

Rage in Constellations

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Is it possible that Family Constellation work could be a way to increase our understanding of the enormous and apparently escalating conflict in the world? Might it also contribute to finding some solutions?

It is now over a year since the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon when we saw vivid images on our television screens of destruction and devastation. In the aftermath of these events we are experiencing the fragile ground between what we call 'good' and 'evil', and we can see the disturbing inconsistencies upon which these differentiations are based.

Are there similarities between these events and the incomprehensible ones that took place during the Holocaust, in South Africa, in Rwanda, in Yugoslavia and in many other countries, where thousands, millions of people were murdered without remorse or regret, in good conscience, out of a sense of necessity, justice or duty? Is it ever possible for us to understand the recurring explosive hate witnessed in ethnic, religious and racial conflict? Can it be moderated or even resolved? Is it possible that evil is an error of creation, and that it can be fought against, diminished, and through increased virtue finally defeated? I don't believe it can, or that we can escape the resurgence of that which is oppressed and defeated.

Realistically speaking, good and evil are inextricably bound one to the other, and the propagation of good does not necessarily diminish evil. It can sometimes increase it. Just as the source of good and evil remains incomprehensible and elusive, so our attempts to understand and control evil and destructiveness often elude us. We can do little else but wrestle with this impenetrable duality, perhaps until such time as we come into contact with the 'all-inclusive', which is above and beyond good and evil, where nothing is excluded and everything belongs. Practically speaking, we will have achieved a great deal if we can occasionally have an experience like that reported by Ajahn Chah, a recently deceased Buddhist Vipassana Master from Thailand. During one of his most popular teaching sessions, a member of the audience suddenly stood up and shouted at him: "*All your magnificent words about compassion and loving kindness and in reality you are full of anger and hate!*" to which Ajahn Chah replied: "*This is true, but I don't act upon them.*"

In constellation work we are often confronted with the issue of wrestling between good and evil, with our helplessness as well as surprising flashes of insight. The following discussion centres upon the theme of the rage and destructiveness that can come up in constellations and it is offered as a contribution towards a corrective balance in the development of this work. Maybe we have been attempting to be too good, too virtuous?

In recent months, I have observed that occasionally constellations have appeared to be too solemn and too sacred. Those qualities that, as a rule, are exactly the ones that belong to constellation work, i.e. devotion, depth and emotional response, occasionally seem to me to have been rather exaggerated. I have also noticed that the normal rituals of acknowledgment, respect, and reconciliation can sometimes result in rather shallow, passive and hollow solutions

It is my opinion that the reasons for these phenomena in constellations are connected to a

particular way of dealing with powerful, aggressive and destructive forces, such as rage, hate and the wish for revenge. In constellation work, as in many other branches of psychotherapy, anger - above all focused and intensely expressed rage - is regarded as one of the least acceptable emotions. This is in part because of an awareness of the possible repercussions of encouraging an expression of this type of emotion, which can result in destruction, devastation and guilt. A belief has developed within constellation work that implies that anger, hate and destructive impulses are generally secondary or surface emotions. They serve to protect the individual from the unbearable pain of the underlying primary emotions of hurt love, longing, despair, or facing up to personal guilt. Moreover, it is often assumed that an individual's anger or rage is not their own but rather that it is unconsciously carried on behalf of another member of the system. Even when the rage clearly belongs to the individual it generally has been accepted among constellation facilitators that it should be expressed in a calm and composed manner, so that it is felt deeply and with more effect.

It is generally accepted that if the rage were to be expressed vehemently, then it is likely to rob the solution of strength.

Such assumptions are in many cases accurate and of great value in their application to practical work. However, if the 'often' becomes an 'always' and any strong aggression expressed in constellations has little, or no acceptable place, then we are excluding a powerful and potentially healing force. The consequence of such exclusion may be to aggravate a problem and to make the situation worse. For example, the aggression may return through the back door against the therapist, and burden the client if they fail to align themselves with the image of a resolution. Alternatively, the client may demonstrate an intensification of auto-aggressive symptoms, such as depression, loss of energy, or psychosomatic problems.

Dealing with Rage in Constellations

It would appear, according to the conventional tried and tested point of view, that it is sensible not to encourage the expression of rage and intense anger in constellations. If, for example, the client has undertaken other forms of therapy and has already extensively and cathartically experienced the emotion, then its expression in a constellation may indicate a tendency towards the dramatic. This will hinder insight rather than facilitate it. The same is true of repeated angry accusations. In such instances, it is necessary to work towards those deeper levels of sadness and painful insight that are masked by the anger and scorn.

