

Drama and Story - Humanity's Version of the Bermuda Triangle

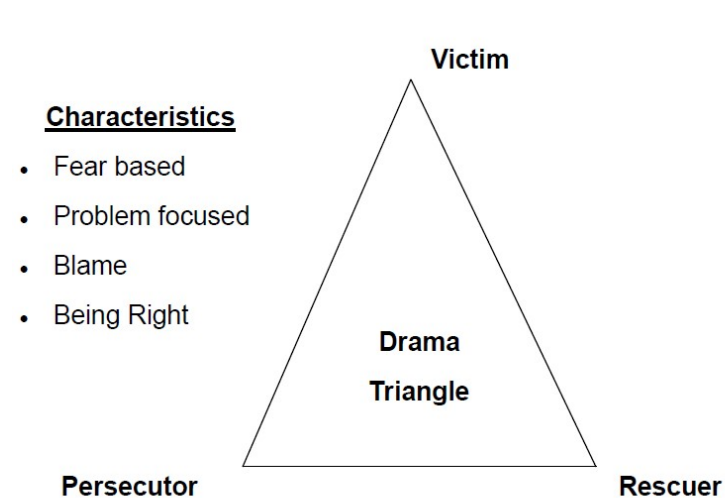
By Tim Buckley

I invited an old friend to a sit down. We hadn't spoken a word to each other in years, after several rancorous arguments about politics. He agreed after I said: "I only want to connect with you. Being right or wrong isn't as important as being able to see each other again as decent human beings."

Like many of us, I had been sucked into the "us and them" dilemma of our age. I had retreated to the far corner of my chosen affinity group and had reduced the opportunities to talk about difficult subjects, except when I was teaching Nonviolent Communication (NVC). Then, like a soap box preacher, I would proselytize the value of NVC, but I didn't venture out of my comfort zone to see how it works in the trenches.

Does NVC work if you're dealing with such dichotomies as liberal versus conservative, mask or no mask, freedom of choice or right to life? I decided to try it out with my oldest chum, whose political views are very different than mine.

The first step in reconciling a distant relationship with him was to be honest with myself. What was my intention? Where was my starting point? Was I aware of my bias, my own stories? When I thought about it, I realized that I've felt paralyzed, vacillating between blaming "them" and feeling scared because of a threat of widespread violence in the US and in the world. I transferred that energy onto him and to our severed relationship.



Stephen Karpman's "Drama Triangle" was my next step, to pinpoint where my story, my "jackal" voice was located. Even before I began self-empathy to seek feelings and needs, I went to the drama triangle. Why? Because when I launch into self-empathy, I want to make sure I'm coming

from a place of true observation, not from a “victim” perspective.

Sure enough, when I thought about my irritation and caution of meeting him again, I was coming from a victim position. My judgmental thinking was, “He’s not going to be using information that I trust. He’s a pawn of that political game! and “He’s not going to listen to me.” From that perspective, I’d say my needs would be “honesty” and “trust”, perhaps even “emotional security”.

Often, when I’m stuck on the drama triangle, I move quickly from victim to “persecutor.” From that perspective, my feeling would be cautious or resentful, and my need is for reassurance and mutual respect.

But if I first get myself out of the drama triangle, there’s a chance that I will see my needs in a different light.

So, before I sat with my friend, I took steps to get out of the drama triangle. (Any number of self-care strategies can work, like a brisk walk, meditation, singing or a hug from a loved one.) From that balanced place, it was easy to find perspective, clarity, ease and an open heart for the repair work I wanted to do with my friend.

I was able to hold two things in my intention simultaneously. First, that I want to explore a reconnection with him. Then, I want to be able to have a conversation that allows me to express what’s up for me, while also being able to stay emotionally balanced when hearing him. He need not know about NVC for this to work, I said to myself confidently.

