

How to Heal Your Family

Louise Danielle Palmer

It's that time again — holiday time. You gather around the table for a feast, doing your best to be grateful, but . . . Half the family is missing or uninvited. Conversation is stilted. All that is hidden, missing, unspoken, hangs over everyone like an invisible fog or a bad odor, origin unknown. Instead of feeling the holiness of the occasion, all you want is to get it over with as fast as possible. Instead of receiving strength and joy from the experience, you end up with a low-grade hangover and a lingering sad feeling.

Now, imagine creating the holiday you are "supposed" to have. Imagine that you see the family dynamics in a clear and peaceful light, as largely the product of the past, as in the ancient past. In understanding the past, you can heal the past, and actually be together in the present. In the present, you can feel the loving communion with your family that you've always longed for. Imagine making this happen in a matter of hours without costly therapy sessions involving endless rehashing and insights that don't help.

It isn't impossible. It isn't wishful thinking. In fact, this healing work, called Family Constellation, is being done around the world, among the Ojibwa in northern Canada, the aborigines in Australia, Jews and Arabs, Chinese and Mexicans. Over the past two decades, this unique and magically effective method for restoring peace to the individual, the family, and the collective has gained a following in 25 countries in Europe, Asia, and Africa — even though it's almost impossible to describe or explain, makes little sense to the rational mind, upends prevailing notions of time and space, and requires trusting a bunch of people you don't know with your private life. It's now a leading form of therapy in Germany, where it was created, and is being used to improve businesses and other organizations, as well as to bring peace to many regions in conflict. Finally, it's making its way into the U.S.

"This work is vital for healing in the world," says Annie Block Pearl, M.S., a New York-based therapist and Family Constellation facilitator. "It is a powerful tool that opens you up like nothing else because it bypasses the mind and goes right into the soul."

Family Constellation is the brainchild of German psychologist Bert Hellinger, and the outgrowth of years of pioneering work integrating systems theory, psychotherapy, family and group therapy, and phenomenology. It is significant not only because it is a powerful cross-cultural healing tool used by tens of thousands of people, but also because it poses a challenge to conventional psychology and science itself. The work seems as "woo-woo" as it gets — until you do it and realize that it actually works.

What Is It?

Constellation work is based on a simple but profound idea: our well-being is tied to the well-being of our family system, or "family soul," which includes the living, the dead, and generations that

preceded us. It invokes an ancient practice (honoring the ancestors) with a post-modern spin (temporarily re-creating our "tribe").

"At a deep level, we are the sum total of the past," says Jan Rupp, a Hellinger trainer in Boulder, Colorado. "We are connected with everything, especially our family legacy, whether or not we recognize it. It follows us until we understand and heal it. Modern research shows that trauma has deep ramifications into the third generation, and trauma is everywhere. We carry it in our limbic brain, which is why we need ritual, which reaches deep into the soul. This is ingrained in us and always has been."

Constellation work approaches individual pain or wounding in the larger context of the family soul, to which we are bound and (blindly) loyal. It resonates with the research findings of biologist Rupert Sheldrake, who posited that related people, places, and animals exist in a "morphic field" of energy which has both influence and memory.

"Like a flock of birds or a school of fish, each family is held in an invisible field that encompasses and governs all its members, who can sense each other and move in concert without a word being spoken," explain Alison Rose and Ed Levy, a husband-wife team who facilitate Constellation workshops in the New York area. "Any painful event touches every single family member and continues to reverberate down to later generations. As a result, people often carry and reenact the original wounds of their ancestors."

These wounds are called unconscious "entanglements": traumatic or unresolved issues that have been hidden, such as a murder in the family, an abortion or miscarriage, an infidelity, or the premature death of a parent or child. Hellinger says these entanglements disturb our lives and manifest in the form of sudden illness or accidents, depression or feelings of isolation, physical or mental illness, and persistent relationship conflicts and dysfunction.

Reclaiming Our Destiny

Our fate or destiny can become "entangled" in the fate or destiny of an ancestor because he or she is part of our family system. When we act with blind loyalty to this system, Rupp says, we may unwittingly identify with an ancestor's pain or issue and take it on as our own, or we may re-create their past trauma in our own lives in order to heal it. This is because all systems seek wholeness and balance. But the family system can function harmoniously only if every person, dead or alive, has a respected place within it.

If someone is forgotten, ignored, rejected, or exiled, or if someone has not played his or her proper role in the family (such as a child becoming the parent, or the youngest child acting as the oldest), it blocks the flow of love through the generations. Hellinger's work is based on the idea that we can, in a sense, go back in time and clear these blockages so that love flows freely again. By making the unconscious conscious, by rendering the invisible visible, by honoring the role and fate of every family member, we are reconnected with our own path and can reclaim our own destiny.

