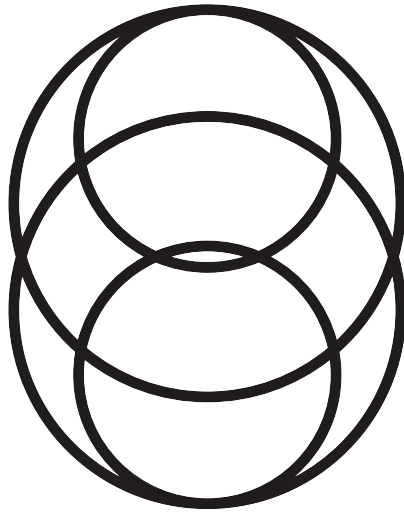


ELS VAN STEIJN

THE FOUNTAIN FIND YOUR PLACE



GAIN CONTROL OF YOUR LIFE THROUGH
INSIGHTS INTO YOUR FAMILY SYSTEM

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Robbert, Job and Mette, and all others dear to me:
you have a big place in my heart!

With thanks for my family system's abundant source.
I am full of gratitude for my teachers.

With deep respect for everyone who dared
to open up their soul to me, allowing this book
to be written.

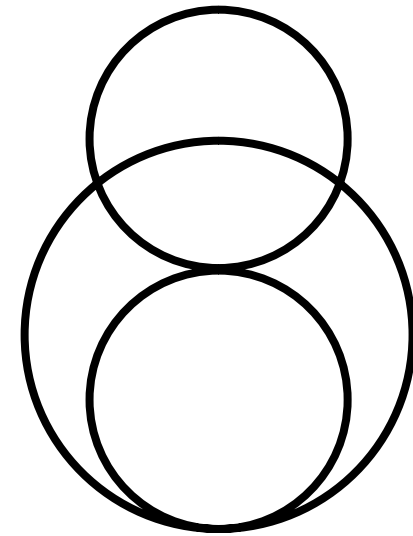
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1. INTRODUCTION

**‘THANK YOU FOR ALL
THE GOOD I’VE RECEIVED,
I WILL USE IT WISELY’**

1.1 BEING HAPPY

A nine-year-old boy asked his father, “What must I do to be happy?” His father replied, “Come, get your backpack and your donkey. We’re going on a four-day trip.” On the first day, the son sat on the donkey with his backpack. The father walked beside him, his own backpack on his back. The people they passed commented to each other, “What a lack of respect that son has for his father. He’s not that small anymore, and yet he’s sitting on the donkey. His father isn’t getting any younger either. Ridiculous.” On day two, the father sat astride the donkey, wearing his backpack, and the son walked quietly beside him. Again, people talked about them. “What a despicable father. He’s putting his own comfort and convenience above that of his son. What’s more, the father’s not that old, and the son is just a little boy.” On day three, both the father and son, backpacks and all, sat on the donkey. “How selfish! Animal abusers! How can they do that? We’d never do such a thing.” On day four, both the father and son walked alongside the donkey with their bags. And again, people gossiped about them, “Those two don’t understand what a donkey is for. What a couple of idiots for not using the donkey.” When they arrived home, the father asked his son, “Has your question been answered?” The son nodded.

To experience happiness and contentment, it makes sense for you to assign your own meaning to situations, regardless of what others may think. And within the limits of the law and reason, naturally. After all, everyone has opinions on things, just as you and I do. Yet these opinions are often formed without any background knowledge or understanding of the situation at all. In judging, you reject others and sometimes feel superior too.

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You give meaning to your life by acting in line with the values and standards that are important to you as much as possible. You feel comfortable and powerful when you and your environment fulfill those values. On the other hand, you lose energy when your environment doesn't adequately align with what you need and find important in life. By living according to your own values, you avoid becoming a rubber ball, bouncing everywhere and nowhere, among everyone and everything. And you have an inner compass to guide you, of course. It directs you, regardless of the solicited or unsolicited advice from those around you. That inner compass gives you something to hold onto and a sense of calm.

Nevertheless, living according to the standards and values that are important to you isn't always enough to make you feel satisfied. You may experience an inner emptiness or remain unfulfilled or wanting for something, even when you're relatively (or even very) successful by current standards. Sometimes, analyzing the facts alone isn't enough to be able to understand certain crises in your life. You feel something you just can't quite put your finger on but have no idea what, where, or why. There seems to be an invisible undercurrent significantly influencing what you do, how you function, and your well-being in both your private life and society as a whole.

