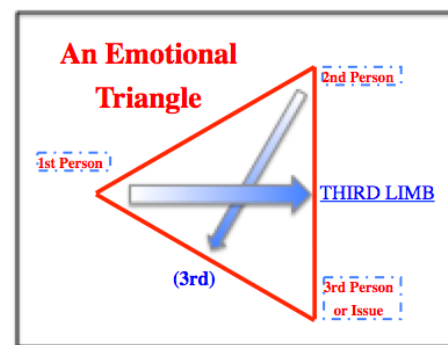


Emotional Triangles

I have been deeply influenced in my life by personal contact with one of the great family systems therapists, Edwin Friedman¹. Ed was gifted in his ability to think clearly about emotional issues, and from him, I learned how to think about what I was feeling. I gained the concepts of emotional triangles from him, and like *Sailors On A Ship*, this knowledge changed my life.

So . . . I live in relationship with others. With effort, much of these relationships are cooperative and pleasant. But some are not. What do I do with alcoholic friends or abrupt colleagues who are unwilling to cooperate with my needs? Or friends who say they will do something and then don't do it, even after the third phone call or several attempts to negotiate a resolution? The management of all this, and more, is available through an understanding of emotional triangles. The concepts are easy to understand, but be aware, they are both powerful and subtle. They also require that I take responsibility and accountability of my life —they require effort and honesty.

First, the basic triangle: everything that occurs in my life can be considered to occur within emotional triangles, each triangle consisting of myself, another person, and a third person or issue common to us both. An important concept here is that of the Third Limb, the limb of the triangle to which I do not intrinsically

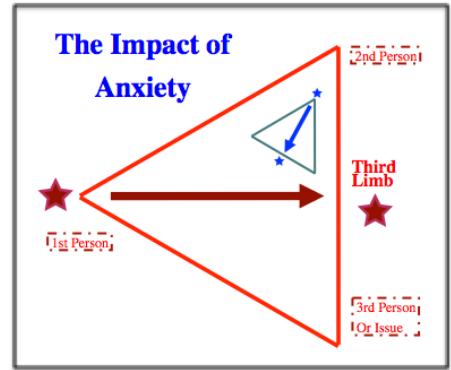


belong. It is a relative location: for me, my third limb exists between the second person and the issue (or third person). For the second person, his or her third limb exists between me and the issue.

A fundamental question is: What pulls the individual into the third limb of the triangle? My answer is anxiety. We are a fearful species; in our evolution, we have been both weak (compared to other mammals of similar size), and yet efficient at overcoming our weakness. One of the

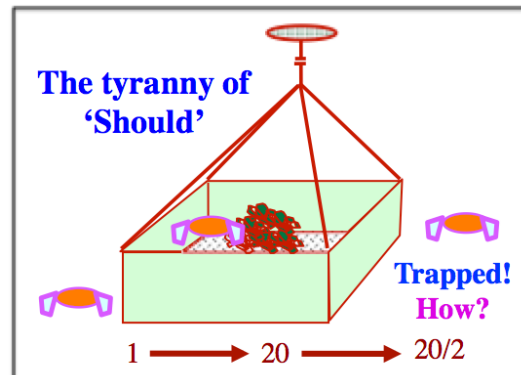
¹ All three of Ed's books are listed in the Bibliography. I recommend all three.

ways our weakness is demonstrated is that we are relatively intolerant of the future, especially when we don't like the possible outcomes. We call this experience *anxiety*, the gap between the present and the future. To relieve our anxiety, we often attempt to control others or issues, so as to reduce the risks, but as will be seen, this method of handling our anxieties is ineffective (there are better methods).



We are also social creatures, and our anxiety of others is a way to maintain group cohesion; we do this through the word *should*. But there is a tyranny to “should,” best illustrated by a story Ed Friedman used to tell about catching crabs (Ed claimed it was true, although I have been unable to find corroborating evidence). The simplest crab trap of which he knew consisted of a large box (perhaps 6’*6’*3’), with a chicken-wire bottom and an open top, ropes and a float attached. Fishermen row it out to where they expect to find the crabs, usually 10’-12’ of water. They put a lot of bait in the box, and push it over the side, the float marking where it is; they come back 24 hours later. The box sits on the bottom, and the bait attracts the crabs. Soon there are twenty crabs in the box, happily eating. One would expect that when the bait is gone, the crabs would leave, but no — they are now trapped. How? There is no top, and they climbed in, so they should be able to climb out.

