

Trauma Work and Family Constellations: Irreconcilable or Complementary?

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I begin with a personal remark: In spite of all the enthusiasm that I experienced discovering family constellations, I was always aware that the approach of family constellations addresses only a certain area of problems, namely those that are rooted within our families. This certainly is an important area, yet not all of our issues stem from this root. Many problems are caused by life experiences unrelated to our families and therefore can't be resolved with family constellations.

I perceive constellations work as one wing of the bird. In order to fly we need the second wing.

In my years of experience as a facilitator of family constellations I also realized how differently I felt working with difficult issues depending on when they occurred. I am quite capable to deal with horrific events that occurred in former generations such as murders within the family, Holocaust issues or war crimes. However, if the horrors occurred closer in time the work became much more difficult for me. I remember for example how shocked I felt while working in a prison setting when my client had murdered her boyfriend. The idea to work with a person who actually experienced torture in this time feels utterly overwhelming to me. This means to me that there are still parts of my psyche and emotions that have not been cleared by the constellation work and that I must approach in different ways.

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This explains why the body oriented trauma work developed by Peter Levine has become so important to me. At first I assumed I was taking the trauma training with Peter Levine for my own personal benefit but as my understanding deepens I realize how many connections to the constellations work can be drawn. This new learning continues to influence and enrich my ongoing work with constellations and I want to share some of my insights.

What is Trauma?

The term "trauma" is no longer reserved for clinical discussions but, in the last years, has been well publicized and discussed. In the world of family constellations, however, there is little notice of this term. The following description of the term is based on the body oriented trauma work developed by Peter Levine, who began his work in collaboration to Anngwyn St. Just. This specific approach of body oriented Trauma work, called Somatic Experiencing or SE , goes beyond any prior concepts of trauma work.

The most outstanding difference of Levine's approach lies in his emphasis of the biological roots of trauma. We know three basic reactions to threat from the animal kingdom, all of which are directed by basic biological impulses. If the animal can match the perceived threat it will fight. If the threat seems overwhelming it will flee. This assessment is an instinctive process that occurs automatically within split seconds of the threat. The cat that turns a corner to face a dog will "decide" within a split second if it can match the threat, in which case it will either posture and hiss or turn to race to the nearest tree.

Beside this fight or flight mechanism, which also forms the basic stress pattern in humans, we observe a third possible reaction: freezing. An animal that experiences a sudden, overwhelming threat to its life may freeze and become immobilized. The mouse caught by a cat freezes in that moment. We can discover this process in humans as well and may understand it as the foundation of trauma. Its basis is the sudden shock, an overwhelming threat and the lack of options to fight or flee. Caught in this dilemma the body freezes.

In the animal kingdom we observe the dissolving of such a frozen state as another natural process that occurs when the danger has passed. The animal "reawakens" from its frozen state, often shakes itself or shivers to release the frozen energies and goes on with its life.

The effects differ depending on the depth of the trauma reaction. If for example a bird gets lost in my room and I catch it, it likely will freeze. Once I release it outside it will reorient within a few moments and fly away. If I catch the bird a second time the frozen state will last longer and the bird needs more time to reorient. Caught more often the frozen state will last even longer, the bird will not reorient well and may be seen pecking aggressively at its surroundings while trying to return to its senses. And if I continue to catch it, it finally will die of a heart attack.

Humans have forgotten how to naturally reset from the frozen state to the flow of life. Without help we often don't fully return from the trauma. We continue our lives but part of our energy stays tied up in the nervous system where these unresolved energies create symptoms such as anxiety, depression, confusion and stress. (I will not elaborate on the important effects of trauma on the nervous system in this article.)

It is important to clarify that trauma always is an individual experience of overwhelm. From this fact the question emerges of, "How is it possible that one person experiences a situation as a dangerous and threatening moment while another person does not?"

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We can find three important factors causing the differences: A person's constitution which is partly based on the biological make up influences our experiencing greatly. Those with a sensitive nature will feel much easier overwhelmed than the sturdier ones. How much input and threat a nervous system can bear before it floods is individually varied. A person's history in regards to trauma plays another major role. The more traumatic situations someone has lived through, the faster he or she can be overwhelmed and reenter the frozen state. For those familiar with constellation work it is no news that children take on unresolved traumatic energies from former generations. For example if the parents were exiled from their country of origin during a war, the child will likely carry some of the feelings involved. Now if this child experiences any even minor events in his/her lifetime that resemble the prior events or trigger similar feelings it may cause disproportional shock. Also trauma therapists confirm that unresolved traumatic experiences in the nervous system and consciousness will be carried over into future generations.

