

## **Autonomy and connection within constellation work Netherlands 2007**

A few years ago Sandra, a colleague of mine, asked me for support in regard to a professional issue. She had already been struggling for a while to stay true to herself at work. Her behaviour towards superiors and colleagues was unstable. Sometimes she would be too familiar and then again distant and cold. Sandra had already had two previous constellations and made other attempts to clear this issue. But she had still not found a satisfactory solution. Her wish was to be able to stay centred.

At that time I was studying some books on new systemic and evolutionary sciences. Especially interesting were Ken Wilber's comments on his basic tenets (viz. Eros, Kosmos, Logos). Wilber describes "agenz and communio" as the most essential forces of systems. Regarding social systems we name these capacities autonomy and connection. A minor imbalance between them has sometimes proven not only necessary but also possible. However, should the balance not be restored over a period of time systems will deteriorate or dissolve.

Sandra's description reminded me of Wilber's statements. So I invited her to set up herself as well as her autonomy and her connection. The representatives had no connection to each other. Autonomy and connection were far away from Sandra's representative and looking outwards. They were looking at the father (connection) and at the mother (autonomy). Setting up the father and his autonomy and his connection as well as the mother and her autonomy and her connection showed amazing results. Sandra immediately understood how she had "offered" her autonomy to her father, who was very dependent and tried eagerly to adjust himself to his environment. And Sandra understood that she simultaneously "gave" her connection to her mother. Her mother was extremely independent to self-sufficient, yet introvert and distant towards other people.

A few months after the constellation, Sandra told me that the most important aspect of the constellation had been the "taking back" of these two qualities. When she could identify them as parts of herself she felt, as never before, deeply connected to her centre. The erratic behaviour seldom showed up again at work. However, by remembering the final image of the constellation she was able to immediately identify it and return to her centre.

Sandra's experience led me to explore these basic capacities of systems in more detail. When represented in constellations, I found they offer support and solutions to many subjects and issues. After a short introduction to autonomy and connection and speaking about some of the effects of their imbalance follows the constellation format in more detail.

### **"agenz and communio" (K.Wilber) as a navigation system**

Systems are based on the ability to retain their unity and on the ability to communicate with their environment. A system can only exist if it maintains its autonomy and individuality; if it can assert itself and protect its boundaries. If this is not possible it dissolves. The same applies to the other pole: systems (be they atoms, molecules, cells, organs, living beings, people, cultures, nations etc.) only survive if they perceive their environment and adapt and adjust to

the ‘others’, to their ‘companions’ at the same level. They function like a navigation system by connecting the inside and outside of systems. They balance the necessity of systems to maintain their boundaries and simultaneously to communicate and adapt with their environment.

### **Love thy neighbour as yourself**

Once Jesus disciples asked him which of his teachings were the most important for humanity. Of the two Jesus named, one is: Love thy neighbour as yourself (Mark 12, 31-33). I think already Jesus was introducing the healing quality gained from balancing autonomy (love yourself) and connection (love thy neighbour) within ourselves. Love thy neighbour as yourself.

In all social areas (individuals, families, organisations, institutions, groups, religious or political factions etc.) the balance between autonomy and connection plays a significant role. Helm Stierlin, the “father” of the Heidelberg School of Systemic Therapy, explains it with the concept of “related individuality” or “co-individuality”. Related individuality is a general principle, he says, which refers to a reconciliatory purpose given to all higher life forms and particularly to human beings. It requires, and simultaneously allows, increasing levels of individuality as well as increasing levels of relating. (Fritz B. Simon/Helm Stierlin (1984): The language of family therapy)

### **Imbalance between autonomy and connection**

An excess on either side dissolves a system instantly by destroying the ‘pattern of identity’. This applies to the growth of a plant in the same way as it applies to the growth of an organization or the patriarchy.

Understanding this basic need for balance between autonomy and connection led to the recognition that many symptoms/disruptions/problems within social systems are related to an imbalance of these two forces as even a moderate imbalance can cripple the whole system.

