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## Family Constellations Are About Love

By Mary Lansing, LMFT

In a circle of fourteen people, a young man is explaining his difficult life issue, which he says has become a pattern. He has had several episodes of not being able to decide between two women in his life. Beside him, the facilitator questions him about his family history, then tells him to choose four people among those present to stand in the middle of the circle: someone for himself, his grandfather and his grandfather's two wives. He moves around the inside of the circle, following her instructions.

He chooses me to stand in for the second wife. This is the first family constellation where I have been a representative, and I am having uncomfortable feelings. My arms are shivering; I reach my hands up to rub them. I feel a heaviness in my chest, like exhaustion. Jane Peterson, the facilitator, moves beside me and asks, "what is happening for you?" I tell her, at the same time wondering if someone let in some frigid air from a window behind me. I'm not sure what is supposed to happen here. Jane puts her hands on my shoulders, wordlessly guiding me a few steps back to where I am no longer between the couple representing my husband and his first wife. Now facing away from the others, I'm suddenly warm; the heaviness lifted. I look out a window onto a forest scene and feel calm.

Jane's questions to him had revealed that at a very young age, his grandfather married the love of his life from a nearby Midwest farm. Shortly after their marriage, his wife died, leaving him susceptible to her family's encouragement that he marry her spinster sister. What followed was a loveless union. After the young man chose the representatives for himself, his grandfather and both wives, the role of the spinster sister-wife became mine.

During the next few minutes, Jane moves around the positioned family members, asking the others what they are experiencing. Then she places the grandfather opposite me. "I was never there for you," he is instructed to say to me after I am turned to face him. "I loved your sister." In a strange way I feel relief at hearing this, as if the truth is finally spoken aloud. Jane explains to everyone in attendance that there is loyalty between the sisters, even more so that they were wives of the same man. "You are the first; I am the second," Jane tells me to say to her. "I release him to you."

Jane then moves the first wife to face her husband and asks her to say, "I wasn't able to be with you. Thank you for loving me." Strangers a few minutes before, these two look at one another, begin to cry, and embrace. A minute and a half pass. Finally the facilitator brings the grandson representative to where he can face his grandfather. She admonishes the



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grandfather to say to him, "This is my fate, not yours." Jane asks the client, who has been sitting in the circle of people surrounding this constellation, to take the place of the his representative and say, simply, "Thank you," then bow from the waist. When he looks up from the bow, he takes a deep breath. There are tears in his eyes.

My sensations of cold coincided with the fact that I had at first been positioned between the grandfather and his true love even though she was gone. It was apparent that I did not belong within their tie to each other. When the grandfather found his place in the arms of his first wife, the young man saw his problem with new eyes. His tears indicated how deeply that movement affected him.

Generational patterns of misfortune and tragedy can be interrupted by family and systemic constellation work. However, most therapists who use constellations in their practices say the process defies definition and must be experienced to be understood. Its model is deceptively simple. The client selects representatives for the members of his/her family and places them in a space in relationship to each other. As soon as these people are "set," they begin to experience the feelings, thoughts and even sensations of the persons they are standing for. A real picture of what is going on in the client's family emerges and with the guidance of an experienced facilitator, a resolution appears. Once representatives are in place, it's as though a visible inner map is formed of an entangled system. Disruptive love, conflict and trauma in earlier generations that have caused suffering in later generations is dissolved as strangers set as representatives play out the constellation. A shift occurs that alleviates the pain. By each family member taking an appropriate and actual place and speaking minimal phrases about the truth of the matter, the grandson's current destiny is interrupted.

There is a mystical quality apparent in constellations that has been labeled phenomenological by Dr. Bert Hellinger, the originator of this system of inquiry. He is one of Europe's most innovative and provocative systemic therapists. His eclectic background includes 16 years as a priest working with the Zulu tribes in South Africa, along with many years in Germany as a psychoanalyst and family therapist. Dr. Hellinger, now in his late 70's, has expanded the family constellation concept to include health and organizational constellations as well as cultural ones. He has worked successfully with the descendants of Nazis and survivors of the holocaust.

