

Family Constellations – Failure, Evil, and Guilt as Sources for Loving Dedication and Compassionate Strength

Talk given by **Dr. Albrecht Mahr** at the
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Conference motto: “Insights into the myths that inform our current global crisis and visions of a new myth that inspires a peaceful and sustainable world for all.”

Let me start with an example from a recent family constellation. I will then explain more in detail what a family constellation is. Joseph, a man in his beginning sixties was suffering for many years of rheumatoid arthritis in his hands with painful deformations of the finger joints. By means of a constellation, Joseph wanted to understand better the meaning and the message of this disease. So he chose from the seminar group representatives for himself and for his rheumatoid hands and set them up in the room according to his feelings and his intuition.

The representative of the disease found his place on the left side in front of the client. In the beginning there was no speaking, just spontaneous very slow and gentle movements which eventually led the disease (or rather its representative) very close to the client tenderly cuddling up his back to him. The client’s representative finally held the disease like a little child and the disease felt blissful when hearing the breath of the client.

The image of a parent caring for his little child inspired me to ask the client whether earlier in his life he had lost a child, and after some hesitation the client reported of two aborted children many years ago. So he found representatives for the aborted children and placed them in front of him, the client’s representative. Both children and client were sad and could not look at each other. Meanwhile the disease had moved behind the client and started very gently and carefully to take the client’s hands moving them tenderly towards the children’s faces. Now the client himself took the place of his representative and the disease behind him directed his almost crippled rheumatoid hands caressingly towards his little children in front of him.

Both the client and his two children started to cry and to look at each other, and it seemed as if hearts frozen for a very long time slowly started to melt. When this happened the disease slowly started to withdraw into the background. All this happened in a very delicate silence. At the end, the client looked thoughtfully at his rheumatoid hands which in the past he had so often considered as hostile to him, and carefully he said to them, “Thank you for reminding me.”

This example contains some of the essential experiences and messages drawn from constellation work. Guilt - as experienced in abortion or in injuries inflicted on others – automatically and blindly leads to the need and pressure to pay and to atone for it, whether we perceive that need consciously or not and regardless of our ideas or ideology to justify our action. Blind atonement always demands some kind of self-restrictive and often even self-destructive action as if we said to ourselves “I want to become like you whom I have harmed” which for example can lead to diseases or fosters their development.

What we observe in constellation work is the possibility to transform guilt into a particular compassionate strength so that the guilty person, the perpetrator develops caring heart qualities and a special determination to support life, qualities which he did not have to the same degree before the harmful action and which are the result of the committed guilt and its transformation.

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This is perhaps what our great German mystic master Eckhart was pointing to when he said, “If Jesus is approaching you in a huge gloriole of light, he is the tempter. If he comes out of the very dark, he is the Christ.” You may check:

if you sit next to a person who makes you really feel comfortable, relaxed and accepted, you may well sit next to a guilty person; a person who has no reason to feel better or superior but compassionate with those who are in difficulties or who have failed. Whereas a person who successfully avoided to become guilty, a “real good person”, who managed to do nothing wrong, may well be surrounded by an aura of narrowness, control, kind of a sour-milk-atmosphere.

Now, the example given at the beginning reminds us that our body is a truly transpersonal organ in the sense that it connects us not only to our nearest and dearest but also – as we will see a little later - to many other if not all beings by representing their presence and their essence in the well-being of our organs or in their suffering respectively.

I have called constellations “knowing fields” not the least because of our “knowing bodies” and their capacity to express a denied or forgotten truth, which may unlock surprising new perspectives.

Now, let me explain more in detail: What is a family constellation?

Often without providing any prior information a questioner sets up a person from the seminar group as mother or father, as a colleague, as his or her own heart, as the Japanese soldier who saved his father's life, as his native country, his faith or as the strangely dressed old woman in his dream of the last night. Virtually any element, any being or any process with an impact on the person and his family or group can be represented by a person. The representative "knows" in his or her bodily experience, in her emotions and in her emerging images and thoughts the inner condition of the represented person or element – very often in a surprisingly accurate and meaningful way.