So, the conversation unfolded this way:

1. I expressed my desire to reconnect and to have a meeting where mutual understanding and respect occur. That part of the conversation went smoothly, as expected. He wanted to reconnect just as I did.
2. He agreed to my suggestion to have us observe guidelines for our conversation: equal time to speak and to listen, without interruption, except maybe for clarification. The second guideline was more iffy: that each of us would attempt to reflect back what we heard each other say.

I say “iffy” because when I get stimulated by something I hear that doesn’t sit right, it’s hard to not comment, correct, or judge. It’s hard to avoid slipping back into the drama triangle.

3. Part of the experiment, which he also agreed to, was to test out a truly difficult conversation. Could I stay neutral and open-hearted hearing him talk about something with which I heartily disagreed? And could I leave the meeting having done that for him, regardless of whether it was reciprocated? In other words, if he couldn’t hold to the agreement, and began to pick apart my politics, would I still consider the meeting a success? Could I stay out of judgment and off the drama triangle?

Well, that’s what happened. And I consider it a success. Here’s why. First, we left on better terms than when we arrived. We agreed that, yes, it took a long time to drift apart. So, it will take some time to weave it back together. Both of us have some enthusiasm about a “next conversation.” That means my need for connection and hope were met.

But what about some lingering resentment because my need to be heard without judgment wasn’t met? When I began talking about how I saw it, he began to disagree and criticize my opinion. He didn’t follow through with our agreement to reflect back my values. I’m thinking, maybe he got sucked into his own “victim” or “persecutor” place when he heard ideas that countered his own.

Long ago, with NVC trainers Susan Skye and Robert Gonzales, I remember their important work with “core beliefs”. Part of my need for being heard and respect comes from a core belief about “not being good enough” or “not being loveable” or “the world will never be a fair and just place.” In Syke’s and Gonzales’ associated “beauty of the need” exercises, I learned that when, in this case, my need for being heard wasn’t met, or that my friend didn’t follow through with the agreement, I can stay emotionally balanced by doing self-empathy. In this case, I acknowledge I’m feeling disappointed and resentful because I wasn’t heard as I wanted, and that he strayed from our agreement.

Here’s where the “beauty” of those needs comes in. Even though my need for being heard wasn’t met with him, I can certainly remember a time when it was

met, whether with him or another friend. Thus, I can stay balanced, even in the midst of emotional upset, knowing how wonderful it is to have that need met, and having confidence that it will be met again. I have many other people with whom there is a consistency in our relationship, where those needs are usually met.

Ideally, when he and I get together again, and he again slips into judgment rather than hearing me out with curiosity and care, I can raise the issue. I can say, for example, “Did I hear you say you would hear me out, and that you would reflect back what you heard me say?” Assuming he says yes, I could continue with, “So I’m feeling unsatisfied because I’ve heard you just picking my opinions apart, and I’d like to be heard, and have you paraphrase what you heard, as I did for you. Are you willing to do that?”

If he is unable, or unwilling to accommodate that request, I have two choices: 1) to go into empathy for him, and how fervently he clings to his beliefs, or 2) I can choose to interrupt him kindly while he goes into judgment about what he’s hearing. That might sound like this: “So when I heard you respond to what I’m saying with your own opinion again, I’m feeling annoyed. We had an agreement to listen and give non-judgmental feedback. Keeping that agreement is important to me. If you think you’d like to give it another try, to listen without interruption and criticism, I’m happy to do that. If you’re interested in critiquing my beliefs, then I’d like to stop the conversation now. What do you say?”

At the end of that conversation, I’d love to be able to say, “When you reflected back what you heard me say, without criticism, I feel very happy. I’m so glad that we can show each other respect, even if we don’t agree with each other”

I’d then like to ask him how that lands for him. I’m hoping that, like me, he would be experiencing some hope that this kind of dialogue is possible between us, and useful elsewhere. Already, I’m feeling some enthusiasm about the outcome, regardless of where it takes us. I’d like to think that I will use this experience to bolster my confidence about the next time, perhaps with a perfect stranger. That would meet a big need of mine: hope.