

SYSTEMIC FAMILY CONSTELLATIONS AND THEIR USE WITH PRISONERS
SERVING LONG-TERM SENTENCES FOR MURDER OR RAPE

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the Faculty of Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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by
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Approval of the Dissertation

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AbstractSYSTEMIC FAMILY CONSTELLATIONS AND THEIR USE WITH PRISONERS
SERVING LONG-TERM SENTENCES FOR MURDER OR RAPE

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This dissertation introduces Systemic Family Constellations into English-language scholarship. A Constellation is an intense group process developed by the German psychologist-philosopher Bert Hellinger. The approach explicitly diverges from much of mainstream cognitive, behavioral, and psychodynamic psychology. The review of the literature includes a process description; sections on how Constellations diverge from empirically supported psychotherapy; its place within the historiography of psychology; the historic roots that are synthesized in its design, including existential-phenomenology, family systems theory, Zulu traditions, shamanism, and Jewish mysticism; and analyses of how reported experiences with Constellations coincide with or diverge from multiple constructs of the human soul and recent findings in brain/mind research.

The research combines theoretical and case description methods to present a broad introduction to systemic Family Constellations. Case research employs retrospective exploratory narrative case descriptions of the process used with a group of prisoners serving long-term sentences.

The theoretical research showed that although the Constellation approach is outside the boundaries of mainstream professional psychology in the United States, its lineage in psychology, theology, philosophy, and indigenous healing practices has deep roots. Because Constellations and mainstream psychotherapy have different aims, it is understandable that their structure, format, and content are radically different. The case research encompassed 13 Constellations across 9 cases. The self-reported outcomes indicate that the Constellations were beneficial in helping the inmates deal with difficult emotions and estrangements from loved ones and to facing images of victims of their crimes and the death of loved ones.

The thematic analysis considers emergent philosophic constructs. These include systemic conscience, guilt and innocence, good and evil, the victim-perpetrator bond, and vengeance and forgiveness. The phenomenological evidence suggests that neither vengeance nor sacrifice changes the fate of the living or the dead for the better and that forgiveness is compassion based on acceptance of the past, acknowledgment of the existential equality of all people, and reverence for the vast beauty of life.

Dedication

I dedicate these results to the men and volunteers of the Growing Together III group at Bay State. Together, we have found acceptance, freedom, and forgiveness in the victim-perpetrator bond.

Further, I dedicate this effort to my daughters, Anna and Rosalie, in hope that this work will contribute something to their inheriting a more peaceful and secure world.

Acknowledgments

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Table of Contents

List of Tables	ix
List of Figures	x
 CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION	 1
Purpose of the Inquiry	1
Rationale for the Study	3
Research Questions	4
Researcher's Personal Narrative	6
 CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	 9
Family Constellation Process.....	9
Process Description.....	9
Divergences with Principles of Best Practices in Psychotherapy	12
The Three Streams of Psychology	20
Academic Laboratory Psychology	23
Clinical Psychology	24
American Spiritually-Oriented Psychology	25
Roots and Influences	27
Existential Phenomenology	27
Family Systems Theory	29
Parallels in Ancient Wisdom Traditions	35
Zulu Traditions.....	36
Shamanism and Native American Beliefs	39
Jewish Mysticism and Kabbalah.....	47
Family Constellations and the Soul	55
The Immaterial Immortal Soul.....	56
The Brain as the Source of All Mental Activity	57
The Soul as Universal Consciousness.....	60
The Soul in the Phenomenology of Family Constellations	61
Psychology with a Soul.....	67
Family Constellations and the Brain/Mind	68
 CHAPTER 3: METHOD	 75
Significance of the Research.....	75
Rationale for Selection of Method.....	79
Theoretical Research.....	81
Exploratory Narrative Case Descriptions	82
Participants.....	86
Research Design.....	89
Validity and Reliability	90
Data Collection Procedures.....	93
Delimitations and Limitations of the Study	94

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS	96
Introduction to Case Studies	96
Case 1: James	96
Background Information	96
James's Constellations	99
Case 2: Barry	103
Background Information	103
Barry's Constellation	105
Case 3: Ted	108
Background Information	108
Ted's Constellations	109
Case 4: Rick	115
Background Information	115
Rick's Constellations	117
Case 5: Rafael	122
Background Information	122
Rafael's Constellation	124
Case 6: Alex	127
Background Information	127
Alex's Constellation	127
Case 7: Colin	129
Background Information	129
Colin's Constellation	130
Case 8: Phil	134
Background Information	134
Phil's Constellation	135
Case 9: Russ	139
Background Information	139
Russ' Constellations	141
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION	146
Group Dynamics	146
Level of Group Participation	146
Volunteers	147
Process Themes	150
Presenting Issues and Reported Outcomes	150
The Framework of Systemic Dynamics	151
Looking Beyond the Problem	151
Life and the System	153
Philosophic Constructs	155
Systemic Conscience	156
Guilt and Innocence	158
Good and Evil	160
The Victim-Perpetrator Bond	163
Negative Effects of Constellations: The Dark Night of the Soul	165
Healing Movements	168

Vengeance and Forgiveness.....	169
Implications: Research and Practice	171
REFERENCES	174
APPENDIX: Informed Consent.....	193

List of Tables

Table 1. Summary of Issues and Outcomes.....	151
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List of Figures

Figure 1. The Universe of the Christian Soul	56
Figure 2. The Infinite Universe.....	57
Figure 3. 21st-Century American Cosmology	60
Figure 4. Children are Small	66
Figure 5. James's Constellation: Initial Set Up	102
Figure 6. James's Constellation: Resolution.....	103
Figure 7. Barry's Constellation: Initial Set Up	105
Figure 8. Barry's Constellation: Resolution	107
Figure 9. Ted's Constellation: Initial Set Up	109
Figure 10. Rick's Constellation: Initial Set Up.....	118
Figure 11. Rick's Constellation: Family	118
Figure 12. Colin's Constellation: Initial Set Up	131
Figure 13. Phil's Constellation: Initial Set Up.....	137
Figure 14. Russ's Constellation: Initial Set Up	141
Figure 15. Russ's Constellation: Resolution.....	142
Figure 16. Good and Evil.....	161
Figure 17. Acknowledging the Excluded Element	162

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Inquiry

The purpose of this research was to introduce the Family Constellation group process into English-language scholarship. Although there are more than 1,000 psychotherapists, medical doctors, healing arts practitioners, and nonlicensed facilitators worldwide who employ the Family Constellation approach (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Systemaufstellungen [German Society for Systems Constellations], 2008; Talent Manager, 2008), this is the first English-language doctoral dissertations to present the theoretical underpinnings of the process or provide case study descriptions of its applications.

A Family Constellation is a single-session, emotionally intense group process that emerged in Germany in the 1980s (Cohen, 2006; Franke, 2003; Hellinger, 2001a, 2002, 2003; Hellinger, Weber, & Beaumont, 1998; Mahr, 1999; Schneider, 2007; Ulsamer, 2005). Its philosophic stances derive from an integration of existential phenomenology (Heidegger, 1927/1962; Husserl, 1913/1972; Merleau-Ponty, 2002), family systems theory (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Lynch & Lynch, 2000; Moreno, 1945, Satir, 1987), and elements of indigenous spiritual mysticism (Boring, 2004; Feldman, 2001; Lao-Tzu, 1989; Somé, 1999; van Kampenhout, 2001, 2008).

Typically, participants in a Family Constellation circle report find the experience emotionally powerful and deeply profound. It is not uncommon for those who present either chronic or acute pressing personal issues and set up their Constellation to report afterward that the issue has eased or even resolved completely (Cohen, 2005, 2006;

Lynch & Tucker, 2005; Payne, 2005; Ruppert, 2007; Stark, 2005; Steifel, Harris & Zollmann, 2002; Ulsamer, 2005; Wolynn, 2005).

Many professional practitioners use superlatives to describe the benefits of the process and its distinctions from more commonly known interventions. For example, Gunthard Weber (Hellinger et al., 1998), a German psychiatrist and former hospital clinic director and faculty member at the University of Heidelberg wrote,

I have participated in many different workshops and training seminars from a great variety of psychotherapeutic schools and orientations and with a variety of teachers [My first Family Constellation seminars] remain indelible in my memory. In every seminar, I experienced something that continued to move me years later, to work in me, bringing me back into balance, guiding me back to myself when I became confused. (p. vi)

Jacob Schneider (2007), a German educator and counselor, contended that in less than an hour, the Constellation process reveals something essential that is immediately understandable, sheds light on personal difficulties, reveals previously unrecognized connections between crucial events and relationships, and opens the possibility for resolution. He explained that what makes Constellation compelling is that the process “leads into a depth of human experience and discovery that reaches beyond the sometimes narrow boundaries of psychotherapy into an encompassing, collective realm of mind and spirit” (p. 13).

Berthold Ulsamer (2005), a psychologist, management consultant and author, claimed that “an amazing and mysterious phenomenon” allows “hidden tensions, conflicts and influential relationships existing within a family to become visible.” Under the guidance of the facilitator, the representatives find a “good family order” and repeat simple sentences that lead to outcomes that “can stimulate change, move the client in the right direction and have a positive effect” (pp. 3-8).

Claims that an austere and emotionally intense single-session intervention can positively impact chronic problems raise red flags of skepticism within the professional community of psychologists and psychotherapists. The field of psychology is littered with countless treatment modalities that were promoted as panaceas or instant cures for a broad range of ailments and later judged by empirical testing and accumulated anecdotal case study evidence to be of limited benefit or even harmful (Brown, 1998; Ellenberger, 1970; Singer & Lalich, 1996; Wampold, 2001).

Out of the hundreds of therapeutic interventions that have been developed and promoted since the era of the *new psychologists* in the 19th century (Reed, 1997; Taylor, 1999), the American Psychological Association (APA) recognizes only 108 empirically supported treatments for the entire range of mental health disorders. These are predominantly cognitive, behavioral, and interpersonal therapies (Chambless, 2002; Chambless & Ollendick, 2001).

Innovations in clinical psychology evolve through an interactive process of practice and research. New modalities develop in clinical practice, then are described by and evaluated with scholarly research. The purpose of this study is to take the initial step of introducing Family Constellations to English-language scholarly literature.

Rationale for the Study

Even in the most ordinary case, a Family Constellation is difficult to explain or fully comprehend. Boulton (2006), a lecturer in complexity theory at Cranfield School of Management (UK), described her struggle to fathom what occurs during the process: “It

is pretty strange, isn't it, from a rational, mechanical point of view. . . . It's mind boggling, but it's true; phenomenologically that is what we experience" (p. 13).

The efficacy or validity of Family Constellations is not supported by randomized controlled studies, as no such studies have been attempted. Beyond the lack of empirical testing and validation, the gulf between Family Constellations and the cognitive, behavioral and psychodynamic therapies supported by the APA is substantial. The Constellation approach explicitly and purposefully omits much that is included in evidence-based practice in psychology and ventures into territory that these therapies explicitly avoid. The Constellation approach traces its lineage through the *scShadow Culture* (Taylor, 1999) of transpersonal depth psychology.

Before researchers can take steps toward evaluating the validity of Family Constellations, it is necessary to convey an understanding of what the process *is*, where it came from, and how it is experienced. As the first English-language dissertation on the subject of the Family Constellations group process, this research aims to address these preliminary questions.

Research Questions

This study combines theoretical research with case descriptions and analysis. The review of the literature incorporates four theoretical questions: (1) What is the Family Constellation process and how is it different from meditative, cognitive, behavioral, and psychodynamic approaches? (2) Where did it originate? (3) What are its philosophical underpinnings? and (4) How do these philosophic constructs correspond with the latest research in the field of neuroscientific psychology? The case descriptions and analysis

asked: What were the experiences of a group of men serving long-term sentences in a Massachusetts state prison who participated in a series of monthly Family Constellation circles?

The theoretical research included an examination of the seemingly inexplicable elements of the process, a discussion of Constellations' roots in the traditions of spiritually oriented psychology, phenomenological existentialism, family systems theory, Zulu ancestor reverence and other forms of indigenous shamanism, and Kabbalah; the relation of the insights revealed in Constellations to the constructs of mind and soul; and a review of whether recent findings in cognitive neuroscience offered a theoretical model that may resolve Constellations' seemingly inexplicable elements.

The research included exploratory, narrative case descriptions of the experiences of a group of men serving long-term sentences in a Massachusetts state prison who participated in a series of regular Family Constellation circles beginning in 2004. This included a cross-analysis of themes that emerged from these sessions. Due to security, confidentiality, and protection of vulnerable human participants in research concerns, the data set was limited to archival program evaluation questionnaires and the recollections of the researcher and prison volunteers. This data set was not suitable for extensive categorization, coding, and analysis. A narrative research method (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004; Josselson & Lieblich, 2001; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998; Thompson, 1981; Yin, 2003) aimed to create unique narratives to convey the emotions, meaning, and outcomes experienced during and after in the group sessions.

Researcher's Personal Narrative

The method used to present the experiences of the prisoners was a narrative case study analysis (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Yin, 2003). With this method, as with many forms of qualitative research, it is important to recognize that the results distilled from the research bore the imprint of the principal researcher (Riessman, 1993). This personal narrative frames my biases for the reader.

My undergraduate degree in history of science (Connecticut College, 1977), focused on the roots of nuclear science from alchemy to the atom bomb (Dobbs, 1975; Kipphardt, 1968; Koestler, 1960; Kuhn, 1962; Scholem, 1965; Thompson, 1971; York, 1976). In integrating these studies as a post-Hiroshima, post-Nazi Holocaust Jewish-American, I felt charged to pursue the challenges to our generation articulated by the philosophical insights of such scientists as Oppenheimer (1948) and Einstein (1946). Oppenheimer (1948) explained that in unleashing the energy of the atomic bomb, nuclear science made future warfare unendurable for the victors as well as the vanquished. The existential dimensions of the atomic bomb “extended and deepened our understanding of the common sources of power for evil and power for good. . . . This is seed we take with us, traveling to a land we cannot see, to plant in new soil” (p. 252). Einstein’s (1946) famous quotation echoes this sentiment: “The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything, save our modes of thinking and we thus drift toward unparalleled catastrophe” (para. 1).

Alchemy’s central metaphor had always been a two-pronged quest: to transform the inner nature of humanity and the external nature of matter. Nuclear science solved

one side of the riddle. Without the other, humanity possessed the knowledge to unleash explosions to incinerate entire cities but not the wisdom to survive this knowledge.

In the first decade after receiving my Masters in business administration (Boston University, 1981), I worked as a business owner and volunteered as a peace activist. Fortuitously, I obtained a personal services contract to provide strategic planning services to the director of the Los Alamos National Laboratory, the fourth lineal successor to J. Robert Oppenheimer. By working directly with Donald M. Kerr and members of his senior management team, I was exposed firsthand to the terrifying trajectory of an organizational system charged with manufacturing evermore destructive weapons of mass annihilation within an institutional culture that strictly prohibited consideration of Oppenheimer and Einstein's cautionary warnings (York, 1976).

Thompson's (1981) challenge to step beyond the edge inspired me:

We are all on edge. Human beings feel safe and secure when they can stand confidently in the center of things . . . but when they come to an edge, they feel nervous and unsettled. There at the edge we see familiar things end and something else begin. . . . Searching for facts won't help, for it is not so much a matter or what we think, but what thinks us. (p. 7)

During the 1980s, I was a founding member of the City of Cambridge, Massachusetts Peace Commission, and codirector of the Boston chapter of Children of War. I lived for brief periods in the two places that epitomized evil in the minds of many Jewish Americans: Germany and Palestine. In Palestine, I walked the length of the Occupied West Bank, joining the former chaplain for the crew of the Enola Gay (the plane that dropped the Atom Bomb on Hiroshima), Father George Zabelka, to reach Bethlehem on Christmas morning 1983.

On the first morning of a trip to Europe, I awoke from a frighteningly intense and vivid apocalyptic dream. Laying semi-awake in a hypnopompic state, in a strange bed on

a different continent from where I had awakened the day before, an externalized voice spoke firmly and succinctly. It said, “If you want to be holy, you must give up sex and language. But your job in this lifetime is not to be holy. Learn to be human.”

Such mystical experiences did not lead me to embrace a mystical creed. Rather, my stance toward countless such experiences with serendipities, synchronicities, and putative perceptions beyond the five senses has always been as an *enchanted agnostic*, one who is open to mystery and skeptical of explanations.

Three decades working with peace-building processes and activities had done as much to reveal their shortcomings as to accomplish their stated goals. I first encountered Family Constellations in 2000 while seeking the missing tool in the peacemaker’s toolkit. Whether conflict is between ethnic groups, lovers, or aspects of the Self, the missing tool uncovers and resolves unconscious feelings and impulses that persist below the surface of cognitive awareness.

I traveled to Germany in May 2001 to study with Hellinger at an eight-day training workshop for therapists. This dissertation represents the fruits of the next seven years. Although I cannot claim to be objective or unbiased in the methods of my research, I can attest that I remained true to my philosophic stance: I am open to mystery and skeptical of explanations. Further, I kept in mind the command given me waking up in London: Learn to be human.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Family Constellation Process

Process Description

The systemic Family Constellation group process (Cohen, 2006; Franke, 2003; Hellinger, 2001a, 2002, 2003; Hellinger et al., 1998; Mahr, 1999; Schneider, 2007; Ulsamer, 2005) was first developed by Bert Hellinger, who came to prominence in Germany during the 1990s. Its philosophic and therapeutic stance derives from an integration of existential-phenomenology (Heidegger, 1927/1962; Husserl, 1913/1972; Merleau-Ponty, 2002), family systems therapy (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Lynch & Lynch, 2000; Moreno, 1945, Satir, 1987), and elements of indigenous spiritual mysticism (Boring, 2004; Feldman, 2001; Lao-Tzu, 1989; Somé, 1999; van Kampenhout, 2001, 2008).

The process evolved from Moreno's (1945) *Psychodrama*, Satir's (1987) *Family Sculptures*, and Boszormenyi-Nagy's (1973) *Invisible Loyalties*. It retains the feature of a client's presenting a narrowly focused, pressing personal issue and selecting members from a group to stand in as representatives of members of the client's system. The Constellation process diverged from its antecedents because once placed, the representatives do not speak, act, or pose. The procedure described below is representative of a typical format.

A group of participants (10-30) sat in a circle. One participant was selected as the client to work on a personal issue. The others served as representatives or observers.

The facilitator asked, “What is your issue?” Ideally, the answer is stated succinctly, for example, “I am 21 years old and was diagnosed with clinical depression thirteen years ago.” The facilitator asked for information about the family of origin, looking for traumatic events from the past that may have systemic resonance. During this interview, the young woman revealed that her depression began when her grandmother died (Cohen, 2005). Other such events include premature deaths, aborted children, murders, suicide, and casualties of war—or members of the family system who were denied their right to belong, such as a disabled child who was institutionalized, a baby relinquished for adoption, a disappeared father, or a homosexual or apostate who was banished from the family.

The facilitator asked the client to select group members to represent members of the family system. Typically, these would be the client’s immediate family or a structural element, such as representative for *depression*. The client stood behind each representative, placing her hands on the representative’s shoulders, and moved them into place. In Hellinger’s (2001a) words, “Put your mother at the correct distance from your father, for example, and turn her to face the way you feel is right. Do it without talking, from your center and in contact with your feelings at the moment” (p. 18).

Once the representatives were positioned, the client sat and observed. The representatives stood with their arms at their sides without moving or talking. They were not role playing. For several minutes, the scene was still and silent. The facilitator observed and waited.

As noted by Ulsamer (2005), once the representatives are set up, they “are able to access the feelings and dynamic relationships of the family in question. They spontaneously experience relevant emotional affect” (p. 3).

The facilitator may inquire of each representative, “How are you feeling?” Sometimes the representatives are placid and without emotion. Other times they report strong emotions or physical sensations. The feelings and perceptions of the representatives are understood to correspond to the unconscious architecture of automatic thought and behavior patterns (Cohen, 2005; Schneider, 2007). The facilitator slowly worked with this three-dimensional portrait, allowing the representatives to move, adding additional representatives or elements, or asking the representatives to reposition themselves in relation to the others.

In the case example, the facilitator asked another member of the group to join the Constellation to represent the grandmother. After allowing this person to attune herself to her place, she reported that she, too, felt a consuming feeling of undying grief. The facilitator conjectured that the granddaughter made a solemn vow that because she loved her grandmother so much, she would never allow herself to get over her death.,a She never did. The client, sitting outside the circle, recognized that her depression was not only unyielding personal grief but her grandmother’s undying grief assumed like an inheritance upon the older woman’s death. Undying grief was programmed into the family across generations. The grandmother carried it and the granddaughter took it, with love.

Next, the facilitator sought a healing movement. The aim was to release the pattern in the unconscious mind and reprogram it with an image of the system at peace.

These healing movements emerged spontaneously from the representatives. Experienced facilitators learn to recognize and work with patterns that frequently emerge in different Constellations. In this case, the shift occurred when the granddaughter perceived the effect of her loyalty to suffering on her grandmother. The grandmother was stricken by the girl's sacrifice. When the young woman took this in, the invisible loyalty to undying grief lost a measure of strength.

Once a healing movement came to light, the client stood in her place in the Constellation. The final step was for the facilitator to suggest one or two sentences to be spoken aloud or inwardly. In this case, the facilitator suggested the grandmother say, "Go live!" The granddaughter accepted this and said, "Dear Nana, please bless me when I have a happy life and become a grandmother myself someday."

Because Constellations are understood to reprogram unconscious patterns, there is no discussion, analysis, or processing afterward. There is a wealth of anecdotal and case study reports that over time the new image of the family system gradually melts the archaic image that supported suffering. For example, Wolynn (2005) documented cases of client self-abuse (cutting, trichotillomania) in which Constellations resulted in an immediate and sustained cessation of injurious behaviors. Research is needed to test the longitudinal outcomes of client's experiences with this method.

Divergences with Principles of Best Practices in Psychotherapy

The three following case examples that illustrate the seemingly mysterious elements that are intrinsic to the Constellation process. The first comes from my own

case files, the second from Hunter Beaumont, and the third from a self-report from a woman who set up a Constellation for herself.

A woman attending her first Family Constellations circle said that her issue was her adult son who had a history of mental illness and addiction. Five months earlier, he left his house and had not been heard from since. The mother assumed that he was living on the streets. After a brief interview, I asked, “If we set up your Family Constellation and it works, what would be different?” She answered, “I want my son to contact the family and go into rehab. He needs to go into rehab.”

The Constellation process revealed a hidden dynamic and a healing resolution. I advised her to not do anything but to allow the effects, if any, to take their own course. She agreed. A week later the son telephoned to say he wanted to go into rehab.

The second case example comes from the American psychotherapist Hunter Beaumont (Beaumont, 2006; Hellinger et al., 1998), one of the leading innovators of the Family Constellation approach. He recounted,:

A woman who had not spoken with her father for seven years attended a workshop in Germany. She did a Constellation regarding her relationship to him, and experienced a powerful feeling of opening in her heart. That evening, she felt an urge to phone him. As she was walking across the yard to the only telephone available to residents, the phone rang. It was her father. He too had felt an urge to phone her and had spent the better part of the day calling her friends to find out where she was. (H. Beaumont, personal communication, February 1, 2007)

The third case was reported by an Israeli woman who attended a Family Constellations workshop led by Bert Hellinger several years ago. She reported,

My issue was that my husband, the father of our three children, had died following heart surgery a year earlier. My children and I were all deeply grieving his death. The Constellation came to a loving conclusion where each representative for the four of us said our “farewell” to him. I did not discuss the contents with my children. One week afterwards, I received an excited phone call from my eldest son, who was on retreat in India. He said he was up in the mountains alone, meditating and saying “farewell” to his father. The same week,

my second son announced that he had to do a short film for his exams, and he decided to do a farewell piece about his father. If it is not enough, the same week, my 17-year-old daughter told me she had to choose a theme for her final year's school art project. She decided on, "Farewell to My Father"! (C. Farkash, personal communication, January 30, 2007)

Although these particular stories are dramatic, improbable occurrences are common for many Constellation facilitators. Such stories abound. Without regard to outcomes, the most ordinary Family Constellation conflicts with our common understanding. As Boulton (2006) described,:

It is pretty strange, isn't it, from a rational, mechanical point of view, that if I go stand over there in your Constellation as a representative, I'm going to feel and have thoughts, and somehow know something about your life, your experience and your family. . . . It's mind boggling, but it's true; phenomenologically that is what we experience. (p. 13)

Typically, representatives have no special talent or training. Whether the Constellations are set in prisons, homeless shelters, or professional psychology conferences representative perception is the same. Roussopoulos (2006) described her encounter:

I once set up a personal Constellation and from it emerged a dynamic between an unnamed and unknown couple who expressed shock and grief at a sudden separation, followed by the male representative experiencing such vivid and disturbing war images that he felt close to madness. I had no idea what was being played out. The next time I saw my mother, she spontaneously told me the story of her father's abrupt enlistment, describing in detail what I had already witnessed. (p. 16)

Family Constellations are at philosophic and material odds with many precepts of empirically supported psychotherapy (APA, 2002; Levant, 2005; Lilienfeld, Lynn, & Lohr, 2003). Furthermore, the deeper one explores existential being through the phenomenological lens of Constellations, the greater is the variance with commonly held perspectives about the sources of, and remedies for, human suffering.

The intake interview, such as it is, lasts only a few minutes, whereas a mainstream psychotherapist would take a detailed history (Somers-Flanagan, & Somers-Flanagan, 1999). There are no professionally accepted standards that govern when Constellations are indicated or contraindicated as the therapeutic intervention. Upon hearing a brief description of an issue and a few facts about the family history, the facilitator initiates what can be an extremely intense emotional process. Corey (2001) counseled that at the outset, the therapist should be nondirective and establish rapport with the client prior to embarking on the challenges of the therapeutic journey. Strupp and Binder (1984) trained therapists to encourage clients to follow their own leads and make their own discoveries.

A Constellation group defies conventional description. It is neither group therapy (Yalom, 1995), nor a variant of an encounter group (Goldberg, 1970), 12-Step program, peer counseling, support group, or religious or spiritual gathering. Although the Constellation is set up by one participant, other members may be drawn into emotional or physical reactions, or they may not. There are no obvious parallels to more established formats for group-process work.

The facilitators, even those who are licensed in medical and therapeutic professions (Faust & Faust, 2006; Hellinger Institute DC, 2006; Systemic Family Solutions, 2006), disclaim that the process is a form of therapy or treatment, instead calling their workshops educational. Despite this, they lead group members into an intense emotional experience without formally screening or assessing participants for pre-existing medical or mental health issues.

In the United States, many Constellation facilitators are licensed and insured in various medical and therapeutic professions. However, Constellations themselves are not

sanctioned by any governing jurisdiction or underwritten by professional liability insurance providers. There is no U.S. professional association to create practice standards, training criteria, or supervision guidelines. Generally, facilitators who receive referrals from licensed and insured professionals or reimbursement for services from managed care providers or government agencies bill for conventional treatments, not Constellations.

The representatives are strangers to the seeker. They receive only a skeletal description of the issue and family history before being asked to stand in the circle in an assigned role, such as “mother.” Once so placed, their responses are not taken as projections or role playing but rather as direct insights received from those they represent. Frequently, the seeker or facilitator may add representatives of family members whose lives are lost to memory or whose very existence is questioned (e.g., great-grandfather and his rumored first wife). Again, the reactions of the representatives are assumed to mirror these actual individuals.

The facilitator intuitively discerns a so-called *hidden dynamic* that is purported to be at the source of the seeker’s current issue. It is claimed that virtually all chronic personal issues are, in part, echoes of transgenerational trauma within the family system. This seminal event may be only faintly recalled by living members of the family, a *forgotten secret* that is not known at all, or a seemingly obscure or trivial piece of family lore. Taken together—the representative’s feelings, the facilitator’s intuition, and the nexus between past and present events—point to the hidden dynamic.

This hidden dynamic is not perceived as a product of repressed, forgotten, or traumatic experiences of the seeker but rather of the seeker’s family seen as a collective

whole. The presenting issue is contextualized as an echo of an event that occurred before the seeker was born, sometimes several generations before. While there are parallels found in established schools of psychotherapy, such as Jungian analytic psychology, Bowenian therapy, transactional analysis, and contextual therapy, this perception of trans-generational, systemic entanglements is a unique element of Family Constellations.

The *healing resolution* is achieved by repositioning the representatives and/or adding representatives of members of the family system who were exiled, excluded, or forgotten. This stage of the process defies common sense. First, seekers are passive observers, needing only to sit silently, look, take their places, and repeat a healing sentence or two to receive an efficacious solution to a serious and longstanding problem. Second, membership in the family system is not confined to biological relatives but may include people whose position of belonging can be hotly disputed, such as aborted fetuses, perpetrators of violence against past family members, or the victims of crimes or injustices committed by past family members.

What are called *healing sentences* can be tautologies (e.g., “I lived and you died”) or provocative statements that conflict with the seeker’s ordinary understanding (e.g., “You are the right father for me,” spoken to a representative of a father who was alcoholic and abusive). The facilitator spontaneously composes these statements and instructs the seeker and representatives to repeat them. They are based on a combination of intuition and formulaic concepts based on a philosophic framework known as the “Orders of Love” (Hellinger et al., 1998).

In cases in which members of the family system who are not present or informed of the Constellation spontaneously respond to the healing resolution as if they had

participated, facilitators do not claim the cause is supernatural, magical, or spiritualist communication. Instead, such outcomes are usually ascribed to some unknown or inadequately understood information transmission medium.

Facilitators are not obligated to provide monitoring or aftercare in case of adverse effects. Licensed therapists are professionally responsible to be available to clients in emergencies. Many Constellation facilitators do not enter into any type of professional therapeutic relationship with clients.

Taken individually, each of these components seems to strain the boundaries of professional practice and common sense. Integrated into a whole, a sensible scoffer would be on solid ground to dismiss the Family Constellation process as a contemporary incarnation of the many spiritualist practices that claim to connect, magically and mystically, ordinary people with an occult universe that lies just beyond the reach of ordinary awareness (Simpkinson & Simpson, 1998; Singer & Lalich, 1996).

In addition to the factors above, there is another element of the Family Constellation process that pushes its apparent plausibility further to the edge. These are the Orders of Love, purported to be a set of invisible systemic laws that exert irresistible force on families and individuals.

When described outside of their context within Constellations, the Orders of Love convey an authoritarian dogmatism or a perplexing inversion of common sense. Ten Hövel (Hellinger & ten Hövel, 1999) wrote that her initial encounter with these Orders “addled my brain [and] unsettled my belief system” (p. ix).

According to Beaumont (Hellinger et al., 1998),

The Orders of Love are dynamic, systemic forces blowing and whirling in our families and intimate relationships. We know the disorder caused by their

turbulence—as leaves know the whirlwind—in our suffering and illness. Conversely, we know their harmonious flow as a sense of well-being in the world. (p. xi)

Within the framework of the Orders of Love, familiar constructs take on new, sometimes even reversed meanings. Tucker (2005) half-facetiously suggested that we develop a new dictionary to distinguish these new usages. As understood in Constellations, “Guilt and innocence are almost opposite of what comes to mind when the words are spoken in other contexts” (p. 18). Similarly redefined are other philosophical terms such as conscience, soul, and forgiveness (Cohen, 2006, 2008; Tucker, 2005). These definitions retain an imprecision and fluidity that stymies precise defining. Hellinger (Hellinger et al., 1998) spoke of this ambiguity: “The Orders of Love aren’t rigid structures. They are always changing; they are different from moment to moment. There’s something richly varied in them, a profound abundance we can glimpse for only a brief moment” (p. 91).

There are no English-language empirically validated or peer-reviewed research studies of the efficacy of the process. Two important criteria for evaluating Constellations, or any other form of intervention, are whether participants are helped and whether the risks of detrimental outcomes outweigh the potential benefits.

The case descriptions in this dissertation represent a first step in presenting the requisite evidence. However compelling, they fall well short of the standard of evidence established in psychological research literature (Creswell, 1994). Lilienfeld et al. (2001) warned against the growing popularity of fringe therapies that rely on the clinician’s intuition and experience rather than research evidence. Lilienfeld et al. claimed that unsanctioned approaches threaten the scientific foundations of clinical psychology.

