

The Field

*René J. Molenkamp**

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At times, we have experiences of profound individual or collective connections with other people without even having spoken to them. We somehow know that there is more than verbal interaction, that there is the More. This introductory article explores the Field of connections by giving some examples of this Field and language to describe it.

Sometimes we find ourselves in-the-zone. We find that we excel at things we do well when we are in-the-zone. There is a flow and effortlessness to our actions. It is almost as if we lose ourselves as a person and we become what we do: the teacher becomes one with the subject and with the classroom, the manager knows exactly what to say to whom in what moment, the mechanic knows what the problem is when he takes a quick look at the car, the runner experiences her runner's high or the dancer becomes the dance.

Occasionally we find ourselves in-the-zone collectively: a sports team, a team meeting or a group of friends shooting the breeze. It is when we are in a moment that we "don't want to end" because of the thrill of what is happening, knowing we are in a connection that would be difficult to find on our own. It is often related to a particular group of people or a particular task.

These in-the-zone experiences are familiar to most people. We don't quite know what an in-the-zone experience really is or what makes it happen, but that does not make it any less real. It is a powerful experience, an experience of being one with another thing or person or group of people. At the moment we are in it, we are often unaware. Indeed if we take a moment to glimpse it while it is happening, it is often "gone." The realization comes afterwards. The feeling is undeniable.

The More

A related experience – perhaps somewhat less familiar to people – is the experience of being part of the More. It is like the in-the-zone experience in that we don't quite know how it works, how we

* René Molenkamp is co-founder of Group Relations International and may be contacted at renemolenkamp@gmail.com.

get there, what it is. Being part of the More is not only being one with something or some one else, but it goes a step further. It is knowing and experiencing that this feeling of being one is part of a larger Oneness.

Being part of the More is when on the one hand we have our own experience of whatever it is that we experience – being in-the-zone or not - and at the same time we realize that the experience is part of something else, something More, something beyond ourselves. Another way of putting it: we have the experience and at the same time we are aware that whatever we experience is something bigger than ourselves. These individual experiences of the More, together form the energy field of connections.

Although many of us have experiences like this, it is hard to make sense of them. They are often fleeting. We don't hold on to them or talk about them. We don't quite know what to do with them or how and where to place them in our world. It is a bit like making a jigsaw puzzle, and after completing the puzzle yet finding pieces left over that clearly are an extension of this puzzle and at the same time the extension is seemingly just an incomplete fragment. We often put the left over puzzle pieces aside without paying much attention to them, because literally they do not fit in our picture. And yet these additional pieces form the beginning of a new puzzle, which we cannot complete alone because other people hold other pieces of that puzzle as extensions to their own puzzle. All these extensions together form a new puzzle. These extension puzzle pieces together with our completed pictures will give a picture of the More. Experiencing the More is somehow knowing that my extension puzzle pieces make sense with other people's extension pieces.

Connections

One of the aspects of this More is the field of connections. At times, we have experiences of profound individual or collective connections with other people without even having spoken to them. We call this the Field, the field of connections.

Obviously, it is a bit of a challenge to describe the Field because our familiar vocabulary is not quite adequate to describe our experiences. We often label these moments with words like coincidence, intuition, pre-moition, synchronicity, telepathy, serendipity, psychic, mystery, or magic. With these labels we often make these experiences both individual and exceptional; individual in the sense that they we believe they stand on their own and exceptional in the sense that they fall outside the normal range of our experience. When we are in the Field, these experiences are

actually the norm if we take time to notice and stay in this zone. Like our puzzle with those extra pieces, we can then begin to see how these moments are connected to each other and a bigger unfolding picture emerges.

As we become more familiar with the Field, we begin to notice how these individual experiences of the More are actually connected to each other. It is as if there is some unknown radio frequency, which normally is surrounded by loud static, but when the conditions are exactly right the reception actually becomes loud and clear. A new world of discovery opens for us.

Noticing The More

There are a couple of very concrete examples that come to mind, which offer illustrations of how this More becomes an energy field of connections--those extra puzzle pieces that somehow find each other. A number of years ago, I directed a number of 10-day group relations conferences. Generally speaking, in these experiential conferences, participants study their own group dynamics with the help of specially trained consultants. In a series of group meetings the consultants and the group members try to pay attention to how our unconscious behavior influences group dynamics, particularly related to leadership and authority issues.

In this particular conference, I decided that the small groups (the home group throughout the conference) would be formed in such a way that participants of the conference self-selected their groups in silence. The instruction was given to wander around the room and to connect with people somehow, and to form three groups of about eight people. In this fluid process, people silently sensed their way through the room and somehow gravitated towards each other until each participant eventually "decided" to morph into a group. A pre-assigned pair of consultants also participated in this process in a similar way until they found their way to the group they would work with.

