

Family Constellations: Incredible Change Moments in Therapy

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I remember so clearly the day three years ago that David walked into my office. Young and handsome, a graduate of Columbia Law, he hadn't even hit 40 yet, but was already well known in the community as an engaging and successful lawyer. He appeared composed and assured, but the façade crumbled quickly during the very first session. Under his polished exterior lay an anxious and depressed young man – a cocaine addict still reeling from a failed marriage – irritable, confused and full of despair.

"I guess I'm a slave to the past," he said, as he described his years growing up in a "wild and crazy" family. "I've already been in therapy for 18 years."

After listening to him for several weeks, I concluded that a series of traditional therapies had enabled David to cast his mother as an oppressor and himself as a victim. And indeed he did seem trapped in this configuration – and no wonder. After nearly *two decades*, he was no closer to understanding or resolving the issues he identified as the source of his problems than when he started. He was stuck – and I found myself a bit distracted by worries that we might be headed for more of the same.

The situation may sound extreme, but really, haven't we all been there – in that dark and frustrating void where you and your client are simply at an impasse? Sure, therapeutically, it might be helpful to simply acknowledge what's going on and take stock of the territory – no harm in that, and maybe great gain. But I got the impression that such exploration might not be able to spark the kind of insight and punch that David needed to start him down another path. That's when I decided that he, like a growing number of clients in my practice, might benefit from an emerging new approach to family systems that I had learned in Europe several years earlier.

I'm talking about Family Constellations – also known as Orders of Love – conceived by Bert Hellinger, a former Catholic priest who developed the approach through decades of study in his native Germany. Widely practiced and accepted in Europe for decades, Family Constellations is just now beginning to gain currency in some parts of the U.S.

I first observed Family Constellations in action after meeting Judith Hemming, one of Hellinger's first disciples, who attended a workshop I was conducting in Bristol, England, on the use of EMDR with negative introjects. After the workshop, Judith invited me to London to observe a constellation. Nothing in my training and practice had prepared me for the impact of that experience. Over and over again, I witnessed powerful, deeply felt transformations among Judith's clients. I wanted that for my clients too. I was so taken with the work that I later went to Germany to meet Hellinger himself and to attend one of his seminars. I've spent nearly ten years now studying the method and honing my skill as a constellator and I remain more convinced than ever that this method

offers many, many people a sense of immediate relief and resolution to a variety of problems.

In a way, it's no surprise. First, although Family Constellations is novel, it draws upon therapeutic systems many of us are already familiar with: Gestalt, Family Sculpting, Primal Therapy and Transactional Analysis, among others. Hellinger, however – a genius at synthesizing seemingly incongruous traditions – also incorporates elements from observations he made while serving Zulu tribes in Africa – practices reflecting values most societies hold dear: love and respect, rituals of giving and receiving, loyalty to shared history, ways of belonging to families and groups, and respect for the natural orderliness of birth, life and death. It was among the Zulu that Hellinger witnessed the power of ancestry, the relationship between the living and the dead and the influence of trans-generational respect, loyalty and memory. He believed these rituals and traditions were similar to structures in family systems everywhere, a belief that would later become a tenet of Family Constellations. Second, participation in a Family Constellation is invitational, non-judgmental and highly experiential. Its physical and phenomenological practices enable clients to literally "see" the complex dynamics of their family history and to physically and emotionally experience the process of righting wrongs. No other tradition offers this, although some might feel Satir's Family Sculpting comes close.

Hellinger spent 25 years in Africa, but eventually left the priesthood to return to Europe to further refine his thinking and observations. He came to believe that shared rituals and principles that support positive relationships were, simply put, "orders" of love, and that in following these "orders," families would thrive. But it was only after many more years' study of other interventions that he was able to define a methodology that brought Family Constellation to life.

Family Constellations, Orders of Love: Basic Principles

- Everyone – living or dead – belongs; everyone has a rightful place in their family.
- The family has a shared consciousness.
- Giving and taking needs to balance out over time.
- Solutions to problems arise when respect, inclusion and reconciliation are present

Simply stated, the Orders of Love are axioms, that, when in place and acknowledged by all members of a family, enable the free and even exchange of love, respect, compassion and humility across generations. People experience problems when the orderly flow of

love and respect is disrupted, blocked or imbalanced. Solutions arise when the impediments are identified and reconciled.