Even though we can't speak of "the" traumatizing event, we can certainly name events that frequently cause traumatic reactions. - First to be mentioned are accidents and catastrophes of all kinds: car accidents, train crashes, earthquakes and death or suffering induced by wars or torture. - Then there is the particular overwhelm that children suffer such as difficult births, early separation from parents or being abused, the so-called developmental trauma. - Helpers and therapists who step in to support victims may also be overwhelmed by what occurred and suffer a "secondary trauma".

After any traumatizing event the victim experiences a settling in of a deep anxiety that centers around the fear that the event will repeat itself, either in reality or in memory. If this does happen, the original shock will be re-experienced as the "retraumatization". This strengthens the traumatic reaction and is both harmful as well as strengthening the original trauma.

On the other hand the organism wants to release the stuck energies of the traumatic event and return to its natural uninhibited flow. This causes an attraction to situations that resemble the traumatizing event. For example if someone had a car accident he may find himself frequently in dangerous traffic situations. But as the body does not know how to react any different than the first time the danger for a similar overwhelm, shock and therefore retraumatization is high.

How does the constellation work address trauma?

Even though the term trauma is barely used in constellations work we constantly deal with traumatic events. We encounter it in former generations in the form of war, exile and imprisonment. We encounter it in current situations in the form of still born children, early or accidental deaths or the suffering of children as victims of abuse and violence.

Beyond the realm of families, our work many times includes the dynamics of victims and perpetrators in constellations. You can find profound examples in Bert Hellinger's book "Wo Ohnmacht Frieden stiftet", where he describes constellations of victim and perpetrator in a rape during war and in a torture session.

In constellation work, we use representatives for the people who are most affected by the situation. These are the one who died and the one who survived in an early death issue or in an abuse issue the victim and the perpetrator. We wait for the representatives to establish contact and perceive each other and work with the emerging themes such as guilt and responsibility. Frequently we discover themes of love and connection and find that the ritual sentences developed by Bert Hellinger prove very helpful in dissolving interfering tensions and stuck energy patterns.

Trauma workers are fully aware that the attempt to resolve trauma inherently carries the danger of retraumatization. Is this true for constellations work as well? Is it possible that a constellation brings up such intense memories and sensations that the client - overwhelmed by the events- returns to the state of shock previously experienced?

When taken a step further, can this also happen to representatives who are standing in for the traumatized client?

My colleague Anngwyn St. Just, a trauma specialist, shared her observations with me. She frequently watched both clients as well as representatives enter the frozen trauma states without the facilitator even noticing it.

I have made similar observations and some other German therapists share my observations, especially Franz Ruppert mentions it in his books.

So, the dangers of retraumatization seem obvious in the midst of the work of family constellations. This danger creates a responsibility for facilitators to educate themselves in recognizing such states of shock and becoming aware of them when they first develop. Looking out for sudden paleness, speechlessness and lack of movement is helpful as these may be signs

of a trauma state. You may also observe the person staring to a distant place and not being present in their body. However, complete loss of control and freak out may also be an indicator of trauma reactions.

Most facilitators of constellations seem unaware of this dimension of their work but avoid retraumatization intuitively. Some of the procedures used in constellations act as a protective mechanism that avoid flooding in clients or representatives. The clients are protected by two such procedures:

The use of representatives

When clients see their representatives they see them from the outside, which allows them to dissociate from the experience to some degree, which protects them from the direct reliving of what happened. The more immediate and direct the hardship is or was, the more protection the client needs. While we usually involve clients directly towards the end of the constellation this does not apply for clients who are in danger of retraumatization. For them it is more important to keep sufficient distance to the events.

Respecting the issue and its limits

Sometimes the presenting issue is fairly superficial such as a work related issue while it is apparent that there are serious and difficult problems present in the family system. The facilitator may certainly discuss what exactly should be addressed in the constellation, yet it is important that the client's wishes are respected and will not be overruled. Even the best intentions don't give the facilitators the right to open up deeper and more painful issues than the client is ready to deal with. The facilitator who disregards the client's wish and "goes for it" also disregards the protection inherent in the client's knowing what he/she can deal with and may inflict harm.

