insult to human dignity to label people with psychiatric epithets. The other side of that is that the psychiatric diagnoses are invaluable tools for a therapist. They help you recognise very quickly the particular issues with which a client is struggling. When I say of a client that he's schizoid or borderline or narcissistic I don't mean this person is in that box. Having information about some of the most popular patterns that people have used to deal with painful situations helps me to recognise someone in a way that allows them to feel understood by me, within a few minutes. I have plenty of time later to adjust for their individual variations. If I have the traditional diagnostic categories in my background, I can use them or forget them. If they're not there at all, I have no choice. The literature about diagnosis helps me to recognise what's there before I've had lots of experience. Psychiatric diagnosis compensated for my lack of experience. As I get older, I'm finding it easier and easier to forget what's no longer useful. I don't think much about diagnosis these days, but young therapists can learn a lot.

Heath and the Spiritual Path

Judith: If you use these diagnostic categories, presumably you have a model of what it would be like to be healthy. That must be part of your typology too.

Hunter: I suppose that's true, but I don't think about it much. It's implicit, in the background. My model of health is hard to describe. I've worked hard to cultivate a place within myself where I can go and be safe while I'm confronted with painful feedback or perceptions that don't fit my beliefs about myself, my self image. That's the prerequisite for being able to perceive novelty and to be open to criticism, having somewhere inside myself I can go while my beliefs about myself are being challenged and my world is falling apart. Where do I go to be safe, without shutting down, without denying, without getting violent or abusive or defensive? Where do I go? Having that place and loving what IS more than what I want to believe – that's health, I suppose.

Judith: As I hear you describe what you see as health, you seem to be describing therapy in a way that is close to a spiritual path.

Hunter: I'm very careful here. I think there's been a lot of mischief done by therapists 'combining' spiritual and psychological work – just as there has been harm caused by spiritual teachers inappropriately applying psychological knowledge and technique. There is no doubt that psychotherapeutic knowledge and traditional spiritual work supplement and complement one another, but combining them is tricky. Spiritual truths are bigger than psychotherapy and they're far older. Eric Neumann believed that the cave paintings were the first evidence of the spiritual path; people journeying down into the depths of the earth to do some kind of transformation process. Some of those paintings are 20,000 years old. So the spiritual path is at least that old and Gestalt has been going for about 50 years.

I stretch the boundaries of psychotherapy as far as I can in a spiritual direction, but I remain a psychotherapist and I don't try to cross the boundary. I've had the privilege of knowing several authentic spiritual masters, and they're in a very different place than I am. I accept that and don't try to emulate or copy them. I'm a therapist.

Nevertheless, there are some similarities between working on yourself in a spiritual way and working on yourself in a psychotherapeutic way. One Sufi definition of a master is someone who loves you until you're able to love yourself. That comes close to what we can offer as therapists. James Masterson talks about the therapist defending the client's Self until the client can do that him/herself. Kohut had the idea of mirroring, Carl Rogers of unconditional positive regard. When we mirror someone, we don't DO anything. We listen, we hear, but we don't DO. Mirroring that way creates a feedback loop that can facilitate awareness. People sometimes say, 'I hear you', or 'I see', or 'I'm open to you, and who you are affects me. I allow you to touch me.' The effect of touching them and being touched by them becomes visible. That's mirroring. Developing the capacity to mirror as not doing is extremely demanding. You must learn to forego all intention, including the intention to help. You have to trust a larger process. So, you see, mirroring or unconditional positive regard in psychotherapy has something spiritual about it. It isn't the therapist who heals. The healing comes like a kind of grace to those who wait, centred in non-doing, both therapist and client.

But even when we see these similarities between spiritual work and psychotherapy, it's a mistake to forget that the Gestalt community is not a spiritual community, and in spite of our interest in community, we don't support one another as true spiritual work requires.

Judith: I would like to return to the key notion of the self being a self-organising self. Does this relate to field independence?

Hunter: Not exactly. I see a different emphasis. I've suggested (British Gestalt Journal 1992) that we have outgrown the term self-regulation, the traditional Gestalt term for describing the dynamic of individuals interacting with the environment. I proposed we use the term more current in systemic thinking – that of self-organising systems.

