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I've Been Framed! How Constellations Can Help.

By Jane Peterson, PhD

I've been thinking about this question for about 11 years now. Even got a graduate degree - and I'm still thinking about it! Recently I was reminded of this question when I saw a video on the web of cognitive linguist, [George Lakoff](#), discussing cognitive frames. Whatever your political beliefs (and Lakoff is unapologetically progressive), the first 18 minutes of this video are one of the clearest explanations of why rational thought is not what we think it is, and how mental frames work. Lakoff points out that mental frames are neurological patterns in our brains. The old saying, "neurons that fire together wire together" is true for the thoughts we think. The more we are exposed to and reinforce certain beliefs and ideas, the more "real" they become to us. That's why it's often harder to change our beliefs than we expect. It's not like flipping a switch. We literally have to make a change in the connections between the neurons in our brains.

What does this have to do with constellations, you may be wondering. A lot as it turns out. People often come for a constellation when something in their relationship with their life isn't working. This may be a relationship with an important person or persons, or it may be a relationship with a part of themselves like a physical symptom or illness, or even a relationship with more existential matters like challenges with earning a living or finding a partner. If this is you, whatever the issue, you know your current ways of thinking and acting aren't getting you what you want. That's where frames come in. Often the way we understand our situation is the first thing that stops us from making the necessary changes to create what we want. Getting past that "old frame" is the first step towards inviting in new and better possibilities.

One of the most wonderful and elegant steps in the constellation process is that you choose a representative from the group to stand for you in relation to the important others in your life. For the first time in your life you get to step outside of your self and see what your relationships to others look like. Someone who has no vested interest in your story or being right (or wrong) will take your place for an hour and carry the load for you. This is an amazing experience! All at once what you've felt but haven't been able to grasp becomes clear. Not only that, you see yourself in relation to your family members or important others. The insights that this produces are extremely valuable. All of a sudden, you can see that your boss is looking right over your head, or that your parent can't look you in the eye, or that your child is torn between you and your partner. This change in perspective alone can be enough to shift your mental and emotional framework for understanding these important relationships. So, one thing constellations do, and do at a visceral level, is



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change your perspective on your issue in useful and productive ways. A constellation literally helps you re-frame your situation.



Leili cat adopts a new perspective

Constellations shift not only your perspective, they change the content of your story as well - the "what's inside" of that mental/emotional frame. We've learned from doing constellation work for the past 40 years that the part of the story that we can see or grasp is usually a small part. Constellation work allows us to bring in people or other aspects of our lives that are important, but may not have been seen. For instance a woman with painful growths in her uterus discovered that she was attempting to solve her father's pain. Her father had lost a leg in the war and experienced phantom pain for most of this daughter's life. She, as a loving, loyal daughter, discovered she'd carried the sentence, "I would give you all my organs" if it would relieve your pain. Her body was trying to comply with that "frame" by growing more organs. Once she could see that her own suffering did not add to her father's well being, she could begin to heal her own body. Constellation work allows us to expand our story to take in more of the living systems of which we are an integral part.

Finally constellations give us witness. We learn, both by representing aspects of others family and life systems, and by having others carry our load however briefly, that we are not alone. We are supported and seen in a loving and non-judgmental way by others in our community. That, for many of us, is a BIG frame change.

What do constellations do? They give us a new view on ourselves and those we love. They help us make our story bigger, more inclusive and less judgmental. And they connect us with our community in a loving and supportive way. Now that's a frame worth having!



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TIP: STALKING YOUR SELF

I've been a fan of [Tom Brown, Jr.](#) ever since I came across his books about Stalking Wolf, the Apache elder who taught Tom the art of tracking. The most difficult aspect of tracking is knowing yourself. Our perception is deeply shaped by what George Lakoff calls our "cultural narratives." These shared stories, such as victim-perpetrator, hero-villain, rags-to-riches, dominate our thinking patterns, our "frames" and limit what we can perceive. Developing clear perception means stalking yourself first, tracking your own thought patterns through the woods and wilds of cultural conditioning. This takes some determination because most of what passes for "thought" are unconscious or nearly unconscious ruminations on these familiar cultural narratives. As Lakoff says, much of what passes for our "personality" is actually the threads and weavings we have made from the cultural narratives available to us. To really discover what stories you have absorbed, often from your family of origin that may be unconsciously running your life, you will need the determination and perseverance of an Apache scout. It's helpful to start with small steps and keep working through the layers of assumption, belief, and construction, rather like peeling an onion a layer at a time.

Many traditions including the Toltec traditions have excellent technologies, frame-busting tools really, for stalking your own frames. One simple approach you can borrow from constellation work is that of "representing yourself." When you find yourself ruminating on some story, first stop. Imagine that you could step outside and sit on the side of the circle, that another "you" would be taking the role of "me." From that position you can watch yourself telling that story. As you watch that story unfold, notice how the roles are assigned. What cultural narrative might you be telling? Are you a victim? Perpetrator? Hero? What's your favorite role? And what other roles do you need to have those around you play so that



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you can enact that role? What would happen if you switched roles? Next, for this short exercise, ask yourself, "what makes this story 'true'?" Not true in the absolute sense of "that's how things really are" - rather what makes this story hang together? What assumptions about "how things are" are buried in this story? For instance, a victim-perpetrator story assumes that there are (only!) two people, one of whom is more powerful than the other. It does not take into account the larger systemic forces that shape the context that those two people meet within. Finally, ask yourself, what other possibilities exist? What other assumptions could I make about "reality"? that might give myself, and the others I'm with, more possibilities, and maybe allow us to be our best selves with each other or act in new ways?

I hope you enjoy this little exercise and keep on stalking!