

## Systemic Constellations – The Work Pioneered by Bert Hellinger

By Romola V. Thumbadoo (Feb 2013)

### Preamble

This is a personal reflection on Systemic Constellation work as pioneered by German psychotherapist, Bert Hellinger. A former Catholic priest, he was stationed in Marian Hill, Durban, for sixteen years and he worked with the Zulu people. While his therapeutic approach to trauma is an amazing complex of evolving insights, techniques and practices, emerging from the structured format of a group engagement, the ideological framework reflects the knowledge and integration of the beliefs of the Zulu peoples of South Africa – in particular, the fundamental and unbroken thread of linkage to the spirit of the ancestors, and the priority of appeasing the spirits of the ancestors. Of course, as elsewhere in the world, belief structures of peoples have been transformed by Christianity. It was fascinating for me to learn last year that the activity of the greatest passionate interest to the African (Zulu, Xhosa and Sotho) people I talked to was going to church – this was an all day commitment – and there, I learned, they encountered the ancestors! The old practices are camouflaged in the new. This passion acknowledges the great healing the spirit/soul recognizes is needed in our post traumatized/post war worlds.

Indigenous Peoples of North America also integrate ancestral linkages in their lives consciously and regularly. Bert Hellinger did some constellation work with Indigenous Elders and peoples in Canada and recognized similar threads in the energetic linkages now fundamental to Systemic Constellation work. Late Algonquin Elder William Commanda and I explored Bert Hellinger's Family Constellation Therapy work (as it has been called in the past); William C. did a Pipe Ceremony at a conference in Germany in 2001, and supported his workshops in Ontario in 2004; and we engaged with the constellation work of Dr. Karl Heinz Rauscher – both in Germany, and in Canada, when he made presentations at our *Circle of All Nations* gathering in 2002.

When I told Bert H. that William C.'s people had *no word for justice* in their language, he thought I had the kind of understanding/affinity for constellation work – I was too busy with William's work to engage formally with constellation work these past ten years – but I believe it is brilliant and transformative work – that could also be deepened with more conscious engagement with *indigenous*. Bert H. has written many books on this work. The note that follows is formally *my* reflection and recollection of constellation work as it was emerging and developing a decade ago, and not its more recent manifestations.

I don't know how much the field has evolved – it has certainly been growing incredibly in popularity and reach. I know people now do many creative things with representations of family. I am not sure how much Indigenous practices are consciously integrated. I noted one constellation therapist with S. American Indigenous roots utilize her *groundedness* in Indigenous ideology to do the better practices that I have seen conducted. I think constellation work could be strengthened immensely with conscious integration with the Medicine Wheel – it is rooted in Indigenous ways of knowing; it is a modern practice now for addressing modern traumas; and it can be supported and enhanced by entrenching with Indigenous again. I shall put my mind to developing this thought further.

## Systemic Constellations - Note by Romola V. Thumbadoo

1. Essentially, this work recognizes the energetic relations in the inter-connections of people. The web of interconnection commences with the nuclear family, and reaches beyond to more distant members of the family. More importantly, the threads of connection also reach into and vibrate with the past – that is with family members who are dead. This then is the field of the constellation, systemically organized.
2. If a person is dealing with some trauma, *conflictedness*, inertia, illness, that s/he is not able to address and resolve, constellation therapy can provide tremendous insights into the probable nature/reason for the dilemma, and offer a roadmap to healing.
3. Constellation therapy is energy work – shifting energy within the family constellation. It posits that the trauma is invariably caused by the premature disappearance of someone from the family unit – for example, the untimely death of a parent, a child, a miscarriage, an abortion, an accident, a divorce – and this loss/disappearance, if not integrated, creates an energetic imbalance/vacuum within the constellation unit of the family, and this impacts a member of the unit, and this in turn impacts relationships within the unit to varying degrees. It is as if the traumatized energy lodges with and immobilizes some member of the unit. That individual's attention is focused elsewhere, not on the rest of the family.
4. It is an energy thing at the basic level, not a mental or emotional thing (though those zones get implicated), and so Hellinger developed an energy movement practice to shift the energy; the practice exposes the problem, and points to a resolution; then the person needs to engage with the mind and perhaps other healing practices in order to move on with life.
5. So, for some, the energy shift and recognition of the energy block is enough to be released and then move on with life, having integrated the pain of the loss. In this sense, the original pain deepens a person – people who have had tough experiences know deep things about life that others never will; if they are able to integrate, their soul forces are deepened, not traumatized. It is not about forgetting – it is about integrating. The constellation work can provide the release; then the person can seek and benefit better from other healing support practices.
6. For others, they have built the structures of their lives entirely around the trauma and it is difficult to leave the place of immobility – that is the paradox of victimhood – it is true perhaps that unfortunate things have happened to the victim, and there may be justification in feeling sorry for one's self etc; but that lodging in the victim zone also hinders the development of *personal* power – the capacity to empower and evolve. For some, the trauma or illness has become that thing that has given the most meaning to life, hence they refuse the resolution – it is like they would die if the illness were not there to give them reason to live.
7. Constellation work presents an opportunity: embracing its gift is a choice and work.
8. The central thread in the energy connections is love – at least that is what Hellinger calls it; maybe it's the soul's current – and there is a logical flow for that love – from the parent, to the child; from the grandparent, to the parent to the child – in that

order; if that is disrupted, then one must find ways of reestablishing the flow; for the child, that means respect directed towards the older ones. So an important phrase for Hellinger in this work is to *bow* to the parent/older one – if one cannot, the energy flow is blocked.

So, for example, in the scenario of the child parenting an alcoholic mother – the flow of love is going in the wrong direction, and energetic imbalances will ensue.

Then the issue becomes ascertaining where the mother's energy is blocked – and looking to help her – in order to release the child to the proper flow of respect backwards and love forwards. So with the traumatized mother, the issue is to see where her energy is blocked.

9. These are the core elements in the process. This is not a role play; the energy of the family is present and in the process, increasingly visible; participants reflect that energy.

- So, in the practice – a group practice – the traumatized individual provides the briefest of details about the issue to the therapist – this is not a mental counseling session;
- The individual then selects individuals from the group to represent family members and places them in the centre of the space; the way the family is set up reveals core information about the dynamics within the family constellation. Should more information be required to understand the constellation, the individual will be asked to select more people to represent family.
- Invariably, the missing people become visible – hidden secrets in families become visible – losses, abuses, abortions, murder, disappearances etc.
- It will become apparent that some member of the family constellation is energetically connected with the missing one.
- The effort then turns to providing support for the missing person, generally via other dead family members, so that the blocked person can, as it were, be released of the weight of serving that energy. It also realigns family members to support each other appropriately and realigns the flow of love and flow of respect;
- It also involves giving the missing person a place in the heart – that is how the love/soul current get recharged and re-vitalizes – as it gives life - to the entire family constellation.
- Then, the traumatized person can release from the trauma and rebuild/regenerate his/her own life.
- This in turn will cause shifts in the energetic lines of the family constellation.
- It is about giving visibility to hidden issues, about not turning a blind eye and about giving a *place in the heart*.

10. Of course, all over the world, people have been deeply traumatized, sometimes by very bad things – so this can also sometimes necessitate banishing people from the family constellation. But that type of resolution also poses problems in energy fields.

11. Constellation work is also useful in nation to nation conflict.

12. This then is the idea behind appeasing the spirits of the ancestor – as reflected in some African practices, or, nuanced differently, in respecting or honouring the spirit of the ancestors, as expressed in Indigenous practices in North America.