

Therapeutic Application of Family Constellation Work for Chronic Illness

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Chronic illness, in contrast to acute illness, displays prolonged medical symptoms that persist in a patient despite numerous therapeutic attempts to remedy them. Systemic Family Constellation work lends itself as an effective adjunct to standard allopathic therapy as well as to alternative medicine, especially within the context of ancestral traumas commonly recognised in the Hellinger method.

The patient's unconscious physiological or emotional response to unresolved ancestral traumatic events can become a contributing factor for illness. The constellation provides the patient with an outward manifestation of these inner dramas. As the patient becomes aware of this identification, the ancestor is also honoured and included in the family field; then the patient notices emotional relief and an unburdening of bodily tensions which positively contributes to alleviating their condition.

From my clinical practice I describe below some of these cases where unresolved ancestral traumas have been a contributing factor for chronic illness in adults and children. Used alongside each other, fields of homoeopathic remedies and the classical Hellinger approach can together foster healing connectedness for the lineage, in addition to the obvious symptomatic changes in patients and their increased awareness and spiritual opening.¹

Patients with chronic conditions seek out my practice of homoeopathy² in search of a successful treatment protocol for their ailment. The initial homoeopathic appointment provides an in-depth assessment of the patient's physical, emotional, and mental symptoms. Important information is gathered in relation to the patient's significant life events and traumas, as well as the entire family history. Over the last three years, I have combined Hellinger's approach with homoeopathic fieldwork and developed a treatment modality for people with chronic health conditions. I have started to implement a screening procedure for recognising traumatic events of a patient's parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. I look for such traumas when working in the context of persistent or recurring symptoms in the patient which are resistant to a host of well-matched therapies these patients have

received from standard medical treatments or alternative methods of healing. I have discovered that some chronic conditions can be linked to the patient's unconscious response to an ancestral trauma.

When these response patterns are consciously addressed, I have witnessed remarkable recoveries of patients with long-standing or untreatable symptoms. I notice a powerful loyalty that binds these patients to their biological systems. Even patients with presumed indifference, or lack of interest about their current family or their family of origin, have clear emotional and physiological responses contrary to their conscious perceptions of family relationships.

For exploring the subject matter, I suggest the hypothesis that a trauma's information remains potent in corresponding fields for several generations. I find it plausible that children, in their first two years of development, when steeped in non-verbal space, start to absorb some of this field information from the system. In the process of growing up, this deep ancestral implant will become enveloped by their maturing ego-structure. Initially, a person starts to object to such experiences of 'otherness' and tries to escape by warding them off. In childhood, this is the place where the inner conflict between self and other can lead to disease. For this reason I suggest that the family system of children with chronic conditions should always be screened for the presence of such family traumas. By the time we have matured to adulthood, the entanglement with an ancestral trauma has significantly informed ego development, even to the point that decisive life choices often originate from this unconscious process.

There are recurring patterns of entanglement that I have found in my work with patients. If these

patterns become visible during a constellation, they can indicate a source for disease embodiment:

- *I follow you into death.* When a parent dies prior to the tenth birthday of a child, or when a sibling dies at such an early age, the emotional bond may be so profound that a living sibling wants to follow the deceased, and consequently becomes ill or accident-prone.
- *I die instead of you.* When a parent is entangled with an ancestor's fate, the parent cannot bond fully with the child. Out of deep loyalty and love, the child tries to relieve the burden of the parent and becomes ill.
- *I stand in for you.* When one sibling is stillborn or handicapped or given up for adoption, the surviving or healthy or remaining sibling can develop an identification and feel that he or she does not belong, has no home and is not wanted, or, if there has been a perpetrator in the family, the victim will become part of the family system and the perpetrator's descendants might identify with the victim's fate and consequently, fall ill.

During a constellation, lineage information clearly manifests itself. The constellation enacts a hidden relationship between the living and the dead. The patient can go through profound catharsis by observing this drama unfold, but it is also necessary to state that the process of witnessing, honouring, and finally integrating a traumatic event has a positive effect for anyone in the system. Besides the patient, siblings or parents may also benefit, regardless of whether they live nearby or far away. It is my understanding that the information retrieved in a constellation arises from a non-linear time-space continuum.