This process is simple and – however dramatic it may be occasionally – it is as natural as breathing. We call this process "representative perception". Representative perception does not require any professional knowledge, no special training nor a specially evolved intellectual, psychological or spiritual state. There are no experts for representative perception, but we do have the possibility to familiarize ourselves with this mode of perception so that it can appear with a certain ease and suppleness offering itself, as it were, with a gentle smile.

Constellations do remind us of the fact that without any effort we may become for each other a medium of experiences we do not know of through conventional information. We become receptive of a special sense organ, which mediates representative perception, just like the eye mediates seeing. This sense organ disposes of a rich variety of functions in order to provide our participative knowledge of the condition and of the experience of other human beings and of virtually everything. In the first place it uses our "knowing body" in its rich perceptual capacities; furthermore it uses our feelings and emotions and our capacity to imagination and fantasy; and finally it uses our mental processes particularly our thinking.

Representative perception is non-local i.e., its action is not limited to spatial closeness of the persons involved: it is independent of the distance of those perceived. And representative perception is trans-temporal i.e., it includes events reaching far back in time and into future potentialities. And it includes the deceased persons i.e., relatives we know of or people who we never met or never heard of, who were deeply influential for the survival and well-being of our family and who's life and fate, even way back over several generations, was crucial for us to be here today.

Representative perception thus reminds us that in addition to our linear experience of time we also live in a timeless space or in an all-times space – frequently unfolding in a family constellation as a quality of undoubted immediacy, simple now-ness and pure such-ness.

In the following I would like to speak about two particularly challenging transpersonal qualities of family constellations, radical inclusiveness and dealing with evil.

Radical inclusiveness

Constellations are useful to remind us of the ever-new and ever newly forgotten experience that we fail in our attempt to exclude what we call evil. Both as individuals and as families, communities and religious, ethnic or political groups we follow the reflex to keep the strange, the unknown, the frightening and threatening away of our consciousness, whether it comes from within ourselves or from an outer source. And it is only a question of time that we have to recognize the natural law – according to Freud’s “return of the repressed” - that we become what we reject.

We ourselves, and the systems we are part of are extremely inclusive. When we reject and exclude our violent and alcoholic grandfather, the systemic conscience of completeness and inclusiveness – one of the systemic natural laws – takes care of grandfather’s belonging to the system by unconsciously forcing a son, a grandchild or great-grandchild to fail, to become violent or alcoholic like grandfather. When a chronic schizophrenic aunt spends her life in a mental sanitarium while she seems strange and weird to her relatives and is shunned and forgotten by them, she will be re-membered, i.e., made a member of the system again, by another member of the family. For example a niece, perhaps without any knowledge of the aunt’s existence, may become a peculiar, bizarre and solitary person caught repeatedly in feelings of de-realisation and loneliness like her aunt. We call this literally trans-personal process “dark belonging” or “dark loyalty”, “dark inclusiveness” or also “dark love”, because it is blind, unconscious and often extremely painful in its consequences.

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The only response to the radical inclusiveness of our systems and of life in general is to practice ourselves consciously the same inclusiveness which means the very rewarding effort to award everybody and everything its rightful existence, its space and its belonging. That is certainly not easy, and it means an ongoing struggle and ongoing warm-hearted mindfulness.

And there are beautiful surprises waiting for us, like in myths and fairy tales, when the annoying, the bad, the revolting and disgusting, the creatures of the dark and the horrifying transform into the most important sources of insight, support and compassion for us – once they are really looked at and included into our life.

Thus family constellations are an extremely useful transpersonal education to care not only for the victims of damaging events but to turn also explicitly to those who in our everyday understanding have failed, are guilty, bad, evil, violent, abusing, hateful or mean.

Dealing with evil in constellation work

It is a crucial issue in constellation work to find ways of dealing with evil in our personal lives, in our families, and communities. To comment on that issue here is the challenging story called of “Satan” by Kahlil Gibran, a story which some of you may know.

Father Samaan was well known in North Lebanon and most appreciated even in the remotest villages for his untiring preaching and curing people from the spiritual disease of sin, and saving them from the horrible trap of Satan. He waged constant war with Satan. The story tells how Father Samaan on his way through a lonely valley finds a deadly wounded stranger who turns out to be Satan. Satan had been hit in an encounter with archangel Michael and his invincible sword. Being thrown to the ground he feigned to have been slain which saved his life from Michael’s infallible all-sin-destroying strokes.