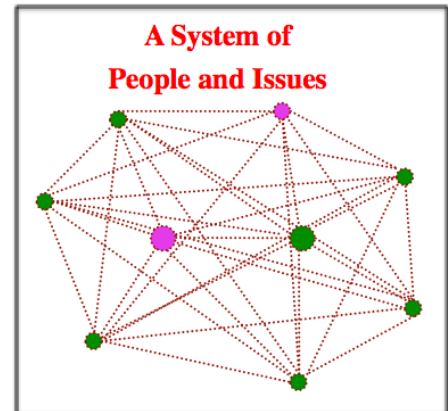
They will not let each other leave! Crabs are social animals — once in the box, they recognize themselves as a group (the sea bottom generally does not have walls), and if one of them tries to leave, the others will pull it back into the box. If a crab insists on leaving, the others will kill it — they will tear the crab apart. So the fisherman comes back at 24 hours, and here are 20 crabs, two dead and 18 alive. Off to market!



Our human crab trap is the word “should.” And we will also kill to protect this word — one only has to look at the wars of the 20th and 21st centuries to see how much we will kill.

The Nature of Emotional Triangles

Returning to the description of emotional triangles, I exist figuratively and literally in thousands of interlocking triangles, where everything is related to everything else. Change in one relationship will ultimately have an impact on all other relationships in my life, often a small impact, sometimes a massive one. (To illustrate numbers, suppose we have nine people (N=9) in a room, such as in the diagram; there will be 49 emotional triangles. Ten people (N=10), 64; eleven, 81; et cetera. The numbers go up by the square of $\langle N-2 \rangle$; the math is slightly more complicated if we there are issues included instead of people. Most people have vastly more than ten people in their emotional networks, and certainly many issues as well; thus, thousands of emotional triangles.)



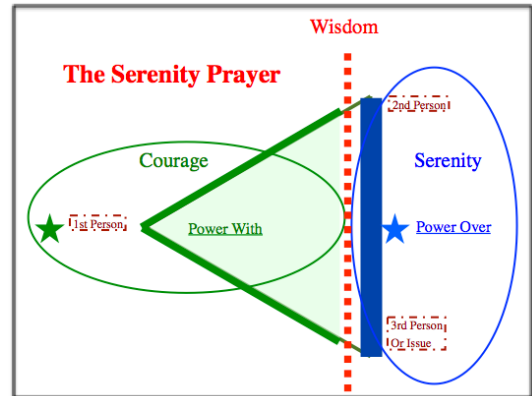
Fortunately, we do not need to deal with all the people in our lives all at the same time — but change in any one relationship will eventually work its way through the system. And every triangle has certain consistent features! There are three features that are so consistent and so powerful that they have been called the Laws of Emotional Triangles, or the Laws of Relationship.

1. I can only change that to which I am connected.
2. If I change, others must change. We are connected.
3. Change requires I stay connected.

These laws are also a manifestation of the Serenity Prayer, in action. I first heard the Serenity Prayer (at least, its usual exposition) when I was a medical intern; I liked the words, but I didn't have a clue how to live them. It was only when I learned of emotional triangles that the prayer really made sense.

God grant me:

- the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change (the third limb of the triangle),
- the Courage to change the things I can (myself, and my direct relationships), and
- the Wisdom to know the difference (that boundary within the emotional triangle that separates me from others).



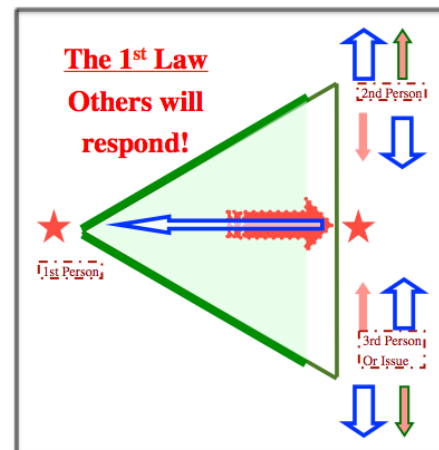
The concept of emotional triangles has given me a way to live the Serenity Prayer effectively.