At times I use the fields of homoeopathic remedies during a constellation; the remedies are

matched spontaneously, according to the emotional, physical, and mental symptoms that the representatives communicate. I write the name of the remedy on paper and ask the representative to step on it. I have found this practice helpful in various circumstances: e.g. ancestors with no connection to their country of origin due to forced immigration; in disconnected male or female lineages; in a disease constellation where body symptoms are expressed by representatives; and occasionally the homoeopathic field can be helpful when family secrets are present.

The following two cases have sparked my interest in working with children with chronic health conditions. They involve children whose parents have attended the constellation workshop:

Case 1: The Boy Who Was Not Heard

The boy's parents came to a constellation workshop in Austria to seek help for their youngest son who had developed a therapy-resistant stutter that impaired his self-esteem and social development at the age of seven. The family history revealed that the maternal great-grandfather had been a high-ranking official in the German SS. After World War II he was tried in court for involvement in atrocities. Like other Austrian families, he shared the fate of someone who had originally been held in high esteem but after the collapse of the Third Reich, the family had become ashamed of his deeds. He was shunned by them and eventually committed suicide.

The constellation revealed an identification of the boy's representative with both the great-grandfather and the victims. Generally, such situations are called 'dual identification'. The stutter was an embodied attempt of the boy, three generations later, to speak the forbidden truth of his great-grandfather, and simultaneously to also honour the victims. The boy lost his stutter two weeks after the constellation; it has not returned over the last two years.

The next case illustrates the magnitude of ancestral influence for shaping one's life.

Case 2: The Boy on Fire

When Mark was nine years of age, he came to my practice for treatment of chronic eczema around his mouth. His condition started at age five and stubbornly persisted through standard medical and alternative treatments. Mark was a well-adapted child with no other notable conditions in his medical history. He was bright, very articulate, and somewhat serious and mature for his age. He seemed burdened. As the oldest sibling in a loving family, he got along well with his younger brother. In times of high emotion, he would collapse and feel guilty about something he had done wrong without knowing what it was.

At the initial homoeopathic appointment, I recognised his response to the field of fire. Eczema burns like fire, hot food makes it worse, and Mark had recurrent dreams of fire and explosives. (Here it is of relevance to keep in mind that Mark despised violent video games and films.) In a telephone interview after the initial session I asked his father if there had been any war involvements in the family. He told me about a recently revealed family secret. The maternal grandfather had served in Vietnam where he had used explosives to perform atrocities. Mark did not know about this. During the constellation and unknown to him, the representative for Mark identified with the victims. He had also tried to support his grandfather by carrying the burden of guilt. Such instances of dual identification, as in the previous case, are difficult to bear. I have conducted several constellations where family members with a dual identification of victim and perpetrator developed mental disorders.

After the constellation, Mark became very ill with acute bronchitis and a high fever. Over the course of a week, his eczema vanished and did not return. Over the next two months, he had only two periods of

emotional collapse. After taking one dose of a homoeopathic remedy, he started to stabilise emotionally. I saw Mark only twice, at the initial interview and then six months later, to assess him for a constitutional remedy. I was stunned by the positive change in the boy. He exuded balance and well-being, the sense of burden was gone. The eczema had also vanished, and has not returned to this day, a year later.

The father, a writer, was very impressed by the effects of the constellation on his son, and because there had been severe loss of his family members in the Holocaust, we decided on a second constellation. Unlike before, in this Jewish family system, the perpetrators needed to be integrated. In the constellation, the representative for the perpetrators was strongly attracted to the father's representative, so I reckoned that the father might have some unconscious identification with the perpetrators. Perpetrator identifications often show up as isolated individuals, loners, shrewd business people, or individuals with paranoid tendencies who leave their system. The father did not display any of these attributes. He was a caring, well-balanced individual with sincere social values.

After the constellation he gave me one of the books he had written. The book had been published several years before in the United States and was very well received. It was a documentary on the rise of neo-fascist groups in Germany. The father had infiltrated German Nazi circles to get inside information, befriended leaders in these organisations and participated in their rituals. He got to know their mindset from the inside out. If they had discovered his Jewish identity, they would have killed him. After the book was published, the author had to go undercover because of death threats. Needless to say this encounter expanded my views on perpetrator identifications.