However, there are occasions when it might be appropriate to actively encourage the expression of anger, hate, and rage in a constellation. This is especially so when these emotions are not apparent, or are only indirectly evident. For example, there are clients who, as a result of painful or traumatic experiences, have every reason to be enraged but who do not express their sense of grievance; or those who, through therapeutic experiences, have become aware of the existence of their anger, but who nevertheless are unable to feel it. There are other clients who willingly adhere to systemic thinking patterns and caught in their entanglements and blind loyalty, they rationalise the hurtful behaviour of their parents, or family members. Clients who fall into these categories may appear frozen, paralysed and resigned following traumatic experiences, or they may be exhausted by the hopeless attempt to turn away from hurtful, disappointing and inaccessible parents. For many of these clients, the intense experience and the systemically framed expression of anger and rage can be a decisive step towards resolution.

Such a step may also be appropriate when usually reliable measures for the resolution of profound disappointment or pain have proved to be ineffective. In other words, when all the familiar movements of constellation work: expressing the pain, fear or frustration; accessing the original source of deep primal love that is there in spite of everything; letting go of an assumed guilt that has been carried on behalf of a perpetrator; and making the bowing

movement in front of the parents - when these and similar movements have no effect, then it is often connected to a **Rage/Fear/Guilt Complex** that needs resolving. When this is ignored or avoided, then we are confronted with the energy of false righteousness that I spoke of earlier. Occasionally the client demonstrates an almost zealous willingness to honour and bow down, but the relief felt in such cases is not so much an act of resolution but rather a successful avoidance. Peace achieved in haste, and reconciliation in the face of unconscious anger and rage – ‘reaction formation’ in psychoanalytic terms - operate from an attempt to sweeten a bitter pill, and lead nowhere.

Indications as to the presence of a Rage/Fear/Guilt dynamic can also emerge in a constellation in the reactions of the client’s representative. The therapeutic value of the representative’s perception is, in this instance, particularly apparent. When a client cannot experience their anger because of a fantasy of the terrible consequences that might ensue, then the perception of the representative - in other words, one of the client’s hitherto unavailable aspects of Self - is very useful. A representative will often experience the anger and rage immediately; they may also feel somatic reactions such as heat, powerful muscular contractions, or extreme nausea. The representative can in this way prepare the client to directly and consciously experience these hidden dynamics of their personality when, later on, they are placed in their constellation. In this phase it can be helpful if, for a while, the representative stands behind the client to give them support and encouragement to express their hitherto repressed feelings.

In my experience thus far, dealing directly with intense anger and rage is called for in approximately 5% of constellations, that is to say one client in a workshop of twenty participants.

Technique and Insight: The Systemic Frame of Rage in Constellations

Above all, there are two important considerations when dealing with powerful aggressive impulses. Firstly, without an insight into the complexity of the psychological structures and dynamics that develop around rage, the intense experience of confronting this violent feeling will remain blind and pointless and will be reduced to short-term, cathartic relief. Secondly, a simple understanding of extreme rage and of the inevitable dynamic of guilt that is connected with it will not be enough to bring about a resolution. It will be empty and may well lead to an overall paralysis in the flow of emotion unless it is accompanied by a forceful and passionate expression of feeling, particularly in the physical body. There is a vital correlation between experience and insight and I offer the following suggestion of how to manage rage in constellations.

Crucial for a targeted approach to rage is an in-depth case history of the origins of the wrath, of the painful early experiences and the systemic burdens of those involved. The often-used rule of approaching constellation work with little information is not applicable in this context. In order to compassionately lead the client into his rage, with helpful challenges and coherent suggestions for a resolution, we need a detailed knowledge of the specific painful or traumatic experiences. Emptiness and intuition are all well and good, but in this case they become even better when founded on facts.

Working with rage begins when things become critical. What I mean by this is, there will be a point at which the constellation unfolds into a scene where the story of the client’s Rage/Fear/Guilt dynamic is present in its bare essentials. The constellation develops to a point where the original violent aggressive impulse emerges, as does the shock of confronting it, and its ultimate rejection and repression. Only at this point will there be sufficient energy in the field to enable a therapist to work with the client; their rage cannot be avoided and the opportunity for a successful resolution becomes real.

