

Reflections on the US Systemic Constellations Conference: A Microcosm of the American Field

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Kate: Lisa, I want to talk to you about your experience of the recent US Constellation Conference held in Seattle. I had some wonderful experiences as well as questions and concerns. I was wondering about your experience.

Lisa: I am grateful for all that the organisers did to bring so many of us together in this complex, emerging field. Their many hours of work were evident from the well organised schedule filled with diverse presenters during our three plus days together. The conference made it possible for each of us as individuals to experience the complexity and diversity of our country's historical field in which the

constellation work in the US is situated.

The questions that remained with me after the conference were: How can American facilitators open their hearts to the indigenous strength of their own ancestries, whether they be European, African, Asian, Arab, Jewish, Hispanic or Native American? How can reconnection with indigenous European ancestry help white American facilitators access their diversity and strengthen their ability to deal with the colonial history of this country? Many Americans with white European ancestry were able to 'pass' into the mainstream majority after only a generation and the loss of tell-tale accents. The

amalgamation of richly diverse cultures into 'whiteness' may make it difficult for some white American facilitators to deal with the difficult issues in the diverse racial history of this country. Is there willingness, ability and permission to allow these kinds of issues to be made more visible within the American field? It may not be realistic or possible for all the things we are speaking about in this conversation to be held by the whole American field. It's more likely that they can be held in different little corners of the field where there's a sense of mutual respect and trust, mutual ability to be with complexity, especially with those who have a good enough

connection with their own ancestors. I don't have all of the answers about it, but what we are speaking about has an effect on all of our children. Our children represent the way forward. If we cannot find ways to acknowledge, own and speak about these hidden truths, our children pay the price.

Kate: Yes, while I wasn't there for the whole conference, I wondered how were we planning to hear the voices of the ancestors of the people from America, both the Native American and the immigrant ancestors?

When Belvie Rooks spoke, I wondered if perhaps it was still too painful to hear from the ancestors of the people who populated this country: the Native Americans whose land was taken; those who were enslaved and forced to leave Africa in chains; the Asians and Europeans who were often forced by hunger and poverty to leave their homelands to find work here; all of those who out of their own need and trauma often took more than they gave, and the ones who came to this land with the movement of 'going toward' without 'fleeing from'? How were we going to hear from them, from those parts of ourselves?

Lisa: One of the greatest unacknowledged truths in the US is that the country was created out of disconnection from family through immigration, attempted genocide of Native Americans, slavery and disconnection from family. They are all woven into the map of America's soul. In this country we live in a culture of fragmented family structure. The greatest gift we can give our children is to tend to these histories behind us so that we break the pattern of passing this task on to the next generation.

Kate: What you are describing points to how the fractured and fragmented family structure that is so central to the American psyche has, I believe, resulted in our becoming a nation of organisations. In organisations, boundaries and structures are there by choice. They're not there by blood. We can much more freely exclude people from organisations. In this country, life centres more around our work and organisational identities than it does around our family connections.

Lisa: In the US we create organisations, groups to belong to, out of disconnection within our own family membership group. We know in our souls how groups

provide belonging, so we have created an enormous map of surrogate groups to belong to. Yet there can be no replacement for knowing where we belong in our on ancestral blueprints.

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Kate: The structures and traditional practices of these organisations and groups that we belong to are the carriers of our intentions. They are the places where our history unconsciously slips in to mix with our conscious intentions. For example: in my experience as an organisational psychologist, big conferences are very difficult to put on. Someone has to make a deal with the hotel to cover the costs of the conference rooms, lodging, meals, etc. At that point, money becomes an important concern. How are participants attracted so that the organisers don't have to pay the hotel out of their own pockets? Who will people pay a fee to be with and listen to?

When individuals are risking a lot of money in service to the community, it may bring up their own family histories, their immigration here, and their relationship to the history and business practices of this country, and so enters the history of our families and their immigration here. The historical business practices of entrepreneurship that underpin capitalism in this country inevitably make their way into a conference about constellations.

