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*Since 1995 he has focused on psychotherapeutic work, combining an interest in severe mental disorders such as psychosis and schizophrenia with a research-based interest in trauma processes and attachment theories. He does this through the use of the constellations method. He first came into contact with Bert Hellinger's work in 1994, which provided him with a means to explore these issues. He currently teaches at the Catholic University and facilitates workshops in Munich and in many other countries around the world. He also works with individuals in private practice. His second book in English translation, *Splits in the Soul - Integrating Traumatic Experiences*, is scheduled to be published in the autumn. Franz lives in Munich with his wife Juliane.*

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This interview took place in November 2009 during a workshop Franz was presenting for Vivian in London.

VB: Franz, this is a privilege for me, having been a student of your work since 2005 when you first came to England; so my initial question is something that always interests me with colleagues: how did you first come into contact with constellations work, and what was your initial experience of it?

FR: It was in 1994. I had left the Technical University where I had been doing research specialising in health and safety issues within organisations. I moved to the university where I now am, the Catholic University, as Professor of Psychology. It was a very quick change for me, from organisational psychology to developmental and clinical psychology, and I was confronted with the question of what to do in the lectures with the students.

VB: Was your original degree in Psychology?

FR: Yes, and then my PhD was in organisational psychology. I had always seen clients as a psychotherapist during that time, but I was more engaged in research with health and safety issues. The move to work within the domain of social work raised the question of how to proceed and what to offer students. So I became more interested in clinical psychology and developmental psychology. This was a time when I was open for new developments and I was trying to increase my psychotherapy practice. Then a friend of mine showed me Hellinger's book (*Love's own Truths*). My friend was a behavioural therapist, and he had noticed Hellinger's book and thought it looked interesting. And then a friend of my wife, Juliane was helping to organise a workshop with Hellinger at the University of Munich, and so I went along. This was my first contact, and initially I was impressed by the openness of the clients; that they were willing to expose their private problems in front of 200 or more people. In the beginning I was rather suspicious as to what was going on, and then Hellinger asked the audience if anyone wanted to be a representative and I stuck my up hand and I was chosen. I was so impressed with what was happening then. It seemed like something very important.

So I read all the books I could, and attended other workshops and constellations events.

Then I did my own constellation and experienced how deeply this changed something within

me. At the time I was in a dilemma about who to have a relationship with. I had never been able to feel settled with anyone; I always seemed to be looking for something else. On a professional level I was quite successful, but on the personal level I was definitely cut off and unable to be with just one person. This contact with constellations work and the 'orders of love' helped me understand what a good relationship could be. Before that I didn't seem to have any idea of how to do this. So it was also a starting point for me to develop myself personally.

VB: So what happened next?

FR: Well, I began to make better decisions about my relationships, and the constellation helped me to decide whom to be with, I have never regretted the decision I made because it was a grounded decision. I found out how necessary it was to be able to say 'yes' and 'no' clearly. So of course I started to run constellations groups, first with students at the university and then it grew very quickly.

VB: And at what point did you start getting interested in trauma?

FR: It was later. First I came to an understanding of bonding. In Hellinger's work he talks about bonding and relationships, but the terms were never clearly defined for me, and so I came into contact with the attachment work of John Bowlby¹.

VB: I suppose that your own experience of finding out how to make decisions about relationships must have played a part. This is a bonding issue isn't it?

FR: Yes. Exactly! I don't remember how I came to Bowlby's work, but it became very important to me, and the more I read his books, the more I understood what was going on in the constellation, and then very quickly I began to understand the role of trauma in the bonding process.

VB: So in attachment theory, the dysfunctional attachment would be traumatising.

FR: Yes, and what happens when you lose a bonding figure? As Bowlby describes it, with the loss of a bonding figure you see typical trauma reactions in the child: anxiety, anger, despair etc.

VB: So did your interest in trauma come through understanding disturbed bonding?

FR: No, it came later when I read Peter Levine's book². That was my first contact with anything about trauma processes. Next I saw Hellinger's development of his understanding of the movements of the soul; when you let the representatives move freely in their own way and express what they are feeling, often what they reveal are trauma feelings and symptoms.

