

Meaning Making Through Family Constellation Work



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Listen to the wind, it talks. Listen to the silence, it speaks. Listen to your heart, it knows.
—Native American Proverb

Introduction

Family Constellations or Systemic Constellations is a phenomenological healing process that makes visible the unconscious dynamics in a family system. It uses the embodied experience of representatives for family members in a group setting which allows us to see what is out of balance, who or what is missing, and what is needed to bring the system back to harmony. It is a process that goes to the heart of the matter, to the soul's deepest yearnings and needs, and to the spiritual truth of the dilemmas we face. It is a way of healing the individual soul by aligning it in right relationship to the family soul. Using intuition and attending mindfully to the subtle somatic experience of the representatives, we tune into the heretofore unseen bonds of love that keep family members connected on a soul level.

This soul realm is distinct from both the somatic or personal realms that have traditionally been attended to by medicine or psychotherapy. We speak of the soul when we are referring to the subjective experience by which we feel emotions like yearning, compassion, despair, and hope. These experiences live in the space between body and mind. It is in this space that we find meaning and value. It has different needs from the body and a different logic from the mind, although it is not separate from either (Beaumont, 2012). In Constellation work, we attend to this soul realm of both the individual and the family.

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The family soul is the energy unique to each family that holds the memory of what has happened in the family through the generations. It includes all members of the system living and dead, as well as anyone who has played an important role in the family story. So, for example, anyone who commits a crime causing death or injury to someone in the family would be connected to that family soul. So, too, are adoptive and foster parents and first loves.

While we inherit many wonderful qualities, talents, and values from our family, sharing sadness appears to keep us profoundly bonded and reinforces our sense of belonging in the system. Based on the empirical work of Bert Hellinger (1999), this method provides a living map for healing intergenerational wounds even when the details are obscured from the client. While this has been one of the more challenging aspects about Constellation work, research in the fields of epigenetics (Skinner, 2015), bonding and attachment (Hellinger et al., 1999), trauma treatment (Levine, 2015), and quantum physics (McTaggart, 2008) has begun to shed some light on how representatives can “know” information about people they never met. However, there is still much that is Mystery. Devastating patterns that plague some families through the generations such as alcoholism, violence, and depression begin to make sense when viewed from a Constellation lens. The insights gained provide new meaning to the current struggles and create the possibility for healing in cases where other traditional therapeutic methods may have been of limited consequence.

Over the last 35 years, the focus of my clinical work has evolved from symptom reduction to creating space for clients to think about what they believe about their life, its purpose, and what they want their legacy to be once they are gone. I grew up in a family where there were lots of inconsistencies between how we talked about our family and how it felt to live in my home. It inspired an early curiosity in me about the deeper meanings of life. Later in my clinical work, I began using a spiritual lens to explore the meaning clients ascribed to the persistence of their suffering as well as to its potentiality for growth and healing. Those clients with the most challenging circumstances often believed they just did not deserve a life that could engender joy, creativity, or love. Constellation work was developed originally for those clients with seemingly intractable problems. In the past 30 years, its principles and techniques have been expanded to address systemic issues in organizations and communities around the world, especially in Europe, Asia, and South America.

This chapter will illustrate the systemic thinking underpinning Constellation work. It will also describe how essential feedback from “representatives” informs the work. It will include both the author’s personal journey and clinical vignettes to exemplify how uncovering and acknowledging what was lost in the family’s past can return us to our rightful place in the family system. When we do so, there is a felt sense of peace and balance that is real and powerful, albeit “difficult to describe,” an often heard comment. It attests to the challenge of putting words to a spiritual process, which, I believe, Constellation work is.

Origin of Constellation Work

The peace of the dead is dependent on the living, and the wellness of the living is dependent on the dead. —Anonymous

Bert Hellinger (b.1925), who developed Constellation Work, grew up during the Third Reich in Germany. He was protected from its hateful indoctrination by the religious beliefs of his devout Catholic parents. After being drafted and subsequently captured in Belgium by the Allies, he returned home and became a Catholic priest. He was eventually sent to South Africa as a missionary where he was moved by the Zulus' respect for and connection to their ancestors through ritual and prayer. Similar to Native American spirituality, the Zulus believed that those who died continued to have an important influence on their daily life. Observing their devotion to ancestors, Hellinger came to value our interconnectivity even in death, "the communion of saints" in the Christian tradition. He remained in South Africa for almost 20 years after which he returned to his native Germany, left the priesthood, and became certified in psychoanalysis.

Hellinger quickly realized that most of the individual problems he was treating were connected to the family. He came to believe that many of the symptoms presented by patients were actually the spiritual legacy of World War II as it was uniquely passed down in each family. He observed a "frozen grief" that blocked the flow of love and life in the German culture not only because of the devastation and horror of the war but also because of a collusive silence in the families of both victims and perpetrators of Nazism. After many years addressing the terrible effects of this unacknowledged grief and trauma in his work, he developed Systemic Family Constellations, his unique contribution to the field (Hellinger et al., 1999).

