

Sarah's Story

Constellating an Archetypal Myth

First appeared in the Systemic Solutions Bulletin, 2002 Issue 3.

by Vivian Broughton

This is an account of an unusual constellation that was set up on September 9th 2001, on the last day of a residential workshop, the final module of training in Family Systems Therapy with Albrecht Mahr. It took place in a lovely green and peaceful landscape. Two days later a group of men of Arab descent flew two passenger airliners into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre, symbols to them of Zionist and Christian 'achievement', killing over three thousand people.

This is a personal account. I have spent many months trying to work out how to write an account of this constellation, and eventually I could find no other feasible way than to write it as Sarah's story. I represented Sarah in the constellation.

The story may be written differently from the perspective of Abraham's representative, or Ishmael's or Isaac's or Hagar's, or from the perspective of Bernard from our group who courageously facilitated the constellation, or from Albrecht's, or any other of the group members present. But I was the one who wanted to write the story. Somehow I think there is no accident in this; the Biblical story of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac is always known as the story of Abraham, but this constellation was Sarah's story.

This is how it came about. Daniel, one of the members of our group was an Israeli living in London and deeply troubled by events in the Middle East. Bernard, another member was interested in the possibility of using constellations as a way of exploring national archetypal myths and legends, stories that seem in some way to portray something deep in the soul of groups of people. Daniel had been fascinated by the story of Abraham for all his life; he was brought up with this narrative, and for him it seemed to permeate everything around him to do with being an Israeli and a Jew. Together Bernard and Daniel proposed to the group that we set up a constellation of the story of Abraham.

Bernard and Daniel sat together and in starting out Daniel said: "I want to constellate what I regard as my inherited myth, the story of Abraham, his wife Sarah and her son Isaac, Sarah's Egyptian slave Hagar and her son Ishmael. In our myth the line through Sarah is the Jewish (Israelite) lineage, and through Hagar the Arab descendants. The story has been alive in me since I started being involved in the Hellinger work".

The story as told by Daniel was that Abraham had a wife called Sarah, who was infertile and she said to Abraham: "Why don't you sleep with my slave girl Hagar, so that she can have a child for me." Abraham agreed and slept with Hagar who became pregnant.

Once Hagar had been intimate with Abraham she despised Sarah, and Sarah, seeing this wanted to be rid of her. Sarah appealed to Abraham who told her that Hagar was her slave and she should do with her as she wished. Sarah banished

Hagar to the desert.

In the desert an angel came to Hagar and told her to go back and that her unborn son would have many descendants and they would be a very angry people. So she went back and gave birth to a son who she called Ishmael.

Later the Angel came to Sarah, when Sarah was ninety years old, and promised her a child. Sarah laughed and said it was impossible because she was so old, but a year later she gave birth to her son Isaac.

One day Ishmael and Isaac were playing together, and when Sarah saw them she again went to Abraham and this time told him to send Ishmael and his mother away again so that Isaac would inherit everything from Abraham. And so he did as she said.

At the beginning of the constellation facilitated by Bernard he told Daniel to place Abraham, Sarah and Hagar. Daniel had also chosen people to represent Isaac and Ishmael, and to represent Canaan, the Promised Land.

As the representative for Sarah I found I needed to push up close behind Abraham, hiding behind him and glued to him. If he had moved I would have moved with him, as if I were physically joined to him. I just had my eyes over the top of his right shoulder looking in the same direction as he, at Hagar. As I looked at Hagar I felt hatred towards her. I felt as though I was trying to kill her with my eyes.

Hagar reported being aware of Sarah's look and confirmed what Sarah said she was feeling. She felt the hatred.

Abraham said he wanted to move away from Sarah, not feeling that involved or interested but increasingly uncomfortable and wanting to move away. He tried to move but Sarah followed, sticking to him like glue. Eventually Abraham moved right away and left Sarah standing opposite Hagar.

As Sarah I felt naked, deserted and abandoned with my growing feelings of hate and violence totally fixed on Hagar. My eyes never left her.

At this point Bernard brought in the representative for Canaan and placed her at the other end of the room. Hagar moved to Canaan and said that she felt more comfortable and at ease near her.