1.2 THE UNDERCURRENT

In my work as a coach, I've come across many situations in which people are affected by the undercurrent without knowing how to deal with it. For instance, they find it difficult to maintain relationships, put themselves constantly at the back of the line, or get caught up in struggles with "authority figures."

The undercurrent is often elusive. It's usually difficult to put your feelings of restlessness, reasons for lack of success, or a loss of energy into words. These are frequently repetitive, extremely persistent patterns. You probably know from experience that good intentions and discipline aren't always enough to help you get a grip on your life.

In my work as a team trainer, coach, and family and organization constellation therapist, two principles form my starting point:

1. If invisible patterns are made visible, they become more manageable.
2. Facing reality heals.

The first principle ensures you can influence the undercurrent if you expose it. That involves a certain amount of responsibility. The question is whether you want to bear this responsibility. Once a pattern has become visible, you can no longer claim ignorance. You can, however, decide how you want to deal with it. Confronting your fate gives you strength. Sometimes, though, you may prefer to remain ignorant. That's fine too, although such a choice does have its own consequences for your day-to-day life. The price you may pay is the rubber-ball effect or a feeling of powerlessness.

Regarding the second principle, my experience has been that facing reality, however tough it may be, provides the most relief and sense of space. Reality may mean, for example, that your parents were insufficiently able to give you love and attention. Or that you're dealing with addiction or have rejected a religion very important to your family. By saying yes to reality, you allow it to have less of a toxic influence on your life. The louder you say no, the harder what you reject bounces back at you. The trick is to say yes to what is there

and acknowledge it has happened (or is happening) so you're then able to separate yourself from it.

The son in the story about the father and donkey realized that saying yes to reality empowered him most. Regardless of what you do or don't do, someone will always have an opinion of you. That's reality, and it will never change, however hard you fight it. Surrendering to what is inevitable gives you strength.

Systemic principles

Water always chooses the path of least resistance and travels downwards, never against gravity. It's a law of nature. Fighting it achieves little and devours energy. You can, though, get this principle to work in your favor by, for example, installing water irrigation techniques on lower-level farmland or building dams so that the water is kept out of specific areas.

The undercurrent also harbors laws that aren't always visible but whose effects are noticeable. Although the undercurrent is complex, it can be reduced to a few basic patterns and essences you can depend on and use to define its effects.

You experience the undercurrent in all sorts of aspects of your life. It doesn't matter whether you live alone, with your partner, or with your family. You're also a member of various groups, like clubs or organizations, but also a town and a country. Look at every group you belong to as a system. Systemic means recognizing the enormous web that connects all the people and events within a (family) system and how these affect the past, present, and future.

Every system involves laws or systemic principles that you can put to work for you. They help you shift into a virtuous circle so you can improve your relationship with yourself and your environment. Many of the systemic principles were

**SURRENDERING
TO WHAT IS
INEVITABLE GIVES
YOU STRENGTH.**

identified by German missionary and psychotherapist Bert Hellinger (1925-2019), who elaborated on the experiences and insights of others. My work is based on Hellinger's, and I've developed a metaphor to make the systemic principles more understandable and insightful. I've called this metaphor "the fountain."

The metaphor of the fountain

The systemic laws I describe using the fountain concern processes within your family system, processes that you are not or are barely aware of. The fountain clarifies your place within your family system. And when you can assume your rightful place within the family system, you'll also be able to find your place in other aspects of your life more easily. By standing firmly in your place in the fountain, you can live your life freely and enter into relationships without being swept along by the instability of others.

Imagine a beautiful fountain with different tiers of water flowing downwards into each other. At the top are your great-grandparents. The tier under that belongs to your grandparents. Under that one are your biological parents. Your place is the tier under them (in the birth order of the children). Maybe you've also passed on life, meaning that your children are under you and perhaps your grandchildren and so forth beneath them. Assume your place, and you'll receive an invisible strength essential to feeling fulfilled and powerful.