Family Constellation Work integrates aspects of many philosophies, modalities, and theories about healing, in particular, Family Systems theory and the power of group. Hellinger studied Gestalt therapy, Primal therapy, and Transactional Analysis and borrowed from Satir's "Sculpting" and Moreno's "Psychodrama." However, he became more interested in what created change in the clients' felt experience than in following any particular theory for its own sake. His work draws heavily on Boszormenyi-Nagy's (1984) construct of "invisible loyalties," believing that symptoms are actually the soul's attempt to stay connected to their family system out of unconscious love and loyalty. Based on his observations, Hellinger hypothesized that symptoms, even serious symptoms such as suicide and chronic illness, were partly unconscious child-like attempts to stay connected on a spiritual level to excluded or unacknowledged members of the family system. He called this phenomenon an "entanglement" when someone blindly takes on the fate of a family member or repeats some negative pattern from their life.

Hellinger's focus was on this energetic family system or "family soul" and how individuals are impacted when they are not in right relationship in that system. His understanding of conscience, guilt, and innocence can be understood in terms of maintaining this balance in relationships. Conscience in his view is what tells the members what must be done to secure belonging to a group—thus remaining

“innocent”—and what cannot be done without risking “guilt.” So, for example, one may feel “innocent” and justified to commit horrendous atrocities in loyalty to one’s family or country such as killing in wartime, while burning one’s draft card to avoid going to an unjust war may engender “guilt.” The justification for slavery in the USA and the denial of its intrinsic economic impact on white wealth until the present day is a poignant example of “innocence” in the service of blind loyalty to white ancestors who may have owned slaves and benefited from their free labor. In this way, one can justify blaming African Americans for the poverty in their devastated communities with a clear conscience.

The Constellation Method

Family Constellations were originally developed for a group setting. The client brings a problem that is usually something that has been resistant to other forms of therapy and has a sense of urgency (energy): a chronic illness, relationship or work issues, or intractable emotional and/or psychological symptoms such as anxiety or depression. There is a brief interview during which the facilitator explores what the client would like as an outcome, for example, to be able to let go of a destructive relationship or to feel more hopeful about her life. The facilitator listens for basic facts about what might be impacting the present situation. When there are no major events in the client’s personal history, the facilitator looks for early deaths, losses, or traumas from previous generations that significantly impacted the course of family history. These may also typically include immigration, natural disasters, or war as well as the loss of a first love, miscarriage, abortion, or releasing a child for adoption.

From the very beginning of the interview, the facilitator is privately tracking possible themes, sometimes creating a genogram as a visual tool. However, any possible hypotheses are held lightly by the facilitator so as to remain humble and open to the movement of energy in a space of respectful unknowing. At times, the client has no conscious awareness of relevant events or does not make any useful connections, but then he remembers that there has not been contact with one side of the family for years or jokes that the family always said he reminded them of an uncle who died young! An important caveat to this work is NOT to assume uncritically that past events explain the present, as no one is immune to the vagaries of life, and most families have some traumatic events in their history. Rather, it is when an event is so shameful or overwhelming or has become a secret that it has the potential of creating a block in the flow of love in the system that can be transmitted trans-generationally through our genes or through mirroring.

Once a theme or pattern is identified, the client chooses group members as representatives for himself and relevant family members. Without much deliberation and following his intuition, the client guides the representatives to stand in spatial relationship to each other. When this living map of the conscious dynamics in the family is set up, the client sits down and watches. This provides emotional distance

to observe and take in the Constellation. The representatives are instructed to tune in to their body, to forget what they heard about the story, and to objectively and without judgment or analysis report physical sensations, feelings, or movements they are experiencing. The pace is slow and quiet with little talking. What follows is an unfolding of the unspoken story of the family. The facilitator follows her intuition about what questions to ask, whom to move, or healing words (“words of empowerment”) that either name “what is” or resolve what is out of balance. Seeing, acknowledging, honoring, and accepting “what is” remains key to opening the heart to let go of what was once held as truth by the client. Throughout, the facilitator tracks information from three sources: the facts of the story, the reports of the representatives, and systemic ideas or “orders of love,” e.g., everyone has a place in the system and everyone has a right to belong; healthy relationships have a balance of give and take; and those who come first deserve our respect. When all the representatives find their rightful place and they feel calm, the client may come in to stand in the Constellation so as to feel the healing energy created.