The First Law

I can only change that to which I am directly connected.

There are a number of corollaries to this law:

- I get anxious about the third limb, and if I attempt to change this limb, the responses are not guaranteed. I can influence people and invite them to change, but people change when they want to do so, not when I insist that they do (unless I provide incentive for them to do so, which again becomes their choice to respond). Attempting to impose on them is not very effective, and usually has long-term consequences (which I probably won't like).
- ***the more I insist*** that the third limb be different, the more I am likely to get a result that is the opposite of what I am demanding (most people know what happens when you tell a child not to play in the puddles!); and any pain in the triangle will move towards me. Not guaranteed; just predictable.



The example I often give here is that of asking a workshop

participant to change seats, and then repeatedly asking them to change seats further, ideally until the individual starts to refuse. I am attempting to illustrate that the individual only cooperates because they want to, influenced by me but not controlled by me. Sometimes they cooperate for long intervals, sometimes short. I do not know when they are going to resist, only that sooner or later they will resist.

The first law illustrates where I have power — within myself — and where I am powerless — the third limb. If I function from anxiety, it is a recipe for me not getting what I want, but fortunately the second law provides relief.

The Second Law

If I change, others must change. We are connected.

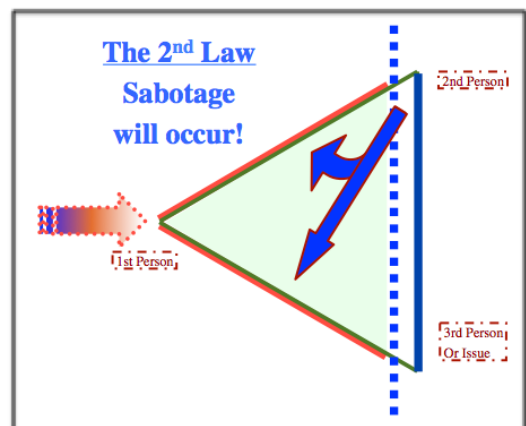
Again, there are corollaries:

- when I change, it impacts the remainder of the triangle, and the participants must change. This aspect is predictable; what is not predictable is how they will change.

This change will require time, and especially it will require time for my change to reverberate throughout the entire emotional system. This may take up to three months (this was the independent conclusion of two of my mentors).

- If my change is significant to the emotional system, others will not like it (it is not predictable who these others will be!). This impact is called *Sabotage*. It is not that others are mean and nasty — they simply do not like the particular change.

I suggest that the management of the sabotage is 70% of the work of change; the change of self is only 30%. In fact, I can know



that my change is significant to the emotional system by the extent to which others attempt to sabotage it.

An example that I usually give is that of a smoker in a family of non-smokers. The rest of the family may have complained for years; when the smoker finally decides to stop (for him- or herself), the family is initially relieved, but very quickly starts to complain about how irritable the “non-smoker” has become. This is the sabotage, not because they want the smoker to go back to smoking, but because they do not want to deal with the consequences of the action (that they themselves wanted).

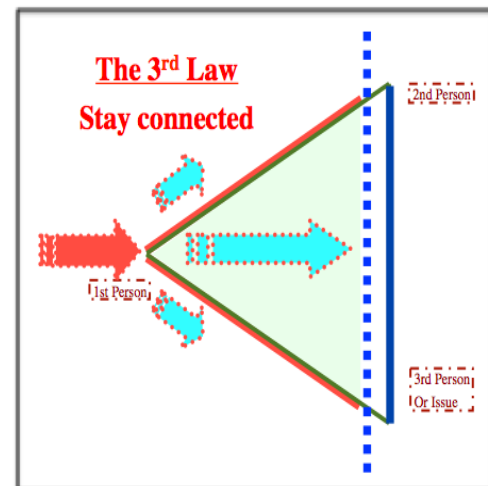
The Third Law

Change requires that I stay connected.

