

Being a Representative in Family Constellations

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In 1996 Bert Hellinger and Hunter Beaumont came to London via the Gestalt Centre to run the first workshop in England on Family Constellations. I was about to complete my training at the Gestalt Centre at the time and was drawn to attend the workshop when I read about the links to working with illness (very prevalent in my family of origin).

Given that this was a workshop with a demonstration group and an audience of around 200 people, I wondered how involved I would be able to feel. However, I had the good fortune quite early in the workshop to be invited to be a representative in a constellation and I was gripped by the work from then on.

What does 'being a representative' mean?

A person is asked what their issue is and a few questions about any unusual events in their family. The facilitator then suggests which family members may need to be set up initially and asks the client to choose people from the audience or group to represent these family members. Initially, all representatives are placed in the middle of the room and the client is asked to take each representative by the shoulders and to move them intuitively to where they need to be in the space in the middle of the group. Representatives are then asked to wait until they begin to feel sensations in their body or a desire to move. After a while, the facilitator moves around the constellation asking each representative what they are experiencing in their bodies. Sometimes, representatives are asked to remain silent and simply to follow the movements of their body.

It is amazing and quite unbelievable, what then happens. It is as if these representatives actually become the people they are representing and many times their reporting has been borne out as extremely accurate by the person whose family is being set up. Some people refer to this as 'movements of the soul' and it is possible, if you wait, to feel the shift from what could be referred to

as 'role-playing' to a deeper level of experience. This is beautifully demonstrated in one of Bert Hellinger's early videos where he invites a woman to move more deeply into her experience and the shift in her energy is palpable.

Sometimes people are chosen to represent concepts, abstract ideas or symptoms such as: death, war, God, an illness, a country or a transplanted organ. These representations can give us great insight into all of these areas in a different way to what might be possible in other contexts.

Depending on the reporting or movement of these representatives and the shape of the constellation set up, the facilitator will bring any possible missing people into the constellation or move others around in an attempt to find a solution to the disorder in the family system. At other times, the facilitator does not intervene at all and leaves the representatives to find their own place. Sometimes, representatives are asked to say healing sentences or to bow in honour of their parents or victims of fate in their family. This whole process can be deeply moving and for some quite sacred.

So far, the constellation work has not been 'fixed' in this way and the reader is therefore left to his own devices about how to make sense of what is being written here. No-one as yet has been

able to fully explain this phenomenon, though scientists like Rupert Sheldrake, with his theory on morphogenetic fields probably comes closer than most. Those interested in quantum physics and complexity theory may also see links to the constellation work whilst those with a more spiritual approach to the work will talk of 'oneness' and the possibilities of life after death. If you are interested in the theoretical understanding, it is possible to read much literature on any of the above. Alternatively, you may prefer to attend a constellation workshop and experience for yourself what it is like to stand as a representative in another person's family constellation or indeed, to set up your own.

Examples of Representations

The representations I will describe below are based only on my own experience in those particular constellations but they have given me a greater degree of insight into what it may be like to be schizophrenic or psychotic, a drug addict or a mother of ten children than I may have gained from simply talking to people or reading books.

Schizophrenia

On three different occasions I have represented a person who was alleged to be schizophrenic. On each of these occasions, I felt zapped by the most incredible, overwhelming surge of energy that felt completely uncontainable

by my own body. Common to each of these representations was an uncontrollable terror linked to the awareness of some terrible truth which no-one else in the constellation could or appeared to want to see. Each time I felt the need to hide away and my body began to tremble. As soon as I sat down from these constellations, I felt completely clear of this energy.

Psychotic Breakdown

At another workshop I was chosen to represent a person who had had a psychotic breakdown. The initial sensations were similar to what I had experienced as a schizophrenic but on this occasion the surge of energy felt more sexual and I immediately dissociated and moved away from everything that was happening. In contrast to the schizophrenic experiences where I felt 'too present', I was a million miles away from those around me and the only thread I seemed to have to reality was to laugh hysterically each time a particular person spoke. I vaguely recall being led out of the room, feeling that my body was no longer my own and those sensations continued when I was outside the room. However, on returning to my seat, they again immediately disappeared.

