



Photographs by Charlotte Macpherson

families & how to survive them

There are things which go on in families which don't get spoken about yet quietly cripple us. Here's an amazing way to heal and move forward without blame and without endless workshops going over the same old thing.

A couple of therapist friends mentioned Family Constellations to me last year. I thought it must be something about astrology, which it isn't, or getting your family in a room to argue with each other in front of a counsellor, which it isn't either. What it is, quite simply, is the most amazing, extraordinary and brilliant way of healing one's issues that I have ever come across.

Founded by Bert Hellinger, a German systems philosopher and family therapist, the approach, initially called The Orders of Love, looks at the way love flows through a family. Imagine your family as a house and love as the plumbing. If there are no blockages and love flows naturally between husband to wife and from parents to children, all is well. But if a parent dies young, or there are secrets, abortions, adoptions, lies about parentage, sexual abuse, ungrieved miscarriages, violence, or any number of other family dramas, the plumbing gets blocked. Not only does each member of a family get impacted, but the effects can run through generations. If granny or auntie was locked in an asylum in mysterious circumstances, insanity may rear its head in the life of someone further down the line who knows little or nothing about her. This work helps people identify the existence of such hidden family roles and dynamics and free themselves from the

“We offer healing and resolution for some of the most troubling and intractable issues of our lives and times.”

resulting entanglements.

And it's not just other people's strange families where this goes on. It seems that the nature of being human means we are all born into a family with issues. Maybe we are the one born to heal them, or we choose that family to give us the very lessons we need. Hellinger has very precise ideas about belonging, respect for the truth and the balance of give and take in a family. Using these 'orders', by focusing on what makes us strong rather than weak, and by emphasising the need for compassion and action, his work produces life-enhancing solutions to one's issues and real healing.

The workshop I attended lasted three 10am–5pm non-residential days in London. There were 20 in the group and a large amount of them were therapists, or experienced in the work. Apart from two of us everyone was over 40, and all looked as if they really had their lives sorted out.

The leader, Judith Hemming, was a magnificent and powerful looking Gestalt therapist who is a leading UK-based constellations practitioner and also teaches worldwide. She gave us a brief introduction to the system and invited us to introduce ourselves with a little bit of explanation about why we were there. I told the group I wanted to break through my own career glass-ceiling. She urged us to come up to the front

waveFAMILIES

to work on our issue only when we felt it burning inside us. Someone was obviously already burning, and came and sat next to Judith at the front and the workshop began in earnest.

Judith asked questions about the subject being worked on, and also asked for lots of facts about the family of origin, going back to grandparents and including step-families. She had an extraordinary capacity to synthesise ten minutes of whittering about what was wrong in one's life to one perfect sentence. After this initial interview the candidate in the hot seat was invited to choose representatives for the family members just described, from the pool of people present in the room. One person was told to pick someone to stand in for his mother, his father, his father's first wife and their kids plus himself, his brother and his son. I was told "we need you and your twin sister and someone to be both each of your futures". It didn't matter who one picked from the group to act these parts so long as they were of the right sex. Over the course of the weekend I was asked to represent a Middle Eastern woman in her sixties, someone's ex-wife, the country of Austria, a granny and someone's lesbian lover. Sounds like a strange mix, but in each case there was a very good reason why I was chosen: whatever was being worked on in some way related to me and my issues.

When the chosen representatives were standing in the middle of the circle the next step was for the issue holder to arrange them in what felt like the right proximity to each other. Not using the intellect, and not like a family portrait but rather as one might arrange some stones picked from the beach. I thought this might be difficult but everybody, including myself, appeared to manage it with ease. It seemed absolutely natural to me that my future should be standing behind me, so much so I was quite happy to defend my position even though it clearly looked barmy to everyone else.

What happened then was nothing short of magical in my eyes. Thoughts and feelings belonging to the people being represented came through the chosen bodies. I went from sitting feeling perfectly happy to sobbing my eyes out and shaking with fear five minutes later in the middle of the circle. If I had much truck with channelling I'd say that's what we were doing, all of us, without any difficulty whatsoever.

Judith would walk around the 'constellation' asking different people how they felt. The answers were often very simple: "I'm feeling cold down my left side" or "I'm drawn to that person" or "I feel more comfortable when I can see that man." We witnessed the most extraordinary events unfold. A young girl went mad in front of us. It wasn't acting, she didn't do very much but twitch but it was totally chilling. Unbeknown to her this family had a history of insanity, and the root of it seemed to lie with this individual. Whilst this is all very interesting you might wonder what difference it would make to discover you had an aunt who'd been locked in an attic. The problem is there is no such thing as a secret and where anything gets

suppressed or hidden it bounces back out in the next generation. As Judith said, "what we don't face, we repeat." An acquaintance on an earlier course had a mother who had been in an institution with mental health problems for over 30 years. Two weeks after the weekend the mother had made a miraculous recovery and was released. It's not hard to come by other stories of the difference constellations work can make in real life. Oh, and in case you're worried, at the end of the constellation the mad-acting young woman sat down and was perfectly fine. I found after being in very powerful constellations I wanted a quick breather outside, but normally the minute one sat down the 'other' feelings disappeared.

I experienced a few real shocks over the weekend. One man's constellation unearthed evidence pointing to the possibility that he and his brother may not share a biological father; another constellation presented a husband with the painful possibility that his son was not his own. In this instance Judith suggested blood testing to establish paternity, for no other reason than the emotional health of the child in question. We witnessed the poisonous effect of lies and the sense of the old adage 'the truth will set you free'.

People came with a variety of issues: there were parents worried about children; someone who felt rootless and wanted to feel at home somewhere; a woman nearing the end of her life who'd spent it waiting for her life to happen and didn't want to die before it had. There were relationship difficulties between partners; issues around death, divorce, adoption, illegitimacy, incest, rape, murder, illness and addiction. Following

in the Hellinger tradition, Judith invited us to bow before our ancestors as a tangible mark of respect for them coming before and giving us life. We apologised to partners, grieved for aborted children, said things to abusers that we couldn't before and told people we loved them. I could feel the power and intensity in these rituals. I was convinced that the patterns running through generations of a family were all shifting and realigning as we worked. It felt very holy, terrifyingly powerful and truly life-changing. In the following weeks I've seen things really move on, not just in my life but in the families of other people on the course. Long lost sisters found and sons coming off drugs. This work makes happy families a reality.

Next workshops with Judith Hemming: Sat 25–Mon 27 Sept; Fri 26–Sun 28 Nov. Also Couples workshop Fri 25–Sat 26 June; all at Regents College, London. For more information contact Terry Ingham on 07866 607789, terry@nowherefoundation.org, www.movingconstellations.com Family Constellations workshops in Brighton with Sussex Constellations, (founded in 2001 by Kevin Baker, Heiner Eisenbarth and Karen Hamblett): 12–13 June; 9–10 Oct; 27–28 Nov. Further info call Kevin 01273 401625, Heiner 01273 382878 or Karen 01273 733274. email: sussexconstellations@hotmail.com

"Many of us act in ways that create suffering without understanding the origins of such forces. They are often created by actions taken by those who came before us in the family, constraining the flow of love within us and those we care about."

Bert Hellinger



"It felt very holy, terrifyingly powerful & truly life-changing."