VB: I think this was a very fundamental shift in constellations work - the shift to letting the representatives move by themselves and allowing whatever was there to come up.

FR: Yes, this made way for the trauma feelings to surface. Before that they were there, but were frozen and suppressed by survival mechanisms.

VB: And because the facilitation style was quite directive before, with moving the representatives around, there wasn't the space for these things to come up.

FR: Exactly, the movements of the soul allowed the space for these things to be there. I first saw this at a workshop in Linz in 1999, and from this moment on I only worked with these movements of the soul.

VB: Was this like a Eureka moment for you?

FR: Yes it was. To me it was clear and I couldn't go back to the traditional structured and directed constellations. It was very exciting for me. Also I had been chosen as a

representative in a constellation facilitated by Hellinger where this happened, I represented someone who had been hanged, maybe as a suicide. This also gave me the experience of being a representative with these kinds of strong trauma feelings coming up.

VB: So that explains something to me. When I first saw you work at that conference in 2004 in Wuerzburg I didn't know anything about your thinking on bonding and trauma, but what really impressed me was how you worked as a facilitator. There were three things that I noticed: firstly, that you left the constellation to its own devices rather than moving the representatives. Secondly, that you only introduced put something new if someone standing in the constellation had asked for it and thirdly, if any of the representatives said anything to you about what was happening, you asked them to say it to the relevant representative in the constellation, thereby continually directing the contact back to where it was needed. These things really impressed me.

While your book gives a very good and clear explanation of your thinking on bonding and trauma, what I missed a bit in it was a fuller discussion of your thoughts about constellations facilitation. I'd really like to hear you talk about that a bit more.

FR: I think that what I was looking for was a way in which something could be revealed by the constellation, so that the feelings of the client could have the space to be expressed. I was sure that this would be supportive of a healthy process. If these things could be allowed and shown by the representative, and if the client could also express whatever feelings he had, this would support a healthy process. So this acceptance of the client as he is has also been due to my being influenced by the work of Carl Rogers. This client-centred approach makes the client the authority of what is true and what happens. It doesn't help if the facilitator directs things. The client must be the one who shows what is going on, and the facilitator needs to try and help him do this using a Rogerian approach.

VB: So as a facilitator what would it be important for you to do, to make sure that this could happen?

FR: It is a non-directive way of facilitating; not doing something for the client that he should do himself. I was convinced that Rogers' direction was right.

VB: And that helped your development as a facilitator.

FR: Yes, my style developed as I understood more about trauma. So the more I recognised that the clients I was working with were traumatised, the more I understood that a non-directive style left them free to direct how things evolved for themselves. The non-directive style is only part of it; understanding trauma processes better and how to work with people so that they don't get re-traumatised is crucially important. The more you can understand that, the better you can work with traumatised people.

VB: And so along the way I know, because of things you have said in the workshops, you also began to look at your own trauma. You realised that you had a responsibility to look at that.

FR: Yes of course, that was essential. Today I know that my own trauma is a 'symbiotic trauma', as is the case for many of us.

VB: So one of the other things you talk about is the notion of 'trauma blindness', that we are all hard-wired to avoid the notion of trauma through our survival and deflective strategies, and if we work with clients, this may cause us to avoid their trauma too. So this must have become a very important part of your work.

FR: Yes, the more I understood trauma in my clients, the more I had to ask myself about my own trauma experiences.

VB: And would it be possible for you to say something about how you did that?

FR: I did my own work in my supervision group. I started the group in 1997 and it is still running, and I did some very important constellations in this group, and experienced the traumatic energies in myself. Of course at that time I didn't fully understand what was going on but it was very relieving and powerful for me.

VB: So I imagine that your process of exploring this work has been paralleled by your own personal work.

FR: Yes, it has clearly paralleled my personal process. Every step I was able to make personally had a great impact on my work with others. I am now convinced that you can teach people certain things, but if people don't address their own trauma then they have this blind spot. So for me it was very important to do my own work, and from this I learned more about trauma in others.

VB: This business of being willing to trust the constellations process is, I think, very challenging for us as facilitators.