It will be difficult ever to establish validity for the Family Constellation process within the boundaries of the universe of evidence based practices (Levant, 2005). I argue that the boundaries of this universe and its operating principles are themselves a limiting factor to the expansion of human knowledge and understanding. A review of their history reveals they were fixed, not solely on their merits, but also from capricious personal, historic, political, institutional, and economic imperatives.

The gulf between Family Constellations and evidence-based psychology is substantial. The Constellation approach explicitly and purposefully omits much of what is included in evidence-based practice in psychology (EBPP) and conversely, ventures into territory that cognitive, behavioral, and psychodynamic therapies explicitly avoid. Acceptance of what occurs during and after Constellations does not ask for a leap of faith or belief in the existence of a supernatural universe straddling our own. Rather, to comprehend such events requires a willingness to value subjective experience and admit that our scientific understanding of human minds and complex systems is incomplete.

The Three Streams of Psychology

If measured against the standards of evidence-based practice in psychology, the Family Constellation approach will be judged to lack legitimacy. Therefore, this section presents a discussion of alternative philosophies of psychology that exist in parallel to the one that dominates American academic and clinical thinking. The purpose is to show that Family Constellations comes from a legitimate and respected lineage, what Taylor (1999, 2008) called the third stream of spiritually oriented depth psychology.

Standard textbooks in psychology present a unified historiography. Schultz and Schultz (1992) traced modern psychology's tributaries to Greek and Roman philosophy but asserted that psychology as an independent formal field of study did not emerge as a distinct entity until the last quarter of the 19th century when "speculating, intuiting and generalizing" gave way to the rigors of "carefully controlled observation and experimentation to study the human mind" (p. 4). This application of precise and objective methods led to the development of tools and techniques that refined "not only the questions psychologists asked, but also the answers they obtained" (p. 4).

To be comprehended, the answers obtained must fit inside the frame of reference of the questions asked. Vico (2000), in his 18th century opus *New Science*, delineated three archetypal languages that correspond to the three ages of history: the sacred language of the age of gods, the symbolic language of the age of heroes, and the secular language of the age of men. Taylor (1999, 2008) posited that there is no single history of psychology but several with their own lineages and epistemologies. He distinguished three streams in the American tradition: academic laboratory, clinical, and humanistic/spiritually-oriented. If we overlay Taylor's three streams on Vico's three languages, we see that they correspond to different modes of knowing.

The stream of academic laboratory psychology studies mind and behavior using a positivistic, reductionist method. The questions must be limited to what can be learned from controlled experimentation. This stream corresponds to Vico's age of man in which the linguistics of myth have been lost.

Clinical psychology speaks the language of the age of heroes. At this level psychology asks three questions: Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we

going? After physical scientists overthrew Ptolemaic cosmology, including the Genesis creation myth, the new science of psychology followed with its own macrohistory, offering humanity new answers to the basic riddles of life. Freud's Oedipus theory, Jung's *Self*, and Heidegger's *Dasein* are contemporary myths that organize the complex data of creation into a coherent narrative form.

Spiritually oriented psychology corresponds to the age of gods, using the language of mystics and seers to help the individual move out of an ordinary mind into the hieroglyphic modes of gods and angels. Unlike the scientists, who willingly overthrew the religious world order, the shapers of spiritually oriented psychology, from Mary Baker Eddy (1875/1994) to Ken Wilber (1979, 1998), were integrators who sought to reconcile the scientific and spiritual worldviews.

The separation of psychology into three streams is not merely a function of philosophical orientation. The worth of a pill, a couch, or a mantra as tools for improving mental health is strongly influenced by economic forces. Medications to treat psychiatric illnesses generate \$20 billion in annual sales revenue, by far the largest component of the pharmaceutical market (National Institute for Health Care Management, 2002). As Thompson (1981) observed,

As the lie commonly agreed upon, history becomes the apology for whatever class is in power. . . . From the raising of children through the techniques of behavioral modification in the elementary schools to the philosophical indoctrination of students in graduate schools, a class of behavioral scientists has positioned itself at the strategic places of power in our secular society. . . . Small wonder when these social scientists write history, they write only a history of economics and technology. (p. 247)

In addition to these three eras, Vico (2000) warned of a fourth age: the age of chaos. This would be a transitional stage when civil society collapses under the weight of

greed and barbarism and the course of history spirals back on itself toward a new age of gods. Combs (1999) suggested that Vico's age of chaos has arrived:

That the world needs saving does not seem to be in serious doubt. . . . Issues of unsustainable growth, ecological depletion, consumerism and market instability, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, diseases, water shortages, etc., are enough to scare the socks off anyone with the courage to look at them squarely. (p. 377)

The coexistence of multiple mythic languages fosters a great divide between mechanists and mystics. One camp of psychology is caught up in visions of total control; the other in visions of spiritual unity.

Academic Laboratory Psychology

The prominent arc of experimental psychology has been to apply mechanistic principles to the questions of human behavior. It follows along the lines of Galileo's (1623) 17th century assertion, "I do not believe that there exists anything in external bodies . . . but size, shape, quantity, and motion." As the entire substance of the universe yielded its secrets to the inquiries of physics, chemistry, and biology, the idea that the human body was a machine subject to the same principles grew more compelling.

By the 19th century, a new philosophy of positivism emerged. Its basic principal was the cult of facts. "The Positivists did not search for the unknowable . . . but for the kind of certitude afforded by experimental science" (Ellenberger, 1970, p. 225).

The founding of Wundt's laboratory separates psychology as knowledge of the soul from psychology as knowledge of the mind and behavior. Although the soul, in the broader sense of the seat of the unknown or unconscious, would continue to maintain a place in clinical practice and spiritually oriented psychology, it evaporated as a legitimate question for the experimentalists.

During the course of the 20th century, two dominant trends, both based on the principles of positivistic reductionism, emerged in laboratory research. The first was the assumption that the improvement of knowledge of human behavior is a function of improved data collection and analysis. The second is that psychiatric illnesses can be explained and treated as a function of brain chemistry.

In reducing behavioral disturbances to genetic disorders that are treated with biochemical intervention, American experimental psychology articulates the ultimate expression of what Mumford (1946) referred to as the religion of the machine. As explained by Brandt (2002), “In addition to the development of new, more effective treatments, research studies that identify the genetic basis of illnesses . . . will undoubtedly help to reduce unfair stigma toward the mentally ill” (p. 1).

This extreme form of determinism substitutes a genetic basis of illnesses for the dynamic relationship of thoughts, emotions, and sensations that were previously seen to make individuals responsible for their actions. Thus has American academic laboratory psychology extrapolated Mumford’s (1946) description of the 17th century scientist to its extreme:

By confining his operations to those aspects of reality which had, so to say, market value, and by isolating and dismembering the corpus of experience, the physical scientist created a habit of mind favorable to discrete practical inventions . . . which he could manipulate with appropriate wires and pulleys. (p.51)

Clinical psychology. The stream of clinical psychology traces its origins to the art and science of healing. As clinical psychology evolved in the 20th century in the United States, more credence was given to techniques and methods that could be objectively tested and verified. In its mainstream form, science rules over art. As Brennan (1998)

noted, “Empiricism has become the dominant perspective of contemporary psychology, gaining almost universal acceptance” (p. 346).

Contemporary American clinical psychology’s thirst for data (Brennan, 1998, p. 309) creates a dual standard for whether an approach receives broad acceptance. In the new age of science, “Curing the sick is not enough, one must cure them with methods accepted by the community” (Ellenberger, 1970, p. 57). It is not simply whether clients respond favorably, but also whether these results can be confirmed in controlled studies. Again, the questions asked limited the answer received.

Because the subjective, pragmatic, metaphoric, and presentational modes of language have been effectively marginalized, American clinical psychology has constricted its scope. APA recognizes 108 empirically supported treatments for the entire range of mental health disorders. These are predominantly cognitive, behavioral, and psychodynamic therapies (Chambless, 2002; Chambless & Ollendick, 2001).

American spiritually-oriented psychology. In the 18th century,

Nietzsche proclaimed that God was dead, Marx followed by announcing that religion was the opiate of the masses, and Freud finished by establishing, in the name of science, that religion was nothing more than the redirection of repressed sexual impulses toward more socially acceptable ends (Taylor, 1999).

It seemed for a time that the myth of the eternal soul and the omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent God would evaporate under the heat of the heliocentric solar system and its billions of infinitely spaced stars. It has not happened. Instead of running dry, the stream that contains spiritual sustenance, expanded consciousness, and explicitly nonscientific remedies has flourished in the shadows and hidden grottos.

For many, the existential mythology expressed by Nietzsche, Darwin, and Freud is profoundly dissatisfying, even unbearable. There is an almost universal human yearning to feel connectedness with something greater than oneself. American culture is the product of countless diverse inputs: immigration, western migration, intermarriage, economic fluidity, and technological advances, among many other sources and influences. As a result, Americans easily subscribe to multiple, contradictory mythic structures, even those that are mutually exclusive (Taylor, 1999).

Humanistic and transpersonal psychology emerged from these historic trends. Humanistic psychology sought to combine the ethical principles of the Judeo-Christian tradition with the scientific reality of the infinite universe. As such, it was generally secular. Transpersonal psychology draws inspiration from the dovetailing of quantum physics and Eastern philosophy. “Einstein thought of God as revealing himself in the wonderful harmony and rational beauty of the universe, which calls for a mode of nonconceptual intuitive response in humility, wonder and awe which he associated with science and art” (Torrance, 2002, p. 1).

This mode of nonconceptual intuitive response is inconsistent with the dominant research protocols of American academic psychology which specifically eliminate “speculating, intuiting, and generalizing” in favor of “carefully controlled observation and experimentation to study the human mind” (Schultz & Schultz, 1992, p. 4). Scientific psychology, by limiting its scope to facts that can be discerned by carefully controlled observations and experimentation, has ceded the realm of personal metaphysics to those who delve in subjective, pragmatic, metaphoric, or presentational languages.

Family Constellations fall into this broadly defined third stream. The sections to follow discuss its roots as an outgrowth of phenomenological existential philosophy, family systems theory, and the ancestor reverence of the South African Zulus.

Roots and Influences

Existential Phenomenology

The Constellation process emerged from the branch of phenomenological-existential psychology that traces its lineage through such philosophers and practitioners as Spinoza, Emerson, Thoreau, Kierkegaard, Brentano, Stumpf, Husserl, James, Jung, Heidegger, Assagioli, Merleau-Ponty, Buber, and Maslow. Bert Hellinger, the originator of Family Constellations, studied philosophy at the University of Würzburg, University of Pietermaritzburg, and the University of South Africa.

While Hellinger served as a Roman Catholic priest in South Africa, he was strongly influenced by a series of interracial, ecumenical trainings in group dynamics led by Anglican clergy in South Africa. The trainers worked from a phenomenological orientation. They were concerned with recognizing what is essential out of all the diversity present, without intention, without fear, without preconceptions, relying purely on what appears (Hellinger, 2003). He said he was deeply impressed by the way their methods showed that it was possible for opposites to become reconciled through mutual respect.

The emergence of existentialism and phenomenology in the 19th century German intellectual tradition represented a structured effort to recontextualize the meaning of human life in an infinite universe. There were two broad responses to the discovery of the

heliocentric universe within psychology. One, the mechanist, positivist, reductionist, atomist stream, came from those who saw all mental activity as purely physical responses to stimulus of the brain. This lineage traced from the early empiricists through Hume and Comte to the behaviorists of the early 20th century, such as Watson, who proclaimed that “given the opportunity, he could condition any human infant to become either a criminal or a scientist by consistently applying the principles of modern behavioral theory” (Watson, as cited in D. Moss, 2001, p. 5).

The other response came through the related lineages of transcendentalism, existentialism, and phenomenology. Each of these disciplines was concerned with the restoration of meaning to human existence in light of the discoveries of science. The American transcendentalists, led by Emerson and Thoreau, sought to restore the validity of imagination and creativity as vehicles for advancing knowledge. “The function of reason, they claimed, was not the discovery of truth, but that of arranging, methodizing, and harmonizing verbal propositions in regard to it” (Taylor, 1999, p. 64).

Family Constellations employ a phenomenological stance to expose a field of information that emerges when observed without intention or fear and without the need to interpret what is revealed in terms of previous theories or beliefs. The facilitator must be willing to consent to whatever emerges just as it is, no matter how unpleasant, distasteful, or disturbing it may appear.

Hellinger (2001) explained his phenomenological stances as follows:

There are two inner movements that lead to insight. One reaches out, wanting to understand and to control the unknown. This is scientific inquiry. . . . The second movement happens when we pause in our efforts to grasp the unknown, allowing our attention to rest, not on the particulars, which we can define, but on the greater whole. . . . We pause in the movement of reaching out, pull back a bit, until we arrive at the inner stillness that is competent to deal with the vastness and

complexity of the greater whole. This inquiry, which first orients itself in inwardness and restraint, I call phenomenological. (p. 2)

Family systems theory. The form of the Family Constellation process can be traced to four prominent system oriented psychologists: Jacob Moreno, Eric Berne, Virginia Satir, and Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy.

Moreno is a seminal figure in systemically oriented psychology. His development of psychodrama (1945) combined elements of spontaneous theatre and Freudian psychoanalysis into an externalized representation of thoughts, perceptions, and feelings enacted on a real stage. The aim of the psychodrama process was to reveal elements of the unconscious that could be altered in the course of a session. Central to the process was the concept that individual biography—the focus of Freudian psychoanalysis—could not fully account for mental disturbances and illnesses. Nor could individuals resolve serious psychological issues absent a systemic perspective. Moreno described a *social atom* that oriented the key members of an individual’s system in relation to each other. Only by perceiving the interaction of the members of the system could the illness or problem be understood and remedied.

Building on Moreno’s insights, Berne’s transactional analysis (1973) proposed that dysfunctional behavior results from self-limiting decisions made in childhood. Such decisions culminate in what Berne called the “life script,” the preconscious life plan that governs the way life is lived out. Changing the life script is the aim of transactional analysis (International Transactional Analysis Association, n.d.).

In the early 1970s, Hellinger immersed himself in transactional analysis, learning to understand the embedded patterns by working with stories, fairytales, novels, and films that have special meaning to an individual. His work with clients validated, for him,

Berne's key premise that there is an underlying, unconscious structure that shapes and drives people's responses to external stimuli.

Operating from a phenomenological, rather than a theoretical, stance, Hellinger was willing to discard or modify a theory when his experiences with clients contradicted the theory's hypothesis. In the case of transactional analysis, Hellinger said, "Berne believed that these scripts are often based on early parental messages, but I discovered that this isn't the whole truth" (Hellinger, 2001a, p. 433).

It became clear to him that some of the scripts come from other sources. One example came from working with clients who chose the story of Rumpelstiltskin (*Rumpelstilzchen*) as their signature fairy tale. This is a story of a motherless child whose father gives her away. Hellinger (2001a) asked, "Who has been given away?" In many cases, someone in the grandparent's generation really had been sent away and the client's life script came from this source. He concluded, "Whether we're aware of it or not, a great deal of our suffering is not caused by what we have personally experienced, but what others in our system have experienced or suffered" (p. 434). The insight that a client's current suffering could be entangled with events that occurred two or more generations earlier led Hellinger to the United States to study emerging trends in family therapy pioneered by Satir and Boszormenyi-Nagy.

Satir is considered—along with Carl Rogers, Rollo May, and Abraham Maslow—to be one of the founders of humanistic psychology. Satir developed and popularized her family sculpture and family reconstruction methods in the 1960s by merging elements of Moreno's psychodrama with innovative systemic family therapy techniques developed at the Ackerman Institute in New York City. In response to one or more clients being absent

from the group appointment, Satir had assistants stand in their places. Satir (1987) observed, “If I put people in physical stances, they were likely to experience the feelings that went with that stance” (p. 68).

These techniques were aligned with the third force of existential-humanistic psychology. They were not designed for behavior modification but instead sought to expand the resources available to clients to deal more constructively with the issues they faced in life. Satir, like Boszormenyi-Nagy, recognized that any given symptom was part of a larger tableau that connected not only to members of the immediate nuclear family but also to members of past and future generations (Franke, 2003).

Boszormenyi-Nagy’s insights into *Invisible Loyalties* (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973) grew out of his clinical practice with thousands of families from all social and economic backgrounds. His systemic orientation led him to look for patterns within the family of origin that related to individual symptomology. He concluded that unconscious regulators of balance, merit, and entitlement bound individuals into narrow roles within the family structure. Because these regulators are not apparent in conscious awareness, he labeled them “invisible loyalties”:

Behavior patterns that are described as “invisible loyalties” are transgenerational. Injustice that has not been resolved is doled out by a “transgenerational tribunal” to future generations using a sort of debt and merit account. (Franke, 2003, pp. 66-67)

The postulation of such transgenerational loyalties did not originate with him, but were previously observed by Freud (1913/1958):

I have taken as the basis of my whole position the existence of a collective mind, in which mental processes occur just as they do in the mind of an individual. In particular, I have supposed that the sense of guilt for an action has persisted for many thousands of years and has remained operative in generations which can have no knowledge of that action. (p. 157)

Boszormenyi-Nagy mapped the functionality of these systemic regulators: “The structuring of relationships, especially within families, is an extremely complex and essentially unknown ‘mechanism.’ Empirically, such structuring can be inferred from the lawful regularity and predictability of certain repetitious events in families” (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973, p. 1). This unknown mechanism operates on individuals without their awareness.

In 1979, Hellinger trained with Ruth McClendon and Leslie Kadis (1983) who were teaching Satir’s family sculpture method. Shortly afterward, he participated in two more training courses in this approach led by Thea Schoenfelder in Hamburg.

In practice, Hellinger gradually stripped the kinetic and verbal elements from the role-playing dramatizations. It is from this arresting of motion and language that the movements and insights of the Family Constellation process emerged. This shifted the emphasis away from exploring or processing narrative, cognitive, or emotional content. Instead, the process aimed to identify and release impulses and hidden loyalties embedded in the unconscious.

These movements and insights gradually diverged further and further from the generally accepted precepts of family therapy. Hellinger claimed that Boszormenyi-Nagy’s “extremely complex and essentially unknown ‘mechanism’” (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973, p. 1), are subject to consistent organizing principles—the Orders of Love—that could be discerned and used to find healing resolutions to specific personal issues.

Frequently, the movements that created a feeling of relief or resolution in a Family Constellation conflicted with those who held popular currency in the fields of

cognitive, behavioral, and psychodynamically oriented family psychology. For example, contemporary perspectives in family therapy support an expansion of the family unit:

Children's sense of security evolves through their connection and identification with those who care for them. . . . When we focus so myopically on the role of mothers, we not only project impossible expectations of them, but we are also blinded to the richness of environments in which children generally grow up. (McGoldrick & Carter, 1999, p. 29)

Constellations frequently present a contradictory view. The spontaneously emerging feelings and perceptions of the representatives are understood to mirror the unconscious mind. Here, a child's sense of security evolves *through* its connection and identification with the father, and most significantly, the mother. Consistent with Boszormenyi-Nagy's observation, the lack of security frequently originates with a primordial trauma that is subsequently doled out from one generation to the next. (See the case descriptions for examples.)

These contradictions between Constellations and mainstream family therapy are especially apparent in situations in which social constructs create abstractions that vary with biological facts. For example, in discussing adoption, Pavao (2005) wrote about the importance of terminology: "People involved with adoption have developed a vocabulary that feels most comfortable for everyone" (p. 2). In this vocabulary, "there are two mothers and two fathers, but only one set of, or only one parent" (p. 1).

Having set up numerous Constellations themed around adoption, I have seen this terminology contradicted. Representatives of adopted children often feel relieved when the ambiguity of having two mothers and fathers is resolved. Biologically, each person has *only one* mother and father; adopted children additionally have adoptive parents who love and care for them. The contradictory propositions that (1) adopted children have two mothers, and (2) they have *only one* mother are not necessarily mutually exclusive. One

is a subjective vocabulary that some claim feels most comfortable and the other is a biologic fact that is potentially disturbing.

It is unsurprising that cognitive and transpersonal psychologies view these questions differently. The systemically orientated Family Constellation process shares roots with Satir's branch of family therapy, but as Nichols and Schwartz (2001) noted,:

Systems thinkers have moved in interesting directions since family therapy's early years, but the field didn't keep up with them. Instead, family therapy reworked mechanistic and hierarchical metaphors, and then, under the influence of the narrative movement, rejected them. (p. 119)

The collision between the vocabulary of family therapy and the feelings expressed by the representatives in the Constellations create a feeling of being disturbed and conflicted for many therapists who encounter the process for the first time. The American-born psychologist Hunter Beaumont described his reaction:

Listening to Hellinger . . . for the first time . . . I vacillated between outrage and fascination. . . Many participants in my psychotherapeutic training groups had the same reaction. . . After a while . . . we could see what [Hellinger] describes happening in our own work—but we had to give up a lot of our preconceived beliefs. (Hellinger et al., 1998, p. x)

By arresting language and interrupting the train of thought, Constellations shift the emphasis away from exploring or processing narrative, cognitive, or emotional content. Instead, the process aims to identify and release impulses and hidden loyalties that are embedded in the unconscious regions of the brain. This accounts for the apparent divergence between Constellations and psychotherapeutic approaches to working with family systems.

Parallels in Ancient Wisdom Traditions

Whereas the principles revealed by Constellations fly in the face of much of cognitive-behavioral and analytic psychology, they are generally consistent with much of the storehouse of oral and folk traditions that predate the scientific worldview. Hellinger did not embark on a mission to integrate contemporary psychology with ancient wisdom nor to modernize mystical traditions. Having rejected Nazism in the 1930s and having left the priesthood in the 1960s, he was drawn away from dogmatism toward a phenomenological stance that favored getting “back to the things themselves” (Husserl, 1913/1972).

Recent research in the emerging field of evolutionary moral psychology shows that the remnants of prehistoric social imperatives still strongly influence our unconscious (Bargh, Chaiken, Raymond, & Hymes, 1996; Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Haidt, 2001, 2006). As Haidt (2006) suggested, “The ancients may have known little about biology, chemistry, and physics, but many were good psychologists” (p. 241). The boundaries of what counts as reasonable and understandable versus what counts as mysterious and inexplicable (among educated professionals in the 21st century United States) are tightly drawn. These boundaries are located partially on the merits of the evidence but also as the accumulation of capricious biases that reflect political, institutional, and economic imperatives. When I have worked with Native Americans, they have said that Constellations are a tool to reveal what is obvious.

Zulu traditions. Hellinger lived as a Roman Catholic priest in South Africa for 16 years in the 1950s and 1960s. During these years, he served as a parish priest, teacher and, finally, as headmaster of a large school for African students. He became fluent in the

Zulu language, participated in their rituals, and gained an appreciation for their distinct worldview. In post-Apartheid South Africa, traditional values and mores have modernized. Contemporary South African Zulu culture is far different than it was 40 years ago (Cumes, 2006; Mutwa & Larsen, 2003).

Although he made no claim to be an interpreter or promulgator of Zulu culture, it is clear that his immersion in their lives had a profound impact on him. Of particular importance is the difference between Zulu attitudes toward parents and ancestors and those typically held by Europeans. The Hitler Youth Organization, which tried to recruit Hellinger in the 1930s, was notorious for encouraging children to betray their parents. In Zulu culture, Hellinger (2001a) said, “I never heard anyone speak disrespectfully about their parents. That would have been inconceivable” (p. 443).

In retrospect, Hellinger’s assignment as a missionary to the Zulus can be viewed as a case in which the hunter was captured by the game. Rather than converting them to Christianity, Hellinger became a convert to their angst-free existentialism and reverential attitude toward parents and ancestors.

A German folk legend captures the existential spirit of Heidegger’s authentic self. In 1266, the uncrowned Konradin, the last monarch of the House of Hohenstaufen, was captured by agents of Pope Innocent IV and imprisoned. Konradin was playing chess when a messenger arrived with news that he would be executed in one hour. He responded, “Let’s continue our game.” Hellinger found this surprising attitude commonplace among the Zulus. “When a white person asks a Zulu, who is apparently doing nothing, ‘Aren’t you bored, then?’ the Zulu will answer, ‘I am alive, what more do

you want?’ There is nothing missing from his life that could make it more meaningful” (Hellinger, 2002, p. 40).

The dark shadows of material destruction and existential angst that enveloped Germany apparently did not extend to Zulu villages in South Africa in the 1950s. Heidegger (1927/1962) postulated that to be human is to find oneself thrown into a world with no clear logical, ontological, or moral structure. In Zulu culture, Hellinger found the opposite: human beings who were naturally comfortable in their skins.

The Zulu villagers that Hellinger ministered in the 1950s possessed a certitude and equanimity that were the hallmarks of Heidegger’s elusive authentic Self. These were not lost individuals thrown into being but temporary custodians of life knit into a tightly woven fabric of generations past and generations yet to be. As Lawson (1985) noted in reference to Zulu religion, when the ancestors are the source of power, group activity is mediated in every case by the precisely defined roles of the religious system.

Although aspects of the healing movements found in many Constellations reflect the influence of the Zulu worldview, it is important to be clear that the process is not a reconstituted version of a Zulu religious ritual. Hellinger (2001a) called Zulu culture “a completely different kind of human interaction, one that was characterized by great patience and mutual respect” (p. 443).

The natural authority of Zulu parents over their children and the reciprocal easy and unquestioned respect they received in turn by the parents is integrated into the philosophic stance of Constellation facilitators. For example, Schneider’s (2007) attitudes on family dynamics evoke Zulu traditions:

The relationship between parents and children depends on the fundamental order that gives parents a higher ranking, but also on another basic order. Parents give

life and children take it. Whereas giving and taking between partners is reciprocal, between parents and children it is a one-way street. (p. 86)

The cultural milieu of the Zulus possessed neither a personified deity, akin to the Judeo-Christian God, nor a natural science to overthrow Him. In Zulu theology, three sources of external power are available to humans as resources: one is God-of-the-Sky, the unbridled force of nature that produces storms, droughts, heat, and wind. Another consisted of the substances of the Earth that sustain the body in the form of food and medicines—or threaten survival, such as predators, parasites, and illnesses. The third, and most important in a religious sense, were the ancestors (Lawson, 1985).

The traditional Zulu people lived and acted in a religious world in which the ancestors were the central focal point. “The ancestral spirits are of fundamental significance for the Zulu. They are the departed souls of the deceased. Although they are regarded as having gone to abide in the earth, they continue to have a relationship with those still living” (Lawson, 1985, pp. 24-25). Crawford and Lipsedge (2004) found the belief that the neglecting ancestors may lead to serious illness continues to exert strong influence in Zulu culture even with the spreading availability of Westernized medicine.

The ancestors were regarded as positive, constructive, and creative presences. Failure to show them proper respect invites misfortune; proper veneration ensures benefit. When a family member suffered the consequences of incurring the ancestors’ wrath, the punishment was not regarded as destructive. Rather, it was viewed as a legitimate expression of the failure of individuals to uphold their duty to the family unit.

The connection with ancestors is a central feature of the Constellation process. As is discussed later, this connection can be understood to exist purely as mental imagery, as a Jungian archetype, or as a tangible relationship with an external entity. In any event, the

lineal chain of life that runs through the biological family is viewed by Constellation facilitators as an essential source of strength and healing.

Shamanism and Native American beliefs. In anthropology, the term *shamanism* is used to describe the spiritual traditions and practices that serve the medical, psychological, and spiritual needs of a community. Originally, the term was restricted to certain tribal groups living in an arc from the Black Sea, across Siberia and Mongolia, and into Alaska and northern Canada. The term now is commonly applied to numerous traditional or indigenous societies regardless of location (Winkelman, 1992). Central to the practice of shamanism is an individual, the shaman, who is supposedly able “to access information that is not ordinarily attainable by members of the social group that gave them privileged status” (Krippner, 2002, p. 962). Like yoga and Zen, the influence of shamanism is percolating through U.S. culture. It has been adapted into numerous forms of neoshamanism (Taylor & Piedilato, 2002) practiced by those from outside the tribes and regions where it is part of tradition.

There is evidence that shamanic beliefs from northern Eurasia influenced the early Greek concepts of the soul (Bremmer, 1983; Eliade, 1964). Shamanic practices and Western cultures diverged as early as 6,000 B.C.E. with the emergence of walled fortresses. In one of his essays on the Western civilization and the displacement of the feminine, Thompson (1981) asserted,

As more and more people moved behind increasingly larger walls, the fortress settlement evolved into the walled city. And from the implosive force of such concentrations of people, culture itself began to change. . . The simplicity of village life was gone . . . and a new relationship was created between literate elite and illiterate peasant. (p. 161)

Shamanic beliefs, myths, and practices are part of the storehouse of cultural knowledge that survived outside the walls and beyond the reach of the city, university, cathedral, and military base. In most regions of the world, what remains are broken remnants or hidden enclaves: Native American nations victimized by centuries of genocide and displacement, Siberian shamans who barely survived Soviet communism, wilderness tribes living beyond the reach of technology, or Australian aboriginals relentlessly driven off their lands and torn from their families.

The influence of shamanism is seen as an important propellant in the emergence of transpersonal psychology as a separate discipline from humanistic psychology (Grof, 2005). Grof, Maslow, Sutich, and the other founding members of the Association of Transpersonal Psychology asserted that humanistic psychology had not paid sufficient attention to the spiritual dimension of the human psyche. They argued for a cross-culturally valid psychology that encompassed, among other influences, the healing and wisdom traditions of shamanistic cultures and respected mystical and altered states of consciousness (Sutich, 1976).

To contextualize the Constellation process in terms of its relation to shamanism, it is useful to draw a set of distinctions between shamanic practices and psychotherapy. This is attempted with the caveat that generalizations about both modalities are necessarily incomplete and only partially accurate. The purpose is simply to frame each in general terms to support the discussion that follows.

Van Kampenhout (2001) compared psychotherapy, shamanism, and Constellations against four variables. The first is that psychotherapy is a process that follows a timeline from intake to discharge; shamanic healing take place in a timeless,

mythical zone encompassing past, present, and future. Further, in psychotherapy, the resolution of the presenting issue generally occurs gradually along this timeline, whereas in a shamanic healing ritual the resolution can occur instantaneously. A second distinction is that the psychotherapist is an expert charged with responsibility to direct and guide a course of therapy; a shaman is an expert charged with accessing the forces and beings of the spirit world. A psychotherapy client is the active agent in the healing process; a recipient of a shamanic healing ceremony is healed by external powers. A third distinction is that psychotherapy is conducted in a private setting on behalf of an individual client, couple, or family unit; a shaman healing ceremony is conducted for the individual but also on behalf of the entire community, and broad participation in rituals and ceremonies is encouraged. A fourth distinction is that psychotherapy is readily available on demand in the marketplace, while shamanistic healing rituals occur irregularly and often require a drawn-out and complex process of preparation.

Comparing this set of distinctions to the Family Constellation process, van Kampenhout (2001) claimed that Constellations interleaf with both modalities. In terms of the first distinction, Constellations are aligned with shamanism, as the boundaries between past, present, and future dissolve in the timeless space occupied by the representatives. Also, each Constellation is a singular event that aims to foster a healing resolution for a particular issue. The resolution can occur instantaneously. “In the interval between each thought, in the interval between each heartbeat, in the place where there is no breath, we recall what we always knew” (Thompson, 1981, p. 7).

In terms of the second distinction, the Constellation facilitator fulfills both roles. At times they withdraw to the edge of the circle, allowing the representatives to feel,

perceive, and move without guidance or direction. At other times, the facilitator behaves more like a leader, intervening to move representatives, suggesting sentences to be spoken aloud, and offering insights and guidance. It is left to subjective judgment whether the key agents of healing reside in the client's mind and body or with spirits embodied by the representatives. Some facilitators speak in favor of each orientation and others are agnostic on the question.

In regarding to the polarity of individual versus collective healing, the Constellation is aligned with shamanic philosophy. The basic orientation of the process is systemic, so that individual problems and their remedies do not reside solely with that person but always as part of a greater collective whole.