This ability to intuitively know what is at least metaphorically true in Constellations by the client and later by representatives was given the term “The Knowing Field” by German psychiatrist and medical doctor Albrecht Mahr (1999). He was inspired to do so after the work of Rupert Sheldrake on “morphogenetic fields” and morphic resonance. Sheldrake observed many species of animals, especially fish or birds, and their ability to synchronize their movements in resonance with each other without any formal communication. He hypothesizes that it is an energetic blueprint stored in our DNA that contains all that has occurred in the past and present (Sheldrake, 2009). It is similar to Jung’s ideas about the “Collective Unconscious” (Jung, 1968). It is in this field that Ervin Laszlo suggests that transpersonal connections independent of time and space are made from which we can draw information such as the thoughts, feelings, and sensations of the person being represented (Laszlo, 2007).

Illustration

In one Constellation, a client James (age 55) described the tense and often distant relationship he experienced with his adult son. While he loved him a great deal, he had difficulty expressing his love, often impulsively judging and criticizing him for minor offenses. Consequently, his son treated him with disdain and avoidance. He yearned for more closeness and warmth and blamed his wife for too often getting in the middle.

During the interview, I learned that James had left home just after high school. He had met his wife while he was in the service; after marrying, they settled across the country from his hometown. He reported that his relationship with his father was also cold and distant, recounting many instances of harsh criticism from him as he was growing up. He avoided visiting and spoke to his dad infrequently. He explained that his grandfather had been very abusive to his father, but that he, James, had never been physically mistreated by his grandfather.

Upon my suggestion, James chose three representatives: one for himself, one for his father, and one for his mother. He guided his “mother” to stand two feet in front of his “father” face to face, while his own representative was placed watching from a distance. The “father” reported feeling dead inside and lonely, the “mother” torn between her husband and her son. James’ representative felt wary and angry. The family energy field felt stuck; no one felt an inclination to move. I asked James about his father’s history, learning that he had served in the Pacific during the World War II. His father never spoke about his experience. Upon hearing this, the “father” then offered that he now felt overcome with guilt and sadness. The “mother” felt compassion for her husband but was still tentative to approach him. The representative for James reported feeling curious.

I then placed a representative for “The War” behind the “father,” who immediately covered his face and began to weep silently. Everyone in the room was moved by his tears, including James’ representative who took a step closer to his “parents.” When asked, the “father” replied, “I am so ashamed. I’m afraid they will hate me if they knew.” What seemed to be a cold and harsh man was really an emotionally wounded and traumatized old soldier who was afraid of infecting his family with the evil he had witnessed and participated in.

With that, I gave the “mother” words to say to her “husband,” “You sacrificed so much for us. I didn’t understand your pain. I see it now. You don’t have to protect us from it any longer.” There was an audible release of breath by the “father,” and his stance relaxed as his “wife” moved to stand beside him as if in support. James’ representative now directly facing his “father” was instructed to say, “Dear Dad, I thought you didn’t love me. I felt so alone.” James’ representative began to tear up, as did James, when the “father” opened his arms to embrace his “son.” The representative for “The War” retreated.

Within a few moments, the representative for James reported feeling as if his heart were broken open. At this point, I suggested James come into the Constellation to stand in his place, with his representative and those of his “parents” behind him. Once I saw he had taken in the energy of his “parents,” I brought in the representatives for James’ wife and son and directed them to find a good place. His “wife” walked to his left side and the “son” stood in front of him. A few tentative moments passed, and then James spontaneously said to him, “Now I can see you.” James and his “son” smiled and hugged. When family members find their way to each other with love and respect and everyone finds his appropriate place, the Constellation ends.

My Journey to Family Constellation Work

Personal History

Like most sojourners, my spiritual path has taken a circuitous route. I am a cis-gender heterosexual woman at the end of my 6th decade. I am married with four adult children and one stepdaughter. I was born the oldest of six children to Italian

American parents; three of my grandparents were immigrants. My father had to work three jobs to support us as he had left high school to support his widowed mother and his four surviving siblings. I was raised in a mostly Italian, Irish, and Jewish neighborhood where family came first, respect for elders was given, and helping care for younger siblings was second only to going to school. My father brought us to Mass every Sunday while Mom stayed home and made the gravy (aka “sauce” to non-Italians) for Sunday dinner. Sunday dinner was the highlight of the week, partly because Dad was home to eat with us and partly because it was almost always shared with extended family or friends. It was an all-day ritual filled with good food and wine, shared conversation, and opera playing in the background. We knew whom we belonged to when we prayed grace before the meal and what roles each of us held by where we sat at the table. To this day, this indelible image imprinted on my soul continues to define what “Family” is to me—connection, sharing food, and love.

Despite these warm memories, in the shadow of my soul for as long as I can remember, I worried about my parents. In fact at age ten, I was hospitalized for a week for what was diagnosed as stress related symptoms. I stayed awake late at night trying to hear my parents’ conversations to make sense of what I was experiencing. I knew they loved us and each other, but my Mom was often distracted and my Dad was moody and unpredictably explosive. He could be playful and silly with us. However, when I turned six or seven that all changed. His moodiness increased, keeping us at a distance for fear of “getting in trouble.” I was to learn many years later that his father had died suddenly when my Dad was seven leaving him as the functional male head of the household. I have come to appreciate how that event effectively ended my Dad’s own childhood and plunged his family into poverty.

