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Surface vs. Substance

By Jane Peterson, PhD

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We were staying at a resort outside of Beijing, China to do an organizational constellation training. Don and I were experiencing culture shock of an unexpected nature. The place our hosts had chosen was decorated in pinks and purples with chandeliers and marble tile. Besides being completely inappropriate for a business training, the construction of the place was fascinating. The furniture reminded us more of a bordello than a boardroom. Obviously a great deal of expense had been put into the materials of the place. From a distance, the effect was rather dazzling.



Up close, the rooms told another story. While spacious and generously furnished, our rooms allowed us a closer inspection of the lavender palace we now inhabited. The marble tiles had been crudely glued to the wall, gaps and glue marring the uneven surface. The bathroom, filled with expensive porcelain fixtures, was not properly vented and the odor of sewage was a persistent companion during our stay. The heavy jacquard drapes at our window were installed partially backwards. The chandelier was covered with dust and we had to clean any surface we wanted to put something on. All the right stuff on the *surface*, but the *substance*, the deeper knowledge of how to use those materials and maintain them, was missing.

This experience, while an interesting travel story, led me to think about the difference between approaches that address the surface symptoms that prevent our growth and development, and processes that allows us to change the substance of our lives. What is the difference?

In my doctoral and post-doctoral studies, I've come to appreciate how much more we are learning about who we really are. There is a deeper part of us, what I like to call soma, the



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living body-brain-being that manages much more of our lives than we are aware. This is the part of you that safely drives your car when you are daydreaming about your next meeting, or are talking on your cell phone, juggling a latte, and walking down the street. Your mind is only on your daydream or your phone call, so something else is running the rest of the show. It's also the part of you that fixates on that chocolate cake in the back of the fridge, and won't let you till you find it on your plate with a fork in your hand. In other words, the "bad habits" that we find so hard to change are supported by this larger, more substantial part of us, and this part has a lot of inertia! It's like a big ship that turns only slowly and with considerable effort. We make our day-to-day decisions quite differently than we may imagine. Recent books attest to this on-going discovery of our somatic self. For example, Tim Wilson's book on what he calls the adaptive unconscious, *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious* (2002) or Daniel Kahneman's recent tome on how we really make decisions, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (2011). These and other authors point out that we really cannot feel our neurons sending signals from one to the other, that is we cannot feel ourselves "thinking" but we can experience the macro effects of those processes. So at some level the soma is outside of our awareness and must be so. Yet this is the same part that manages most of our day-to-day activities, and influences our decision making far more than we realize.

If much of what we do is governed by processes that are happening outside of our awareness, how can we make substantial changes when we, or those we are in relationship with, keep enacting painful patterns that cause hurt and dysfunction? Often people end up in our constellation workshops after trying verbal or cognitive approaches to changing these challenging relationship patterns. What is it about constellation work that moves beyond surface change and impacts us so deeply?

First of all, constellation work involves our whole self. We are physically, that is, somatically engaged in the process of creating the constellation. We move from a story based concept of our problems to a full three dimensional representation of our relationship field. This shift is profound. Now we can see and hear what before we could only feel. It turns out that this felt sense of our relationships often holds the key to a more substantial shift in our understanding of ourselves and our relationship systems, whether those are family or business, or our relationship with ourselves.

In allowing this deeper "felt sense" part to express itself in the language it knows best, the language of the body - gaze, touch, distance, direction - we both open ourselves to the substance of our experience, and allow ourselves to experience our self in a new context. The story goes from "I" to "we" as we see and experience how others perceive us and our



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family members or business associates. We learn that we are intrinsically connected with the larger human systems that make up our world. Better than trying to escape family or quit a job, learning to understand the hidden forces that affect your and others behavior, and experiencing this larger system directly through a constellation can help you make a "substantial" shift.

Whole person change, change that sticks, takes methods that engage all of you, including that more substantial part that is often hidden from your awareness.