When Father Samaan first heard Satan’s name he trembled and cried out “God has often shown me your hellish image and justly caused me to hate you; cursed be you for evermore! The mangled lamb must be destroyed by the shepherd lest he will infect the other lambs!” But Satan in the process of dying asks him to listen for a few moments and to bear the following in mind: “You are cursing me in the hour of my defeat, even though I was, and I still am, the source of your tranquillity and happiness because you live and prosper in the shadow of my being.

You have adopted my existence as an excuse and weapon for your career, and you employ my name in justification of your deeds. ... Do you not realize that you will starve to death if I were to die? What would you do tomorrow if you allowed me to die today? What vocation would you pursue if my name disappeared? For decades you have been roaming these villages and warning the people against falling into my hands. They have bought your advice with their poor dinars ... What would they buy from you tomorrow, if they discovered that their wicked enemy no longer existed? Your occupation would die with me, for the people would be safe from sin. As a clergyman, do you not realize that Satan’s existence alone has created his enemy, the Church?”

These words set Father Samaan thinking and he listened reluctantly but attentively when Satan continued: “In Babylon the people bowed seven times in worshipping before a priest who fought me with his chanting ...

In Ephesus ... they offered their children’s lives in sacrifice to my opponents. In Jerusalem and Rome, they placed their lives in the hands of those who claimed they hated me and fought me with all their might... I am the courage that creates resolution

in man. I am the source that creates originality of thought. I am the hand that moves man's hands...

I am Satan whom people fight in order to keep themselves alive. If they cease struggling against me, slothfulness will deaden their minds and hearts and souls... Consider that the monk who prays in the silence of the night to keep me away from his bed is like the prostitute who invites me to her chamber.

I am the builder of convents and monasteries upon foundation of fear. I build wine shops and wicked houses upon the foundation of lust and self-gratification. If I cease to exist, fear and enjoyment will be abolished from the world, and through their disappearance, desires and hopes will cease to exist in the human heart. Life will become empty and cold, like a harp with broken strings...

I am the inspiration of falsehood, slander, treachery, deceit and mockery, and if these elements were to be removed from this world, human society would become like a deserted field in which naught would thrive but thorns of virtue...

I am the father and mother of sin, and if sin were to vanish, the fighters of sin would vanish with it, along with their families and structures...

I am the heart of all evil. Would you wish for human motion to stop through cessation of my heartbeat? Would you accept the result after destroying the cause? I am the cause! --- I am Satan, everlasting and eternal", which he repeated strongly for several times.

Eventually he asks Father Samaan, "Would you allow me to die in this deserted wilderness? Do you desire to cut the bond that exists between you and me? Answer me, clergyman! ... you may do as you please. You may carry me to your home and treat my wounds, or leave me in this place to die."

And Father Samaan finally understood that Satan was his most intimate *raison d'être*, and that the existence of satanic evil was the precondition to knowing and loving the good, and so he came to the conclusion to say to Satan: "You must live, for in your life is the salvation of humanity from evil and sin."

Thus father Samaan rolled the sleeves of his robe and lifted Satan to his back and walked towards his home. In the midst of those valleys, engulfed with silence and embellished with the veil of darkness, Father Samaan walked towards the village with his back bent under the heavy burden. His black robe and long beard were scattered all over with blood streaming from above him, but he struggled forward, his lips moving in fervent prayer for the life of the dying Satan.

The story tells us that we need Satan not only because we are perhaps professional Satan-fighters. We need him in the same way he needs us as the core motive which makes us move on, being creative, inventive, compassionate and loving in the very presence of its contrary i.e. destruction, annihilation, and non-existence. So we meet again the age-old mystery and paradox of how disastrous the final victory of good over evil would be: in Khalil Gibran's or rather Satan's words, there would nothing thrive but "the thorns of virtue".

Thomas Moore, the author of "Care of the Soul" and "Soul Mates", in his book "Dark Eros – The Imagination of Sadism" comes to a similar conclusion when he meets "the soul's love of evil" over and over again so that Moore summarizes: "Our task is not to rationalize this evil with the whitening language of psychology, or to integrate it into our personalities so that its black becomes gold, but rather eternally to find ways to allow evil to coexist with our preference for good, darkly infect everything we do and think, and especially reveal its own poetic reading of our lives and its own meaningfulness."

