

Research & Development

Art Therapy and Constellation Work

Ursula Gubler-Lanz



Ursula Gubler-Lanz grew up in a working class family, being the youngest of three daughters. As a teacher in primary school, she took a great interest in what really nourished and empowered children, especially children carrying a burden with them. Her training as a therapist working with shapes, colours and sounds gave her access to the rich imaginary world of the soul. Since 1986 she has been working with children, adolescents and adults, helping them to find their way towards resolution of the problems in their lives. In addition she works as a supervisor, and in 2013 she gained her newly-created Federal Diploma in Art Therapy. She is married with two sons and a new granddaughter.

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Abstract: In this article, I am attempting to show how I combine Art Therapy and Constellation Work to give an external form to the internal images and perceptions of my clients, with a view to helping them expand their horizons and their capabilities. I present the two methods: Art Therapy and Constellation Work, and show how I apply and then combine them. In the therapeutic process mental images take on an external form. Structured situational depictions and the viewing thereof from literally different standpoints expand the individual scope of life.

1. Bridges and Transitions

A bridge connects two separate areas. This may mean for each side a broadening of horizons, an exchange and a stimulation. In both art therapy and constellation work, imagery forms a bridge between the inside and the outside. In Constellation work, new images create bridges between internal ideas and parts of the self as well. In being able to visualise previously unseen aspects, the client

finds some movement, which can clarify, soften and help to resolve their emotional enmeshments. In this way fixed opinions can change, fears can be reduced, hopes can gain powerful momentum and longings turn into projects. In the following article I want to show how I bring these two approaches together, when working individually with people.

2. My Access to Systemic Constellation Work

I had been working a long time as an art therapist when a friend made me aware of the Constellation method. With a critical interest, I attended constellation seminars and read everything I could find about this method: First of all, I read all about Bert Hellinger's work, and later the writings of other authors. What deeply impressed me about this method was

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the language of images coming from the imaginary realm of the soul. In countless constellation experiences with different facilitators, I have gained valuable insights about myself and the many systems in which I am involved. Like a piece of dough, I was softly kneaded into the roles as representative, so that my opinion of what was right or wrong slowly evaporated. At the same time, my perception of the outcome became more finely tuned and I began to see how real the systemic connections were. My husband and I completed the training in Systemic Constellation Work with Sneh Victoria Schnabel in Freiburg, Germany. Ever since, we have been offering Systemic Constellation groups (www.aufgestellt.li).

Even in my work as an art therapist, I am including more and more of my experience and knowledge of the systemic background. Then I came across the book: *'Im Bilde sein'* (*Entering Inner Images*) of Madelung/Innecken (2006), which was exactly what I had been looking for. It gave me the courage to find my own way. Instead of working with representatives, I started to work with coloured papers. They are placed on the floor and depict the different aspects of a system and give it an external form. The chosen colours of the papers, as well as their distance from each other characterise the picture (Fig. 1). Depending on the concerns of the seeker, the individual sheets of paper symbolise members and their place in the family system, issues of everyday life or in the professional field, body organs or personal internal interests (e.g. doubt, fear, hope, drive, the inner child, etc.).

After the client and I have observed the constellation together, we discuss and exchange our impressions. I then ask the client to stand on the various papers and to focus on his/her perception. This then determines the further course of events.



Fig. 1

Such a layout of papers is like a painting which can be altered by the client. Once the composition is created, as in any constellation, the real work begins. Step by step (also in the literal sense) the seeker reaches a visible and tangible experience. Oscillation between the individual positions permits the integration of different perspectives or indicates where fears and obstacles are. The different papers can be moved. If necessary, more can be added. Sometimes I work with the meta-level (see Madelung/Innecken 2006, p.52). This is a neutral place, usually at some distance from the image, which allows an inner distance and an overview of the depicted situation. I constantly experience that

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from this angle/standpoint the view is expanded and judgements become obsolete, so that every revelation may stand on its own. If the person enters a defined position, surprising perceptions of the body or ideas may surface and influence the ongoing process. For example on the site of a power source, an immediate change in the body can set off a positive impact on overall well-being. The person concerned might feel quite light-headed, or experience warmth in their heart, or feel firmly rooted with a wider perspective. Just as in the role of a representative, our perceptions are leading the way in the Constellation work. The effect of this perception can be greatly enhanced if it is possible to grasp the essence in a brief but precise sentence. If this sentence hits exactly the point, there is a long-term effect and it will trigger the next steps in development. Sometimes detours are necessary to reveal the causes of distress or pain. If dark events can be seen in a larger context, the re-discovered resources can help the client to thaw frozen and split-off feelings and re-integrate them.