- Over-emphasized autonomy causes estrangement, isolation, rigidity, numbness or inner paralysis. Very often it involves an extreme withdrawal of the person, the family, the organization from any community. Over-emphasized autonomy is also visible in intimidating and patronizing behaviour. By suppressing the autonomy of others it can lead to power struggles, even to violence.
- With over-emphasized connection/adaptation the boundaries are less clear. It can lead to denial of responsibility and also to partial or complete loss of identity. We see this in family constellations when children ‘identify’ with partners, siblings or even the parents of their parents. In organizations these blurred boundaries are exhibited when superiors inappropriately become “mates” with their employees or the other way around.
- Often an over-emphasis on one side is connected to a hidden bond on the other side. As, for instance, with a young man who described himself as hugely disassociated and self-centred. And he thought about his behaviour towards his boss and colleagues as quite presumptuous. A constellation showed how deeply he was identified with his grandfather; nearly to the point of total fusion. The balance of both forces was redressed once he realised the fusion and could let go of the presumption resulting from this identification.
- The balance of autonomy and connection can often be established when the roles are divided between the members of the system. In particular this is sometimes visible in

couples. One partner represents autonomy, independence or freedom while the other one struggles to maintain the union. When seeking a solution through constellations it is helpful to represent both aspects for each partner. Often very subtle dialogues develop, presenting the partners with new visions for activities, changed internal and external responsibilities and duties within their relationship.

### **Autonomy and connection in constellation work**

Setting up these qualities clarifies conflicts between love and freedom, belonging and individualisation, separation and union, rights (agency) and obligations (communion), Yin and Yang, inner and outer navigation –just to name a few.

When these or similar subjects have been touched on in constellations for organizations, institutions, companies etc. it turned out to be extremely helpful to set up these two qualities. Very quickly they lead to unseen or unconscious issues. The imbalance, for instance, reveals unclear or unresolved situations from the start-up. Or it is connected with inappropriate belief systems and concepts which are no longer helpful. Or the orientation is unilateral, is overly focused on either internal or external issues.

When used for personal and therapeutic issues this format fits in - next to the points mentioned above - wonderfully with processes to find oneself, find one's centre.

As in the example with Sandra such constellations usually evolve in three steps:

- In the first step representatives for the client (focus), autonomy and connection are set up. Sometimes the 'movement' of all three creates a fine balance and gives the client deep insight in regard to both characteristics. Generally, however, the one and/or the other aspect is weak due to conceptual or ideological beliefs, biographical events, family ties, constrictions and loyalties.
- The second step uses a systemic level change as described in Structural Constellation Work. Structural Constellation Work offers tools (for example the so called "cataleptic hand") that allow the client to see and identify these entanglements and beliefs and to possibly dissolve them. This step clears and frees the qualities from layers that do not belong to them and makes them available for the client as resources.
- This new perspective leads the constellation into the third step and back to the qualities of autonomy and connection and to the movement that can now bring balance to the person. As the feedback shows this third step seems quite helpful and essential for the clients. As Sandra said, and also other clients very often mentioned, by remembering the final image of the constellation they were able to quickly recall it, to return to their centre and to withdraw from entanglements or inappropriate loyalties.

### **Autonomy and connection: an ongoing process**

Autonomy and connection are both equal and opposite tendencies. They are held as tension within a system, comparable to the tension between survival of the species and self preservation, rights and obligations, individuality and belonging, personality and community, autonomy and heteronomy, self determination and subordination. How can we live our wholeness and simultaneously be part of something bigger without sacrificing one for the other?

"This original polarity runs through all levels of manifestation and already finds its archetypal expression in the Taoist principles of Yin (communion) and Yang (agency)" (K. Wilber).

The constellation template of autonomy and connection reflects these basic resources. It usually leads to greater empowerment of the system and to an expansion of inner space due to these qualities. The balance between autonomy and connection is, however, not a place one

arrives at and then stays. It is founded in dialogue, from which it becomes evident that sameness rather than equality is relevant. Autonomy does not exist without connection. Neither does connection without autonomy.