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Published in "The Knowing Field", Issue 6, June 2005

Carmen's Dream:

Integrating Constellation Work with Ongoing Therapy

Abstract

This article I will be discussing how three pieces of constellation work integrated with a client's ongoing therapy. The emphasis here will be on the constellation work. The rest of the therapy will only be sketched out in very broad brush strokes to give an impression as to how the constellation work fits in. It will include reference to:

1. Supportive therapy in the style of Kohut's self psychology
2. Trauma theory
3. A mindfulness technique based on Buddhist Vipassana meditation.
4. The Jungian technique of Active Imagination

I will also outline some of the professional support I received through the email discussion group "Constellation Talk". This support enabled the therapy to progress to a successful resolution.

Introduction

The three pieces of constellation work very effectively addressed the systemic family issues, especially the transgenerational issues.

The pieces of constellation work discussed here are:

1. An individual constellation done in my rooms, using markers on the floor to mark representatives' positions.
2. My client Carmen's involvement as a representative in another client Mary's constellation.
3. A constellation done using images that emerged in a dream of Carmen's, using active imagination.

The emphasis here will be on the constellation work. The rest of the therapy will only be sketched out in very broad brush strokes to give an impression as to how the constellation work fits in. This is in no way meant to minimise or denigrate the significance of these other aspects of therapy. The constellation work addressed the systemic family issues, especially the transgenerational issues, very effectively. While the more traditional psychotherapy could not have done that, it did address issues arising from Carmen's personal history with which constellations would have struggled.

When discussing Mary's constellation. I will briefly digress onto Mary's ongoing therapy, as well as practical procedural issues that arose out of that constellation. In that discussion I will outline some of the professional support I received through the email discussion group "Constellation Talk". I believe that is in keeping with the systemic nature of our work that does not draw artificial boundaries around people and events.

Background

Carmen is a pleasant 42 year old Latin American woman who migrated to Australia one year before first seeing me, in July 2002. She lived. She had At the time of seeing me she was living in temporary accommodation with her three children having been separated from their father for thirteen years. Carmen and her family were having trouble settling into this country. They were struggling to adjust to the different language and culture and Carmen was encountering problems because of her political activism. There were a number of unresolved issues related to their life in Latin America prior to emigrating. She was referred to me because of her poor English and because I could give therapy in Spanish.

Although Carmen had symptoms of anxiety and depression, they wer not considered severe enough to warrant anti-depressant medication. She had no evidence of post-traumatic stress disorder, despite having suffered severe trauma earlier in her life and having been a political refugee. She also had some physical problems with back pain that flared up from time to time and tiredness secondary to anaemia. All these problems seemed to be made worse by an exaggerated sense of responsibility that Carmen seemed to carry for the welfare of her homeland, including her friends and family.

Carmen felt very competent in her own country but had an overwhelming sense of vulnerability living in Australia. Consequently, her early therapy was mostly supportive, consisting of validation of the difficulties she was experiencing as a normal part of adaptation to a foreign culture and language. My personal experience of marriage to a Latin American woman helped me to empathise - in the tradition of Heinz Kohut – with the cultural dislocation Carmen was feeling.

Kohut stated that empathy was the capacity to think and feel oneself into the inner life of another person. (1984 p.84) This description developed an almost phenomenological flavour when he stated that this is done by attempting to experience as closely as possible what the patient is experiencing. (ibid p16.) By doing this I was able to validate Carmen's experience and to help her contain her distress. This process enabled her to re-establish the sense of self she had felt prior to migration In this way her anxiety and depression quickly began to improve as did her English and understanding of the Australian culture.

The history of Carmen's extended family suggested a number of possible systemic entanglements. (To reduce the possibility of identification I will not list all of them here.)

Carmen was one of several siblings and her parents separated when she was ten years old. The entanglement that is important in this narrative is related to the fact that her mother's parents were killed by right wing military when her mother was only eight years old. Following this her mother lived alone in the countryside for several months, until a family took her in and employed her as a servant.

Individual Constellation – Remembering Grandmother

As part of her adjustment to Australia, Carmen was having quite a lot of difficulties dealing with her adolescent children, especially her daughter. So after several months we did a small constellation in my consulting room, using placemats on the floor. Carmen was most surprised when I put her grandmother behind her mother. Previously she had had no sense of her grandmother at all.

