

Letter to the Constellations Community

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Dear Colleagues,

My name is Lisa Iversen. I live in Bellingham, Washington, located between Seattle, WA and Vancouver, B.C., Canada. I am a member of the growing international community of constellation facilitators. Thank you to all who are providing leadership for our field.

Many thanks to Hunter Beaumont for his 'Open Invitation to the Constellation Community' in January's issue of *The Knowing Field*. I am also grateful to Jane Peterson for e-mailing a questionnaire to U.S. facilitators regarding the Inaugural meeting of the ISCA. I write in resonance with the growing, shared sentiment that many voices are needed from the international community.

My background and experience facilitating in the U.S.

I am a Licensed Clinical Social Worker with a Masters in Social Work from the University of Washington. I have had a full-time private psychotherapy practice for almost fifteen years. I was introduced to Bert Hellinger's Family Constellations in 1998 and participated in the first International Intensive at ZIST in 2001. Last October I returned to Germany for the Spirituality and Constellation Work seminar hosted by Sneh Victoria Schnabel. Over many years, I learned the work by working with as many teachers as possible. I feel very fortunate to have learned from so many of our field's most seasoned, gifted facilitators.

For many years, I have been leading circles and integrating the approach into my Pacific Northwest therapy practice. In 2005, I was invited to work in Atlanta, GA, located in the Southeastern U.S. I feel incredibly lucky to be a part of the work spreading in this part of our country. To be entrusted to do so when my skin colour is usually the lightest in the room (I am a white woman from the North) is profoundly humbling. The mix of racial, socio-economic, and religious backgrounds in these circles is inspiring.

Grief, guilt, and frozen trauma from our immigrant experience, genocide of Indigenous tribes, and enslavement of African people – this is the unacknowledged, frozen, 500+ year old backdrop for the constellation work in the U.S. I am so grateful for how smart the soul is...how slowly it is allowing the work to grow on this land. This is another reflection of the greater soul's patience and wisdom. There is no linear timetable to follow. The soil of our soul in the U.S. needs to be tended before the seeds of this approach have permission to spread.

When I lead circles with mixed European ancestry, the participants' questions from the mind are plentiful. One of the most painful questions has been, "What's an ancestor?" It is a frequent comment, when asked where their ancestors come from, or what their family's religious or faith backgrounds are, for people to not even know their grandparents' home countries. This is how disconnected from our heritage and life many of us are in the U.S. These kinds of questions/comments do not often come from African, First Nations', African American, and recent immigrants in my circles.

In my experience, the U.S. (nearly all white) facilitator field is deeply entangled with our colonial history. The necessity for each of us to become more grounded and conscious in our family histories as they relate to U.S. history is requisite for the work to grow well on this land. The constellation field in the U.S. does not need facilitators. Too many of us need the constellation field. Without attention to the influence of colonialism in our individual and collective lives, we will be unable to tell the difference between these needs.

Institution

In the U.S., we love institution. It makes us feel like we know something, that we're credible, an authority. It also helps us feel that we *belong*. We are all institutionalised. Not knowing who we are because of our immigration stories makes it easy for us to agree to belong to institution. It's an immediate surrogate for ancestral belonging.

Is our current focus regarding the background and accrediting of facilitators a distraction from these more complex questions? I think it's wonderful – really grounding – for all of us as facilitators, teachers, and simply humans – to embrace what feels to me like a very important truth when faced with all questions about this work: *we just don't know*.

I welcome the uncomfortable shadows in the ISCA dialogue as an opportunity to experience not belonging, being excluded, having decisions made for me. My fate includes being born into privilege because of my skin colour and living in the U.S. For me, I accept exclusion as a wonderful gift. Perhaps our constellation field might grow quite well in the U.S. if more of us with mostly European backgrounds were excluded from facilitating.

Institution for the sake of institution results in energy flowing toward the institutional structure – not the mission. I trust that each of us cares deeply about this work. I also find the task of becoming and staying awake to one's own entanglements and shadows to be a quite a task. It's up to each of us to do so in our way.

I have sensed being invited into fearful anxiety about the decisions being made in Europe; what will be put down on paper about membership, criteria, etc. This feels like being invited into entanglement rather than conscious, awake organisational structures. How can we compassionately acknowledge the personal

reasons for those who feel most driven to create or *prevent* proposed international structures – whether the person is me or someone else?

If the desire is to create a truly representative international organisation, we can develop a thoughtful, unhurried process to include people from the international community to do so. I am glad for Francesca Mason Boring's and Jane Peterson's presence on the teaching staff this year and recognise that this represents a significant movement toward acknowledging the place of the U.S. in the teaching community. I honour and respect both of them and their contributions to our field.

It's also important to say that the U.S. is a really, really big country. The Northwest, Midwest, Southeast, Southwest, etc., parts of this country are very different from one another. The diversity of subcultures, rural vs. urban, economic diversity, etc. is incredible. It is impossible to expect two people, no matter how experienced they might be, to represent the entire U.S. – especially regarding this work and its place in its evolution on this land we call the United States.

We know enough about the variety of applications of this approach and varying backgrounds of current facilitators to know that the wisdom of this approach flows through and is integrated into each person in ways that are unique to each person. The *person and field* of the facilitator have everything to do with the work. Given that there is not yet, and perhaps will never be, agreed upon criteria or standard accreditation processes for who belongs to this field:

- What qualifies those of us who facilitate or teach (even it has been for 10-25 years) to do so?
- From where or whom have I gotten this permission?
- With whom or what am I entangled when faced with my embodied response to these questions?