His development of the "Orders of Love" include simple "laws" which, when thwarted or violated in some way, keep families entangled. Those orders are 1) there is a need to belong to a system; 2) there needs to be a balance between giving and taking within the system; 3)



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safety and predictability are needed to elicit order. In his book LOVE'S HIDDEN SYMMETRY Hellinger states, "These needs constrain our relationships, and also make them possible, because they both reflect and enable our fundamental human need to relate intimately to others." Disrespecting a family's birth order hierarchy or failing to honor a member's equal right to belong to a system, for instance, are both outside of the Orders of Love. Ignoring or disobeying these Orders creates entanglements that reach across generations, according to Dr. Hellinger.

The orders can be broken unwittingly in different ways: A child or young adult may have died and not been mourned; an extra-marital affair may have been kept secret; previous partners may not have been acknowledged or honored between couples; a child may have been given away for adoption and no longer talked about; babies aborted may not have been acknowledged and mourned. In short, when family secrets are kept, the laws are broken. The pain resulting from such entanglements continues in future generations when those secrets are not brought to light. A constellation will show that a family member incorporates the destiny from a relative into his/her own family, despite the fact that person may have lived two or more generations before. In the following example of Donald, the unresolved pain and conflict of the father's war-torn life became the physical disability suffered by his son.

After I experienced that first constellation, I was eager to witness more. My opportunity came several months later when with twenty eight other people I sat in on a weekend of the work facilitated by the renowned German psychoanalyst Dr. Albrecht Mahr. In October of 2002, in this large conference room at Portland, Oregon's World Trade Center, every chair in the circle is taken, except for the one to the right of Dr. Mahr. This one is reserved for the person requesting the constellation.

When Dr. Mahr says, "Who is next?" a man in a wheelchair spins to his side and the empty chair is whisked away to create a space. In response to Dr. Mahr's next question, "what is the nature of your issue?" the man, whose name is Donald, begins to speak.

It is clear that his speech is impaired by his disability. Behind him, his wife interprets: "I have ALS (Lou Gehrig's Disease), where my immune system is attacking my nerves. It has been my family's belief that life is a struggle."

Dr. Mahr, director of the Wurtzburg Institute for Systemic Constellation Work and Integral Solutions (ISAIL), is here from Germany to lead participants from the larger circle into finding solutions for systemic family problems. The workshop is sponsored by Jane



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Peterson, Director of the Human Systems Institute in Portland. Dr. Mahr is chairman of the International Bert Hellinger Association for Systemic Resolutions, also based in Germany. The use of constellations occurs in thirty countries worldwide.

"My father was an Army Chaplain in World War II, stationed in the Philippines in 1943 and 1944," Donald's wife interprets from his distorted words. "His friends were murdered. He helped bury them, wrote letters to their families." Here Donald becomes overcome by body-wracking sobs. When he is able to gather himself once again, his story continues, "America stopped the war with the Atom Bomb. That saved my father's life." Silence fills the large room as these words lie on everyone's consciousness. Dr. Mahr stares at the floor. No one moves.

With the words, "Let's start with your father," Dr. Mahr has Donald choose a representative for his father and place him inside the circle of participants. He explains to this man, "whatever happens in the body, just let it happen."

Within seconds, the representative slumps, breathes with open mouth, and looks up. Sobs arise from his throat before he turns to look outside the circle and takes a deep breath. When after more questions Dr. Mahr confirms that the father's soldier friends were killed by the Japanese, he asks, "Is your father still alive?"

Again Donald's wife interprets. "No. He had a stroke, then lived for ten years paralyzed. He died at age 75."

Taking over in the selection of representatives for the rest of the constellation, Dr. Mahr chooses two young men whom he places eight feet from the father representative. "These are the friends who were killed. You buried them." He goes on to choose a male representative for the Japanese who killed them and places him facing the soldiers. Next he chooses a woman. "You stand for the Japanese Homeland, Nagasaki and Hiroshima," placing her behind the soldiers. Finally, he chooses another man to stand for the American Atom Bombs that were dropped on Japan. With one hand on that man's shoulder, Dr. Mahr turns to the father, "This is what saved you so that you could come home to your infant son."

Donald cries out and covers his face. The man representing his father collapses to the floor, face down. Each representative begins to react. The woman who is Japan starts to crumple, bends over and cries out, "No, no..." The men before and behind her touch her. The Japanese Army representative stands with crossed arms, feet apart. Three minutes pass.



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The constellation is now set, and the representatives within its "knowing field" show they are having sensations, thoughts and feelings attributed to the people they stand for. Dr. Mahr moves into this "field" (the constellation) and lifts the father so that he faces Donald. Japan falls to the floor; one soldier comes to her, collapses beside her. Dr. Mahr stands between Donald's representative and his father, admonishes the former to say to his father, "Yes, Pa, I share with you, with all my being, my soul and my body, I am sharing with you." It is repeated by the representative.