Immediately after this process, people worked together in these groups and also talked about why they thought they were in the group they were in. Individuals articulated why they made their choices, but they were mostly personal and individual reasons. Many people could speak about feeling a bond towards one or two other people in the group, but no one had hunches about why this *group* was together.

After working together for a week – in two of the three groups some clarity emerged around underlying themes that connected the people in the group to each other and revealed a deeper "why" to

their silent choices. In one group, it appeared that all the participants were currently in a period of celibacy in their lives, for a whole variety of different reasons (breaking up with partners, religious reasons, illness). And the two male consultants that worked with them were perceived to be the most virile and expressively sexual members of the staff. In another group, there was great difficulty in the group. There were challenges in how the participants worked with each other, how the consultants worked together, and how the consultants worked with the group. Eventually, it appeared that every single person in the group was in an inter-racial relationship with a partner from a different country other than their own. In parallel, the consultant pair represented this core collective identity of the group: a black woman from the Caribbean working with a white man from the US. Members of the group did not only find each other, they matched up with this particular consultant pair and mirrored the level of difficulty of the cultural discourse necessary in such relationships, both on an interpersonal level, but also on a systems level.

In the initial silent selection process people seemed to engage in the process in different ways. Participants were more or less deliberate or skeptical or trusting. There were different levels of engagement as well. Some chose and some were the chosen ones. The actions initially were beyond participants' conscious intentions or desires *regardless of how they participated in the group selections*. Something else was happening that drew the people together. As people sensed their way through this process and it ended up in the way it did, a bit of the Field made itself known.

These discoveries of groupings according to initially not-known similar state of lives were a revelation for participants and staff alike. It actually points to the existence of an organizing principle about human connections that is unfamiliar to most of us. This experience is just one example of being part of the More. In other words, there is more than we can see and understand going on all the time that we are initially aware of. Perhaps even more intriguing is that somehow these unseen and incomprehensible elements may well influence how we make choices, determine whom we gravitate to, and effect how we create collective experience.

Another example from such a group relations conference came when the staff was doing some work while the member groups were involved in another process. We were talking about our connections, and all of a sudden the song "Spanish Harlem" became part of the conversation. When we explored the lyrics and genre, it appeared that at that moment there was meaning in this song for

every single staff member. The director was born in Haarlem (the Netherlands), the associate director lived in Harlem, New York. Another person was of Hispanic descent and was deeply connected to the Spanish reference. For another the song evoked powerful images of her grandfather and a final person linked with the soul genre of the song. I remember it being an amazing experience that became even more powerful in the next moment. Shortly thereafter when we began our work with the participants about their process, I was quite stunned to find someone in the art group working on a clay red rose. The song begins with: There is a rose in Spanish Harlem / A red rose up in Spanish Harlem.

Invisible Strings

One way of thinking about the Field is through the metaphor of the puzzle. Another way of describing it is that there are these invisible strings that we touch in each other without knowing it. If these strings would make sound, they would culminate in some harmonious string concert – even though on the surface this group of people appears to be quite diverse and perhaps even discordant. Yet another way of describing the Field is that there is some order in a seemingly disordered situation. One just needs the right circumstances to find the order. It is amazing how a chaotic neighborhood somehow becomes more orderly when viewed from some distance. Those of us who have experienced a plane taking off over a city gain a perspective where we can see its serenity, its intricate connection of the streets, its seeming unity, and its silent peacefulness. What one is likely to see then is a growing order and the neighborhood—the city—the region being part of a whole.

We all carry these invisible filled strings inside of us and we all have the capacity to touch these strings in other people. This process is invisible, but therefore not less real. A manifestation of how this capacity operates is the following. Why is it that when we walk on a busy street we discriminate between people – that is: we make choices? I'd love to have a conversation with certain people but not with others. I have decided this intuitively, because of impressions, image or sexual appeal, for example, the way people are dressed, or the way they walk and move. Or it could be that I have decided for a host of other reasons we don't have words for yet – the preverbal ability to touch invisible strings. And all of us have the capacity to respond to the thrill of the string, as by magnetic force. It is almost as if we are weaving a web of like-minded or complimentary spirits.

When our mostly Dutch speaking family moved from the Netherlands to San Diego last year we did not know where to live. Through a series of "coincidences", we ended up where we are.

Two days after our belongings were delivered to the house we celebrated our oldest son's birthday. He had made instant friends with the neighbors whom he all (eight of them) invited to a makeshift pizza party between the boxes. When time for the cake came, we sang happy birthday. And because we just arrived from Holland and wanted to honor our language and tradition, we told the family we were going to sing the Dutch version of the song. To our amazement, the neighbors joined in singing the Dutch song. It turned out that they had lived in Holland for a number of years and one of their traditions was to sing Happy Birthday in Dutch at every celebration of their own birthdays.

