

URSULA FRANKE with THOMAS BRYSON interviewed by Vivian Broughton.

Ursula Franke was part of the initial wave of constellations facilitators learning directly from Hellinger and those who had been with him for many years. She has made major contributions to the field through her exploration of healing the interrupted reaching out movement and by her two books, one covering a detailed look at the sources of Hellinger's work ¹, and the second offering guidelines for taking the work into the one-to-one session ². She has a doctorate in clinical psychology (her thesis was based on Systemic Constellations), and has been trained in behavioural therapy, body work, hypnotherapy, gestalt and short term therapy. Ursula recently married Thomas Bryson, with whom she now works.

The interview took place on 21st June 2009, during a workshop in Bristol, UK, for Constellations Work Trainings UK.

VB: Ursula, how did you get into constellations in the first place, what is your story about coming to this work?

UF: At the time, it was the early 1980's, I was working at a centre similar to Zist³ and I met Eva Madelung⁴ there. She had been with Bert for many years, so she is of the first generation... I think of those who had been with Bert before Gunthard published his book⁵ as the first generation. The work was very rudimentary at that time because there were no books. Eva invited me to a workshop she was doing. I think this was in 1992. As there was no literature, everyone was experimenting with how to do constellations. I was chosen to play the role of an aunt. I can still remember it, it was so... phew... I was so struck by suddenly being someone else! It had a powerful impact on me.

I had finished my psychology studies and I was looking for a subject for my doctoral thesis and I thought "Wow, this is something I am interested in, what is this?" So I became involved.

Also at that time Matthias Varga von Kibéd and Insa Sparrer had an experimental group made up of colleagues, and they would meet together; Eva knew them so she took me along. At this time none of us really knew what family constellations was. Matthias and Insa had been working with Virginia Satir and they were adapting her family reconstruction work to constellations.

So this was my very first contact. And I took on an exploration of this work for my doctoral dissertation, which was quite a radical thing to do.

Then Eva [Madelung] asked me to help her organise a supervision group in 1993 with Bert... and Bert said that this would be the last workshop he would do, that he would retire after this. But then 500 people signed up without our doing any advertising. That year was the beginning of the really big workshops; the following year there was another one, and the following year another one. At the time I looked for a place where we could host all these people, and I asked my professor at Ludwig Maximilian University, so we did these big workshops in the University Hall there.

Then for my dissertation I started reading about the background of this work. At the time Bert was being harassed by the Evangelic church because they said that he was forming a sect, and I thought "this is not a sect, this [constellations work] has roots, and so I have to find the ancestors." I realised the importance of understanding the roots, because with the kind of forbears that we have it is clear that constellations is not the activity of a sect, but has its foundations in theories and psychological methods. My goal in my dissertation was to show that we did have roots, and in a way also I wanted to show Bert that we have roots. I felt that this was lacking in his presentation.

VB: So the start of your first book, "The River Never Looks Back" came out of your thesis?

UF: Yes, that's right. Then Gunthard had a working group which met once a year for three days, about 30 people, most of whom were that first generation, just Gunthard's colleagues that he invited... and he invited me to be part of it. We had this group for 7 or 8 years.

VB: And would you say now that all of the work that you do is oriented around constellations?

UF: Oriented yes, but it is not only constellations. I have a background in behavioural therapy, gestalt and body work, but the systemic view is very inclusive and I find working systemically extends the limitations of all the other therapeutic forms.

VB: This is one of the things that I have thought about the contrast between psychotherapy and constellations... because psychotherapy has kind of constrained its view to this other person and me, the therapist, and this relationship, and often doesn't go very far back, maybe back to the parents but not much more than that, whereas constellations brings us this much more expanded family view and a socially expanded view, too.

UF: Yes, and now we have more of an understanding of biology and genetics, and trauma work and epi-genetics and body therapy. Biology brings us the evidence that a person is a constant fluent

agglomeration, a thickening of certain traits, so that the 'I' doesn't actually exist... it is just an overlap of many different flows and traits that all come from the past... and our biological, social, historical and physical patterns all overlap at a certain point and are then condensed into what we then say is 'me'. But it is not... and this is what I learned from Tom through his work with presence awareness... that there is no 'I'. 'I' is just a complete resonance with everything that was before and is around now... it is a pattern repetition but it is not stable in this pattern.