To protect representatives from entering trauma states consider the following:

Distance When difficult feelings are encountered during a constellation we often observe that the representatives are unable to look at someone or something. The tension is too intense and they need more space. Simply allow them to move away as far as they need to in order to feel safe enough to look. Space and distance protect from the intensity.

Contact Facilitators need to stay in contact with the representative, particularly whenever constellations deal with heavy and tense situations. Simply connecting in by language, asking, "how are you doing?" creates connection to a representative who is holding difficult feelings and prevents these feelings from taking over.

Language Another tool to assist representatives who are holding a burden lies in naming them in well-chosen sentences. By naming the burden we create a small inner distance to it. For example: A father who survived war and imprisonment may create an important distance by stating, "It was too much".

De-rolling Facilitators need to be well trained to recognize when a representative is in danger of being overwhelmed. The question "can you hold it?" can clarify the situation. If it does not get answered with a clear "yes" the representative needs to be released from the role immediately.

Physical Contact Whenever the danger of overwhelm becomes apparent and a representative is in danger of either freezing or freaking out, the facilitator may establish some physical contact. I often position myself behind the representative and put my hand on his/her back. This gesture is not to be seen as comforting but as a lending of strength and support so that the representative may stay present with difficult feelings.

All the above-described tools belong in each facilitator's toolbox and are constantly used without anyone ever mentioning the word trauma. However, there are some other concepts and procedures used in body oriented trauma work that might prove very useful to constellations work.

How does body oriented trauma work address trauma?

To describe Peter Levine's body oriented trauma work, called Somatic Experiencing ("SE"), I will mention four basic principles.

Titration: Drop by Drop It is dangerous to access trauma fast and direct. It can, however, be dissolved level by level. An image describing this process can be found in chemistry: If you add HCL to caustic soda an explosion will occur. If you add HCL to caustic soda in a drop-by-drop fashion they will mix well. Chemistry calls this process titration. You can transfer this image to trauma work by stating that you look at a trauma drop-by-drop. In that way the body does not create "explosion" but is able to integrate the traumatic experience with other positive experiences that are present in the moment. When the trauma occurred too much happened too fast and too intense. Slowing it down, taking breaks and stretching time are therefore important therapeutic tools to process trauma safely.

The natural pendulation of the organism As both of these states appear, threat and overwhelm on the one hand and resourcefulness and security on the other, we observe a natural movement back and forth from one to the other which we call pendulation. The therapist carefully watches for the sometimes minimum movements that indicate the next change of direction and supports the natural pendulation. A trauma work session generally begins with establishing a resourceful, positive state, then it carefully approaches the outermost level of the traumatic experience. Once the client begins to connect with difficult events or feelings the therapist helps to make sure that he/she only approaches as much of this material as can be handled and supports the naturally occurring return of pendulation as soon as the body initiates it. This way frozen energies let go slowly and the therapists watches for physical signs indicating the release which may come in various forms such as small shivers or hot or cold flashes. Then, it takes time for the client to reorient to the present and it is important to allow sufficient time to establish a positive connection in the here and now before entering another movement into the traumatic state. The therapist waits for the natural movement to occur and is prepared to support the client as he/she enters the trauma state - this time a level deeper than before. It takes a number of pendulations to fully access an experience. How many depends on how intense the experience was as well as how deeply in the psyche it lives. As an example: I had an accident one night that had only minor physical consequences. I was out jogging after dark and collided with someone on a bicycle that had no lights. It took two sessions of an hour and seven pendulations for me to be able to remember the actual course of events, moment by moment without any sign of overwhelm.

Trauma resolution mainly occurs on the physical level As described earlier, traumatic shock creates a freezing of energies that settles as rigidity in the body. To bring these energies back into motion and reestablish a natural flow the trauma therapist needs a well-trained eye to