FR: Yes it is quite different to the scientific approach I came from where we were always trying to define things and make rationalisations. It was as if I had to give up a scientific stance.

VB: Well, I think you are not so far from Hellinger in some of the principles that apply in your work, although you have a more scientific background and he has a more philosophical background that forms the basis of his thinking.

FR: Yes it was a struggle for me, because I developed some doubts about science.

VB: That's really interesting, because obviously your research into attachment and trauma has been quite scientific as well, and so it's quite contradictory; you have been paralleling the scientific approach with a trusting approach.

FR: Yes it was a challenging pathway to take: on the one hand with a traditional scientific approach and on the other finding a more spiritual way. Sometimes I think I sat between the two. I was no longer a scientist; I couldn't do that any more because I thought it was a lot of effort for very little results, years of interviews and research out of which came very little - a few facts and figures and formal data. And it wasn't clear how the empirical information was correlated with the theoretical information; for me it seemed like a waste of time and money. On the other hand, seeing that with constellations work you could get inside an area that other methods couldn't reach, that was what convinced me to stay with this work. But there was also the danger that like many others I could go too far down the spiritual and esoteric path. This was a big struggle within me for some years. Some of my colleagues accused me of no longer being a scientist. They said I had changed sides. And for some in the constellations community I was too scientific. So it was very difficult for me for some years. I didn't feel on safe ground. But even so I was convinced that I could work with people with constellations and continue learning.

VB: I think that perhaps your greatest contribution to the constellations field is your ability to hold both, because there has been little science-oriented research into the constellations method. I think you have made an extraordinary contribution to our field, providing scientific theory and still holding the constellations values.

FR: I needed to re-define science for myself. The constellations method is itself a method of research. That is how I re-defined it for myself.

VB: This is similar in the Gestalt field where the whole notion of diagnosis in re-ified terms is disliked, diagnosis being better understood in the here-and-now process of contacting and in the experimenting with something new in that moment.

FR: You learn via this process in this way, directly working with the issues that are immediately relevant. So for me it was important not to be too esoteric and spiritual, particularly by saying: "You never know what will come out of this."

I don't believe that we can look at something in the constellations without any prejudices or preconceptions - you always have preconceptions. It is an idealistic position to say that we know nothing and wait for what comes. So for me, it was similar to science where you may have ideas or hypotheses and you can test these in the constellation as an ongoing research.

VB: It's very tempting when you are new to something to take theories or ideas like The Orders of Love for instance and to try and fit the practice to these ideas, which I think a lot of us have done during our learning; I certainly have.

FR: Yes, in the scientific method you have a theory and you test it with an experiment and for me every constellation is an experiment – and then something is confirmed. But also in a good experiment there is always something new. Then you have to think about how this fits with what you know already. What can I understand from this new piece of information that makes sense of what I already know?

VB: So you have now taken us in the direction of the work that you are currently doing. Someone in the group today said to me that your work now is very distilled and I thought this was a good word for it because it does seem very refined. It appears to be oriented around what you call symbiotic trauma. Can you define for me what you mean by symbiotic trauma?

FR: What I learned from bonding theory is that we develop in contact mostly with the mother at first. The foundation of our psychological being is from our contact with our mother, even within the womb. This means that all of us are imprinted by what our mother is, and we cannot deny or reject it; this process just happens. It should be the case though, that after three or four years of being close to the mother you have had enough from her, and want to be more separate and your own person. Then the question for me was, why do we as adults, even sometimes into old age, still have trouble with our relationship process with our mother? Why is this the case?

VB: It's quite extraordinary when you think about it.

FR: Yes, even when the mother has been dead for many years, still the relationship with the mother is a concern. Firstly, I came to understand that a trauma experience causes the personality to split, and this split becomes frozen, staying exactly as it was when the trauma originally happened. This was clear but what I didn't yet fully know was why, if you looked at your own personally experienced trauma, it didn't change anything about the entangled relationship with the mother; it only dealt with the experienced trauma. My initial idea before this was that if someone looks at their own trauma then he or she would be free from this entangled process with the mother, but it isn't the case. I realised that it's the other way around, if someone is looking at their own trauma, say sexual abuse, they cannot really deal with this trauma until they have disentangled from the mother, until they have dealt with the trauma of bonding with the mother.