My relationship with my Mom was one of apprenticeship in caring for the younger children and in sharing her burdens. Caring for babies was like play for me and my sister, but it was my role as my Mom’s comforter that was overwhelming. I became hyper-vigilant about her emotional state. I never knew exactly what triggered her emotional meltdowns, so I made sure I never gave her something to worry about with me. I learned to deal with life on my own and to put on a happy face when my Dad would send me to check that Mom was okay. This led to my later struggles and confusion around boundaries, personal limitations, and over-responsibility.

By the age of seven, I had learned well to be a “good girl” in an attempt to avoid triggering my Dad’s rage and to assure my Mom that she could count on me. Before I could even name what was happening, my identity became cemented in the role of caretaker. It was only after years of working with traumatized clients that I came to understand the origin of my father’s frightening outbursts as symptoms of PTSD from World War II, and my mother’s depression from the loss of her firstborn child. However, it was my own Constellation work that finally opened my heart to fully accept the deep love from and connection to my father and my mother that eventually freed me to be more present to my own partner and children.

Music, Liturgy, and the Church

My formal education through college was in the Catholic school system, but what really moved my soul were the beautiful church rituals, the soaring music, and the original Latin texts that transported me to another realm. These attuned me to an easy acceptance of Mystery as an integral part of life. I found comfort and solace at church, and it gave me a safe place to let go of the over-responsibility I felt in the outside world. I loved being part of a community connected through a shared faith in a loving, merciful God, even if its representatives did not always model that. Somehow, during liturgy, my conflicted feelings about the apparently arbitrary pronouncements of the institutional church disappeared. I felt held in liminal space by something beyond my cognitive understanding. I experienced a blurring of barriers between myself and those present, and felt more loving and open hearted, especially at the Kiss of Peace, at Eucharist, and later, when I became a leader of song.

After a painful divorce in my forties that was not sanctioned by the Church, I experienced a crisis in faith that eventually forced me to let go of internalized rules from my childhood that constricted my soul. This was not an overnight process, but with the compassion of a spiritual director and the support and wisdom of the women and structure of my Twelve Step group for Relationship Addiction, I found a peace I had never enjoyed before. Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest and visionary voice in the Catholic tradition echoes John of the Cross in describing what felt to me like a spiritual breakdown. He describes it as a “dark night of the soul” experience that nudges us to enter the darkness of the void before we can arrive at “spirituality for the second half of life” (2012). This was a space that led me to feel more expansive and more creative, where I ultimately let go of the container that formed me because I was no longer motivated by fear of “getting in trouble,” but rather by a deep abiding Love.

Body, Mind, and Spirit Connection

As psychotherapists, we cannot help but come face to face with the problem of anxiety in its chronic, often debilitating, and sometimes life-threatening forms. It can hold us back from using our gifts to create a life that is fulfilling and joyful. It is a symptom of entanglement and conflict of values; it is a sign of the “guilt” Hellinger describes when one acts contrary to the unspoken family rules for belonging that we intuitively hold. I had known disabling anxiety intimately without ever giving it a name. The internal sense of deadening powerlessness was too often a familiar part of my personal landscape. Even though it numbed me in social situations, reduced me to a state of paralyzing inertia in my professional life, and glued me to unhealthy personal relationships, I believed for a long time that this was normal.

But not always... sometimes I would experience a spurt of confidence and purpose that would lower the volume on my anxiety and self-doubt. I would be inspired

to begin a new project, and I could reach out with surprisingly affirming consequences. I offered to volunteer with a children's choir and became the cantor at my Church. I agreed to fill in for a supervisor at a community mental health clinic on maternity leave, and I became the clinical supervisor. I joined a peer network and was asked to give a retreat day for social workers. Even my personal life opened up, and I reconnected with a former colleague, fell in love, and eventually married my soul mate. To the outside world, I looked like an accomplished woman in her fifth decade blessed with a successful personal and professional life. And yet, there were times when all my accomplishments seemed to be a delusion, and I was brought back to that place of shame, self-doubt, and powerlessness.

Vertigo as Teacher

My journey back home to my Self began with a medical condition that had plagued me for about 15 years beginning with the birth of my second child. Disabling vertigo would occur unpredictably but usually after a particularly stressful time. The last and longest episode persisted for 2 weeks, requiring isolation in a dark and silent room. Feeling desperate and powerless to help myself, I finally surrendered to prayer. Almost instantly, the very clear awareness came flooding in that I was making myself dizzy. In attempting to fix everyone and everything around me, I was sacrificing my own health. I was humbled, and it was obvious that I had to let go of these unrealistic expectations or continue to suffer. Relaxing this over-responsibility was the beginning of releasing my need for a physical symptom that would stop me in my tracks and force me to look at my obsessive mind and inability to relax. Once I did, I never suffered from vertigo again. It was my introduction to the very real connection between body, mind, and spirit.