Abraham meanwhile turned and looked away from the constellation. He said that he didn't want to be involved in what was going on; it had nothing to do with him.

As Sarah I felt left alone. I began to feel desperate, there would be no solution for me, and there was no one I could turn to. I couldn't rely on Abraham as he had removed himself. I felt a growing tension in my body, a growing feeling of fear that something awful was going to happen, that I would not be able to contain the tumult within. I appealed to Bernard as the facilitator, but he was talking to Abraham and Hagar and didn't respond to me. A little later he asked me how I was and I tried to say what was happening, but not much came out. I

didn't know what to say. What was going on in me felt beyond words. I felt scared and I managed to say that. But then he went and talked to Abraham again. After a bit I looked around to see if there was somewhere I could move to where I might feel safer and I saw the person who had been chosen to represent Isaac, not actually positioned yet, but sitting on a chair next to the person chosen to be Ishmael. I felt drawn to him. He was my son and I thought I might find some solid ground near him. I moved over and stood behind him, my back against the wall, wedged in between the wall and the chair Isaac was sitting on. I started to play with his hair; I was able to breathe a little easier.

Meanwhile things were still happening. The group was discussing something about God; Abraham was staring away and saying something like: "I'm just following God's will." As Sarah I felt ignored and desperate still. I began to feel that I was central and that there was something about me, and my experience, that was crucial to the constellation. I was obviously feeling a lot, I had tried to say so, but somehow no one seemed to really be taking any notice. The feelings seemed to be collecting in my belly. I felt this horrible tension and queasiness there, I started to feel restricted in my chest again, hot in my head, my legs felt shaky and I had to cling on to the chair to stay standing. I tried to attract Bernard's attention. I think I said something like: "I think the issue is here, I think you have to do something here." Still I felt unheard. I felt ignored and unseen. I tried again: "Something has to happen here... please, something needs to happen here..." Bernard came over and as far as I can remember suggested that I come out from behind Isaac's chair. I wouldn't. I felt like I couldn't. He seemed insistent. "No, I can't". I don't remember where he wanted me to go, but I couldn't move. I wouldn't move, nothing, no one would make me move from where I was. "No" I said. "No, no, no, I can't..."

Bernard was still there and seemed very close so that I felt hemmed in between him, the wall, and Isaac's chair. I felt increasing panic and rage. The overwhelming feeling was of being trapped, unseen for who I really was, not taken seriously. I tried to tell Bernard to go away. I couldn't bear his proximity and his lack of understanding about the level of rage and turmoil that was still growing in me. I didn't know what was happening I just knew that if something didn't change soon I was going to explode. I had no idea what that meant. I just felt like I was a fragile container of a huge and massively destructive evil energy. He didn't move. I tried again: "Go away." He didn't move. "GO AWAY." He looked uncertain but held his ground. "GO AWAY!!!" I was yelling by this stage... and then I erupted. I howled. I don't know where it came from... but I howled like a wild animal. The roaring and howling came from my belly. I lost vision of the room; I had this image of multitudes of people coming from my belly, an outflow of humans into the future. I felt as if I was giving birth to centuries of hatred, rage, persecution, violence and evil. I disgorged pain and torment. I saw the generations that came from my belly suffering and hating and killing. I felt as though I was giving birth to the Holocaust. I felt lost in the experience; I have never in my life felt less available to myself as Vivian. I felt almost wholly something else, completely immersed.

Bernard asked Albrecht to help and he brought me back to myself and I felt held. The group were talking about what had happened and discussing what to do. Still clinging onto Isaac, I felt a bit calmer and more able to think. They were making suggestions as to what movements might be possible. I looked at Hagar, and I

no longer felt the hate. I saw her sitting on the floor at the feet of Canaan and she looked so comfortable, beautiful and strong that I too began to feel more solid and strong.

