

**Bert Hellinger interviewed by Harald Hohnen  
following a seminar with cancer patients in Washington DC,  
October 2001. Karen Hedley, trans. (2002).**

**HOHNEN** Participants experienced your work here in Washington with cancer patients as 'soul work', working with and on the soul. Soul, cancer, the greater soul, coming into harmony with the family soul? Could you please comment on this.

**HELLINGER** Family Constellations have brought to light how entanglements within the family of origin can lead to cancer. Sometimes a cancer patient has to represent someone from his family of origin, for example a victim. If this victim was not honoured in the family, the cancer patient wants to atone for it or to become like the victim. On the one hand this is due to the workings of the collective conscience which is unconscious. On the other hand this collective conscience works hand in hand with the personal conscience. For instance, when a child wants to follow someone out of the family, or wants to die instead of someone in the family, or wants to atone for an injustice that has not been redressed in place of someone else, then the child feels innocent and has a good conscience. My work with cancer patients began with an exploration of the relationship between the entanglements of the personal and of the collective conscience.

Since then, starting with a seminar for cancer patients in Salzburg, our focus has extended even beyond that. We called this workshop with cancer patients in Salzburg 'The Greater Soul'.

What we could see there was that many cancer patients were cut off from this Greater Soul. This soul reaches beyond the family soul, and it is essential for the soul of the cancer patient to come into harmony again with something greater. This then has a spiritual quality - the feeling of being connected with something greater and contained within it. One lets go of the presumptuous desire to help. One becomes humble and thus connected with something greater.

**HOHNEN** I wonder if I have understood you correctly? When you talk about something which goes beyond the family or the family soul, do you mean by this a deep bond with Life and Death?

**HELLINGER** The bond contact is with something greater than both. Both life and death must submit to it. One can be in tune with it through living as well as through dying. You might also say: when you are in tune with this you are in tune with life and with death each according to their time. The method which is used to help someone to come into contact with this Greater Soul differs in many ways from the method so far used in Family Constellations. It begins with me not even asking the client any questions. In fact, if he wants to tell me what the matter is I actually stop him. I ask him to wait. I myself wait and let him wait. This allows his inner dialogue to stop. He becomes quiet. The defence mechanisms which are maintained through a description of the problem give way. His soul is allowed the opportunity and the time to show itself and to bring to light that which is essential to it. You could also say, we give the soul the space to reveal itself.

The same takes place within the therapist. By sitting quietly next to the client, maybe by looking into his eyes for a while and then asking him to close his eyes, he himself becomes collected. He lets go of his intentions, also of any ideas about what might be needed here, and connects inside with something greater to which he does not give a name. What helped me with my inner process is what Guru Dev Singh calls 'deep relaxation in the divine name', and what I will call 'absorption in the divine name'. That is a strange description, because it does not name anything. By saying name, I don't name anything. Another phrase he uses is: 'surrender to the essential truth', 'to abandon oneself to the essential truth' as I will call it. When one opens up to it, one comes to a deep collectedness and calmness. I sometimes imagine becoming permeable like a membrane. I let something which comes from beyond flow through me without leaving any trace, so that I become a medium between a greater healing force and the client, without doing anything myself. This also has the effect of centering the client. He too comes into contact with something greater, and it can work within him. It is important to give him the full time for this process. It isn't as if one tells him something, or initiates something which he may act upon later. Here the entire healing process takes place immediately. Often the client remains very still, hardly moving, but one can see that he is deeply collected. The entire group, too, remains deeply collected even though this process can go on for a long time. The forces which are present here not only affect the client but the whole group. It is clear when the inner movement comes to an end. Then one stops without talking about it. Whatever is essential therefore remains hidden.

**HOHNEN** You as a therapist are in the service of the relationship with the Greater Soul. Is that correct?

**HELLINGER** If I were in the service of something, I would be active, but in fact I only mediate.

**HOHNEN** You would be the one who brings about this relationship. When I look at the audience I see that they are also collected, but in my opinion not because of what the client is doing but because of how the therapist, in this case you, gives space to the process and how he stays with the client.

**HELLINGER** I am, so to speak, the medium through which something flows. The process is strange. I cannot describe it. It only happens when I am free of any desires, when I am humble, in the sense of: I completely forget I am there, I am unaware of what is going on around me, I am often unaware even of the client. I do not even look at anything. I am simply collected within myself and am aware that something is going on.