The difference between self-regulation and self-organisation is huge. They reflect different thought worlds. Self-regulation implies that we leave and return to a homeostatic balance. Self-organisational assumes an evolving system. Change is not just a response to novelty in the environment; it is inherent to the organism itself. There is an inherent thrust to become or unfold within self-organising systems.

Now, with that basic paradigm shift, we can reconsider field dependence and field independence. Are we not always dependent on our environment? Is there any possibility of existence without an environment that supports us? Ultimately, field independence is impossible. The crucial issue, as you suggest, is the degree to which self-organisation is limited or enhanced by a group of reference or by family of origin and by our membership in any social group.

One example that is close to home is to notice how huffy some people get when their assumptions about Gestalt are questioned. Their sense of self depends on their identification with Gestalt. If you question Gestalt, they experience a personal threat. So they are field dependent for a stable sense of self. The emphasis, however, needs not to be on developing field independence, but rather on increasing the stability of their self-organisation. Increased field independence follows automatically as a consequence. If someone tries to increase their field independence without increasing the stability of self-organisation, they quickly move beyond their support and will fail.

The Order of Love

Judith: I want to move on now and ask you about your current involvement with the form of therapy created by the German systemic therapist Bert Hellinger that he calls 'The Orders of Love'. You have been teaching it here in Britain for the past five years or more and have also translated his ideas and produced the first English book of Hellinger's teaching (Love's Hidden Symmetry, 1998). You are now collaborating and working with him in both America and Europe. Many readers of this journal may know little or nothing about his life and what has influenced his thinking. Could you begin by telling us a little about that?

Hunter: The historical life experiences of Bert Hellinger have certainly been important. As a young person of 17, in Germany, he found himself on the Nazi list of people suspected of being an enemy of the people. He was refused his high school diploma. Being on the list was simply one small step away from being on the death list. At the end of the war Hitler drafted all of the 15-17 year olds and threw these into the war as cannon fodder. Hellinger's escape from the Gestapo came by being drafted into the army as part

of that last ditch sacrifice of the youth of Germany to Hitler's madness. However, he was captured, went to prison, escaped, and then became a Catholic priest.

He worked with the Zulu people of South Africa, living with them, speaking their language, preaching, and ministering in Zulu. During that period he had very little contact with white people. But he had an experience with his bishop where he was asked to submit himself in a way that wasn't true for him, so he left his order and went to Vienna to be trained as a psychoanalyst. He was just in the last stages of training when his analyst presented him with a book by Janov about Primal Therapy. He went to America and studied with Janov for eight months, came back to Vienna and wanted to integrate body-oriented therapy into psychoanalysis. As was typical for him he simply left his training institute, abandoning his credentials and his degree in psychoanalysis in order to preserve his autonomy. Later he discarded what wasn't useful about Janov.

So, Bert Hellinger is a person who has experienced in his personal life three of the most powerful ideologies of our century – the Nazi movement, the Catholic Church, and psychoanalysis. He is a warrior for the ability and the need of the individual human to defend itself against group pressures, not to surrender dignity or autonomy.

Judith: For you, I understand, Bert Hellinger's systemic insights and innovative style of working have found a significant place alongside other kinds of therapeutic approaches. What needs does Hellinger's work fulfil, do you think, that hadn't been so well addressed before? What do you especially value in his thinking?

Hunter: That's a nice question. What Hellinger has understood is how systemic turbulence disturbs self-organisation, and conversely, how systemic order is related to the completion of gestalts. I do not know anybody else who has done that. Gordon Wheeler (1991) wrote about the field being structured rather than random. It's not empty, it has structure, but he had difficulty telling us how it is structured.

One structure all Gestaltists know well is the tendency for gestalts to complete themselves. That's clearly something that Being imposes on us. It takes energy to hold a gestalt open. That's an order of Being. It is in the field as a structure of the field. Jung's archetypes are also structures of the psychological field that shape our experience. They give our experience form.

What Hellinger has been interested in relates to what there is in the field that supports love and intimacy. It's clear that if we do something that hurts love, it withers and dies. If we want it to mature and grow and flourish, what do we have to do? How must we behave? What choices must we make? Bert Hellinger was the first person I heard talking about this.

Judith: Can you give an example for those unfamiliar with Hellinger's ideas?