"Psychology often implies its belief in the paradise of a hygienic relationship, an adjusted personality, or an enlightened parenthood. Psychology might change radically if it learned from de Sade the value of reflecting on fallen human nature. We all eat of the apple, and so we need a psychology that assumes an essential corruption in the human soul and that it is not salvational. ... (knowing that) to cut the corruption out of the heart is to lose the soul altogether."

I believe that constellation work can help us in what Thomas Moore proposes by mindfully observing evil in our families and even in our hearts. Which is certainly not a cheap and so to speak transpersonally correct lip-service to accepting the shadow or something like that but the possibly shaking and deeply moving experience of enlarging our consciousness and the capacity of our heart.

Let me give you an example.

I remember a woman in her fifties who's father had been a high ranking Nazi and responsible for the deportation and the killing of many Jews. When in the constellation the father faced his victims being represented by four persons in front of him, there was a strong and palpable tension and a strongly burdened silence in the room. For a long time seemingly nothing happened. Surprisingly one of the victims started to move a little bit towards the perpetrator with a compassionate expression in his face which caused the until then frozen-stiff perpetrator to get confused, to sway, to stagger and eventually to fall down to the floor feeling deep desperation and pain. The one victim slowly bent to him and timidly touched him very carefully, always with the expression of compassion. The perpetrator started to cry and to grasp the feet of the victim,

which allowed the other three victims to calmly become focused on the two persons on the floor.

The client, until then equally frozen while observing the constellation from the outside, also started to cry and after a while she said very moved and pensively, “There is something behind both my father and the victims” while indicating the space beyond father and victims. She was asked to choose someone for “what is behind them”, found herself a woman and placed her in the space beyond the representatives. The woman representing “what is behind perpetrator and victim” grew into and radiated an enormous dignity, great clarity and in contrast to the beginning a now awe-inspiring silence. She opened both her hands towards the persons in front of her and said very calmly to the perpetrator, “You are in my right hand”, and then to the victim, “and you are in my left hand - and I am One”.

The atmosphere in the room had now become light and transparent. And later the client said: “Despite all enlightenment, I had always carried along the image of God being the good Lord as opposed to the many evil forces threatening His wonderful creation. Now I have touched the truth that He is it all. Also the evil is God, God’s dark side. And I do not yet really understand, but in some very real way, God has also been with my father, when my father did what he did. There is a deep relief in that, I can feel it.”

Later in a letter the woman wrote me that in a book on Jewish mysticism she had found the words “Good and Evil are the right and the left hand of God.”

Old and new myths

This conference has the objective to gaining “insights into the myths that inform our current global crisis and visions of a new myth that inspires a peaceful and sustainable world for all.”

As you all know C.G. Jung struggled intensely with these questions. Remember this statement as reflecting his struggle: “But what if I should discover that the very enemy himself is within me, that I myself am the enemy who must be loved – what then?” To circle around an answer to this question let me give you another example from a constellation which took place a ten days ago in Holland.

Example:

Jack, a Dutch man in his thirties, for seven years suffered of endlessly sore teeth, painful inflammation of the gums, losing eventually two molars after many complicated attempts by his dentist to save the teeth, which lead to further poorly

healing wounds and more chronic pain. By means of a constellation, Jack wanted to understand better the dynamics underlying his suffering teeth. Jack summarized his effort with the words “I lost the battle”. When asked for more information Jack was very moved when mentioning his father who shortly after WW II was part of the Dutch armed force operating extremely brutally to put down the rebellion against the Dutch colonial occupation in Indonesia. His father had reported both exciting and nice adventures from this mission. But Jack had been burdened for a long time by a diffuse and persistent feeling of guilt, and in an earlier constellation around this issue, there was a very strong indication of many victims in connection with his father’s actions. In that constellation two years ago, he had given back to his father the burden of his guilt which Jack had tried to carry for him – the ritual of giving back assumed feelings and experiences to their original owners being a very common practice in constellation work.