In practical terms the flow comes from a re-enactment and expression of the traumatic experience, alongside new systemic insights. With a close examination of a case history and a thorough sequential unfolding, it soon becomes apparent where the client is seeking a resolution. The following example illustrates this procedure in the case of a conflict between a man and his father.

Father and Son Conflicts

A constellation is set up in which a number of male ancestors support the client's father. The father's father and all his male ancestors going back three or four generations stand at his side or behind him, supporting his arms and back, so that he becomes rooted and immovable. The son stands opposite his father and holds him tightly by the wrists. Breathing deeply and quickly, as if he were on a gentle jog, he looks at the father and breathes into the place where the blocked aggression needs resolution. His hands remain holding his father's wrists, his feet firmly on the ground. Thus the son is supported in a full expression of his disappointment, hurt and rage through his voice and body. In so doing he is able to fully and freely express his potentially murderous and destructive rage, whilst at the same time feeling entirely safe. In this way he is protected from the risk of annihilating others and from being annihilated himself.

There are a number of characteristic features in such cases of conflict between a father and a son. For example, the power of his own strength and that of his ancestors may surprise the son. His own aggression may trigger a reciprocal awakening and resurrection of aggressive forces within the system. The male ancestors are reminded of their own powerful strength, which in its original potent state they now place at the man's disposal. When this happens, then a great and dramatic battle unfolds into peaks of joyful awareness as the beauty and abundance of this strength emerge. The ancestors – together with the holding circle that represents humanity - testify openly and non-judgmentally to the necessity, beauty and greatness - and the limitations - of the son's strength.

As the rage is confronted in a constellation there will be a cycle of restraint, then of powerful expression, followed by exhaustion. This cycle may have to be repeated several times. With each wave - and this is particularly important - the actual experience is connected to new insights. Pauses, especially in the exhausted '*I can't go on*' phase, are doorways to a growing awareness of the frightening and tormented illusions that are associated with the expression of rage. These may include vivid images of severely injuring or even murdering the father, resulting in losing him forever. This causes unbearable guilt, resulting in fear of the father's revenge and consequent suicidal tendencies.

In this place of heightened awareness, repressed memories of experiences at certain decisive moments in life are often re-awakened. These moments of pausing, of closing the eyes and going fully inside and being fully aware of the body, are precious pearls in the process towards healing. They allow moving and sometimes shattering insights. Here, at these moments, even during an extreme expression of rage, the son can see for the first time that he cannot destroy his father. He can also have a sense of whether there is still some unfinished business that he has to attend to.

Often during this joint process the entangled ancestors also experience insights. For this reason it is helpful when setting up the constellation to name each individual ancestor. It can become clear to them what the consequences of their actions are, for their son, grandson and great-grandson. They can see the repercussions and the suffering caused by their actions. They might express their regret and remorse and be given an opportunity to make amends by blessing the son and setting him free. Through his fear, guilt, despair, regret and exhaustion, the son can eventually find his way back to the original source of respect and love towards his father. In turn, he may witness his father's primal love for him.

Case Study

In two earlier constellations, Leo had worked in depth with his family of origin and with his father, whom he experienced as weak and emotionally absent. There had been many losses in his father's family. Leo's grandfather had died in an accident when his father was a very young child. His great-grandfather had also died when his son was a young boy. Leo's father's elder brother died of meningitis when his father was twelve years old. Out of a loyalty to her socially superior family his father's mother was unable to stand by her husband.

Leo had an understanding of all these issues, having already worked through them in the familiar solution-focused process, and he felt some relief. He was less burdened and driven and had, for the first time, entered into a long-term relationship with a warm-hearted woman. In this relationship, however, he often initiated arguments and this regularly resulted in him running away from the relationship and experiencing suicidal impulses.

In the discussion preceding the constellation, Leo was concerned about the chronic resentment and reproach he felt towards his father, which he had never fully admitted to before. When in touch with it, his mood became one of agonizing restlessness or exhaustion. In setting up his constellation Leo placed the representatives for himself and his father far apart with their backs to each other. After a long period of standing motionless, Leo's representative slowly fell to his knees, then onto his hands. Then he began to crawl awkwardly, at first with some uncertainty, then with increasing purpose, in a wide, twisting arch towards his father. The striking of his hands on the floor became increasingly forceful; eventually he pushed his head and shoulders between his father's calves and like a bull, tried to lift him off the ground. He was unsuccessful. This scene was gripping and deeply moving but also frightening in its violence.