Hunter: Yes, one example would be that in the relationship between parents and children, Hellinger saw that love works better when the parents behave like parents and the children like children. Love is damaged by anything else. The specifics of the behaviour will vary from culture to culture, but the structure remains true across all cultures: hence the notion of an 'order'. Love is best served when parents carry out the functions and responsibilities of parents, and when children behave as children. In some families, of

course, children have to take over what the adults cannot do in order to survive. If they do it for good cause, it usually works out OK, but it places a burden on the kids. In all cultures, it seems, love is damaged, when parents, without good cause, default on their job, and when children, without good cause, presumptuously assume their parents' responsibilities and privileges.

That's one example of what Hellinger calls an Order of Love. Once you hear it, it is obvious and so simple, as if we had known it all along. It's a field structure that constrains the success or failure of love. Once we know these orders or field structures, we can recognise whether or not we stand in alignment to them by paying attention to our body experiences. When we act as if the orders did not exist, we lose the support of being in alignment with Being and we can register the strain in our bodies.

Judith: How do you see Hellinger's work fitting in to the larger framework of psychotherapy?

Hunter: I see four basic things psychotherapy can offer. Different schools focus on one or more aspects in different ways. For example, when somebody is not getting ahead in life as their potential would allow, we can assume there's something blocking their way. Depending on our orientation, we might see that what's keeping them stuck is either a learned pattern; or a psychodynamically arrested development or deficit; or, third maybe they are suffering from the consequences of an act of fate that cannot be changed with psychotherapy. In the latter case we may be able to help the person learn to live with the consequences of what cannot be changed. In addition to these three general areas, Hellinger's work recognised that we also get caught and suffer from entanglements in our family. We sometimes suffer the consequences of what we did not even do. Working with that suffering requires a different approach.

His approach gives us tools to help us work effectively with people caught up in solving family problems that they neither created nor consciously knew about. For example, some people really want a relationship. Yet there is a discrepancy of the type we were talking about earlier – between what they want and what they do. If you look at what's going on from a systemic perspective, you often see that although they are acting in a way which militates against having a satisfactory relationship, they are undoubtedly acting selflessly, out of loyalty to the family or to someone in the family. Working on relationship skills usually is not enough to help someone in that situation, unless their unconscious function in the family system can be brought to light and redirected.

Judith: You have suggested that Hellinger's work can be thought of as adding a different perspective for looking at structures of ground, additional ways in which we are hard-wired to complete gestalts.

Hunter: I'm not sure that we're hard-wired, but Being is. The question for me is: what are the structures of Being in which we participate? The Jungian idea of archetypes, the great myths by which we live – for instance, the hero's journey or women's spiral dance of fertility; and the deep linguistic structures described by Whorf and Chomsky – these are all examples of structuring dynamics within the environmental field. But additionally, Bert Hellinger has described how the hidden structures of love support our relationships when we adhere to their requirements, and make our relationships difficult when we violate them.

Judith: Superficially it may appear that in this work you are making value judgements about how people should behave. But I don't think you are. (You seem to be making a distinction between the process and the content of a culture?)

Hunter: Moralistic value judgements have no place in this work. We are looking at long-term consequences of what individuals do at the process level. Any child will pay a heavy price if what they do is not in conformity with their social context. The question is, what supports a child in freeing itself from destructive patterns in the family or social group? What is the motivation of that child to do that? And, perhaps frighteningly, what are the consequences for that child's children? If the child's motivation is love of truth, or love of the good, then we observe that the long-term consequences are often good, in spite of the suffering. But if a child leaves a family because someone else in the family needs it to leave the system, then that child will suffer the consequences of something it did not consciously choose and the long term consequences for that child and its children tend to be destructive. A child cannot defend itself against such family pressures. There's no moral judgement in this. The work with family constellations that Hellinger has developed allows us to observe the consequences of an action over several generations.

Judith: Could you say more about the premises on which such work is based?

Hunter: All psychotherapy assumes we get a second chance. For instance, even clients whose mothers were remote still have a sense of how she should have been. That means that although such persons never actually had the opportunity to experience the good mother, they know her contours. They know her shapes. They have knowledge of the good mother even though their physical mother may not have provided it.

