



# Human Systems Institute, Inc<sup>®</sup>

HOLISTIC + GENERATIVE APPROACHES = CREATIVE + SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS

## Educational Gerontology and Family Constellations

By Calista Streitmatter

It is my hope that phenomenological systemic work enhancing educational gerontology can facilitate old humans growing into ego integrity or gerotranscendence versus despair or depression in their final stage of development. It is important that we look at life as instruction, says James Hilman (Force of Character, 1999). He talks about moving from a "lasting" to a "leaving" mindset. Similarly, Swedish gerontologist, Lars Tornstam's concept of gerotranscendence (1989) can be seen as a search for the spiritual dimensions of aging. Catherine Marshall said in her book, "**Something More**", "as the physical life winds down - the spiritual life accelerates." My life experiences verify such.

Generational healing became an interest of mine while working with Dr. Frank Minirith's Spiritual Therapy Program in North Texas Medical Center Geriatric Unit doing Bible Studies, Music, Movement, Art, Pet Therapies, and Life Reviews. I felt something more was needed beyond existing therapies and treatments. Patients spoke of unresolved relationship problems and often returned again and again.

In September of 2000, my husband died, our daughter was diagnosed with the same type of brain tumor in the same part of the brain as her father, and my interest in generational healing intensified.

Odd events began unfolding: While talking with my son, Eric, who lives in Austria, he said, "Thomas is almost six feet tall". The last time I'd seen my grandson Thomas, he was five feet tall, so I called American Airlines for a ticket to Vienna. The girl said, "Oh, but you want to go to Zurich", (they had a bargain fare). Then a friend mentioned the importance of "family fabric" to clarify it's meaning. I plugged "family fabric" into a Google search and up came Bert Hellinger with an office in Zurich. Since I was now going there, I emailed them - and Isabella Stieger met me at the Zurich airport. She arranged contacts and resources and when I returned to Texas, there was an invitation to see Bert Hellinger at Omega Center in New York. Pre-requisites for the workshop were doing a three-generation Gen-o-gram and reading Hellinger's book, "**Love's Hidden Symmetry**" and John Bradshaw's book, "**Family Secrets**".

While Bert Hellinger was doing my family constellation, with the Issue being my daughter's tumor and her father's grandfather's murder identified as the Entanglement, I was feeling both my own gratitude and a desire for other older people to have family constellations. At least, that their struggles, issues and sufferings could be addressed with this almost



# Human Systems Institute, Inc<sup>®</sup>

HOLISTIC + GENERATIVE APPROACHES = CREATIVE + SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS

miraculous way of solving life's most serious problems. Meanwhile, at age 75, I am a trainee of this work, training two years in California with Heinz Stark (one of the great teachers from Germany).

## EDUCATIONAL GERONTOLOGY

Gerontology generally promotes the medicalization of old age, with focus on the physical. Educational gerontology, Gerotranscendence, and Psychoanalysis emphasize old age having a holistic focus and see old age as a distinct stage of growth. Joan M. Erikson devoted the last chapter of her revision of Erik H. Erikson's, "**The Life Cycle Completed**"(1997) entirely to the Gerotranscendence Theory. This process is recognized by a number of alternations, including:

An increasing feeling of affinity with past and future generations.

An increasing feeling of a cosmic communion with the Spirit of the Universe.

A redefinition of the perception of time, space and object.

A redefinition of the perception of life and death and a decrease in fear of death.

A decrease in interest in superfluous social interaction.

A decrease in interest in material things.

A decrease in self-centeredness and more time spent in meditation.

Many elderly individuals develop a new view of reality, human existence and the Self. Some aged internalize, we have a round-trip ticket to this life journey. While family constellation work aids every age, for the old person the work is a final opportunity to resolve entanglements, leave a legacy of family love flowing freely and allow a good death. Educational gerontology uses adult education processes to address elderly needs by balancing loads with powers, and extended with family constellations seems a logical way to bring Hellinger's work to the aged.

