

## A Letter from Germany

# How Do I Get From ... Or: Where Would I Like to Get to ...?

Jürgen Hargens

**I am writing this letter around the change of the year** — while you read it now in this issue of the *ANZJFT*, some changes have happened and I have no idea which ones. Thus, I am writing about some of my impressions, trying to make sense out of them. That's what we are always doing, as Jay Efran once put it: '... life is a meaningless drift, to which we add our own meanings as we go along' (1990: 45). The world has reached a stage of globalisation that has pushed many of 'our' central issues right to the periphery — the threat of a war, the idea of (dis-)solving conflicts simply by military power, how can we talk about such a world from a systemic point of view?

This might be seen as a context/background and we are still training students in therapy to help them to help people to overcome their dilemmas — in a friendly, respectful, and peaceful way. Isn't it a little bit strange that in therapy we follow such different ideas from those in global politics? In a nutshell we are working on living together, respecting togetherness, and giving credit to reciprocity. As soon as the context shifts, as soon as we leave the therapy room and enter the 'real world' (whatever this might mean), these basic ideas seem to fade away — we still rely on ideas of power, strength, etc. And training might be implicitly led by the idea of teaching something 'right' which confirms the idea of right/wrong. I know, publicly we talk differently and we do try hard.

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The late Heinz von Foerster said in a book of interviews: 'Truth kills' which means that *if* there were *the* truth then you have to believe. If you don't believe, I have to convince you because there is *one* truth. If you still do not believe, I have to force you, etc. His idea is that talking

about 'truth' has disastrous consequences. He reminded us of the millions of people mutilated, tortured, and burned in order to enforce the idea of (a specific) truth through violence (1998: 29ff).

He also reminded us of the history of the word: 'truth' is related to 'trust', suggesting that we don't need any external reference (e.g. truth) as soon as we accept truth as trust between people. I might put it the other way round: whenever I don't trust, then I rely on an 'objective' truth ('the

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one and only ...') and I need power and weapons to enforce my idea. Using constructivist and constructionist lenses, how can I ever be sure that I am right? Doubt reigns, I believe. And that's good, I think, because doubt may open up my mind to different options. That's what I have been trained to think of in therapy — options, possibilities, and mutual respect.

I have to be clear about my goal, I think, keeping in mind that my goal might be best for myself — and not for you. That's what I have learned in my therapeutic training, too. Duncan and Miller (2000: 13) have highlighted it eloquently when differentiating between '*competence* of service delivery' and '*effectiveness* of the services delivered'. More often than not we simply *believe* in our competency and don't care about the consequences. (I might relate this to a gender issue, too: male display behaviour ...).

This reminds me of how other people (men, I must admit) talk about what might be a foundation for human



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living. One of them is Humberto Maturana. He never hesitates, but names 'love' as a basis for human living or, he says, 'the basis of existence is trust' (2002: 211). The other is Sting, who produced a song which says that whatever tempest seems to overwhelm us, there is a 'deeper wave' which will prevail. The song ends: 'I say love is the seventh wave'.

Where would I like to get to — to a world in which reciprocity, love, and trust reign. And I *cannot* enforce such a world. That does not mean that I cannot do anything — the road is how you walk it. Thus, I can keep on walking. Just live my ideas ...


To end with some ideas I have learned from my training — what might be good reasons for the other to behave as s/he behaves? What good might it become for me that the other behaves the way s/he behaves? And you may put in, for example both the names of George W. and Osama, and play with this idea. Who really knows who's really right? I remember an old Bob Dylan song, in which Dylan comments that while we may all be right,

we're both just one too many mornings  
and a thousand miles behind.

Yours peacefully,  
Jürgen Hargens

P.S. There's another lesson I have learned in the years of my therapeutic practice (to be precise: I have learned that lesson from my clients — in German I call them 'KundInnen') which is really very, very old: no matter how bad you are feeling, no matter how much worse your symptoms may become — just falling in love with another person makes the symptoms (no: not disappear but) lighter and your life brighter. That's something you should remember in times of troubles, I think.

## References

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## Editors and their Sheds: Babies and Small Children

‘Colwyn Trevarthen, Professor of Child Psychology and Psychobiology at the University of Edinburgh ... argued that babies are born intrinsically “dignified”, with a coherent sense of self (defined as “sharing a sense of purpose in passing time”)’

Sue Jones reporting on the UKCP Conference, *Context*, 60, 2002: 19.

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Flaskas, Carmel and Cade, Brian, 1998. Of Apes and Infants: The Cutting Edge of Psychoanalytic Thought? [discussion of Robert Langs' *The Evolution of the Emotion-Processing Mind* and Daniel Stern's *The Motherhood Constellation*], *ANZJFT*, 19, 2: 75–80.

Huston, Cathie and Armstrong, Ken, 1999. Home Visiting Family Therapy for Children at Risk, *ANZJFT*, 20, 1: 41–43.

Scott, Elisabeth, 1999. Are the Children Playing Quietly? Integrating Child Psychotherapy and Family Therapy, *ANZJFT*, 20, 2: 88–93.

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