

# 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 Although their crimes are real and their punishment severe, these men are not hardened, hostile or withdrawn.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

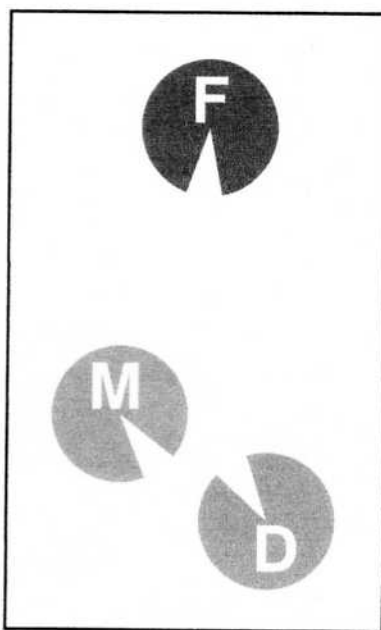


Fig. 1

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.

It implied that offering palliative relief to the offenders softens their punishment. Is the justice owed to the victims betrayed by an act of compassion towards the offenders? Incarceration serves multiple purposes. It protects society at large from offenders who are deemed dangerous. It also exacts a measure of vengeance against them.

Arendt (1958) in her classic treatise *'The Human Condition'* advocated the importance of forgiving to overcome the inevitable errors and injuries that are ubiquitous in human relationships. When we forgive, we recognise and respond to offences against us by interrupting, instead of repeating, cycles of resentment. According to Arendt's (1958) understanding:

*"Trespassing is an everyday occurrence... which needs forgiving, dismissing, in order to make it possible for life to go on... In this respect, forgiveness is the exact opposite of vengeance."* (p. 240)

Forgiveness frees both the victim and offender from the confinement of vengeance and blame which left unimpeded, could recycle indefinitely. Yet, Arendt in formulating the necessity of forgiveness also draws limits around it. She points to actions designated as 'radical evil', which are so destructive and irreversible that they can be neither punished nor forgiven. (p. 241) Murder is such action, because the life taken can never be returned. My neighbour was questioning whether doing something good for the offenders constituted doing harm to the victims.

As the check-in continued it became clear that my reporting of this comment had touched a nerve. It was a question that many had considered in depth and several of them offered eloquent and heartfelt responses.

Phil became very emotional when it was his turn to speak. Though he is usually quiet and reserved, his

voice choked and his eyes moistened. These sessions are not recorded or transcribed. What follows is my recollection presented in dialogue form:

"That comment really hits me hard. I've been in for 25 years for murder. It is really hard for me to face the victims, and especially to realise there are always new victims from that one crime. I killed my wife, so I knew her whole family. I was close to them. Whenever I think about how they are all victims of my crime it pains me deeply. But what is worse is thinking about the new victims. My son has three grandchildren now: a 7 year-old girl, a 4 year-old boy and a 3 year-old boy. When the youngest was born, I thought to myself, 'Oh my God, another victim of my crime'.

"When will it end? How long will it take and how many victims will there be? My son tells me the 4 year-old is sort of withdrawn emotionally. He gets angry and acts out sometimes. I look at the photographs he sends me and hear the stories and I think to myself, 'That's just how I was when I was a boy. He's just like me'. And that really scares me. This is hard.

"My son visited again a few weeks ago and he told me he is going to come and bring the children in February. They want to meet me. There's a photograph of me on the wall. 'That's your Grandpa,' they tell them, 'He lives in Massachusetts'. That's all they know, that I live in Massachusetts, which is why I don't visit. I told my son, 'You do what you need to do.' But I can tell you now, I am dreading it. They are going to have to drive up and see the walls, the towers and the wire. They're going to go through the 'trap'. They'll have to tell those kids, 'Here's your Grandpa. He's doing a life bit.' It breaks my heart. It just really breaks my heart."

The check-in continued. Several of the men acknowledged Phil's pain and distress. One of them,

who is also serving a life without parole term for murdering his wife, spoke directly to Phil, (paraphrasing again):

"Phil, I know what you are going through because I went through it exactly myself. After a lot of years, my son came to visit with his two kids. They were about the same ages as yours. I was really afraid of it. I felt ashamed for them to meet me this way, and for what I had done. I didn't know what to tell them. But when they came, I just told them the truth. I didn't tell them the details, but I told them the truth about what I did. And you know what? They only wanted to love me. They ran up to me and climbed on my lap and we hugged and kissed. We laughed together. They said, 'We love you, Grandpa.' That's all they cared about. They only wanted to love me.

"Now when I call on the phone, they make their dad give them the phone right away so they can talk to me. 'It's Grandpa! It's Grandpa!' So we talk and I ask them questions about school and their friends.

"It's so wonderful, Phil; so wonderful. Don't be afraid. They are your grandkids and you are their grandfather. Tell them the truth. They only want to love you."

When the check-in was completed, before our break, I asked Phil if we could set up a constellation after the break to help him with this issue. He accepted my offer.

I asked Phil to select three representatives: one for himself, one for his son, and one for his 4 year-old grandson. (We had no women volunteers that day, which limited my choices).