The next two cases involve two adults with chronic symptoms who attended a constellation workshop and made a remarkable recovery afterwards:

Case 3: A ‘Ghost’ In The System

Susan, a 41-year-old woman, came to my practice because she had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis two years previously. Her physical symptoms were mild, her progression slow, but the typical changes in the MRI did warrant the start of more aggressive therapy. However, her neurologist advised her to first consider an alternative treatment, and consequently, Susan contacted me for homoeopathic treatment. The family history revealed the tragic death of her great-grandmother, who had died from a haemorrhage in her early thirties, just one week after giving birth to her youngest child. The family story portrayed her as a woman bravely fighting to stay alive, but who was taken away by death. Her death had an effect on the next three generations of females, from the grandmother who at a very young age had to take care of her siblings and the father, to the mother who had not been mothered herself and did not allow her maternal instincts to benefit Susan, and finally to Susan, who was terrified of becoming pregnant and had also developed MS. During the constellation, the great-grandmother’s representative was restless and displayed the symptoms of an anxious dead person, although she had literally died decades before.

Much like paranormal phenomena, these ‘ghost’ energies are more than energetic memories arising from the unconscious. I have seen cases like this before and conjecture that such energies can be remembered in the disease of a descendant. The representative for the MS, without knowing any details about the family situation, felt that he could leave Susan as soon as the bonding ritual of the female lineage was completed. Once the bonding between daughter (Susan), mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother had occurred, the representative for the MS did leave the constellation, and the representative

of the great-grandmother came to rest. I used the fields of two homoeopathic remedies in the bonding ritual.

About one week after the constellation, I also gave Susan a homoeopathic remedy. Two months later, another MRI of the originally identified area was performed. All original MRI findings had disappeared, so had the physical findings in the neurological exam, and Susan is free of her original symptoms. Although very impressive, this must be seen as a preliminary report, and is valid for about nine months at the time of writing this paper. Since Susan received a homoeopathic remedy at about the same time of the constellation, both events may have to be counted as contributing factors.

Case 4: The Spell Constellation

A 25-year-old woman, Catherine, came to a constellation workshop because of nightmares and a generalised anxiety disorder. She had one younger sister with bulimia. Her mother was diagnosed with a mild form of paranoid schizophrenia when Catherine was three; her parents were divorced. There were no serious traumas in the family background, but already at the beginning of the constellation, a haunting feeling was palpable in the room. The representative for Catherine’s mother had a fixated gaze on the floor and did not respond to the daughters. I broke up the constellation because I had the sense that some relevant information was missing. The next day, Catherine provided additional information: Her maternal grandfather had accidentally killed a little girl with his truck while reversing. This had occurred when Catherine’s mother was ten years old. The circumstances were not clear, but the grandfather was never tried.

The constellation showed a different picture; the mother’s representative had a dual identification with the little girl and the burden of the grandfather’s deed, and felt a stabbing pain between her shoulder

blades, as if someone had stuck a knife in her back. This was exactly the same symptom the mother had experienced for years as a young adult. The smell of alcohol tainted the room as soon as the grandfather's representative was placed into the constellation and the representatives for Catherine and her sister fell into a trance state and were not able to talk. I was at my wit's end and considered removing the representatives from their roles to protect them from whatever was circulating in this system, when a different response pattern occurred to me: I placed a representative for a presumed anonymous person who might have cast a curse, and asked her to feel and say the words, "the spell is over." Instantaneously, the mother's representative was relieved from the stabbing pain, and the two daughters woke up from their trance-like state. This constellation had some more angles to it, with the outcome that the mother later reported some relief from her paranoid fixed ideas, and an increased connectedness with her daughters. Catherine also reported losing her nightmares of being buried alive.

The positive results from constellations suggest a systemic healing force that is capable of affecting chronic symptoms. When patients observe how their ancestral lineage restores itself by assuring the original ancestors of its continuity, their perception of the family system changes and a newly found equilibrium starts to unfold. During a constellation, patients can identify with events and response patterns of the representatives, and resonate with the corresponding psychological and emotional states that, previously, they had been unable to experience in relation to their family system. The traumatic fixation of a family system is then recognised and addressed, finally embraced, and its negative charge released. Almost instantaneously, the observing patient feels a positive emotional change. These dynamic processes can also reach family members who are not participating in the constellation and who might not

even be aware that a constellation has taken place. I have received numerous accounts from patients who reported changes in the behaviour of family members consistent with the target activity of the constellation. Hellinger has recognised this fact:

But in the same way that the real family is present in the constellation, the resolution of the representative family also has an effect, in return, on the real family. Something returns to the system, even if they don't know anything about it. (Hellinger 1999, p. 64)

In this context, constellation work can provide successful surrogate healing for ancestral trauma. This is demonstrated in the above cases involving children where the recognition of ancestral fate brings a positive impact on the child's health. Proper placement in one's family lineage provides strength for the individual, releases previous entanglements, and restores vital energy that the individual can utilise as an impulse for personal healing. Participants repeatedly comment that their newly found connectedness with their family lineage brings them a sense of peace.

In constellations where chronic illness is addressed, I have noticed that alienation from one's parents disrupts lineage connectedness. In children who are born prematurely and spend time in the incubator, or children with early hospital experiences, the symbiotic tie with mother can be severed. The mirroring and bonding phase of the pre-verbal stage can also be inhibited. The re-enactment of such early disconnectedness allows the client to feel this desire for what is known in constellation work as a 'reaching-out movement of the child towards the mother', and can start a healing impulse. Re-connecting with one's mother or father clears the channels for vigour and health as it is related to acceptance of one's lineage and life in general. Participants have reported numerous times that, after the constellation, their inner image of the world turns from hostile to friendly, from empty to

connected. Their world becomes a safer place; they feel more protected, more trusting, and less anxious in their body.

For awareness of lineage connectedness I find it helpful to invite participants to enact a 'reconnection visualisation'. This enactment takes place in gender specific lineages, and I ask the patient to leave the observer seat and actively participate in it. Occasionally, this process requires increased emotional processing related to mirroring and bonding, which can be assisted by resonant fields of homoeopathic remedies. When a person with chronic illness is able to witness or directly experience family bonding, a positive reinforcement or embrace, a profound healing impulse may occur. Such a process is non-verbal, and when it happens during the constellation, I let it unfold in its own time without interruption. When the system is ready, the son will stand before the father and lean back into the father's supportive hands that are placed on his shoulder blades. One by one, the grandfather provides the same support to his son (the father), the great-grandfather to his son (the grandfather), and so on. I instruct the son to lean back and feel the support of the father, and then let him visualise all the ancestors lined up in support from the beginning of time. Then, starting at the beginning of time, I let the son visualise each man supporting the one who continues the lineage, which brings a profound sense of ancestral connectedness. The process at times is trance-inducing, as the breath of all the men synchronises and a wave is noticeable, carrying the pulse of life forwards to nourish the bodies of all. In female lineages, I use the image of 'birthing the one before you into life'. The individual recognises that these non-verbal movements speak the language of the body, ever dependent, interdependent, and connected to its lineage and the web of life. It is a potent pre-cognitive space that contains the basic necessities for healing: to be seen, embraced and held, feeling a sense of connection,

and from there, to start living, nourishing ourselves and others, and passing on what we have received.

In conclusion, patients' physiological responses to unresolved ancestral traumatic events can become a contributing factor in illness. Systemic Family Constellation work provides a patient with an outward manifestation of such inner dramas. The therapeutic impulse addresses the hidden part of the iceberg, where separation anxiety, sibling rivalry, or conflicts with one's family are powerfully contained by a bigger force, the interconnectedness of life. The body instinctively recognises where it comes from; it craves the energy of the ancestors, their strength, support, and wisdom. The re-enactment of this awareness in the context of Systemic Family Constellation work activates a systemic shift with the potential to release the patient from systemic entanglement, and can stimulate a positive healing response.

Reference

Hellinger, Bert & ten Hövel, Gabriele (1999) *Acknowledging What Is. Conversations with Bert Hellinger*. Zeig, Tucker & Co., Inc., Phoenix, AZ.

Footnotes

- (1) *A longer version of this paper was presented at the First U.S. Systemic Constellation Conference, October 6-10, 2005.*
- (2) *Homoeopathy is a holistic treatment modality to address all physical, emotional, and mental symptoms of a patient for the purpose of illness assessment. A homoeopath will use this information to find the most well-matched remedy for individual treatment. Homoeopathic remedies are derived from plant, animal, and mineral sources and prepared in a laborious fashion to retrieve their curative powers in minute dilutions.*