The container for Constellations is more closely aligned with psychotherapy. Constellation facilitators promote their services to the public, are paid directly for their work, and conduct their events in professional settings. There are no elaborate preparations or closing rituals associated with Constellations, nor do most facilitators employ prayers, animal furs, fire, drums, songs, costumes, or other accoutrements that are common to shamanic ceremonies.

The majority of Constellation facilitators working in Europe, North America, and Australia were born into Christian families educated in Western-oriented schools and universities, and established conventional professional careers prior to their introduction to the Constellation process (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Systemaufstellungen [German Society for Systems Constellations], 2008; Talent Manager, 2008). Few of them self-identify as practicing shamans. However, many of them nevertheless find themselves

drawn into the metaphysical space of shamanism. For example, Stark recounted meeting Robert Moss (1998) at the Esalen Institute:

He told me he had heard about the fantastic shamanic work that I had done. When I asked him, somewhat amazed, why he thought my work was shamanic, he told me that he had heard that I worked with the dead. (Stark, 2005, p. 1)

On reflection, Stark (2005) identified four areas in which his approach to working with the dead paralleled shamanic strategies. Like shamanic rituals, Constellations retrieve parts of the whole that have been lost; they aim to bring the living and the dead into mutually satisfactory order; they achieve reconciliation in service of the living; and, they bring comfort, honor, and acknowledgement to the dead.

In Western psychology, there is universal agreement that the dead are powerfully present in our conscious and unconscious minds. However, because mainstream scientific research has been unable to locate, observe, or otherwise account for the realm of the dead, adherents to its methods strongly doubt that individual consciousness survives brain death. The emerging views among Constellation facilitators regarding this question are characterized by diversity and uncertainty. They can be roughly placed in four broad categories: scientific, Jungian, shamanistic, and subjective.

In the Western scientific view, the feelings expressed by representatives of those who are deceased are strictly personalized inner images that express figurative emotional truths. The Jungian view is that the dead in Constellations reveal archetypal mythic symbols that portray the architecture of being held in collective consciousness. For those who were born into or became immersed in shamanic cultures, the interplay between the living and dead in Constellations is a literal, functional communication portal between the realms of the living and the dead. Again, these three perspectives parallel Vico's (2000) three languages: secular, heroic, and hieroglyphic.

Hellinger and others have extrapolated the experiences of working with the dead in Constellations into general principles. He qualified these with the disclaimer, “I don’t know, of course, to what degree they are true” (Hellinger, 2003a, p. 124). He observed that the dead, in memory, genes, and emotions continue to have a presence in the living. Expanding on these ideas, he moved beyond a scientific view towards one that was more shamanistic. “When we do a Constellation . . . there is also an effect on the dead. They can more easily find their peace” (p. 147). He suspended judgment on whether these dead have an independent existence or exist solely in our images of them.

Schneider (2007) adopted a similar stance of ambiguity in acknowledging the Western view, leaving the door open for a more shamanistic perspective:

We actually don’t know anything about the dead, and in Constellations they are represented by living people, who naturally cannot actually represent the reality of being dead. . . But representatives of the dead often bring a kind of energy into a Constellation that makes us consider whether there may be more powerful forces at work than we normally consider. (p. 65)

Mahr (2005), a psychiatrist, went further. He qualified his assertion, “We do not really know where the dead are” (p. 8). Then, he stepped beyond the medical definition of death:

Family Constellations indicate that the dead and their fates share and influence the same timeless space that we inhabit. When the dead are still entangled with the living and are preventing both from moving on, then it is possible for the dead and the living to find a common solution. (p. 8)

Some critics who interpreted this statement to go beyond symbol and metaphor chastised Mahr for promoting “hocus-pocus” not grounded in the sound scientific foundations of psychology (Adamaszek, 1999; Osang, 1999).

Few Constellation facilitators entered their professional lives embracing shamanic attitudes towards the realm of the dead. Instead, their experiences, accumulated

individually, moved them in this direction. Stark noted that it took 12 years of facilitating for him to accept gradually what he encountered time and again: that the relationship between the living and the dead is not strictly a mind game but involves external influences and input. He confessed to being surprised that as his views evolved, they became “more and more aligned with those of pre-Christian healers and shamans” (Stark, 2005, p. 26).

van Kampenhout (2001, 2008) trained with native shamans in Eurasia and North America and spiritual teachers for 15 years before he encountered Constellations. He did not have to navigate through a gradual process similar to Stark’s because his training and practical experience had brought him in line with shamanic principles that are reconciled to spirits interacting with and influencing the living. His current practice combines elements of Constellations, shamanism, and mystical Hasidic songs he learned from dreams. His healing circles aim to strengthen participants’ connections with the spirits of their ancestors.

Francesca M. Boring (2004, 2006) is a Shoshone medicine woman, who, like van Kampenhout, came to Constellations after many years of training and experience in native healing. When she was first exposed to the process, she recognized it as growing from a “place of healing and knowledge that has been accessed for millennia by indigenous healers and teachers throughout the globe” (Boring, 2006, p. 66). In her view,:

The Ancestors are real. Unlike the interpretation of constructivist constellations which may relegate Ancestors to allegory or metaphor, the Ancestors are viewed simply as ancestors. (p. 67)

Lanier (2005), who has lived and trained with elders of the Maya Mam and Ojibwa, accepted that the presences manifested in the Constellation process are independent spiritual entities. She warned facilitators who treat them as mental and

emotional abstractions that “a dead person who suddenly finds himself invited into a vibrant human body to express himself in the service of the living may not want to leave” (p. 43). For her, prudent and responsible Constellation work includes protective invocations and respectful releasing of these spirit-world entities.

To the materialist/scientist, consciousness is extinguished upon death of the brain. To the Jungian, a collective field of archetypal symbolism exists beyond the consciousness of individual brains. To the Shoshone medicine woman, the ancestors simply exist.

Stephen Jay Gould conjectured that it may well be impossible to resolve *objectively* whether the words and emotions expressed by those representing the dead are projections, archetypal symbols, or spirit beings. “Each of us has to have a personal metaphysics. There are questions that are formally unanswerable on which nonetheless every individual must take a position in order to integrate various pieces of his life” (Gould, as cited in Kayzer, 1997, p. 226). Some participants will sense that external entities are present, guiding the movements and opening the hearts of all involved. Others will be certain such things are impossible. Still others remain open to the experience and skeptical of the explanations.

Ultimately, the aim of the Constellation process is neither to channel ancestors nor to research the inner workings of the brain. When a client presents an issue and sets up representatives, the group is looking to find a concrete solution that will have a positive impact on the client and other members of that person’s family system. A belief in a particular model is not prerequisite to the attainment of this goal.

Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah. With the emergence of transpersonal psychology and its blending of mystical Eastern philosophy and new physics, there came a revival of interest in Kabbalah and a growing recognition that the “Jewish visionary tradition was clearly an immense—if at first bewildering—treasure house of psychological insight” (Hoffman, 1981, p. vii). To Family Constellation practitioners and participants, the expression “an immense—if at first bewildering—treasure house of psychological insight” is equally fitting. The insights from the Constellation process do not derive from ancient texts or mystical revelations but simply from the temporarily arresting motion and speaking in a structured group process. Still, if one can find scant corroboration of the principles that emerge in Constellations in the 49 journals published by the APA, one can in the interpreted writings of Kabbalah scholars.

The oral traditions of mystical Judaism trace their origins to the religion of the ancient desert Hebrews. According to Feldman (2001), “The universal mystical spirituality of the children of Abraham is a robust, precious, and little known heritage upon which the fabric of the Judaic, Christian, Islamic, and perhaps even the Tantric religions are woven” (p. 23). The primary written texts of the Kabbalah include the Hebrew Torah, other Hebrew texts from the first two millennia B.C.E., and the Zohar, first published in 11th century Spain. The expulsion of Jews from Spain initiated a revival of interest in Kabbalistic teachings centered in the town of Safed in Palestine and the 16th century master, Kabbalist Isaac of Luria. In the early 18th century, the oral and written tradition experienced a brief period of increased popularity with the founding of the Hassidic movement.

By the beginning of the 19th century, Kabbalistic knowledge and practice was largely in retreat, swept away by urbanization, industrialization, and the Jewish Enlightenment. Among the emerging intelligentsia of German Jews, the Kabbalah was seen as a “foul and errant stream in the Jewish current” (Hoffman, 1981, p. 39). Under the onslaught of harsh criticism, most notably from the definitive 11-volume *History of the Jews* (Graetz, 1895), the Kabbalah was largely forgotten for several generations.

The broad cultural movements expressed in the foundations of scientific psychology were strongly materialistic. The early Jewish psychologists, most prominently Freud, followed the popular trend of the late 19th century toward secularization. Freud subscribed to “an extreme form of positivism, which considered religion dangerous and metaphysics superfluous” (Ellenberger, 1970, p. 525). It was not until the mid-20th century that the Kabbalah once again experienced a popular renaissance (Buber, 1958, 1961, 1970; Jung, 1963; Scholem, 1960, 1961, 1965; Sperling & Simon, 1934).

The philosophic kinship between Constellations and Kabbalah can be seen in three areas: the acceptance of nonlinear connectivity, the principle of inclusiveness, and the attitude toward collective authority and the sanctity of revelation.

One of Hellinger’s (Hellinger et al., 1998) initial insights that diverged from an individualistic perspective of psychology was that each family member shares a common destiny with more distant relations:

Whatever is done by, or happens to, a member of our family group, whether for good or for ill, touches us and also all the others. Together with our family, we form a fellowship sharing a common fate. (p. 150)

In a mechanistic cosmology, individuals can be touched, whether physically or emotionally, only if there is a sensory medium through which to transmit contact. For

example, say that a young woman in California experiences constant worry and sorrow. A Constellation may portray that her fears are the unconscious entanglement with the fate of her grandfather's first wife and child who died together in childbirth in Turkey. Can a causal relationship between her mind-state and the death of a distant relation be credibly asserted absent a defined, measured, and verified mechanism for transmission of the memory of her existence? However doubtful this proposition is to empirically validated psychology, is it basic to the Kabbalistic worldview. "The most fundamental principle of Judaism's entire visionary way is that the cosmos is a coherent and meaningful whole. . . Each aspect of creation is vitally connected to everything else" (Hoffman, 1981, p. 45).

A second aspect of the Constellation experience that finds validation in Kabbalistic philosophy is the general direction of what Constellation facilitators call *healing movements*. The central myth of the Lurianic Kabbalah is "concentrated in three great symbols, the *tsimtsum*, or self-limitation of God, the *shevirah*, or breaking of the vessels, and the *tikkun olam*, or harmonious correction and mending of the world" (Sholem, 1965, p. 110). Simply stated, this myth contends that (1) God has withdrawn from ordinary human sensory perception; (2) at the moment of creation, there was a shattering of light that caused sparks to scatter throughout the universe withone spark invisibly embedded in each living creature; and (3) the task of redemption is to gather these sparks together in the spirit of healing, repairing, and transforming the world (Lerner, 1992). In this tradition, "It is the duty of every man to strive to 'release the holy spark' from the lower creations and bring that spark back to the Godhead" (Unger, 1929, p. 391).

In a typical Constellation, after presenting an issue, the client sets up family representatives in a configuration that represents dysfunction, alienation, or estrangement, a system that symbolically resembles *shevirah*, a broken vessel. Once the representatives are placed and attuned to their positions, very often one or more of them will aim their visual focus toward the horizon or the ground. The facilitator may then add a representative to meet this gaze. Allowing the feelings, perceptions, and movements of these representatives to unfold frequently reveals that one or more members of the family has been shunned, excluded, or forgotten. The principle is “everyone in the system has an equal right to belong, and no member can deny another his or her place” (Hellinger et al., 1998, p. 153).

The healing movement is based on the principle of inclusiveness. It restores excluded members of the family system to their rightful places, honors the suffering they endured, and humbly asks them to look favorably on the living family member who has unconsciously become entangled in their fate. Reflecting the symbol of *tikkun olam*, the basic movement is always to restore whoever belongs to their rightful place.

The common root of mystical traditions in prerabbinic Kabbalah, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism is the tenets of unity and the primacy of love. The expression of this principle of inclusion is “seeing the Divine Source in all beings: ‘And thou shall love your neighbor as your self’” (Feldman, 2001, p. 219). Although the words are familiar, Hellinger (2006) commented that the commandment to *love thy neighbor* has been distorted by the portrayal of the God who commands this love as the exclusive deity of a particular sect or religious group. In this interpretation, the *neighbor* is only the neighbor who belongs to the group. If God shifted from the exclusive deity of an in-group

to an inclusive God-of-all, with everything connected, everyone belonging, and no one claiming God as their exclusive deity, the Commandment would be understood as “and thou shalt love thy neighboring country like your own and the religion of your neighbors like your own.”

This is more than a theological fine-point. The political discourse and foreign policy of the United States is shaped by the portrayal of entire nationalities as evil-doers or terrorists. Were this to change, it would not be political heresy for a public official to say:

Palestinians have the same dignity, the same honor, and the same rights as the Israelis. A Palestinian life is exactly equal in value to a Jewish life. The tears of Palestinians and Israelis carry the exact same measures of grief. Their mothers love their children as much. Their fathers want only what other fathers want. Their children are just as frightened. (Cohen, 2005, p. 138)

A third aspect of Constellations that resonates with Kabbalistic philosophy is the attitude toward collective authority, interpretation, and the sanctity of revelation. At their roots, both psychology and religion share the same aim: to heal the soul (or mind) and through this to heal the whole person and instill a sense of values and meaning in everyday life.

In every generation, the evolution of belief and therapeutic practice emerges from the tension, even conflict between conservative and progressive elements. As Heraclitus (cited in Sweet, 2007) succinctly put it, “*Panton pater polemos* [Strife is the father of all things].”

Both Lurianic Kabbalah and Hellinger’s Constellations emerged outside of the boundaries of their respective authoritative orthodoxies:

When Israel Baal-Shem, the 18th century founder of Polish Hasidism, put forward the mystical thesis that communion with God is more important than the study of books, it aroused considerable opposition and was cited in all the anti-Hasidic

polemics as proof of the movement's subversive and anti-Rabbinical tendencies. (Scholem, 1965, p. 25)

Hellinger did not set out to be any sort of heretical revolutionary, either in regard to the dissolution of his vows as a Roman Catholic priest or his steady divergence from the practices of empirically supported psychotherapy. He simply adopted a phenomenological stance that was out of favor with the times:

I disregard common assumptions as much as I can and I open myself up to reality as is revealed and as it changes over time. Then I wait and see whether something emerges suddenly, like a flash of lightning, which seems essentially true and throws some light on the situation. (Hellinger, 2003a, p. 4)

Although such instantaneous and individualized visions abound in the annals of scientific discovery and religious mysticism, defenders of orthodoxy necessarily embrace common creeds and disregard inspirational flashes of insight. The tension between individual insight and the collected storehouse confronted the 12th century Kabbalists, who first assembled their own cannon. When faced with the inherent conflict in diverging from rabbinic commentaries on the Torah and Prophets, their compromise was to establish a hierarchy of revelations whereby "the first revelation expressing the fundamental contents of a religion is the highest in rank. Each successive revelation is lower in rank and less authoritative than the last" (Scholem, 1965, p. 19). By bowing to the authority, they were able to put new wine into old bottles.

In the scientific age, this compromise becomes increasingly fragile and uneasy. To the rabbinate, the highest ranking and most authoritative revelations were received by Moses on Mount Sinai, and all subsequent prophetic revelations stand in descending rank. This structure is exactly opposite of scientific philosophy, which claims older knowledge to be more primitive and more recent discoveries to be most accurate and

refined. The conservative bows down before the patriarchs; the progressive claims, “If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants” (Newton, 1697/2006, p. 1).

In practice however, as Giegerich (2007) and Thompson (1981) convincingly argued, contemporary institutions that elevate scientific knowledge to the highest rank maintain the essential preoccupation with defending dogma and orthodoxy. Those who admit to operating from flashes of insight or claim to be standing on the shoulders of giants are quickly lassoed to the ground. Radin confessed that the idea that launched him on 20 years of scientific research into the conscious universe came in a flash of inspiration. “The thing that gets me upset every so often is the word ‘wacky’ written in conjunction with what I do. . . . You’re wacky before you succeed. Afterwards, you’re a genius” (as cited in Brown, 1998, p. 300).

Hellinger’s phenomenological stance radically rejects the compromise. Like Giegerich (2007) and Thompson (1981), he asserted that scientific psychology, as much as religion, inhabits a realm of archaic, mythical imagery that claims it can silence our anxieties by a kind of superstitious naiveté. In doing so, Hellinger aligned himself with one of the great 17th century Hasidic saints, Rabbi Mendel of Rymanov (Scholem, 1965).

The revelation given to Moses on Mount Sinai contained the Ten Commandments. It stands as the defining moral statement that serves as the bedrock for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The sages asked, but what is the truly divine element in this revelation? According to the Talmud, only the first two Commandments, “I am the Lord thy God” and “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20: 2-3) were spoken directly to the children of Israel. Maimonides (1956) refined this further; the

people heard inarticulate sounds and only Moses comprehended the words and communicated them.

Hellinger (2003b) rejected religious authority, arguing,:

God will entrust this revelation to no one else. All others are excluded from such revelation, and God has ordained it so for all time. He who receives the revelation is thereby elevated above his disciples, but in fact he also elevates himself above the God whose gospel he purports to preach. (p. 5)

The Kabbalist Rabbi Mendel of Rymanov drew essentially the same conclusion. He took Maimonides's (1965) interpretation to its furthest conclusion, that not even the first two Commandments were revealed directly to the whole people of Israel. All Israel heard was the *aleph* (alpha), the sound from the larynx when a word begins with a vowel. The Kabbalists always regarded the *aleph* as the spiritual root, the source of the Word and all elements of human discourse. "With his daring statement that the actual revelation to Israel consisted only of the *aleph*, Rabbi Mendel transformed the revelation on Mount Sinai into a mystical revelation. . . . In this light every statement on which authority is grounded would become a human interpretation" (Scholem, 1965, p. 30).

Hellinger's (2003b) argument against the hegemony of religious and scientific orthodoxy stated, "There is no evidence that he who receives the revelation speaks for anyone but *himself* and that the disciple to whom he preaches, can in the end only believe in *him*" (p. 5, emphasis in original). With the application of this argument to his therapeutic stance, flashes of insight are neither divine revelation nor are they necessarily wacky. They should not be accepted or embraced without being tested in their particulars. Nor should they be invalidated simply because they conflict with more popular views, which themselves derive from some older, more revered authority's flash of insight.

Family Constellations and the Soul

Hunter Beaumont, writing the introduction to *Love's Hidden Symmetry* (Hellinger et al., 1998), asserted, “Bert Hellinger has re-discovered something about love in intimate relationships that grasps people and changes their lives. What he found is this: ‘Love follows the hidden order of the Greater Soul’” (p. x).

To English speaking Constellation facilitators, this foundational statement is a source of both inspiration and ongoing confusion. The German words *Seele* and *Geist* lack direct English equivalents. The English word *soul* has an array of ambiguous meanings. This section examines these semantic and mythic threads.

In terms of the collective myths of mind and soul, Western culture is fissured along sectarian lines between the Platonic-Christian-Cartesian myth of a dualistic immortal soul and the scientific myth of a unitary consciousness confined in the brain. A third cultural element is an emerging myth that purports to integrate New Science with ancient traditions.

The mythology of Constellations stands apart from these commonly understood constructs of the mind and soul. The soul witnessed in Constellations exists as an aspect of inner being that can be witnessed and experienced but not captured or defined. This perception diverges from the image of the immortal Christian soul and the contemporary scientific view that the soul is an illusion of brain function.

The immaterial immortal soul. The myth of the Platonic-Christian-Cartesian soul (McGraw, 2004) is that there exists an “immaterial, immortal part of ourselves that endures after death” (p. 113). In this dualistic view, humans are one part immortal soul

and one part mortal body. The earliest variations on this theme can be traced to animistic rituals as old as 30,000 years.

In shamanic cultures, initiates, in trances of ecstasy, temporarily free the soul from the body and travel into other realms (Campbell, 1959; Eliade, 1964). The images from these visions were articulated and adapted by Socrates and Plato to form the foundation of Western thought on the soul. Socrates promoted the idea that humans possess an immortal soul entrapped in a mortal body and that the natural desires of the soul are pure and wise, whereas the desires of the body are base and irrational.

McGraw (2004) noted that “with the entrenchment of Christianity into the Western tradition, the notion of an immortal soul became more than theory, more than philosophy, it became dogma” (p. 85). In this articulation, humans are infused with a spark of divinity. Figure 1 depicts the cosmology of this universe.



Figure 1. The universe of the Christian soul.

In this myth, the immortal human soul endured the toils of the Earth as a prerequisite to a heavenly reward. As Jung (1933) explained, “Men were all children of God under the loving care of the Most High, who prepared them for eternal blessedness” (p. 204). This myth could not withstand empirical testing. In the modern world, “Such a life no longer seems real to us, even in our dreams. Natural science has long ago torn this lovely veil to shreds” (p. 204).

The brain as the source of all mental activity. The second major mythology of contemporary U.S. culture is interpreted from scientific research. The scientific age began in the 17th century when Kepler (Koestler, 1960), using observed data and calculation, demonstrated that the movements of the planets did not conform to the model of the celestial sphere shown in Figure 1. By using observation and calculation to disprove the veracity of Ptolemy's geocentric universe, Kepler opened the door for an emergent philosophy of the soul that was based not on religious dogma but on the principles of scientific method.

Once the maps of the Earth, planets, and stars had been redrawn along heliocentric lines (Figure 2), the grand vision of Christianity appeared like an archaic and faulty piece of wishful anthropocentric aggrandizement. Scientists began to articulate their views along secular lines. A prominent theme in 19th century European philosophy was the intellectual war between secular and theocentric perspectives of the soul.



Figure 2. The infinite universe.

The German philosopher Rudolf Hermann Lotze framed the debate:

As the growing farsightedness of astronomy dissipated the idea that the greatest theatre of human life was in direct contact with divinity, so the further advance of mechanical science begins to threaten with similar disintegration the smaller world, the microcosm of man. (as cited in Reed, 1997, p. 2)

As Reed (1997) noted, by the 1890s, the tide of the debate had turned: “Early in the century, psychology was considered to be a science of the soul. By the end of the century, psychology had more or less abandoned the soul and replaced it with the mind” (p. 3).

By the 20th century, scientific psychology had established a new mythology built around Freud’s declaration that religion “was an illusion inspired by infantile belief in the omnipotence of thought, a universal neurosis, a kind of narcotic that hampers the free exercise of intelligence and something that man will have to give up” (as cited in Ellenberger, 1970, p. 525).

Stripped of the mantle of immortality provided by religious dogma, the soul becomes the unconscious mind. In recognizing the force of unconscious impulses and desires, Freud acknowledged the soul, but by explaining it materialistically, he denied it. This put scientific psychology in need of a new mythology. Rank (1930/1998) spoke directly to this dilemma when he wrote,

To know psychology one has to know its object, the soul. But given its peculiar nature, psychology finds itself in a unique position. . . . The soul, as we know it from antiquity in folk belief, religion, and mythology, does not exist for scientific psychology, yet research goes on as if it did. Ironically, psychology purports to determine the validity of the soul-concept, but its research only confirms that there is no soul. (p. 1)

During the 20th century, scientific neurophysiology succeeded in reformulating a model of consciousness along materialistic lines. In its simplest articulation it states that the brain is the source of all mental activity (Dennett, 1991, 2006; McGraw, 2004; Ondrias, 1999). The modern myth of consciousness as brain function brings with it a new set of underlying assumptions. For example, Ondrias (1999) asserted that “faith,

conviction, consciousness, the soul, and even so-called free will derive from human brain function” (p. 11).

Out of this stripping away of the myths of faith or soul emerged another myth: “Man is just a biological machine controlled by a program supplied by its hardware and software equipment” (Ondrias, 1999, p. 11). Within this mechanistic myth, “mental illnesses are caused by abnormal quantities of various substances produced by the brain” (Soltys, 1999, p. 7).

The myths of religion and science share an interest in exercising control over the human condition. Rank (1930/1998) understood that there was an inherent, if unacknowledged, dualism in psychology:

We must distinguish between two facets of psychology: that of self-knowledge, and that of knowledge of others. The first is the psychology of self-awareness . . . and the second is psychology as a means, tool or technique to understand and control others. (p. 2)

Rank (1930/1998) anticipated that professional psychology would evolve to favor cognitive and behavioral approaches over subjective psychology. He explained it this way:

Objective or technical psychology . . . works to control other people. . . . Subjective psychology, devoted to self-knowledge, lacks that practical advantage. . . . Deep down, we don’t want to observe ourselves and increase self knowledge. First of all, the search for self-knowledge is not an original part of our nature; second, it is painful; and finally, it doesn’t always help but often it is disturbing. . . . Knowledge of others can be put to use; too often, self-knowledge proves a hindrance. (p. 5)

Despite this, the movement to empty the heavens of angels and the inner being of its soul has not been completed. The empty universe with its randomly forming and mindless colliding particles remains too frightening to accept. The inner world, abandoned by the fleeing soul, becomes hopeless, chaotic, and dark. To Jung (1933),

“Science has destroyed even the refuge of the inner life. What was once a sheltering haven has become a place of terror” (p. 205). Between the terra firma of Ptolemy’s celestial sphere and the existential void of the infinite abyss, emerged a third mythology, largely derived from Eastern philosophy and quantum physics.

The soul as universal consciousness. The third stream of soul mythology in contemporary Western culture is inherently diffuse. This stream combines elements of ancient wisdom traditions, the visions of modern mystics, spiritualism, folk tales, cutting-edge scientific theories, offshoot religions, urban legends, and countless idiosyncratic teachings. A pictorial image of the cosmology of this contemporary mythology is depicted in Figure 3.



Figure 3. 21st-century American cosmology.

The rich lineage of this stream in modern psychology includes such philosophers and practitioners as Spinoza, Kierkegaard, Brentano, Stumpf, Husserl, James, Jung, Heidegger, Assagioli, Buber, Frankl, and Maslow.

Soul work is typified by James Hillman (1975, 1996), Thomas Moore (1992, 2004), Ken Wilber (1979, 1998), and many others. It has roots in classical philosophy, mystical branches of major religious traditions, indigenous shamanism, and New England

transcendentalism. Soul work encompasses such a diverse set of labors that an encyclopedia (Simpkinson & Simpson, 1999) was created to catalogue the “Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, and Jewish paths, body-centered practices, shamanism, and various psychotherapies” that go by this name. (Hammond, 1999, p. 83).

In this third myth, the soul is the essence of inner being and part of a larger external or systemic whole. Laszlo (2004) framed the question in this way:

Are human beings entirely discrete individuals, their organism enclosed by the skin and their minds enclosed by the cranium housing the brain? Or are there effective, if subtle, interconnections between humans—and between humans and the world at large? (p. 21)

The soul in the phenomenology of Family Constellations. The soul as articulated in the culture of transpersonal spirituality is closely aligned to how the term is used by Family Constellation researchers and facilitators. However, there are some key distinctions. Beaumont (2006) described the soul as a metaphorical, not a metaphysical, concept. He wrote, “The soul is realm or dimension of human experience subjectively distinct from both mind and body” (p. 16).

The soul is understood as a force that creates a movement from within. It is the core of being that can be neither accurately explained nor fully understood. According to Hillman (1975), “The soul is immeasurably deep and can only be illuminated by insights, flashes in a great cavern of incomprehension” (p. xvi).

Beaumont (2006) spoke of *soul* as the originating source of compelling feelings such as intense longing, heart-wrenching compassion, or the tearing loss of intense grief. He asked, “Are these experiences mental or physical? Or are they human experiences of a third kind, inhabiting an inner space between body and mind?” (p. 16)

The soul of Family Constellations whispers a story that the ears cannot hear, gazes in desire at what the eyes cannot see, echoes with fates that are lost to memory, and feels what it touches as belonging to itself. The soul unconsciously regulates balance, bonding, and order outside of the visual field of the geneticist's microscopes and scanners that can only identify objects. Combs (2002), echoing James, called this inner reach of human experience "a process in flux rather than a fixed event, more of the nature of rippling water than of the rocks over which it flows" (p. 2).

This description of soul, as perceived in the phenomenological knowing field (Mahr, 1999) of Constellations is nearly synonymous with the meanings found in the broader field of soul work, particularly in Buddhist, Taoist, and First People's contexts. This description, however, differs from the more familiar representations in the world of contemporary spirituality in several important respects. Unlike its representation in mainstream dualist theology, the soul appears as an integral part of the human being, not as a separate immortal entity that inhabits a mortal body as a vehicle for its salvation. Further, as a phenomenological process, the mythology of Constellations does not subscribe to accounts of divine revelation nor their offspring, religious dogma.

Another distinction is that the soul is not seen as the property of the individual. Unlike the theist who believes in an immortal soul, the atheist who denies it, and the seeker of spirituality who connects it to universal consciousness, in a Constellation, the human being does not exist as an "I." Hellinger's (2003) perspective is as follows:

In religion, just as much as in psychotherapy, there is a myth that the soul is believed to be something personal. When we look objectively it becomes clear that it is not we who possess a soul but rather a soul which possesses us; and that the soul is not there to serve us but rather that we are in the service of the soul. (p. 4)

In this view, the inner soul of the individual is attuned to a larger field of systemic intelligence. Individuals, families, communities, nations, and the whole of humanity form systems to bond members of the group together in a larger common context.

This is a variant of the myth of generative immortality (Rank, 1930/1998) and the cosmology of the South African Zulus (Lawson, 1985). Hellinger (2002) asserted that individuals are not independent entities but

. . . links in a long chain connecting all those who have lived and will live, and those living now, as if we were all part of one life and one soul. Therefore soul reaches beyond us into another space: into our families, into larger groups and into the world as a whole. (p. 126)

To the Constellation facilitator, the scientific view of the mind as brain function appears accurate but incomplete. First, there is a growing body of scientific evidence that mind is not confined to the brain (e.g., Radin, 1997, 2006). Second, the scientific myth of the soul is anchored by the proposition that genetics drive human behavior. This view was popularized by Dawkins's (1989) *The Selfish Gene*, among others (Ardery, 1961, 1966; Blaffer-Hardy, 1977; Morris, 1967; Wilson, 1975). The main assertion of this myth is that the human animal exists and acts in service of genes. The survival and reproductive urge of genes is comparable to the Freudian concept of libido.

The perceived limitation in this view is that it omits the influence of culture (Thompson, 1981). In this regard, the mythology of Constellations is more closely aligned with Taoist or Buddhist philosophy. For example, Govinda (1961/1969) pointed to dual aspects: life has two fundamental tendencies: the one is contraction, the other expansion" (p. 53). The genes represent an expansive force, but their desires do not tell the whole story.

The family system exerts a conservative force that seems to care as little for genetic replication as the relentless motion of animated matter appears to care for loyalty and hierarchy. What Thompson (1981) called the steady-state, “the more ancient and stable way of life” (p. 50), is expressed in Constellations as the conservative systemic force of the family molecule maintaining its structure and integrity.

The collision of love and order can be recognized at the root of virtually every tragedy. In the story of the doomed lovers Romeo and Juliet, their passion can be seen as an expression of Dawkins’s (1989) selfish genes, but it is the countervailing cultural bond of family loyalty that drives the lovers to a tragic end. Rank (1930/1998) well described the battle between these two antithetical forces as the “fundamental opposition between individual will, which seeks to immortalize itself, and the collective soul, which is immortal” (p. 27).

Another distinction of soul in Constellations has radical, if not revolutionary, implications. In many spiritual practices, the healing response to overwhelming negative feelings or behaviors is to attempt to transcend these feelings to connect to a realm of pure love, universal life force, or infinite field of cosmic consciousness that is called the source of life. Again, the expressions of these myths tend to omit or diminish parents and the biological ancestors.

A commonly articulated description of the healing movement is the

Recognition and acceptance of a God [higher power, Self] beyond our own intelligence and with whom we can have a relationship. This God can provide an experience of inspiration, joy, security, peace of mind, and guidance that goes beyond what is possible in the absence of the conviction that such a power exists. (Holistic-Online.com, 2007, para. 1)

In Family Constellations, God or some abstract higher power is rarely seen as the source of the healing movement. Rather, in most cases, the movement that relieves these

feelings is to put afflicted individuals into good contact with their mother and father.