VB: So one of the things I know from observing you working on Friday is that this focus on the process of coming into presence is central to what you do. Can you say a bit more about this 'coming into presence'?

UF: Presence is the only true moment, because the past is over and the future hasn't arrived yet. So presence is about the present... but it's more than that. Presence is the awareness of *being* in this very moment. And presence is eternal and without characteristics, it's without traits, it doesn't have any qualities... presence is just pure being. And by that it is completely unattached and...

TB: ...unconditioned.

UF: Yes, unconditioned. It's just this very moment regardless of the passing state.

VB: So it is like in the meditation tradition, the notion of pure awareness with no thought, nothing else, and most of us don't do that most of the time.

TB: Yes, presence is pure awareness. It isn't about not thinking, but of being what is underneath the thinking.

UF: The thoughts and everything else is all conditioned, it is all patterns from the past, and this is all perception and resonance from the past. And I think that presence embodies in each one of us. Our clients understand presence very well, no matter how strong their symptoms have been. It's nothing new for them. We are presence and we are also body at the same time.

VB: It's interesting there, because I was thinking, with a word like *presence* it is a word that we all know what we mean by it, but it is difficult to formulate, in the same way as the term soul is something that we all know what we mean by, but putting it into words is difficult.

UF: Presence has no qualities, that's why you can't put it into words, it is unconditioned.

TB: From Martin Buber's perspective presence is the subject.

VB: In the I-thou relationship?

TB: Yes.

VB: So it's not subject on its own, it's subject in relationship.

TB: Not exactly. It is subject on its own, and it is subject in relationship. I think presence just *is*. The ego is an object, presence is the subject. The subject exists without the object, but the object does not exist without the subject. But in order to experience the subject there must be a relationship. This is the duality that we live in and what we are dealing with in psychotherapy.

VB: It reminds me of the paradox of grappling with the fact that we live in a Newtonian world and we also live in a quantum world, and these two realities... you can't think both at the same time, it's a figure and ground oscillation.

TB: Another way to put that is that we have a lineage of biological and social conditioning that goes all the way back to the dawn of time. In trauma therapy we can see the biological past that is so strong in us. At the same time we have presence that is completely unconditioned. And that is the root of the Christian concept of being both mortal and immortal at the same time.

VB: So it's a paradox of two things that seem like oil and water...

TB: I don't think it's a paradox... it's holding two truths at the same time, it only appears paradoxical to the mind.

UF: The body lives the reality all the time, so for the being itself it isn't a paradox.

VB: These are really interesting ideas, and if you take this now to that moment when you sit with a client, how does it translate?

TB: That's a good question. It is reminding him of being presence.

VB: It interested me when you did the experiment Tom, with one of the participants where you brought her right into the present, asking her to attend to her experience of colour and shape and sound, and then taking her back to thinking about the issue and she saw how she weakened when she went back to the issue and how she strengthened when she came into presence... and bringing someone's awareness to how they don't do that...

TB: ... and to how they can do it and how easy it is.

UF: And how they actually *are*... that is the essence of our being. We *have* the conditioning, but we *are not* the conditioning. This is the therapeutic step to bringing someone out of the thinking that they *are* the conditioning and just pointing out the freedom they have when they are in presence.

TB: Yes, understanding the difference between who you are and what you are experiencing, including the interpretation of the experience.

UF: I learnt body therapy from an analyst. I learnt to go into relaxation with my clients, into presence, through body therapy. We would go into stress positions, as you do in bioenergetics, but he wouldn't let us act it out... he would invite us just to observe. So there was this change to experiencing the body and looking at what is happening here, rather than acting it out or expressing it.

VB: Rather than what we used to do in the '80's and '90's... with the stress on cathartic expression, which often got people nowhere...