The inclusion of her grandmother enabled Carmen to acknowledge her mother's loss of her own parents and she could see her own mother getting stronger as she accepted the grandmother's support. These images than made it possible for Carmen to bow before her own mother and then to accept her support, which then put her in a stronger position in relation to her own daughter. This transgenerational strengthening fits well with Kohut's idea of development and maintenance of sense of self.

Ongoing Therapy -Still Taking on Everyone Else's Troubles

Carmen's relationship with her daughter subsequently improved. However, she continued to exhaust herself, taking on every one else's problems. Not only was she trying to help Latin American refugees come to Australia, she was also involved in bringing out Latin American political representatives to Australia, as well as taking on the problems of any friends that she got involved with. So Carmen was constantly stressed and tired.

Much of the second year of therapy revolved around these issues. Despite developing a great deal of insight her behaviour only changed slightly. I was perplexed by this, as she seemed to have taken a much more appropriate place in her family. Being less of a parentified child is usually associated with a decrease in inappropriately taking on other people's problems. The physical exhaustion, which was a consequence of the ongoing rescuing behaviour, was increasingly frustrating for Carmen.

A Serious Adverse Reaction to being a Representative in Mary's Constellation

Carmen was chosen as a representative for "Nourishment" in a constellation set up by Mary, a client who came to the workshop wanting to address the issue of her obesity.

We set up one representative for Mary and Carmen was chosen to represent "Nourishment". Once these representatives settled into their positions, it became clear that the representative for Nourishment was behaving like a little girl. Mary confirmed she had a younger sister. Mary's representative felt very strongly that the second representative was in fact her sister. Once this was affirmed Nourishment's representative (Carmen) immediately became very distressed and started speaking Spanish.

Carmen told me in Spanish that she was experiencing severe chest pain, which was consistent with angina or a heart attack. So I removed her from the constellation and attended to her in a quiet corner of the room. At the same time Libby, my co-facilitator, selected an experienced participant to take over the role of the sister's (Nourishment's) representative. The group became distracted by Carmen's distress and my co-facilitator to refocus and collect the energy before the constellation could continue.

Very soon after Carmen was removed from the role as the sister's representative, her chest pain and the distress disappeared. As she recovered she experienced a relaxation in her breathing and small shivers. I later realised that this was consistent with the process of recovery from reactivated trauma as described by Levine.(1997)

As soon as the new representative took the same position in the constellation, she started to experience quite severe pain in her throat. At this point Mary volunteered that her younger sister had almost died from swallowing turpentine when she was only a toddler. (This would explain both chest and throat pain.) Mary had brought this misadventure to the attention of their mother, who then took her sister to hospital where she was treated. As soon as this was mentioned, the symptoms experienced by Mary's representative started to settle. It became clear that Mary was carrying the physical pain and the fear of death for her sister. A representative for the mother was introduced and the constellation eventually reached a good resolution.

As the constellation proceeded Carmen returned to the holding circle. When the work was completed, she reported that when she had to leave the constellation, she felt ashamed of what she judged as her weakness for having to withdraw from the role. This settled as she was reassured and brought back into the holding circle. Mary reported that emotional weakness and the shame about that weakness were feelings with which she had struggled for a large part of her life.

Feedback From “ConstellationTalk”

Given the gravity of the issues raised by this constellation, I sought permission from Mary and Carmen to discuss this constellation with other practitioners on the email discussion group, “ConstellationTalk”:

One contributor wrote:

“We should consider the safety of participants. Perhaps facilitators who are not medical practitioners or nurses should have updated qualifications in first aid.”

This contributor is in good company here. Gunthard Weber (2004), says the following, in an article about organisational constellations:

“The constellation work can lead to intense emotional reactions and stressful experiences – for the representatives as well as for the clients. Those who want to offer constellation seminars should therefore know how to deal with, for example, fainting or circulatory problems, hyperventilation, asthma or migraine attacks, suicide danger, abrupt withdrawals from the group and emotional escalations (for instance, panic attacks, crying fits, etc.). I don’t want to create fear, and I want to remind you to be equipped for such situations. Recently a colleague of mine During a workshop of hers a participant had a heart attack. The first distinct physical symptoms were wrongly interpreted by the facilitator and by the participant as the after-effect of a constellation, in which the participant had stood in a very stressful place.”

Another contributor wrote;

“..... Sometimes I check in with the representative: “Can you hold it?” when physical symptoms are revealed. Just asking this acknowledges their effort and indicates that I am there with them, aware of what is happening. Sometimes this is enough.

Another invaluable tool is distance: Sometimes you can move her further from the other representative(s)- distance often provides safety and a greater ability to see what is going on for the representative”

In this post the contributor drew my attention to the possible reactivation of past trauma for this client.