The strange thing happened that exactly in the moment when Jack performed the giving-back ritual, in another city 150 miles away, his 70 years old father fell dangerously three meters off a steep staircase down on his back. When Jack talked to him of the constellation, his father said “You have hit me very hard.” The always very difficult relation to his father painfully deteriorated again.

In the recent constellation we did together it turned out that Jack’s father looked down to the floor and had the vision of someone laying there who looked at him, and this other person had his son’s, Jack’s, face. When this other person, a man, was included into the constellation facing Jack’s father, the father felt very clearly that he had to say to the other man “You have hit me very hard – but you lost the battle” – using the same words which a few moments earlier had emerged in different contexts when Jack had reported on the difficulties with his teeth and with his father. The other man felt very precisely that his whole mouth and all of his teeth had been totally damaged and incurably destroyed in the battle which he had lost against Jack’s father – and Jack understood and felt very clearly that he had been identified with his father’s victim keeping its memory alive on behalf of his father.

Why does that happen? It happens when a guilt cannot be held, acknowledged and dealt with by those who were involved originally; when the images of the other, of the enemies and the victims are too painful, too shameful, too haunting, so that the important other is excluded of one’s consciousness; so that, furthermore, remorse and regret, the strength and the dignity as the result of acknowledging one’s own guilt are covered away and thus inaccessible – then a son or a daughter, grandson or granddaughter unconsciously re-member (that is: make again a member of) the denied, and excluded person by literally becoming and being that person. In Jack’s

case: by experiencing strangely and painfully incurable teeth and by “loosing the battle”.

The solution of this constellation included several steps: Jack’s father felt a deep bond, a loving obligation to his former enemy who responded to his former opponent with an equally deep compassion. The father did not want his son to be furthermore involved into his experiences in Indonesia. He firmly assigned a border between his own past and his son’s present life. And Jack respected his father’s will and his former enemy’s fate by deeply bowing - which is our most powerful gesture to affirming truth and such-ness and to let go of experiences out of our soul and out of our body which do not belong to us and which never the less somehow do inform and qualify us for a much wider and deeper compassionate consciousness.

Jack said to the former enemy of his father “You have lived on in me and somehow I have tried to heal your wounds. Now I honour your fate and I bow to you and to my father, and I withdraw into just my own existence which has been deeply touched by yours.” Only then Jack’s father felt honoured and respected and he, as well as the deceased man, agreed to the recovery of Jack’s teeth.

Depth psychology and new ethics

One of the most important contributions to the questions raised in my presentation came some decades ago from Erich Neumann, the Jewish author and most appreciated successor of Carl Gustav Jung. Erich Neumann wrote “Depth Psychology and New Ethics” in 1949 after his escape to Israel during and shortly after WW II under the impression of the upcoming next and even more dramatic global self-destruction through the atomic bomb. Neumann stated the necessity of creating a new ethics of completeness and wholeness in contradiction to the old ethics of perfection i.e. the separation into the perfect good which is God and his counterpart the evil: “In a dream of a contemporary man”, Erich Neumann reports, “the voice of an invisible being shouted to him when he tried to avoid nightmarish beings of illness and death ‘God loves his plague too.’ “And Neumann comments: “Not fighting plague any more, not only accepting and enduring the plague, but loving it - is that supposed to be the paradoxical demand man faces who seeks an ethical orientation?”

Doesn’t then a dangerous abyss of insanity, crime and death all of a sudden break up in front of us? Isn’t that the downfall of all ethics, isn’t this not really an unrealisable, meaningless temptation luring into annihilation by what in earlier times has been called the Satan and which in modern times is disguised as the so called demand of the unconscious?”

Neumann continues: “The horror of this statement ‘God loves his plague too’ undoubtedly surpasses the capacities of human realisation, but it contains a self-revelation of the divine which once and forever does away with the naïve idea to tear apart God’s world in light and dark, pure and impure, healthy and ill, sane and insane. The creator of light and darkness, of good drives and evil drives, of health and illness, stands in the unity of his numinous ambiguity in front of modern man, with such vastness and impenetrability that the orientation by the old ethics of right and wrong is revealed as by far a much too self-assertive and infantile approach to reality.”

In the tradition of Kabbala and Chassidism, Erich Neumann found in the demand “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” the homonym “thy neighbour” written in different letters which then meant “Love your own evil in the same way I, Jahwe, love you” or “in the same way, you love your own evil, I, Jahwe, will love it.”