Phil chose the representatives and set them up. (Fig.2) Then we sat, looked and waited. The representative for the father was erect and looking directly at his son. The representative for the son was restive, alternately looking at his father and the ground. His hands

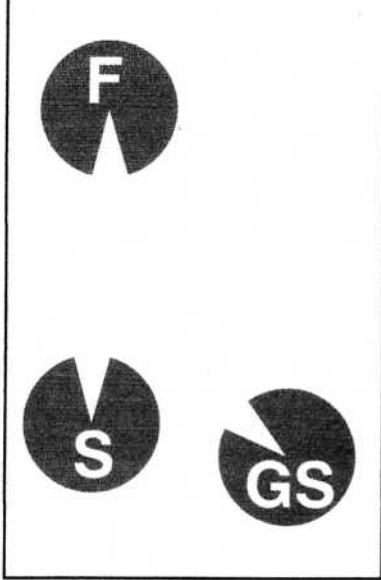


Fig. 2

representative for the grandson was looking at his father, and stealing occasional glances at his grandfather.

The piece took on the characteristics of movements of the soul – I did not intervene in any way, neither by inquiring of the representatives, nor suggesting movements, nor offering sentences to say aloud.

After several minutes the representatives reached an equilibrium point. The image was one of discomfort and disturbed emotions. The father and son shared a bond, but neither was capable of approaching or reconciling with the other. The grandson shrunk in stature as neither elder could look at him. Their energy was absorbed in mutual stalemate.

I considered intervening because the representatives and observers seemed on the edge of losing their concentration. Experience has taught me that the wisdom comes from the field, not the facilitator. So I waited and looked.

The healing movement was small, but dramatic. The grandson reached out his hand towards his father's. The father took the hand in his own. With that gesture, the emotions shifted, as if a broken

circuit connected and turned on the lights. The son moved towards the father. The father's distress transmuted into warm love. The three came together, took hands, then slowly fell into an embrace.

As my only intervention, I asked Phil if he wanted to take his place. His representative stepped aside and Phil became absorbed with his child and grandson.

At the next month's meeting Phil reported that his meeting had gone very well. The grandchildren pretty much ignored the surroundings and the family was loving and affectionate. Phil received a visceral confirmation on the theme that Tom had articulated so clearly, "They are your grandkids and you are their grandfather. They only want to love you."

Then Phil told me that the eldest child, the 7 year-old girl said to him, "Grandpa I had a dream that you tried to kill me." He recounted, "When she said that, it was like my chest was ripped open and my heart thrown on the floor. I told her, 'Darling, I would never do anything to hurt you.' She seemed satisfied with my answer and we went back to playing with some toys."

My comment was that this exchange, painful as it was, may have freed the granddaughter from having that dream evolve into a recurring nightmare. I told him, "You may have felt terribly pained to hear those words, but in telling you she was able to shift the pain and terror from herself to you, which is where it belongs." Holding that heartbreaking pain may be the greatest gift he can give her, for it is his to hold. In taking back this terrible feeling, he is freeing her from having to feel it for him.

CONCLUSION

The members of Bay State Correctional Center's Growing Together III Group are society's ultimate outcasts. Sentenced to die imprisoned by a jury of peers, these men personify evil brought to justice. Ironically, to be in their presence is to be touched by grace. As another woman volunteer observed: "Saturday afternoon at Bay State Prison was a deep learning experience at the emotional, the spiritual and the intellectual level.... Today, the faces of the men were still in my consciousness, each one left a mark on me, a mark of awareness and joy." (Marga Deiter, personal communication)

Scientific psychologists examine the 'real' nature of the mind, explaining our thinking and behaviour in terms of genes, brain chemistry and sensory stimulation. (Dennett 1991, Schlinger & Poling 1998) They locate consciousness in the brain. Contrary to this view, constellations in prison suggest that the touch of fathers and children literally penetrates brick walls and extends over razor wire enclosures.

It is difficult to assess with objectivity whether constellations support family healing. They may merely be an intensely emotional experience that subsides without long-term consequences. And, if there are long-term consequences, there is no objective proof whether they are beneficial or detrimental. This is not a trivial concern. Many innovative interventions have proven more harmful than helpful. (Wampold 2001)

Because we cannot control or measure the variables that moved Rahim's daughters to write nor create a randomised control group of incarcerated grandpas and their 4 year-old grandsons, the process fails to meet the 'gold standard' (Robson 2002) that validates sanctioned interventions. Nevertheless, our group proceeds cautiously with gentleness and respect.

Thompson (1981) observed:

*"Searching for facts won't help, for it is not so much a matter of what we think, but what thinks us. In the interval between each thought, in the interval between each heartbeat, in the place where there is no breath, we recall what we always knew."* (p. 7)

Again and again we see constellations reveal wordless truths that exist in the space between parents and children. In this dimension, we see that love both creates and destroys and that the worst crimes and injustices can be committed by people acting with a clear conscience, while dignity and benevolent action derive from acknowledging one's own guilt. (Cohen 2005, Hellinger et al. 1998)

Poets approach knowledge from a different angle, seeking words to express the secrets of wordless truths:

*here is the deepest secret  
nobody knows...  
i carry your heart (i carry it in  
my heart)* (Cummings 1994,  
p. 766)

We carry our mother and father's heart in our heart, as did they. It is not all rainbows and flowers and hugs and kisses. Those encased hearts hold all the ancestral memory of the orphan's grief, the exile's lament, the soldier's guilt, the widow's anguish, the slave's humiliation, the mother's anxiety, the father's emptiness and the

child's loneliness. These hearts can be murderous, the heart of a rapist or the heart of a saint.

When we set up constellations with men serving life terms in prison, and look at what emerges, we see that the heart we carry in our heart holds everything a human heart can hold. The healing movement is to agree to it all, to carry it all...with compassion. By tending to our own broken hearts, perhaps the hearts within the hearts of our children and the children of those we harm can in turn become more tender.

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