What Are Constellations?

*By Suzi Tucker*

Pickpocketed from Wikipedia: “A constellation is a group of stars that forms an imaginary outline or pattern on the celestial sphere…”

A systemic constellation refers to a group of relationships that forms an imaginary pattern or outline on the internal and external landscape of a human system. Rather than an animal, the pattern we see tends to be in the shape of despair or disappointment or anger, loneliness, illness, poverty, grief, longing, lack of thriving …

This pattern appears imprinted on the family or organizational system as a whole or on the heart of an individual.

Systemic constellations are both surgical and encompassing; they invite change quickly and unfold over a long time. Bert Hellinger, the provocative founder of the work, has assembled thinking from the realms of philosophy, psychology, sociology, and art to try to understand where things fall apart — and how they can come back together no matter the amount of damage that has been done.

In this bold approach, the observations and process work together to create fresh paths out of the worn-out ways. Individuals begin to understand themselves as being under the influence of historical events and decisions, and often operating unconsciously to demonstrate their hidden loyalty to various forces in the system. This pattern can be seen in family systems and, in fact, in all systems.

At the same time, systemic constellations allow individuals to glimpse and feel the benefits of mobility and taking responsibility for one’s part (different from taking responsibility for everyone). Moving out of the realm of the past is a gift to the future —and also to the past.

As children, we internally organize around danger and survival, the heartaches, unmet needs, terrors of others. The fact that our great-grandparents were slaves, or grandparents escaped the holocaust (or didn’t), or our mother was adopted, our father lost his father when he was 4-years-old, there are three "miscarriages" before you were born -- all such dramatic interruptions to the expected flow of life have everything to do with how life is navigated. And our compass, how we navigate, is nested in those events and calibrated in accordance with how they were negotiated by those who came before us. Did they run? Hide? Protect others? Kill? Go mad? Betray themselves? Sacrifice, barter, win, lose?

If we are still traversing the old territory, promises of success and abundance are not convincing. Turned to what was, we back into life. We know this especially when our hopes and our abilities are time and again no match for the ambushes that feel as though they “just happen.”

In terms of relationships, personal or professional, if survival (for instance) is still the subliminal vocabulary, then we are going to be challenged when it comes to making nutritious choices — the decisions that hold the possibility of leading to more life, more love, more meaning. Nutrition implies a future, long term, healthy seeds for healthy growth. Survival is immediate, short term, a reflex.

The boss is my lifeline. Am I free? I cannot make it without my spouse. Am I free? I know what’s happening is wrong, but I am afraid to speak up. I am not free. I deserve a raise and at the same time do not deserve anything. I am not free. My most important connections seem to hinder rather than support my evolution. I am not free.

Systemic Constellations invite us to out-picture the tangle of information that lies beneath the awareness of the system and its inhabitants. Immediately, as we set up the image that has been weighing us down, there is the relief of becoming a witness to our situation, of releasing the intolerable tension from the body and mind, of becoming an observer.

As members of the group (a constellation is usually done in a group setting at first) are selected to represent various people or parts of the system, they step into a silent agreement in which they shed agenda and simply feel into their positions. What does it feel like to stand so close, so far, so despised, so adored? Responses come to mind and to body, and based on them, the facilitator will begin moving people in the relational field that has been set up. What changes? Whom or what are you aware of? Where is your body drawn? Does an emotion rise up? Where do you feel it. Perhaps you feel nothing. That’s a feeling too?

Looking at the positions people inhabit in the family or in an organization, rather than settling into a judgment of personality, we stay mobile. How much of the personality, after all, is defense against having been pressed into a position that isn’t ours? A bare bones example: The first-born child faces challenges that overwhelm the parents and so the second-born child becomes the next best hope. All attention and care go to the second. This is the one who will save us. The first, then, is trapped in a prison of deficit, lack of trust, assumption of failure, disappointment. The second suffers from too-high expectations from the parents (and the anger of his brother). Both are stuck in a position around which aspects of the personality logically develop.

We can easily see how this works in a company as well. The person hired as the manager makes a mistake. Soon, an assistant is hired to “help.” This person has a lot of charisma and confidence, and seems to attract all of the positive attention. This is a burden for the manager, who now is less mobile (fearful and hurt) and thus less likely to succeed. The assistant may be confused and feel guilty and so withdraw or overcompensate in response. Often, these things are known, perhaps experienced as suspicions, before we step into the field of the particular organization because we are drawn to what we know, even as we resent it.

It will be very difficult for these types of issues (which will likely get worse) to be resolved between the siblings or between the coworkers — those who are navigating a kind of inheritance.

We would, in both cases, wonder, How does the disorder serve the system? Why are those in “power” unwilling to clarify the order? To support overtly everyone involved? To whom or what are the siblings and coworkers being loyal by not extricating themselves? Where are the resources that will guide the systems out of stagnation and even eventual destruction?

Continuing to move the relevant representatives around and along the timeline — past, present, future — we dislodge faulty interpretations based on narrow experience and open to the wider context and healthier conclusions that allow for movement forward (rather than in circles). We begin to see the ways in which defining dynamics came to be and seeing how far the reverberation reaches. Soon, we can also begin to glimpse the road out of the entanglements. It connects with the deep system — the lineage of the family or organization that made every right choice to land in the present, that allowed us to be here. And it connects to the future of the future -- the vision, the purpose, and the integrity of love. The resolution is always the same: the client, the one who is curious enough about another way, steps fully into the one position that is truly his or hers, no longer carrying the burdens of others, and free to take responsibility, to sense capacity, to commit fully to fruition.

Most of us travel through life under the heavy weight of a subliminal misconception that we can, through our suffering and blind love, save those who came before us — mother, father, those who were enslaved, slaughtered, lost to forces beyond them.

It is a bit of quirkiness — we think of ourselves as more powerful than we are and at the same time, we miss our significance. We lose sight of our essential place in life: to bring life further with every breath and step we take. In this way, we are far more important than we imagine.

Once we are persuaded that we will survive our own dispensability and can imagine that we have the capacity to agree to our responsibility, a path appears … and then a road …and then a wide-open confluence of possibility.

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