

# Making the Invisible Visible

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*If we go down into ourselves, we find that we possess exactly what we desire – Simone Weil*

## Semiotics

Late one night a bat flew into the large hall where a group of us were meeting before a night-long ceremony with our South American curandero friends. It flew once around the room in a wide circle then flew back into the night. The shaman asked me, “What does it mean?”

Perhaps, for the shaman, the bat was a portent, perhaps he was testing me, to discover what meaning the bat might have for me. I suggested that the bat was a beautiful creature of the night – the spirit of the night – paying respects to the people who had travelled so far to join us for this ceremony.

Semiotics recognizes that all the images, symbols, and forms that make up our every-day experience are as specific and meaningful as words and language. Our world is infused with the meanings and nuance of a myriad images. Some of them have been with us for millennia, while others enter our collective consciousness through art, through the forms of nature, through commercial branding, or simply through repetition in the media.

A bat of course, is just a bat, but through continuous human contact with them, bats, like countless other animals, plants, landscapes, objects, and events, have taken on a wealth of meanings and associations.



## Systems, Family, and Organizational Constellations

Imagine you are standing in a room with three, or four, or more people who have agreed to represent elements of your life. They represent family members if you are doing a Family Constellation. They represent the chosen role you have designated for them if you are doing an Organizational Constellation for your organization or business; or they may simply represent aspects of your inner experience or life-path.

You direct your representatives to stand in an arrangement that expresses your current idea of how your ‘system’ works, how the various elements are situated in relation to each other. Each representative has already agreed to trust their intuition and put aside any story they may have about you or the issues you are addressing. They may not even know who or what they are representing. Then they move as they are inspired to. Their positions may continue to change as the Constellation proceeds. The facilitator may ask them to speak, and to express their relationship to others in the system. You, as the client, simply observe. Later you may be brought in to interact with various representatives of your system under the guidance of the facilitator.

No two constellations are the same. Some last for a few minutes, some last for an hour. What is common to all Constellations is that any system changes when it is illuminated by an external representation of itself.

The scientific fundamentalism that has pervaded our thinking for the past several centuries and which has come to be accepted in the dominant culture as the *de facto* 'truth' would declare that a bat is simply a winged rodent, driven by basic instincts.

But a tension exists between our mechanistic explanation of the world and the reality of our associative consciousness that has absorbed the richness of mythological and semiotic meaning.

An indigenous shaman divining whether it is auspicious to conduct a ceremony, might have very specific associations for a bat, or a snake, or a tree growing in a certain way, or a pattern in the clouds. That's how divination works. It's also how semiotics works. We make meanings, and from those meanings we derive a context-specific reality, a truth.

"We are meaning-making machines," says Richard Bandler, the co-creator of NLP. We are continually extrapolating meanings from our experience. We have to, in order to make sense of it all. If we didn't, the world would be an incomprehensible soup of random pieces of unrelated information.

Neurologically speaking, we're wired to make patterns. It's how our brains make intelligible images from the fragmented bits of information it receives from our eyes and our visual cortex. It's how we organize memories, thoughts, sounds, tastes, smells, and the wealth of somatic occurrences, all within the dynamic neural network that we construct and experience as our senses, our bodies, our life.

In fact, the world as it is experienced, might best be described as a vast neural network whose principal function is to make patterns.

No wonder then, that we sometimes get our wires crossed, or compromise ourselves with outdated or inadequate information. No wonder, given our propensity for seeking what is familiar and safe, that most of us resist change of any sort, and avoid disturbing the patterns by which we have comfortably interpreted the world, and our experience of it, for a lifetime.

Interestingly, the participants in any constellation also experience change. Something shifts in the collective energetic field. Accessing hitherto unseen information has the effect of activating our capacity for new insight into our own life, whether we are the client, the representative, the facilitator, or an observer.

It may sound like magic, but it is only magic in the sense that it reveals how quickly, deeply, and effectively change can take place when we make the family, organizational, or personal system visible.

### Everything's connected Everything's alive Everything matters

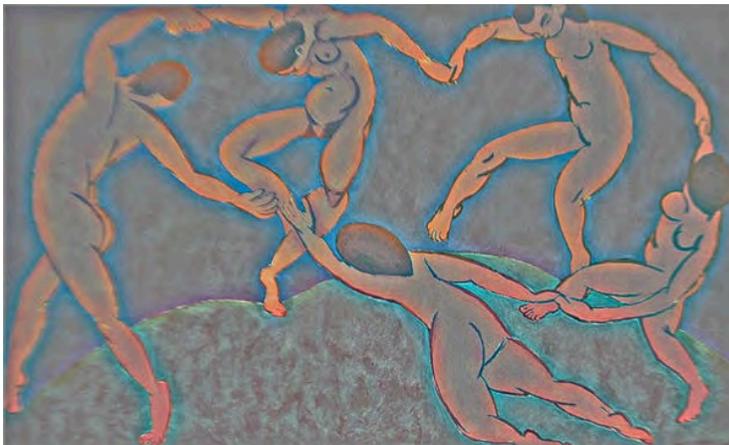
When people ask us what informs our work we say, "Everything's connected, everything's alive, everything matters."

