



# Human Systems Institute, Inc<sup>®</sup>

HOLISTIC + GENERATIVE APPROACHES = CREATIVE + SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS

## What are constellations?

By Jane Peterson, PhD

### *Relationship is the key*

In Western culture we prefer to assume that all useful knowledge comes from the mind. In truth, we live and experience the world through our bodies. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we live our lives in the context of relationships, in complex and changing positions relative to the "others" who inhabit our physical, emotional or mental space. This is reflected in our everyday language when we say things like, "I'm close to my brother, but my mother and I don't see eye to eye," or "My co-worker is always breathing down my neck." As we are learning from the biological and new complexity sciences, much of the information in the universe is encoded in pattern, that is, in the *relationships* between things.

### Embodied Knowledge

Our bodies have an unconscious knowing of "where we stand" relative to the others in our families, workplace and social systems. Systemic constellations allow us to tap directly into this unused knowledge and make our felt "inner maps" of our relationships visible. Once these "maps" are recreated in three-dimensional space using the bodies of fellow workshop participants, we can suddenly see with great clarity "where we really stand." This allows us to uncover the roots of dysfunction in our systems and reveals possible solutions to the many issues that confront us in our daily lives.

### Powerful Insights into the Dynamics of Human Systems

Bert Hellinger, the colorful and controversial originator of Systemic Constellation Work, spent many years phenomenologically studying the function of conscience in human systems. His startling empirical insights have greatly clarified the often mysterious dynamics that occur in human families. Backed by the wisdom that flows from these insights, and our embodied sense of the living web of relationships that supports each of us, we can very quickly reveal much of what is happening in family and organizational systems.

### Form vs. Essence

Like any practice, it is important to distinguish the form, that is, the movements we make or words we say, from the deeper essential knowledge that give the form meaning. Constellation work can be done conversationally, in a workshop setting with other people as representatives, or by using objects, like small dolls or even tableware, to map out the relationships in a group. Typically most people encounter constellation work



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in a workshop setting with several other participants. In this form, the facilitator does a brief interview with the person who has chosen to set a constellation. Based on this conversation, the facilitator will ask the person to select representatives for important members of the family or elements of a work system, for example, from the people present in the circle. Then he or she will position those people precisely according to his or her inner felt sense of who is close to whom, who is far, who can see, who cannot, etc. Representatives are not sculpted, simply placed. What then transpires is a bit amazing, however, we have evidence from people in over 30 countries world wide that this is a common human phenomenon. The people placed as representatives will start to experience thoughts, feelings or physical sensations that correspond to the person they represent. Using the subjective responses of the representatives we are often able to determine with some clarity what has stopped the flow of love in a family or what hinders the success of an organizational work team, for example. We can then find out what the system needs to find its way back to health and wholeness. Remember this is just one form of a very deep and essential core of understanding of human behavior.

## Benefits

Constellations are relatively quick and yet thorough windows into our network of relationships. They allow us to make the visible the forces that affect our work groups, families and social worlds. Constellations show us how to live in harmony with what we cannot change, and what will be effective in those situations we can change.

## More Information

Please read some of our [introductory articles](#) to learn more about this remarkable work.

## About the Institute

Jane Peterson and Don Chitwood founded the Human Systems Institute in 1999 in Portland, Oregon USA to further the exploration and development of the Systemic Constellation Work in the U.S. In 2001 they began to train facilitators to use this work and to explore the limits and possibilities of perception, embodied knowledge, emergence and collective consciousness in working with groups. In 2005 they organized and sponsored the first U.S. Conference on Systemic Constellation Work. The facilitation program developed and taught by Jane Peterson is now available in Asia, Europe, Canada and the U.S, with portions taught in Mexico and S. America. Please contact the Institute for more information.