carefully observe the client's body signals. All release happens physically and small, unconscious body movements inform the facilitator in which way the body moves towards release. Most often we observe flight or fight behaviors. Consider for a moment what it might feel like to reemerge out of a situation in which you felt shocked and completely overwhelmed. Our first instinctive reaction to such intense threat is generally flight. Our attempt to create distance - both externally and internally - is often accompanied by small movements of our feet. Once enough distance is established and we feel sufficiently safe the next level of reaction may surface in the form of uncontrolled aggression. Just as the bird in the earlier example picked at anything or anybody in its reach, we tend to unleash our aggression on our environment before we are able to move to an even deeper level of the experience where we most likely will discover pain and sorrow. This cycle may repeat itself a number of times before a trauma state is released and resolved. I have learned to value "flight" as a necessary step to unraveling frozen energies in our system. If somebody stays too close, he will remain frozen. This is not a question of will power. Without creating the necessary distance we can't experience the tremendous relief of finally being safe. It is important to point out here that it is not necessary to remember traumatic events in order to move through this process. Some clients remember the experiences and others don't. It suffices to follow the body's movements as it finds its way to release and return to its natural equilibrium.

Awareness Listening to body movements and understanding them requires awareness. Many of our body movements have become unconscious and it takes focusing and slowing down to perceive them. We may have to repeat a movement a number of times and consciously sense into them before we understand what our body is expressing with this movement. For example: While talking about something a person performs a number of small defensive hand movements without any awareness of doing so. The trauma therapist would focus in on the movement, slow it down, have the client repeat it and look for its full expression or meaning. It is through following this process that frozen energies release and become available again. We go through a similar journey encountering our emotions. The key word here is "containment". When emotions flood us - no matter if it is pain, rage or bliss - we cannot contain them and look for ways to cope. Regression, catharsis and acting out are clear indicators that the emotions can't be contained. As in the case of unconscious body movements, emotions need to be regained and contained bit by bit by bringing more and more awareness to them. Much as in the practice of meditation we are looking to gain a more profound level of consciousness.

What aspects of trauma work apply to family constellations?

Insights gained through trauma work don't contradict or challenge the principles of the constellations approach. They do, however, call for more careful proceedings when dealing with traumatic events.

I believe it would be very helpful to introduce the process of titration - the drop-by-drop procedure- to facilitators of family constellations, so that they only confront clients with as much as they are able to safely absorb. Currently most facilitators avoid overwhelm instinctively, and even though no one wants to overwhelm their clients I believe it happens frequently and could be avoided by asking themselves the question: "How much can this client integrate at this time?"

What can the facilitator do to avoid a possible overwhelm? For one, if the experienced situation was heavy, slow the process down. I personally have stepped away from the idea that it is possible to resolve such an issue f. e. abuse in one single constellation. Instead I may

work with several constellations over whatever time span is needed to help my client resolve the issue safely. In this way people continue to discover deeper levels of connections as they proceed to face both the love and the darkness inherent in each family system.

Since I pay more attention to how much my client can bear my work has changed. Before I encountered trauma work I felt more inclined to confront a client who was not looking at a person or an issue. I would encourage them to face it. I remember one of Bert Hellinger's sentences: "Flight is no escape." In the meantime I see that flight is no escape - but flight might be a necessary first step of a solution.

Today my attention focuses more on how much my client can integrate. Let me give an example:

A female client reports that a friend of the family had sexually abused her. The abuse had gone on for about three years of her childhood. During the constellation the child's representative feels extremely abandoned by everyone and particularly by her mother. Facing the perpetrator she experiences pain and shock but is eventually able to leave all guilt with him and turn away from him to face her family.

At this point I bring the client into the constellation to take her place. She breaks down in tears and is unable to look at anybody. I immediately have her turn away from the constellation, yet her tears continue to flow uncontrollably. I join her and we distance ourselves from the constellation and even as we exit through the door her tears continue to flow. We wait in the next room until she calms down and I ask her if I should finish the constellation or if she would like to meet anyone in this constellation. She replies that she would like to look at her two sisters. So I return to the constellation and release father, mother and perpetrator from their roles. The client returns to make a brief loving connection to her sisters and we end with this moment.

In my opinion the client's needs override all rules and ideas of how a constellation should be done. I orient my work around these needs and I am willing to interrupt, take distance or take a break in order to avoid overwhelming someone. I stay in close contact with my client and let him decide, how much he can handle.

This way I keep my constellations in service to my clients. I may even encourage an abused client to keep distance from a perpetrator before looking at him/her and to raise one hand as soon as feelings of overwhelm come up. Once I see the hand raised I freeze the constellation immediately.

Dealing with traumatic events it is important that the facilitator has to be aware of the client even while working the constellation.