At some point in the therapeutic process, they stand before a choice – either to cling to their memories of the bad mother or to release that bad mother and utilise the information that they have about how their mother should have been in order to fulfil their potential. Where does this information come from? Hellinger's work demonstrates it comes from their parents, in the sense that it is part of the life-field that their parents opened to them.

Part of the passing on of life includes the passing on of this order, the inbuilt structures of the field. Biological parents also provide the genetic information to identify this potential for good. Without a capacity to access that kind of information in the field, then what hope does psychotherapy offer? That we have this inbuilt knowledge of love strongly supports the movement from our entanglements towards the realisation of our human potential.

Judith: So it is not necessary for clients to be re-parented by therapists?

Hunter: Re-parenting in some form may be necessary for some psychologically ill persons, but it takes years and is extremely demanding on both therapist and client. Hellinger's offer is more appropriate for people who are poorer or who cannot go every week to therapy. If their problem is systemic, it will shift in a session or two, and they can get on with their lives.

One kind of psychotherapy supports personal growth. It's not trying to get rid of some kind of problem, but to develop our human potential. That is the kind of therapeutic work that I'm actually most interested in, but I also see that it requires a lot of discretionary time and money. Hellinger has been very interested in helping people who are in trouble and who urgently need a solution or a resolution, but who have limited time and money. It's really beautiful to see hope, joy, love and growth open for people in one or two sessions, even after a lifetime of suffering. Seeing that happen time after time challenges our fundamental beliefs about psychotherapy. Health may be closer than we think.

Traditions of Problem Solving

Judith: Obviously you have integrated Hellinger's approach to problem solving into your work as a therapist and trainer. Could you describe how?

Hunter: I use two metaphors for change. One of them is the metaphor of the hero's journey. It denotes an action-orientated approach by problem solving. A hero or heroine seeks solutions by breaking away from convention, going into isolation, questing, fighting the dragon. They fight with weapons of insight and with gifts of knowledge, and they defeat adversity with cunning and strength. Even for women, it is a patriarchal approach, one that emphasises ego consciousness and action. It is an important and indispensable approach. This action-oriented approach seems to have taken a long time to evolve as a possibility in human consciousness, but it also runs the risk of letting loose rampant technology that rapes the earth and the soul. It encourages the belief that if I'm still stuck or ill, it is because I am not trying hard enough.

The other approach to solving problems is metaphorically represented by the women's spiral dance. This is an ancient tradition. Women danced around the fields before they were planted to remind the people that we must move in harmony with the forces of nature, with the phases of the moon, and with the seasons of the year. This is almost the opposite approach to solving a problem. It's the approach that says, 'Health comes when I find my place within a larger order and surrender to it'. The path is surrendering to the eternal truths and laws of nature.

Both of these approaches are relevant, but they have different functions. There is a time when it is necessary for us to fight and there's a time when it is necessary for us to surrender to the forces of what is. Wisdom is what helps us to distinguish between the one situation and the other. Both have their place, but there is a lot of confusion about when the one or the other is most appropriate, even in psychotherapy.

Judith: There are many forms of surrender in our persuasive society, ones that involve something that sounds similar – the suspension of ego consciousness so that belonging to a larger order is possible.

Hunter: 'Surrender' has a negative valence in the context of the hero's journey, where it implies defeat. Within the context of the spiral dance, it opens one of the most beautiful of all human experiences – surrendering to the rhythm of the music as we dance, or to the pleasure of making love, for example.

Judith: The main tool you use to make systemic dynamics visible is the family constellation. The client represents or models their family, by choosing group participants to stand in as family members. He or she then positions them in spatial relationship to one another. The representatives in the constellation, each standing in the place of a family member, are then asked what they are experiencing. They are encouraged to pay particular attention to their somatic experience. What is so crucial about attending to body experience?

Hunter: It's like Bob Resnick used to say, 'The body cannot lie.' The representatives' somatic responses are one of the most convincing things about this method. For example, one woman doctor suddenly began to sweat and had intense pain in her chest and down her left arm. She thought she was having a heart attack. It turned out that the family member she was representing in the constellation had almost died from a heart attack some weeks earlier, but we didn't know that. Another example is a man in Seattle, who, representing a suicidal person, passed out and hit the floor so hard that we all thought he had broken his head open. Just last week someone in a constellation reported deafness in his right ear, and it came out that the man he was representing had a war injury and was deaf in his right ear, but we didn't know that when we started.