Howard Yale McCluskey, renowned leader in the field of Educational Gerontology, developed the Theory of Margin. He identified needs of the elderly and was my professor. He said:



# Human Systems Institute, Inc<sup>®</sup>

HOLISTIC + GENERATIVE APPROACHES = CREATIVE + SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS

"I came into the field of gerontology from the domain of adult education. The gerontological movement is geared to the protection of old people and the production of a floor of support, so that older people can live in dignity and self-respect and as independently as possible. This is as it should be. But the educational approach is a little different. When we turn to education, we find a more optimistic domain".

Categories of Need, (identified by H. McCluskey as co-chair, White House Conference on Aging) includes:

**Coping Needs.** Older persons are frequently not ready for the realities of retirement, adjustment to basic changes, and changing biological and social demands. People often need to learn to be older adults.

**Contributing Needs.** Many older people have a need to be needed and be of service to others.

**Expressive needs.** Individuals have a need to develop their Potentialities to the greatest extent possible. The later years can be a time for liberation of creativity.

**Influence Needs.** Persons need to influence their own life and that of future generations.

**Transcendence Needs.** Rising above age-related limitations; learning to balance power and load. We are all growing, developing, searching for knowledge and wisdom to understand our self, our world, our Creator and where we fit in all this.

## THEORY OF MARGIN

**Margin = Load divided by Power.** Margin is a function of the relationship of Load to Power. Load consists of demands of society and self, external tasks of living and Internal-personal expectations. Power consists of resources, both external and internal.

## ADULT EDUCATION PROCESS

Build rapport with Learner



# Human Systems Institute, Inc<sup>®</sup>

HOLISTIC + GENERATIVE APPROACHES = CREATIVE + SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS

Diagnosis Need

Prioritize

Design Program

Do Program

Evaluate with ongoing modifications to meet actual, current need. (Participation of Learner is Key)

Erik Erikson's famous life cycle delineates eight stages of psychological development. The last stage challenges the individual to rework the past while remaining involved in the present. In an interview with the famous couple (Erikson in His Own Old Age Expands His View of Life, New York Times, June 14, 1988) Joan asks, "What is real wisdom?" Her husband answers, "It comes from life experience, well digested. It's not what comes from reading great books. When it comes to understanding life, experiential learning is the only worthwhile kind; everything else is hearsay! When we looked at the life cycle in our 40s, we looked to old people for wisdom. At 80, we look at other 80-year-olds to see who got wise and who not. Lots of old people don't get wise, but you don't get wise unless you age." Originally, the Eriksons defined wisdom in the elderly as a more objective concern with life itself in the face of death. Now that they are at that stage of life, they have been developing a more detailed description of just what lessons each part of life lends to wisdom in old age.

## LIFE CYCLE STAGES LEARNINGS FOR OLD AGE

Stage 1	Infancy---Basic Trust vs. Mistrust	HOPE
Stage 2	Early Childhood---Autonomy vs. Shame/Doubt	WILL
Stage 3	Play Age---Initiative vs. Guilt	PURPOSE
Stage 4	School Age---Industry vs. Inferiority	COMPETENCE
Stage 5	Adolescence---Identity vs. Identity Confusion	FIDELITY
Stage 6	Young Adulthood---Intimacy vs. Isolation	LOVE
Stage 7	Adulthood---Generativity vs. Stagnation	CARE
Stage 8	Old Age---Ego Integrity vs. Despair/Disgust	WISDOM

## BERT HELLINGER'S CONTRIBUTIONS

Bert Hellinger studied theology, philosophy, pedagogy and directed a Catholic mission in



# Human Systems Institute, Inc<sup>®</sup>

HOLISTIC + GENERATIVE APPROACHES = CREATIVE + SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS

South Africa for 16 years. He became a psychoanalyst, successfully left the priesthood and studied Gestalt, Erikson, Primal therapies, worked in comprise analysis, hypnotherapy and developed his own approach of system family therapy phenomenological systemic family constellations. As a tool for exposing current, unconscious entanglements, family constellations in its spiritual dimensions exceeds therapy and science. Guided by the morphic field of the family to restore the orders of love in a family system, Bert Hellinger's work has grown from a solid foundation of both intellect and intuition (specifically with the observation of thousands of family systems), and continues its ongoing growing.