UF: It didn't help... it was a tension reduction, so a short-term relief but no change to the underlying pattern. Also in behaviour therapy when you do a systematic desensitisation you have these incompatible states or behaviours, so that you are either relaxed or you are tense with fear. You can't be tense when you are relaxed. And I was doing that intuitively with clients, by getting them to exhale they went into a more relaxed state, and then by going to the more difficult place by questioning, and seeing what produces a reaction. So in fact I had been doing this for years on a bodywork level, but it was so helpful for me when Tom and I started to work together and Tom brought the spiritual knowledge about presence. By exhaling, by going into the body we are going into presence, and we go into our centre in our body where we find silence and where everything outside stops.

VB: One of the things I understood from your talk on Friday which I hadn't quite understood before, is that the notion we have of primary and secondary emotions is not just about emotions it's about a state of being.

UF: Yes, I talk about primary and secondary movements, which includes the whole bodily movement, with thoughts and emotions and actions and impulses. Whether the movement is towards or away, the movement towards being the 'yes' towards life and the movement away being the 'no' towards life. So primary movement expresses presence continuously, and secondary movement expresses 'no', the avoiding of presence, the avoiding of being in contact with what is out there. I am currently reading [Martin] Buber⁶ again. He describes how when we see the other as an object we also become an object. On the other hand, when we act as a subject we look at the other as a subject as well. So if we are in that place in ourselves we can see it in the other.

TB: And if we can see it in the other then we can find it in ourselves and it can heal us... and that is where the spiritual teacher comes in.

UF: When you, as the facilitator, are in that state of mind then you influence the state of the client. I also learned with Tom, in talking about the primary movement, it is the child being present when it is newly born... the child is just presence, and this look that you see in the child! I think it wasn't like that when I was born, now babies really look at you. I think in our generation we didn't look, maybe because of the war... I haven't thought this through fully yet but now I see that when a child is born it *is* presence and it looks towards the parents with its presence. I don't know yet if children are born already in a secondary state or how that happens.

VB: Do you think that is possible?

UF: Yes, I think so.

VB: Do you think that might be from experiences in the womb?

UF: Yes, either that or more likely it might be a systemic issue. As if the child in the womb is already in resonance with his system that would fully make sense to me. In being born the child is embodying presence, and is looking as presence to the other presence, and yet the parents are not being present for whatever reason. The presence of the facilitator can help a client into presence in the same way that a baby can invite presence from the mother.

TB: The child comes with presence and if presence is not reflected back, the child doesn't know presence. They are still presence, but they don't know presence. We know things through subject and object relations. That lack of mirroring of presence can be the beginning of a spiritual journey.

VB: Are you writing about this?

UF: Yes, we are writing a book. We don't have a title yet. The working title is 'Treasure in the Darkness.'

VB: I want now to ask you about entanglement since you say that you have never used this term.

UF: I never understood the concept of entanglement, because I can't see how we can be entangled. First of all I learned that negative descriptions don't really contain information. Entanglement is a

negative description of a dynamic. When we are born into a system, we are the essence of the system, everything that is in the system is in us, so all the conditioning of the system is in us, all the tasks of the system are our tasks, so it is part of our being that we have to deal with everything that is there, and therefore the notion of entanglement doesn't work.

VB: The way I have understood entanglement is that it is the way in which I am unconsciously and unhelpfully bound in a way that limits me in my ability to be fully myself.

UF: But you are fully yourself... how can you be otherwise?

TB: What you are describing is what we call the lineage of conditioning and that is never free, never purified.

VB: That's true but what we do in therapy or in whatever work we do, the essence of what we do is make things more conscious...

UF: We do that by stepping into presence and then looking at the conditioning...

VB: And the step into presence must be a step out of entanglement?

TB: Well, the word that Ursula uses is not entanglement, but she talks about family tasks. When we are talking about structure and flow and presence we are talking about how over the years of conditioning, when there is trauma, the structures become more restrictive, so that you are being held more tightly by the system.

UF: I am always thinking about the tasks that we have: What are we doing here? And we are busy resolving all the tasks in our system that haven't been resolved yet.... And of course we suffer from this, because we realise that our presence can't be lived in this tightness. So we start to ask and to learn and to deal with that, first in a defensive way by withdrawing and then from this distance we learn to approach without getting lost, without losing our presence. It seems like this is the duty that we have to do in the first part of life: we have to deal with the tasks that we are confronted with by just being in this system. And then comes the creative part. We have to deal with the tasks of our family because there is nothing else we can do, because it is who we are, we are the system. So how can we be entangled with the system if we are the system? Again it is a tension reduction... giving something back is saying: "it is not me", and if you keep doing it, like all the others in the system, it's a secondary movement.