VB: So the bonding process itself triggers a prior trauma, which, if it is something like sexual abuse would also have a prior trauma - the fundamental trauma?

FR: Yes, so that was my question. There must be a trauma before the abuse trauma but I realised that bonding itself for the child can be traumatising and that this is the beginning of the entanglement with the mother.

VB: So this takes me back to something from your earlier thinking that I wanted to clarify with you. If there is a bonding trauma for the child, there must have been a trauma for the mother. This is your earlier thinking about bonding trauma, that the child bonds with the trauma of the mother and therefore has a bonding trauma. So there is a complex trauma there.

FR: Yes, this thinking differs from my prior thinking because then I thought that the bonding trauma was the child taking on something of the trauma of the mother. This is still true, but this process *itself* is traumatic for the child, that is something I hadn't realised till now. So now with this concept of 'symbiotic trauma' I understand better what is going on. On the one hand, the child in his surviving structure identifies with the mother's own trauma and her survival strategies and therefore idealises the mother and is always trying to help her. Then, separate from that, there is the traumatised part of the child himself with all his anxieties, fears, anger and despair, helplessness and loneliness.

VB: So another thing that became clear to me also was the dilemma of the child, in the sense that they have a desire to move close to the mother. Yet, as soon as they attempt to go into contact with the mother, this puts the mother closer to her own trauma feelings. Therefore the child's dilemma is: I want to move close and yet when I do she gets anxious and I want to protect her from that. This is the symbiotic entanglement process.

FR: Yes. It goes round and round and nothing works; nothing helps. It only consumes the life energy of the child, and of the mother too.

VB: There was something you said earlier that triggered for me how traditional family constellations might, instead of providing us with the real healing, be a way of actually avoiding it. Perhaps you could say something about that in relation to what you are currently working with.

FR: Yes, the more I understood this symbiotic trauma and all the strategies that the child uses to try and get in contact with the traumatised parent, the more I began to suspect that with the traditional constellations way of working we were supporting the continued attempts by the entangled child to get into contact with the mother. This was not the real mother in the constellation of course, but her representative. I wouldn't do this now. It colludes with the client staying in the illusion that they can reach the traumatised parent, and in fact can heal the parents, the grandparents and the whole system. This is part of the symbiotic illusion that we all have when we have traumatised parents, that if we just try something else we will be able to heal them and have good contact with them.

VB: So this takes me to another point of interest, because we have, for instance, practitioners who do think that the present person can have a task for the system that actually does affect people, some of whom are dead. But I think what you are saying is that to think that I could heal my mother of her trauma is an illusion. This is a very hard-hitting thing to say.

FR: Yes the more I work with trauma, and I've been doing so for about ten years now, the more convinced I become that the only person who can make the step of coming out of their trauma is the traumatised person himself. Nobody can do this for anyone else and no one else can do it for him. We can't help anyone else come out of their trauma, because the

mechanisms for avoiding and suppressing traumatic experiences are so strong that only you yourself can make that step. How could you, in a constellation with a representative for the traumatised parent, do anything to bring the actual parent out of their traumatised state when the actual person is not even present? I realised that it is only the actual person who can do this for themselves. All other things are illusions resulting from the symbiotic entanglement.

VB: So this is interesting. There is just a little bit here I want to argue with you about. If we think systemically, holistically and about our interdependence in the world then much of it is reflected back to us. Therefore surely it must be possible, if I take a step in a new direction, for it to have a wider effect than just on me?

FR: But what is the effect?

VB: Well I don't know exactly, but I think what I am saying is that I don't think we can know for sure. Nonetheless, it may be a good place to stand, to say that I can only heal myself. It may be safer to say that I can't heal anyone else than to go into grandiose thinking about it, but actually I don't think we can know one way or the other.