Albrecht asked Daniel what would be a good outcome for him. He thought and then said it would be if Ishmael and Isaac could play again... Suddenly as he said that I knew what I had to do. I had to get to Hagar. I didn't feel I could go alone, but if I could take Isaac... and Ishmael with me.... Perhaps we could go to her. I moved and taking Isaac by the hand I said: "You come too." And we went over to Hagar and she smiled at me. Ishmael followed. I felt so drawn to her now as I knelt down and quite slowly put my arms around her and then lay down in her lap as she held me. I felt I had come home... and then I realised I felt forgiven.

Two days later, as I watched on television the second airplane fly into the World Trade Centre I thought of Sarah. I couldn't believe, as I imagine few of us could, what was happening, but it matched my experience of Sarah's feelings of horror and destruction. Four days later as the world tried to make sense of what was happening a phrase popped into my head: "The small quiet voice of guilt." I didn't know what it meant. I didn't make any connection, but it stayed with me. Five days after that it hit me. Sarah's guilt. I realised that beneath all the tempestuous feelings I had felt as Sarah there had been the small quiet voice of guilt. Too quiet to be heard, even by me as Sarah. As I thought more about it I came up with the following: Sarah gave her handmaiden to Abraham to make love to and to conceive a child by. She was responsible for that. Then when Hagar did conceive Sarah couldn't bear it and she applied pressure on Abraham to banish the pregnant Hagar. Abraham handed the responsibility back to Sarah and said: "She's your slave... you do as you wish." So, Sarah banished Hagar and her child to the desert. Later when Sarah gave birth to Isaac, and Ishmael and Isaac played together Sarah again felt jealous and asked Abraham to banish Hagar and Ishmael again so that Isaac would be the sole inheritor of his father's wealth. Sarah was doubly guilty.

Guilt needs to be heard. We know from our work with Hellinger and constellations that the guilty need to be allowed to stand with their guilt, to be given their place and honoured for the fact that they accept their actions and the consequences of these actions. I have often seen in constellations how once a representative owns his or her guilt and is seen and accepted by others in the constellation, then they grow taller, become more solid and the feeling in the constellation changes. The guilty must have their place with their guilt. A couple of weeks after the twin towers and still working to understand all these events, I was talking to a colleague who told me that once in a workshop she had attended, an angry woman in a constellation was asked to say to the object of her hate: "What have I done to you that I am so angry with you?" She understood what I was saying.

Sarah's rage covered and masked her guilt and shame, but it also came from the frustration of not having the space to own it. In our culture to be guilty is in itself shameful. When we are guilty we are punished, and if we own our guilt we are not honoured for doing so. Outside of a constellation we don't understand that to feel guilt and to fully carry this burden is in itself strengthening to the individual and that it serves to even out the imbalance between the persecutor and his victim. This gives birth to true forgiveness and peace. As we know, the

persecutor needs to be loved by someone in the constellation, to be given the space to be seen, and then they can lay down their guilt at the victim's feet. Then they can both find peace.

We found a good resolution for Sarah and Hagar in the constellation. We found a place for them both to recognise and acknowledge the offending act. When this does not happen, when a person cannot be heard in their guilt, then the resulting frustration and masking rage ensures that the violence, devastation and horror will continue down through the generations.

In the weeks after September 11th I heard a story on the news about a group of Palestinian and Israeli women who are working together for peace. Perhaps, if we could create a little space and time, Sarah and Hagar can come together and Sarah can stand with her guilt and she and Hagar can become strong together.

POSTSCRIPT

Two days after I finished writing this article Time Magazine came out with a cover story entitled 'The Legacy of Abraham' by David van Biema'. It followed the publication of a new book by Bruce Feiler called 'Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths'. Feiler sets out to understand the historical origins of the animosity between the three great religions of Islam, Judaism and Christianity.

In the article David van Biema summarises the individual versions of the story of Abraham as told by each religion, and makes it obvious how each religion uses the story to uphold its claims. For instance in Islam, Ishmael is the son that Abraham nearly sacrifices on the mountain, not Isaac as in the Judaic and Christian tradition. Van Biema also focuses attention on the extraordinary inheritance of the two sons from their father Abraham. Van Biema writes: "If Abraham is indeed the father of three faiths, then he is like a father who left a bitterly disputed will."

Reference

Time Magazine, September 30 2002, Vol. 160 No. 14, published by Time Warner Publishing.