Hellinger (2001) explained this movement:

I always look to see, where is the beginning and where is the original strength? All therapy, as I understand it, has to go to the source. For each one of us, the source is, first of all, our parents. If we are connected to our parents, we are connected to our source. A person who is separated from his or her parents is separated from his or her source. Whoever the parents are, however they behaved, they are the source of life for us. So the main thing is that we connect to them in such a way that what comes from them can flow freely to us and through us to those who follow. (p. 1)

It is a patently self-evident, almost banal observation that the biological mother and father are the source of life. A medieval proverb says, “He who knows the soul knows the Creator” (cited in Leahey, 1992, p. 70). Who is the creator? In religious terms, it is seen as an invisible and ethereal God. In transpersonal spirituality, it is a universal life force. The radical, if not revolutionary, context of the soul in Family Constellation is this: Foremost, our Creators are our biological mother and father. In the soul, the object of greatest love and yearning are the parents.

Hellinger (2001a) observed,

The longing for spirituality, for spiritual achievement, very often is the longing for the mother. What happened to Buddha actually? He lost his mother at birth. That is what happened. . . If you have this in mind, you can understand his teachings about the escape from suffering. This is the teaching of a child who lost his mother at birth. (p. 37)

The significance of this distinction is brought to focus when we consider how the source of life is considered in contemporary spirituality and psychotherapy. In a typical course of client-centered psychotherapy, clients’ feelings, attitudes, and interactions with their parents often fill numerous sessions. Imagine if instead the starting ground was, “It does not matter how our parents are now or were as we were growing up. It does not

make any difference. . . . There are no more accusations, no blaming in any way”
(Hellinger, 2001, p. 8).

The prevailing myth of transpersonal spirituality culture is practically the exact opposite. The wish is for individuals to leapfrog over their deficient or missing parents to connect directly with the field of universal consciousness. Hillman (1996) presented a conception of soul derived from Platonic philosophy that is closely aligned to the perception of souls in Constellations. It is drawn from Plotinus (II.3.15), who wrote,

Coming into this particular body, and being born of these particular parents, and in such a place, and in general what we call external circumstance. That all happenings form a unity and are spun together is signified by the Fates.

Hillman (1996) interpreted this as, “we elected the body, the parents, the place and the circumstances that suited the soul” (p. 8). The circumstances of birth that embed the pattern of fate and destiny “are my soul’s own choice” (p. 8). This subtly implied that one’s own soul is a separate primordial entity in possession of superior agency to choose one’s own parents. The Order of Love as seen in Constellations reverses this, adhering more closely to biological fact: parents come first, children are smaller (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Children are small.

The effects of these spirituality myths are to separate the individual soul from its context within the biological family system. Constellation facilitators are well

accustomed to the allergic response of many seekers to the myth of the Creator being one's actual mother and father. In a Constellation circle, the emphasis on one's own parents as the source of life aims to re-integrate the soul in the body and mind. The practical application of this principle is seen when the representatives for children appear to be comforting their parents. This may occur because the parents are needy or deeply wounded from some trauma in their past. When children sense this, they try to compensate by giving their parents support. "This does not usually help in reality, but it becomes a deeply rooted pattern in the child," Schneider (2007) wrote. "Although based in love, it puts the child in a presumptuous position that later causes harm" (p. 88). When working with representatives in a Constellation, a movement that frequently brings relief is to re-establish the natural order in the family: parents are big, children are small; parents give; children take.

The child of the family is seen as part of a Greater Soul that is moved by inexorable historic, terrestrial, systemic, genetic, and existential forces. In this re-visioning of one's personal mythology (Feinstein & Krippner, 1988), the past is acknowledged as it was, with the dark secrets revealed, the difficult fates honored, and the excluded members of the system restored to their rightful place. Ultimately, this leads to a humble acceptance of one's life exactly as it is.

Psychology with a soul.

When we will ever learn?
When we will ever learn? (Seeger, 1961)

Thompson (1981) called for a re-visioning of history as a means for increasing self-knowledge:

Anything can deliver us from our loss of memory of the soul: science, history, art or the sunlight on the grass *taitami* mats in the Zendo. And anything can enslave us: science, history, art, or the militarism of a Zen monastery. But if we are lost in time and suffering from a racial amnesia, then we need something to startle us into recollection. (pp. 7-8)

Family Constellations aim to startle the soul into recollection. In adopting a therapeutic stance derived from existential phenomenology, the Constellation opens Laszlo's (2004, 2004a) field of connectivity. As the case studies to follow will show, the insights that emerge from emptiness are far beyond what logic and ordinary common sense might suggest (e.g., that a murderer and his victim share an inexorable bond).

Hillman (1975) presented a revolutionary challenge to professional psychology when he wrote, "Where there is connection to soul, there is psychology; where not, what is taking place is better called statistics, physical anthropology, cultural journalism or animal breeding" (p. 78). Elkins (1998) agreed with Hillman and added, "Make no mistake, soulless therapies produce soulless results" (p. 83).

In this light, if the aim of Family Constellations is to focus on resolving disturbances of the soul, it makes sense that the structure, format, and content would be radically different, in fact unrecognizable, from the best practices in empirically supported psychotherapy.

Family Constellations and the Brain/Mind

In a Family Constellation, a mother's heart opens to buried grief; her son, who has been using drugs on the streets for five months, telephones to say he wants to go into rehab. A daughter's heart opens to her estranged father; within hours the two are speaking by telephone for the first time in seven years. After the representatives for his children say a heartfelt farewell to their deceased father, the living members of the family

follow suit so that life can go on in a good way. If consciousness is purely brain function confined to the head, then these events must be ascribed to insignificant coincidence, false reporting, or magical thinking. However, if individual consciousness is part of a holographic information field (Combs & Holland, 1996), then these events are part of a natural, if poorly described phenomenon.

This section examines whether it is possible to reconcile the experiences of collective consciousness felt by representatives in many Family Constellations with recent findings in brain/mind research. As Combs and Krippner (in press) noted, “The natural sciences have found no generally accepted explanation for these sorts of phenomena and for the most part have ignored them” (p. 2). As a phenomenological process, it is not necessary to explain satisfactorily the how and why of what occurs during and after a Constellation. However, a reasonable person reading this dissertation may conclude that the examples of collective consciousness presented in the case descriptions to follow misrepresent reality. Therefore, it is worthwhile to attempt to create a context in which such occurrences are not impossible on their face.

In the universe of psychology, the apparently anomalous qualities of Constellations are most closely aligned with Jung’s (1964, 1973) views on synchronicity and the collective unconscious. Jung described synchronicity as the “marriage between the essence of human nature and the external world of physical reality” (Combs & Holland, 1996, p. 65).

Beyond Jung, there is a growing body of scientific literature that aims to reconcile anomalous phenomenon within the borders of current scientific understanding. In regard to Constellations and the hypothetical constructs of representative perception, intrafamily

telepathy, and invisible loyalties (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973), many writers have proposed possible, scientifically valid explanations. In reviewing this literature, such propositions are highly disputed, frequently overwork the data, and are at best inconclusive. Although there are promising possibilities, the intersection between the anomalous phenomena of Constellations and valid scientific explanations has not been reached.

Most scientifically oriented hypotheses related to nonlocal or nontemporal phenomena “point to features of quantum physics that allow separate events to demonstrate significant relationships, or to explanations involving various sorts of physical fields” (Combs & Krippner, in press). The most frequently cited parallel to what Mahr (1999) called a *knowing field* in scientific literature is Sheldrake’s theory of “morphic fields” (1981, 1988, 1999, 2003; Sheldrake, Hellinger, & Schützenberger, 1999). Sheldrake’s central idea is that living organisms resonate with larger sources of information. Sheldrake (2003) pointed out that phenomenon such as telepathy are “only paranormal if we define as ‘normal’ the theory that the mind is confined to the brain” (p. 10). He countered with the results of numerous research studies that suggest that “the fields of our minds are not confined to the insides of our skulls, but stretch out beyond them. . . . Our mental activity depends on invisible fields that can also bring about effects at a distance” (p. 11). Sheldrake remains a peripheral figure in scientific circles. He noted, “Practically everyone in the academic world has simply ignored my research, rather than tried to critique it or interact with it” (R. Sheldrake, personal communication, January 24, 2006).

There is a wealth of other recent research that supports the potential for nonlocal communication. Laszlo's (2004a) work on Akashic fields has speculated about a zero-point fields that could serve as a repository for the collective contents of human memory. Grinberg-Zylberbaum (1994) and Wackerman, Seiter, Keibel, and Walach (2003) conducted brainwave research that showed neurological mirroring between pairs of participants who meditated together to achieve a state of empathic nonverbal communication.

Research from the Institute of HeartMath (Childre, Martin, & Beech, 1999) showed the heart contains an intricate network of neurons, neurotransmitters, proteins, and support cells like those in the cranial brain. This elaborate circuitry enables the brain-in-the-heart to act independently of the cranial brain—to learn, remember, and even feel and sense. They concluded,:

We are in effect broadcasting our emotional states all the time (and receiving others' . . . Even without body language and additional clues, we transmit a subtle signal. We can't keep it in. All of us affect each other at the most basic electromagnetic level. (p. 161)

Building on this research, McCraty, Atkinson, Tomasino, and Bradley (2006) documented that the electromagnetic fields produced by the heart form a complex energetic network. The heart's energetic field acts as a carrier wave that communicates information throughout the entire body and even conveys information outside of the body between individuals. The rhythms of the heart provide a global signal that integrates the order of the system as a whole. Their research showed that these signals can be measured by sensitive detectors up to 10 feet away and also sensed by others.

The heart's energy field is coupled to a field of information that is not bound by the limits of time and space. The heart is directly coupled to a subtle energetic field of ambient information that surrounds the body which, in turn, is entangled

and interacts with the multiplicity of energy fields in which the body is embedded—including that of the quantum vacuum. (p. 73)

In the latter case, as the scientific pioneers who endeavor to integrate new science with psychology contended, “We are only just beginning to understand the fundamental role of a bioenergetic communication system in processing information from sources both within and outside the body to *inform* physiological function, cognitive processes, emotions, and behavior” (McCraty et al., 2006, p. 73).

Recent findings in cognitive neuroscience (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Greene & Haidt, 2002) suggest that reason and felt emotions are less determinant factors in moral decision-making than nonconscious, automatic processes. Their social intuitionist model, which integrates findings in neuroscience research and evolutionary psychology theory, contends that moral judgments form in the mind automatically and are followed by emotions and reasons that serve to backfill a rationale for the preordained choice. Thus, they instantaneously formed intuitive responses are driven by reciprocity, loyalty, purity, and suffering.

Within this model, the soul in the phenomenology of Family Constellations can be located in the automatic moral faculties of the brain. The representatives standing still and silent, with the seeker sitting and looking, has the effect of temporarily stilling the ever-chattering cognitive and emotional centers of the brain. Out of this stillness and silence, what Greene (in press) called the “mind’s clockwork” is revealed in conscious awareness. Once revealed, these automatic intuitive processes can be reset with the images of the healing movements and the suggestions of the healing sentences. The strongest benefit to the seeker comes not from the intensity of the emotions or the new understanding gained but from the reprogramming of the automatic brain.

The compatibility of Greene's (in press) neuroscience research into moral psychology and the soul as understood in Constellations can be illustrated by his example of the moral dilemma of the crying baby:

It is wartime, and you and some of your fellow villagers are hiding from enemy soldiers in a basement. Your baby starts to cry, and you cover your baby's mouth to block the sound. If you remove your hand, your baby will cry loudly, the soldiers will hear, and they will find you and the others and kill everyone they find, including you and your baby. If you do not remove your hand, your baby will smother to death. Is it okay to smother your baby to death in order to save yourself and the other villagers? (p. 7)

The design of Greene's (in press) study correlated the responses of research subjects to neuroimaging scans of which parts of the brain were involved complex moral decision making. The results showed that the impulse to *not* smother the baby came from brain areas associated with the automatic mind, and the decision to sacrifice the baby to save the others came from parts of the brain associated with pragmatism and cognitive problem solving. This confirmed Greene's dual process theory that such moral choices are guided by the interplay between conscious reasoning and nonconscious impulses. Greene further hypothesized that these nonconscious regions have been programmed by millennia of evolutionary biology.

Greene's (in press) research was rigorously designed, quantitative, and digital. Constellations are free-form, purely subjective, and analog. In this sense, the approaches are incompatible and cannot be compared. However, there have been thousands of Constellations in which real life moral dilemmas have been presented and set up. The behaviors of the parents forced into such irredeemable moral quandaries are consistent with Greene's findings: people are conflicted and the choices are not clear cut. However, what Constellations reveal with great clarity and consistency are moral drivers that

influence these choices. The analysis of the case descriptions of using Constellations in prison will elaborate on these drivers.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Significance of the Research

The purpose of this study is to present a broad introduction to the Family Constellation process by combining theoretical research with case descriptions and analysis. The research questions were: (1) What is the Family Constellation process and how does it differ from more commonly known group approaches that work with psychodynamic issues? (2) What is its history and lineage? (3) What are its philosophical underpinnings? (4) How do the constructs of mind and soul as perceived in Constellations correspond with those found in religion, psychology and neuroscience? (5) What were the experiences of a group of men serving long-term sentences for murder or rape in a Massachusetts prison who participated in a series of monthly Family Constellation circles? (6) What were the accumulated insights of these prisoners as revealed by the Constellations into the psychological movements towards acknowledging guilt, accepting responsibility, giving and receiving forgiveness, and achieving reconciliation with loved ones?

The Family Constellation process was not documented in the knowledge base of U.S. scholarly literature. A search of the Academic Search Premier database revealed only one peer-reviewed article devoted to the topic, this author's "*Family Constellations*": *An Innovative Systemic Phenomenological Group Process From Germany* (Cohen, 2006). No previous English language dissertations had been published on this topic.

Despite its lack of presence in the arena of U.S. scholarship, the emergence of the Family Constellations process was important in the evolution of 21st-century psychology. In the book *The Noonday Demon* (2002), the 2001 National Book Award winner and Pulitzer Prize finalist, author Andrew Solomon wrote, “Of the group processes I studied, the one that seemed to me most subtle and nurturing, the one that brought people closest to resolution, was the Family Constellation based on the work of Bert Hellinger” (p. 158).

Bert Hellinger’s books have sold more copies than any American family therapist (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001, p. 121). Those translated in English included: *Love’s Hidden Symmetry: What Makes Love Work in Relationships* (Hellinger et al., 1998); *Acknowledging What Is: Conversations with Bert Hellinger* (Hellinger & ten Hövel, 1999); *Love’s Own Truths: Bonding and Balancing in Close Relationships* (Hellinger, 2001a); *Insights: Lectures and Stories* (Hellinger, 2002); *On Life and Other Paradoxes* (Hellinger, 2002a); *Farewell: Family Constellations with Descendants of Victims and Perpetrators* (Hellinger, 2003); *No Waves without the Ocean: Experiences and Thoughts* (Hellinger, 2006); and *With God in Mind* (Hellinger, 2007).

Internationally, there were more than 1,000 practitioners and two professional associations, the International Systemic Constellations Association (ISCA), the International Arbeitsgemeinschaft Systemische Loesungen (International Association for Family Constellation Work). There were both English and German language professional journals, *The Knowing Field* and *Praxis der Systemaufstellung*.

Since 1997, annual international congresses worked to integrate the principles of Systemic Family Constellations within the broader fields of transpersonal psychology, health care, education, peace studies, and systemically oriented organizational consulting.

Some of these congresses have drawn more than 2,000 participants. The systemic Constellation approach attracted support and cross-fertilization from numerous internationally known scholars and innovators, such as Peter Levine (Levine, 2005; Levine & Frederick, 1997), Hans Peter-Durr (Dürr, Popp, & Schommers, 2002), Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela (2004), and Claude AnShin Thomas (2004).

The principles of the Constellation process were broadly applied beyond personal therapy. A third professional association, Infosyon, founded by Gunthard Weber, (Wieslocher Institut für Systemische Lösungen [Wieslocher Institute for Systemic Solutions, 2008), Mattias Varga von Kibed (SySt Intitute, 2008), and Insa Sparrer (2006) catered to organization and management consultants who apply Constellations to organizational systems. Beyond Hellinger, numerous professional titles were published across a range of topic areas including individual therapy, *Entering Inner Images: A Creative Use of Constellations in Individual Therapy, Counseling, Groups and Self-Help* (Madelung & Innecken, 2004); organizational consulting, *Invisible Dynamics: Systemic Constellations in Organisations and in Business* (Horn & Brick, 2005); shamanism, *Images of the Soul: The Workings of the Soul in Shamanic Rituals and Family Constellations* (van Kampenhout, 2001); and education, *You're One of Us!: Systemic Insights and Solutions for Teachers, Students and Parents* (Franke-Gricksch, 2003).

Beyond the community of Constellation facilitators, this research had significance for professionals and volunteers involved with prisoner emotional healing and rehabilitation programs. The case descriptions, although only a first step in a full research sequence, documented important changes that occurred for the prisoners involved in the

study. Further, more rigorous research was needed to substantiate these changes and test whether the outcomes are consistent.

Many of the research participants reported that their participation with Family Constellations helped them gain understanding and relief with issues that had troubled them for many years. The case descriptions documented significant changes that impacted not only the men but their loved ones beyond the prison walls. As James, one of the participants, wrote in his questionnaire, “Constellations have allowed me to grow and allowed me to work on some serious issues that I was never able to do before. I am so grateful for that.”

In recent years, most prison programs for long-term offenders, especially those serving life without parole, have been dismantled. These prisoners often become hopeless, “with nothing to look forward to and no way to redeem themselves” (Liptak, 2005, p. 1). Documenting the case descriptions demonstrated, however imperfectly, that these men’s parents, wives, siblings, and children remain connected in profound and tangible ways despite years, even decades, of total separation. In the majority of the cases presented in this dissertation, following the Constellations, the men restored and healed ruptures in these relationships. Even though the data did not support any formal measures of causality, the fact that the events occurred was of social significance.

Steven Spitzer, professor of sociology at Suffolk University and executive director of the Jericho Circle Project (Jericho Circle, 2008; Spitzer, 1975, Spitzer & Scull, 1988) worked with many of the same prisoners through Jericho Circle. He endorsed the proposed research using the case description data:

The case study data that Dan has compiled represent a significant contribution to the research literature in both transformative psychology and corrections. The

self-reports of men who have participated in the Constellations he has guided reveal deep insights on the part of the subjects and broad implications for correctional programming in the years ahead. The case materials that Dan has shared are the beginnings of a valuable data set for those working with, researching and theorizing about the roots of crime and the preconditions to successful personal change. (S. Spitzer, personal communication, May 26, 2008)

The importance of Family Constellations as an innovative modality was recognized by numerous editors and publishers. This author's writing on the use of Constellations in prison and as tool for fostering reconciliation was published by Sage's *The Family Journal* (Cohen, 2006) Springer (Cohen, in press), and Zeig, Tucker, and Theisen (Cohen, 2005). I published numerous works on this broad topic while a student at Saybrook including, *Begin with the Work: Family Constellations and Larger Systems* (Cohen, 2005); *I Carry Your Heart: I Carry it in My Heart: Family Healing in Prison*, (Cohen, 2006a); "*Family Constellations*": *An Innovative Systemic Phenomenological Group Process from Germany*, (Cohen, 2006); *Ich Trag Dein Herz Mit Mir: Familienstellen in Eimen Amerikanischen Gefängnis [I Carry Your Heart With Me: Family Constellations In An American Prison]* *Praxis der Systemaufstellen: Betirägezu Lösungen in Familien und Organistaionen* (2006b); *Israel and Palestine: The Search for Peace* (Cohen, 2007); *Family Constellations and the Soul* (Cohen, 2008); *Guilt, Responsibility, and Forgiveness: Lessons from Lifers in Prison* (Cohen, in press).

Rationale for Selection of Method

The Saybrook Graduate School Institutional Review Board (SIRB) restricted the data collection procedures in the interest of protecting human research participants from the risk of being harmed. As a result, the case description and analysis component of this dissertation fell below the usual standard for dissertation-level research. Rigorous case study or quantitative research on outcomes will have to be pursued by future research.

The case descriptions were neither precise nor objective for reasons both philosophical and practical. The narrative case descriptions of Family Constellations with a group of men serving long-term sentences in prison were presented as subjective portraits because of the constraints imposed on this research by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the SIRB. Due to security requirements, the researcher was not permitted to bring any recording devices into the prison facility, not even paper and pencil, nor were the inmates permitted to communicate, meet, or correspond with the researcher at any time outside of the prescribed group meetings.

Saybrook's director of research, on behalf of the SIRB, expressly prohibited the prison inmates from actively participating in the research due to the risk potential for a civil lawsuit against the school. The director specified that this must be exploratory, qualitative research using an *archival* data set (A. Collen, personal communication, January 26, 2005). This structure effectively indemnifies the school from risk.

For this study, the archival data were program evaluation reports written by the group members and previously submitted to the Massachusetts Department of Correction staff member who coordinates volunteer programs. The study commenced two years after the data collection procedures were completed. These constraints made it unfeasible to employ commonly used qualitative data analytics such as coding or categorization to construct a logical chain of evidence. The archival data set was not of sufficient quality and the SIRB explicitly prohibited the researcher from obtaining one of higher quality. Nevertheless, exploratory narrative case descriptions and cross-case analysis are a suitable and well-established method for answering the research question.

Thompson (1981) advocated for the resacralization of culture through the resacralization of scholarship. “For this radical task, the boundaries of both art and science must be redrawn. *Wissenschaft* must become *Wissenkunst*” (p. 248). In Thompson’s *Wissenkunst*, research creates a unique narrative. “*Wissenkunst* is a unique and anarchic expression of freedom” (p. 249). To examine the subjective river of soul that Combs (2002) called a “process in flux rather than a fixed event, more of the nature of rippling water than of the rocks over which it flows” (p. 2), the consistency of controlled experimentation gives way to Heraclitus’s phenomenology, “No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man” (Sweet, 2007).

Theoretical Research

Theoretical research was chosen because Constellations were a new modality not previously described in scholarly literature. Family Constellations emerged from a different historical, philosophical, and ontological tradition than those which ground more familiar cognitive, behavioral, and psychodynamic therapeutic approaches in contemporary U.S. psychology. Without this broadly articulated and historically grounded theoretical discussion, the case descriptions and thematic analyses that follow would lack sufficient context.

This dissertation was intended to serve as a resource for students, practitioners and researchers encountering Family Constellations for the first time. The initial questions are theoretical: What is a Family Constellation? What are its roots and lineage? How does it differ and how does it correspond to more familiar therapeutic modalities? Is

it possible to reconcile the experiences of collective consciousness felt by representatives and family members in many Family Constellations with recent findings in brain/mind research?

Exploratory Narrative Case Descriptions

The qualitative component of this research employed retrospective exploratory narrative case descriptions and thematic analysis (Lieblich et al., 1998; Yin, 2003) of the Family Constellation process used with a group of prisoners serving long-term sentence for murder or rape at Bay State Correctional Center in Norfolk, Massachusetts. The case descriptions were considered retrospective because they were derived from archival program evaluation questionnaires completed by the prisoners prior to the initiation of this research study. The questionnaires inquired about the prisoners' experiences with the Family Constellation process in 2004-2006.

The foundation of scientific knowledge is to bracket subjective impressions from data that can be objectively observed, measured, and replicated. The marriage of quantitative research methods and psychology in the last half century has largely resulted in the concentration of clinical practice around a relatively limited set of empirically supported cognitive, behavioral, and interpersonal therapies (Barenbaum & Winter, 2003). Schultz and Schultz (1992) defined psychological research as "carefully controlled observation and experimentation to study the human mind" (p. 4). To accomplish this, they argued in favor of methods that are precise and objective.

Quantitative research methods are considered the gold standard for determining empirically validated clinical treatments (Robson, 2002; Slade & Priebe, 2001). The

argument for relying primarily on quantitative methods was stated forcefully by Kerlinger (1979):

Scientists are not and cannot be concerned with the individual case. . . . The unit of speech in science is always the set, the group . . . ; The existential individual, the core of individuality, forever escapes the scientist. He is chained to group data, statistical prediction, and probabilistic estimates. (pp. 270, 275)

However, qualitative methods have a recognized and accepted place in the discipline of psychological research. The qualitative method is suited to areas of research that are embedded “in rich contexts of history, society, and culture,” where it “resituates the people whom we study in their life worlds, paying special attention to the social situations they occupy,” and where “it regards those whom we study as reflexive, meaning-making, and intentional actors” (Marecek, 2003, p. 49). Luyten, Blatt, and Corveleyn (2006) advocated for methodological pluralism that bridges the divide between interpretive approaches that focus on understanding and meaning and neopositivistic approaches that focus on explanation and general laws.

Qualitative methods are well suited for researching issues within human sciences. They include exploratory-descriptive and narrative case studies, grounded theory, ethnography, and phenomenology. What these methods share as a means to study human experiences is that they focus on the entirety of experience, emphasize meaning, rely on description of first-person accounts, reflect the interests and involvement of the researcher, and view subject and object as inseparable aspects of being (Moustakas, 1994).

Allport (1937) advocated the use of both quantitative and qualitative approaches because the task of science itself is twofold, to include the nomothetic, which leads to general conclusions, and the idiographic, which describes unique situations and events.

He argued, “Though less developed at the present time, idiographic methods of study are basically more important . . . and no less scientific than nomothetic methods” (Allport, 1964, p. 150).

Sherman, Webb, and Andrews (1984) noted that qualitative research is useful to describe the essential qualities of events, to interpret the meanings and relationships among those events, and to appraise the significance of these events in the larger picture. The case study, as Bromley (1986) asserted, “is the bedrock of scientific investigation” (p. ix). Lukoff, Edwards, and Miller (1998) advocated its use to understand the effects of unconventional approaches, such as Family Constellations: “The case study approach offers an alternative methodological route for investigating and generating findings in this area” (p. 44).

Yin (1993, 2003) recommended exploratory case studies when the research question aims to answer a “what” question, rather than those beginning with “how” or “why.” Case descriptions are an efficient and accepted method for an individual practitioner to report on the outcomes arising from eclectic or innovative treatment approaches. The academic proponents of the case method (Barenbaum & Winter, 2003; Dattilio, Edwards, & Bromley, 2004; Lukoff & Edwards, 2006) advocated for the validity of a “true science of a single case” (Barenbaum & Winter, 2003, p. 196). Dattilio et al. (2004) argued for the “role of case-based studies within the scientific progress of knowledge” (p. 5).

For innovative approaches that have not been documented in scholarly literature, the first step in the research sequence is the case description. Edwards (1996) stated that such “descriptions of individual cases have been the cornerstone on which the

development of scientific knowledge has been built” (p. 10). Strupp (1981) agreed, noting that most of what the field of psychotherapy has learned in its first century came from “astute and creative clinical observations” (p. 216).

Narrative approaches to psychological research illuminate phenomena without reducing them. Narrative case descriptions are fundamentally concerned with the subjective and intersubjective lived experience of the research participants. Central to narrative psychology is a complex, unified individual who exists in the context of their larger social world. Beyond exploring the subjective experiences of the participant, narrative analysis incorporates [rather than brackets], the intersubjective and meaning-making capacities of the researcher and readers. It is ultimately a three-way partnership between the participants, the scholar, and the readers aimed at enlarging each partner’s awareness of human experience and of their world (Acquaro, 2007; Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004; Josselson & Lieblich, 2001).

The use of subjective narratives or stories to understand human experience is the foundation of human knowledge (Nelson, 1989). In Edwards’ (1993) continuum of case research methods, exploratory case descriptions are recommended when the concepts of the phenomenon under investigation have not previously been described in scholarly literature.

Riessman (1993) contended that narrative stories are essential to comprehend important aspects of life and to construct identity, especially in cases in which the ordinary social constructs that unite society and self have been breached. Men serving terms of life in prison without the possibility of parole struggle daily to maintain a bearable sense of self-identity.

Lieblich et al. (1998) defined the mission of this type of psychological research: “to *explore and understand the inner world* of individuals” (p. 7, emphasis in original). Stories and written accounts presented by individual narrators provide access to this inner world. The narrative case descriptions in this study did not claim to be objective, replicable, or scientifically valid. Rather they aspired to contain a “narrative truth” (Spence, 1982, p. 1) that accurately captures the experience of men participated in the Family Constellation process in prison. The aim for the research was to give the reader a sliver of understanding of the inner world of these individuals that illuminates larger themes such as guilt, innocence, remorse, dignity, and forgiveness.

The research participants at Bay State Correctional Center occupied a unique and particularly rich social context. Although their crimes were real and their punishment severe, these men were not hardened, hostile, or withdrawn. In the context of the group meetings, they seemed to be remarkably warm and kind. The depths of these qualities are better captured by rich, narrative descriptions than by an instrument to measure personal values, (e.g., Scott, 1991).

Participants

The research participants were members of the Growing Together III group at Bay State Correctional Center (Norfolk, Massachusetts), a general population, medium security facility. The Growing Together Program was based on the principles contained in the book *Houses of Healing: A Prisoner's Guide to Inner Power and Healing* by Robin Casarjian (1995). There were three phases to the program. The men of Growing

Together III graduated from the first two phases and possessed many years of experience in sophisticated emotional and spiritual development processes.

The members were serving long-term sentences for violent crimes, most commonly life without the possibility of parole for murder. The research protocol approved by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Corrections and the SIRB did not allow collection of census data on their demographic characteristics, crimes, sentences, or other personal data. Most of the men were incarcerated for decades and had uncertain prospects for ever being released. Several were observant Muslims or Christians; at least one practiced Wicca; another followed a form of Germanic neopaganism. The group was racially mixed.

The group met every Saturday afternoon in a classroom in the administration building, which also housed a prison library, small meeting rooms, and offices. Participation in the group and individual meetings was voluntary. Members received annual certificates of attendance that become part of their prison record. Typically, there were approximately 10 members present. Each meeting was facilitated by an outside volunteer.

The general meeting format began with the men sitting in a circle of chairs. They begin with one member leading a closed-eye guided imagery. This is followed by a round of check-ins in which each participant freely shared whatever he chose, anything from a sentence or two to a monologue that could extend 10 or more minutes. Following the check-in was a snack break in which the volunteers were served food purchased by the prisoners from the canteen with their personal funds. Afterward, the volunteer took over leading a wide range of activities such as preparing for a parole or commutation hearing,

doing movement exercises, engaging in group processes, writing exercises, theatre games, or spiritual rituals and ceremonies.

At my first Growing Together III meeting, I was accompanied by two other long-term volunteers: the man who coordinates the program and a woman who leads *Houses of Healing* (Casarjian, 1995) programs. At subsequent meetings, other volunteers, both men and women who had heard that I was doing Constellations in prison, asked to attend the meetings. Subsequently, there were growing numbers of requests from outside volunteers to attend these meetings. Eventually, it became necessary to establish a maximum attendance cap and a wait-list for volunteers. From these volunteers, eight elected to obtain permanent volunteer status and now lead Growing Together groups and other volunteer programs at Bay State and other Massachusetts correctional facilities.

The members of Bay State Correctional Center's Growing Together III group were society's ultimate outcasts (D'Cruze, Walklate, & Pegg, 2006). Sentenced to die imprisoned by a jury of peers, these men personified evil brought to justice. Ironically, to be in their presence was to be touched by grace. A woman volunteer observed,:

Saturday afternoon at Bay State Prison was a deep learning experience at the emotional, the spiritual and the intellectual level. . . Today, the faces of the men were still in my consciousness, each one left a mark on me, a mark of awareness and joy. (M. Deiter, personal communication, October 23, 2006)

Research Design

The research design combined elements of theoretical and case description methods to present the reader with a broad introduction to the Family Constellation process, its roots and lineages, philosophical underpinnings, practical applications, and accumulated insights. The contribution to English language scholarship was to present

what Family Constellations are, where they came from, how they are used, what effects they have, and what they say about larger philosophical questions of punishment and rehabilitation, guilt and innocence, good and evil, and love and forgiveness.