A female client had suffered a "medical mistake", lost one arm and was dealing with its consequences. The constellation moved well and the representatives were heading to a solution picture when I noticed that the client was not observing the constellation anymore but looked away. I stopped the constellation to inquire how she was feeling and realized that she was in an overwhelmed and frozen state. I joined her and we backed away from the constellation to create distance. From there I dissolved the constellation and worked with her on her current state.

As my goal is not to "pull a constellation through" or even to reach a positive solution picture, I feel free to interrupt whenever my client seems absent or negatively affected.

In an advanced training group I decided to demonstrate how to use wooden figures to work with individual clients. The man who volunteered brought a difficult issue. When he was six months old his parents left him with his aunt, because they had to go abroad, to Germany, in order to earn money. They did not reunite until he was three years old.

I suspected that this issue was one of "interrupted movement" (a term in trauma work when a child was separated in an early age from his parents) and though I doubted that it was suitable for working with wooden figures I decided to go ahead and explore it. We put up figures for father, mother and child and began the constellation. We worked for about a half an hour until the client imagined that his mother was smiling at him at which point I decided to leave it.

Later, during a feedback circle, this client reported how he felt relieved. He had been extremely nervous to approach this issue, because he was unsure if he could bear re-experiencing the situation through representatives. The use of wooden figures had made it easier for him as it created more distance. We had made a small first step towards resolving this interrupted movement.

These examples have taught me to stay more humble in certain situations. Rather than hoping for major liberations through a single constellation I now try to advance at the client's speed.

Understanding how trauma states resolve has taught me some other new perspectives in my work.

A client was working on feeling estranged from her family. She suspected abuse by her father but had no memories before the age of 14. The child's representative is afraid of the father and wants to move away from the family. As we have no facts I avoid naming anything and just follow the energies present in the constellation. When the client enters the constellation she can't bear being near her family and feels relieved when backing away and finally turning away from them. She reports a sense of liberation and relief and I end the constellation.

As the seminar continues I observe this client, who always presented as quiet and reserved, become increasingly discontent with her constellation. She behaves more and more aggressive towards me and requests "some more" on our last day. When I suggest a second constellation she declines and concludes our final feedback circle with a single word: "Shit!"

This could be viewed as failure on my part as the facilitator. From the perspective of a trauma therapist I see it differently. The retreat from her family, the distancing and turning away were a kind of a necessary flight. Enough distance was created for my client to reorient, recover and gather strength. As the energies unravel the flight reaction is followed by rage and - the deeper the hurt the wilder the rage. Just as that bird awakened out of its shock to pick at whatever is nearby, her rage gets directed at whomever is present and as the facilitator (and also as a possible "father figure") I become the target. This rage has little to do with me personal but is a necessary part of a solution.

I obviously won't know how my client will integrate the experience after the seminar but she has clearly stepped into a place where she accesses her strength and power. The best I can do for her process is to bear her rage without reacting or getting angry back ("you are unfair!").

Awareness of this bigger healing movement through the pendulation between resource and hardship creates a new perspective of the overall effect of family constellation work. Doesn't the image of rightful order that often concludes the first constellation serve as a resource? This can be understood as a resource of strength and healing that the client needs to integrate before entering deeper levels of entanglement that might have been invisible before.

When I first put up my family I received a simple, healing image that felt right and extremely good. Several years later I asked for another constellation and very different energies emerged. I was confronted with intense energies of isolation, insanity and horror. The pendulum had swung the other way and I have no idea how many more movements of good and bad may come my way.

Understanding this process takes pressure off the facilitator. If only positive solution pictures would help our clients, we feel responsible to bring the constellation to "a good end". If, however, an organic pendulation exists that continually moves between resourcefulness and hardship and thereby brings about healing, the facilitator can relax and simply accompany the client and support the unraveling of this process.

It would be a fascinating exploration to find out if the same pendulation process can be observed in Hellinger's work "movements of the soul".

When trauma and family entanglements go together

Finally an example how trauma and family issues can overlap:

A tall young man in his early twenties comes to do his constellation. He is friendly and well mannered but people who meet him in the street would rather avoid him because he shaved his head and has tattoos all over his arms and shoulders. His issue: many years of drug addiction.