We are informed by the truth that everything is part of an integrated whole: our thoughts, our experience, the people who cross our path, the stories we project onto our lives, the shadows we try to exclude, our fears, obsessions, regrets, ambitions, joys, creativity, memories .. everything!

Everything is part of the intimacy we call life, and as such is worthy of our attention. More than that, it demands our dispassionate awareness if we are to become whole. When, out of fatigue or fear, we exclude part of that system we call life, we diminish ourselves and everything around us, and we pay the price with our suffering.

This tension between the mechanistic-rationalist worldview, and our ability to transform what appears before us into archetypal representations, is exactly why constellations are effective. It opens a door to a part of our psyche which has laid dormant for generations. It's as if we hunger for a pretext to open to the realm where we can make fresh meanings about our life, where we can see with fresh eyes, where we can understand something about what 'we know but don't yet know that we know', where we can trust our intuition.

The new meanings may be as fragile and unverifiable as a cloud in the sky foretelling the future, or as the diviner's cards thrown down on the table, but that doesn't make them any less true or useful. Perhaps their fleeting evanescence makes them all the more real, by reflecting the chimera-like nature of the world.



## Heuristics

Heuristics is discovering the solution to a problem by looking for it in places you never imagined you could find it.

Open a book, put your finger randomly on a word, then use that word to guide you as you write your speech, or start the awkward conversation you've been avoiding, or begin that difficult project.

'Trusting your gut'

'First thought, best thought'

'Forget everything you think you know about this situation'

– are also forms of heuristics.

Human beings are gifted with a capacity for life-altering insight. We are not broken, even though we may invest in the idea that we are.

Constellation work is a way to help you *know what you already know, but don't yet know that you know it*.

Which is why whenever we facilitate a Constellation, we, and the clients we work with, are astounded by the incredibly rapid shift they experience in their perception of their life, and of their so-called problem.

### Two reasons we are blocked from solving our problems:

- We imagine that the changes we need to make are complex
- We imagine that because we've taken a long time getting to where we are, it will take a long time to get out.

Experience is always in the present moment. Thinking concocts a complex chronology to reinforce the illusion of trauma reactivated over time. But that's thinking, not experience. What if you cut through thinking and go straight to the rich tapestry of experience in this moment to uncover your capacity for new awareness, perception and healing in the moment?

We imagine that we can't change the past, that we can only influence the future. The opposite may be closer to the truth. The past is exactly what we **can** change. It's never too late to have a happy childhood! – because we can change our perception of it. And we can, more easily than we often accept, convert trauma to learning, resistance to gratitude, and acceptance and fear to joy and love.

If you have a problem which is abstract, or if your understanding is unclear, look for another problem that is more specific and use it as a clue on how to proceed.

Draw a picture, or a map, to represent a situation you don't fully understand yet.

If you have a problem that can be represented by two individuals, choose two people in a crowd, at a shopping center perhaps, or in a bar. Watch how they move and stand, how they interact with each other.

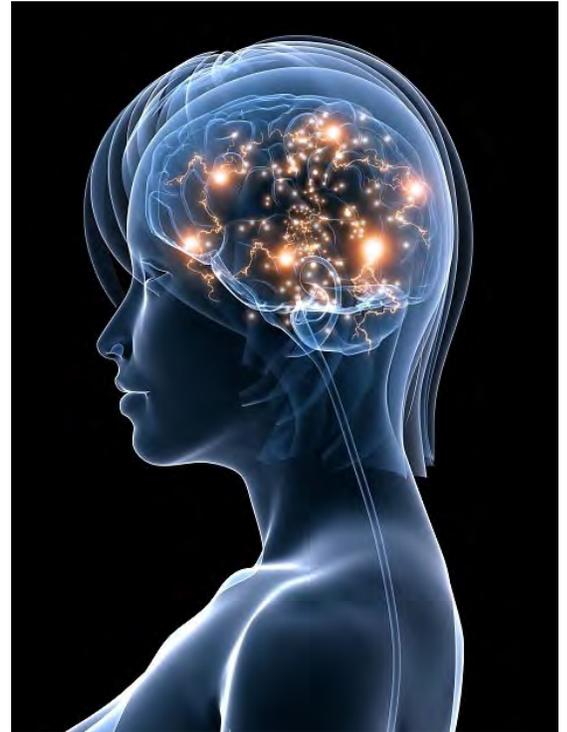
Heuristics can be a Constellation. Constellations are heuristic.

We imagine that the world is more linear, more coherent, more bounded by fixed rules, less interconnected than it is. We assume that our problems are unique and specific to us. Imagine that we spend our lives representing different elements within countless constellations, for countless others. Imagine that the parts we play, while unknown to us, may be as essential to those in whose systems we serve as the air they breathe. While we, unbeknownst to ourselves, help them navigate their way through the mystery of their lives?

## Tarot de Marseilles

Typically, a Tarot card reader will ascribe specific meanings to each card, and give fixed meanings to each position in any given spread, then read the cards as if they were a parrot or a robot.