In fact Bertold Ulsamer (2004) writes:

“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, frequently watched both clients as well as representatives enter the frozen trauma states without the facilitator even noticing it.”

It is now clear to me that Carmen was feeling overwhelmed by the activation of her own trauma system. Even though I removed her because I was concerned about her chest pain, she probably needed to be removed and cared for anyway because of the level of trauma she was experiencing.

Despite all the focus on Carmen, Mary still got a good result from her constellation. In the months immediately following this constellation, Mary reported that she had much less craving for sweet food, her chronic feeling of depression had lifted & the world literally looked as if it had more light in it. She also stated she felt a sense of inner peace that she had never experienced before. One year later she successfully came off antidepressant medication, despite numerous unsuccessful attempts in the previous ten years.

Carmen reported that she was much more aware of the cost to herself and others of continually taking on other people's suffering, just as she had experienced as Mary's representative in the constellation.

However, I still had not dealt specifically with Carmen's trauma system. Even when she told me a week later in therapy that the episode in the constellation had reminded her of past "incidents" in her life, I was still thinking of her as vulnerable rather than "traumatised". It was only when I got the feedback from ConstellationTalk that I was able to make sense of what was happening.

Carmen seemed very competent and strong most of the time. It was when her trauma system was activated that she became overwhelmed and appeared weak. This insight helped me to be more vigilant in Carmen's subsequent individual therapy, which eventually led to the breakthrough described below.

"An Unexpected Catharsis"

Carmen was seeing more and more clearly that she was unnecessarily taking on other people's worries to her own detriment. For example she came in one session after seeing a TV programme about the mistreatment of factory hens wanting to become involved in a crusade against this inhumane treatment. In another session she was very distraught about the problems that her Australian partner was having with his ex-wife and their children, and wanted to rescue the children. She was able to drop these preoccupations as soon as she could see what she was doing.

We then worked with a mindfulness technique adapted from Buddhist Vipassana meditation practices (Kornfield Jack 1993) which led to some useful work around illness she had experienced as a child. This technique simply involves the non-judgemental labelling of worrying thoughts as "just worrying" and bringing conscious attention back to the breath or simply changing the subject.

THE "JUST WORRYING" LABELLING TECHNIQUE

As a preamble to discussing this technique with a client it is often helpful to differentiate worrying from constructive problem solving. Worrying involves repetitive circular thinking, which is associated with anxiety and produces no enactable practical outcomes.

This technique simply involves a person labelling worry as "just worrying" and then bringing their attention back to their breath or to simply change the subject of their thinking. Every time a person catches themselves worrying they just label it again and change the subject. It doesn't matter if a person does it 10 times in one minute or if they only realise they have been worrying after a period of 2 hours and then apply the technique. The important thing is that the person applies the technique when they realise they are worrying.

This technique involves no criticism or internal struggle, just simple non-judgemental labelling. **Therefore it is important in this regard that the client does not change the label from "just worrying" to "don't worry".**

This technique is very powerful and most people find that their worrying thoughts dissipate almost totally within a few days. Then they usually start worrying about a week later because they have forgotten about the technique through lack of need to use it. At that point a reminder of the technique usually suffices.

The same technique can be applied to other disturbing repetitive mental events using labels such as "just doubting" or "just criticising". This is subtly but significantly different to avoidance. It is not running away from the aversive mental stimulus. Rather it is the non-judgemental labelling which is encapsulated in the word "just"

Carmen adopted this technique and indeed the worrying subsided but she developed a terrible feeling of disorientation and fear. In fact she felt like she was going crazy. A friend supported her through the

worst part of this, which lasted, for two days. Carmen saw me three days later and she was still experiencing the fear and disorientation, although it was less severe than it had been.

As we explored this response Carmen suddenly realised that it was a very familiar feeling that made her feel about 8 years old. She then remembered at that stage of her life she suffered chronic conjunctivitis, which meant that she woke up in the mornings unable to see until her eyes were cleaned. At the same time her parents were fighting a lot so she woke up blinded and terrified with her parents fighting and feeling totally out of control.

Once Carmen identified this childhood feeling as being the same feeling that she had recently experienced, she was able to separate the two. This allowed her to calm down considerably. She was then able to identify the residual anxiety as feeling of a knot in her abdominal region. It then struck Carmen that she had been carrying these feelings of anxiety in her abdomen most of her life and a lot of her incessant activity and helpfulness was an attempt to distract herself from this chronic anxiety.