Often, though, you haven't assumed your rightful place. You may have ascended to a tier above you for any number of reasons, meaning you no longer receive but give instead. Although you may feel big and important, you're actually building up a deficit. You become needy.

The trick is to get to your place and stay there. Leaving your place in the fountain can happen both consciously and unconsciously. You won't always be aware that you've shifted places, but because you've changed places in the fountain, you're unable to adequately capture its flow. That means you'll have to stand on your own two feet in life without the natural support of the fountain. You'll also often feel a sense of inner emptiness. The good news is that the fountain is always available, provided you're in your rightful place and say yes to what is there—to the good and the bad. You learn to receive.

Constellations

A family or organizational constellation can be used to make systemic laws and their resulting dynamics visible. A constellation is a visualization of how the fountain of your system flows.

During a constellation, all the elements of the force field of your problem or “stalled” process are mapped out. This is done by focusing on a specific problem, such as that much of what you do doesn't end well or that you very often take on responsibilities that aren't actually yours.

Other participants represent the people close to you and position themselves in a certain way in the space, replicating your situation. It becomes clear how you stand in relation to others during a constellation—patterns and any accompanying dynamics become visible. After the diagnosis, potential interventions are explored so that you and your system can become even more empowered. Solutions present themselves in constellations. You gain a different perspective on the situation, and that will also work through into other aspects of your life. How to proceed often becomes clear in an organic way.

1.3 INNER STANCE

The wonderful thing about having insight into the fountain is that you can claim your rightful place by actively working on your inner stance. And what's particularly welcome is that you're not dependent on anyone else to do this. Only you, by changing your inner stance, can take charge of your life and assume your place in the fountain. Your place is where you're most powerful and where you can tap into your individuality and flair. It's related to your family system, but—as strange as it may sound—it doesn't matter whether family members are living or not or what they've done well or even wrong in their lives. It concerns only your inner stance in relation to your family system. Of course, some people have more challenging lives than others. Your fate encapsulates all the circumstances that have led you to be who you are today. In my experience, everyone who truly faces their own fate can not only cope with it but draw strength from it too.

It can sometimes be extremely painful and difficult to accept your own fate. Turning a blind eye feels easier, which is why people often focus on someone or something else. The tricky thing about that, though, is that it's impossible to assume someone else's fate. You only make yourself and the other person weaker by taking responsibility for something that's not yours. By facing what is yours (your fate), you create strength within yourself, and surprisingly, within the other person too. This is a golden rule you can always fall back on.

Systemic work is about your inner stance in relation to your family system. We'll look at who and what that comprises later in this book. My clients often tell me they like the fact that the people in their family system don't actually have to be involved in the process.

**YOUR PLACE IS
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AND WHERE
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INTO YOUR
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AND FLAIR.**

Effects of patterns in your family system on your current private and working life

It's striking that the patterns in your family system with which you (un)consciously live or struggle repeat themselves in your private or professional life. To put it very simply, you can often link a pattern, such as regularly clashing with senior organizational layers, to something that you probably still have to sort out with your father. Another dynamic results from the pattern of "feeling overly responsible." In those situations, there's almost certainly a pattern in your family system in which you've cared for at least one of your parents in a particular way.

So many of the dynamics in your current life can be traced back in this way to your family system, and the pattern then repeats itself in your own family and private or working life.

I don't want this book to suggest that the systemic perspective is the (only) truth, that it's the sole trustee of wisdom, or that there's no other way to empower yourself. I do hope, though, that this book gets you thinking and brings you new insights that you can relate to your own experiences. Relief, energy, and space often come about once the effects and workings of systemic principles are clear. The objective of this book is to present you with another perspective. After all, a different interpretation can provide you with a new way of seeing things, and that's how you expand your possibilities and potential.

In this book, I discuss several themes concerning living rather than being lived or surviving. In addition, I want to help you find your place in the fountain so that you can (continue to) claim your rightful place. Personally, I'm convinced that the systemic approach gives access to a button that can trigger all kinds of useful mechanisms. Please be aware that this book can never replace professional guidance if you are experiencing

psychological distress. In my opinion, it shows more courage to acknowledge your limits than it does to exceed them. It can also prove worthwhile to get the help you need on time.

I wish you the courage and strength needed to stand, when desired, even more so in your rightful place!

Els van Steijn

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