3. Case Study: Resource Constellation using Ground Anchors

Mrs. D. came to see me to find a bearable way to deal with her history of abuse. She and her younger sister had endured sexual abuse from their older brother. In the therapeutic process, she worked intensively with her strengths and skills and tried to find a new self-image. In various contexts of life, and at work, she managed to gain attention, to address unpleasant issues and to propose problem-solving solutions. She was taken seriously, her achievements were noticed and she felt validated. But she was plagued by panic attacks. One day Mrs. D. reported that she was waking up at night because she was hearing unusual noises. She suddenly felt the horror and fantasy that her brother might break in. During our session, she placed papers representing the

various resources (*Fig. 2*), named them and chose particular colours:

- Mrs. D. as a little girl – yellow
- Mrs. D. as an adult – light grey
- Her strength – red
- Her hope – light green
- A friendly family – pink
- Animals – purple
- Nature – brown
- Spirituality – light blue and turquoise (four sheets)

She stood on some of the coloured papers and felt increasingly quiet and safe. She took some distance from the process, during which she realised that at night she had been succumbing to the fear of the child who had not been able to put up a fight against her brother. She chose out of my collection of figurines, an ideal mother figure who would be able to protect her child, and a butterfly, which was for her a symbol of metamorphosis and beauty. The image of her present safe situation and the re-experience of supportive forces, clearly relaxed Mrs. D. In our conversations she realised that relapses were part of the process. We explored together the idea that suffering and pain can seem to take us right to the edge, but it may also send us off in search of what helps and heals.



Fig.2

4. Constellation Work combined with Art Therapy

In some individual sessions I combine approaches from family constellations with art therapy. This is a similar approach to that presented by Barbara Innecken, which she calls: 'Neuro-imaginative Shaping' (cf. Madelung/Innecken 2006, p.19).

Once I have heard the concern of my client and have their agreement to do a constellation, I ask them to find with their non-dominant hand, colours and shapes for individual aspects of the constellation. If a right-handed person is encouraged to paint with the left hand, it is much easier to waive the need to make a 'beautiful' picture. The drawings tend to be more childish and simple, but also deeply expressive. Normally spontaneous

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representations are created in a short time. To view certain issues from different angles, I propose sometimes to work with the following four aspects and present them symbolically: the body, the mind, the emotions and spirituality. This idea I have taken from Sebastian Seidler in connection with constellation work in groups. An individual constellation benefits from a situation where the various aspects are designated symbolically. We can recognise clearly different parts in ourselves and can observe how they sometimes block, devalue, support or complement each other. These images are then placed on the floor the same way as the coloured papers. The client then gradually stands on each of these images. Here I want to mention

again how impressive it is when direct, physical contact with an image actually changes the perception of a person, almost immediately. Obviously it makes a difference whether I look at a picture I have painted from a distance or if I stand on it (the image is protected by a transparent paper). However, the success of this method can differ sharply from client to client. Individual differences need to be considered of course.

5. Case Study of a Constellation using Inner Images

Mrs. R. has been with me in therapy for some time. She has an older brother who was born with spina bifida and is paralysed from the navel downwards and therefore confined to a wheelchair. This fact influenced the whole family history. Mrs. R. had to be a very reasonable little girl. She learned early to ignore her own needs and help her mother, who had to cope with a huge workload. One day Mrs. R. came to therapy with a bad cold, headache and cough. She painted this discomfort (*Fig.3*) and said: "The round shape in the middle looks like a bud. From below flames are licking up. At the top of the paper are hanging icicles. The one in the middle pierces the apex of the bud."



Fig.3

Now we add to it the four configurations (*Fig. 4*) for spirituality, body, emotion and mind. Mrs. R. first selects the place of the emotion and reports what she sees facing the bud: "The bud needs to get out of the fire quickly. If it burns, it's over." On the drawing of the body, she says: "No, not that as well. I am totally exhausted." On the drawing of spirituality she says: "There are many helping forces. I did not know. Also, the headache is now barely noticeable."

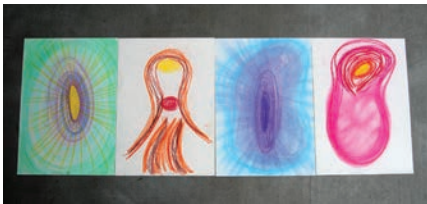


Fig.4

She leaves out the place of the mind. In the following conversation Mrs. R. recognised that she pushes herself beyond her own limits over and over again and ignores any warning signs. She knows this is a pattern. In an earlier session Mrs. R. had painted a picture of the healing power. She now adds it (yellow sun with white centre, (*Fig.5*) and stands on it. She immediately feels better.



Fig.5

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Although her feeling of well-being changed only for a short time, the physical awareness remains. There is not just a new opportunity in sight, but her own awareness actually changes. The next steps are to figure out how these different impressions are related. In the meantime, Mrs. R's overall well-being has changed. She has started to consider what strategies she could develop to take better care of herself. Some of her ideas were: to take timely breaks, carve out time for herself, not be always available and look for suitable forms of meditation. Mrs. R. was able to take these impulses seriously and gradually implemented them. She now leads a more stable life compared with her life two years ago.

6. Final Thoughts

I experience time and again how everything takes its own course, even the process towards maturity. We therapists can identify interconnections and assist the client to gain confidence and build trust in their own development. When ground-breaking images emerge during therapy sessions, my role seems to me like that of a midwife. However, the decisive changes happen in secret. Sometimes they show up as a new warmth in the

heart: the eyes of the person starting to glow again, the stride more upright, the voice stronger and an inner presence felt. At those moments I know I have chosen the right professional path.

REFERENCE:

Madelung, E. and Innecken, B. (2006) *Im Bilde sein*, Carl-Auer-Systeme Verlag, Heidelberg, Germany. (eng. trans. 'Entering Inner Images')

Note:

All photos taken by the author and published, with written permission from the clients.