

I CARRY YOUR HEART (I CARRY IT IN MY HEART)

FAMILY HEALING IN PRISONS

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. (R. J. inmate, personal communication, 2005)

For the past two years, a group of 'Lifers' has been participating in monthly family healing constellation circles as part of the third stage in the Growing Together Programme at Bay State Correctional Center in Norfolk, MA. In my view, these men do not fit whatever pre-existing stereotypes are commonly held about murderers and rapists in prison. Although their crimes are real and their punishment severe, these men are not hardened, hostile or withdrawn. In the context of the group meetings they are remarkably warm and kind. One of the women volunteers from outside the prison who participated in a constellation session with the men, reflected on her experience: "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." (Doris Speer, volunteer, personal communication 2005)

Despite their decades of incarceration, it has become clear to me that these individuals remain deeply connected to members of their family systems. Besides being released, what the men want most

is to be with their families and loved ones. In committing their crimes, the men took away a life. In administering justice, the State took away their freedom. They now acknowledge these crimes and accept their punishment; yet they still yearn to be accepted and loved.

Constellations suggest the presence of a field of connectedness between family members that extends beyond the limits of the physical body. Representatives routinely report that they tune into the resonance of family members regardless of the circumstances of the relationship and regardless of whether they are alive or dead. I believe this connection to be more than the residue of memory and the product of brain functioning.

Participants in a constellation feel the palpable presence of members of their family systems. Is this merely a heightened form of theatrics, a kind of high energy psychodrama? Or does this silent and still process generate a kind of primitive receiver of the knowing field? (Krippner 1990, Laszlo 1987, 2004; Radin 2006; Sheldrake 1988, 1999, 2003)

Precisely because prisoners are removed from their homes and communities and physically cut off from family members on the outside, the prison is a fertile environment in which to ponder these questions. As punishment for their acts, and to protect society from the risk of further criminal

behaviour, they are incarcerated behind impenetrable walls. I imagine the children of these men carry on with their lives, substituting those who are physically present for those who are absent. However, if what we see and feel in a constellation is valid, they will remain connected in a profound and tangible way to their fathers despite years, even decades, of total separation.

This article reflects on these questions and gives examples of this 'connectedness' as witnessed in two constellations and the changes that followed them.

THE GROWING TOGETHER PROGRAMME AT BAY STATE CORRECTIONAL CENTER

Bay State Correctional Center is a small general population medium security facility that predominantly houses older 'Lifers'. The Growing Together Programme is 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 are three phases to the Programme. The men of Growing Together III have graduated from the first two phases and have many years of experience in sophisticated emotional and spiritual development processes.

Most of them are serving long-term sentences for violent crimes, most commonly life for murder, without the possibility of parole. The Programme protocol does not allow me to collect census data on their crimes, sentences and demographics. However, many of the men have been incarcerated for decades and have only faint prospects of being released. Several

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of them are observant Muslims or Christians; at least one is an avowed atheist; another follows a form of Germanic neo-paganism. The group is racially mixed.

The format is for the men to sit in a circle of chairs. They begin with a meditation with eyes closed, followed by a round of check-ins where the men can share whatever is on their minds. Then, the guest facilitator presents his or her contribution. These can range from the practical, such as: preparing for a parole or commutation hearing, to the physical, for example: yoga or qigong, to a relational activity like psychodrama or to spiritual rituals and ceremonies.

RAHIM'S CONSTELLATION

During one of my first visits, a man whom I will name Rahim asked to set up his family constellation. He had been imprisoned for 30 years. At the time he was sentenced, he had two eight year-old daughters from two mothers. Independently, both mothers came to visit with each daughter. They said words to the effect of, "Take a good look at her. You'll never see her again." And he has not. These girls are now grown women aged 38. He has had no contact with them whatsoever in the interim. Even though Rahim has done a considerable amount of self-healing and personal growth over the years, thoughts of his daughters tear at his insides and leave him distraught. He asked me, "Can you help me with my relationship to my daughters?"

On that day, we had two women present as volunteers. In the prison setting, I do not allow men to represent women, though I have done this freely in other settings. Owing to this limitation, I asked him to set up a representative for himself, one for the two mothers, and a third for the two daughters. He set up the constellation and the rest of us sat and observed for several minutes. The initial set-up (Fig. 1) showed the father at a distance, looking longingly towards

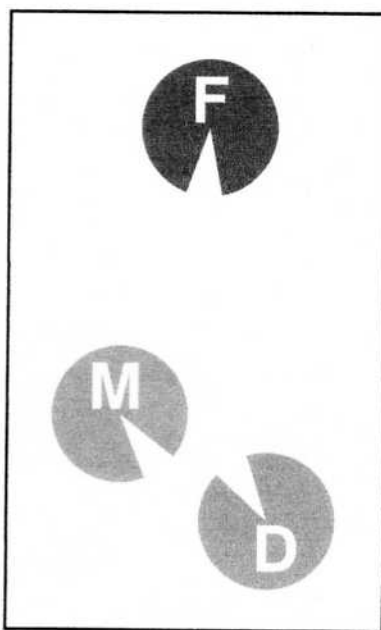


Fig. 1

had her back turned towards him and was focused only on her daughter. The daughter was facing her mother and close by her side. The key inner movement occurred after a few minutes; the daughter's gaze was gradually drawn away from her mother and became riveted on her father standing in the distance.