Opium Dealer

A woman from Hong Kong was attempting to connect to her Chinese roots and I was set up as one of a group of opium

dealers. In this representation, I began to feel like I was spinning, a bit like a tornado and that unless I could keep the whole of one side of my body in contact with another human being, I would literally spin off the planet. Now I have never taken any kind of hard drugs, so I have no idea how my experience fits with those taking heroin and other opium based drugs.

Mother of Ten

I was once chosen to be a mother of ten children in an Irish family. The initial feeling was very heavy and oppressed. I felt completely exhausted, but when all of my children were lined up in front of me and I had my husband at my side, I felt an incredible strength and weight at having given life to all these children.

I have chosen these examples above, to demonstrate how it is possible to feel extreme feelings and sensations as a representative and for them to disappear on removing yourself from the energetic field of the constellation. With the more subtle sensations, the change is not so obvious. Over the years, I have noticed some common threads with certain representations – feeling lost and forgotten as an aborted foetus, an excruciating pain in my chest each time I was chosen to be a representative in an Irish family, the pain and despair of being a Nazi or a Jew. Some feelings as a representative are extremely positive – the love of a mother

for her child, the opening of the heart as I finally meet again my first love, the settling and peace that goes with standing in the right place in my family. Yet, beyond these common threads have been many unique experiences.

Difficulties with being a Representative

The difficulty with being a representative many times as I have, is that I now run the risk of falling into my ideas and concepts about what it's like to be any of the above labels and I am very mindful of this as I stand in a constellation. To completely trust my phenomenological experience is hard. How do I know when I have moved from my purely physical sensations into my ideas about that representative? It is a subtle, almost imperceptible shift that is easily missed. Often our representations are close to our own personal experience and it is easy to take energy from the constellation in trying to work out whether what's happening is to do with our own 'stuff'. For this reason, as a facilitator I remind people of this in advance and ask them to completely trust that what they are experiencing in the moment is to do with that particular constellation and has nothing to do with them.

The other aspect of being a representative which is particularly difficult and can also

be highly controversial, is when the sensations and emotions you are experiencing fly in the face of the most commonly held beliefs and assumptions about what it means for instance, to be sexually abused, to be a murderer or to be dead. It can be hard as a sexually abused child to acknowledge that I may feel a very deep love for my abuser or that, as a victim of a murderer I am the one holding the murderous feelings or else feeling deep compassion for the person in front of me. Some people representing dead people have reported not knowing they were dead, or having an influence on the living, looking to the living to help them die. I remember on one occasion, being a woman who had died suddenly in an accident. I had no idea that I was dead and was wandering about in the constellation. It wasn't until someone came up and said to me, 'You are dead' that the realisation came to me.

It is also possible to see people having the same movements and sensations with different representations and then the question arises as to whether these people are really immersed in the representation or acting out their own personal story. At the same time, you could argue that they have been chosen for those particular representations because of who they are anyway.

Sometimes so much information is coming through in a constellation it is hard to know what to report and what to hold on to. It can be overwhelming for a facilitator if too much information comes through at once. At the same time, I remember someone in one of my workshops telling me afterwards that when representing a lost soldier in the war, he had been feeling an excruciating pain in his arm but didn't think it was worth mentioning!!!

The other risk when being a representative, is that our need to make things okay for people gets in the way of our being able to stay with what is actually happening. This is a particular risk if we already know and like the person and for this reason, it often works better if participants do not know each other beforehand.

What next?

When he first came across this work, Bert Hellinger resisted

having anything written down. He did not want his ideas, which were based purely on his own observations to become yet another set of moral dictums by which people would live their lives. Although there are organisations and trainings in existence, so far the constellation has managed to stay fluid and evolve over time. However, it is in a period of transition. It may be that as a result of this, it simply becomes absorbed into other ways of working or it may stand alone. Whatever happens, it is the representatives themselves who can influence the direction of the work by continuing to trust their experience in the moment and not to take on board any preconceived ideas about what they 'should' be feeling. It is a privilege to stand as representative for another person's family member and this privilege deserves to be honoured and respected.

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