

From Constellation Work to Your True Self

It has been some years now that constellation work has encouraged us to work through hidden systemic bonds, unfelt familial loyalties, and intergenerational entanglements. Indeed the step from personal issues to the mutual effects of a larger family or organizational system has broadened our view, sharpened our awareness and trained our sensitivity for large-scale reciprocities. We seem to have understood how much we are part of a larger whole and that our personal well-being is relational – is connected with the people around us and the way we relate to them and how they relate amongst each other. The phrase: “Appreciating the other sustains myself” has been a guiding principle and we have had awesome times of wondering how tightly we are connected with other people and how much our own assumed identity is formed by the relational field we are part of. Many of you may have read works on constellation work and have focused very much on appreciating the people who support you and recognize the reality and quality of feelings, bonding and relationships.

However, the more we focused on constellations and larger systems the more our view was drawn away from ourselves and shifted towards what is out there in the system. During my facilitation of constellations, I sometimes wondered if the whole issue of looking at the family-systems may sometimes become rather a diversion from looking at the bounty of myself as an individual person. More than once, I have had the feeling that it is easy to become intrigued by the constellation itself, rather than looking at the necessity to get closer to our individual responsibilities, feelings, conceptualizations, talents and possibilities. Bodywork taught me the simple but striking lesson, that the way we experience the world is equivalent to the way we experience and inhabit our body. Or to put it the other way round, only if we can actually feel our body, develop a felt-sense of our embodiment

that is rooted in the perception of our senses, will we be able to experience the bounty of life, the connection with the world and get a sense of our truly felt self and the dynamic in the family system. The way we relate to ourselves, the way we feel our body, the way we dare to get actually “down” to our feelings, sensations, and different perceptions will give us a felt-sense of coherence, tangible reality and a felt connection to actually belong to a larger (family) or any other larger, natural, spiritual or generational system. Being connected to ourselves, being able to feel our true self as a sensuous physical reality is the precondition for connecting to the reality of a piece of constellation work and to life itself.

Recently I am even more aware of people who want to set up a constellation, but where to dissociate to connect to the constellation and its accompanying emotional process. Sometimes you look at a person and his/her body and get the feeling “nobody is home” there. It is a sad experience to see that the person felt so unsafe in its connection to its sensuous and perceptual body, that it felt safer to dissociate and leave it behind rather than to stay connected with him-/herself. In fact, we all are more or less dissociated in what we do and more often than not, we dare not be fully present in the here-and-now of the immediate situation. In this condition we feel easily lonely, disconnected and estranged from the world around us. We find an eccentric way of getting along and feel forgone by life and its offerings.

Due to this experience, in my recent work I have become less intrigued by classical family constellation and more inclined to do constellational process work. Constellational process work is centered around the client and the way he asks his question. Process work is focused around why the client asks the question in that way and in what respect it is relevant to him. And it is worthwhile to remember that even in classical family constellations it is not the constellation that is the major focus of our

attention. A constellation rather serves to trigger off a personal process. But it is this individual process of the client that provides the guideline for the facilitator to navigate through the constellation and help the client “see” and feel what his situation is about. The work is focused on the client’s inner landscape that may differ from what he says or is able to talk about. It is very much about taking his inner reality into account that may diverge vastly from what is put into words and even go back to circumstances that can not be put into a coherent story as they are deeply rooted in the physiology of the body.

And what are the landmarks of this individual process ? What are the guideposts to help a person get more connected to her-/himself and allow her/him to become ever more authentic ? What will we experience on the way of supporting the reconnection with our true self during process work ? What will eventually pave the way to our being nature rather than a made-up idea of who we think we are ? How do we know we have come to a point where we can rely on our perception, “reality” and feelings ?

First of all this endeavor begins with becoming aware of what we have relied on so far. What were the skills, relationships, achievements, that made us look at ourselves the way we did and do ? How do we “do” ourselves ? How do we experience and conceptualize ourselves ?