**HOHNEN** Could one say that there is an expansion of the energy field?

**HELLINGER** Something comes in from outside. 'Energy field' is too neutral a term and not appropriate here. It is an active presence which has a healing effect. The soul of the client comes into contact with a Greater Soul, which affects some healing deep within, not just on the physical level in relation to the illness. Through this process someone who has been cut off from the source of his being either through worries or intentions, or the effects of his conscience, may reconnect with it again. He reconnects very quietly, without wishing for anything, without calling on anything, without doing anything. He is being led back into Being itself.

**HOHNEN** Sometimes in the past when you needed help you envisaged the person's death and then waited to see if a word or a piece of advice would come forth. Now it is a matter of being collected in order to give space to something greater, if I understand it correctly, and not even waiting for a word.

**HELLINGER** Exactly. I no longer enlist any help nor do I imagine anything like the client's death and wait for an answer. It is beyond all that now. Even there I sometimes get some indication

**HOHNEN** I would nevertheless like to ask you some technical questions in this context. Sometimes, seen from the outside, it appears to be an utterly still process - it seems like nothing at all is happening. Sometimes you become very alert after a few minutes and suddenly set up a person. What is happening there?

**HELLINGER** I bring something in, but I can't explain it exactly. I sense that the client is cut off from a person with whom something needs to be resolved before he can connect with the Greater Soul. Then I place someone in front of him to test this out. I often have the feeling it is the mother - but I am open to it being someone else. It sometimes proves to be someone else.

**HOHNEN** But you don't label it.

**HELLINGER** No.

**HOHNEN** The client still has his eyes shut. Does it depend on where you see the client is looking, or do you simply make an opening move?

**HELLINGER** You put it well. I make an opening move.

**HOHNEN** You set up a person, sometimes two, and the client still has his eyes shut. What happens next? Do you wait for a reaction?

**HELLINGER** I have a concrete example in mind. It was clear in this case that the client was cut off from her mother. She was very overweight. That indicates that she was cut off from her mother. And she had strong resistances, that was clear too. I held up a mirror to her, by setting up a representative for her and her mother. She still had her eyes closed. My image was that when she opened her eyes she would see herself. The whole situation which she had hitherto experienced on the inside she could see as a reality on the outside. That proved to be so. The person representing her had turned away from her mother, completely rigid. When she opened her eyes again, she said: Yes, that is exactly how I am! The representative had mirrored her precisely, and in that way it was an added influence on her from the outside.

**HOHNEN** Lately you have said loud and clear, that the work is ultimately about connecting or reconnecting the client with their mother and their father. Can you say more about that?

**HELLINGER** Strangely it almost always concerns the mother. The father hardly comes into it. Which proves that it is not only to do with the actual mother. Mother in this context is an image for something greater. She is an image for life, or let's say she is the gateway to life.

When a deep connection with mother is achieved then the connection to the Greater Soul may also be possible. When we manage to connect deeply with mother we also manage to connect deeply with the Greater Soul. In this context I often do an exercise, an inner one, where I let the person kneel before her parents and look at all the generations behind her parents and see that life, very pure and from far away, flows through them all into her. Then, if she bows before her mother and of course also her father and if she takes her life from them as it comes to her, she connects to that which is greater and which comes from beyond her actual mother.

**HOHNEN** If I understand you correctly, this is also an example of how your work is developing in its minimalistic form. What does this mean for Family Constellations? Does it mean that we can abandon much of what we have been doing up to now?

**HELLINGER** It would be risky to put it like that. It is obvious that Family Constellations have done a lot of good and are still doing so. It depends on the therapist, how deeply he wishes to enter into this other realm. In a sense one can't learn this, although Family Constellations point more and more towards something which works beyond the family. That became most clear for me during a seminar for psychotic patients in Wiesloch. Suddenly there were tremendous forces active which could not be put down to reactions within the family. One could feel a strong force coming from the outside. I am beginning to go beyond the boundaries of the family, as I see that there are other forces that are active. Only when they are included can one really help in such cases. This goes beyond Family Constellations. In this wider context the method as described earlier is more effective. To go back to minimalism - there is much more at stake here. It is a matter of total renunciation. It is a matter of agreeing to non-action, trusting, that something else will arise without my Intervention.

**HOHNEN** If I understand you correctly Family Constellations have their positive side, but don't attend to this connection with a Greater Force. To connect with this force, to give it room - this is what is special in how you are working at present. You are aligned with it in a special way right now. Did I get that right?