Over the next few sessions Carmen became more interested in this feeling of anxiety in her abdomen without being so afraid of it. She even began to find the variations in intensity of this feeling a useful barometer, which indicated to her when she was experiencing more stress. In this way, she began to manage her stress levels, and the difficulties in her life more effectively.

Then one day Carmen presented for her therapy session absolutely distraught about her relationship with her older sister Luisa, who lives in the capital city back home. Luisa had recently been sending emails to all the other family members viciously attacking Carmen. Carmen and Luisa had had a very difficult relationship since childhood and Luisa resented Carmen for moving to Australia, even though Carmen did not have enough money to eat, pay the rent or for her children's education in her own country.

The Dream as Told by Carmen (Translated from Spanish)

"I was in the capital city at a very big party, where there were like a carnival with fireworks and music lots of happy people in the street dancing and laughing I was with an old friend, Veronica and we were laughing with joy. She needed to go to the toilet. Unlike me, she was unfamiliar with this place as she was from a village a long way away. I knew that Maria lived very close and I offered to take Veronica there so she could use the toilet. There was always someone at home in Maria's house.

We ran there because we wanted to get back to the street party. I took Veronica's hand so that we wouldn't get separated in the crowd. We arrived at a building where we climbed a long spiral staircase to reach Maria's apartment. We knocked on the door and someone opened it. We stepped straight into a sitting room and saw Maria and some other people who lived in the apartment, whom I didn't recognise.

A man was lying flat on the floor with the face covered. Although I knew he was dead I wasn't frightened. Veronica looked at me very surprised and asked me what to do. I laughed and said we should be calm and take no notice of him and go quickly to the bathroom. However, to get to the bathroom she had to hop over the dead person.

Right at that moment the dead person moved and began to reveal his face. He looked around slowly as if he was looking for something. I was more worried for my friend than for myself. When Veronica returned to the sitting room I saw that the dead man was moving and wanted to run towards me. Veronica tripped over the dead man and fell to the floor in a panic. She jumped up and began to run, shouting and telling me that we had to leave this place. She was very scared and the expression of terror on her face infected me with fear as well. I insisted that she calm down and that nothing was going to happen, that the dead man was harmless, but she would not listen to me.

From this moment on the rest of the people who lived in the apartment began to shout at the dead man ordering him to calm down. But he didn't seem to listen and was out of control. I always knew that Maria could make the dead one go back to sleep and this time it would be no different. But even so, I

preferred to run with my friend to get out of this place. No one could block the dead one's path and he came after us with his arms extended trying to grab us.

We ran very fast down the spiral staircase and looking upwards to see if the dead one was still pursuing us. Sure enough he was there, with a lost look on his face that was full of exhaustion and anxiety. I had a strange sensation: Even though I knew that the dead man was not evil and he wasn't going to do us any harm, I couldn't shake the feeling of terror and so I ran trying to protect my friend who was even more terrified than me.

In that moment I woke up."

Associations With The Dream

I began working with this very intense dream that Carmen reported. We firstly looked at her associations with the major characters of the dream.

Veronica: *"She was a very good old friend with whom I have laughed a lot. I remember her from my time in prison. She was a political prisoner, a member of a resistance group. However, she never renounced her leftist ideals to continue the struggle for more justice back home. I very much admired her ideals and her courage as she had renounced her own personal interests, and freedom, to defend the rights of her compatriots. In spite of her bellicose and rebellious temperament she had a noble and honest heart.*

Maria: *"She is a member of Carmen's extended family. She is a great person, very friendly and with good morals. She lived in one of the best suburbs of the capital city. She is one of those elegant ladies with good manners that likes acts of charity and goes to the church daily. She doesn't understand much of politics but she repeats what she has heard in the news: 'We have to help the government in order to stop the guerrillas!'*

When I recovered my freedom Maria took my children and me into her house. I lived there for a couple of years until the time I had to flee my country. I remember Maria with a great deal of gratitude because she helped me especially when I was sick and penniless."

The Dead Man: *"Still I remember the face of this dead one even though I didn't recognise him. He had a very thin body, dressed in very formal clothes with a tie. His face was very pale and cold. However, his expression frightened me, yet in my heart I knew that he was not going to cause me harm."*

The Dream Constellation

Having heard about Carmen's problems with her eldest sister immediately followed by this dream, I had a strong intuition that Carmen's sister had an identification with the assassin of her grandparents in the family system. I felt there might be a double displacement (Hellinger 2001) where Carmen had been representing her own forgotten grandmother and her sister Luisa representing the assassin. The unresolved antagonism between the grandparents and the assassin were being acted out between Carmen and her sister.