Another example is the traditional ways we set up chairs and sound systems in large auditoriums. On the one hand this is a very practical way of helping everyone to see and hear. On the other hand this seating arrangement has vestiges of colonial, western military, and educational structures within it. When you walk into a room where the chairs are all lined up facing a stage with a podium you instantly know who is in charge and to whom you should be listening. How do we know when we are honouring indigenous people's wisdom in this arrangement versus embedding their offerings as performance within a western construct? The large events at the Seattle conference used this seating arrangement in the same way every other conference I have ever been to uses this design.

There is no reason the Seattle conference should have done it differently, except that now, in hindsight we have the opportunity to reflect on how the design of our gatherings makes visible our unconscious histories. We have an opportunity to consider meeting and conference designs that might better support our intentions.

Lisa: Right. And what you're speaking about is a universal phenomenon. It's not personal to the Seattle constellation conference.

Kate: Absolutely. It would be easy to just hold the leaders and designers of this or any conference responsible for these blind spots, but we participate in all these structures and business practices through our payment in fees and our participation.

Lisa: You're raising points about the relationship between trauma, business, family, and gender, and how once you set up the organisation and the structure there's a chicken and egg dynamic. The structure gets created out of trauma but then the structure itself perpetuates it, too. Indigenous wisdom refers to wisdom that is grounded, rooted in a particular region, belonging to place. For example, it was a

blessing for there to be recognition of some of the local tribes on the opening day of the conference. Yet this wisdom lives in all people – not just in those with Native American, Maori, Mayan heritages, the indigenous people featured at the conference. What we don't see is that there can be a tendency in western culture to either deny or deify these kinds of heritages, particularly among people with primarily European ancestry. Both ways are their own kind of trance. Without intending to do so, when those of us with

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European ancestry deify this wisdom whilst remaining cut off from the European indigenous strength of our own ancestries, this can be another kind of 'taking' in resonance with the original colonial movement.

I had a conversation recently about Bert Hellinger and his early years in this field. I feel

grateful to have worked with him and many other European constellation facilitators on multiple occasions. Hellinger was riveted by the perpetrator/ victim bond, the need for post WWII reconciliation. And so the constellations in Germany were, over and over again, about setting up constellations of this victim/perpetrator bond.

In the US field, we don't want to see the perpetrator energy in our American history, in all of our ancestors. WWII is just a blink of an eye; it's recent history. In the US we have a 400 to 500 year back-log of unacknowledged perpetrator/victim experience on this land, complicated and enriched by our immigrant history. The formation of this country and our American consciousness were founded on disconnection from family. That is quite a history. It's a very worthy history for all of us to open our hearts to. The difficult inheritance of these trauma bonds on this soil, and the disconnection from family are the source of the deepest wounds in this country, as well as resources for the greatest healing.

Kate: You're reminding me of one of the break-out sessions. Belvie Rooks and Eimear O'Neill shared their conversation with one

another about their African and Irish ancestry in their session: *'Sisters of the Hearth: Irish and African American, Honoring the Ancestral Call'*. Belvie thought that slavery and oppression started in Africa and early in their friendship asked Eimear how her people could do what they did to Belvie's ancestors. Eimear essentially replied: "Well, we had been enslaved and oppressed for a long time. We had many years to learn the methods of oppression that we used on others."

What you are making me realise with your chicken and egg comment is that it is the trauma of the loss of family that often goes into creating a perpetrator who is willing to take other people from their families, as in the form of slavery. The frozen grief around the loss of family that occurred with so many immigrants makes us in turn willing to kill others, take land and split families apart. When the loss of family goes unrecognised, we can fail to recognise how hard the heart becomes. We think only to survive ourselves, and pretty soon the survivor becomes the oppressor.