At this point Leo was brought into the constellation, supported for a while by his representative who stood behind him. In the manner described above, he positioned himself in front of his father and his ancestors, breathed deeply into his feelings of longing, bitter disappointment, hate, scorn and wish for revenge, and expressed them physically in the form of ever more powerful screams and yells that came up from his belly. Throughout this his father and the solid and powerful group of male ancestors held him in safety.

Following this intense expression of pain and despair with regard to his father, whom he perceived as unapproachable, there was a decisive moment when Leo felt the terrible fear of having annihilated him with his rage, and his only way to balance this out would be to kill himself. At this point, he wanted to give up, and he collapsed. What he had not anticipated was that his father and his ancestors would offer him powerful encouragement to continue and to prove himself a worthy descendant. They embraced him in a truly solemn, challenging and loving way, and he was only able to recognize this in the moment when he looked them fully in the eye. He stood up, gathered himself and allowed his body to express what was necessary.

At the end, he stood in front of his father and looked at him peacefully for a long time. Then he turned and looked intently at each member of the group who had witnessed this event and above all at his partner who was also at the workshop. It was obvious that he had taken an important and courageous step and that the effects of this experience needed further attention and time to develop.

Mother and Son, Father and Daughter Conflicts

The same principles apply to conflicts between a mother and son, a mother and daughter and father and daughter, with some important adjustments.

In conflicts between a child and a parent of the opposite sex any direct bodily contact can be experienced as an intensely sexual encounter. As a result of this, I have found alternative methods to be more appropriate.

When a mother and her son are involved I stand them opposite each other in such a way that body contact is not possible, and the son is physically well-supported by his father and his male ancestors, thereby allowing his feelings their full expression without crossing the safe boundary between him and his mother. In this way, the male ancestors demonstrate to the son the correct attitude to a mother and to women: that is, a respectful, loving and clear stance. In constellations such as these, the very best in men is propagated through the ancestors, something that is conveyed to the son while he wrestles to find himself. Behind the mother stand her female ancestors, supporting her in her dignity as a mother and as a woman, as well as in her compassion and suffering if her son has rejected her. These ancestral groups become powerful non-judgmental sources of strength that help to acknowledge and resolve the entanglements.

The same applies when a daughter stands at a safe distance opposite her father. The mother and the female ancestors, who support her, teach her about the dignity and strength of women and about expressing this in a positive way towards men. This may happen in a number of ways, for example: through a clear assessment of personal guilt and responsibility and that of others; through not taking on a debilitating victim role; and through compassion, humour and generosity. The father's ancestors encourage and support him in the task of truly seeing his daughter; acknowledging his own guilt; and, if necessary, lovingly resolving the daughter's confusion, and recognizing his original affection or love for her mother.

In the course of such a process we do not encounter just the perfect ancestors; they appear exactly as they were in life - called upon, however, in this exceptional situation and in spite of their own entanglements, to remember to the best of their ability and to pass on to their descendants, the wisdom that they have acquired through their own fate.

The Therapist's Responsibility

Our clients' rages can be a source of great challenge to us as therapists. As a result, it is helpful to gain some insight into this emotion in ourselves, and into our reactions to the wrath of others.

A number of years ago, a friend of mine, a psychoanalyst who also worked experientially, told me how in the presence of a dejected client, he grew so sleepy that he slipped off his chair onto the floor and was on the brink of drifting into an anaesthetised state, when he heard his client's worried voice calling from far away: "*This was not what I wanted!*" Suddenly he was wide-awake again and he asked the client: "*What was it you didn't want?*" "*I didn't want you to die.*" In this way my friend and his client were able, for the first time, to address the latter's rage.

As therapists dealing with unconscious repressed rage in our clients, we must reckon with our powerful feelings of transference such as tiredness, confused restlessness, personal anger and contrived gentleness. Only when we are able to deal sufficiently fearlessly with rage, that is, to perceive it with neutral interest, can we support the client in the above-mentioned procedure. In a constellation it is necessary to stand physically close to the client and to reassure him through bodily contact and words that the therapist is totally prepared for the rage to be expressed fully, and that his safety, and that of others taking part, is ensured. The client needs to understand that the issue is one of powerful, authentic expression as well as of experienced insight. In such a process, compassionate provocation, loving firmness, patience

and humour are good companions. For the therapist, this highly concentrated work can be totally fascinating, satisfying, and instructive for their personal development.

Contra-indications

As I mentioned above, clients who have an inclination towards excessive expression of emotion and who are constantly seeking cathartic therapeutic experiences without real insight, will not benefit from this procedure, although it will cause no real harm.