I sensed the dead man represented Carmen's grandparent's assassins in the dream. In the dream Carmen had gone with her left wing friend, Veronica. She was the one who experienced the most fear – not surprising if the dead one represented the right wing assassin. All this happened in the house of the house of Carmen's naïve right wing friend Maria. Maria's house could easily represent Carmen's country, a place where she found some refuge after being released from jail. It is also interesting that the whole situation came to a head when Carmen's left wing friend went to go to the toilet – to get rid of her shit – in that very same house! This understanding came to me in a flash as an intuitive insight. I decided not to tell it to Carmen, but rather to use my understanding to work directly with the dream.

As often happens, when a client relates an intense dream, Carmen had entered a dream like state. This is very conducive to working the dream with Carl Jung's technique of active imagination. (Whitmont 1978 p76) I had a strong intuition that not only was this the right thing to do, but also that this dream could be seen and worked with as if it were a family constellation.

So I asked Carmen to imagine herself turning around to face the dead man who was lying on the floor and kneel down at his side. At first this made her heart beat strongly but eventually her fears settled. I then asked her to imagine her sister kneeling on the other side. Surprisingly this had an immediate calming effect.

I then asked Carmen to say to the dead one: "You are dead and I am alive, but we are connected." She said that this felt true. I then asked her to say, "You're the one who killed my grandparents and now you are dead too." When I suggested this she looked shocked and tears started rolling down her face. She nodded to let me know that it was also true.

I then asked Carmen to imagine her sister kneeling at the opposite side of the dead one and to look at her. Again she was surprised as her sister looked kind. She had not thought of her sister as being kind for some time. I asked her to say to her sister: "You are my big sister; I am your little sister." And then: "This one here is dead and we are alive." With that her sister looked at the dead one, Carmen observed that interaction. I asked her to imagine her sister saying to the dead one: "You carry a heavy fate. It's yours to carry not mine." As Carmen's sister said this, Carmen said that she saw the dead one's eyes closing. I said to her that he could now rest in peace without having to bother her or her sister anymore. With that she nodded, smiled and heaved a deep sigh. I did not feel it necessary to bring in the grandparents and have them lie with the dead one as the constellation seemed to have already reached a good resolution.

After this session Carmen lost all desire to respond directly to her sister's malicious e-mails or even to speak further to members of the family about them. She has also felt a lot more at peace when she thought of her sister. She was even able to speak much more kindly of her.

Carmen told me Luisa had been a very successful professional in back home. However she no longer had the money to pay for an expensive lifestyle for which she has become accustomed, as she had recently become unemployed and was finding it difficult to find new work because of her age. (50 years old)

She told me Luisa had suffered a lot because in their family. Of all her siblings, she was the one who had had the worst time. She had to take the responsibility for all the younger siblings, after the parents separated, when she was barely 15 years old. Carmen believed so much suffering had left Luisa filled with bitterness and resentment. Carmen said that Luisa had fought against this attitude in herself, assisted by personal growth work, reading books, and doing yoga and meditation exercises. However, often she lost control and she became very aggressive, especially with Carmen.

Carmen said she had been afraid of Luisa. Her relationship had been based on fear and it affected her a lot when she attacked her. She now felt she could protect herself from Luisa without taking her attacks so personally. Moreover, she stated that she was beginning to understand her problems and anxieties from childhood. She was finding it is easier to manage the fear in regard to her sister. She has decided not to respond to the emails that Luisa has sent her in recent weeks, and she has not received news of her since.

Since this issue settled, Carmen has remained calm. Her sessions are now becoming less frequent with a view to terminated fairly soon after this session.

Yo sé que hay otras y otras cosas rodando alrededor de la noche o debajo de los muebles o adentro del corazón.

I know there are others, other things prowling about at night or beneath the furniture or deep within the forgotten heart.

Si, pero tengo tiempo, tengo aún mucho tiempo, - tengo una caracola que recoge la tenaz melodía del secreto y la guarda en su caja convertido en martillo o mariposa – tiempo.

Yes, but I have time, plenty of time still – I have a conch shell that collects the tenacious melody of secrets and hoards them in its chamber, transformed into hammers and butterflies – time.

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NB. People interested in joining ConstellationTalk can go to www.constellationflow.com and click on the registration button there.

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