A safe way to get started here is to count our blessings, feel what our felt-sense conveys as our personal reality and rely on our personal potential, skills, talents, aptitudes, etc.. This appreciation of what we are, can, accomplish, of how have managed to live so far and how we went about problems, setbacks and personal crisis may help us to identify the building blocks of our present identity. When we are sure, reassured and certain about what we are today and how we managed to come to terms with the predicaments of life, we may gradually allow the deeper, unnoticed and body-based feelings of the deep layers of our true nature come up.

These deeper feelings that arise out of an undefended state towards ourselves ignite a personal transformation. We need to go to our body as a source of past experience, wisdom and carrier of information to help us get in touch with the full reality of our being-self. To dare to fully feel what is coming up needs a careful listening. The quality of our listening capability is one of the primary steps to personal change. When the dawning of the true self actually sets in, this may be a frightening, confusing, uncomfortable and unfamiliar experience that goes along with a change of perception of self and environment. Most people who have the privilege of actually getting to this point feel touched, moved, or become strongly “emotional” within themselves. They also feel love, gratitude, often humbleness, and a sense of tenderness. They experience a deeply felt appreciation for the other, witnessing person and his/her presence witnessing the process that seems so difficult and precious at the same time. The new thing is that we begin to feel – and not just become aware of - more intensely what evolves in response to our own self. We begin to feel understood, seen, loved, touched or affected by the presence of other people. All these evolving emotions give us the felt certainty and self-evident knowledge that we are getting to a more intimate level of personal authenticity. This feeling and awareness is a kind of fulfilling liberation to a more comprehensive level of being. It is just the opposite of shame and withdrawal that goes along with the experience of failing to be what we deeply know ourselves to be. This is a very intense, often silent, humbling and speechless experience that can usually not or hardly be expressed by words. The full range of non-verbal compassion, body contact, rituals, artistic expressions of self is needed to get closer to a sharing of this experience. Afterwards, we may not say what it was and how it came about. We do not know what changed us, how we changed. But we feel the transformation and have rarely experienced something that feels so right.

Instead of realizing our being nature many of us are bound up in the feeling of shame. This is a feeling that develops early in life when we get scolded and take this as a rejection of what we are and could be. As little children we are naturally expressing ourselves and reaching out for the environment. But by encountering the boundaries of our expressions of life we are responding with a feeling of withdrawal, guilt, shame and self-consciousness. It is essential to overcome these shameful experiences by feeling our own empowerment, getting confirmation and approval within our immediate environment. Getting to the core of sensations that once threatened our being – real or imagined - goes along with a feeling of the uprising of all kind of emotions that may also be felt in our body. When people feel this emotional welling up in the body they suddenly find themselves in states of trembling, get a shaking voice and may try hard to fight back the rising emotions or tears. Here it is important not to focus on the emotions primarily but shift the attention to the accompanying body sensations. It is the body which may give away the intensity of this releasing, internal process by displaying a large array of physiological signs. Eyes may be filled with silent tears, the skin color and overall complexion may change and get more tensed or relaxed, the body may shake and tremble and the body will follow its own internal healing plan. The engagement of the body's internal, autonomic healing plan is paramount for the well-set unfoldment of this process. Diana Fosha¹ exquisitely describes the nature of this process when she talks about healing affects:

The healing affects possess simplicity, clarity, innocence, freshness, sweetness and poignancy. The individual is in a state of openness and vulnerability, but a shimmering vulnerability without anxiety and without the need to be defended. The mood (or primary affective state) surrounding healing affects can be either solemn,

poignant, and tender, or else joyous and filled with wonder, often accompanied by a gentle, almost shy smile”.

