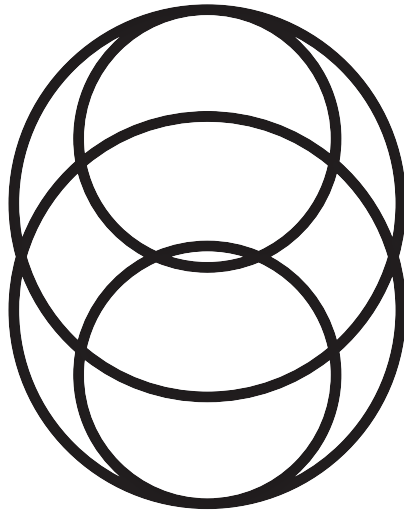


ELS VAN STEIJN

THE FOUNTAIN FIND YOUR PLACE



CONTROL OF YOUR LIFE THROUGH
INSIGHT INTO YOUR FAMILY SYSTEM

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First Edition November 2019

Originally published in the Netherlands under the title: De fontein, vind je plek, November 2016

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Design: The Green House Amsterdam, Brechtje Baars and Leonoor Verplanken

Translation: Natascha Barton, Margot van der Krogt

Printing works: Wilco Amersfoort

Special thanks to: Guido Keff

ISBN 978-94-92331-75-5

NUR 770

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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 the abundant source of my family system.
Full of gratitude for my teachers.

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

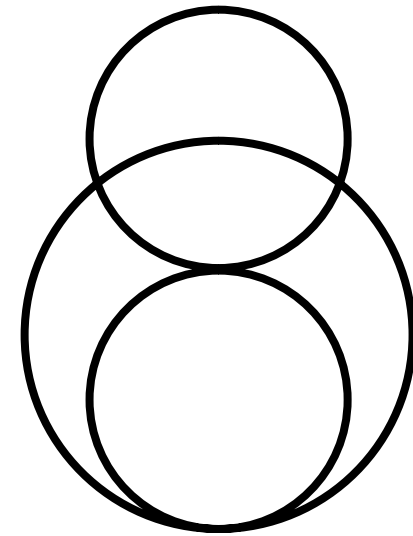
CONTENTS

1.	INTRODUCTION	11
1.1	Being happy	13
1.2	The undercurrent	14
1.3	Inner attitude	19
2.	THE FOUNTAIN	23
2.1	Receiving	25
2.2	Connecting	27
2.3	Three sources of strength and energy	30
2.4	The metaphor of the fountain	38
2.5	Your family system	41
2.6	Leaving your place	48
3.	FEELING GUILTY AND INNOCENT	53
3.1	Sweet, good little girl/boy syndrome	55
3.2	Your conscience	56
3.2.1	The personal conscience	57
3.2.2	The family conscience	62
3.2.3	The universal conscience	68
3.3	Accepting your guilt	69
3.4	Taking responsibility for your own life	74
4.	YOUR DESTINY	77
4.1	Worries are relative	79
4.2	The destiny	82
4.3	Consequences of ascending in the fountain	83

4.4	Your destiny and accompanying emotions	88
4.5	(Innerly) absent parents	95
5.	ASCENDING, METHOD ONE: TAKING OVER UNDUE RESPONSIBILITY	105
5.1	Leave someone his destiny, or leave someone to his destiny	107
5.2	Making an unconscious appeal to your child as parent	108
5.3	Needy parents	112
5.4	Signs that you have ascended due to taking over undue responsibility	114
5.5	Presumption and arrogance due to taking over undue responsibility	124
6.	ASCENDING, METHOD TWO: MAKING JUDGEMENTS AND DISCONNECTING	129
6.1	Someone doesn't see you, do you see them?	131
6.2	The other person doesn't see you	137
6.3	Examples of ascending due to preconceptions/judgements and disconnecting	139
6.4	What does 'making a judgement' mean?	140
6.5	Signs that you have ascended due to judgements and disconnection	143
6.6	Combined ascending	151
7.	ASCENDING, METHOD THREE: UNCONSCIOUS IDENTIFICATION	155
7.1	An invisible world	157
7.2	Unconscious identification or being entangled	158
7.3	Family conscience laws that cause an unconscious identification	161
7.4	Signs that you've ascended in the fountain due to unconscious identification	162
7.5	Nuances	167