Reiki—"Trust the energy and not to worry" (Personal communication, Reiki master Josephine Miranda).

A number of guideposts helped me find a new spiritual ground on which to rebuild my life and eventually led to Constellation work. In 1992, I was initiated into the ancient Eastern tradition of Reiki (Universal Life Force) healing modality that recognizes the interconnectivity of all energy that can be used to restore balance and harmony to body, mind, and spirit. It respects the innate wisdom of the body to draw energy to the source of the imbalance underlying symptoms. It personally released something in me and gave me courage to quit a job that I had long outgrown. I went on to open a private clinical practice where I eventually added Reiki to traditional psychotherapy for interested clients. They reported an experience of peace and serenity that was new for them and gave them the energy to participate more fully in their therapy work.

Reiki is a spiritual healing art. While my personal experience of it convinced me of its power to calm my soul, I still held some skepticism that it could help others physically. One client in particular healed my disbelief and confirmed once again that all is connected.

Illustration

Joanie was a 12-year-old girl bedridden for about 6 months by a life-threatening pulmonary problem. She literally struggled to exhale. We agreed to the protocol of four consecutive sessions of Reiki typical for chronic conditions. Joanie was a very timid child, but by the second session on the table, she began hinting that she accepted being sick. It inspired me to offer her a talk session during which she confessed that she was glad to be sick so she would not have to visit her divorced father who terrified her with his rage and inappropriate sexual behavior. Her body had offered the best solution to an impossible situation by keeping her safe in bed. That night was Joanie's first full night of sleep in months. By the fourth session, she had the courage to ask for a one-year hiatus from all contact with her father, to which he agreed. Within 2 weeks, this young girl returned to school with no physical impairment. The doctors could not explain her apparently spontaneous recovery. Her recovery was confirmation for me that something greater than me was operative and that trusting in this Presence was key to healing, even if I could not quite explain it or even discuss it with colleagues who, I feared, might judge me as unprofessional.

Constellation Work: An Invitation

Just as the body is a system with each part intricately connected to every other part, so too, is the intergenerational family system. While my postgraduate work was primarily in Bowenian family therapy, and I use genograms as an integral tool in identifying themes and patterns in families, my journey took a giant leap toward developing a cohesive integrative practice using a spiritual approach 12 years ago when I read an article entitled, "How to Heal Your Family" (Palmer, 2006). It described Family Constellation work and how seeing the hidden dynamics operating in families was the first step in healing the family. This was during a period of my life just after my father's death. We were still adjusting to the inevitable shifts that occur after losing the central figure in a family. I was acutely aware of the many faces of grief that were surfacing in our family interactions, and when I read the article, I recognized the truth of what was happening in our relationships.

Constellations seemed to be a culmination of all I had learned about families, suffering, somatic memory, mindfulness, intuition, and intergenerational trauma. The organizing systemic principles were familiar to me, but making the shift from cognitive insight to the healing of the heart still eluded me too often. I made a commitment to learn how and why Constellation work appeared to be such a powerful tool, but before I could research it further, I received an email invitation to a workshop being given by a facilitator quoted in the article. Since I did not know the writer, it felt like validation to explore this mysterious process.

First Constellation Workshop

I decided to follow my intuition and attend my first workshop. I was chosen as a representative in the first Constellation of a young woman whose creative work had stagnated. She was hoping for some release from whatever internal barriers were holding her back. I was asked to represent her mother. She placed me at a distance from the representatives for herself, her husband, and her two children. We were directed to simply follow any internal movements and to move as requested when asked. Immediately upon entering the circle, strong emotions and sensations surfaced in me that were not my own. It was as if I were channeling the person I represented, even though I was given very little information beyond my relationship as the client's mother. I felt paralyzed with despair and unable to engage with the representative for the client/my "daughter" despite her attempts to engage me. I felt disconnected, surrounded by an impenetrable, invisible wall. It was only after a representative for my "mother" (the client's "grandmother") was brought in to stand behind me that I became emotionally reactive, first with fear and trepidation of her criticism, then with relief and childlike tears when she seemed to soften towards me. "I blamed you," she said to me. The facilitator looked for verification from the client who explained that her grandmother had become embittered after her grandfather had left home one night and never returned. The grandmother's representative softened once her own hurt and sadness were acknowledged. Now, when she looked at me with tears in her eyes instead of anger and rejection, I felt deep relief and energy washing over me.

When these emotions in me settled, I was turned to face the representative for my daughter, "the client." My previously frozen heart was brimming with love and acceptance. This time, when she approached me, I could take her into my arms, and she wept with joy. As often happens, there was a parallel reaction with the client watching the process. She reported an almost indescribably deep sense of peace and love.