The design reflected the tension between the need to research the applications and effects of innovative psychological processes and the ethical requirements to protect human research participants from unknown risks. The resolution was to use a small sample of archival data. Effectively, no research participants were put at risk. Although this compromised the validity of the findings, the more primary purpose, which was to provide a credible starting point for future research, was accomplished. It was left to such future research to proceed with research designs that are more robust and telling.

This study presented nine case descriptions based on group meetings held in 2004-2006. During each meeting, one member of the group volunteered to present an issue and set up a Constellation. As such, there was no sampling of participants within the Growing Together III group. The participants were self-selected based on their voluntary participation in group meetings, their willingness to complete program evaluation questionnaires, and to sign an informed consent form (see Appendix A) authorizing their responses to be used in this study.

These narrative case descriptions incorporated the archival program evaluation questionnaires, the researcher's notes and recollection, and input from other volunteers who participated in the group meetings. Each case description included a section of background information that described the prisoners' criminal history, present circumstances, and other pertinent information. This was followed by a section that describes the Constellation and its effects.

Following the case studies, the report analyzed content themes including discussion of the level of participation, particularly the withdrawal of several Islamic members on religious grounds; a report from one of the men who did not set up a Constellation but nevertheless had a noteworthy aftereffect; the experiences of volunteers who joined the group, presented personal issues, and set up Constellations with the men serving as observers and representatives. Process themes were also analyzed. These included an examination of the insights in conscience, guilt and innocence, the perpetrator-victim bond, and forgiveness.

Validity and Reliability

Yin (2003) described four criteria for judging the quality of case study research. These are: construct, internal, and external validity, and reliability. Internal validity is relevant only for explanatory or causal case studies. It is not addressed in this section.

Construct validity establishes the correct operational measures for the concepts being studied. Three tactics suggested by Yin (2003) are to use multiple sources of evidence, establish a chain of evidence, and have key informants review drafts of the report. These tactics are used to minimize the distorting effects of the researcher's subjective judgments. As stated above, the SIRB research protocols dictated that this is a retrospective study that used archival data. Therefore, the research participants were not given access to drafts of the reports. Drafts of the narrative case studies were circulated to volunteers who participated in the meetings for review; their comments were incorporated into the final text as appropriate. The data were not subjected to qualitative data analytics such as coding or categorization to construct a logical chain of evidence.

Given the inherent imbalance in the relationship between a volunteer and a lifer in prison, the validity of the questionnaires is weak.

External validity asks whether the findings can be generalized. Case study research focuses on a small set, sometimes as small as $N = 1$. This test of validity asks whether the results are applicable to larger sets or confirms a broader theory. As no other Constellation facilitators are working with lifers in prison in the United States, the entire set for the experiences documented in this study is $N = 1$. Further, no attempt was made to correlate the Growing Together group at Bay State Correctional Center with any other group of lifers in prison. Therefore, for this research, no claim of external validity was made.

The last criterion established by Yin (2003) is reliability. Reliability in case research means that if the study was duplicated, the findings and conclusions would be consistent. Again, because this retrospective study used archival data, there is insufficient documentation of the procedures even to begin to make the research replicable. However, even if the Growing Together meetings had been recorded and transcribed, they could never be repeated. Each Constellation is unique, nonreplicable, and inconclusive. Under this definition, these data are not reliable.

In measuring the proposed research against Yin's criteria for evaluating the quality of research, the results are neither valid nor reliable. Some proponents of narrative research assert that the concept of validity is not a useful determinant. Riessman (1993) suggested that the standard criteria for establishing case study validity are largely irrelevant for narrative research. One does not typically expect that a personal narrative

needs to be corroborated by multiple sources of evidence or be replicable to be consistent or truthful.

Riessman (1993) proposed alternate criteria for the evaluation of quality in narrative research that includes: persuasiveness and plausibility, coherence, and pragmatic use. Under these criteria, the case studies may qualify as worthwhile contributions to scholarship.

According to Yin's (2003) criteria, we cannot assert validity or reliability for this claim. However, employing Reissman's (1993) standards, we can point to 25 years of estrangement, a Constellation set up around this issue, and the prisoner's testimonial to the change. If presented well, these nine case studies will be seen as plausible, logically coherent, and relevant to the 2.3 million prisoners in the United States (Pew Center for the States, 2008), their families, mental health care providers, and correctional workers responsible for managing their incarceration.

Data Collection Procedures

The Principal Researcher began volunteering with the Growing Together III group at the Bay State Correctional Center in September, 2004. In 2006, the volunteer who coordinated the program suggested that we give the group members a questionnaire to evaluate their participation in the meetings. He was interested in understanding how the participants felt about the process. The questionnaire, which served as the archival research instrument for this study asked:

(1) Why are you here?

- (2) What issue did you present when you set up your family system using the Constellation process?
- (3) What was your experience of your own Constellation?
- (4) Describe your experience as a representative or observer of other Constellations.
- (5) Describe any perceived benefits or unwelcome effects that you believe resulted from your participation in this process.
- (6) Has the issue you presented changed since you set up your Constellation?

These archived program evaluation questionnaires were submitted to the Massachusetts Department of Corrections. A research proposal that requested their release was submitted to the department and approved. A copy of the approval letter was previously submitted to the SIRB. The questionnaires are in the possession of the researcher.

In addition to this questionnaire data, the principal researcher asked outside volunteers who participated in these meetings to expand and enrich the descriptions of the Constellation processes. The data from the questionnaire, the input from volunteers, and the principal researcher's notes and recollections were woven into case descriptions aimed at capturing the depth and meaning of the group members' experiences using the Constellation process.

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

This study was designed to serve as an exploratory introduction to the Family Constellation process. More rigorous research designs that will shorten the list of delimitations and limitations to a manageable length are left to future researchers.

The theoretical research was delimited by the parameters of scope and length imposed on dissertation-level research. Certain topic areas that are relevant to the history and philosophy of the Family Constellation approach were not examined. These include Jungian and Freudian psychology and Buddhist and Taoist philosophy. The responses to each of the four theoretical research questions could be greatly expanded. The major delimitation of the case method research is that the exploratory, narrative case descriptions are based on a single group of incarcerated men in a Massachusetts state prison who attended monthly meetings with a facilitator who used the Family Constellation process.

The results of the case research are limited in that the demographic characteristics of the prisoners are unknown, and in any event, are unlikely to be representative of any other group of prisoners. The Family Constellation process has not been previously documented or studied in English language scholarly literature. The facilitator led Constellations in an eclectic style that is not necessarily representative of other Constellation facilitators. Because of the restrictions imposed under guidelines for the protection of human research participants, the data set consisted of archival program evaluation forms administered and collected by a third party. The researcher was not permitted to record any of the sessions or take written notes. As a result, the data are limited in depth, inconsistent, subject to bias, and insufficient for coding and

characterization analysis. The research participants were not permitted to be involved in the study beyond the completion the questionnaires; they could not review drafts of the case studies or provide supplemental data to expand on their written responses. The researcher served a dual role as the Constellation facilitator that inherently introduces bias into the narrative stories; the author has a strong incentive to cast the presentation in as favorable light as possible.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Introduction to Case Studies

The Massachusetts Department of Correction and the SIRB approved a research protocol for the protection of human participants that did not permit collection of basic demographic data, criminal records, or prison terms for any of the members of the Growing Together III group. The descriptions of race, age, and criminal past, years served, and prospects for eventual release that follow are all approximated. Some details were modified to obscure the men's identities.

The sessions were not recorded in any form. The reconstructions of dialogue and events are based on personal recollection, confirmed to the extent possible by other volunteers who were present. These are displayed in normal text. Quotations from the handwritten questionnaires have been edited for grammar, syntax, punctuation, spelling, and continuity. They are displayed in block text.

Case 1: James

Background Information

James was acknowledged as the group elder. He was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole in 1963 for being accessory to a murder committed during an armed robbery. He had been in prison 45 years. In his questionnaire, James took extra pages to write about his life.

My mother gave me up and put me in a children's orphanage when I was a baby. I never met or knew my father, not even his name. My mother took that secret to her grave.

They put me in a foster home. When I was seven, my foster father sexually assaulted me, almost choking me. The next day, I told my teacher in school. I was very scared what my foster father would do to me for telling on him. But, I did not have to worry because the teacher never told anyone. She only told me, “Everything will be alright.”

My mother took me back when I was 10. Her husband abused me emotionally and physically many times. He often drank and beat me. I hid behind my pain with drugs and alcohol. Never knowing my father, not trusting anyone or being allowed to express how I felt inside, made me feel powerless and angry. I took my anger out on a lot of innocent people.

When he was 18, a couple of friends decided to rob a bar near closing time. James guarded the door. When the bartender refused to give up the cash in the register, James’s codefendant shot and killed him.

James was one of the founding members of the Growing Together III group. He rarely missed a meeting. At a check-in some months after his second Constellation, he casually told a story that underscored how vulnerable these men are in their daily lives. Earlier that week, he was transported to a larger prison’s infirmary for medical tests and an exam. When these were completed, he was brought to a holding room to wait for the van. The corrections officer on duty told him, “It says on my computer, you have been transferred here permanently. I can’t let you leave.”

James was nonplussed, “What do you mean I’ve been transferred? I’m only here to see the doctor.” The officer answered, “Not according to the computer. You can’t go anywhere until this is straightened out. That’s not going to be until tomorrow at the earliest. I’ll find you a cell here for the night.”

Such capricious upsets are familiar in the life of an inmate. James had no recourse, no one to call or to whom he could appeal, no advocates or representation. He was no stranger to this larger facility; it represented a serious downgrade in terms of

living conditions. As he sat in the holding room, he grew more anxious and concerned, while keeping focused on his hard-earned optimism and positive attitude.

When the van driver from Bay State arrived, the guard told him James would not be allowed to return. He responded, “What are you talking about? He’s not been transferred.” The two staffers argued briefly before the driver said, “I don’t care what your computer says, I’m not letting James spend a night here. He’s coming with me.” With that they left. James was well aware of being powerless against the whims of bureaucracy and also inspired by the compensating power he gains from being a loving person.

I should disclose that this research study would likely not exist without James’s strong support. At several crossroads in the process, he used his leadership position within the group to encourage the research. For just one example, when I presented the Informed Consent form to the group, I read through it in its entirety and explained it carefully. I stressed that the research had been designed to minimize as much as possible any potential physical, psychological, and social risks. That said, these precautions were not guarantees. The case studies use pseudonyms and altered personal information to protect the participants’ anonymity. However, the prison superintendent, staff, corrections officers, and others have access to the final document, if they choose. Because the group is small and the basic details of their lives are unique, I cannot mask the men’s identity from them. On several occasions, I urged them to consider these risks carefully before agreeing to participate. James responded,

I can’t leave this place, but you don’t have to come in here. You come of your own free will. What I’ve gotten from these Constellations has meant the world to me. Thanks to you, a great weight has been lifted off my shoulders. When you write your report, maybe someone will read it and learn what it’s like for us in

here. Maybe I can help someone else who is feeling like I used to feel. It doesn't bother me who knows about it. It's a privilege you are writing about us.

Although several members of the Growing Together group chose not to participate in the research, James's stance set the tone for the majority.

These concerns reflect back on my moral choices in composing the case studies. As I wrote, I was aware of the corrections officers from the story above reading over my shoulder. I was bound to not distort the facts *and* to safeguard the welfare and minimize the aversive impact of the research on the participants. In this regard, I was guided by my former teacher John Gardner (1978, 1983), who taught me that moral writing is created out of a deep and honest concern for a vision of life that is worth pursuing.

James's Constellations

The first time I came into Bay State was the first time I had been inside a prison for any reason. My previous volunteer activities focused on issues revolving around ethnic conflict between Jews, Germans, and Palestinians and the broader question of war and peace (Cohen, 2005, 2008). The volunteer coordinator of the Growing Together program invited me because the group needed facilitators each Saturday. Having never used Constellations in such a setting, I was uncertain how I would be received and questioned whether the process would be appropriate for the group.

My plan was to proceed cautiously. At our first meeting, I encouraged the men to forego setting up a Constellation, in favor of introductions and a few preliminary exercises. James encouraged the members to jump in, and one of them presented an issue regarding his relationship with his daughters (Cohen, 2006a).

The next month, James said he wanted to work. He said,

Even though I did not hold the gun or pull the trigger or ever intend to be part of a murder, I feel totally responsible for the bartender's death. I can't get the memory out of my mind. I'm standing by the door. My buddy goes up to the bar, pulls out a gun, and shoots the bartender dead. He looked me in the eye. I'll never forget it. Can you help me?

I asked James to select a representative for his victim. The two of them stood face to face. James became very emotional. He expressed his regret in a heartfelt voice. I brought in a third representative for Fate and had the two men stand side by side, facing this abstract archetype. The victim had been angry at first. Hearing James's remorse softened him. Slowly, the two men moved toward Fate, eventually coming together in a circle. The movements were austere and did not need explanation. The reality is that the victim was dead and James was alive; they are joined by their common fate. There was no forgiveness, but there was recognition that further vengeance or sacrifice served no good purpose.

On his questionnaire, James wrote,

I wanted to face the person that was killed. I am so sorry for what happened that night. Even though my codefendant killed you, I felt I pulled the trigger. That was a very emotional Constellation for me, but I felt a lot of relief.

About a year afterward, James asked to set up a second Constellation. Four years after he was imprisoned, James was befriended by a Catholic chaplain. The priest became James's surrogate father, spiritual teacher, and best friend. James recounted that during his first years in prison, he was continuously getting into fights and receiving discipline reports from correction staff.

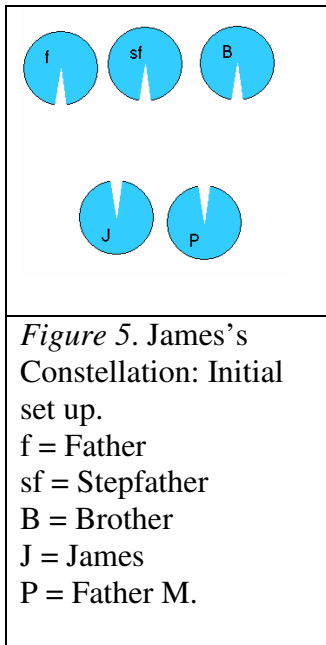
I thought Father M. would leave me just like all the other people in my life. But he never gave up on me. He only encouraged me to stay focused and always do the best I can. He has been my friend for 38 years. Over the years, I started to see him as more than just a friend; he was the father I never had. I have survived all these years because of him.

At the time of this meeting, James had just learned that Father M., then aged 80, had terminal lung cancer. James awakened at 3:00 a.m. every day to exercise, meditate, and pray. He had given a lot of thought doing a Constellation to allow him to deal with Father M.'s impending death.

James set up representatives for his father, brother, stepfather, and Father M. He stood across from the family members and spoke a soliloquy to each one (see Figure 5). He confronted the father, "Here's your son you abandoned. Look at me. I was convicted of murder as a boy and sent to prison for the rest of my life. Look what you did to me." His eyes were wet with tears.

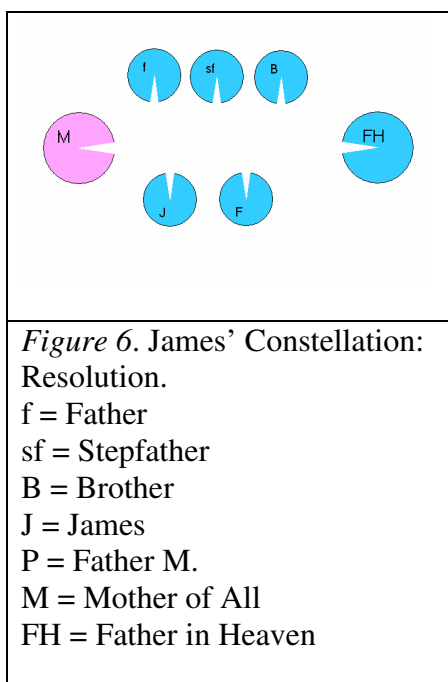
His brother had also abandoned him, never making contact after he was imprisoned. "Where are you? What happened to you? How could you disappear off the face of the earth and leave me here alone?" His stepfather was an alcoholic and abuser. James described in harsh detail the abuse and beatings he suffered at the hands of this man.

Then he turned to the priest, whom he had placed at his side. Through all the years of isolation and incarceration, Father M. had always visited and always been kind, even sending a small monthly allowance. James expressed his love and heartfelt thanks to the only person who had stood by him as a constant source of friendship, support, and guidance. Turning back to the trio of "sinners," James said, "I forgive you all from the bottom of my heart." His expression of forgiveness felt large and sharp, like he was running a sword through them as well.



To this point, with so much speaking, the process was closer to a role-play than a Constellation. I asked myself whether James's forgiveness could go further. I suggested to James that he be silent and placed a representative for the Mother of All (a woman volunteer) to the left, and a man for God in Heaven to the right. In this configuration, these two figures stood at opposite poles with the other representatives between them, as shown in Figure 6.

As the room grew silent and still, we felt the presence of something sacred. The perspective shifted, with these five individuals now framed by the profound vastness of all creation. The image that emerged was the Mother as an archetype of the source from where everything comes. Opposite her was the Father, in this scene symbolic of where everything goes in the end. On this scale, everyone comes into life, lives for some time, and dies. The saints are neither bigger nor better than the others. As the novelist Shirley Hazzard (1980) wrote, "Of those who had endured the worst, not all acted nobly or consistently. But all, involuntarily, became part of some deeper assertion of life" (p. 171).



After taking this in for some time, James said to each representative, "I agree." Gone was the sharpness of before. This was forgiveness, based not on judgments of virtue and sin, but on deep compassion and humility.

James reflected on his experiences in his questionnaire:

I was carrying all this weight. I hated my father for abandoning me, my stepfather for the beatings, my brother for disappearing, and myself for all the harm I have done, especially being involved in a murder. Because of the Constellations I have been able to feel

like I am *somebody*, be open-hearted, be patient, be forgiven. Now I walk a spiritual path, with wisdom, compassion, and truth in my life.

When I came to prison, I felt alone, like a bird unable to fly because my wings were broken. For many years I was in darkness. These Constellations gave me a portion of my life that was missing. The wings mended.

Case 2: Barry

Background Information

Barry is an African American in his 50s. Barry was 18 years of age and on parole from a crime committed in another state when he and two acquaintances planned a robbery to acquire illegal drugs. Barry approached a stranger on the street, a 24-year-old recent business school graduate. The two exchanged a few innocuous words before Barry shot the man in the face with a handgun, killing him instantly. He was arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

Barry had dropped out of high school. In prison, he completed his high school equivalency diploma, continuing his education through prison programs earning

associate, bachelor, and masters degrees. During the 1980s, he was granted work-release assignments and weekend furloughs. Through these activities, and subsequent in-prison programs, Barry became active as a counselor for at-risk youth. He explained his commitment to working in the community:

I can be of service to others. I believe I can encourage people to make the strides they need to change negative behavior. I present workshops, and oftentimes I say, "I was a teenage killer." I share my story. People see that I'm much more than that today. My message is not only for prisoners but for people in the community who are doing things that are wrong. I give them encouragement and hope that they can change too. There is a possibility for positive change, regardless of how many years a person has been incarcerated.

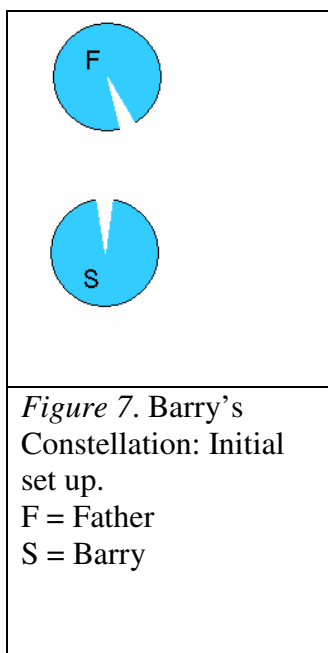
Barry is an unusually articulate and charismatic man. Through his participation in academic and volunteer programs, he has developed friendships with numerous community leaders. They, in turn, have become advocates for his efforts to obtain a governor's commutation.

Barry's Constellation

Barry asked to set up a Constellation. He was the second child in a large, stable, and tight-knit family. He loved and respected both his mother and father and had close relations with his siblings. In more than three decades of incarceration, he enjoyed visits from family members nearly every week. The support he received from his family uplifted him and gave him strength to endure the hardships of prison.

He said his issue is that from the day of his arrest, his father never visited him. This pained him immensely, a pain made worse and irreversible when his father died in 1999. He strove always to keep a positive outlook in word and deed, but whenever he thought of his father, he felt empty and sad. He asked whether a Constellation might bring him peace of mind and help him to understand his father's unyielding scorn.

I suggested that he begin by setting up a representative for his father and himself. He asked two of the Growing Together men to stand in the Constellation and placed them in the circle. He placed them about five feet apart, as shown in Figure 7.



After giving the representatives several minutes to tune their perceptions, I inquired what they were feeling. The son reported feeling drawn to the father and saddened by the lack of eye contact. The father said he was aware of the son's presence, but did not want to look at him. He lacked concentration and felt somewhat disconnected from the process.

I asked a third representative to stand in to meet the father's gaze. I did not name this representative, nor did I know

who he was.

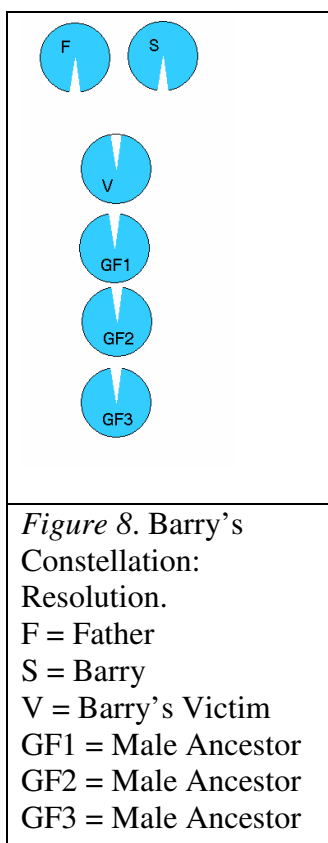
In general, when a parental figure in a Constellation is staring off or looking at the ground, the facilitator can bring in a nameless representative to fill the empty space. One of the principals of the Orders of Love articulated by Hellinger (2001a, 2003; Hellinger et al., 1998) is that everyone who belongs to the family system has an equal right to their place and cannot be excluded. The representative who is looking at something that is not there may be emotionally connected with an excluded person. Bringing in a representative as I did is a way to test whether this possibility resonates with the representatives.

I placed the representative to the right of Barry's representative. This addition immediately heightened the emotional energy. The son felt frightened and moved away.

The father's interest picked up; he felt emotionally drawn to this new figure, and also, suddenly very sad. The new representative felt a strong surge of energy in his body and a mixture of emotions. He was angry at the son and shared the father's sadness. With the introduction of this new representative, in the space of a few moments, the Constellation shifted from being flat and ambiguous to being highly charged.

I sat briefly with Barry. He appeared stricken and was fixated on the new representative. "Do you have any idea who that could be?" I asked. He responded, "That must be K. That's the man I killed." Part of the phenomenological process is that such conjectures can be tested by the facilitator, client, and representatives. Barry's representative and the victim himself supported this identification. The father said, "There's someone else behind him."

I asked another representative to stand behind the victim. The father looked past the victim to this new representative. He reported that his feelings toward this man were sadness and love; the man said he felt drawn toward the father with love. I brought in two more representatives, thereby creating a male generational line behind the victim. I asked Barry to stand next to his father, which he did willingly. The father was able to receive him. The Constellation then looked as depicted in Figure 8.



With the father and son so aligned, facing the victim and representatives of their common male ancestry, the enmity and emotional distance between them melted. Figure 7 depicts Barry's emotional perspective, "My father won't look at me. He won't visit me." When Barry stands with his father, he sees as if through his father's eyes. In Figure 8, he sees what his father could not bear to look at, that Barry and his victim stand at the head of a long line of victimization and perpetration that is the burden born by many African Americans who are descended from slaves and slave owners.

It was not hatred but sorrow and grief that prevented the father from visiting. The father's pain and disappointment

was so great because his love for Barry was so great. With this shared recognition, the two could look at each other with love and compassion.

When asked whether the issue had changed afterwards, Barry wrote,

The Constellation provided a broader view of my father. It's been several years and I know my relationship with my mother [who is living] has improved. The dynamics between my siblings continues to evolve in our community activities. As an older brother, I try to provide a glimpse of the past to help pave the highway towards the future. Constellations broadened my worldview. I feel more focused on task objectives.

Barry continued to press his case for a governor's commutation. He elicited support from the founder of an advocacy group for families of murder victims. Other than Barry, this man had never offered formal support on behalf of an offender in a parole or commutation case. He said about Barry,

I do work in the victim community. I've been into a lot of different prisons. I've had conversations with a lot of offenders, a lot of killers. When I had the

opportunity to speak with [Barry] what struck me most about him is that he gets it. He gets what he did. And that's really pretty rare.

Because [Barry] understands what he did, because he can articulate that in an unvarnished, clear way, I think he has the ability to actually prevent others from following the trail. Having Barry reintegrated into the community would be an act of crime-prevention. It's a very special person who can take what he has done and use it to prevent another offender from pulling that trigger. Barry can possibly save another family from knowing the pain of the funeral parlor and the emptiness of the graveyard. (Anon., personal communication, November 1, 2007)

Case 3: Ted

Background Information

Ted is of Anglo-European descent and appears to be around age 50. He grew up in a violent family with alcoholic parents. He recalled frequent severe fist beatings from his father. After one of these beatings, when he was about age 13, his father left him crumpled and bleeding on the floor in his family's home. His mother's response was to kick him forcefully several times. He believed his parents were monsters.

In his 20s, he parked his car illegally and went out for a night of drinking. The car was towed. In a rage, he attacked an employee at the tow lot with a tire iron, beating him literally to pieces. After his arrest the next day, the police brought him to see the patch of pavement where blood and flesh were spread. He was sentenced to 30 years to life.

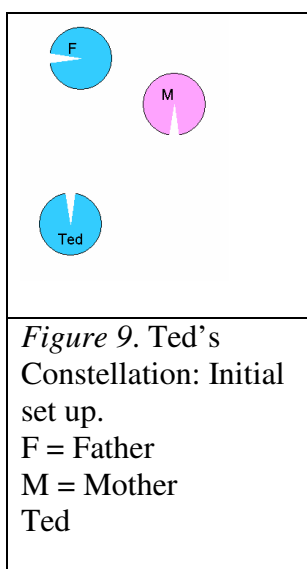
When I first met Ted, he said very little during the check-ins. He had pronounced tremors in his hand and an involuntary habit of touching his face. One of the women volunteers recalled that when she first met him, she felt unsettled in his presence. She conjectured that his withdrawn expression, trembling hands, and the unusual angle at which he carried his head betrayed troubling emotions that he could not allow himself to acknowledge or outwardly express. He has since become more vocal in the group and has

set up three Constellations: one concerning his relationship with his parents, one concerning his crime and desire for forgiveness, and the third regarding a woman, Jane, with whom he shared a love relationship.

Ted's Constellations

Ted's first Constellation was about his relationship with his parents. In describing the issue, he wrote, "I wanted to be able to forgive my parents once and for all. For being beaten by both parents I had a lot of anger. It was a burning hole I couldn't deal with."

I asked Ted to set up representatives for his mother and father. Once they were placed and given a few minutes to perceive, I asked him to put in a representative for himself. The initial set up of the Constellation was as shown in Figure 9.



When I checked in, Ted's representative reported feeling frightened and weak. Even though his father was at a distance, it felt too close. He was interested in his mother and hurt by her unwillingness to make eye contact. The representative for the father reported that he felt little connection to anyone or anything. The mother said that she was aware of the others but unable to connect with them. Ted wrote in his questionnaire,

It was a scary process at first. I did not know what would be opened up deep inside me. There were a whole lot of feelings and emotions in constant struggle with one another. But I felt safe. I actually felt the process as we went through it. It was the support from the others that made the difference.

I brought in additional representatives for the paternal and maternal ancestral lines. It became clear that violence and alcoholism ran through the family like a plague. When Ted was able to perceive that, his attitude toward his parents softened. Despite

being raised in an environment of violence and alcoholism and then being incarcerated for murder, Ted was grateful to be alive. We did not find forgiveness for his parents, only the recognition that he and they were caught up in a maelstrom of violence that was overpowering. He wrote,

The benefit for me was that I had always seen my parents as monsters. But when I finished the Constellation, I could see that my parents were people who had problems. I had never been able to do that and in a funny way that's a breath of fresh air to me. To a large degree, I am not bothered about forgiveness. There are moments of peace and tranquility.

Several months later, Ted told us that after 30 years of incarceration, he would have his first parole board hearing. His question was, "How can I ask the state for mercy when I cannot forgive myself for what I did?"

I asked for a volunteer to represent the victim. Charlie (a Growing Together member) immediately raised his hand and stepped into the circle. Without a word, he lay on his back on the tiled floor, slightly spread-eagled with his eyes closed. Ted stood before him. The victim lay perfectly still. Ted stood over him for several minutes, shaking, tears wetting his cheeks, growing weaker with each breath. This portrayed the present situation. There was no opening for forgiveness. Any attempt to foster it would be forced and false.

I asked the victim what he was feeling. He said, "Nothing. Absolutely nothing." There was no door to forgiveness because the victim was gone forever, thus could not grant it, and Ted had no right to fabricate it.

Intervening, I asked the victim to stand and face Ted with his eyes open. After a few minutes, the victim grew angry over the injustice of his life being terminated senselessly and needlessly. Ted was bereft and hopeless.

I asked Ted to state succinctly the honest truth: “I killed you and I lived. Had I not killed you, we both would have lived.” He added, “I am sorry.” This softened the victim somewhat. It felt slightly better to be seen and acknowledged.

Next, I brought two male volunteers to stand shoulder to shoulder with the victim. They represented anyone in the offender’s life, then and in the future, who angered, offended, threatened, or harmed him. I suggested these words for Ted to say:

This is my solemn vow. [To the two new representatives] Whenever I confront *you*, the man I killed will be present in my heart and mind. [To the victim] *You* will always be there to inform and guide my response.

On hearing these words, the victim reported that his attitude shifted. Being seen, seeing the offender’s remorse and hearing his promise to be remembered gave the victim a feeling of peace and a willingness to open his heart.

One by one, each prisoner was asked to step forward and stand with their friend. They silently bowed to the victim (of Ted’s crime and implicitly their crime as well). They told Ted, “I will support you in keeping your vow.”

The victim said he was now at peace with his own demise and with his killer. He said, “Maybe being remembered like this will save someone else’s life.” In this situation, complete forgiveness could not be achieved. It was a lifelong path that required earning a small measure with every step.

Charlie shared his experiences in his questionnaire:

I allowed myself to be used as an empty vessel to be filled with the energy, to allow my body to be open and my head clear. . . . Not right away, but afterwards, I felt freedom. The load is lighter. The issue carries me, I no longer carry it. After being in prison for 33 years, finding freedom is beautiful.

At another meeting, Charlie took me aside during the break and asked me whether I knew anything about interpreting dreams. I replied that it was not my area of expertise

but that he was welcome to tell it to me. He later copied it over from his journal and included it with the questionnaire.

Had a dream last night of a person I never met in person. She is dead. But although we never met, she knew me, knew I was a friend of Ted, who we both are connected with. Ted is a good friend I knew for years. He shares in a group about his relationship with Jane, also some letters from her.

In the dream, I walk into a building, hung up my coat, and joined a circle of people, men and ladies all sitting in the circle on folding chairs. As soon as I sat down, a lady said to me in a loud voice, "Where is he? Why did you let him do that? You were his friend. I trusted you."

I asked her, "Who are you talking about?"

She said, "You know who. Ted."

I then stated as she yelled on, "Who the heck are you?"

She shouted, "I AM JANE!"

I awoke.

Charlie was mystified. Did the dream come from his imagination, from her spirit, or from some form of external energy? Did the dream contain a hidden message? How could this Jane know that he was a friend of Ted? Is it possible to be visited in dreams by souls of the dead? His questions gained more potency after he told Ted about the dream; Ted showed him a photograph of Jane and he recognized her face from the dream.