8.	ACCEPTING YOUR PLACE	171
8.1	The person that I was I am no more	173
8.2	Effects of descending	174
8.3	The process of descending	181
8.4	General basic steps to descend in the fountain	184
8.4.1	Put your parents above you in the fountain	187
8.4.2	Letting go of what belongs to the other person and facing what's yours	190
8.4.3	Saying yes to what's there	195
8.4.4	Engaging in your own primary feelings	199
8.5	Losing a small piece of yourself	200
9.	DESCENDING	209
9.1	Letting our light shine	211
9.2	Descending after method one of ascending, taking over undue responsibility	212
9.3	Descending after method two of ascending, judging and disconnecting	216
9.4	Descending after method three of ascending, unconscious identification	225
9.5	Signs and pitfalls	227
10.	YOUR PARENTS	235
10.1	Parents are a package deal	237
10.2	Your mother	238
10.3	Your father	242
10.4	When do children feel safe?	249
10.5	Complicated systemic situations	253

11.	PARTNERS, RELATIONSHIPS, DIVORCE AND CO-PARENTING	261
11.1	A successful relationship	263
11.2	Finding and keeping a partner is tough	270
11.3	Difficult moments in relationships	276
11.4	When is a divorce successful?	283
11.5	Co-parenting	285
12.	WHERE DO YOU STAND?	291
12.1	In what place are you?	293
12.2	Do you want to get it or do you want to be happy?	295
12.3	Different fountains	296
12.4	My place and yours	297
	SOURCES	301
	THANKS	303



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 asks his father, ‘What must I do to be happy?’ His father replies, ‘Come, get your backpack and your donkey. We’re going on a four-day trip.’ On day one, the son sits on the donkey with his backpack. The father walks beside him, his own backpack on his back. The people they pass comment to each other, ‘What a lack of respect that son has for his father. He’s not that small anymore, and yet still he sits on the donkey. His father isn’t getting any younger either; ridiculous.’ On day two, the father sits, wearing his backpack, on the donkey and the son walks quietly beside him. Again, people talk about them. ‘What a despicable father, he puts 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, sit 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 walk alongside the donkey with their bags. And again, people gossip about them, ‘Those two don’t understand what a donkey’s for. What a couple of idiots for not using the donkey.’ When they arrive home, the father asks his son, ‘Has your question been answered?’ The son nods.

In order to experience happiness and satisfaction, it’s worthwhile to give meaning to a situation yourself, regardless of what the other person thinks. Always of course within the limits of law and reason. After all, everyone has an opinion about something, just as you and I do. Often though, this opinion is formed without any background knowledge or understanding of the situation at all. In your judgment you reject others, and sometimes feel superior too.

You give meaning to your life by acting as far as possible

**YOU GIVE
MEANING TO
YOUR LIFE BY
ACTING AS FAR
AS POSSIBLE
ACCORDING TO
VALUES AND
STANDARDS
IMPORTANT
TO YOU.**

according to values and standards important to you. You feel comfortable and powerful when you and your environment fulfill these 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 of course, you have an inner compass to guide you. It directs you, regardless of the advice your environment, invited or not, gives you. Providing you with something to hold onto and a sense of calm.

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

1.2 THE UNDERCURRENT

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

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. Frequently these are repetitive, extremely persistent patterns. You probably know from experience that good intentions and discipline alone are not always enough to help you get a grip on your life.

In my work as team trainer, coach, and family and organisation constellation therapist, I use two principles as starting point:

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

The first principle ensures you can influence the undercurrent if you expose it. This 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 destiny gives strength. Sometimes though, you may prefer to remain ignorant. That's fine too. Although such a choice does have different 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, I've the experience that facing reality, however tough it may be, provides the greatest relief and sense of space. Reality may mean for example that your parents were insufficiently able to give you love and attention. Or 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), to then be able to separate yourself from it.