Above all, clients who incline towards very weak personal boundaries and who suffer from a burden of defence mechanisms such as projection, de-personalisation or fantasy, should not be exposed to an intensive mobilisation of distressed feelings. Neither should psychotically inclined clients, or those who are physically very weak or at high risk of a heart attack. When spiritual or physical signs of over-burdening and risk become apparent, it goes without saying that the work should be interrupted immediately.

Habib Davanloo's Psychoanalytical Short-term Therapy

The Iranian psychiatrist and psychotherapist Habib Davanloo, Professor of Psychiatry in Montreal, has developed an original and highly effective form of short-term therapy - generally about twenty sessions - which focuses entirely on the resolution of the Anger/Fear/Guilt dynamic.

Davanloo's Intensive Psychodynamic Short-term Therapy as described in his book: 'Unlocking the Unconscious' focuses on the premise that childhood trauma inevitably provokes a response of rejection, rage and a wish to retaliate. These movements are suppressed but are substituted in the conscious mind by a fear of loss, guilt and punishment. Alongside the fear numerous defence mechanisms begin to operate, which ultimately combine to form complex spiritual and physical symptoms.

His simple, highly differentiated model is used to uncover the individual Rage/Fear/Guilt dynamic. Davanloo works in an extraordinarily precise and confrontational way with these life crippling defence mechanisms in sessions that may last several hours. His methods have earned him the badge of 'love without mercy'. The frightening impulses of anger and rage are activated and remembered with great intensity during the transference relationship with the therapist. This requires a great deal of the therapist. Ultimately, the process goes through numerous, ever-deepening cycles to the original source of love and to the profound pain of the child, to his feelings of guilt and shame, and to his inner desire for healing for himself and for those close to him.

Davanloo is a highly controversial figure and is almost unknown in mainstream psychotherapy, even though his book was published eleven years ago. His work requires a particular ability and inclination on the part of the therapist. A number of years ago, I tried to work with Davanloo's approach but discovered that I was not suited to it. However, the documented results of his treatment are so convincing that I consider Davanloo's work to be extremely valuable and a courageous contribution to the difficult field of working therapeutically with highly destructive impulses. This man, in his way, is conducting peace work. He enables the client not merely to think of evil but to experience it directly at an intense level and in so doing, to approach its close relative - suppressed love. From the point of view of constellation work, I have benefited above all from Davanloo's highly differentiated perception of defence mechanisms, and his courageous exposure of their life-limiting effects.

Systemic Beginnings

A female colleague recently suggested the phrase ‘Systemic Beginnings’ as opposed to ‘Systemic Solutions’. ‘Solutions’ has a conclusive quality to it, whereas ‘Beginnings’ describes fresh starts and new openings. And so I return to the beginning of this article. The process of dealing with rage in constellations touches basic questions to which answers are not readily available. Are we fundamentally good and only reactively bad? Is War the father and mother of all things? Are the polarities of good and evil inextricably linked because only in this way can each know of the existence of the other?

In ‘African Fever’ (Kapuszinski 2000, p.209) Ryszard Kapuszinski tells of Hamed, from Somalia who spoke about the often fatal conditions of life experienced by his tribe in the desert:

“Drought, heat, the dry wells, and death on the road are integral to life. Without them, man would never be conscious of the true joy of rain, the sacred taste of water and the life-giving sweetness of milk. Cattle would be unable to delight in juicy grass, to grow intoxicated by the scent of pastureland. Man would be ignorant of the feeling associated with climbing into the cold, crystal-clear water of a river. It would never occur to him that this was purely and simply equivalent to the Kingdom of Heaven.”

In a memorable training group I attended a while ago, a number of us took some time to share memories about the experiences of our families during the War and the Nazi period. A music therapist then gave musical instruments to half the group in order to express what they had felt during this process; the other half held and observed the experience. Later the two groups swapped roles. After a tentative beginning in both groups, an overwhelmingly intense and powerful expression of warlike sounds, rhythms and tones developed to the extent that it was almost unbearable for some participants.

Afterwards as we processed our experience, the word inevitable was used often, as if it would have been impossible to avoid this powerful force. Expressing it was an absolute necessity.

The closing sounds of the musical expression were quiet, peaceful and had a pensive, open quality to them. The beginning of a new cycle? We could not say for sure, but it appeared to us all as though a space had opened up in the room.

References

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