At the time of Charlie's dream, Ted was in a deep depression over Jane's death. During one meeting he told us that his heart felt pitch black. He wrote,

I had known Jane for 25 years. For the last 20 of those years she wanted more than a friendship and I wouldn't have anything to do with it. Inwardly, I wanted to, but was terrified of hurting her or being the big failure and disappointment to her. It was selfish of me not to try and be in that relationship.

In the weeks leading up to the second anniversary of her death, Ted's grief was unbearable. At times his mood grew so dark he plotted ways to end his own life. He confided his private pain and shame to Charlie, who, remembering his dream, felt

compelled to intercede. Charlie did his best to support and encourage Ted. He recalled Jane castigating him, “Where is he? Why did you let him do that? You were his friend. I trusted you.”

The next time I came in, Charlie told me before we sat down for the check-in that Ted was in need of a Constellation. He asked me to hold the space for him. When it was time to begin the Constellations, I asked Ted whether he wanted to present an issue and he agreed. He said he wanted to clear a path so that on the anniversary of Jane’s death, he could sit and make contact with her spirit that lived in his heart. He wanted to tell her that he did care about her, needed her, and truly loved her. He wanted to say these things without being overcome with remorse and grief.

The Constellation itself was simple and emotional. I asked Ted to pick a representative for Jane and himself and to place them in the circle. I next brought in a woman to stand behind Jane and a man to stand behind Ted. They represented the fathers and mothers who had been born, lived amidst the struggles, joys, and heartaches of life, passed life on to a new generation, and then died. Finally, I asked Ted to stand in his place in the Constellation. He and Jane’s representative stood across from each other.

The volunteer who represented Jane reported that she strongly felt this woman’s presence; it was the most emotionally heightened experience she had ever had in a Constellation. At first, the overwhelming emotion was a mixture of heartache and frustration that Ted was not able to reciprocate her love. She desperately wanted to love him and be loved in return, but he was as imprisoned emotionally as he was physically.

These are the feelings reported afterward by the volunteer. In the moment, the two stood facing each other in silence. As their inner emotions built, they both began to shed

tears. The representative for Jane reached out toward Ted. They took hands and symbolically embraced. The volunteer reflected afterward on what occurred:

The impulse to reach out to embrace him came from the presence of Jane's spirit. She needed him to know, "I love you. I care about you. I miss you." Facing him, Jane did not care about his failings or inadequacy. She well understood how wounded and fearful he was. She needed to convey her eternal love. Her message was, "I love you. You can take this embrace for the rest of your life."

In his questionnaire, Ted wrote,

I am always amazed at how the process works. When you sit and watch the representatives, it is like being a ghost watching your life. You can see the healing take place. Sitting outside you feel distant and cold, but when you placed me in with my representative I could actually feel what was taking place. I got to feel the strength and healing from within.

For seven days after my Constellation, I had a recurring nightmare of having a tiger pouncing upon me. As it pounced I would waken and I didn't know why. I figured out it was an abandonment issue I had with Jane. When I realized that, the dream stopped.

On the second anniversary of Jane's death, I did a private ceremony for myself. I sat and had a conversation with her in my mind for two and a half hours. I told her all the things I didn't have the courage to say when she was alive. As a human being, I sure must have been a very poor one, that's for sure. I have been so fearful of opening up to someone, to anyone. I may never get another chance at a relationship in this lifetime, but I won't be afraid next time.

I have been able to forgive myself for the way I acted and treated Jane, and for the way I treated myself. I have a firm resolve to give myself the chance to care about and love someone. I will make the other person feel deserving of their feelings and emotions.

During a check-in several months later, Ted spoke more about his personal transformation. He told us that the blackness had enveloped him making him sometimes wish he were dead. Now, he said his heart was light gray, sometimes even lighter. He emphasized that he could then feel love and acceptance from his memories of Jane, instead of being overwhelmed with remorse and regret. The volunteer who represented Jane commented that although Ted was still physically in prison, his heart was set free.

He also spoke about his hands; in recent months their tremors had greatly diminished:

For years, I looked at these hands and hated that they were attached to me because of what they had done. Now, I can accept them. My father was a drunk who beat me my whole childhood growing up. Then I killed the pain with beer and ended up beating a man to death. It was a terrible crime, but it doesn't have to make me a terrible person forever. I can be a good person, a loving person, despite what I did.

Case 4: Rick

Background Information

Rick was of Anglo-Irish descent and in his late 40s. He was raised in a conservative rural community in the Midwest. His mother became pregnant with him when she was 17 years of age. The father fled from his responsibility by enlisting in the Navy and never returned. In that small town, such events were scandalous in the 1960s. Her parents intervened, bribing a man twice her age to marry their daughter and forcing her to marry him. The husband claimed paternity of Rick as his child.

A few years later, the couple had Rick's brother, Terry. From a young age, Rick's inner life and sense of self conflicted with the pretense of his family life. The family attended weekly services at an Evangelical Southern Baptist church that promoted the political views of the Christian Right, including strong opposition to premarital sex and homosexuality. When Rick was about seven years old, he discerned that the man he knew as his father was not his actual father, though he did not confront his mother to confirm this until he was 14. From an early age, he kept a second secret: he was sexually attracted to men. Given the social milieu in his community, he never confided these feelings to anyone out of fear of shame and rejection.

When Rick was 13, his mother and stepfather divorced. His brother Terry blamed Rick and their mother for the divorce. Rick felt innocent of blame and rejected Terry's accusations. The relationship between the brothers became antagonistic. When their mother revealed the truth of Rick's paternity shortly afterward, the breach between these half-brothers was complete. For the next 30 years, including the 25 during which Rick was incarcerated, the two hardly spoke, and then only briefly to argue.

When Rick graduated high school, he left his hometown and came to Massachusetts to attend college. He wrote,

My primary reason for moving so far away was to hide my homosexuality from my family—in order to maintain the belief that they, particularly my mother—still loved me. I believed if they knew who I really was they would disown me.

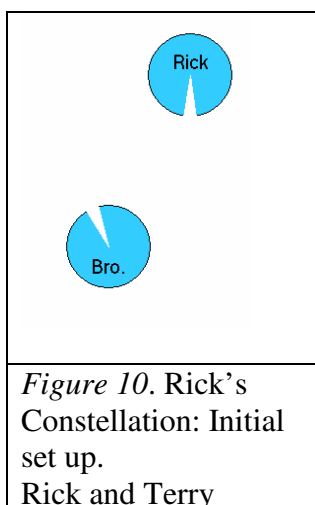
Within a year, Rick became romantically involved with a man, Freddie, who was also gay and closeted. Freddie's closely knit Roman Catholic family was from Puerto Rico and also virulently antihomosexual. To complicate the situation, Freddie was married and the father of a newborn son. As their love affair progressed, they recognized it was impossible to sustain their secret lives. They planned a robbery that would garner enough funds to resettle Freddie's wife and child in Puerto Rico and free them to be together, still closeted but less encumbered. The planned robbery went awry, resulting in Rick and Freddie committing murder. He was convicted at trial and has served 25 years of a life sentence. In retrospect, Rick saw the tragedy of the crime stemming from his and Freddie's desperation to find love with each other without losing it from their families.

Rick was pursuing an appeal of his case. He was represented by a nationally prominent law firm that had a pro bono legal staff that advocated on behalf of defendants whose civil rights may have been violated.

Rick's Constellations

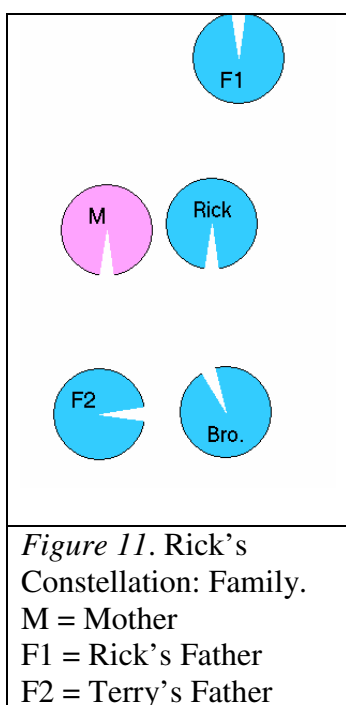
Rick presented personal issues and set up Constellations more than once. The first one concerned the issue of his estrangement from his brother. He explained that the two had only had two brief telephone calls during the past 15 years; both had rapidly disintegrated into arguments and ended abruptly. Rick claimed that his brother always acted hostilely to him since the divorce. "He blames me for the divorce. It wasn't my fault. My stepfather was abusive to my mother and me. It was his fault the marriage broke up." Then in his third decade of incarceration, Rick's only living relatives were his brother and mother. He expressed a deep yearning to have a meaningful relationship with his brother.

We began the Constellation with two representatives: one for Rick and one for Terry. Rick placed the representative for his brother diagonally in front of him, facing away as shown in Figure 10. It took several minutes for the two representatives to settle in their positions. As they experienced representative perception, Terry's representative reported that he was uncomfortable being close to Rick, while simultaneously sad from loneliness and angry at his brother. Rick's representative also felt sadness and a feeling of emptiness.



I then asked Rick to place representatives for his mother and the two fathers. He placed his mother near him, his actual father behind him at a distance and Terry's father with his son, as shown in Figure 11. Again, we allowed the representatives to stand in these positions for several minutes. The representatives became uneasy and avoided eye contact. Phil was representing Terry's father. He wrote in his questionnaire,

I automatically felt so close and protective of my biological son. I couldn't take my eyes from him. I felt I should stay near to support and protect him from his half-brother. I also felt indifference or resentment towards my stepson. I felt shame anytime I tried to look at my wife. I felt shame, guilt (without knowing why), and a feeling that my affections would not be welcome. Afterwards, when I mentioned it to the lady, she said she felt the same way towards me.



When I queried the representatives for the brothers, both reported that their feelings of ill-will toward each other had intensified. When Constellations portray a frozen quality of emotional stalemate, the facilitator faces three primary options: do nothing, add a new representative, or move the ones who are placed, or as Hellinger (2003a) offered, "Wait and see whether something emerges suddenly, like a flash of lightning, which seems essentially true and throws some light on the situation" (p. 4). In this instance, I sat, looked, and waited.

The insight that broke the stalemate was that Rick *was* directly responsible for his mother and stepfather's divorce, not in the sense of what he understood as his brother's accusation, that he had *done* something to wreck the marriage, but in an existential sense.

His conception set into motion a series of events. His father joined the Navy and left the community. His grandparents, against the wishes of his mother, paid off an older man to give the baby a name. The marriage was loveless and practically doomed from the start.

I proposed this to Rick. At first, he was defensive and rejected the suggestion. In a moment, however, he recognized its truth. This precipitated the unfreezing of the stalemate. As Rick wrote later,

My experience of the Constellation was an awakening, an opening up, or an acknowledgment, an *awareness* of Terry's hurt, his pain, his *grieving* over the loss of *our* family—the good and the bad of it. It was still his source of stability, safety, and comfort. All this and more were ripped away from him without consultation or any expression of sympathy, nor any explanation. This left Terry confused, sad, fearful, and angry.

The change occurred when (having all of the above new beliefs in mind) I approached Terry from a position of new understanding, compassion, and sorrow for his feelings of hurt and grieving. In great part these were his feelings; his hurt had never been acknowledged by me. I had not respected his feelings of loss. And likewise, he had not acknowledged how I had been hurt, which he has now done.

The acts by each of us of acknowledging, being aware of the other's feelings was a breaking down of the wall that separated us, allowing us to reconnect in ways that neither of us believed would ever happen.

At check-ins over the next year, Rick continued to report on an expanding relationship between him and his brother. They exchanged long letters and telephone calls on a regular basis. The culmination of their healing process occurred when Terry invited their now elderly mother to move 1,000 miles to the town where he and his wife lived. She had been in declining health, living alone, with one son incarcerated in Massachusetts and the other estranged from her. When Rick told us this news, he added, "There used to be a river between us that neither one could ever cross. Now, instead of a barrier, it's a river of love."

A year after his Constellation, Rick asked whether he could do another one concerning a traumatic incident from his childhood that continued to weigh heavily on him. When he was in junior high school, the school coach called him out in front of his classmates for being a “sissy.” At that age, Rick said he did not fully understand what being gay was.

I knew it was a bad thing to be and I knew being a sissy was a bad thing too. When Mr. S. called me a sissy in front of the class it was an emotionally crippling moment. I already knew I was different from the other boys, but I didn’t want others to see it. Mr. S. pointed out my difference that day in gym class. I was humiliated.

To begin the Constellation, I asked Rick to set up a representative for himself and his coach. Because there was a clear structural element presented in the issue, I asked Rick also to place a representative for his Shame. He chose a woman to represent Shame. The systemic perspective posits that chronic, overwhelming emotions such as shame, grief, emptiness, anxiety, and so on, can be echoes of past traumas. The question that follows from this is: Whose shame is Rick carrying? or more directly: Who is Shame? In this case, the representative for Shame knew her identity quickly. Rick agreed. Shame was his mother. Shame was Rick’s birthright: a 17-year-old girl’s scandalous pregnancy; the father’s abandonment; the grandparents’ connived marriage to the older man; and the false claim of paternity. These facts were all dark secrets, covered by a sham storyline presented to church and community. The mother carried this denial of reality as shame and the son felt it. Compounding this was Rick’s own secret kept from his mother, that of his sexual orientation. Being exposed as a so-called sissy in front of his classmates shattered this dissembled façade, exposing the unbearable reality of Rick’s true being.¹

¹ This exposition is for the reader’s benefit. In the Constellation, the realization came in a flash of insight and was not deconstructed as it is here.

The healing movement was to bring in a representative for Rick's actual father to stand with his mother. He could then permit himself to return what was theirs, which they acknowledged and lovingly received from him.

On later reflection, Rick wrote,

My experience was to give the shame back to my biological father and mother. They were the source of my first and original bag of shame. They made the decisions. I was an innocent child, born free of shame. I had taken on their shame and made it my burden. The act of giving back the shame was not just mindful, but felt in my heart. The experience also firmed up in my heart/mind that I have always been loved by my mother. Giving back the shame was a huge shift in feelings.

I embraced the part of me that others or even I may view as being feminine qualities—being sensitive to feelings, emotions, and the needs of others, etc. There's no shame in being different. Mr. S. was an ignorant man with no understanding/ability to nurture me to be the best person I could be. Mr. S. was a product of his environment. He probably thought he was doing the best he could. I have since forgiven him and given back the shame—it was never my bag of shame to carry.

Rick summarized the changes he experienced from the Constellation:

This experience showed me that my shame was not so much a burden of my mind and body, but of my heart and soul. At the end of the Constellation I felt some difference in my outlook. The process continued for many days as I sat and reflected upon the experience. If I had been expecting a quick and easy solution, I would have been disappointed. Because I did feel a dissolving of the shame, I knew the process would take hold. It made a difference in the way I felt inside.

Case 5: Rafael

Background Information

Rafael was born and raised in a large family in Puerto Rico. He appeared to be in his late 50s or early 60s. He was 35 years into a life sentence on a homicide charge. He rarely spoke about pursuing pardon or sentence commutation.

Four of his brothers died early; two others were alcoholics. His father, also a heavy drinker, was largely absent from the family, though he remained married and

supported the family economically. By his own account, Rafael was a heavy drinker and a drug dealer. He became involved in a running feud with another man who made several attempts on his life. One night, Rafael was home drinking when he was again targeted. He left the house armed with a gun, found the man, and fatally shot him.

Rafael was considered one of the leaders of the Growing Together III group. Occasionally during a group check-in, shared a story that began innocuously and ended ripe with meaning. For example, at one meeting around Christmas he told this story:

Christmas is always a happy time for me. The other day in the lunchroom they put out apples. I sat on my own at a table and carefully cut an apple into eight slices. It was a good apple and I ate slowly, enjoying it slice by slice. When I was a small boy in Puerto Rico, the only time we ever ate apples was Christmas day. My mother would buy a Christmas apple for her eight children. She sliced it into eight pieces and each child got one. I loved my Christmas apple. It was a real treat. When I was in the lunchroom, as I ate each slice I thought one by one about my brothers and sisters, my memories of each of them and what their life was like now. It brought me close to them and to my mother. I really enjoyed that.

In the 1980s, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts used inmate labor at state facilities. Rafael was assigned to a large state hospital that permanently housed residents with severe mental retardation. There he met Angela, who was on the staff. Over time, the two became involved in a love relationship.

During the 1988 presidential election campaign between Governor Michael Dukakis and Vice-President George Bush, the Massachusetts prison furlough and work-release programs became a major issue. Bush campaign manager Lee Atwater elevated the case of Willie Horton (Willie Horton Campaign Advertisement, 1988) into the centerpiece of a series of negative attack ads and speeches on crime. As a result of the political fallout resulting from these attacks, the program was discontinued in 1989 (Germond & Witcover, 1989).

No longer allowed to see each other at their hospital jobs, Angela visited Rafael in prison every Sunday without missing a week for nearly 15 years. She explained to him, “I am not easily discouraged by obstacles. I think we must always see the stones thrown in our path not as objects to trip us, but as something to step on to take us higher” (Anon., personal communication, December 8, 2005).

In early 2004, Angela was diagnosed with breast cancer. The Growing Together group prayed for her recovery at each week’s meeting. She continued to visit Rafael every Sunday, except when she was hospitalized. Realizing that her prognosis was bleak, she told Rafael that she wanted to get married. In September, they had a wedding ceremony in the prison visitor’s room. Rafael wrote,

She was surprised to see the setup I had for our wedding. She wasn’t expecting flowers, sodas, and a nice cake with a lot of strawberries on top. We could only invite five guests from outside. She loved the setting and I loved her happiness. There was singing and dancing. While we were dancing to “Over the Rainbow,” her eyes were closed with a nice smile on her lips. I didn’t want to ask her what she was thinking. I didn’t want to disturb her thoughts. Knowing that she was happy was good enough for me.

Her health continued to deteriorate. By November, she was too weak to walk.

After a friend brought her to visit Rafael, he recounted,

My whole body was in pieces, not only my heart. There was sadness, pain, and fear. Tears ran down my face. The only thing I could do was watch her, pray for her, and cry. Angela was my strength, but she also was my weakness. I couldn’t stand the pain of seeing her suffering and my not being able to help her.

Rafael’s Constellation

I came to the prison three days after Angela died. During the check-in, the men offered their prayers and condolences to Rafael in his grief. They shared stories of how she had touched their lives as well. When it was Rafael’s turn, he gave a long eulogy

about how they had met, their love and times together. He spoke eloquently, with great sorrow and tenderness.

He told us this story. Two days before she died, Rafael spoke to Angela on the telephone.

She said to me, “Rafael, I’m scared.” I said to her, Angela, “Before you were anything, you were in a place filled with only love. It was perfect. You never wanted to leave. Then your mother and father loved each other and drew you into your mother’s womb. Maybe you were afraid to leave this perfect place, but it was your time.”

“Then you were a tiny little baby growing in your mother’s belly. It was perfectly dark and warm and safe there. You could hear mama’s heartbeat. It was filled with love. After nine months, you grew too big. Maybe you were afraid and didn’t want to go in the world. But it was your time to be born.”

“Then you came into this world a little baby girl. There was a lot of love for you here. You grew into a child and then into a woman. Life is hard here. We suffer and are hurt all the time. When you got sick, you were afraid to go. You fought the cancer as hard as you could, but it is now it’s your time to leave. And it’s frightening for you.”

“Angela, when you left the place where you weren’t anything and went to the womb, you were scared. The womb was filled with love. When you left Mama’s belly and came into life, you were scared. Life, for all its troubles is filled with love. Now, when you are leaving life, you are scared. You don’t want to go. But where you are going, love is waiting for you. When it’s my time, I’ll see you there.”

She said to me, “Rafael, I’m not scared anymore.”

After the break, I suggested a ritual in which we set up representatives for Angela and her female ancestors, as a living altar. Then Rafael and the men could step forward to face them. We had several female volunteers that day. I set them up, one to represent Angela, another as her mother, another as her grandmother, and another as a maternal archetype. As soon as they were placed, the representatives rebelled against this Constellation as ceremony. The wife was very angry. The other women moved away from each other. Instead of a sacred altar, the scene looked like a disturbed nest of ants.

Hellinger (2001a) warned,

If someone sets up a Family Constellation according to a plan that he or she has worked out in beforehand, it never works. The hidden dynamics operating in the family only come to light gradually, step-by-step, during the Constellation, and they usually are a surprise. (p. 439)

Rafael confirmed with a nod that the representatives' behaviors were consistent with his understanding of the relationships between Angela, her mother, and grandmother. I worked with each representative to see what was missing, who needed to be acknowledged and honored, and what was needed for a satisfactory resolution. We worked this way for some time, effectively building the line of female ancestors on a solid foundation.

I began the ceremony by asking Rafael to select a representative for himself. He asked Colin to stand for him. I asked Rafael's representative to bow to the women. Without further prompting, he fell to his knees, his head touching the floor, his shoulders trembling. He held that position for about 3-5 minutes.

I did not inquire what he was feeling, but perceived the weight of his sorrow for his own losses, the loss of his victim, the weight of his life-long incarceration, and his grief for Angela's death. Simultaneously, I felt Angela's love and the strength radiating from the women standing with her. I asked Rafael to move beside the man representing him. Then, one by one, each of the men came forward to join him. They bowed to the women and to Rafael. I suggested they say, "I honor your loss. It's my loss as well. I will be your friend." Many added their own heartfelt condolences. The ceremony ended with all of the men standing in a phalanx behind the grieving husband, facing the women.

Afterward, Rafael reported that it was very painful for him to witness the conflict between Angela and her mother portrayed in the early stage of the Constellation. It fit his

understanding of their relationship, suggesting to him that her last days were troubled because she was unable to accept that she was going to die. He wrote about what was most difficult for him:

Here is this woman who has been on my side in good and bad, in health and illness, and now that she needs me the most I cannot be by her side to help her. . . . I felt that I was a failure to her.

A few days after the Constellation, a friend of Angela who was with her at the end contacted Rafael. She told him that in her final hours, the group by the bedside talked about their ideas of Heaven. Angela became peaceful, accepting her impending death and the idea that love awaited her. Rafael took great comfort from this news, as it stilled his fear that she had died in turmoil. A short while later, a second friend of Angela's called him and gave essentially the same report. Then, a third friend called to tell him that Angela had died in peace. Rafael wrote,

This brought peace to me because I did not know this before the Constellation. I believe the energy of the Constellation touched those people to let me know that she was at peace before she passed. Yes!

I understood that to love a wife with a terminal illness and not to be able to do anything to help feels painful and despairing. Nonetheless, focusing on the immense love we shared and cherished, which continues to be very alive in my heart, was the antidote to my pain, suffering and immense sense of loss. I don't deny that she is not physically present, but I can vividly feel her in the pure air I breathe, in the beautiful sunsets, and in a kind of gesture of a human being.

There is nothing better than life. Life is the most beautiful thing that God has given us. The dilemma with life is that nothing comes easy. To enjoy it we must understand that we are going to confront difficult situations every day. When difficult crises appear we may crumble, become confused and not know what to do. When we realize that pain, sorrow, compassion, suffering, love, and happiness are all part of the same package, we have learned a good lesson in life.

Case 6: Alex

Background Information

Alex, then in his mid-50s, came to the United States as an adult from his native Greece. At the time of his crime, he was married with young children. His crime was killing his wife in an unprecedented, spontaneous act of passion after learning she was involved in an affair. He had served nearly 30 years. Should he apply for and receive parole, he will be deported from the United States.

Alex was quiet, introspective, and impeccably polite. He always acknowledged each volunteer in attendance and thanked them for sharing their time with him and the group. When he did speak, his message was invariably nuanced, positive, and supportive. He attended the meetings to help himself become a better person, to gain new understanding of life's difficulties, and to be a source of support for others. He did not write in English, so his questionnaire was transcribed by one of the other group members.

Alex's Constellation

In one of my early visits to Bay State, Alex raised his hand when I asked who wanted to begin. He said he remained very angry with his mother's sister over an incident that occurred in the first year of his incarceration. His mother died a few years afterward and her sister was his last living relative from her generation. It pained him deeply to be incarcerated an ocean away from his homeland and estranged from the one person in whom he saw his mother's face.

I asked him to describe the event that breached their relationship. He told me,

Before I was sentenced, they held me in the county jail. My aunt lives in nearby and came to visit me. She suggested that I make arrangements for my mother to

fly from Greece to see me. It was a terrible time. Everyday, I sat in a jail cell and thought about what I had done to my wife, my children, my family, and myself. I missed my mother so much. I made all the arrangements through my sister. The day before my mom was flying to the U.S., my aunt came to the jail and told me telephone my mother and cancel the trip. She said the reason was my mother could not stay with her.

I was upset, mad, angry, and confused. My aunt suggested the visit in the first place, got me all excited and built up to see my mom. Then at the last minute she let me down for no reason.

Alex was infuriated at the time, but when his mother died without ever visiting him, the anger hardened in his heart. His aunt still lived nearby, but the two did not communicate. He wanted the Constellation to help him understand his aunt's actions.

I did not take notes on this early Constellation. From what I remember, we started with a representative for Alex and his mother and aunt. At first, Alex was only in contact with his own feelings of hurt, loss, sadness, and anger. When we added representatives for Alex's, father, wife, and children, the quality of the Constellation shifted dramatically. Alex had been deeply hurt and blamed his aunt. Sitting outside and observing the larger tableau, Alex could see that there was an ocean of hurt, loss, sadness, and anger surrounding him. His mother's sister saw this larger context: Alex's mother (who spoke no English) was to fly across the ocean to visit her son in a county jail where he was held for the murder of the mother of her grandchildren. The collective pain was immense; it was unfair to assign blame for the trip's failure to the aunt. The healing movement was for all of them to fall together in grief and love. They sobbed and held each other up. In spite of all that was done and all that was said, the love endured.

Alex wrote,

After the Constellation, I felt like a very different person. I wrote my aunt. She answered me, and included her phone number. We began talking by telephone. She even came up to visit me for the first time since my mother died. When she

visited, she explained why she made me cancel the trip. I now understand why.² Our relationship is good now. Besides giving me a better relationship with my aunt, it helped me be a better father. The Constellation was a gift.

Case 7: Colin

Background Information

Colin was a gregarious and witty white male in his mid-40s. He had an athletic build and competed in several of the prison's sports and fitness programs. He also participated in the facility's educational programs, having completed a bachelors degree and was working on a masters.

During the Growing Together meetings, Colin was often a source of comic relief. His humor was always affectionate. He maintained a running joke that he was the twin brother of an African American group member; their only resemblance was their shaved heads and alliterative first names.

Colin has served 20 years of a 30-35 year sentence for a violent rape against a woman he was involved with in an extramarital affair. At the time of his crime, he was a heavy drinker and prone to violent outbursts.

After several excruciating Constellations, Colin stopped attending the meetings. As I had no means to communicate with him, I assumed the worst; that his experiences had retraumatized or otherwise hurt him. Eventually, one of the other members told me that Colin had stopped attending the meetings because he found the Constellations too strong and disturbing. I next saw him at the annual volunteer appreciation day. He told me that the Constellations were good for him, but he could not handle any more of them.

² He did not elaborate the reason to me.

Colin's withdrawal from my Growing Together groups initiated a broad discussion during the months that followed. Although many members stressed the great benefits that they were receiving from Constellations, they agreed it was important to protect the well-being of the most emotionally vulnerable members.

From these discussions, the group and I became more attentive to these concerns. We concluded every Constellation with an exercise designed to release each representative from the emotional field of the Constellation and reground them in their own identity. When I saw a representative in either an especially heavy role or appearing emotionally taxed, I would add representatives to provide support and care. I might also inquire directly whether they wanted to withdraw and sit down, although no one ever did.

After an absence of about one and a half years, Colin returned to the Growing Together meetings. He submitted a written response to the questionnaire shortly before the deadline to participate in this research.

Colin's Constellation

Colin asked to set up a Constellation about his difficulty in connecting emotionally in love relationships with women. Many men have insecurities about their ability to love women fully. In Colin's case, this was more than the typical lament. His crime was committed against a woman with whom he was involved. He was asking to understand, and perhaps remedy, what he perceived as an inability to share intimacy. However, his question opened the door to look at the roots of his violent behavior.

We began with a representative for Colin and his father. The father turned his head away, leaving the son feeling abandoned and alone. I brought in a representative for

the father's father. After some time, this representative mirrored the father's movement and turned away, leaving *his* son feeling abandoned and alone, but even more so, angry. I brought in a fourth representative for the grandfather's father (see Figure 12).

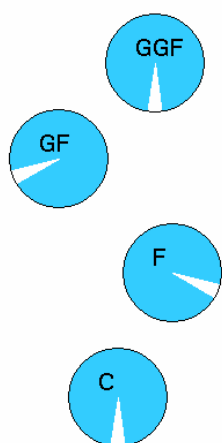


Figure 12. Colin's Constellation: Set up.
C = Colin
F = Father
GF = Grandfather
GGF = Great-Grandfather

I asked Colin to tell me a little about his father and grandfather. He said that his father was an alcoholic who routinely beat his wife and children; the grandfather did the same. I asked whether he knew anything about his great-grandfather, and Colin said only that he came to the United States from Ireland and was never spoken of in the family. Colin, who had been matter-of-fact at the start, grew outwardly emotional. He admitted that he too drank heavily and had been angry and violent, just like the father who he despised for this reason.

I commented that with the men in the family so prone to alcoholism and domestic violence, the boys born into the lineage are strongly pulled to follow the pattern. In his questionnaire, Colin wrote,

As I watched the representatives standing in the Constellation, my first thoughts were that this would accomplish nothing. But as the Constellation went on, I soon realized that this was far from the truth. Issues of abandonment, that I thought I had resolved with my father, came right to the fore.

I brought in two female volunteers to represent Colin's wife and the victim of his crime and two men for his sons. They stood in front of his representative. The enormity of the violence and pain behind and in front of him was palpable. As Colin recounted,

When representatives were placed in the Constellation for my victim, wife, and children, the raw emotion that this evoked was terrifying. I don't think I was ready for what I experienced that day. Love, hate, anger, compassion, and a host of other emotions came on so strong that I felt completely overwhelmed.

The resolution of the Constellation was for Colin to accept his male lineage. He said to his sons, "It ends with me," adding, "Even if it doesn't, I am still your father and you are my sons." He accepted responsibility for the harm he perpetrated against his rape victim and wife. The sons, who had originally felt themselves drawn in helplessly to continue the family pattern, now accepted their father as an insulator who would shoulder the burden of his own life and leave them free to have healthier relationships with women.

Colin wrote about his struggle with his feelings in the days following the Constellation:

The experience left me shaken for several days. I couldn't seem to stop the flood of raw emotions that kept rising to the surface over the course of those few days. To tell the truth, it scared me so much that I considered not attending another one.

He did come to the subsequent meeting, the one in which we set up a ritual for Rafael. Rafael asked Colin to represent himself, another very taxing and emotional role. Colin wrote,

I assured myself that I would experience nothing like I had the first time, as this was not my issue and I would only be a representative. Again, I was sorely mistaken. By the end of the Constellation, I was again caught in an emotional hurricane.

It was after these experiences that Colin elected to observe only. Even witnessing proved to be too upsetting and he stopped coming to the meetings that I facilitated.

Colin and I talked about the benefits and costs of these experiences to him. As a facilitator, my view was that the price of his emotional distress was too high to pay for the benefits he received. I am willing to shake people up but not to that extent.

Extrapolating from this single case, I became concerned that sometimes Constellations are too emotionally taxing on the participants and it was not always possible for me to discern when or whether that occurred. Afterward, I made a determined effort either to defuse the emotional energy in the circle or to add levels of support. Additionally, I have raised these concerns with the group members on numerous occasions and encouraged them to take good care of themselves and their friends.

