

### AXIOM 3

*A previous state of victimization does not by nature confer moral authority or a greater understanding of suffering or justice on anyone, often quite the opposite.*

To a certain extent it seems sensible that those who have been victimized understand the nature of the suffering that their kind of victimization causes, that they might know better than others what those who have that kind of experience need in order to heal, that they might understand more fully what kind of societal response it merits. But nothing is ever as simple as this. Human beings, their lives and experiences, are complex. Reducing that complexity to the equation: victimization equals moral authority ignores the complex nature of human beings and all of human history. When instituted it always ends badly. Such wilful ignorance allows the shadow-truths that the ignorance hides to become dominant. And the shadow sides of human nature are rarely benevolent.

Historical amnesia is endemic to the human tragedy. New generations emerge every 25 years. And all of us, when young, tend to see the world simplistically. And from a simplistic viewpoint it is very hard to understand the difference between justice and retribution, to know, beyond the shadow of a doubt that anger and pain, when used as motivations for action, never create justice. What they do create is an escalating cycle of violence.

Clarissa Pinkola Estes has some succinct words on this . . .

*There is no ethnic group on the face of this earth that has not been slaughtered; viz Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Britons. When, after a conflict, the best balanced leaders who have a stake in the future of all persons, are bypassed, and instead power is seized by the angriest and most grudge-holding, whose greatest stake is in the past . . . thus erupts a horrible recycling of living out the least of what is human in this world.*

She reveals an important clue to the essential difference between justice and retribution. Justice looks to the future, retribution to the past. And so, we must always ask ourselves, what is the likely outcome of what we now do on the future? To the future of those groups (or individuals) we now demonize? What is the future of our culture when we single out a single gender or racial group for retribution in response to victimization we have experienced? To future children – theirs or ours? To our collective future? Those are crucial questions. But another is: what will my actions do to my future self?

I once heard an interview with the warden of a Norwegian prison. What he said has stayed with me through the years, has been the stimulus for much contemplation. An American interviewer was doing a special on a Norwegian prison for violent offenders which included murderers and rapists. Oddly, the prison, located in the midst of an old forest, had no gates. The prison did have a wall but it was designed by an artist and was quite beautiful. The warden was asked about this,

why is there a wall but no gates? He replied: the wall is only symbolic. It lets the prisoners know there is something that lies between them and the rest of humanity. But there is a way through, a way to rejoin humanity. One only has to walk through the opening that allows such a rejoining to occur.

The interviewer, a woman as I recall, was taken on a tour of the prison. It was a remarkably convivial place, open spaces, comfortable chairs. The kitchen was state of the art and the prisoners who so wished were being trained, not as cooks, but as chefs. The woman was nervous going into a room where murderers had easy access to knives and meat cleavers. All very sharp of course. (She emerged undamaged.)

The warden showed the woman every part of the prison, including the rooms set aside for conjugal visits.

At the end of the interview the woman asked the warden why they did it this way, for of course American prisons are very different. His reply has always stayed with me; “We are not in the business of turning men into animals but helping prisoners become human beings. That is our greatest concern. But as important is that we do not want, by treating men like animals, to turn ourselves into what we have created.”

That system, that prison, those people, understand the difference between justice and retribution. There is something in those words of his, some deep truth that we in America have never as a culture learned. I wonder sometimes if we are even capable of understanding it. And as I write these words I think of something else I was told once, by an expat American couple running a bed and breakfast in Amsterdam. “We thought when we started this that the most paranoid people who would stay here would be the Israelis. But it wasn’t. It is the Americans. Always.”

There seems some deep fear in our American culture that despite our reputation for a kind and democratic people I think is foundational to us. I believe that much of it comes from our being embedded within what the psychologist Steven Karpman called the Drama Triangle.

Karpman formulized the drama triangle out of work initially done by Eric Berne in his development of Transactional Analysis. Transactional Analysis, though considered passe’ these days, is a tremendously useful tool to analyze human interactions. While Berne did not list the drama triangle as one of the games he outlined in his book *Games People Play* it is inherent in his work. It’s common to all people, irrespective of culture. Americans, however, seem to have it encoded as deeply in their genome as the Declaration of Independence.

It goes like this: there are always three players (a player can be an individual or group). There is the Victim, the one who has been harmed. There is the Persecutor, the one doing the harming. And there is the Rescuer, the one who acts to save the Victim and stop the Persecutor. Insightfully, Karpman described this as a triangle, in fact an equilateral triangle, that is a triangle with three equal sides. The reason he did this was that he poignantly understood that the triangle can stand on any side, the players can change position at any time. In fact, every person in the drama triangle is actually playing all three parts simultaneously. Each position is only an aspect of

the other two. Most people can easily understand the relationship between rescuer and victim, few can easily see how rescuer and persecutor are identical. Rescuers always persecute someone in order to save the victim. The victim becomes the rescuer of other victims. And of course those that rescuers persecute often feel themselves as victims and the cycle is passed on, forever. Justice never emerges from the drama triangle. Only retribution and a continuing cycle of violence.

The damage that the drama triangle does to culture is terrible. But the damage it does to those who play is worse.

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The drama triangle cannot by its nature produce long term, beneficial outcomes. There are hidden psychological motivations for playing and they have nothing to do with justice. For the drama triangle is a Game (in Berne's sense), that is, in his words . . .

