



# FAMILY *fortunes*

Could the hardship faced by your ancestors be affecting your life today?

**Janey Lee Grace** investigates

**How would you feel if years of angst and all kinds of health issues could be 'healed' and cleared in one short 45 minute session?** Well, if you are an issue

holder at a Family Constellations workshop that's exactly what can happen. It's easy to forget how our past affects our present, yet recently epigenetics – the study of heritable changes in genes – has proven that our cells carry memories, and these patterns often deep within our subconscious mind can have a massive impact on our health, wellbeing and relationships which can often be entangled.

The BBC *Horizon* documentary *Ghost in our Genes* revealed a new paradigm shift which shows that epigenetics add a whole new layer to genes beyond the DNA, which can cause inheritable effects in humans. The concept of Family Constellations is a unique form of group psychology which can heal these inherited emotions, often in one session. The workshop is

an amazing phenomenon, sometimes referred to as emotional healing for the family or homeopathy for the soul. It can clarify and ease family entanglements and can produce a significant change in your perspective in a very short time.

## Soul therapy

This important work was started by German-born Bert Hellinger (considered one of the most respected psychotherapists in the world today). Followers of the work say it has revolutionised the heart and soul of family therapy by illuminating the often destructive loyalties which lay within families, some of which are entirely unconscious. He observed that traumatic events, like the premature death of a parent, sibling or child, or an abandonment, crime or suicide, can exert a powerful force affecting later generations.

Entangled with unhappiness from the past, family members often continue patterns of anxiety, depression, anger, guilt, fear, unfulfilled

relationships and chronic illness. The Family Constellations practitioner I worked with, Julie Toms-Arbel, is very skilled and intuitive and seems able to tap in immediately to what needs healing in our complex family structures – often

spanning over generations of angst. Rather than trying to heal the past, it's about healing the impact of the past on the present.

Within the family constellations workshop there are usually five people who have designated themselves in advance as issue holders – these are the people who will be bringing a problem which will be addressed within the group setting. The remainder are the representatives – onlookers who get involved if requested to represent a family member or other person who may help give an insight into the dynamics which may be contributing to the issue holder's predicament.

We sat in a circle as Julie outlined the concept of Family Constellations and we introduced ourselves. The first issue holder took her place while those of us who were representatives listened. Julie asked her to explain what she would like to work on, specifying facts rather than stories. I did wonder why anyone would want to talk about personal issues to a therapist in front of others but I quickly discovered this was a very safe setting to be in.

The woman who was rather beautiful sat face to face with Julie (the constellator) and explained she had problems with her body image, feeling she over-ate and binged despite being seemingly happy and content in other ways. We learned that she had Italian relatives who had been literally starving during years of famine. I could see where this might go from a psychotherapy perspective; it

doesn't take Einstein to recognise that she was subconsciously trying to eat for them. But what happened next played this out dramatically. The issue holder was asked to select from those in the circle someone to represent her mother, father, siblings and grandparents and someone to represent herself. They were adjusted into position, perhaps turning away from each other or face-to-face depending on what felt right. It's important to stress that this is not role play, the representatives are there to simply be a flag in the wind during the exercise – a barometer for the soul of the person or presence who is a key figure in the issue holder's plight.

### Powerful mystery

The representatives when asked said they felt cold, numb and in the case of the grandfather, guilty. When another representative was chosen by Julie to stand behind them this made the family group feel far worse, their shoulders hunched, one woman even went pale. Julie then revealed the new presence represented famine. The issue holder stood feeling sadness and sorrow looking at this wretched picture of her family in torment.

It's not possible to explain how the representatives are given the information and the feelings. The truth is we don't know how it works. It is sometimes referred to in Constellations work as The Knowing Field. Certainly until I was asked to be a representative I was highly sceptical, thinking that my rational mind would be telling me to say certain things, act a certain way that I guessed was appropriate, but once I'd been in the shoes of a character that was certainly not within my recognition, I could feel how powerful this work is.

Julie gave the issue holder and the representatives specific, almost archaic sentences to repeat such as "I have been trying to eat on your behalf". The picture changed dramatically as Julie took it forward by many years, replacing the presence of famine with that of abundance (she chose a tall woman wearing a wide flowing

red shawl and got her to stand draping herself around the whole family). Their body language changed immediately and they looked and felt much better. Julie gave them sentences to repeat to encourage the issue holder to enjoy her life, to eat appropriately and a reminder that it 'filled them up' to see her healthy and happy.

"Both chronic and serious illnesses can often be linked to entanglements within the family," says Julie. "By being entangled with another, we can often follow in the footsteps of that particular individual: the fate of another family member who has gone before us can be taken on.

"Constellation work can provide us with a tremendous amount of information about what underlies illness and what is being expressed. I often ask the client to choose someone for themselves and someone for the illness. They set them up and I see what unfolds. The reps are like flags in the wind: I see in what direction they are blowing, so to speak.

I observe their posture and where they are looking, as well as gaining clues from how they feel and any reported sensations within their bodies.

"Representatives give us an enormous amount of valuable information and their bodies are given the opportunity to speak through a

"Family members often continue patterns of anxiety, depression, anger, guilt, fear and chronic illness"



constellation. In fact, our bodies are beautiful barometers that express many truths."

In my opinion Family Constellations should be free for all on the NHS. One female participant said: "I feel like five decades of angst has been healed in a day. I had extreme anger with my father (now passed away) and it's all gone, there's no emotional charge any more."

Oh and back to that first woman who presented with issues of over-eating, I saw her at another workshop three months later. She had lost at least four stone and looked amazing. "I didn't change my diet or lifestyle," she said. "I just didn't feel the need to overeat ever again."

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