## FAMILY CONSTELLATIONS

"The focus in a family constellation is not the evident problem. Bert Hellinger says that psychotherapy is problem oriented and that by constant repetition the therapy reinforces the problem instead of alleviating it. In psychotherapy we are looking for a change. Something or someone is not "good" and needs improvement..more of this and less of that.

"In family constellation work, the therapist simply looks for love. It is a treasure hunt and when the treasure, Love, is found, it is acknowledged and cherished in the open. Once Love is acknowledged everything falls into place. In all families it is out of love that family members suffer. A child may become sick out of the love for their sick or absent parent. With his/her sickness the child tries to avoid suffering or the impending death for mom or dad.

"The Basic Theory: Each and every one of us is part of their family. The family functions as a collective system that can either promote or hinder the growth of its individual members. It can function harmoniously only when every family member is awarded the place they hold and deserve. Perfect harmony is possible when each family member knows, honors, appreciates and lives the fact that they are part of a bigger unit." Copyright by Frank Arjava Petter, 2001

British biologist Rupert Sheldrake explains morphic field (which guides the family constellations) in an interview with Matthew Fox (Knight Ridder/Tribune News, 1997): "The fields are spread out in space. There's a field in my body and within your body. And there is a field for each social group. A flock of birds as it turns, does so because it is ordered in a field, a bit like a magnetic field, which embraces the whole flock. I think these fields have evolved over time and have a kind of memory within them...I call it 'Morphic Resonance'. The influence of like-upon-like through space and time, from the past to the present. In its most general form, this hypothesis says that the whole of nature has a kind of memory with



# Human Systems Institute, Inc<sup>®</sup>

HOLISTIC + GENERATIVE APPROACHES = CREATIVE + SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS

it."

In the interviews, Fox is questioned: "And you say religious rituals are effective because of a collective memory within the group?" Fox answers: "Ritual is a way of tapping into the fields of our ancestors. You invoke the ancestors, their names, their patterns of prayer, but I stress that the ritual is not just about memory of the past. It is about our echoing of the past into a view of the future. Rupert talks about the field of an organism growing toward something. I think it is important that ritual, too, draws us toward the future".

A family constellation works by people looking at their family background for patterns of problems or issues they would like to address. The group members sitting in a circle briefly introduce themselves and the facilitator asks who is ready to set up their family constellation. The client gives a very brief statement of his/her issue and selects people from the group to represent the family members. The client holds a representative and places them (by feeling) somewhere in the center of the group. When they are placed, the client sits down to watch the unfolding constellation. As the representatives begin to feel emotions and sensations of the family member they represent, inside themselves and in relationship to the others, their task is to just stay with what they feel at the moment - to allow their bodies to express such slowly and softly and to tell the facilitator what goes on for them. The facilitator guides the representatives through a process of unraveling. The feelings are explored, connections become visible and through position change, gestures, short sentences, the entanglements are gently unraveled. The purpose is always to restore the flow of love for all.

I surmise, as an educational gerontologist with credibility as an old human, that extending existing customized solutions for aged clients and their families can follow similar prerequisites as the Omega Center workshop mentioned earlier. Services sequentially move from life reviews (based on Erikson's Stages of Development) to Genograms (genosociograms) to family constellations for resolution of individual issues as requested. Another avenue for family constellations to be accessed by aged individuals is via the church and other natural networks offering educational gerontology-family constellation retreats and life reviews/stories seminars.