My presence impacts others. If I want my changes to reverberate throughout an emotional system, I need to stay connected so that my presence can impact the system, for at least long enough for the system to stabilize at a new equilibrium (likely three months).

Emotional space here is different from geographic distance. When I leave an emotional situation, creating geographic distance, what I take with me is my own anxiety. As a result, the others whom I have left no longer need to deal with me, and hence my presence is not longer effective in promoting change in the system.

There is nothing wrong with leaving, but when I have not resolved my anxiety (my own issues), I am very likely to recreate a similar situation in another geographic location. As I will indicate later, the best time to leave is when I have resolved my anxiety about an issue, and simply do not want to waste my time in an old location. Sometimes I need to leave so as to provide space for growth prior to returning to the system.



Healthy Exchanges and Options

Based on the above, I maintain that human interactions fall into two categories: healthy and unhealthy.

Healthy exchanges are direct. They define the individual in relationship with and to the other; they are a stance of integrity. *This is who I am; who are you?*

I maintain that any healthy exchange of energy will improve the over-all health of the emotional system long-term; it is called growth. The manner in which this will occur is not predictable! Such exchanges will not always be

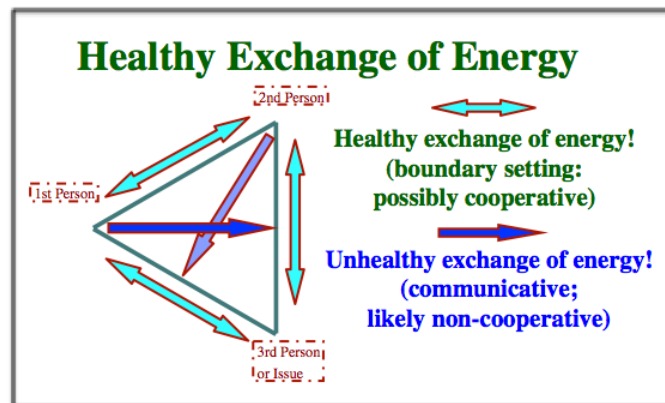
pleasant (conflict is normal), but they do offer the possibility of cooperation. Suppose I approach you and say, “I am angry with you. You said you would do X and you have not done so. What is going on?” This is not pleasant, certainly not for me, but it is healthy. The system can potentially move forward. (If I say nothing, and quietly resent you, it certainly will not move forward!)

Unhealthy exchanges are indirect; they usually represent interventions into the third limb, and as such, they may be very communicative (such as loud angry gestures) but are not likely cooperative.

So what are the options? I suggest they are six-fold.

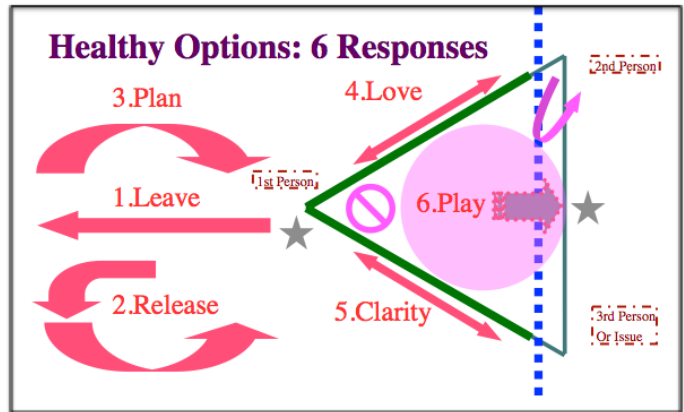
First, I can *leave*. As suggested above, this can be a good option — when I am satisfied that I know how to handle my anxiety.

Second, *leave and release* my energy, so that when I return, I am no longer contaminated by my energy (my anger, anxiety, et cetera); this is an important feature of the process that I call *Blowing Out*. When I release my energy, I am able to think more clearly, and thus approach I can the relationships and issues in a different way.



Third, *leave and plan*. A major difficulty of emotional issues is that I do not think very clearly when I am caught in my emotions, especially my stronger emotions such as rage.