Eventually, Colin returned to the Constellation meetings. In our discussions, he consistently argued that the emotional price he paid was well worth it for the benefit he received. The emotional content—his feelings toward his father, the urge to violent behavior, the shame he felt toward his victim and wife, the sorrow for his two decades of incarceration, the concern for his sons—all were circulating inside of him at all times. The Constellation merely concentrated the omnipresent soup of persistent feelings into a potent bouillon cube taken straight, with no chaser. He wrote,

At the time, the whole situation seemed overwhelming and I did not want to deal with it. What I have come to realize is that I am a better person for having these experiences. Even though the emotions were intense I feel I have come away richer for having experienced them. I can say for certain that there was a definite shift in certain aspects of my relationships, though perhaps not so for other aspects. Since I have start attending Constellations again, the strong emotions are still there, but I know better what to expect now. Even though they scare the hell out of me sometimes, when I feel them, I know I'm better for it. They make me feel alive!

The men, far more than I, were fully aware that they exist in a crucible built of their own personal histories, the acts and consequences of their crimes, and the daily ordeal of incarceration. Constellations turn up the heat in this crucible by laying bare this reality. The men participated from willingness, even burning desire, to use Constellations to forge greater dignity and compassion within themselves. From these intense and often painful experiences they emerge as stronger, more loving human beings.

Case 8: Phil

Background Information

Phil was in his late 50s and of Anglo-European descent. In about 1980, he was convicted of murder after pushing his wife down a flight of stairs in their home during an argument and fight. He claimed to have immediately called for medical assistance. He was serving a life term. In group meetings, he was soft-spoken and reserved, rarely interjecting his feelings or opinions into discussions. During the check-in and check-out, he was unfailingly polite and gracious. He had experienced life-threatening medical issues that kept him from attending some meetings. As with many of the men, facing death as a lifer is emotionally wrenching. On occasions, Phil shared his fears in this regard.

Phil's Constellation

From my first visits, an issue that came up many times was the men's estrangement from their family members. After we set up Constellations centered on this theme, men who were either clients or representatives reported that longstanding patterns began to shift. For example, Phil had not done his own Constellation but had represented others. He had not had a visit from his son in more than six years.

During the check-in, he reported that he was feeling especially good. The previous Sunday, his son came to visit. They had become estranged at the time of the birth of the son's first child, Phil's first grandchild. Phil's visit with his son lasted an entire afternoon. He reported that it was warm and loving, leaving him elated even a

week afterward. His son brought photographs of Phil's three grandchildren and told stories about each of them.

Several months later, during check-in, I shared a comment made by a neighbor whom I told about my prison volunteer work. He said, "That sounds like a good thing you are doing. Of course, I might not feel that way if I were a relative of one of their victims" (Anon., personal communication, April 9, 2005).

This statement was provocative as it implied that offering palliative relief to the offenders softens their punishment and betrays the victims. I posed this question to the group: Does benefiting the offender harm the victim? My reporting this comment touched a nerve. Many of the men had considered the question in depth and several offered thoughtful and emotional responses. In general, they expressed remorse; sympathy for their victims; and a desire for redemption from feelings of condemnation, self-hatred, and self-pity. They did not agree that receiving support to become better people was detrimental to those they had harmed.

When it was his turn, Phil, who was usually short-spoken and reserved, became emotional:

That comment really hits me hard. I've been in for 25 years for murder. It is hard for me to face the victims, and especially to realize there are always new victims from that one crime. I killed my wife, so I knew her whole family. I was close to them. Whenever I think about how they are all victims of my crime it pains me deeply. But what makes it worse are the new victims. My son has three children now: a 7-year-old girl; a 4-year-old boy, and a 3-year-old boy. When the youngest was born, I thought to myself, "Oh my God, another victim of my crime."

When will it end? How long will it take and how many victims will there be? My son tells me the 4-year-old is sort of withdrawn emotionally. He gets angry and acts out sometimes. I look at the photographs and hear the stories and I think to myself, "That's just how I was when I was a boy. He's just like me." And that really scares me. This is hard.

My son visited again a few weeks ago. He told me he is going bring the children next month. They want to meet me. There's a photograph of me on the wall. "That's your grandpa," my son tells them, "He lives in Massachusetts." That's all they know, that I live in Massachusetts, which is why I don't visit. I told my son, "You do what you need to do." But I can tell you now, I am dreading it. They are going have to drive up and see the walls, the towers, and the wire. They're going to go through the "trap." They'll have to tell those kids, "Here's your Grandpa. He's doing a life bit." It breaks my heart. It just really breaks my heart.

As he spoke, his voice choked and his eyes moistened.

The check-in continued. Several of the men acknowledged Phil's pain and distress. One of them, Alex, who is also incarcerated serving a life without parole term for killing his wife, spoke directly to Phil:

Phil, I know what you are going through because I went through it exactly myself. After a lot of years, my son came to visit with his two kids. They were about the same ages as yours. I was really afraid of it. I felt ashamed for them to meet me this way, and for what I had done. I didn't know what to tell them. But when they came, I just told them the truth. Not with a lot of details. I didn't tell them the details, but I told them the truth about what I did. And you know what? They only wanted to love me. They ran up to me and climbed on my lap and we hugged and kissed. We laughed together. They said, "We love you, Grandpa." That's all they cared about. They only wanted to love me.

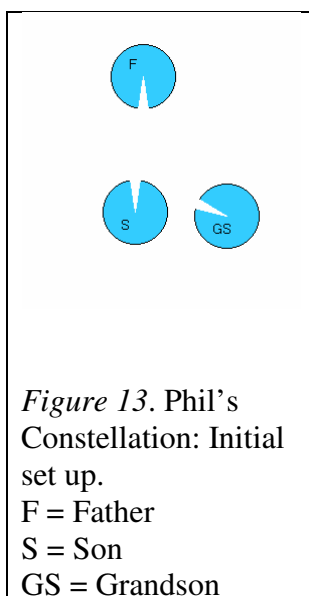
Now when I call on the phone, they make their dad give them the phone right away so they can talk to me. "It's Grandpa! It's Grandpa!" So we talk and I ask them questions about school and their friends.

It's so wonderful, Phil; so wonderful. Don't be afraid. They are your grandkids and you are their grandfather. Tell them the truth. They only want to love you.

When the check-in was completed, I asked Phil whether we could set up a Constellation to look at this issue. He accepted my offer.

I asked Phil to select three representatives: one for himself, one for his son, and one for his 4-year-old grandson. (We had no female volunteers that day).

Phil chose the representatives and set them up as shown in Figure 13. We sat, looked, and waited.



The representative for the father was erect and looking directly at his son. The representative for the son was restive, alternately looking at his father and the ground. His hands fidgeted nervously. The representative for the grandson looked at his father, stealing occasional glances at his grandfather.

I did not intervene, neither by inquiring of the representatives, nor suggesting movements, nor offering sentences to say aloud.

After several minutes, the representatives reached a discomforted and disturbed equilibrium. The father and son were connected, but neither was capable of approaching or reconciling with the other. The grandson shrunk in stature as neither elder could look at him. They stood in a mutual stalemate.

The movement that changed the dynamic was small but dramatic. The grandson reached out his hand toward his father. When the father took the hand, the emotions instantly shifted, as if a circuit connected and turned on the lights. The son moved toward the father. The father's distress melted. Slowly, the three came together, took hands, then fell into an embrace.

I asked Phil whether he wanted to take his place. His representative stepped aside and Phil became absorbed with his child and grandson.

In his questionnaire, Phil recounted how he felt when he took his place in the Constellation after the movement occurred:

My son had love and pride on his face and in his eyes. The child was hugging his father and looking towards me with wide eyes, seeing Grandpa for the first time. He had wonder in his eyes; sometimes smiling and kindness. . . . I saw pride and

love in my son's eyes, but no hate or anger in any of them. I realized I was worrying for naught and could face them honestly and be myself.

At the next month's meeting, Phil reported that his meeting had gone very well.

The three grandchildren ignored the surroundings and the family was loving and affectionate. Phil received a visceral confirmation on the theme that Alex had articulated so clearly, "They are your grandkids and you are their grandfather. They only want to love you."

He wrote, "My son and three grandchildren visited after the Constellation. I felt more relaxed and confident. It surprised me to learn that my granddaughter had been worrying *I* wouldn't like *her*."

In describing the visit to us, Phil said that this 7-year-old granddaughter told him:

"Grandpa I had a dream that you tried to kill me." When she said that, it was like my chest was ripped open and my heart thrown on the floor. I told her, "Darling, I would never do anything to hurt you." She asked how her grandmother had died and I told her the truth: that it was a terrible accident and I am very sorry it happened. She seemed satisfied with my answer and we went back to playing with some toys. The two boys seemed more concerned about what I should be called. It was not anywhere as traumatic as I had feared for any of us. The Constellation helped.

I commented to him that this exchange, painful as it was, may have freed the granddaughter from having that dream evolve into a recurring nightmare. I told him, "You may have felt terribly pained to hear those words, but in telling you she was able to shift the pain and terror from herself to you, which is where it belongs." Holding that heartbreaking pain may be the greatest gift he can give her, for it was his to hold. In taking back the terrible feeling, perhaps he was freeing her from having to feel it for him.

In a period of months following his participation in Constellations, Phil and his family's life changed significantly. He had not had one visit from his son in six years.

Then his son came in, followed by the three grandchildren. In reflecting on the benefits of his participation in the group, Phil wrote,

How we perceive things are often jaded by our preconceived views of how things are/were/will be. We all seem to be carrying around our pasts and our family's pasts with us in ways we aren't even aware! The past affects us in so many ways; views of ourselves, how we view others, and even our status in this world without many of us having a clue until a Constellation brings it out.

Case 9: Russ

Background Information

Russ was in his 40s. His German-born mother and Native American father met in Germany in the 1960s where his father was stationed in the U.S. military. When Russ was two years old, his parents separated. His mother stayed in Germany and Russ came to the United States with his father, who placed him in an orphanage. For a brief time when he was seven years old, his father took custody. He never saw his mother except for a brief visit in New York when he was a teenager; that is his only memory of her. He grew up living in a series of foster homes and residential facilities. When he was 18, the state released him from their care. He lived independently for a brief time before being arrested for the first of a series of escalating crimes. During the next few years, he cycled between prison and the streets before being convicted and sentenced long-term for committing a rape. As Doug once put it, "I never knew my mother. I was abandoned by my family and incarcerated my whole life."

When I came into Bay State, he had completed the term of his sentence but was being held indefinitely for refusing to participate in a mandatory treatment program for sex offenders. Having lived virtually his entire life in institutional settings and not successfully managing the brief periods of independent living, he was reluctant to face

the challenges of the treatment program. In 2006, he reversed his stand and elected to enter the treatment program. He has since been transferred to another facility where the program is administered.

As with many of the members of Growing Together, Russ always spoke positively of others. One of Russ's roles in the group was to lead the guided imagery at the beginning of each meeting. These were lyrical journeys to tranquil natural environments. The group members always expressed their gratitude to Russ for transporting them away for a few minutes. After his transfer, they frequently recalled him and the beauty of his images.

Russ often wore a pained expression on his face and sometimes appeared to drift into a private space of inner sorrow. When he spoke, his words contrasted sharp with his appearance; invariably he focused on the beauty of nature, the preciousness of love, and the generosity of the Creator. One of the volunteers commented that Russ was heavily burdened from his upbringing, crimes, and incarceration, but he never spoke a bitter or unkind word.

Russ's Constellation

In one of our first circles, Russ raised his hand immediately when I asked who wanted to present an issue. He said that he wanted to have better understanding of his anger and sadness. I asked him to tell me a little about his parents. His mother's father had been a tank commander on the Eastern front during World War II. He died during the siege of Stalingrad, one of the nearly two million casualties of one of humanity's most lethal battles (Stalingrad, Battle of, 2008). His father was of mixed Native American and

Irish heritage. His father grew up adjacent to a Native reservation in Upstate New York but was neither accepted by them nor the outside community because of racial bigotry. His father was an alcoholic and prone to violence.

I asked Russ to set up representatives for himself, his mother, and his father. They all faced different directions and gradually their gazes turned to the floor (see Figure 14). When I asked, each of them reported feeling very uncomfortable: the father was angry, the mother afraid, and the son sad and alone. I asked two more men to stand in the Constellation to represent Russ' two grandfathers. They stood by their children. Gradually their eyes also turned to the floor.

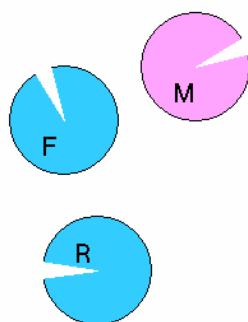


Figure 14. Russ' Constellation: Initial set up.

F = Father
M = Mother
R = Russ

Often, when representatives look at the floor, their downcast body language indicates a strong emotional connection with someone who has died. The pose suggests a person standing over a grave. The facilitator can test for this connection by placing a new representative on the floor to meet the gaze. I did so, placing two more representatives on the floor near the feet of each parent.

The emotional tone of the Constellation turned very dark. I recall my own sense that before Russ's father lay a symbol of the victims of centuries of genocide committed against the Native people of the United States. The representative on the floor in front of Russ's mother symbolized the unimaginable slaughter of the Eastern Front and more generally, the destruction of Germany in the Second World War. It is not uncommon for Constellations to reveal similar images of past traumas in the family system. Human history grows from deep

roots of sorrowful destruction. What made this Constellation particularly difficult for me (and no doubt others) were the consequences. If little else in terms of nationality, language, and culture, what Russ's mother and father shared was a common connection to violence and death. They each were traumatized by the destruction of ordinary life that befell Germany and the Native American people. The child of this brief union never knew his mother, was put in an orphanage as a toddler, was raised in a series of unstable foster homes and youth residences, committed a violent sexual assault, and was now incarcerated for decades.

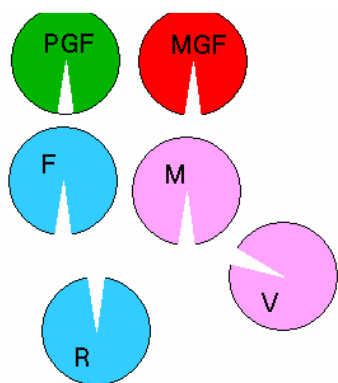


Figure 15. Russ' Constellation: Resolution.

F = Father

M = Mother

R = Russ

PGF = Paternal

Grandfather/Native

Ancestry

MGF = Maternal

Grandfather/ German

Ancestry

V = Victim

Having entered this bleak landscape, it was my aim to seek an image that would ease the weight on Russ' shoulders. I asked the representatives for Russ' parents to turn and face each other, and then to look at their son. They looked at him, as if for the first time, seeing the child their love had brought into life. The representative for Russ's mother reported afterward that she had felt terribly burdened until she saw her son. Then she was flooded with strong feelings of love, sadness, and compassion.

I asked one of the women volunteers to stand in the Constellation to represent the victim of Russ's crime (see Figure 15). At first, this representative was understandably fearful and uncomfortable. The two

women, Russ's mother and the victim, faced each other with difficulty. The mother

reached her hand out towards the victim. They held hands, then came closer together and were able to offer each other support.

When I brought Russ to stand in his place in the Constellation, he asked me, “Where is the love?” I answered, “This is the love,” gesturing toward his mother and father. Despite all the violence and loss, love found a way to give life to a child. It has not been an easy life, but it was all the family could give and was given with love. When we ended the Constellation, we seemed to have arrived at a better place and shed light on Russ’s question, which was to have a better understanding of his anger and sadness.

In his questionnaire, Russ wrote,

The reason for the Constellation was to gain more clarity of my ancestral history both in Europe and the United States, as well as my anger and sadness. I received understanding about who I really am, as well as who my people are and just how much they mean to me. It gave me a feeling of being more attached, and a sense of belonging to my family.

He included this poem [excerpt]:

Growing up in a time
Where children were to
Be seen and not heard.
Arguing and fighting
All the time to be seen and heard.

Looking deep inside where
I cannot hide. In a
Place where I can confide
In myself and the Creator
Where he helps me to
Heal and be myself.

By my choice of acknowledging
And recognizing as well as honoring and
Respecting my family and
Brothers and sisters
I am seen and heard.

As one striving to become once again
The true human being

The Creator meant for me to be
Here on Grandmother Earth, Aho!

In 2007, well after Russ had been transferred from Bay State, I attended a training and supervision program in Germany. The morning session was called “Constellations as Ritual and Ceremony,” led by Jacob Schneider (2007) and Francesca Mason Boring (2004, 2006). Boring is a member of the Shoshone Nation. Like Russ, her heritage is mixed Native American and European.

I asked Francesca for guidance regarding Russ’s Constellation. Having described his issue and the Constellation, I said it rang true but left me questioning whether it had been too heavy and disturbing given Russ’s circumstances. In general, it is better to look at the wound in the light, than to cover it over in the darkness. However, some wounds are so deep and include so many people that the person who looks needs lots of extra support that the prison environment cannot provide.

Francesca said she had seen this type of Constellation many times before. In the Native communities with which she works in the West, it is not unusual to find shattered families and lives for at least three generations. Sometimes poverty, addiction, displacement, and abuse leaves very little strength and support in the system with dire consequences for the current generation. In these cases, she handles the Constellation differently. She offered to demonstrate this approach.

She asked a representative for Russ to stand in the circle. A man from Hong Kong stood up and went to the center of the circle. After several minutes, he reported feeling very weak and alone. He appeared to waver on his feet, as if the slightest force could knock him over.

Francesca asked each of the other participants to tune in to see whether they could sense contact with any of Russ's ancestors, particularly ones from older times who had lived joyous lives. If anyone felt contact with one of these ancestors, they were directed to ask silently for permission to stand up and join the representative in the center of the circle. Francesca said, "Even if this man has had a hard life, joy still runs in his veins from the old times. It is never fully lost."

After some time, a woman and then a man stood up and went to stand with the representative. The woman put her hand over the representative's heart. The man put his hand on the representative's shoulder. Francesca checked in. The representative said that the hand on his shoulder felt too heavy. The man standing in for the ancestor shifted his hand and held it with less pressure. Then a second man stood up and stood behind the other three. Francesca asked him after some time what he was feeling. He said he had decided just to observe, but he felt a very strong push in the middle of his back that lifted him out of his chair. He said the ancestor that moved him was the Ancient One, a Teutonic warrior from centuries ago.

Russ's representative felt lighter and supported. The weight of his circumstances was not as heavy. He said that he could feel the love coming to him from the ancestors who had lived in better times. This gave him strength.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Group Dynamics

Level of Group Participation

Of the 9 group members profiled in the case descriptions, 7 were continuing as regular participants in Growing Together III meetings when the research ceased. Phil stopped attending for medical reasons. Russ was transferred to another facility, as were three other members who attended regularly and did not submit program evaluation questionnaires. Four group members who regularly participated in the meetings and Constellations are not depicted in the case descriptions either because they did not submit questionnaires or the written information they provided was too scant. Aside from these regulars, there were about eight other inmates who sat in at several meetings at different times and stopped attending. As I had no access to the men outside of the meetings, it was not possible to inquire about their reasons for no longer coming.

About a year into my involvement with the Growing Together III program, several Islamic members said that they would no longer attend meetings where Constellations were part of the program. One man explained that Islamic law prohibits “talking to the dead.” The practice of setting up representatives for people who had died violated this prohibition. Another man explained his choice this way:

I’ve done a lot of bad things in my life and hurt a lot of people. Now I am sentenced to die in prison. You could say I’ve messed up my life pretty good. My practice of Islam gives me a chance to have it better in the afterlife. Maybe I can even get to heaven. I don’t want to mess that up by doing Constellations. (Anon., personal communication, December 17, 2005)

In responding to their announcement to withdraw, I emphasized my respect for their religious beliefs and practices, telling them that they would be missed and

welcomed back at any time. Within the year, all but one of these Islamic members returned to the meetings. One of them stayed for the check-ins and left at the break. The others participated fully in the Constellations. We did not speak further about their decision to leave or to return for religious reasons.

Volunteers

In 2004, when I was first invited to join the Growing Together III group, I was accompanied by two long-term volunteers: the man who coordinated the program and a woman who led Houses of Healing programs (Casarjian, 1995). A few months afterward, two women who knew of my work with Jewish-German-Palestinian reconciliation but had never volunteered in a prison or participated in a Constellation circle asked to attend a meeting. The introduction of outside volunteers with no prior experience with prison programs seemed to heighten the expressions of emotion. After this first meeting, the volunteers provided immediate feedback about their experiences:

I was amazed how much I became involved with the Constellations. It was a great privilege to be in the company of people who had gone through an ordeal that we can only imagine, and had worked, with your help, to find a way to their souls. It is always a work in progress, and they had progressed very far. The space had a feeling of a monastery. Maybe grace happens more clearly when one has been in disgrace in the eyes of the world, and in extreme circumstances. I had something like a feeling of coming home. (Anon., personal communication, October 23, 2005)

Saturday afternoon at Bay State Prison was a deep learning experience at the emotional, the spiritual and the intellectual level. . . . Today, the faces of the men were still in my consciousness, each one left a mark on me, a mark of awareness and joy. (M. Deiter, personal communication, October 23, 2005)

Subsequently, I received a growing number of requests by outside volunteers to attend Growing Together III meetings. Eventually, it became necessary to establish a maximum attendance cap and a wait list for volunteers. From these volunteers, eight

elected to obtain permanent volunteer status and now lead Growing Together groups and other volunteer programs at Bay State and other Massachusetts correctional facilities.

In the second year, I suggested that we open the invitation to present personal issues and set up Constellations to volunteers. The group readily agreed. After the check-in and the break, anyone in the circle is free to ask for a Constellation. About one-third of the subsequent Constellations were for volunteers.

Constellations on behalf of volunteers were not documented and they are not part of this research. However, several salient points are worth noting. First is that allowing volunteers to present issues and set up Constellations shifts the balance between giving and receiving in their relationships with the inmates. Ordinarily, volunteers are perceived to be the ones giving up their free time and offering their company, knowledge, and support to the incarcerated group members; the inmates receive this company, knowledge, and support. When a volunteer asks for help with a pressing personal issue and the inmates stand in as representatives of the family system, this delineation between the giver and receiver is softened and perhaps even erased.

The blurring of these distinctions was brought forward when a woman volunteer presented an issue regarding her impending divorce. She held an advanced degree from a prestigious university, as did her former husband. They both were professionally associated with a university-sponsored, international research institute. Through the divorce proceedings, their relationship became hostile and contentious, leaving her at times doubting her own capabilities and self-worth.

The Constellation brought forth themes of victimization and perpetration that resonated in the husband's and wife's families, both of whom were traumatized in 20th

century ethnic cleansing campaigns. When we brought in representatives for this woman's maternal ancestral line, it became clear that her feelings of low self-worth fed from a wellspring of oppression, disenfranchisement, and suppression of self-expression that were part of her family's traditional culture.

The powerful denouement of the Constellation was for her to drink from this wellspring, which also was fortified with an abundance of maternal strength, love, and endurance. The men of the Growing Together group were fully drawn into the perceptive field and became the conduits for her to receive the Constellation's healing movements. At the check-out, I commented that the social ranking that placed executives of international research institutes at the top and so-called murderers and rapists in a Massachusetts prison at the bottom had been turned upside down. What this woman received from the men was a gift of confidence and strength that her university, with its libraries and endowment could not provide.

Another theme that emerges from the involvement of the volunteers is that in spite of their physical separation, the Growing Together inmates remain members of the community at large. On numerous occasions, the volunteers who joined the meetings expressed how violent behavior had shaped their own lives. In coming to Bay State to work with the men to discover movements toward healing and reconciliation, the volunteers engage in their personal healing as well. In Jungian imagery, the members of Growing Together symbolize a shadow aspect of our collective culture. How they are perceived and treated, and perhaps ultimately rehabilitated, represents the larger community's capacity to integrate shadow elements of the collective Self.

Process Themes

Having presented nine case descriptions, I explore in this section commonalities among process themes. These observations are admittedly personal and subjective. They are based on my experiences in facilitating Constellations with the Growing Together III group, informed by my half century of life experience and study. The data sample is too small and idiosyncratic to yield a more credible and rigorous analysis. The discussion of these themes aims to illuminate (1) the purposes for which the Constellations were used, (2) the self reports of the benefits and/or detriments that resulted from participation in the process, and (3) the common systemic dynamics that led toward resolution.

Presenting Issues and Reported Outcomes

The issues presented by the group members can be categorized into several broad areas of concern. With several of the men setting up Constellations on multiple occasions, there were 13 Constellations across the 9 case descriptions. The common themes contained in the presenting issues were: (1) dealing with difficult emotions, (2) estrangements from loved ones, (3) facing the victims of their crimes, and (4) dealing with the death of a loved one.

Table 1 presents a summary of each Constellation and the outcome reported by the participants either on their program evaluation questionnaire or during subsequent group discussions.

Table 1

Summary of Issues and Outcomes

Name	Presenting Issue	Reported Outcome
James	1. Face my victim 2. Father M.'s death	1. "I feel a lot of relief." 2. "I feel open-hearted. Forgiveness."
Barry	Father never visited	"Broadened my view of my father. Relationship with my mother has improved."
Ted	1. Anger towards parents 2. Forgiving myself 3. Grieving Jane	1. Stopped seeing parents as monsters 2. Hands trembling diminished 3. "I can be a good person, a loving person, despite what I did."
Rick	1. Estrangement from brother 2. Shame	1. Relationship with brother has become close and loving 2. "Huge shift."
Rafael	Grieving wife's death	Learned from wife's friends she died at peace
Alex	Estrangement from mother's sister	"Our relationship is good now."
Colin	Difficulty connecting emotionally with women	Overwhelmed by emotions during and after Constellation. "I am a better person for having these experiences."
Phil	Afraid of meeting grandchildren for first time	Visit went well. Children now know and love their grandfather.
Russ	Wanted better understanding of his anger and sadness	"I received understanding about who I really am. It gave me a feeling of being more attached, and a sense of belonging to my family."

The Framework of Systemic Dynamics

Looking beyond the problem. Each Constellation begins with the premise that when someone says, "I have a problem that I cannot overcome," the frame of the problem is too narrow to contain the solution. Constellations aim to widen the frame by asking, "Whose problem was it before it was yours?" As seen in the case descriptions, in Constellations that involve estrangements with loved ones, the presenting issue was a rift between the seeker and one or more individuals: "My father never visited me"; "My

brother and I never talk to each other”; “I’m angry at my aunt.” In these depictions, the stories or explanations constrain the movements toward resolution.

The Constellation process begins by placing the protagonists, sometimes with a third symbolic element (e.g., The Mother of All), in the center of the circle. The first step is to get a snapshot of the problem in its frozen state. Typically, the estranged parties are unable to make comfortable eye contact, as was the case with Barry and his father:

The son reported feeling drawn to the father and saddened by the lack of eye contact. The father said he was aware of the son’s presence, but did not want to look at him. He lacked concentration and felt somewhat disconnected from the process.

The son’s sadness is experienced in the immediacy of his father’s rejection. In life, the father refused to look, refused to visit, and is now deceased. Barry cannot change these facts. The clue that points toward resolution is that the representative for the father is looking elsewhere and not emotionally engaged with his son. He is looking beyond. When we bring in a representative for what he is looking at, even without identifying it, the emotions immediately heighten.

In each case of estrangement, there is more to the situation than meets the eye. Beyond the narrative story of what happened, who is at fault, and whose feelings are hurt, is resonance, or invisible loyalty, with older injuries and losses. By creating a three-dimensional matrix of the ancestral lineage, the Constellations transform the nonconscious impulses of the automatic mind (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999) into spatial symbolic representations that can be worked with directly. These symbolic representations of the family system manifest the vast tapestry of life. Seen within this larger frame, the estrangement (or difficult emotions, etc.) can yield to new points of view.

Life and the system. Constellations open the frame of reference from an individualistic to a systemic perspective. Rafael's wife died of cancer; he was serving a life sentence for murder. When we seek to offer him palliative relief from his immense feelings of grief and loss, we look not at microscopic serotonin levels nor query him about his feelings. Instead, the Constellation frames Rafael and Angela's love and loss as one scene in a tapestry woven from generations of women and men who loved and lost.

Looking at multiple tapestries, we come to recognize the influence of certain forces that drive and shape repetitious events in families. The architecture of what Boszormenyi-Nagy called a hidden and unknown mechanism (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973) comes into view. Constellations portray the interplay of two primal forces, which I label *Life and the System*. Life is animated existence—the force that moves the breath, circulates the blood, and strives to keep death at bay. It is radical and expansive, like an arrow. Life moves relentlessly forward. Its concern is the animalistic genetic imperative to breathe, feed, and reproduce. The System is a force that creates order out of chaos—it gives the glucose molecule its shape and the C note its consonance in the ear. It is exclusive, conservative, and binding, like a circle. The system is an ever-shifting container concerned with keeping its elements connected and aligned.

Although immensely complex in their iterations, Life and the System function according to simple principles that have been known to humans since at least the beginnings of recorded history (Govinda, 1961/1969; Lao-Tzu, 1993; Thompson, 1981, 1996). Life (animated existence) survives and perpetuates by promoting directional motion in pursuit of exchange (Margulis, 1980; Thompson, 1996). The System maintains

form and function by connecting and positioning what belongs and excluding what does not.

The two fundamental principles applied by Constellation in pursuit of peace of mind, freedom, and reconciliation are that Life wants life to persist and thrive, and the System wants everyone who belongs to be in their proper places.

Ancestors in Constellations represent those who received Life, carried it for some time, and passed it forward. The System operates on least three dimensions: (1) It is consciously perceived and expressed through culture; (2) it operates through the nonconscious or automatic mind (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Greene & Haidt, 2002) to maintain connection with everyone who has a right to belong; and (3) it maintains a unitary or mystical connection with all being. The effects of the *Ancestor Syndrome* (Schützenberger, 1998) within families are a mechanism for the System to restore excluded elements and achieve equilibrium.

Many tragedies can be understood as the human cost of Life's interaction with the System. For example, in Rick's first Constellation, Life is represented by the sexual urges of the two high school students who brought about his conception. The collective cultural conscience of the Midwestern community exiled his father into the Navy and compelled his grandparents to bribe an older man to take their daughter in a loveless marriage to give their grandchild a virtuous name. The community, with its rules about premarital sex, economic class, religion, and family values, cared little enough for Life that it shamed Rick's father into exile and substituted a stranger for the sake of false appearances. As agents of Life, neither the sperm nor the egg from which Rick grew cared about the grandparents' or the community's concerns.

The System, the hidden mechanism, will not tolerate this deceit:

It is better to know a truth, even if it is difficult, shameful or tragic, rather than to hide it, because what we hide, others pick up on or guess and this secret, this unspoken truth, becomes a more serious trauma in the long run. (Schützenberger, 1998, p. 52)

Though excluded by the family and community, Rick and his father maintained a bond, even if only in Rick's nonconscious mind. The estrangement with Rick's brother endured for decades until Rick restored his father to his rightful place. With his father now present in his mind's eye and his heart's mind, Rick was able to see his brother in a wholly new frame. In a matter of months, the enmity between them dissolved.

In a Constellation like Ted's or Colin's, the interplay between Life and the System is even more problematic. Ted's spasmodic, raging act of violence, in which he literally scattered the flesh of another being with his hands, can be understood as the force of Life being unleashed by a corrupted System. The same can be said for Colin's violent sexual assault. Violence and sex are Life forces that promote survival and procreation. In families like Ted's and Colin's, the collective conscience of the family does not modulate these behaviors but inflicts them. When violence and alcoholism run rampant like a plague through a family, children born into a new generation become inculcated to remain loyal to *these* family values. Here, Life and the System conspire to perpetuate "the lawful regularity and predictability of certain repetitious events in families" (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973, p. 1).

Philosophic Constructs

At the center of every Constellation in prison is a man who has committed a serious crime, in these cases murder or rape. Such crimes irreversibly violate the

principle of Life continuing in a good way. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts responds by incarcerating these offenders. This effectively removes violent or dangerous citizens from public spaces and is believed to serve as a deterrent to similar behavior in others.

Incarceration that results in offenders' exclusion from their families has far-reaching negative consequences. An illustration of this effect was best expressed by Phil, who before we began doing Constellations had not been visited by his son in six years.

My son has three children now. When the youngest was born, I thought to myself, "Oh my God, another victim of my crime." When will it end? How long will it take and how many victims will there be? My son tells me the 4-year-old is sort of withdrawn emotionally. He gets angry and acts out sometimes. I look at the photographs and hear the stories and I think, "That's just how I was when I was a boy. He's just like me." And that really scares me. This is hard.