The experience seems significant. What is the underlying principle in finding each other and living next to each other? At some point in time, we each chose to live there. Was it really that random and accidental, or was there more to it? When we see the Field, such an experience is evidence of the More.

Often we think we are individuals, separate human beings, little islands, but apparently we are connected to each other in ways that we don't know or understand, perhaps like drops of water are connected to each other in the ocean. Or are we like stones and we never forget that we were part of a mountain? Are we part of something and trying to re-discover what that is? In the above 'silent choosing' example, people did seem drawn to each other like magnets, they chose each other unconsciously for reasons that were articulated shortly after this process but did not include the additional and profound discovered reason seven days later. In walking around and looking at each other and choosing each other, people "saw" what cannot be seen but is somehow "visible" nevertheless. It is like reading between the lines – except there were not even lines.

These experiences are experiences of "being part of the More." Perhaps the best way to describe this More is that we as human beings are part of a subtle energy field that influences our human connections. In the moment of the discovery of why people had selected each other, the energy field of connections became "visible."

For those of us who work with groups, it is relatively easy to understand: groups work on a particular content (for example a certain task or a project) and at the same time there is a group process going on (that comes out in glimpses of competition, attraction, protecting turf, etc.). In our human relationships, we make conscious and unconscious choices about people in our lives (about friends, where we work, who we love, etc.) and at the same

time, we are part of a field in which the organizing principle of relationships is mostly unknown to us, yet very much operational.

The More as Flash Mob

The idea of a flash mob can help here. There is a flash mob, which takes place in a shopping mall; participants are cleaners, consumers, diners, business people and strollers in that mall. They are participants in the "world" of shopping. But suddenly specific music plays, one person starts singing and is gradually joined by more people. It is clear that in another "world" these different people are connected through music. By making the connection known (and in this case visible) a wonderful gift emerges.

In some ways, we are all part of a flash mob, in one "world", our connections with each other are relatively clear, in another "world", our connections are to be discovered and revealed, the world of the energy field of connections. And if this connection emerges and is discovered – amazing gifts can emerge from that. Of course, the flash mob is in the realm of the known, the organizing principles of a flash mob are clear – at least to the organizers and participants in the mob. In the energy field of connections, we deal with the realm of the unknown and the organizing principles are much less clear.

What if we are more intentional about the discovery of this unknown? To try to make sense of our extra puzzle pieces, to discover underlying patterns, to speculate about what strings people touch in us and we in other people, to find a common radio frequency, to take a bit of distance from chaos, or simply to pay attention to seemingly disconnected situations and people. There is much more to be discovered about why we are related and connected, and if we do discover the reasons, the source, the organizing principles of it, it is my belief that it opens doors to unknown territories in evolution theory.

Practical and Concrete

Of course, this raises the question: how do we do this? How do we discover the energy field of connections? How do we know that it is happening in the moment? There are a couple of fundamentals, such as curiosity, interest and relative openness that need to be present in a person. Without at least some degree of these characteristics, not many discoveries will be made in this or any other field.

Awareness

Discoveries can be made by becoming even more aware of what is going on inside and around oneself. I work at prominent European

business schools in leadership programs with executives who make important strategic, financial and personnel decisions. During the program we introduce the concept of mindfulness, as an exercise we ask participants to close their eyes and to be quiet, and then we guide them through a body scan of about eight minutes. After the body scan is over, we invite them to write down what they noticed in their body and to give their reaction to the exercise. Subsequently we engage in a debrief. One of the points we make is how much more people notice during these eight minutes than they normally do. They experience bodily sensations, like tensions, aches, temperature differences, heaviness, sounds, etc. because of slowing down, taking time and focused attention in this lightly guided exercise. We use it to make the point that we tend to hardly ever notice these things. Yet, once we stay with what these sensations might mean and explore them in subsequent guided exercises they actually contain a wealth of information. It is a bit like standing at the beach and looking at the ocean. I cannot see but water, yet there is a whole life hidden for which I need special equipment, time and energy to have access to that life and explore it.

For awareness to grow and develop, we need to expand our capacity to notice: not only noticing the obvious, but also the less obvious, the seemingly less important. In order to do that we may need to let go of some expectations and pre-determined patterns. I remember going to the zoo with my oldest son to have a fun day together. When we walked through the park, he was however much more fascinated with the pebbles and the stones he found on the path than with the animals, and he spent lots of time playing with them. At first, it was frustrating, but eventually I realized that discovering and playing with stones and pebbles was part of his world in which I was invited. And I started noticing stones with him.

I have come to think of noticing as tending to the soul of the world. Honoring what is around us. Nurturing. The practice of noticing is a pre-requisite of expanding awareness and it increases the chances of making connections, recognizing patterns and discovering more of the field. The invitation is to expand our capacity to notice, not to get lost in bodily sensations, to become marine biologists or to collect pebbles.