How Constellations Work

There are four stages to the process. First, the therapist (or constellator) convenes a group of people who are interested in participating. Then, with anywhere from ten to 20 people gathered, a participant who desires to address a particular problem identifies him- or herself and comes to sit by the constellator. This creates the scene for the second stage, the interview.

The purpose of the interview – conducted by the constellator – is to elicit from the client what he or she has longed for in life but has not been able to achieve, and to transform that longing into a vision of what life would be like if that goal were achieved. Constellations can address virtually any issue that therapists deal with: alcoholism, drug use, violence, incest, rape, depression, headaches, unusual deaths, the feeling of wanting to die and not understanding why, anxiety, eating disorders, wanting the love of a parent, the effect of abortion or miscarriage, and so on. A second goal of the interview is to identify who constitutes the client's family and what happened in that family's history. Here, the work diverges significantly from many other interventions. The constellator joins with and is in contact with the client, but does not become empathic, as that tends to draw the facilitator into the system. Constellators need to know facts - who belongs, what happened and who was left out or excluded. Judgmental statements such as "My mother was ruthless and uncaring" are distracting. We want to know what *happened* to the mother.

The third stage is creation of the constellation. Here, the client picks people from the circle to represent members of the family system. It's a good idea to begin the constellation with as few people as possible, just to keep it simple – others can be added if necessary. As in Family Sculpting, the client places them within the circle, silently and gently guiding them from behind, moving them into place. Unlike Satir, there is no sculpting of the arms or telling people how to act. Representatives simply stand in the field of the family system at hand.

The resulting tableau, or constellation, is full of information. The distance, orientation and demeanor of the participants offer clues to the client's dilemma. For Gestalt therapists, this first look at the spaces in which people are placed is the "fixed Gestalt" which inhibits or blocks the client's longing. It reveals how the client carries this issue and why the client is stuck in it. In Family Constellation theory, it reveals how the Orders of Love are out of alignment.

It's the fourth stage, where the constellation begins to reveal the family system that participants usually find most astonishing. As the client takes a seat to watch, and without

prompting, the participants in the circle begin to behave, move and sound like the client's actual family members.

How? How can this happen? Scientifically, no one really knows. David recalls, "it felt like magic," (admittedly not the kind of endorsement we might seek out) but there are theories that attempt to make meaning of what does, indeed, takes place. Hellinger believes it may be the result of tapping into ancestral energies that can be summoned at any time. In Jungian terms, it might be construed as the power of the collective unconscious. Rupert Sheldrake talks of the power of the morphogenic field – the reverberations of knowledge through time and space. I suppose anyone with a literary bent would probably have to invoke the "willing suspension of disbelief," and scientists might recall Sid Harris's cartoon of the professors standing in front of a blackboard filled with equations – the middle one being, "then a miracle happens." Whatever the reason, the constellation truly does come to life at this juncture, revealing the current state of the client's meaning-making, the impediments to the Orders of Love, and a pathway to possible resolution. This, in turn, opens the door to the last stage, the process of release and resolution.

During this last phase, the constellator begins to release the system's inhibitions and blocks through a ritualistic-like exchange of statements among various members that reflect and reconstitute proper relationships as defined by the Orders of Love. As the statements are exchanged and felt, the constellator gradually rearranges the family members into proper alignment. When the family is completely refigured, the client is able to see how love and respect can flow more readily. This image, and the understanding of what it means, is the source of relief and change.

Which brings me back to David, who I introduced you to at the beginning of this article: It was clear to me that within the context of Family Constellations, there were many instances where his family members had violated the Orders of Love. David agreed to take part in a constellation, and through three sessions over several months, he began to find his proper place in the family system. He came to know and to respect his heritage. He discovered the real identity of his father. And he finally understood that his mother's own imbalance and her fate held no malice toward him.

We haven't said goodbye to each other yet, but I feel the time is coming soon when we will. Asked to recollect about his experience with the constellations, he said, "I know I'm a work in progress. The constellations shook me up. They showed me in a really visceral way that I don't have to constantly relive the traumas of my past and to move on with my life. Today I am more accepting, more able to look to the future, less likely to wallow in my past. The anxiety is better. No kids yet, but yeah, I've got the radar going."

Family Constellations had helped him become "unstuck."

For more on Family Constellations, see:

www.hellinger.com

www.movingconstellations.com

www.nowherefoundation.org

www.andystuck.com

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