TB: If you take "it's not me" to mean it's not presence, then you can leave it *tangled*... when you step out of it and you don't keep putting tension on the lines of incarnation they relax and the tangles can fall out, and you can see... 'Oh here is somewhere that is restricted' and that needs presence and then when the presence comes in contact with that it loosens up the structures and flow can be introduced. And in that moment it's not a giving back or a letting go it's just a kind of...

UF: ... a "Yes!" A 'yes' movement...

VB: Yes! That's good! I wanted to briefly touch on trauma... it's something I am very interested as you know... I have spent much time studying Franz Ruppert's work with trauma, and I think it is such an important part of what we do... when we hold the concept of trans-generational trauma rather than just the trauma that happens to a person. I am interested to hear about your thinking about trauma, how you see it in your work.

UF: We have the biographical level, we have the systemic history and we have the biological level and the spiritual level. Initially we work with the biographical in psychotherapy, and in constellations we work more with the systemic family historical level. But now we understand that the biological level is more important because the experience of the person and of the whole system is stored in the body. So we have to deal with the biological level, and it doesn't matter in a way whether we work more with the biographical or the systemic, it is all stored in the body. It is the body that carries all this information. So when we bring in presence at the spiritual level, or presence as the eternal, the most containing completing space, other things lose relevance. We worked with someone recently whose whole background from both the mother and father for many generations was filled with trauma, and when we brought her into presence she could see this without the experience of the trauma. So presence is beyond trauma.

VB: It's interesting to me because at the moment Franz works with the intra-psychic aspects of the person, so what he is often setting up is the part of the person that can come into presence, he may not use that terminology... he talks about the healthy part which I would think of as the part that can come into presence... and the part that is traumatised and working with the relationship between the two, which in the beginning we would see as an avoidant relationship, but then becomes a primary movement relationship.

TB: We bring people to present awareness by focusing on the senses. When we do that we are operating from the perspective of presence. That is a place of resource and power. The mind thinks that something has to happen in order to be present. But presence is not within the mind. There is no need to 'go into' presence. All we have to do is to be engaged with what is actually real to our senses. Being present is no more complicated than noticing the colours. We are making this process very explicit.

VB: I can see parallels with trauma work where you invite the client to watch the trauma episode as a movie or something like that... that this is that moment of observation and the person in that moment is in presence.

UF: Yes, that is right... oh, there is so much more to say about this!

VB: I would like to move on to another subject that we discussed briefly yesterday and that is the role of the feminine in the constellations community at present. It often seems to me that our community is very male dominated and that the more feminine way at times gets overlooked. Do you think there is an issue here and if so what could we do about it?

UF: Just do good work! Well, if you look at the community how many are women and how many are men? There are more women than men working with constellations. There are many women doing very good work in our field. Everyone who is doing this work does it out of personal interest. We consider every therapeutic search to be a response to the duality in life of being both human and eternal. The interrupted reaching-out movement is to solve this deepest of human dilemmas. I think Bert tends to leave the body out of his work... and this is the reason why the feminine, more earth-oriented representation is not so present... and the male constellations facilitators of course will likely follow this. You could see this in a constellation we did at the ISCA⁷ meeting recently where a representation of the feminine element came into the constellation pleading, "see me" ... and yet persistently she felt excluded, put aside again. But I think in the long term the feminine – and the body - cannot be excluded. It is a very critical and difficult subject to talk about at the moment, but later on when the first generation has passed on, retired, stopped working... then the field will be different.

TB: The way we are working [Tom and Ursula] is explicitly holistic and systemic. Men frequently speak from the head up, and the women are saying "but what about the body?"

UF: It is obvious that the constellations field is at present male-dominated, and it is very painful for many women in the field feeling that they are not recognised. This is very painful for them, for us... in any description of the history of family constellations the female contribution is never properly seen or acknowledged.