The loss of family, and the resulting survivor mentality that emerges can create a perpetrator. It is hard to acknowledge our perpetrator

side, however, because being victims of loss, we continue to experience ourselves as victims, and so we preserve our innocence. In addition, whether we are fighting the revolutionary war or a war in another country, we tell the story of ourselves as liberators, freedom fighters, heroes. Through this image of ourselves as Americans we preserve a false sense of innocence. This makes it very difficult for us to own and take responsibility for being the perpetrator. It is very hard to hold victim and perpetrator together within ourselves.

Lisa: Yes, the false innocence. It's one of Hellinger's tremendous gifts to us in his articulation about group conscience and the guilt and innocence in membership groups.

Claiming the perpetrator energy in our American lineages somehow goes against the rules of our American citizenship membership group. We maintain our innocence by excluding the perpetrator.

Feeling innocent and belonging in our American membership group has historically also meant staying in disconnection with immigrant homelands. When someone migrates to the US they are required to take the

following Oath of Allegiance in order to become an American citizen: *I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty, of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen.*²

We know deeply from the constellation field, but more so from the lives of recent immigrants, that while you can move from one country to the next in body and on paper, often a part of the soul remains in the home country. These are invisible truths that can block Americans' ability to access the indigenous wisdom within their own ancestries.

The role for me in terms of gender, women, and the place for women's voices around what we're talking about is essential. While we are seeing some shift in the gender of our leaders, up to this point they have, for the most part been men. Men from all lineages have paid such a heavy price in war. Now is the time for women's voices to be heard around this history, out of respect and gratitude for the heavy price that men have paid. More men have killed than women. There is a heavy burden, a heavy price for killing. Our sons, brothers, fathers, husbands, grandfathers, who have gone to war carry an often

unspeakable heaviness in their souls from that experience, and at the same time all men, women and children in all families experience the trauma and grief of war.

Kate: We as women have to figure out a way to claim our voices, because the dilemma of how to support and be supported by men who have gone through this puts us in the position of either silencing ourselves (thinking silence is support), lambasting them to get them to understand and see, or blaming them and making them wrong while we remain innocent. None of these methods work. So I don't quite know what the solution is, but women need to find their voices in a way that is clear, truthful and supportive.

Lisa: I am really reminded of the connection between the individual and the collective in our conversation. It's one of the key things we need to remember. Constellations enable us to feel and experience ourselves and our family history not just as individuals, but also as part of a collective. In part, that is where we can access the strength needed to see the difficult truths and release what is waiting to be released in terms of trauma. Colonialism cannot be looked at fully as an individual. It's a

collective movement.

Collective movements require groups to be with one another to look together at what needs to be seen. They require those of us with white skin, claiming the indigenous wisdom in our European roots, not only to unfreeze grief as a source of strength, but to face the difficult truths around our colonial history.

Kate: Yes, I went to two sessions at the conference that allowed me to experience different aspects of our colonial history. In the session I went to regarding Irish and African ancestry, I was able to get in touch with perpetrator energy and what that feels like. My experience was a feeling of being very cold, isolated, and having great difficulty connecting or wanting to connect. People wanted to comfort me but it didn't help. At that point there were only two men in that entire circle. There was a comment noting that all the men except two had left the session, and another comment about the role that men usually take in relationship to women. I was reminded of something a friend and teacher had said: "Many men have killed so women could eat in innocence." I felt as if I was standing as a representative for the 'killing and taking' roles that men

have typically had in wars and genocides.

Is there a conscience group of constellation facilitators, and how does it vary from country to country?

Representing the perpetrator brought to mind my own history growing up in Alaska in the 1950s. My parents were there as kind of a second wave of colonisers. They were there around the time all the institutions fell into place – school systems, the churches, the health systems – always to serve ‘progress’ of course, but with little thought about the fact that the shift in language meant that grandparents and grandchildren could no longer communicate with one another, or that with grocery stores and a cash economy, the role of the hunter was shifting, etc. I was a child in a wave of colonisers, both innocent and guilty. While I wasn’t there by choice, I absorbed the coloniser energy of the place. It feels awful, but it’s very hard to understand and figure out how to work with the coloniser/perpetrator role.