This first Constellation convinced me that something profound had occurred on a number of levels. I felt a deep resonance with the client, as did many of the witnesses. Like the client, I, too, had been feeling stuck in my creative life. My fear of failure and criticism was paralyzing at times. Somehow, after the Constellation, I felt a calming sense of peace and harmony. Subsequent to this Constellation, I returned to voice lessons, after having left singing behind years before for reasons that I was to learn later in my own Constellation work.

Intergenerational Loss in My Family of Origin

Merging With My Mother

There are many losses and secrets I have discovered over the last 10 years of working with Constellations that had affected my life in invisible ways. One had to do with my becoming pregnant at the age of 19. After informing my parents of my

pregnancy, I learned that my mother had also delivered a baby who was secretly released for adoption. She had been studying at Juilliard and performing with an opera company on tour at the time of her pregnancy. She was 19. I kept my child and juggled college, childcare, and a difficult marriage, but my mother and I never spoke about our shared experience again, remaining loyal to the family rule about never talking about “the secret we both knew.”

Many years later, an appreciation for the profound systemic consequences of that secret became more apparent in a Constellation I attended to seek some insight around a pattern of starting and stopping in my professional life. Tremendous anxiety had surfaced again as I began preparing for a singing engagement. What emerged from the feedback of the representatives during a Constellation was how depressed and anxious my mother was in relation to her firstborn. The decision to release this child for adoption was not her own; rather, it was my grandmother’s, whose representative sadly explained, “I thought I was protecting her.” It was clear from the representative for my mother that some part of her spirit had shut down in being forced to give her child away. She never sang professionally again nor did she ever complete college. My chronic anxiety and intermittent depression now made sense in light of these new images. A child’s blind love knows no bounds. The worst pain is to see a parent suffering. What released me from carrying my mother’s pain were the words that emerged from that Constellation session, “Out of love and loyalty, I suffer like you, Mom.” In contrast to unconscious loyalty, conscious love acknowledges the sacrifices and sufferings but chooses life in honor of that person.

Identifying With My Grandfather

My mother once remarked that I got the best and the worst of both sides of the family. Indeed, there does seem to be a pattern that the eldest child becomes entangled with unfinished business from both sides of the family tree. Beyond the story of my mother and her interrupted life path, there is the story of my paternal grandfather, who was not only a Catholic priest in Italy but also a musician until he left the priesthood and immigrated to the USA. I only learned this a few years before my father’s death. Looking back, I realize that it was not a coincidence that my father, not my mother, was the parent who encouraged me to study music. Mom had too much unresolved trauma from that chapter of her life to be supportive. It is also no wonder to me today why I suffered so much internal conflict whenever I performed. I know now that I carried not only my parents’ losses but my grandfather’s, as well, whose musical gifts were lost and forgotten in his immigration story.

Personal Impact of Constellation Work

Opening My Heart to My Mother

Through my work with Constellations, I have made peace with the many conflicting energies that have impacted my life. In seeing the connection between my mother's depression and the early loss of her first child, I was able to connect with her in a much more compassionate way. My heart opened to my mother's pain, sacrifice, and most importantly, her courage. The arrogant position I took in my heart that made me think I knew better what was good for her softened, and I stopped trying to suggest ways she could feel better. This shifted my place in relation to my Mom from one of peer or even parent to my rightful place as her child. There was more ease in our interactions and, for the first time in my life, I was able to ask for her comfort when I was going through a crisis. It seemed to lift her spirit to know that she had contributed to my life in an important way. When I told her how much I appreciated and needed her, she replied, "Wonderful, that's all I need to know." At the time, I thought it a bit odd, but in retrospect, I realized that a mother's role is to give and a child's to receive. Because of the consequences of her unacknowledged losses and secrets, I had learned to give but not to receive, thus robbing my mother of the opportunity to mother me.

Becoming One of the Gang

Another important shift in my "place" in the family was in relation to the birth order of my older unknown sibling. Following my first personal Constellation, I had an insight about my ambivalence and insecurity being in leadership positions. The internal voice I had often struggled to silence was, "Who do you think you are?" This sense of not being enough had resulted in vertigo years before. Now, it was tied to disabling doubts around the issue of authority in every area of my life. What surfaced in the Constellation was the awareness that I was not, indeed, the eldest child of my mother. I became aware that the internal pressure to be over-responsible was at least partly connected to an unconscious need to make up for a sibling who was invisible except in my soul. No wonder that I could never feel that I was enough! On a soul level, I could never take my older sister's place.

Once I saw this in the Constellation and humbly acknowledged my sister in my heart, I felt a different kind of peace. The impact on my relationships was dramatic. I was finally in my right relationship not only to my other siblings but with friends and colleagues, as well. I could more easily ask for and accept help without shame, I let go of the need to be perfect and to know everything (as if this were ever possible!), and I could finally enjoy my siblings as peers. I learned to relax and to listen. I got more humble. I was finally in my right place in the family.