There's a photograph of me on the wall. "That's your grandpa," my son tells them, "He lives in Massachusetts." That's all they know, that I live in Massachusetts.

Phil unquestionably belongs to his grandson's system. Because of his crime and *the stigma of guilt* attached to it, however, he is not only physically incarcerated but effectively excluded from his rightful place. The effect is detrimental not only to him but to his son and grandchildren as well.

After participating in Constellations as a representative and seeker, Phil reconciled with his son and met his grandchildren for the first time. He is no longer a phantom soul, an abstract, two-dimensional image on the wall. He has taken his rightful place in the lives of his grandchildren.

Systemic conscience. Conscience is an important construct in Family Constellations. In Western philosophy, conscience is generally understood as an internal

regulator that enforces familial and cultural ethical values. In ancient Greece, conscience was the voice of inner knowledge that was attuned with other souls and gods. This was adapted in Christian theology, which endowed the soul with a conscience that can discern the absolute, God-given standard of good and evil (Schneider, 2007, p. 37).

Children are taught the popular image of conscience that shows a whispering devil on one shoulder and an angel on the other. The devil is portrayed as the voice of evil and the angel speaks on behalf of good, even of God. In this way, having a clear conscience signals self-righteousness, whereas a disquieting conscience inhibits evil behaviors. Having no conscience is ascribed to an individual who commits terrible crimes or hurtful acts (Arendt, 1958).

Constellations contradict this understanding of conscience. When Alex killed his wife, where was conscience? To my understanding, it was not lost or suppressed. It was functioning normally. In the moment he committed this act of violence, he felt justified. Alex caught his wife having an extramarital affair. His social subculture of Greek husbands sanctioned his exacting revenge. Ordinary conscience allows people to feel fully justified in committing destructive acts (Beck, 1999; Lifton, 1986).

Hellinger (Hellinger et al., 1998), who grew up in the Nazi era, fought in the German Army in World War II, and ministered in Apartheid South Africa, observed,

A clear or guilty conscience has little to do with good and evil; the worst atrocities and injustices are committed with a clear conscience, and we feel quite guilty doing good when it deviates from what others expect of us. (p. 3)

The novelist Shirley Hazzard (1980) expressed this idea in a literary mode: “A conscious act of independent humanity is what society can least afford” (p. 61).

For many of these men, the collective conscience of their family of origin favored violence, addiction, and separation. This conscience is not merely a product of here-and-now social and economic conditions but resonates with traumas of the past.

In Barry's Constellation, the father looked beyond Barry to see the victim. Then he looked beyond the victim to see the victims and perpetrators of his family's African American history. The violence that Russ inflicted was woven in the tapestry of genocide against Native Americans and the Battle of Stalingrad.

The function of conscience as seen in Constellations is to bond individuals to the family and group that are essential for survival. Some writers in the field of evolutionary psychology have hypothesized that innate behavioral drives to be loyal to the group became imbedded in the automatic mind during the Paleolithic era (Barklow, Cosmides, & Tooby, 1992; Gilbert, 1989; Kropotkin, 1995). We can see in the Constellations that the force of this conscience is not seen or felt. Colin and Ted stated they despised their fathers. Yet the Constellations showed they were compelled to follow in their father's footsteps. For individuals who come from families and cultures that engage in violent, hurtful, and destructive behaviors, the healing movements of Constellations overcome the limits of systemic conscience by finding the open-heartedness and dignity that reside in guilt.

Guilt and innocence. If conscience regulates systemic belonging rather than ethical behavior, it follows that feelings of innocence and guilt do not necessarily correspond with righteous or evil behaviors. In the lexicography of Constellations, "Guilt and innocence are almost the opposite of what comes to mind when the words are spoken

in other contexts” (Tucker, 2005, p. 18). Redefined, innocence flows from connection and guilt from separation.

Human relationships involve an exchange of giving and taking, gaining and losing, offering and receiving to invisibly maintain the balance, bonding and order required to sustain life. Feelings of guilt and innocence are integral regulators employed by conscience to keep these exchanges in balance. Hellinger observed, “Guilt feels like transgression and as fear of consequences or punishment when we deviate from a social order. We feel innocence, with respect to social order, as conscientiousness and loyalty” (Hellinger et al., 1998, p. 6).

The important insight in this regard is that the equation of innocence with virtue and guilt with evil is false. This fallacy encourages people and governments to embrace their innocence and deny their guilt, as if this claim makes them more virtuous or superior to those whose guilt cannot be denied. We witness the destructive consequences of this stance on a daily basis, as it is the articulated justification of the U.S. War on Terror. Our nation’s military actions against nations ruled by so-called evil-doers are justified as being in defense of a higher, nobler cause, such as freedom or peace (Bush, 2003). Making strident claims of one’s righteous innocence often justifies perpetuating suffering, whereas accepting and acknowledging one’s own guilt opens the door to compassion and reconciliation.

Mahr (2004) illustrated this principle:

If you sit next to a person who makes you really feel comfortable, relaxed and accepted, you may well sit next to a guilty person; a person who has no reason to feel better or superior but is compassionate towards those who are in difficulties or who have failed. Whereas a person who successfully avoids guilt, a “real good person,” who managed to do nothing wrong, may well be surrounded by an aura of narrowness, control, a kind of a sour-milk atmosphere. (p. 1)

These Constellations in prison support Mahr's observations of the power of acknowledged guilt. By placing the men in Constellations with representatives for the victims, the full weight and consequence of their acts could not be suppressed or denied. Although this was often extremely painful and hard to bear, their standing in their guilt had the effect of opening the heart to compassion and igniting a strong determination to support life. As Madelung (2001) observed, "The dignity of the perpetrator resides in his guilt" (p. 1).

Good and evil. Under the sway of conscience, guilt and innocence become relative terms. With a single act, one can be guilty in relation to someone and innocent in relation to someone else. All of the crimes rendered the men guilty in relation to the people of the Commonwealth. In relation to what or to whom were they innocent? Further, if guilt and innocence regulate belonging, not ethical behavior, how do we determine what, if anything, constitutes evil behavior?

James, who stood in the background while his codefendant unexpectedly murdered the bartender, was ambivalent whether his participation constituted an act of evil. Barry's situation was different. He came upon a stranger in the street and shot him in the face without provocation. Both of these men were equally guilty in the eyes of the law and both fully acknowledged their own responsibility for their crimes. Neither considered himself to be evil. Ted, however, who like Barry, killed a man in rage, told me that he thought of himself as an evil person for most of his life. Each of the men in Growing Together wanted to be a good person. They sought redemption in various prison

programs and religious practices. What do the Constellations contribute to understanding these questions?

The Constellations suggested that an act of murder, especially one committed with malice and without sanction, cause, or necessity, is an act of evil. One can imagine a simple exercise in which a perpetrator stands before his victim and between twin poles, one representing good and the other evil. If good is associated with Life and the System in balance, then evil represents separation, therefore guilt.

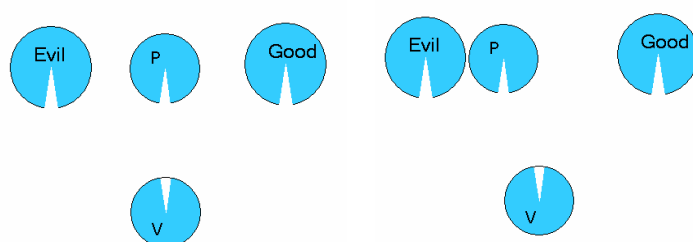


Figure 16. Good and evil.

P = Perpetrator

V = Victim

Innocent in Relation to
Evil

Guilty in Relation to
Good

As shown in Figure 16,

the act of murder separates the perpetrator from good. The next question is: what force motivates this movement?

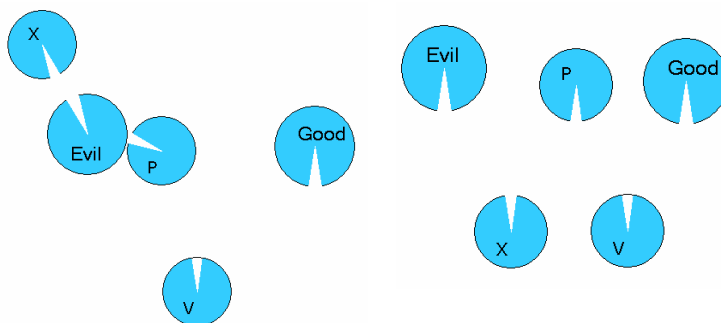
In the context of Constellations, the generic answer is that there is an

excluded member of the family system who experienced a violent trauma. In Barry's African American family, the father was determined that his children would have a better life than was the tradition in his family. He dedicated himself to hard work and success. He looked at what was good and paid no heed to the shadow element, the lineage of African American men who had been enslaved and impoverished by racism and oppression. Barry, as one of the eldest children, was captured by the residual shadow of his family history. The grandfather and great-grandfather in his Constellation were victims of this history. Perhaps there was also a slave owner ancestor in the mix, as there

are in many African American families. Barry's movement away from Life brought him closer to the shadow of rage and violence that infected his family system. Barry could not escape from what his father refused to look at, and thus became, himself, what his father refused to look at (see Figure 17.).

Is a person who commits an evil act necessarily an evil person? For most of Ted's life, his sense of self has been that his close bond to evil and separation from good is wired in to his character and can never be altered. James, speaking on behalf of most of the group members, rejects this assessment. He agrees they are guilty of committing evil acts, but claims they are not intrinsically evil people. They possess the potential for transformation. He wrote:

I have been able to feel like I am *somebody*, be open-hearted, be patient, be forgiven. Now I walk a spiritual path, with wisdom, compassion, and truth in my life.



**Figure 17. Acknowledging
the excluded element.**
Good and Evil
P = Perpetrator
V = Victim
X = Excluded System
Member

Honoring the victim and the excluded member restores the perpetrator's dignity.

We cannot tell whether the restoration of the excluded member of the system from the shadows and connection with Life through the ancestral line (see Figure 8) had a lasting impact on how these men modulate good and evil behavior. Each of the men

experienced these movements as a release from the automatic impulses that fueled their crimes. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts is not going to provide these inmates with

real-life situations to test whether they would again turn to violence. What can be seen is that standing with their guilt makes it easier for them to stand with goodness.

The victim-perpetrator bond. To understand the principle that the System wants everyone who belongs to be granted their proper place, we need to know who belongs to the family system. In general, the simplest family system, starting with an individual, includes siblings, parents, and grandparents, whether living or dead. In blended families and those that have experienced trauma or premature death, others can belong as well, such as adopted parents, step-parents, aunts and uncles, great-grandparents, and so on.

The importance of this distinction lies in whether a rightful member has been excluded and a surrogate in a descending generation has been recruited to replace them. The system does not operate at the level of conscious awareness but through what Boszormenyi-Nagy (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973) called an unknown and hidden mechanism. Even though research has yet to determine convincingly the physical properties of this mechanism, Constellations consistently reveal its effects.

Though speculative, the evidence from this set of Constellations in prison is unambiguous. The victims of these men's crimes belong to their systems. It can be extremely painful for the men to stand and face the victims of their crimes. Both James and Ted shed tears when standing in front of representatives of their victims. In all the Constellations that included a representative for a victim, there was a strong, inextricable bond with the perpetrator.

The premise of a victim-perpetrator bond may seem counterintuitive. The bond is not based on affection or friendship but on an intersection of fate that cannot be undone.

In committing a murder, the perpetrator took something irreplaceable from the victim. In this sense, one can never be free of the other. In the same way perpetrators become members of the victim's family systems (Cohen, 2005).

To stand in his guilt, the offender must stand with his victim. The pain can be immense and overwhelming, as it was for Colin. Even in his case, the emotional distress of lifting the full weight of cause and consequence eventually subsided. On the other side of this distress, he reported that he benefited from these experiences:

Even though the emotions were intense I feel I have come away richer for having experienced them. Even though they scare the hell out of me sometimes, when I feel them, I know I'm better for it. They make me feel alive!

Related to the bond between the members of Growing Together and the victims of their crimes is the bond between free citizens and the more than two million Americans who are presently incarcerated. The operation of correctional systems in the United States is to brand prisoners serving life sentences as murderers, objects of derision who deserve the punishment inflicted on them. As a society, we deny our bond with them and feel quite justified in excluding them. In doing so, they become phantom souls that haunt the shadow of our just and equitable society. It is not their incarceration but our popular culture's representation of them that interferes with the healing movements for victims and offenders alike.

Khalid, one of the Islamic members who only attended the check-in portion of the meetings, wrote and recited poems from memory. After he recited this one, I asked whether he would write it down and allow me to use it. It eloquently captures the voice of those who are excluded from their rightful place at the family table:

Phantom With a Soul

First, they ignored me.
 Then, they said that I didn't exist.
 Then, they even refused to see me,
 To hear me, to feel the fire within me.
 They . . . made . . . me . . . a ghost.
 A wandering spirit,
 A mere shadow, a puff of smoke,
 A phantom with a soul,
 A figment of their own imagination,
 A spook who sat by the door saying,
 "OPEN UP!"
 "Guess who's coming home for dinner?"

Negative Aftereffects of Constellations: The Dark Night of the Soul

An abiding concern in using emotionally intense processes with vulnerable populations is the potential to cause short-term or long-term harm. Lillienfeld (2007) cautioned that even the most well-intentioned psychological services can have iatrogenic or harmful effects. The Constellation process has not been evaluated in these terms and such research is well outside the scope of this study.

The topic of the effects of Constellations, especially the potential or actuality of harmful effects, was a frequent topic of discussion during the group meetings. During one check-in, Charlie described a harrowing night's sleep following his representation in an intense Constellation for another group member. He later submitted a written description of the event with his questionnaire. He wrote,

I was asked to stand in as a great, great grandfather. I stood as an empty vessel to allow myself to be used by the energy of the person. It felt like it was not me, yet it was me. Tears were shed. We reached a powerful conclusion. After the meeting, I watched some TV, wrote a letter, and drank a cup of coffee, as I do most nights.

That night, I had a bad experience. In a dream-like state, I saw myself in a battlefield, dead people all around. Green rolling hills, castle in the background, fog drifting in pale light. It was my face, yet as a younger person on someone

else's body. I was walking, yet not walking, more like floating just above the ground, telling myself in a voice I do not use, "And they wonder why I drink . . .!"

I awoke: scared, crying, heart beating a mile a minute, upset, shaking. It felt like the energy of the Constellation came with me or visited me again in the night out of nowhere.

After recounting this experience during the check-in, he asked for my response.

My first reaction was concern and alarm. All of us have had bad dreams and sleepless nights, but to endure such an experience in the confines of a prison cell must be especially distressing. Without abdicating responsibility, I sought to contextualize the night by telling him about the writings of St. John of the Cross (2003) and the *Dark Night of the Soul*. These experiences, though uncomfortable and frightening, are understood in spiritual tradition to have potential to purify and illuminate as well. Traversing the dark night of the soul brings one in contact with true being, Heidegger's *Dasein*. Through it individuals can become clearer in mind, more authentic in speech, and focused on what is immediately present, rather than distracted by the nebulous fears and threats of the thinking mind.

Charlie later told me that the dreamer's statement, "And they wonder why I drink," spoke directly to the transgenerational alcoholism that afflicted him, his father, and Irish-born grandfather. He came to consider the dream and dreamer to be a relic of the soul, an archaic memory from an otherwise forgotten cataclysmic massacre that unleashed recurring trauma in his paternal line. Placed in this context, the battlefield dream imparts meaning into Charlie's life and his passage through the dark night of the soul was purifying, even liberating.

I look back on what took place at that time. I am thankful my body can be used in such a way. For in life, one must have pain to have healing. The unwelcome guest was a gift, a blessing that was new to me. This was why it was upsetting to me at

first. In my meditations I visit places that scare me. It is like I am there, but not there, visiting a shadow outside my ordinary sense of identity. A place of stillness, yet not. A place of space, moving, yet not moving.

In the months following this experience, Charlie frequently spoke about his spiritual progression from imprisonment to freedom. The irony that he came to freedom and peace in prison is not lost on him. He talked about the many years lost to violence and addiction when he was free to come and go as he pleased. He was a prisoner to his life on the streets. Though physically held behind wires and walls, his inner being came to feel free and at peace.

Charlie's experiences with Constellations and the dark night of the soul is a sample of $N = 1$. I am hesitant to extrapolate any generalized meaning, except that in this one instance it supports, rather than disputes, my philosophic stance toward the question of the potential for Constellations to cause short-term or long-term harm. One could not responsibly enter the space of Family Constellations without subscribing to the proposition that individuals are strong enough to bear them. Gauron and Rawlings (1973), writing a generation ago, argued against the myth of the fragile patient. They likened the therapist who subscribes to the dictates, "Be careful," "Avoid confrontation and controversy," "Be supportive," to a person "in an antique shop who is gingerly holding a priceless vase in fear it will shatter before his eyes" (p. 352). They argued that treating clients as if they are prone to breaking leads to defensively oriented treatments that place more emphasis on not making the patients worse than on improving their circumstances. Ultimately, the authors asserted, subscribing to the myth of the fragile patient limits personal growth, for both therapist and client. What else, they asked, is therapy "except encouraging people to develop their own resources and gain confidence in their own ability to handle stress?" (p. 353)

Healing Movements

There are two basic healing movements that emerge in an aggregate analysis of the case descriptions. One, which serves Life, is to connect individuals to their ancestors, first to their own mother and father, then their grandparents, and beyond them, the countless souls who were born, lived for some time, and passed life on. The experience of taking one's place in this chain of Life has a transformational effect.

The other movement, which serves the System, is to see, honor, and make a place in one's heart for everyone who belongs. In a Constellation, the phantom souls are welcomed home. By including everyone who belongs in this manner, participants felt a great lifting of a heavy burden.

The Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh (1999) describes this healing movement in his poem, "Please Call Me by My True Names": [Excerpt]

The rhythm of my heart is the birth and death
of all that is alive. . . .

I am the twelve-year-old girl,
refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean
after being raped by a sea pirate.
And I am the pirate,
my heart not yet capable
of seeing and loving. . . .

My joy is like Spring, so warm
it makes flowers bloom all over the Earth.
My pain is like a river of tears,
so vast it fills the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and my laughter at once,
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.

Please call me by my true names,
 so I can wake up,
 and so the door of my heart
 can be left open,
 the door of compassion.

Vengeance and Forgiveness

When traumatic crimes and injustices committed in one generation are not resolved, successive generations are drawn into the fray. Within the United States, the impact of mass traumas such as African slavery and the genocide of the Native Peoples still reverberate in collective consciousness. Immigrant groups, who escaped from extreme circumstances such as the Irish famine, pass the legacy to their descendants. Without fully comprehending their impulses, children and grandchildren can feel compelled to complete what they did not start, atone for what they did not do, or inflict punishment on the living for crimes committed by those who are now dead.

When the acts that caused harm are irreversible, the pathway to forgiveness descends into the realm of the dark night of the soul. For the offenders, or their descendants, forgiveness requires that they acknowledge guilt, express sincere remorse, and offer a reasonable restitution. For the victims and their descendants, forgiveness is an act of deep compassion and humility that restores the sweetness of life to the living.

Forgiveness leaves the guilt with the perpetrator and frees the victims from the desire for vengeance. It comes when perpetrators, victims, and their descendants include each other as full members of the human community. The fate of all individuals involved are accepted and respected, even those who committed acts described by Arendt (1958) as *radical evil*. Such forgiveness is never complete in life.

After they have perished, the victims and perpetrators of crimes and trauma maintain their presence in the lives of others. Charlie told me this story. He had been incarcerated for 33 years as an accessory to first-degree murder. During the crime, he left his codefendant with the victim. The victim screamed, “Help me!” as he was being stabbed to death. Charlie did nothing to stop the killing. He was caught, convicted, and sentenced to life without parole. Five years into his sentence, there was an attempted mass prison break from his cellblock in another facility. He retreated to his cell as fighting broke out between prisoners and guards. He heard a guard, who had been set upon by a group of prisoners, screaming, “Help me!” At that moment, he felt the spirit of his murder victim come to life within him. The spirit compelled him, literally propelled him out of the room to save the guard’s life, which he did.

Afterward, he did not reflect philosophically about this event. In our experiences with Constellations in prison, however, it clicked for him that this was a very concrete example of the victim-perpetrator bond and an illustration of how forgiveness works in cases of acts of radical evil. Forgiveness is not complete. His guilt is not absolved nor even reduced. From the victim-perpetrator bond, however, a life on the verge of being lost was saved. With this, he earned a measure of forgiveness and his dignity.

Children who lose a parent continue the relationship, carrying pain and love in their hearts. Invisible loyalties can become a burdensome weight, whispering the message, “Because you suffered and died so tragically, I cannot find joy. I will avenge the injustice of your death.” This engenders a sense of innocence because it brings the survivor into closer contact with the deceased.

In forgiving, the child can ask instead, “Would my father want me to sacrifice my

own life after his? Or would he want me to take my life and make something good from it?” The answer, accumulated from phenomenological evidence of Constellations is consistent: neither vengeance nor sacrifice changes the fate of the living or the dead for the better. Forgiveness is compassion based on acceptance of the past, acknowledgment of the existential equality of all people, and reverence for the vast beauty of life.

Implications: Research and Practice

This research study was designed as a theoretical introduction to the systemic, phenomenological Family Constellation process. It includes case descriptions of the experiences a group of prisoners serving long-term sentences for murder or rape who attended monthly Constellation circles in 2005-2006. It is the first English-language dissertation on this topic in scholarly literature. The efficacy or validity of Family Constellations is not supported by this study, as the research method used explicitly restricted such an analysis.

The gulf between Family Constellations and the cognitive, behavioral, and interpersonal therapies supported by the APA is substantial. The Constellation approach explicitly and purposefully omits much of what is included in evidence-based practice in psychology and ventures into territory that these therapies cautiously avoid. It is left to the readers to determine whether there is merit in further advancing research in Family Constellations, first to methodologically sound exploratory case studies and later to rigorously designed efficacy studies.

I believe the results from this study, anecdotal as they are, support further use of the Family Constellation process with perpetrators and victims of traumatic crimes and their descendents. In terms of future research, I have these recommendations:

The phenomenon of collective consciousness, called *representative perception* in Constellations, is poorly understood. Some participants experience their standing in the place of a designated family member as an ordinary role-playing exercise. Others feel that their bodies and minds are literally being taken over by the disembodied spirits of the beings they represent. In many traditional cultures, such exchanges of thoughts and feelings are well understood and considered ordinary forms of communication. Research to deconstruct these felt experiences in relation to contemporary neuroscience or to correlate representative perception with known facts about the actual family members could expand our understanding.

There are countless avenues for further research on the effects of Family Constellations. A logical step in a research sequence is to develop exploratory studies to assess the impact of integrating Family Constellations with other healing modalities. Prisons are clearly ripe in terms of the issues presented, but security, funding, and institutional concerns may make them less attractive for researchers. In England, the Nowhere Foundation (2008) is engaged in collaborative research projects in schools and with addiction treatment programs. Most treatment and counseling modalities use cognitive and/or behavioral approaches that do not examine the wider systems to which people belong. An action research method would allow Constellation facilitators, program managers, and researchers to co-create systemic tools to bolster existing efforts.

For those concerned primarily with victim-offender dialogue and restorative justice programs, a logical next step would be to explore the use of Constellations with victim populations. If the process themes of guilt and innocence, the victim-perpetrator bond, and movements toward forgiveness are valid, those who have been victimized by violent crimes may also find healing movements toward greater peace of mind and acceptance.

In conclusion, this research study demonstrated the potential benefits of a psychologically oriented healing modality that integrates elements of Western philosophy, ancient wisdom traditions, and family systems theory. Even though the structure of the process does not lend itself to variate-controlled empirical testing, it merits further qualitative research to test its longitudinal effects.

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APPENDIX

INFORMED CONSENT

CONSENT FOR GROWING TOGETHER III MEMBERS TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Purpose:

This consent form gives Dan Booth Cohen your permission to use the evaluation forms you submitted to Jaileen Hopkins.

The purpose of this research is to describe and explore your participation in the Family Constellation process at Bay State Correctional Center in 2004-6. This project is being conducted by Dan Booth Cohen, MA, who is a graduate student at Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center, as part of his course and dissertation requirement.

Principal Researcher:

Dan Booth Cohen
% Jaileen Hopkins
Bay State Correctional Center
28 Clark Street
PO Box 73
Norfolk, MA 02056
Tel: (508) 668-1687 ext 211

Procedures:

[1] The research involves the Principal Researcher receiving your permission to view the program evaluation questionnaires you previously filled out for Bob David, the volunteer Program Coordinator and submitted to Jaileen Hopkins.

[2] The Principal Research will conduct interviews with outside volunteers who participated in the Constellation groups. He will also rely on his notes and recollections.

[3] The Principal Research will write a series of case study descriptions of the past experiences of the group. These case study descriptions may be used in multiple research reports. The reports may be published in a journal article, dissertation or used as part of a book.

Possible Risks and Safeguards:

This research is designed to minimize as much as possible and potential physical, psychological, and social risks to you. Although very unlikely, there are always risks in research, which you are entitled to know in advance of giving your consent, as well as the safeguards to be taken by those who conduct the project to minimize the risks.

Since you have already participated in the groups and completed the questionnaires participation in this research presents no more than a minimal risk to you.

I understand that:

[1] My identity shall only be known to the Principal Researcher, other members of Growing Together III and the outside volunteers who participated in the meetings.

[2] Portions of my responses to the questionnaires may be quoted in the research. Personal information about my life and family may be incorporated into the descriptions of the Constellations. My name will not be used. All details which would lead to my identity being recognized will be modified or concealed to protect confidentiality.

[3] This consent form will be kept in a secure location separate from the questionnaire I provide, in a location known only to the Principal Researcher for three years after which it will be destroyed.

[4] The questionnaires are to be stored in a secure location accessible only to the Principal Researcher and volunteer program coordinator for three years, after which they shall be destroyed.

[5] Transcribed data in the form of computer disks containing written descriptions will be kept indefinitely for future research.

[6] All the information I give will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law.

[8] All personal information I provide associated with my identity will not be released to any other party without my explicit written permission.

[9] If quotes of my responses are used in the research report, as well as any and all future publications of these quotations, my identity shall remain anonymous, and at most make use of a fictitious name. All information that would lead to my identification being revealed will be modified or concealed to protect confidentiality.

[10] I have the right to refuse to answer any question asked of me.

[11] I have the right to withdraw from participation at any time for any reason without stating my reason.

[12] I will receive a copy of this signed consent form for my records.

Regarding any concern and serious upset, you may contact the Principal Researcher through Jaileen Hopkins. You may also contact the Research Supervisors of the project, Dr. Jeanne Achterberg (831-643-9249) or Dr. David Likoff, (707-763-3504), or Dr. Arne Collen, the Chair of the Saybrook Institutional Review Board (925-930-9779). You may write any of them at this address: Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center, 747 Front Street, San Francisco, CA 94111.

Benefits:

I understand that my participation in this study may have possible and potential benefits.

[1] The Growing Together III library will be given a free copy of *Messengers of Healing: The Family Constellations of Bert Hellinger Through the Eyes of a New Generation of Practitioners*, edited by J. Edward Lynch, Ph.D. and Suzi Tucker. This book will be donated whether or not you give your permission to use the evaluations forms.

[2] I may obtain a greater personal awareness, knowledge, and understanding.

[3] Through future communications and possible applications of the findings of the research, indirectly my participation may bring future benefits to others who are incarcerated or to the loved ones of someone who is incarcerated.

[4] My participation may enable the Principal Researcher and others working in the topic area to make a contribution to knowledge of the personal healing and growth experienced by men who are incarcerated.

Summary Reports:

Upon conclusion of these studies, reports of the findings will become available. A copy of these reports will be donated to the Growing Together III library.

Consent of Principal Investigator:

I have explained the above procedures and conditions to this research, and provided an opportunity for the research participant to ask questions and have attempted to provide satisfactory answers to all questions that have been asked in the course of this explanation.

Dan Booth Cohen

Date

Consent of the Participant:

If you are ready to provide your consent, read the statement below, then sign, and print your name and date on the line below.

I have read the above information, have had an opportunity to ask questions about any and all aspects of this research, and give my voluntary consent to participate.

Signature

Date

Print name

CONSENT FOR GROWING TOGETHER III VOLUNTEERS TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Purpose:

The purpose of this research is to describe and explore your participation in the Family Constellation process at Bay State Correctional Center in 2004-6. This project is being conducted by Dan Booth Cohen, MA, who is a graduate student at Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center, as part of his course and dissertation requirement.

Principal Researcher:

Dan Booth Cohen
1313 Great Plain Avenue
Needham, MA 02492
781-444-0145
dan@HiddenSolution.com

Procedures:

[1] The Principal Research will conduct a one-on-one interview with you and other outside volunteers who participated in the Constellation groups. The interview will be conducted at a time and place at your convenience. As the purpose is to obtain your recollections and impressions of your participation, it is not possible to fix exactly how long these interviews will take to complete. However, you are allowed to limit the duration to fit your schedule and level of interest. The interview questions will be open-ended, e.g. "What do you remember about the Constellation with Mr. ABC."

[2] The research involves the Principal Researcher viewing program evaluation questionnaires the Growing Together III members previously filled out for Bob David, the volunteer Program Coordinator. He will also rely on his notes and recollections.

[3] The Principal Research will write a series of case study descriptions of the past experiences of the group. These case study descriptions may be used in multiple research reports. The reports may be published in a journal article, dissertation or used as part of a book.

Possible Risks and Safeguards:

This research is designed to minimize as much as possible and potential physical, psychological, and social risks to you. Although very unlikely, there are always risks in research, which you are entitled to know in advance of giving your consent, as well as the safeguards to be taken by those who conduct the project to minimize the risks.

Since you have already participated in the groups, participation in this research presents no more than a minimal risk to you.

I understand that:

[1] My identity shall only be known to the Principal Researcher, other members of Growing Together III and the outside volunteers who participated in the meetings.

[2] Portions of my responses to the interview may be quoted in the research. My name will not be used. No details about my identity will be used.

[3] This consent form will be kept in a secure location separate from the questionnaire I provide, in a location known only to the Principal Researcher for three years after which it will be destroyed.

[4] The interview notes are to be stored in a secure location accessible only to the Principal Researcher for three years, after which they shall be destroyed.

[5] Transcribed data in the form of computer disks containing written descriptions will be kept indefinitely for future research.

[6] All the information I give will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law.

[8] All personal information I provide associated with my identity will not be released to any other party without my explicit written permission.

[9] If quotes of my responses are used in the research report, as well as any and all future publications of these quotations, my identity shall remain anonymous. No information that would lead to my identification being revealed will be used. The report will refer to volunteers only as "man volunteer" or "woman volunteer."

[10] I have the right to refuse to answer any question asked of me.

[11] I have the right to withdraw from participation at any time for any reason without stating my reason.

[12] I will receive a copy of this signed consent form for my records.

Regarding any concern and serious upset, you may contact the Principal Researcher. You may also contact the Research Supervisors of the project, Dr. Jeanne Achterberg (831-643-9249) or Dr. David Likoff, (707-763-3504), or Dr. Arne Collen, the Chair of the Saybrook Institutional Review Board (925-930-9779). You may write any of them at this address: Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center, 747 Front Street, San Francisco, CA 94111.

Benefits:

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[1] The Growing Together III library will be given a free copy of *Messengers of Healing: The Family Constellations of Bert Hellinger Through the Eyes of a New Generation of Practitioners*, edited by J. Edward Lynch, Ph.D. and Suzi Tucker. This book will be donated whether or not I give your permission to participate.

[2] I may obtain a greater personal awareness, knowledge, and understanding.

[3] Through future communications and possible applications of the findings of the research, indirectly my participation may bring future benefits to others who are incarcerated or to the loved ones of someone who is incarcerated.

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Consent of Principal Investigator:

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Dan Booth Cohen

Date

Consent of the Participant:

If you are ready to provide your consent, read the statement below, then sign, and print your name and date on the line below.

I have read the above information, have had an opportunity to ask questions about any and all aspects of this research, and give my voluntary consent to participate.

Signature

Date

Print name