

# Constellation Corner: Do Ancestral Families Have Souls?

**W**ELL, SOME FAMILIES HAVE SOUL, YOU SAY, AND SOME DON'T. It just depends on what kind of tunes they like. Classical types don't rock. But what's an "ancestral family" anyway? Well just hold on—I'll reply—this is not really about music. By "ancestral family," I mean your birth family two or three generations back. And the question's really about whether there is some kind of organizing system that distributes roles and functions in that family over those several generations, and whether that system persists and is somehow still active even though various members may have died.

Boy, that's a mouthful, you say. And this, I suppose, has something to do with this issue's theme of "lifestyle"? Well actually, yes—it does. What if, in a great many cases, very powerful influences on your adult lifestyles arise, not from your personal history, but rather from active, present-tense attachments to ancestors already long dead whom you may never have met. By influences I mean chronic problems (or sometimes uncanny good luck) with health, wealth, or relationships. Through the pioneering work of Bert Hellinger, spreading now from Germany rapidly throughout the world, tens of thousands of people have achieved seriously better lives through a process called "family constellation" work. And this process does not focus purely on the individual. Instead, it reveals and realigns hidden loyalties and present-tense dynamics in the individual's ancestral family system.

Well, ok, you now concede, so we're social animals and group cohesion's important.



And, old habits hang around from old groups. Why elevate that to the level of some kind of "soul"? Great question, I respond. Why don't I describe a constellation process and then you decide what words to use. Here comes 19 year-old Marvin to a workshop with 15 other people. In a brief dialogue with the facilitator, we learn that he has severe migraines every autumn. Nothing seems to have helped. Trained to look for certain patterns, the facilitator determines that one of Marvin's uncles fell and was killed by a head concussion. He tells Marvin to pick 5 people from the group and place them intuitively on the floor as representatives for Grandfather, Grandmother, the lost Uncle Phil, his Father, and himself. The lost Uncle Phil is asked to lay down. The others stand wherever Marvin put them. All are asked to simply focus quietly on their bodies, their feelings, and any reactions to other representatives.

After a few minutes, the facilitator queries each one ("how is this for you?") and perhaps allows some movement. Grandfather and grandmother can't look at each other. They face resolutely away from one another. Nor will they look at their dead son on the floor. Father faces roughly between his lost brother Phil and the representative for his son Marvin. "I am fixated on my Uncle," says Marvin's representative when queried, "and I want to go sit down next to him." Marvin the client seems very moved by this whole display. Bits of family history that he has known his whole life, but not thought much about, now start to fill in the picture.

The uncle was killed at age four, in a head injury, the same age the headaches began. It happened in the autumn, which is when they come. He fell down a stairway whose railing was broken. Grandmother blamed Grandfather for not fixing it sooner. Grandfather blamed Grandmother for not watching the child better. Bitterness arose in the family, which affected everyone. Marvin's migraines express an unconscious loyalty

to his Uncle, an attempt to properly grieve his death (which never happened) and bring his Grandmother and Grandfather back into harmony.

Wow, you say, it's like where's the real sickness here? Is it in Marvin, or rather his grandparents? Exactly. You're starting to get the picture. Even if this is all that happens, Marvin has a whole new image and feeling about his situation, and can be aided in letting go of this unconscious loyalty. But often, there is more. Marvin's representative sits down next to Uncle Phil and starts crying. Encouraged by the facilitator, Grandmother and Grandfather slowly soften, become aware of their grandson's suffering—and begin to accept that it is their unaccepted grief and pain he is acting out. Slowly, aided again by the facilitator, they find it in themselves to forgive each other, take their rightful place in grief for their son Phil, and start telling Marvin to please get up and go thrive in his own life. There is no need for his sacrifice any longer. In the aftermath of this work, Marvin's migraines eased up quickly, and did not return the next Autumn.

Ok, you say. What I'm seeing now is that the healing starts going both ways—from Marvin to the ancestors, and from the ancestors to Marvin. Right again! And now suppose there were tens of thousands of serious healings that, like this one, seemed to connect very clearly with some kind of real ancestral awareness, and you watched that awareness grow and change in the moment as part of those healings—you saw it somehow alive and responsive in the deeply felt actions of strangers—would it be fair to call that awareness an "ancestral family soul"?

Well... you say, pausing a moment, I'm almost ready to believe you on that... but how in heaven's name do we explain such a thing? You know, I can tell you that part's getting a bit easier as well. But, you'll have to wait for next issue to hear about it. In the meantime, here's a thought: Hellinger says we do not "have" souls, but rather that we "belong to" souls. ▲