*A game is an ongoing series of complementary ulterior transactions progressing to a well-defined, predictable outcome. Descriptively, it is a recurring set of transactions... with a concealed motivation... or gimmick.*

A game in this sense is a complex series of interactions, usually learned in childhood from one's parents (who learned it from their parents and them from theirs) composed of interlocking words, tone of voice, body language, facial expressions, settings that occur between two or more people and which follow a predictable pattern. While it often seems that a current interaction has nothing to do with past interactions, a deeper examination reveals it to be identical in essence. What confirms this is that there is always, as Berne put it, a payoff or hidden goal.

And the thing is, the player knows at the moment of payoff that there is some hidden failure in it, something morally questionable about what has happened. For there is always a "funny" feeling, however repressed it is, indicating that something is "off."

It is rare that participants *consciously* know they are playing a game. A game interaction can last just a few seconds or for months or years. A game can be as minor as you smiling and saying hi to a neighbor who then grimaces and turns away. Either can initiate this by the way. *How* you say hi has a lot to do with the response. (The payoff here is that you feel bad about yourself to varying degrees which then reinforces long term feelings of worthlessness.) Games can also escalate in seriousness to things like "war" or "courtroom" which need no explanation.

A payoff is always be recognized by how you feel at the end of the transaction. The feeling is familiar, that is, the feeling you now have has been a common one in your life.

Games and their outcomes are always connected to psychological dynamics that are essential to the self-identity of the players. By playing they gain three immediate benefits: 1) strokes (in Berne's system, a stroke is a unit of recognition, like a hug or a compliment – but strokes do not

have to be positive to be a unit of recognition); 2) a reinforcement of the psychological orientation/stance of personal identity (e.g., I am a failure or I don't deserve love or I will show the bastards); 3) the release of pent up emotion, usually archaic anger or rage. Archaic rage is anger stored from past experiences that are considered to be negative rather than positive. Such anger builds up until it has to find a mechanism for release. One of the drama triangle's main functions is creating an outlet for the pent up energy. Importantly, the release always seems justified. (Americans have a great deal of trouble expressing anger, most often they need a permission mechanism to do so.)

The outcome is never intimacy or redemption or resolution or justice. It can't be because there is a concealed motivation and a payoff in Berne's terms. The game becomes its own reason for being. And there are very deep and powerful reasons for the game to be played. The only way to stop the game is to understand it (and the needs of the self that are driving it). This can only occur through deep self-examination, which is always difficult. Blame has to be abandoned as a default approach toward previous victimization, which is always difficult. Archaic rage has to be resolved, which is very difficult. And the players must find a way to achieve strokes outside a game, which is also very difficult and culturally rare in America. Doing so entails learning to give and receive strokes through intimate interactions (clean interactions without hidden motivations) which is in almost every instance terrifying to those who play games. It necessitates an unconcealment of the self. Games are always protective of the vulnerable self.

Abandoning the game also means abandoning a self-identity rooted in one or all of the three positions. This entails one of the most difficult and terrifying questions of all: who am I? When everything is removed and there is nothing left but me, who am I? What am I? Why am I alive? What is my purpose? What do I really want to do with my life?

It necessitates a journey into the deepest recesses of the self and a search for core identity, one not rooted in externals or wounds or friends or relatives or culture.

Finally, it means finding a way to work with anger very differently. Anger, contrary to the way the American culture defines it, is not by nature negative. It is not a "negative emotion." It is merely "energy to solve a problem." Anger is in fact a form of power. And one of the things that Americans have a great deal of trouble with is learning the proper use of power. Which is why I suppose that so many in my liberal tribe try to get rid of anger completely, try to become soft and unthreatening, loving and peaceful. Anger is not by nature violent, though repressing it for years often makes it so. Gandhi had some succinct things to say about anger (he was quite fond of it actually). He put it in a box inside himself and used it to power his work without ever letting it attack anyone. It was fuel, not self-righteous justification for harming another.

It is possible to determine if the drama triangle at work in your life. Just ask yourself these three questions; are you blaming someone outside yourself for what is happening in the world or that is going on with you? Do you want to make someone suffer for the pain you or others feel? Do you want to rescue someone (or be rescued) from something that is happening?

The belief that those with a previous state of victimization somehow possess greater moral

authority rests on a logical fallacy, that is that victimization equals awareness or a greater moral authority. The historical outcomes of believing that it does can be seen by looking through an historical lens, at what happens whenever an aggrieved group has decided act on what they perceive to be their victimization.

Any social justice movement that holds the position that a person or group that has suffered a previous state of victimization possesses greater moral authority is firmly locked into the drama triangle. The only outcome there can be is violence and the perpetuation of the game.

*The only way to win the game is not to play.*

All of us suffer. All of us have been wounded. All of us have been or will be victimized. It is an inevitable aspect of our human experience. What matters is not that we have been harmed but what we do with it afterwards. If we want to stop the patterns that continually run through our American culture and our lives, that keep creating the same outcomes over and over again, then we have to begin with the one thing we can control: ourselves. Always we can control how we react to what happens to us, what we do with it internally, and how we act afterwards. But it entails the hardest journey of all, the one that leads deep inside, to the parts we have kept hidden even from ourselves.

It leads as well to a crucial moral decision: do I want to perpetuate the violence or do something different, something that might really help heal the wounds within and around us? To stop playing the game entails a significant re-orientation of self; it isn't easy. But our children's (and culture's) future depends on it.