Originally, the Tarot was a game, *le jeu de Tarot*. It was a game of free association, improvised meanings, lots of puns. In parts of Europe where the old ways persist, or among a few of us who learned and hold to those ways, the cards are used like words in a sentence. The cards are placed one at a time on the table and the reading continues for as long as the cards are put down – *un tirage en ligne*.



### ***I sent this in an email:***

“The system is alive. Our ancestors are not dead but live on, in us, through us, through the system which we call our life. And of course, until we learn to fully acknowledge them, honor them, grieve them, respect them, they will get up to no end of mischief. Sometimes, some of the things we feel are the most unfortunate circumstance in our life, may just be our ancestors, trying to get our attention. If you haven't worked on this level, then these words may sound fantastic, bizarre, superstitious, unrealistic. But when you start working in this realm, you will understand that they are true.”

### ***I received this reply:***

I'm from Puerto Rico. I grew up honoring our ancestors, it is part of our culture. My dad passed years ago. I serve my dad his coffee every morning – just like he liked it and ask for his blessings.

I've heard that some of the old Romany readers will sometimes use all 78 cards in the deck, and weave an entire story, though I've found that five or six cards can be enough for a useful reading.

It begins with a question from the client, the more specific the better. Then the cards are put down, and the interpretation is given, often as a single sentence. The *meaning* of the cards is derived from where they land in the sequence, how they relate to each other, the semiotics of medieval symbolism, the patterns they form together, the transitions that occur (three cups turn into four swords, the Hapsburg bird on the Empress's shield flies into the tree under a star-filled sky), and also with any associations that pop into mind – *first thought best thought*.

I have been using the Tarot as a form of constellation for many years. After laying down the cards in response to a client's question, I will speak my sentence, explain a little at how I arrived at it. I explain that the reading describes the situation as it is. Then I ask the client to rearrange the cards as they would like them, describing to them the new implications of this new ordering of the cards. Then, as with a constellation, I will return the cards to their original order and ask the client if there is one card they would like to move, or remove, from the spread – thus they make their first step towards the resolution or transformation of the system that the reading has shown to them.

My teacher asked me to lay down some cards with the question: **What am I good at?**



**My response:** XX – the call (Miles Davis often comes to mind here), XII – biding my time, XIII – then getting moving, getting through this stuff, 0 – gathering momentum, XVIII – (re)emerging

**My line:** I'm good at reinventing myself.

**My teacher's response:** For your trip down the Ancient Highway, the Journey starts with the call (and Miles called from a different galaxy that most), continues with meditation, past lives in other bodies now dead, tomfoolery with the Familiar, and ends under the Moonlight where there is no human voice to be heard. A perfect place to reinvent a self, if you still need one.

# La Medicina Sagrada

It began with a walking constellation. We saw them coming through the gate of our center – the curanderos and shamans from Colombia. Then there was a phone call. Then they arrived. They were here! And our lives changed forever.

The world I had constructed from the fragments of our collective fundamentalist-mechanical worldview unraveled, and something else took shape from things I had missed, ignored or rejected as too fantastic.

All the meditation, constellation work, hypnosis, psychology, NLP, and Psychomagic came to fruition in those dark nights of ceremony. Much of what I thought I understood well, I realized I had known only in the most superficial way.

- The mind-body is not our own, nor is it bounded in any of the ways we assume.
- It is possible to create a reality from any thought.
- Anything is accessible through thought and imagination.
- Tend to your thoughts wisely.
- Everyone you meet has something to teach you about the system you are part of.
- Treat them all with tenderness and love.



Sometimes, in ceremony, so many intangible beings appear that I have to keep my eyes closed. I prefer to feel them rather than to see them. I recognize that many of them have nothing to do with me. They are part of the constellated elements of others' lives, assembled there: spirits, demons, ancestors, guardian angels.

Once in the forests of the Amazon, within minutes of drinking the medicine, they streamed in. They leaned over our hammocks, ancient spirit-healers, from the trees, from the river, deeply curious, attending to us carefully, tenderly, studying the strangers from the north.

Once, sitting in a room in the city, oblivious to the noise of the police sirens and revelers on the street outside, *SHE* came. She came, in a dress made of intricate beadwork like the jewelry of indigenous people in the northern Amazon. Seven feet tall, she sat in front of me all night long. She said, "I will never leave you." Waves of joy, regret, delight, gratitude, sadness and love washed over me, all the emotions it is possible to feel. For the first time I felt myself to be part of this strange universe where I lived. I felt included, for the first time. I realized that until that moment I had never felt such a profound sense of inclusion.

"Remember, I'll never leave you," she said as she stood up at the end of the night to go. She smiled, "I'll never leave you," and ever since, wherever I am, I can call on her and she will be there, and I will know that I am included, in this world, in this universe, in any universe, in whatever situation or system I am part of at that moment.

*Is there anywhere to stand in this universe that is predictable and safe? We hope so. All our fundamentalist logical scientism has been an attempt to make it so. But profoundly useful as our logic and reason might be, it points to just a fragment of the way the universe plays itself out. As the Chaos Theory people would say, "If you could see what's behind your back at any moment, you'd see that all the so-called laws of the universe had been suspended. The apparent order you see in front of you has been organized for you by your brain."*