Most indigenous cultures understand that in healing the ancestral family soul, we heal ourselves. The Mayan people say that if you do not feed &151; your ancestors, they will feed on you. Remember the hungry ghost? Remember the Biblical saying about how the sins of the fathers are visited upon the sons?

While entanglements with our ancestors create serious problems, we typically view them as our own problems. We get stuck in our own "story." Hellinger offers another perspective: while these problems are expressed through us, they don't originate within us. Therefore, we don't have to — and in fact, can't — heal them all on our own.

"You can immediately see the shift, and the relief, in people when they realize they aren't locked into their individual traumas," says Alison Rose Levy. "It's neurological. You perceive family members differently and accept them with compassion. Next time, at a family dinner, instead of noticing how annoying your dad is, for example, you'll remember the hidden pain driving his behavior, freeing you from reacting to it, or repeating it. Now you can lovingly connect with him — and with other members of your family, as well as your ancestors, because you better understand the root of their pain and struggle. Though you can't see every one of them, you can give them all a place in your heart."

The Constellation Process

So how does this work? Unlike psychodrama, there is no role playing, role reversal, acting, or intended emotional catharsis. Trained facilitators, many of whom are psychotherapists, lead workshops comprising people who do not know one another. A session can begin with a ritual, prayer, or meditation and the intention to create a safe and confidential circle.

A person will bring forward an intractable issue or problem, providing details on the family background, such as a trauma, a premature death, and other notable events. The facilitator suggests which members of the person's family belong in the constellation, allowing for others to be added later. The client then places "representatives" for family members including him- or herself within the circle.

Once the "living map" of the family is laid out, the client steps back and the magic begins. Pearl says that the constellation activates the energy of the ancestral family in you because this energy has never left your field — energy, as we know from physics, is neither destroyed nor created but transformed. If the family energy field is activated in you, representatives can begin to mirror it. (For a fuller explanation, read "Wired for Compassion," S&H October 2006.) Information begins to come through the representatives in the way they move their bodies and express themselves; thoughts, feelings, and images emerge as they tap into the inner condition they are embodying.

This process is called "representative perception," says Albrecht Mahr, a Hellinger trainer who presented the constellation work at the 2004 International Transpersonal Association conference. It is simple and as natural to us as breathing. It doesn't require any special knowledge or training because, he says, we have "knowing bodies." With our rich perceptual capacities, emotional

intelligence, and powerful imagination, we have the innate capacity to become a "transpersonal organ" and the source of otherwise inaccessible information for one another, says Mahr.

"I became totally different personalities that had nothing to do with mine," says Carl Austin Hyatt, who has participated in several constellations in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. "In one, I became an aloof, distant, and controlling father with a particular worldview and set of values. In the next, I was a giddy, mischievous uncle, constantly making light of the situation, butting into conversations, teasing people in compulsive and inappropriate ways. In each case, I was told that I was perfectly true to the actual person I was representing. It's like the spirit of that person takes up residence inside you, and you act with complete precision. It's kind of spooky, but it really makes you trust the process."

Mysteries Revealed

As the constellation unfolds, a story begins. Other parts of the family system present themselves. They may include distant ancestors you don't know (the crazy aunt everyone ignored), the dead (a stillborn child), significant actors (the Vietnamese soldier who killed your father), a body part or illness (the cancer in your leg), or an issue (an addiction). Because constellations are "knowing fields" populated by "knowing bodies" with the capacity to express or deny a forgotten truth, says Mahr, surprising new perspectives on ourselves and our family history begin to emerge.

The facilitator helps this process along by guiding the constellation, interpreting the movements of the representatives, and asking them what they feel or have to say. Even the simplest gestures are meaningful. An expert facilitator will be able to intuit &151; underlying family dynamics revealed through these cues. They also rely on a body of knowledge drawn from the collective wisdom of practitioners who, over many years, have learned how to read the meaning of these subtle but significant movements.

In the constellation in Boulder, Colorado, facilitator Jan Rupp was like a conductor playing the room as if it were an orchestra, calling on people as if they were instruments with tunes to play at just the right moments. Rupp has enormous compassion and an uncanny sense of what is key to unearthing and resolving hidden family trauma.