Now, if people pass out, or get the symptoms of a heart attack, just because they're representing someone in a family, in a constellation, we need to take these phenomena seriously. It's even more interesting when their reactions repeat what the original persons experienced. The representatives' reactions give us valuable information about the hidden dynamics in a family.

Ask yourself, 'What is going on so that strangers, by virtue of the fact that they stand in for someone else in a constellation, experience such dramatic and precise symptoms?' I experience things like this every working day. I have thousands of anecdotes like this, and so does every therapist working with constellations. We don't really know how it happens but after a few years of working like this, I've had to surrender to the weight of evidence and conclude that we are connected in ways that contradict my previous belief about individuality and autonomy. When you see a thousand constellations with things like this, you have to rethink Fritz's, 'You do your thing and I'll do mine'. That just doesn't stand up to the test of observation.

Judith: What you are describing fundamentally changes our perspectives on what it means to be an individual human being.

Hunter: This phenomenon will eventually alter our view of the world. The constellations are the only method I know that make it possible for normal people to have the somatic experience of being influenced by another person's experience. When you stand there in a constellation feeling like you need to vomit, and at the same time clearly feel, 'this has nothing to do with me personally', you get a wonderful opportunity to rethink your beliefs about the boundaries between me and not-me. It opens all kinds of new ground for investigation, and eventually, will lead to a fundamental paradigm shift in psychotherapy.

Now the constellations show clearly that we are also connected to other members of our family across time, and that such connections do not depend on conscious knowledge alone. Many of the symptoms we suffer result from things others in our family system have done or failed to do. We truly are parts of greater wholes. That too will eventually force therapists to rethink psychopathology and developmental psychology.

In addition, the representatives' experiences in the constellations threaten our western illusions about personal freedom and autonomy. They place us as individual humans inescapably in the context of larger social systems. Working this way, we see that the degree of free choice that we have is strongly limited by the social systems in which we live. The price of what individual freedom we do have is the willingness to experience the deep guilt of violating the norms of the group that are important to us and of leaving those we love behind.

Judith: All therapy promotes a particular set of values. There's no way to avoid that. I'm thinking of people who have looked back on decisions which they thought were having a good effect on them, but which harmed others. Hellinger's approach suggests that therapeutic work should be measured in relation to a whole system's well being, not just that of an individual. This seems to be an importantly neglected value in our individualistically orientated therapeutic culture.

Hunter: I agree. We can observe what a powerful effect it has on the representatives when every member of the family is included in the family, and when everyone is relaxed and in harmony, having found their place within the system. Harmony is a real phenomenon.

There's no way a therapist can escape his or her value system. Even bracketing can't ultimately protect us from our biases. Systemic work values the individual in a large systemic context. That sounds very Gestalt to me. By looking at larger gestalts of an individual within a family system, we can begin to see resolutions for everyone. Maybe there's no lasting resolution for an individual unless the family as a whole also finds resolution. What kind of peace can I enjoy while my parents, brothers and sisters suffer injustice? The work with family constellations teaches us that everybody in the system needs to have the feeling, 'this is my place, I can stand here.' Only then is the system as a whole in order. Only then can all the individual members know lasting peace.

Judith: The work with family constellations reinstates the co-equality of everyone in the system.

Hunter: That's a profoundly Gestalt thought, that we are part of a larger whole, that the total is different from the sum of the parts. The concept of Gestalt implies that 'the other' matters. It's a question of whether I'm looking at smaller gestalts in which I am the totality, or at larger wholes of which I am only a part. This has always been implicit in Gestalt, that an individual is a totality of smaller units and, at the same time, is a part of larger wholes. That is the structure of Being. There's nothing other than that.

Experiencing membership in the larger wholes requires the beautiful surrender I was talking about before, just as maintaining individuality within them requires walking the hero's path.

Judith: You have ranged over the field of Gestalt and what you see that we as Gestalt therapists could usefully encounter. I like the fact that, after this discussion of Hellinger's contribution, you have returned to the holism of Gestalt and our inevitable membership of the larger wholes. Thank you very much indeed.

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