VB: But is there any way that we as women collude with this 'not being seen'?

UF: I see that the group of women facilitators is wonderful... their work is wonderful... doing interviews and pointing out what women are doing is very important. Women need to talk about what they are doing, be more explicit about what they are doing... the men do talk about what they are doing, but the women need to do that more than they are.

VB: Are we perhaps reluctant to put ourselves forward, to talk about what we are doing?

TB: Sometimes when women put themselves forward, they do it in a masculine way.

VB: This was always the problem with the women's movement in the beginning, we thought that in order to create any kind of equality we had to do it in the male way... this was always a no-runner in reality. So what is the female way of doing this, of honouring ourselves?

TB: Stepping into the embodied power of presence, and if talk is needed, say it from there.

UF: I heard a sentence once that went something like: those who are not interested in politics are ruled by those who *are* interested in politics. And generally women are not interested in politics. I don't know what else we can do other than just do good work... I have to think about it. For example The Knowing Field Journal is run by a woman, so she can bring women more into focus through the magazine, by interviews and articles such as this, which she is doing.

Out of many years of gender discussion we know that complaining does not help, that assuming the same position as the dominating person only gives short-term satisfaction. But this means that real change can only occur with the integration of both sides, assuming male strength but keeping the female qualities. This seems possible through consciousness and presence where the antagonisms are united and play together. This is a question for humankind. In constellations this question is so strongly in focus because the dogma of constellations is integrating that which has been excluded. And if an organization does not do that sufficiently, then it will continue the exclusion of those who do not seem to fit in. This is a contradiction in itself and of course will be reflected in all members and

will be felt as disappointment, violence and exclusion, whether consciously or not. This will undermine its stability, quality and strength.

TB: ... because the feminine way is inclusive and holistic and systemic... the feminine way includes the masculine, and this deeper sense of feminism is frequently not understood by men or women; because if it is women in *opposition* to men, that is women taking over the male model.

VB: It seems that we still find it difficult to fully embrace the feminine way to do it... and perhaps this is because the feminine way is as you say not to be in opposition to but inclusive of... to just get on with the work and not seek any kind of limelight.

Just one final question... the presence of ISCA in the field is a big presence, I know for myself it has been a complex and somewhat painful journey... I am interested to know how you feel about the formation of this entity.

UF: I think it is a big thing that Hunter initiated. It is a very good influence that he has had, giving a network where people can connect over all the continents... and it is the people who do it. But it has to be really a democratic, inclusive and systemic organisation that also honours the women or it won't survive. It has to have these primary qualities in order to be attractive to everyone.

TB: I think it depends on whether you look at ISCA as an object or as a process. If you look at ISCA and the specific individuals as an object then you have to think: "Do I want to be part of this or not?" But if you look at it as a reflection of the international field of facilitators, as a reflection of the whole, and as a process that is always moving... then from that framework ISCA can be a reflection of present reality. If, for example, we are the parents and ISCA the child, we can bring our presence and our embodied power as a mirror to ISCA. It is the same process that we have as facilitator and client... where the inner structures can change in the encounter with presence. Then I think there's an opportunity to have ISCA evolve in a healthy direction.

UF: But the question is how can ISCA include those who feel excluded... and also, whatever you do, initial structures leave a legacy.

VB: Ursula and Tom, thank you so much for this. I have found it immensely enjoyable to talk with you.

UF: Thank you, too, a pleasure to talk with you.

¹ *The River Never Looks Back: Historical and Practical Foundations of Bert Hellinger's Family Constellations*

² *In My Mind's Eye: Family Constellations in Individual Therapy and Counselling*

³ Zist is where the international trainings used to be held in Germany.

⁴ Constellations Facilitator and co-author with Barbara Inneckenof *Entering Inner Images: A Creative use of Constellations in Individual Therapy, Counselling, Groups and Self-Help*.

⁵ *Zweierlei Glück* originally in German, which was re-worked by Weber with Hunter Beaumont into *Love's Hidden Symmetry* in 1998.

⁶ Martin Buber

⁷ International Association of Systemic Constellations