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Remembering and Forgetting: Past and Present

Morning lecture at the 1st International Asia Conference for System Constellation

Work of Bert Hellinger

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First I want to take the opportunity to really say thank you so much for this overwhelming welcome that you gave to me.

So I am here in Taiwan now for the 3rd time in two years. And I feel wonderfully supported by you. And this support also encouraged me to leave all my notes behind. And to explore what out of the present moment comes into my mind to deliver to you.

We heard a lot about the past in these days. And also we did a lot of work including the past in these days. Sometimes I am wondering whether we are not mature enough to find our own answers. Or moreover, if we don't have the answers, to live with the questions. Because in the first place our life is a question to us. We don't know where we are coming from, we don't know where we are going to, the only thing that we know is that we are here. This brings me to one of my topics: If we know that we are here, then we are in the present.

So why this work about the past?

The past by definition is that what is over. It is that what has been, and what has past by. And we cannot do anything to change it. So in a certain sense, the past is perfect. And moreover: we cannot only change it, we are the past. For example in our body, the whole history of our family is incorporated, is incarnated. In a certain way, as we often have heard, we are our parents and we are our families, and that also means in a wider perspective that we are our history, that we are our past as we are.

So looking from that perspective, we could say the past is perfect, because if I say I am as good as I am, and I accept myself as I am, I also have to say - or it is included in these words - that I accept the past as it is.

But on the other hand, there is one thing that we can observe in our work daily: there are obviously things of the past that want us to be remembered, want us to be looked at, that harass us, that torture us, make us sick, and so on. Without looking at them, it seems, we can't find peace.

There is a very interesting thing about the word remember. It consists out of two words, the proverb "re", which means "again", and the word "member". So "remembering", by the words, says "making somebody a member again", or "making something a member again". With the German word for remember it is similar. The word is "erinnern", and it means "taking something in", "taking something into yourself". So it's the same picture.

This composition of the word makes only sense when something was excluded before. Because if it would not have been excluded, then we would not have to "re-member" it.

So looking from this point of view, the work that we are doing, Family Constellation work, is "re-membering" in the literary sense of the word.

We are making that what was excluded out of our memory, out of the memory field, a member again, we bring it into life again. Giving excluded people who belong to a system their pace again is re-membering them – or vice versa.

But sometimes I ask myself, how far can we go with this? Can we remember everything?

In the evening of the first day of this conference, for example we heard about the history of different countries. And we heard about all the terrible things that happened there. We heard about the millions of murdered people in Russia under the Stalin regime, which were completely forgotten; about millions of abortions in Russia and China, about the genocide to the native Americans and the exploitation of the black slaves in the U.S., which are not really recognized yet, and many other things that were not remembered and are popping up now in family constellations. And we can imagine the effect that these terrible things had in every single family. But even if we were ten thousands of constellators: trying to remembering it all looks like everybody's taking a spoon and trying to empty the ocean. And also when we look at our personal issues, there are layers and layers and layers and layers of things that might be excluded. So to me it doesn't make much sense when we do the work with the intention to bring it all into light and to make it all better.

Apart of the point that it is not possible, there is something else that is speaking against that attempt. Because while we are working on our past, we exclude the present. So the game of exclusion may go on while we are trying to include, to remember the excluded ones. We miss the present moment while working on our past. Unless, maybe, unless we do it with a certain attitude. That certain attitude is not to focus on the past but to focus on the presence, on being present.

Quite often people come to me and say: "I have to work on my past". And I always tell them: "Then you have to go to somebody else". Because I don't do that job. It's too much. And it's wasted time.

But when we focus on the presence, then that what has to be re-membered, naturally comes up. When we really are in contact with reality in this very moment, then all our fears, all our entanglements, which come from the past, vapor up. Of course it is sometimes too much for us to hold that. Often we are not strong enough to stand it and to stay focussed with the present. Just yesterday I saw a beautiful example in the workshop my friend Heinrich did. There was a certain fear from his client, and he said: "Look at me. I make a movement", and he made a fist and moved it towards her face, very slowly of course. Like this (*showing the movement*). And it became obvious that the fear of the fist, that the client felt, the fear of violence, had nothing to do with Heinrich. It has to do with something that the client experienced in her childhood. So if in such a moment, you really look into the eyes of the person, and you really are present, you will see whether there is danger or not. Usually we close our eyes and we drift into something that comes from the past. So that's why in those situations sometimes some work is helpful. It is helpful to make us aware that our feelings and reactions are related to the past and not to the presence. So the real meaning of such work should not be to heal all the wounds of the past but to enable us to let the past behind and be present, be here and now.

But let me say a few words also about the presence, because there are some misconceptions about it.

A few weeks ago I had a workshop, and there was a woman from Switzerland, and she said: "I have a daughter, she is 8 years old, she asked me a question and I couldn't answer it. Maybe you can answer it." She said: "My daughter asked me: Mama, what is the present? I cannot figure it out. Because when I try to hold it, it is already gone. So where is it? It is always gone." I said to the woman: "Your daughter seems to be a very wise child, because she is absolutely right, in time there is no presence."

The present is not a moment in time. In time, there is only past or future. And if for example, we say: "I want to catch hold of the present moment" we have already missed it, because it doesn't belong to time. This is very logical, everybody can figure it out.

If the present doesn't belong to time, then what is it? To me it seems to be something like a certain perspective, a certain way of looking at life, or moreover, a certain way of being. The present is not different from the past, or let me say it in other words, it is not against the past. The present is including the past. Being in the present to me means being with that what is. Just stay with that what is. And this includes everything, also our past. And this also includes the so-called bad things of our past.

Yesterday we saw this beautiful dance and heard this beautiful classical Chinese song, and I was wondering - all this beauty, it was so Chinese, the movements of the dancer, and the voice when she was singing. And I heard and saw all the beauty and also all the suffering of the Chinese women. All the suffering too! There is no great art in the world that exists without suffering. All art is coming out of suffering. So if we reject the one side, we automatically also reject the other side. And vice versa, if we take the beauty of our culture, we have also to say yes to the horror of our culture. Because both are only different sides of the same thing.

So being in the present, to me is a certain attitude towards existence and also towards our past as it is. And it is the attitude of acceptance.

I also want to refer to another piece of art that we saw in yesterday's celebration. This is the Gurdjieff dances, sacred dances. These gestures that we saw in the dance and the movements, they were unbelievably strong, and they had a deep, deep beauty. This reminds me of the constellation work. These are also gestures and movements of immense strength and depth that really touch us.

But there was one part of the dance that I would like to remind you of: In the end, we had to close our eyes, and then, after a while, the gong came, and then you open your eyes, and - the stage was empty! That was also part of the dance. The stage is empty!

So to me there is a deep message in that. There is the part of movements, of gestures, that's the visible part of life, that we are dealing with in our work. But deep down, the stage is empty. And maybe we can really get in touch with reality when we have this emptiness with us when we do the work.

OK, that's all I have to say to you. Thank you very much.

One thing more, that is the beauty of Taiwan. Just this morning a woman - I worked with her the other day - she came and gave me these flowers. And to me this is a gift that I will take home in my heart.