**HELLINGER** You can also see it in the context of the development of >psychotherapy as a whole. This began with individual psychotherapy which looked at an individual. When it became apparent that this was insufficient, a move was made to include the family. More was achieved that way than was possible with individual therapy alone. Of course individual therapy has helped many people, but family therapy has helped more, because it includes more. Now it seems to me that the development transcends the family to include another dimension. All these developments have their place in the whole, and I do not wish to play them off against each other. It depends on the situation one finds oneself in whether or not one chooses this way or that. In this context one can see how family therapy replaces individual therapy in a certain way, family constellations replace the initial family therapy in a certain way; but it is not necessary to set anything up any more because the essential things happen inside. What is essential is gained through an inner process.

**HOHNEN** So in this context what is systemic is the client and the connection he has with the greater force?

**HELLINGER** To call it systemic does not go far enough. What is at work here cannot be a system. One descends into this Greater Force, becomes encompassed by it and united with everything, without it being a system.

**HOHNEN** I notice that lately you often break off the work. I also notice that you are very clearly provocative at times.

**HELLINGER** As far as this particular course is concerned I did break off constellations, but this is to see it only in a superficial sense. The interruption set something in motion in the soul of the client and also in the audience. Naturally it also provoked a certain dismay. Nevertheless I myself did not stop working. I continued the process by immediately picking up on the reaction to the interruption. By breaking off I went to the extreme limit, confronted the client with the extreme, but stayed close by him nevertheless. All at once this extreme was included within himself and so the work became for him a complete whole. Breaking off was therefore only one step within a comprehensive process, which continued beyond the interruption. The same happened here with several more constellations. For me each time it was a clear finish. I really did not want to continue, but I could see that something was immediately set in motion by breaking off, which was helpful in the end.

**HOHNEN** As a therapist you risk exposing yourself very much to the opposing forces within the group. You have to be able to withstand a great deal. You must be prepared to accept defeat when there is no other option/nothing

works. But in this course we could really see how, sometimes within twenty seconds, the work could proceed again. What was happening with your own energy in that moment?

Are you aware of anything? Where are you in that moment?

**HELLINGER** I never thought about opposition, that it might give rise to antagonism. I was far too focused on the client. It is also true that I stay unaware of what is happening in the group because I avoid eye contact so as not to be distracted. Only afterwards do I hear from others that the group was very collected or that many people were crying. I do not notice it myself. I am completely withdrawn into myself, in order that I may not be influenced in any way by what is happening in the group. Here too I stayed in my own space completely.

**HOHNEN** But you still connect with the client?

**HELLINGER** Mostly, yes, but sometimes I also withdraw from the client for a short while, in order not to disturb him. By sitting next to him I stay in contact, but I do not observe him for example. Only afterwards do I look at him again.

**HOHNEN** I want to leave out the technicalities now for a moment and ask you whether you gained any new insights into the appropriate context in which to view cancer by working in this different way?

**HELLINGER** I did not give a thought to cancer/think about cancer any further here. I only saw the person and their connection with something greater, without searching for an outcome and without intending to achieve anything specific - except to give the client the possibility of open himself up to this force and being guided by it.

**HOHNEN** I also had the feeling, that you knew in the back of your mind, that the patient had cancer, when you looked at him, but that you did not use this as a lens through which to focus your eye, but that instead you made room for other things.

**HELLINGER** On the whole it was like that. Sometimes I was looking at the cancer, too. There was a man there, who obviously had a dangerous kind of lung cancer. He also said that this form of cancer grew very rapidly. Then I looked within at how the cancer was growing and stayed with that image. All at once a sentence occurred to me, which I don't remember exactly now, but which was something like: please, be kind, please treat me kindly or please look kindly on me. Immediately I got a picture that his cancer had something to do with someone who did not look kindly on him, or that he thought that someone did not look kindly on him. I also had the picture that he himself might have wronged someone who as a result did not look kindly upon him. So I asked him to imagine this person saying to him: please, look kindly on me. I think that was what was decisive for him in this context.

**HOHNEN** I had the thought meanwhile that the word 'soul work' does not quite fit, because there is too much 'work' involved. It has more to do with 'soul observance'.

**HELLINGER** Soul work is not an appropriate phrase, that is clear. But I have given some thought to what the word might be that would contain all that is essential in the soul? For me the word is Andacht, awe. I am in awe, and because I am in awe, the client, too, becomes in awe. For a long time I thought that there was no good English word for it, but during the course this word came to me: awe. It leads the soul into a realm of deep devotion.

**HOHNEN** When you say awe, it is beyond active and passive.

**HELLINGER** Exactly. That is also the basic attitude of this work: beyond active and passive, neither one nor the other.