The son from the story with the father and the donkey realised that saying yes to reality made him most powerful. Regardless of what you do or don't do, someone always has an opinion about you. This is the reality and will never change, however hard you fight it. Surrendering to what's inevitable gives you strength.

Systemic principles

Water always chooses the path of least resistance and travels straight down, never against gravity. This is a law of nature. Fighting it achieves little and costs energy. You can though get this principle to work in your favour, by for example installing water irrigation techniques on lower-level farming ground or building dams so that water is kept out of specific areas.

The undercurrent also harbours laws that are not 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 the effects.

You experience the undercurrent in various aspects of your life. It doesn't matter if you live alone, with your partner or with your family. Additionally, you're also part of various groups, like a club or an organisation, but also a town and country. Look at every group you belong to as a system. Systemic means recognising 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 get to work for you. They help you shift into a positive spiral, so you can improve your relationship with yourself and your environment. Many of the systemic principles were identified by the German missionary and psychotherapist Bert Hellinger (1925), who elaborated on the experiences

SURRENDERING TO WHAT IS INEVITABLE GIVES YOU STRENGTH.

and insights of others. My work is based on Hellinger and I've developed a metaphor to make the systemic principles more understandable and insightful. I have called this metaphor 'the fountain'.

The metaphor of the fountain

The systemic laws that 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 take your place within the family system, you'll also be able to more easily find it in other aspects of your life. 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 into each other. At the top are your great-grandparents, the tier under that belongs to your grandparents. Under this 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, beneath them, your grandchildren etc. Take your place, and you'll receive an invisible strength essential for feeling fulfilled and powerful.

Often though, you're not in your rightful place. For various reasons, you may have ascended to a tier above you. 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 position in the fountain can happen both consciously and

unconsciously. You're not always aware you've shifted. But because you've changed place in the fountain, you're unable to adequately capture its flow. Meaning 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 own place and you say yes to what is there, to the good and the bad. You learn to receive.

Constellations

A means to making systemic laws and the resulting dynamics visible, is the family or organisation constellation. A constellation is a visualisation of how the fountain of your system flows.

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

Other participants serve as representatives of the people close to you and position themselves in a certain way in the space, replicating your situation. During a constellation it becomes clear how you stand in relation to others. Patterns and any accompanying dynamics become visible. After the diagnosis, possible interventions are explored, so that you and your system can be even more empowered. Through a constellation, solutions present themselves. You get a different perspective on the situation, which will also work through into other aspects of your life. What you should do often naturally becomes clear.

1.3 INNER ATTITUDE

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

It can sometimes be extremely painful and difficult to accept your own destiny. Turning a blind eye feels easier. Which is why you often focus on something or someone else. Perhaps frustratingly though, it's not possible to take over somebody else's destiny. You only make yourself and the other person weaker by taking responsibility for something that's not yours. By facing what is yours (your destiny), you create strength within yourself, and surprisingly, within the other person too. This is a golden rule you can always fall back on.

Systemic working is about your inner attitude in relation to your family system. Who and what that comprises, will be discussed later in this book. My clients often tell me they like the fact that the people in their family system do not actually have to be involved in this process.

**YOUR PLACE IS
THE POSITION
WHERE YOU ARE
MOST POWERFUL
AND WHERE YOU
CAN ACCESS YOUR
INDIVIDUALITY
AND FLAIR.**

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

It's striking that the patterns from your family system with which you (un)consciously live or struggle, repeat themselves in your private or working life. To put it very simply, you can often link a pattern, for example regularly clashing with senior organisational layers, to something that you probably still have to figure out with your father. Another dynamic results from the pattern of 'feeling over-responsible'. Almost certainly there's a pattern within your family system that means 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 this pattern repeats itself in your own family and your 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 gives you new insights you can relate to your own experiences. Relief, energy and space often come about once the effects and workings of the 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 field of vision. And this is 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 own position. Personally, I'm convinced that the systemic approach gives access to a button able to trigger many useful mechanisms. Please be aware that this book can never replace professional guidance when experiencing psychological distress. In my opinion, it shows more courage

to acknowledge your limits than to exceed them. It can also prove worthwhile to request 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

Utrecht, Bujumbura, Molkwerum, Montolieu 2014-2016