FR: There are two things here. Firstly, I have never seen a situation where a client was able to do this. I had one experience with a client that shifted the illusion somewhat, where she herself was severely traumatised and also had a psychotic mother. After the constellation she met with her mother and she came back and told me that her mother was doing much better. And then the next time she met with her, it was a catastrophe. In this situation I was critical of myself and the client lost confidence in me and the work. So to be fair to the client it is important that the facilitator does not do anything that supports such illusions. If, as facilitators we foster such illusions there are consequences and the client is likely to be disappointed. There are many people who have been disappointed in this way, where their expectations have been and the facilitator has supported these illusions.

This is one of the reasons in Germany that constellations are not as popular as they were; the process often supported such illusions and sooner or later the client would come up against their disappointment in the work. Secondly we have to ask if there is an effect, what exactly is it? Is that effect the actual healing of the parent of their trauma? No, it cannot be.

VB: And of course the work of constellations is still very young, and the feedback loop of how people are doing twenty years on is only just coming in.

FR: Yes, for me it is very clear that it is not helpful for the facilitator to support any of these kinds of illusions.

VB: I can also see that with this very clear stance you are likely to disappoint some people working in the field, perhaps even make some enemies.

FR: I don't want to make enemies, but I do want to say clearly what I have learned and what I think, and if this is contentious for some people then they can choose what to do. And if what I am saying is in contradiction to what others think then that is how it is. I just want to be able to be open about what I think.

VB: Yes I know, and I am just thinking that the old constellations style was a very beautiful and engaging process, and people felt good and part of something wonderful and it made us feel good. That's a big edifice to undermine and I think what you are saying could be seen to undermine this.

FR: Yes it does undermine it - the reality of trauma and the denial of trauma-surviving strategies undermine all illusions.

VB: The perspective you put forward means that none of us is without trauma and there is a very small percentage of us who are trying to do something about this. One could see this as quite a bleak perspective that over generations the trauma in the system is exacerbated and there is no question that in some cases it does lead to severe forms of mental illness such as schizophrenia and psychosis. However, the reality is we are all still here and we have been around for a very long time and somehow we still manage to function. Do you think that it's possible that the effects of trauma actually might dissipate or even disappear over time?

FR: No they don't. The only thing is that we now have in some parts of the world for example in the UK and in Germany, a period of time in which there has been minimal war and not too many traumatising events in society. This opens up a window for past trauma to come up and be dealt with. We have a great chance now to understand ourselves much better as human beings.

VB: But there have been some terrible traumas in history; you would think that over a few generations of persistent traumatic events it would have crippled people completely and yet we still survive somehow; we must have incredibly efficient survival strategies.

FR: Yes you're right. We have developed very, very sophisticated survival strategies because we haven't really understood what was going on before and now we are just at the very beginning of understanding the process more clearly. Some collections of people are very severely traumatised. Look at the Aboriginals in Australia; these people can only survive through the use of alcohol and drugs. Over the centuries we have been confronted with trauma and we have used all sorts of methods such as: religion, spiritual practices, shamanism and modern medicine to try and deal with trauma. But all of these things were in fact ways of surviving trauma; they all provided survival strategies to maintain the split and keep the trauma unconscious. Now, for the first time we have the chance to do something really different with a proper understanding of trauma processes, working from a research and scientific basis.

VB: OK. I want to move on to ask you about feelings. Allowing the trauma feelings to surface is a very important part of your work in the constellation,. Can you say a bit more about these feelings and the way they may be merged with the parent's feelings?

FR: If you are identified with the trauma of your mother or your father, you mirror it within yourself and there is no distinction within you between you and them. So in a constellation the client can make the distinction of which are his feelings and which are the mother's. Then it is no longer necessary to act out the feelings that belong to the mother. As long as you think that it was you who were terrorised, then you are confused with the feelings of the mother.

In the last constellation today we could see the client touching her body and feeling her embodied difference and separation from her mother, feeling her own feelings as distinct from her mother's. Another example is if you see a disaster on television, and you do not have a sense of yourself as a separate being, you may look at such experiences and be drawn into the feelings.

VB: So what about the empathic component here, in that we do empathise with another's pain?