Reclaiming Our Legacy of Music

There was one more lasting shift that was around my relationship with music and the Church. My feelings about the Church had always been conflicted. As explained earlier, I loved liturgy and the music that accompanied it. I had cantored in Church for many years and given it up for reasons that I thought were about politics in my parish. What I have come to know in my heart is that my leaving had more to do with loyalty to my paternal grandfather. He had also become disillusioned with the Church and lost everything in leaving the priesthood—including his family, status, and financial stability. When he died after only 10 years in this country, he was denied burial from the Church because of the family's inability to make the required donation. In acknowledging "what was," I was able to let go of the unconscious "guilt" about being an integral part of parish events, and I have returned to liturgical music with a joyful heart that honors my grandfather and what he left behind.

This legacy of music has also been passed down to my children, and it continues to inspire and energize our family. My two oldest participate in a number of oratorio societies and chorales. One daughter helped start a new orchestra with a colleague, and she is coming up on her twentieth anniversary as a director at Juilliard—the school my mother never graduated from. My son joined the same opera company that, unbeknownst to any of us, my mother had sung with over 70 years before, where she had been a lead in *La Boheme*. We accompanied my mother to my son's first performance with this company, which, coincidentally was *La Boheme*. It is a memory we will always cherish. He had dedicated the performance to his grandmother in the program notes, and the director acknowledged her from the stage after the performance. That was 3 years before she died. When my Mom passed 2 years ago, the family "choir" of about thirty all sang her favorite hymn at her funeral mass, the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi, "Make Me a Channel of Your Peace," a treasured postscript to a poignant chapter of her life and legacy.

Finally, my Dad, who never had the opportunity to study music but was always so proud of my Mom's voice, had been deprived of any acknowledgement or appreciation for his role in passing on a love of music to us, especially opera. After his death and upon my daughter's suggestion, we instituted a vocal scholarship for an opera major at Juilliard in my parents' names that will continue in perpetuity. In addition, we continue the family tradition of song each year we meet for Christmas Carols or for our latest venture, singing through the scores of beloved Broadway shows. The family soul is finally at peace and in harmony!

Alternative Settings for Constellation Work

Traditionally, Constellations are facilitated in a group setting where the participants may come to act as observers who hold the Knowing Field, as representatives, or as seekers/clients to do their own work. The workshop usually begins with a brief

orientation with particular attention to the goal of being of service to each other in a safe, nonjudgmental space. They are reminded that this is an intuitive process and that there are no mistakes possible. Everything has its place in the system. They are encouraged to be mindful to the subtlest shifts in their somatic experience and to avoid analyzing.

I have also found that they can have just as powerful an impact in individual, couple, and family settings. Because of the more intimate setting of the therapy office, clients who are somewhat hesitant about a group experiential process are more likely to agree to one here. I use small figures for tabletop Constellations, or papers or floor markers when I want the client to actually stand in a particular role. Imaginal Constellations with closed eyes are also useful for those who are more reserved about expressing feelings. Having a parent stand on a floor marker as a representative for their irascible child or disrespectful adolescent often helps the parent appreciate their child's confusion and anxiety, thus increasing empathy and hope and sidestepping the typical parent worry about shame and blame.

Constellations in supervision and consultations can be a short cut to getting to the "heart of the matter" when colleagues have reached a stalemate in treatment. In supervision, it is helpful to set up representatives for both the client and his/her family of origin and the therapist and his/her family of origin. In these Constellations, the therapist is often able to see patterns from his family of origin that may be creating a block in the therapeutic process. In a consultation at a children's psychiatric hospital, a brief Constellation helped identify the source of "resistance" in the mothers' support group. What surfaced was the mothers' shame over being judged by the mostly unmarried treatment team and their fear about expressing it directly. Once the staff experienced the mothers' shame in the Constellation, they were moved to work harder to create a more respectful collaboration with the mothers in the group. Not surprisingly, the children began to improve as they were released from the loyalty bind between their family and the staff.

Illustration 1: Ripple Effect of an Early Death of a Sibling on a Marriage

The following case from my clinical practice illustrates how a short Constellation can get to the real spiritual source of the problem and open the door for more empathic connection between a couple, even when one is a reluctant participant.

Mary and Robert are Jamaican American in their early 1940s. They came in with complaints of growing distance between them emotionally and physically. They both declared their love for each other but often found themselves in drawn out arguments around Mary's feeling controlled and criticized and Robert's feeling left out of Mary's life. After spending some time getting more details about their conflict, I explained the exercise that would help me get a better picture of what they were experiencing. I brought out little figures for each of them, in turn, to set up on the table in a configura-

tion that described how they experienced their relationship. Mary went first and set her figure at a slight angle away from her husband's figure. His figure was facing her at a close distance. I then asked about their observations and their internal experience. Mary described feeling anxious and overwhelmed, with heaviness in her shoulders and a desire to move away from Robert's figure. Joe described feeling sad and helpless, although he also admitted that his figure seemed intimidating.