The group was able to take in the paradox between external and internal loyalties. The daughter was outwardly loyal to her mother, who had made a solemn oath that the two would never see each other again. Inwardly, she was yearning for her father with all her heart;

she couldn't take her eyes off him.

I repositioned the representatives, seeking a configuration that was more satisfactory for the three of them. With the daughter still by her mother, she stood much closer to her father. Slowly, they inched closer and closer to each other, until the three tenderly embraced.

This was a constellation which was beyond words so my attempts to describe what happened are necessarily constrained. In a literal sense, the three representatives stood there, quite still and silent. Any report by a participant or observer is wholly subjective. With that disclaimer, what follows is for me, a poetic representation of what was expressed in the daughter's gaze at her father. The poem below is by E.E. Cummings. (1994, p. 766) In this context the daughter speaks to her dear missing father.

I invited the client to stand in his place. I brought in representatives for the victim of his crime and another for the child of the victim. He faced them and at my suggestion told them, "You died and I lived. This is my deed, my guilt. I carry it myself, with dignity." In facing the victim, acknowledging his own guilt, and finding the inner strength to hold the full weight of his burden, the father symbolically

i carry your heart with me (i carry it in
my heart) i am never without it (anywhere
i go you go, my dear; and whatever is done
by only me is your doing, my darling)
i fear no fate (for you are my fate, my sweet) i want
no world (for beautiful you are my world, my true)
and it's you are whatever a moon has always meant
and whatever a sun will always sing is you

here is the deepest secret nobody knows
(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud
and the sky of the sky of a tree called life; which grows
higher than the soul can hope or mind can hide)
and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart

i carry your heart (i carry it in my heart)

leaves nothing unresolved for his own daughters to carry on his behalf. In other constellations (Hellinger 2001, Hellinger, Weber & Beaumont 1998, Cohen 2005, Ulsamer 2005, Wolynn 2005), we often see children lovingly sacrificing themselves for their parents. These sentences aim towards freeing the daughters from the unconscious burden of atoning for their father's crime.

The embrace between the father and daughter moistened the eyes of many members of the group. We've coined an expression for these situations: "Feeling like crying counts as crying." This acknowledges necessary limitations to the full expression of emotion due to the inmates' living conditions.

When the constellation ended, we caught our collective breath. I advised Rahim not to act on the image, but to let the image act on him, slowly, in its own time and be absorbed with a minimum of intellectualising or processing. I recommend to clients that they do not turn their constellation experience into a prophecy or action plan. Rahim might have been tempted to move immediately into action, though, given his situation and resources, there was not much he could do. He would not have known how to reach out to his daughters even if he had wanted to.

I explained that constellations can gather so much systemic resonance that representatives can often feel similar experiences and feelings to those they represent. In theatre, even in psychodrama, the actors know they are playing the role of a character. It seems to me that in constellations, this distinction blurs. Both the representatives and observers become drawn into a field of consciousness that appears to exist independently of their own cognition. It had felt in this constellation as if the wife, daughter, victim and victim's child were actually present. We know this is not true, but what is less clear is whether it is completely untrue.

My stance as a facilitator is to be open to all experience and sceptical of all explanations. We felt the presence of the sacred, elemental forces of consciousness that gather in life and disperse in death. When one is touched by the sacred, one is moved and once so touched and moved, one is never the same again. The question that hung in the air was whether the father, mothers, daughters, and victim's family might also be touched and moved.

In fact, there was subsequent contact between Rahim and one of his daughters. In April, 2005, Rahim reported that he had received a letter, including photographs from one of his daughters. This was the start of an exchange of communications consisting of letters and telephone calls. He discovered, among other things, that he was the grandfather of a young woman in college.

During a later visit he told me that this daughter was planning to visit him, together with her children, in the Spring. Rahim was beaming with love and pride as he told me this information. We shook hands, then hugged as he thanked me.

SUBSEQUENT CONTACT WITH CHILDREN

One characteristic of family healing constellation work with this group is the high degree of overlap among the members. Besides sharing the commonality of having committed capital crimes and being incarcerated for most of their adult lives, the men face many of the same issues. Rahim's constellation hit home to many other members of the group who were similarly grieving for the loss of connection to their children.

Several months later during our opening check-in, another group member, Phil, reported that he was feeling especially good. He went on to report that on the prior Sunday he had received a visit from his son whom he had not seen in more than 6 years. The two had become estranged at the time of the

birth of the son's first child, Phil's first grandchild. He had not received any visits since then.

We cannot understand what, if any, influence the constellation work might have had on the resumption of their contact. Causality between a constellation experience and a rapprochement between the men and estranged family members is impossible to establish. Even the question itself seems unpalatable, as it serves to satisfy a natural curiosity, but reduces complex internal processes of the family members to simplistic explanations of cause and effect. Nevertheless, it is fair to note the apparent synchronicity between the themes that arise in constellations and the material changes in relationship patterns that have been frozen or closed for many years.

Phil's visit with his son lasted an entire afternoon. He reported it was warm and loving, leaving him feeling elated even a week afterwards. His son had brought photographs of Phil's three grandchildren and told many stories about each one of them.

Retrospectively one sees in constellations how the exclusion of a member of the family system, such as a father or grandfather, frequently has negative consequences in future generations. We can logically speculate that the restoration of Phil's relationship with his son, and new feeling of connection to his grandchildren will ultimately benefit the entire family.

Phil's Constellation

In late 2005, during our check-in, I shared a comment made by one of my neighbours 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."

I found this statement provocative.