"Say to him, 'I am still living. I am still living.' What do you see?" The response is only the sound of sobbing.

"Say to him, 'I try to take it into my body for you. I tried hard. Very hard. And I was ready to die for you.'" Donald's representative repeats verbatim, staring straight ahead. Dr. Mahr continues, "... so that the war goes on in my body. Say to him, 'Pa, it's too much for me. I'm just your loving son.'" He sees the real Donald smile and asks him, "What do you see?"

"The face of Pa," says Donald, and smiles again.

Dr. Mahr bypasses Donald's representative and brings the father representative directly to Donald's wheelchair. "Let your father know where in your body you feel something from that war."

Donald jerks one arm toward his back, "Right here."

"Look at him," asserts Dr. Mahr. "Be honest, Donald, whether you are ready to leave to your father his own experiences. Tell him, 'You are big. You have been in it. You have experienced the war. And I am small. I am just your little son. Not more. And say, 'Please, Pa!' At the words "your little son," Donald lets out a cry, but continues to repeat the words spoken to him.

Dr. Mahr continues, steps toward the father representative and states, "You, Father, take into your hands what is there." He points to Donald's spine. The father places his hands on Donald's tipped back, grasps with his hands what is there, then brings his hands back against his own chest. There is another long pause.

Dr. Mahr steps back away from the constellation and admonishes the father, pointing to the scene of his friends, "Stand up, all of you. Join each other." As they do, he asks Donald to turn his wheelchair to face the backs of the rest of the representatives. "Okay, okay," he



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adds, "now we'll go to the center of the circle."

Donald is now in a position to see all the participants in the larger circle. Most of them are crying. Visibly moved by their reactions, he slowly navigates his wheelchair to a new place among them. After a respectful two minutes, Dr. Mahr says softly, "We'll leave it at that." The representatives shed their roles and move in turn to Donald, who thanks each of them, reaching his hands out to grasp theirs. His face is joyous as he spontaneously laughs and cries at the same time. The elapsed time has been 37 minutes.

It takes great courage to experience something without understanding it, according to Dietrich Klinghardt, M.D., Ph.D., whose Institute of Neurobiology in Bellevue, Washington regularly offers family constellation opportunities. "The constellation and its phenomenology need to be experienced, as what occurs is outside the mental understanding," he points out. Participants leave constellations with a life-changing, deep understanding of themselves and the forces that govern their relationships. In the case of Donald, his change of heart was apparent in the transformation of his grieving face into a happy one. Follow up in early 2005 confirmed that his work that day had great value for him. In Donald's words, "I released my responsibility for my father's pain from the war experiences. I had less back discomfort. For six months I felt more energy... This was the most healing experience I have had." He also revealed that five years ago doctors told him he had five years to live.

Dr. Mahr whose work in Germany provides the straddle between family constellations and psychoanalysis, has done a long-term follow-up study on people who have experienced their own constellations. The study showed that the benefit of the experiences was not only in the clients but also in the representatives. Dr. Mahr attributes this to "the field," (a term taken from Rupert Sheldrake's morphic field. See his book *A NEW SCIENCE OF LIFE*) which is created as the constellation is set up. Not surprisingly, Dr. Hellinger has been attacked as unscientific and not grounded in research. Using the term phenomenological to describe constellations may explain the mystical and magical quality of the results of the work, but it does not often satisfy those in the field who seek measurement.

Although this work is relatively new to the United States, the past five years have seen training groups and constellation weekends spring up in a handful of states across the country. Dr. Klinghardt, for example, has conducted summer retreats on Cortes Island in British Columbia, where participants gather to experience a full week of this work. Jane Peterson of Human Systems Institute in Portland, Oregon conducts year-long facilitator trainings around the world.



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My own constellations have involved, at various times, my maternal grandparents, my father and his twin, my brother, and my immediate family. After thirty years of working as a family therapist, along the way gleaning from the rich world of psychotherapy each new tool made available, I consider my search to be over for that "one more modality" that will complete my repertoire. My confidence in my craft has soared and I am infinitely more accepting. Most of all, by revealing the ways blockage occurs, constellations have shown me where the love is that holds a family together.