There are a number of things we can practice to enhance the quality of our noticing:

1. Being silent. When we stop talking, we listen better, we see more. We pay more attention to what usually easily escapes

us or is edited out. In the silence, we become more aware of what goes on around us, and we will pay attention to our inner movements, our feelings, our thoughts and our memories.

2. Slowing down. When we allow ourselves to take time, we pay fuller attention. We can pay attention to the details. When we explore a city and walk through it, we get to know the city more intimately than when we drive through it.
3. Remaining curious. Many of us are paid to make good judgments and decisions. However, often judgment closes things down, simplified: yes to this, no to that. Curiosity opens things up for exploration. Why does this happen this way in this moment? What can we understand and learn from it? Are there other layers, connections? When we are in love, at some point in the process, we become incredibly curious about the person we are in love with and interpret their behaviors in all kinds of different ways. Can we apply the same curiosity to our chance encounters and see where they lead?
4. Paying attention to patterns. Discovering patterns in one's own and other people's behavior, between events, between people we meet – and paying attention to the more obvious and less obvious ones. What is our understanding of these patterns, how do we make sense of them?
5. Taking time. Provocatively, I wanted to call it “wasting time.” Taking time to not do anything often feels like wasting time. Yet, taking time frequently results in creative bursts of energy. It is often in the stillness and unexpected moments that insights arrive. We may feel that we are wasting time, and yet it is actually making room for emotions, thoughts, ideas and creative processes that are hidden underneath the busyness of our daily life.
6. Engaging in reflection. Our youngest son came to our bedroom one morning. He lay next to me and unexpectedly he said: “I really love this family.” It was very touching and a bit unusual. It is only later in a quiet moment of reflection during my airplane ride that I realized that it was exactly seven years ago that we welcomed this adopted child into our family.
7. Giving voice to what we notice. Sharing what we notice in words, images and metaphors, will make our experience more

real. We learn to verbalize our discoveries and the sharing of this will help mark the field and perhaps slightly more recognizable for others.

Community

The seven practical and concrete factors above increase the quality of our noticing and the capacity of our noticing. It requires that we learn to hear with different ears and see with different eyes. It also requires that we are part of a community of some kind. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Recently, a trusted colleague and I finished guiding the first of three modules of an experience we named: Energy in Groups. A group of eight professionals took time to slow down, to take time, to reflect, to be silent, to stay curious and to pay attention to patterns. Throughout this process, people were invited to give voice to their discoveries, sometimes in the whole group sometimes in smaller subgroups. Together we saw things that would have been invisible if we would have been alone. It is as if together we could complete the words and music and dance to a song which none of us could have done individually. In this four-day experience, the field became more visible for us as a group. Since then, people have reported that their experience of the field is quite present, but more in the background until a conversation, or an email exchange with another person from the program and then the discoveries, insights, patterns and connections reveal themselves like new flowers of impatiens.

This field theory, if you will, has individual aspects and social aspects and because it is relatively new, it is very helpful to explore with others what can be discovered. Like minded people provide the emotional setting in which individuals can do their own internal work. The field asks us to not only examine the connections between us, but also beyond us and inside of us. This happens with the support of other people, in communities of all kinds.

Sharing experiences make the field also more visible and accessible. In addition, it helps to create certain common markers in this field, as a point of orientation, like a buoy in the sea, a stone in a field or a star in the sky.

Conclusion

We make many choices about connections in life consciously and unconsciously, willingly and unwillingly in terms of partners, parents, children, friends, colleagues, and lots of groups we belong to. These connections take place in familiar ways of meeting another person, like having a conversation with a friend or falling in love. Seemingly less meaningful or haphazard connections, for

example with check out clerks, new neighbors, the woman with her journal at my favorite café, the person who contacted me to return my lost phone, the person who mysteriously always annoys me, etc. may have more to them than we initially think.

They are unseen and often unnoticed connections. And these connections even exist between people who have never met. We have our reasons why we have the relationships we have *and* at the same time, we are together because of the energy field of connections. If we apply this energy field of connections theory to our relationships, then our connections to people may also reveal something different, something to be discovered, something More. We may need a different mindset and language to discover it. Let me end with a story from a Dr. Seuss book.[†] It is about a boy who challenged his playmates to stretch their imagination beyond the traditional 26 letters of the alphabet – from A (Ape) to Z (Zebra) to create an extended alphabet.

In the places I go there are things that I see
That I never could spell if I stopped with the Z
I'm telling you this 'cause you're one of my friends
My alphabet starts where your alphabet ends

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we are currently offering as work-in-progress
through the Group Relations International website,
www.grouprelations.org.
Your thoughts or reflections are very welcome.
ReneMolenkamp@gmail.com*

[†] Dr. Seuss (1955). On Beyond Zebra. New York: Random House.