The facilitation of these processes need an attitude of non-doing, non-invasion and utmost respect for the way the person had to protect and shelter him-/herself for personal survival in the world. It needs utmost respect for the wisdom of the body that shows the way for its own healing and “re-member-ing”. As facilitators we do not even go with the idea of actively going for solutions. The idea of solution-focused orientation is already too much. Instead, we stand back, become observers, witnesses and just stay aside the fence to appreciate, approve and confirm the process that unfolds in its own wiggled, coiled and complex way. We have to learn and find an attitude of being present, attentive and observant without acting or grabbing onto an imagined or desired change process of the client. We have to be critical with our own ideas about change as they always imply an attitude of disapproval of what there is now. But deep down in deep-change processes we rather need confirmation, our being-nature needs to be contacted and we need reassurance rather than to be changed. A huge lesson of respect and non-invasion is to be learned and this is a challenge for client and facilitator alike.

And finally, what will the personal transformation be when this process has taken place ? How will it be and what are the tell-tale-signs that we have finally attained our being nature ? What are the criteria that we are suddenly breaking through to a new state of self and what does it take us to get there ? What I see in the workshops is a new quality, a new kind of field spread amongst the group that shows much of what could not have been shown easily elsewhere. Instead, it needs rather gentle than strong encouragement, reassurance, acceptance and sober, detached friendliness to invite and allow a person to go into an undefended state. A state were the person can let go of the extra tension and protection that

¹ Fosha, Diana. 2002. True Self, True Other and Core State: Toward a Clinical Theory of Affective Change Process. Paper presented at the Los Angeles Psychoanalytic Society and Institute

takes up so much energy in everyday life and estranges us from those aspects that want to find their way into the everyday reality of our life. To allow this to happen takes extra care, sensitivity and awareness to listen attentively to the subtle marked messages that can be detected in our life. You also will have to listen to your body and find a new relationship to this source of innate wisdom. Also, having an empathetic, non-invasive guide aside may help to slowly approach our true nature in a contained and sensitive environment. The rise of body-based information, emotions and physiological energetic overcharge may ensue and make the person attentive to his/her own autonomic unfolding process. The autonomic internal healing plan has a chance to take action as long as we witness, stay in observer position and keep out with our intention. Contained step by contained step we get closer to who we are, once we are no longer locked into old constrictive patterns of our holistic body-mind. Eventually, being connected to our true self, our being nature is characterized by calm, silence, openness, vitality, ease, clarity and a strongly felt evidence of the own experience. The body shows no specific emotions, thinking very often stops, and a feeling of peaceful connection with the world sets in. You begin to feel deeply connected with what you experience and perceive your experience as a deeply-felt, emotionally cleansed, emotional truth. Sensation here is heightened, speech becomes soft, imagery is vivid, and experience is intense, deeply felt, unequivocal and clear. Our perception and relating to people becomes strongly colored by feelings of love, tenderness, compassion, closeness and mindfulness. This is also possible due to the inner sensation of self-possession and being fully connected to a coherent experience that qualifies subjectively as "self". This state of being goes along with an authentic knowing and authentic communication from being to being without the coloring of personal striving. We surrender to our own and a more universal reality. What we share feels like original truth. An attitude of generosity, out-

reaching empathy, self-empathy, and wisdom spreads forth from this connection with the core of what we are. We finally function from a point of internal connection with our source, rather than from eccentric striving or protective self-defense. This way of being qualifies as a kind of grounded peak experience. Everything around you has a certain ease and seems to go by itself.

One of the most rewarding results of going through this process is the experience of heightened relational competence. If we are reconnected to our core, being-nature, internal health or whatever term here seems appropriate for you, rather than to our traumatic, protection-instigating background this experience roots us deeply in a kind of compassionate benevolence. This goes along with a natural stance of disclosing authentic feelings and a responsiveness to the expressions of the other. This attitude invites kindness, openness, trust and emotional security that results in resonating with each other in a positive and rewarding way. As we are connected with ourselves we have a kind of internal reference when the going in a relationship gets rough. From the connection to this source we are less dependent on the other person and well-nourished from relating to ourselves. And by appreciating ourselves we can appreciate the other person more and vice versa. This stance provides increased efficiency for the healing of the relationship and empowers ourselves in a very gentle, connected and rewarding way.

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