We don't know how, where, or even if this work would have spread throughout Europe and the globe if the person who developed the approach were an African single mother who was pastor of a church, or a Jewish holistic doctor, or a musician/artist, or...

Place of Bert Hellinger's Influence in the field

I am deeply grateful to Bert Hellinger for his brilliant contribution to our human family. It's natural – perhaps part of our human condition – to place people with brilliance on pedestals. I also see him as a person with personal shadows, just like each one of us; seeing him as anything else feels dangerous.

With respect and reverence for the profundity of Bert's contributions, I experience these shadows in the following ways:

- I have grown tremendously from Bert's insights about the therapy profession. I also sense that the inflammatory spirit of his public, sometimes venomous comments regarding therapists is played out between us in the field. 'To be or not to be a therapist' seems to be one of our most divisive topics. It's often expressed with almost perpetrator/victim energy. Indirect accusations on one side, e.g., "What right does she have? He's not qualified; he's not a therapist," or from those in other fields, "As long as the work doesn't stay in the hands of the therapists..." If we see each other as dangerous, what kind of structures will we create? How can I trust myself as a facilitator if I don't trust the other? What guarantees me to be trustworthy?

- When I came into this field, I was married with no children. In 2000, my husband and I were blessed to have a baby. Some may remember us from the first International Training at ZIST; we were the ones carrying our five-month-old daughter Kellia in a front pack. Since then, I notice how few facilitators there are in the U.S. who are mothers with young children. This is curious to me, given the nature of the work. Logically, the demands of the field are a significant factor. I chose early on to pace my availability to this work according to our family needs. Even with a wonderful husband and only one child, this is not always easy to do. To what degree does the Roman Catholic Church's exclusion of women from institutional and spiritual authority, unconsciously contribute to the small numbers of facilitators who are also mothers raising children?
- Living with African Zulu tribes was an important context for the development of this approach. Zulu wisdom (like early Celtic Christianity) is very different from the Roman Catholic Church and other Western institutions. Family constellations are innovative, but its roots are ancient. Tribal wisdom came first; Western institutions came second. The very nature of IAG/ISCA structure and process favours Western culture. How can we tend more consciously to the Christianisation of Africa and its link with colonialism as part of the backdrop for the development of the constellation field?

When it comes to Bert Hellinger, what is and isn't my business? I can do my best to say inside my soul, "Your life is not my business," but his deeply felt influence without embodied participation in the co-creation of international criteria makes this an impossible task. The personal relationships between Bert and others – both the smooth and rough spots – have a far-reaching, systemic effect on the whole field. When Bert's friendships or relationships end or begin, much more happens unconsciously in the international field than what might be possible for us to be aware of – perhaps both inside and outside of Germany. There is a relationship between our questions about belonging, competency, credentials, etc., and Bert's personal web of relationships.

We are all invited to have compassionate, non-judgemental awareness for ourselves and each other, including Bert Hellinger, about the complexity of finding belonging for all of these invisible threads.

Questions and ideas for next steps

I share concerns about competency/consciousness/ethical practices of facilitators. I agree that we need to tend to these questions. I offer the following questions to guide us in our discernment:

- Until those of us in the field are able to articulate why each of us belongs – and this is understood, accepted, honoured by each other – how can criteria be established for new people coming into the field?
- Will institutions being formed in Europe promote a climate where future gatherings will be attended by mostly white, European, Western-educated facilitators who can afford the registration fee and airfare? Or will the proposed ISCA promote an international climate where there is a place at the table for all?
- If the European Union were not making changes in its educational systems, would the IAG be making its proposals for the current structures with its suggested timeline?
- If we could look into the future, can we see a bit (from the perspective of a seventh generational prophecy), what legacy we are passing on and to whom? Are there any echoes of colonialism or other histories that are painful for us to see in this picture?

- For those of us rooted in Western values and practices, how can we look more to leaders and healers from tribal based communities for wisdom? How many facilitators know how Zulu spiritual leaders and healers are selected?
- How can we continue to make a good home for addressing the collective trauma from colonialism, and nurturing a spirit of compassion for ourselves and one another for the ways in which each of us are entangled with these histories?
- How can we nurture a spirit of open-hearted curiosity? (e.g., How has it come to be that you know what you know? What don't you know? How do you know what you don't know?) rather than with suspicion, mistrust, or defence? How can we become more at home with our human fears about ourselves and 'the other'?

Lisa Iversen

Editor's Note:

This letter was originally written by Lisa for the Inaugural meeting of the ISCA in response to invitation for feedback. Her comments about the U.S. field are based on her understanding that the ISCA leadership welcomes hearing many voices within the international community – in part, to learn more about the place of the work in each area.

*Lisa Iversen, MSW, LCSW, has been a Systemic Family Constellations practitioner since 1999 and a psychotherapist since 1993. She is the author of *Ancestral Blueprints: Revealing Invisible Truths in America's Soul* (Family Constellations West, 2009). Her areas of expertise and interest include transgenerational trauma, mental illness in families, effects of war in family and American culture, relationship between individual-collective healing, post-colonial healing, integration of indigenous and western healing approaches, visibility of feminine rooted wisdom, and ancestral resonance in daily living. Lisa lives in Bellingham, Washington with her husband and daughter. To learn more, visit www.ancestralblueprints.com.*