The only thing that allows me to do so is to simply stand and be responsible. That is the way of it. The past cannot be changed. Guilt doesn’t help a lot, nor remorse, nor asking the other person to be responsible for forgiveness. That is probably where the deep sense of isolation came from in that session. When others in that conference session came to comfort me, it wasn’t helpful. It made me feel as if I was in it alone: the only one guilty and responsible. The ending of that event felt a little ragged to me. We had tapped into something very deep. Holding both parts of ourselves and our ancestry, the victim and the perpetrator, is not easy work.

When I left, I went to another session: *Tending the Soil: the Facilitator’s Relationship with Reconciliation in America’s Soul*, which was also a very large constellation with many people in it. We were invited to stand either on the side of the room that represented the old country, the European countries we had emigrated from, or on the other side of the room, representing the new land we had emigrated to. I found myself on the new side, standing in the place where I was able to look both forward and backward. I could hear the screaming and the wailing and the desperation of

lost loved ones and deaths as they went across the sea and all of those other pieces that emerged in the constellation. I felt the strain of the crossing and the loss of family and home in my legs and knees. I found that I could hear it, I could listen to it, I could see the history, and in seeing and taking in the history I was able to look forward. It was really an amazing experience. I found that, as I was looking out of the window at all the people passing by, I was drawn to all of the busy-ness out there in the world. It felt like a fabulous distraction from the history, from the moaning, the anger, the tears, and all the loss that was behind me. Directly in front of me, on a chair, was a musical instrument. I found that the music was what enabled me to remember, to hold the truth about the history, and to be responsible. I was struck by the fact that the possibility for music that was in that instrument enabled the remembering, the looking back and the responsibility, and the busy-ness on the street was inviting because of its ability to distract me from the history. The experience was both healing and helpful for me to understand what was required to stand in responsibility and to hold both the looking back and the going forward.

Lisa: With gratitude for the conference that just took place, I also look forward to creating future ones that focus on the kind of responsibility you're referring to and ways of being with the complex histories of this land. I invite others to join me in working with their own family legacies, resonances, shadows, with their ancestral homelands, tribes, faith traditions, in context of the American landscape; to constructively work with inheritance of European disconnection and guilt; to experience ancestral strength as a resource for reconciliation of postslavery and post-colonial trauma; and to open their hearts to ways in which the American constellation field is influenced by US history.

I often sense a deeply systemic avoidance of US history's most difficult truths. We need one another; we need to be together in order to ask and answer such questions as: How do we hold and acknowledge the 'takings' and the perpetrator in our US history and energy field? To whom do we look for support? Where do we find the resources to acknowledge the difficult truths in American history? How can we see the ways in which we exclude the perpetrator to protect our innocence and our

right to belong? And looking beyond the US at the wider field, is there a conscience group of constellation facilitators in each country and culture, and how does it vary?

Kate: Yes, I'm grateful that the conference prompted us to have this conversation today, and I look forward to continuing it with others from all lineages in the series we are convening in 2014.³

Lisa: Likewise, I trust that those who have permission and a 'good enough' support from their own ancestors will be just the right ones to join us. I am hopeful about providing an embodied setting in which to disentangle the relationship between belonging, ancestry, race, and power. It's a gift to make a home for these images from the soul. I have a feeling that this conversation, in some form, is deep inside all of us. Everything that happened at the conference is a part of me; everything that didn't happen, that's a part of me, too. It's all in contact with spoken and unspoken, blind and awake love, and histories that we've all inherited. In the end, thank you again that our conversation reminds us: we all belong.

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Notes:

1. See full conference website for details about all sessions referred to in this article at <http://constellateus.com/conference2013sched/>
2. <http://www.uscis.gov/us-citizenship/naturalization-test/naturalization-oathallegiance-united-states-america>
3. 'An Embodied Conversation with the Internalized Colonizer'. <http://familyconstellationswest.com/internalized-colonizer-series/>



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