Compassion Through Understanding

To get a sense of how delicate this work can be, here's an example of how Rupp guided a constellation set up for a woman I'll call Julie, who wanted to explore why she was suffering from a disease that was crippling her hands. Julie had devoted her life to caring for her family and feared that she had not found — and would never find — her calling in life, just like her father. During the constellation, the man representing her father kept looking at the ground. Rupp noticed his eye movement and observed that someone had died. I represented the dead person. Immediately, Julie's father moved toward me with his hands out, while the woman playing Julie began to cry. Observing what was unfolding, the real Julie suddenly introduced the fact that her brother had died when he was three and she was five. She said she was holding him by the hand when he broke

loose, ran into the street, and was killed by a car. Had Rupp missed the eye movement of the "father," material key to the unfolding of the constellation may not have been revealed.

Through the constellation's unfolding, it became clear that Julie had been terrified of her hands and had dissociated from them. Grief- and guilt-ridden, she'd decided to pay for her "mistake" of letting go of her little brother by giving up her dreams — and her hands. Julie discovered the source of her illness and found resolution as the spirit of her little brother spoke through me: "I know you love me and remember me. I don't blame you for what happened. I didn't have my life to live but you have yours. I want you to honor that by living fully. Your hands should be a source of joy to you. Please use them to create beauty."

I never interviewed Julie about her experience, but she was beaming by the close of her constellation.

Stepping Out of the Current

The healing power of constellation work seems, in part, to lie in the client's capacity to observe the whole family "system," including what is hidden, missing, or disconnected. Seeing the root causes of struggle and suffering in the family promotes forgiveness, understanding, and ultimately, love. Honoring our ancestors by simply attending to them and allowing them their place in the family &151; also unlocks the energy bound up in an "entanglement," according to Mahr. This releases the entire family from patterns it is unwittingly caught in — patterns that can make for a miserable life.

"I find this to be a wonderful, gentle way of dealing with difficult issues because you aren't doing the heavy lifting, you are just watching," says Hyatt, from the New Hampshire groups. "It's like being plucked out of the heavy current you are swimming in so you can see it for the first time. What you learn is that what you thought was 'you' is actually the current. You are born into a current called your family, and it pulls and pushes you certain ways. During the constellation, the unresolved issues float around for a while, but eventually there is closure or a healthy conscious resolution. It's healing for you and — what I find so amazing — it's healing for people who aren't even there!"

Constellation work defies time and space. And it asks us to reconsider the way we have been taught to approach our own wounds and the way we go about trying to heal them. I asked Pearl how she understood and explained this logic-defying phenomenon of doing something in the present to affect the past in order to change the present.

"I don't, I just receive it," she says, "I recommend against analyzing this work. As soon as you put something into words, you define &151; its meaning. The soul works in a much more global, expansive way. Spirituality requires trust in the mystery, and that's where I choose to leave it."

Louise Danielle Palmer is editor of S&H.

Healing Constellations

Here are a few of the many examples of how healing the past allows us to find peace in the present:

- A woman in a constellation, healing the trauma experienced by some of her Lithuanian and Polish ancestors, received a phone call from her 60-year-old brother a few days later saying he had just quit drinking. He had struggled with alcoholism his entire adult life.
- A woman who couldn't remember a single detail from her childhood was advised by her facilitator to look at pictures of herself as a little girl. The day after the constellation, the woman received an email from her mother with pictures of her as a child.
- A man who felt he couldn't find his place in the world discovered in his constellation that his mother had had another child before he was born. His mother later confirmed this. On a deep level, the man had suffered from inexplicable guilt, confusion, and bewilderment. Once he was able to understand these feelings, honor the child in the constellation, and assume the right "place" in his family of origin, as the second- rather than first-born child, his life shifted dramatically.
- A woman whose father had abandoned her family discovered in a constellation that her mother was in love with a man before meeting her father. She also realized her mother had never stopped loving that man, which had deeply affected her father. A few months after the constellation, she made peace with her father, and her mother reconnected with her old love, whom she eventually married.
- A woman whose father had died of carbon monoxide poisoning discovered in a constellation that he had been sent to clean up a concentration camp — and the noxious gas chambers that took so many lives — at the end of the Second World War. Her life changed by simply understanding the accident that took her father's life and the root cause of his lifelong depression.
- A young woman with a severe intestinal disorder that prevented her from sustaining a romantic relationship and having children discovered that the disorder was rooted in something that had happened three generations ago. Within a year of the constellation, her disorder had disappeared and she was married and pregnant.

Constellation Resources

To contact the facilitators mentioned in this piece, and for more background information, book resources, and national networks of facilitators, follow the links:

Annie Block Pearl: annieblockpearl.com

Jan Rupp: whitecrane.com

Alison Rose and Edward Levy: family-healing.com

systemicconstellations.org

Gail Cloud: gail@gailcloud.com