“My shadow”, says Erich Neumann “is part and exponent of mankind’s shadow. And if my shadow is antisocial and greedy, gruesome and evil, miserable and deplorable, when it attacks me as a beggar, a brute or an animal, then, while reconciling with my shadow I reconcile with - dark brother and dark sister of all mankind. While taking my shadow and myself fully, I take with it that part of mankind which in my shadow is my neighbour.”

According to Neumann, the process of taking and owning my shadow can amount into the movement of “representative suffering”: “The individual assumes part of the collective’s burden as her or his own responsibility and she or he detoxicates and integrates this evil by means of her or his transforming work. This may, if it succeeds, contribute to the collective’s liberation to a certain degree.”

I would add: my representative suffering can be helpful to the extent that my personal inner work triggers and wakes up correspondingly resonating fields in my fellows and activates and encourages their readiness to start consciously working on themselves. I doubt that any “taking another person’s burden away”, as misunderstood in naïve Christian belief, would have a collective transforming effect unless it triggers some own transforming work in the other.

Systemic constellation work is very much a practice of working with our individual and our systemic i.e., family and community, shadow in order to finally own it so that its fighting or fearing it “out there” and can be given up. — Many other approaches work at present - and have always worked – in that very direction.

Now, supposed ever more individuals, families, communities, larger groups, and nations eventually succeed to become highly conscious shadow-lovers and shadow-transformers – how will the world look like in those days? An all-smiling gathering of

friendly beings who fight all the formerly outwardly acted out conflicts, wars and genocides in themselves? Perhaps there will be special schools, trainings and sanctuaries to provide safe space and caring guidance for everybody to owning and consciously containing ever more shadow energies and to make it available for evolution, for the painfully creative undoing of the old and worn-out, of the useless and the discarded, and for the supporting of the ever unimaginable and the ever surprising emergence of the divine?

I don't know. I don't know whether an ongoing endeavour in this direction as so beautifully realized by this conference will eventually lead to a new myth "that inspires a peaceful and sustainable world for all."

To conclude my presentation let me give you **another example** which may in its own language contribute to this question. I call this example, "The Blessing of the Perpetrator."

The blessing of the perpetrator

A woman in her fifties suffered for many years from inner restlessness and depression. Now living in a Scandinavian country, her family came from Lithuania and could escape from the Russian invasion during WW II. Her father had served in the German army and had committed crimes amongst Lithuanian civilians. He also escaped to the Scandinavian country, lived with the family and died at the age of 55. The constellation took place in the beginning phase of constellation work in Germany i.e. around 1994 and I followed our assumption at that time that people who had committed severe crimes like murder would lose their right of belonging to their family system. The representative of the father was thus sent out of the room and we closed the door behind him which symbolically would indicate the loss of his membership in this family. In the constellation, the rest of the family including the client gained some stability and reassurance so that we concluded the constellation assuming that we had reached a sufficiently complete solution.

The strange thing was that the representative of the father could not disengage from his role but remained agitated, restless and angry for the next two days. We had no choice but to take up the constellation again where we had ended it. This time we asked the father (or rather his representative) to stay in the room near the door by which he had left in the first constellation, and the rest of his family stood at a distance from him in the centre of the same room. For a few moments, father silently looked at his family and then he said calmly: "I know that I have done wrong and that I cannot stay with you and share life with you as if nothing had happened. But please know that I am not that bad that you could deny me my wishing you well and my blessing you." Now all his agitation had gone. There was a soft and gentle expression in his face, and

his daughter, the client, could relax with his blessing and with this human image of her father.

I have since encountered the blessing of the perpetrator several times in constellations and each time I have found a particular humanity, humbleness, and even tenderness in it.

As I said a little earlier, I don't know whether, on a larger scale, we will succeed to change the world to the better, whatever that would mean. But, and by this I want to conclude my presentation, on a nutshell-scale I know from experience, that the knowing field of a family constellation can give us an immediate and vivid taste of the great potential waiting for us when we include the excluded so that we become more complete and more ourselves, very much "as God has originally planned us", as we say in German. –

Thank you for your attention.

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