

# A Question of Balance

## A Systemic Approach to Understanding and Resolving Trauma

This book begins with a persistent mystery and a number of unanswered questions. During her years in Colorado, as a trauma consultant in a family practice medical clinic, Anngwyn St. Just encountered an enigmatic cluster of traumatized patients suffering from a repetitive series of automobile accidents. Before long it became apparent that her somatically oriented efforts to restore balance within a traumatized nervous system were not sufficient to explain, interrupt or resolve these ongoing patterns. A new paradigm was needed. By looking beyond the individual nervous system into the role of other systems in generating patterns of overwhelm and disconnection, she uncovered a new path of inquiry. From the study of social trauma she knew that traumas often happen on anniversaries of other traumas. Moreover, these anniversary dates often reveal unresolved issues involving separation and other forms of broken connection. Terrorists, ambitious politicians and the international media pay close attention to both the meaning and the unfinished business that surround anniversaries. Therefore Dr. St. Just thought that it might be productive to look into the possibility that there could be any relationship between these repetitive accidents and anniversary dates involving separation and broken connections. Together with her patients, she did discover a clear pattern of separations and broken connections in individual and family histories that corresponded with dates of their repetitive accidents. Now, questions remained as to how and why this could be the case and how to find a path to resolution. During this time of clinical inquiry, and development of non-linear methods, the Columbine High School massacre happened in the nearby community of Littleton. Nearly a decade of research follows during which Dr. St. Just brings to light a number of cultural blind spots crucial to an understanding of this seemingly senseless rampage. Together with the killers' choice of date, she explores the history of the Columbine location, a Native American massacre, Neo-Nazi mindset, and the unfinished business of domestic terrorism and war. It soon became apparent that the anniversary and other patterns surrounding this event offer valuable insights into the underlying dynamics and international impact of this now infamous social trauma.

The first rule of ecology is that everything is related to everything else. If one can accept this premise, then a systemic approach to understanding and resolving trauma has much to offer. As a traumatologist and cultural historian, Anngwyn St. Just maintains that even seemingly random events do not happen in a vacuum. All of those events which we experience either as individuals or collectively happen within a meaningful context. Over time she has come to believe that an understanding of *all* of the elements such as time, date, place, family and cultural history, as well as the need for balance, increases the possibility for drawing strength and meaning from adversity. In this sense, a systemic approach to trauma is as much a world view as it is a method. Humanistic studies and attention to history reveal that the kinds of overwhelming events which we experience as "traumatic" have always been with us in one form or another. Long before the advent of psychology or psychiatry, trauma was understood and treated by medicine men, and wise women, many of whom were also shamans. Within these archaic traditions it was implicitly understood that healing always involved some version of reuniting a disconnected part with a greater whole. This ancient wisdom is still relevant for those of us who encounter the many levels of fragmentation within the traumatic experience. While it is understood that systemic approaches to understanding and resolving trauma are not everyday topics, the fact remains that this is a subject of great importance for all of us who are human and also social beings.