When Joe set up his internal picture of their relationship, he placed Mary's figure farther away from his, and raised the arms of his figure out toward Mary's. He observed feeling an even heavier sense of powerlessness and fear that he described as tightness in his throat and head. Pointing to the Constellation, he said, "It feels like I'm losing her." Because Mary's figure seemed to be looking away somewhat, I placed a figure in the space directly in front of her gaze. She looked up curiously and asked who that could be. I was not sure, but it seemed to me that something was distracting her from facing Robert. I asked about any abortions or miscarriages, first loves, early losses in her family of origin, or other traumas in her history. She inhaled audibly, looked at Robert cautiously, and reported that her mother had lost a baby when Mary was about 8 years old. It was never talked about, of course, but Mary, typical for her age, believed she was responsible for her mother's losing the baby and her parents' subsequent divorce.

I invited her to close her eyes and to imagine this sister at whatever age she felt was right. I instructed her to repeat words I would give her unless they did not feel right for whatever reason. With her eyes closed and imagining holding her infant baby sister while looking deeply into her eyes, she repeated my words, "You are my baby sister. I love you so much. I lived and you died." Mary began to weep as the little 8-year-old released long suppressed guilt and grief. Joe gently took her hand in his. Sobbing, she cried, "I was so lonely." I reframed this to include the relational problem they had come in with. "When you died, a piece of me died, too. I kept you close by keeping out everyone else I loved." A quiet nod of affirmation confirmed Joe's experience of their relationship, and I encouraged him to move closer to her. Mary released a deep sigh of relief. While she was drained from crying, she reported also feeling somehow calm and peaceful. She was grateful for Robert's quiet presence. Robert reported feeling deeply moved and more connected to Mary than he had been in a long time. While he could not exactly say what changed for him, he now moved his figure closer to Mary's. Mary exclaimed that she had wanted to do the same thing.

Illustration 2: What Is the Soul Trying to Manifest, Resolve, or Balance?: Adolescent Girl With Obsessive Compulsive Symptoms

This case exemplifies how emotional and behavioral complaints may have their origin in a secret in the family and how bringing the secret to light can release the symptoms.

Janet was 17 when she sought treatment for a severe obsessive fear that her boyfriend was cheating on her. She could not concentrate and had difficulty sleeping. She would force herself to throw up to keep thin and would stalk her boyfriend when he was not with her. No amount of reassurance helped alleviate her symptoms. She was losing weight and despite being an A student, her marks were steadily dropping. We did a tabletop Constellation, using figures for herself, her mother, and her father. When we looked at the external picture of her internal sense of the relationships, she observed that both parents were looking away. She reported feeling anxious and frightened. Only when I spoke to her mother privately did her symptoms make sense. I learned that her parents had started their relationship as an affair and had never revealed this secret to her. Everyone else knew including her four older stepsiblings on both sides of the family. The order of precedence had not been respected. The first spouses who were left were not given a respectful place in the system. This created a great deal of conflict and tension for the other children. Janet apparently became entangled in this unfinished business and unconsciously identified with the abandoned spouses around their right to honesty and respect for their sacrifice. “Because they lost, the new couple gained.” Once the secret was revealed, her obsessive fears disappeared.

Efficacy of Constellation Work: Healing the Heart

Constellation work values both the rational mind and the intuitive mind, but it particularly highlights the heart-centered consciousness of intuition. It is a wonderful tool that externalizes the problem, provides alternate perspectives, reduces shame and blame, and nurtures empathy, hope, and connection. It reconnects the individual soul to his family soul and reframes our struggles as being in loving service to forgotten members of our family. Sometimes, it even provides a realignment of the system that then restores harmony among family members who are not part of the session.

Personally, I have used this method when I feel stuck or when I have to make an important decision. I have participated in hundreds of Constellations and trainings both here and abroad. I am still awed by the power of this method to heal the heart, even as a small part of me wants to dismiss it as hocus pocus. There has been some research about its long-term efficacy, but more needs to be done in this area. Despite this limitation, Constellation work continues to inform and inspire me in both my personal and professional life. It has confirmed my deep faith in a Great Mystery that we are all a part of, a Loving Consciousness that envelops and enfolds us and from which we can draw information, guidance, and support even in the most desperate situations. Finally, this work has confirmed for me that what we often reject in our life actually holds the key to our redemption—there is a gift in the “Dark Box” (Oliver, 2006, p. 52).

Someone I loved once gave me a *box* full of *darkness*.

It took me years to understand that this too, was a gift.

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