FR: Yes that is true, but as someone was saying in the group today, if I am conscious and can stay in touch with my own trauma then I can see the other's pain without getting drawn into it. This is conscious empathy. The other is the blind identification with the mother's trauma.

I could add something here; I had a discussion in the lunch break about Hellinger's suggestion to the client of saying: "You are the mother and I am just the child." This is about becoming aware of the difference between the child and the mother. It's a crucial experience.

VB: OK, now I want to go back to this idea of your work being very distilled. We have talked about the ideas of symbiotic trauma as a distillation of your many years' of thinking and research about bonding and trauma, but there is also the actual practice of your work right now, which is a very distilled form of constellation. Can you describe for me this way of working that you are now doing?

FR: Well, I just set up a person for the client's issue, and then the client as himself, just these two components. This is a radical new way of working with constellations. I changed to this method because I realised that too many representatives distract us from the core conflict. I understand now that such a situation is just re-enacting the trauma. So working in the way that I do now, we stay very close to the client and their entanglement, and the real issue of how to come out of this. The constellation focuses on the relationship between these two: the client and his issue.

VB: In that work how do you see your role as the facilitator?

FR: Understanding what is going on and offering statements to clarify this.

VB: And in the individual session?

FR: Yes, you can do the same in the individual session by using yourself as the representative for the issue. So the client sets you up as the representative and then sets himself in relation to the issue. So this has changed my individual work as well. If we get stuck then I come out and move back to the facilitator role. So the interesting thing is that as a representative I learn a lot about the client's situation, by experiencing it.

VB: You have said that most conflicts in society come from people operating from their survival strategies and I was thinking about survival strategies and power and politics and business. Could you say something about these larger systems from your perspective?

FR: For me the best example of this is Hitler: he was severely traumatised through a symbiotic trauma. All his thinking and everything he did I see as clearly resulting from his experiences as a symbiotically entangled child. So if you look at politicians and look at their biographies you can find the sources of trauma and understand much better why they behave as they do.

VB: So all our major decision-makers may be operating from a traumatised background?

FR: Yes, more or less, unless they are looking consciously at their personal background and working on their trauma and I believe that this type of work we are doing is an answer to the enigmas of psychosis and all our other serious mental illnesses. With this work we have access to a way of understanding and affecting these issues. Also for hyper-active children, this is an answer for that too, because we see the children re-enacting their mother's trauma. In the end the constellations method provides us with a very sharp way of understanding these things.

VB: What about collective trauma? Do you have anything to say about that?

FR: When there is a collective trauma to a community, the symbiotic trauma is always there behind it. People's ability to deal with collective trauma will be directly influenced by their own symbiotic trauma. But these subjects are too big for me. I like to work with what I can see in front of me. That is enough for me to. I like to stay with what I can immediately

experience in the moment. I must concentrate on things that I can have some influence with; the rest I can only speculate about.

VB: Franz, thank you for sharing so much of your current thinking with me.

FR: You are welcome and I thank you for your inspiring questions and the trust in my work that you have.

BIOGRAPHY

Vivian is a constellations facilitator and trainer, and has run a training programme in systemic constellations in the UK since 2000. She has a particular interest in Franz Ruppert's trauma work having studied with him for the last five years. She edited Franz's first book in English translation, *Trauma, Bonding & Family Constellations*, and is currently editing his next book in English, *Splits In The Soul - Integrating Traumatic Experiences*, which is due for publication in the Autumn of 2010. Vivian has also focused on working with constellations in individual contexts and has just published her first book, *In the Presence of Many, Reflections on Constellations Emphasising the Individual Context*. She is a director of Constellations Work Trainings UK, and a partner in Green Balloon Publishing, the publisher of Franz's books in English.

¹ John Bowlby wrote a series of books focusing on attachment theory in the 1980's and 1990's, the most famous being what is known as The Attachment Trilogy: *Attachment* in 1969, *Separation: Anxiety and Anger* in 1972 and *Loss: Sadness and Depression* followed in 1980 respectively. *Attachment* was revised in 1982 to incorporate recent research.

² *Waking the Tiger*, by Peter Levine 1997, North Atlantic Books, California, USA.