The constellation reveals that his mother cannot really look at her child. She is afraid of him. (This means normally in a constellation that she confuses the child with somebody else). I asked for any facts in the family history that might help us understand this fact but he knows none. As it seems obvious that it is not the child whom the mother fears, I choose a man, place him next to the boy and name him "the one who is really meant". Mother's attention immediately shifts to him and she is visibly frightened of him. The child shows great relief and can finally be seen as just the child. Because of a strange attraction I suspect that this man might be a first boyfriend who was violent or even raped her.

The mother of this young man had been to some of my workshops and when I met her again I asked her who she thought this "one who is really meant" might be. She thought about it, said that she had heard that one of her grandfathers could be violent and we left it at that.

The next day she returns and reminds me of a constellation we had done several years prior. When she was 12 years old two men kidnapped her and held her for nearly 12 hours. They tied her up, tortured her and sexually abused her until she eventually managed to escape.

In the constellation particularly the older of these two men presented as brutal and violent, making statements such as "I like it when you are terrified." The representative for the child vacillated between terror of and boundless love for this man. (Trauma research has confirmed that such connections frequently happen between perpetrator and victim.)

When she thought about her son's work, my client concluded that it was this perpetrator whom she perceived when looking at her son. Her son, in turn, had taken on a part of his role.

Here you can see how traumatic experience can directly affect family members. Talking further with my client I learned how different therapeutic approaches had worked well together. When she first began working on this kidnapping experience she found hypnotherapy to be a most helpful tool. Her next big step was to meet the perpetrator in her constellation. However, she still feels the effects of the trauma living in her body and has now decided to begin trauma work.

How do trauma work and constellation work differ and what do they have in common?

Trauma and constellation work address different layers of our being.

Constellations connect us with our roots as social beings by demonstrating how we are connected to our family system. They make it clear that we belong to that system and will remain a part of it.

If we encounter in a constellation a perpetrator outside of our family system, we discover a human being who carries a burden of guilt. Even if we turn away from this person, we do so with respect and it is this respect for the fate of another that brings about healing. This respect can heal relationship with others as well as part of ourselves.

Trauma work focuses directly on our body and its reactions. Much of our impulses and instinct are an inheritance from the animal kingdom and it serves a facilitator well to understand how these energies move within our bodies. Trauma work addresses the physical level of our nature and heals there. Once frozen energies have been resolved we can return to undisturbed interactions with our environment and our fellow humans.

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However, the boundaries between these two approaches are not always so clear-cut. Here is a quote by Peter Levine: "Looking at trauma we are looking at loss of connection, connection to ourselves, our families and our surroundings."

In the application of trauma work the connection to the therapist as another human being therefore becomes a central theme. It is this connection - continually reestablished and reaffirmed - that creates a polarity to the pull of the trauma.

The trauma therapist Babette Rothschild speaks to this by talking about our ability to create relationships later in life: "A traumatized child is not necessarily doomed to a life of dysfunction. Many people who did not have opportunities to create safe relationships during their childhood were able to correct that later in life and create positive experiences with their connections and relationships". Rothschild mentions friends, teachers, neighbors, partners as well as psychotherapists. And these issues of bonding, connection and relationship are the core concerns of family constellation work. Through it we frequently discover a deep, connecting flow of love in seemingly dysfunctional families. This experience that connection has always been there creates a new sense of belonging, which can be seen as a corrective experience.

As you can see, both approaches, constellations and trauma work, overlap in many places. I see them as two circles that overlap in some part and stand alone in another. Maybe half the

issues brought in by our clients could be addressed with either approach though they would utilize different tools. In the other half each area holds its own domain and is preferable to the presented issue.

I am planning a workshop for severely traumatized clients in which I combine both approaches. In the mornings we will be working in a group setting and do constellations while the afternoons are reserved for individual SE sessions. I can't wait to see how both approaches work together and what results can be achieved. The question of healing and growth is not an either/or question, trauma work or constellations, but how can we combine them on our journey to more vitality, love and life force.

In this process it is clear to me that I can only take people as far as I have gone myself. In other words constellations led by me will only uncover both positive as well as negative aspects of life to such a degree as I am able to accept and contain. Facilitators therefore need to stretch their abilities to meet and accept the hardships in our human experience. I believe trauma work to be a good tool for such expansion.

Thanks: Thank you to Polarity - and trauma therapist Urs Honauer for his valuable insights. Thank you for the work of doing the English translation to Samvedam Randles and for the final overview to Sheila Saunders!

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