In planning, I envision scenarios where I might become caught, and I develop strategies of how I could get a better outcome. Ideally, I plan at least three options, and “keep them in my back pocket.” Then when I return, and a situation develops where I might previously have been caught, I engage one of the plans without the sudden need to envision it in detail, without the anxiety of “what can I do.”

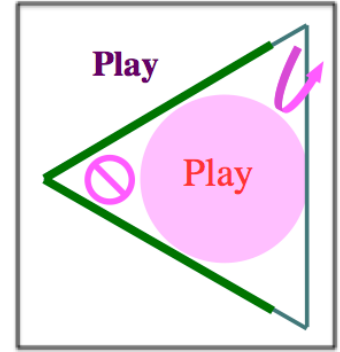


Fourth, extend positive energy into relationships with people; it is called *love*. Love is “the willingness to extend oneself for spiritual growth, my own and others.” It is in some fashion a gift into the relationship, and like all gifts, it leads to a desire to gift back (if you have not seen the movie *Pay It Forward*, I recommend it). Somehow the experience of love contributes to positive outcomes, although the means by which this occurs is often unpredictable.

Fifth, extend positive energy into understanding the emotional dynamics of the processes that are occurring; I call this *clarity*. Like love, this somehow contributes to positive outcomes.

Finally, the sixth option is *play*. The dictionary definition of play is “an activity whose sole aim is diversion or amusement.” In play, I act in a way that is inappropriate to the emotional dynamics, but intended as non-threatening — an unexpected response. In so doing, I utilize the energy of the emotional triangle in a way that blocks the ability of myself and others to be involved in the third limbs of the triangle. Unexpected, it disrupts my getting caught in your own energy, and perhaps your getting caught in mine.

Play is a most difficult process since we are so easily caught in our emotions (anxiety and playfulness are usually incompatible). And yet it is a powerful one when utilized well. Unfortunately words do not adequately do justice to the utility and playfulness of this concept; it took me ten years to learn to be playful, and I generally recommend that people come to my weekend workshop *Blowing Out The Darkness* if they wish to explore further with me.



A caution: playful interventions are not useful in cooperative conflict; they do not problem-solve, and they jar the emotional system. The skill of a playful intervention is to act in a way that I am in a state of *wonder* as to what will happen if I do the intervention — I simply do not know what will happen, and am chuckling to myself as to the possibilities. In such a state, I am not anxious of what the second party is doing, and I am also not susceptible to any emotional pressure from them! They cannot engage me in their third limb (my relationship with the issue or third person). But it does not mean that this second individual will like my playful intervention — they are potentially caught in their own issues about me. What it does mean is that they will be left to deal with their own issues, rather than attempting to dump their issue on me. They may not like this. As such, they might escalate in their efforts to avoid their issues — I need to be prepared for this possibility (and sometimes do not choose play as an option, especially when I am fearful of the consequences).

The Utility of Emotional Triangles

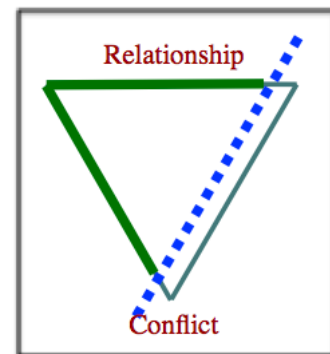
In reflecting on the power of emotional triangles, I am reminded of the story of a client who also gained from this information. The client was a senior electrician, engaged in the renovation of a new high-rise, state of the art building for internet business. He had 80 electricians under him, and he was ready to quit his job as he was so frustrated with the inefficiency of his assistants. But once he learned of emotional triangles, he started walking around the building holding his thumbs and

index fingers together in the form of a triangle, thus reminding himself of wherein he had power for change (himself) or not (others). His life changed with this simple maneuver.

Conflict

Let me state first that the skills of conflict resolution differ depending on whether the participants are cooperative, desiring resolution of the conflict, or non-cooperative, with no desire for resolution. As noted at the beginning of this monograph (with alcoholic friends, abrupt colleagues, friends who say they will do something and then don't do it), conflict situations are often very difficult — most people want to avoid conflict, especially non-cooperative conflict.

A major awareness here is that “the relationship is not the conflict!” For most people, in both business and personal issues, they consider “we have to solve this conflict so as to have a good relationship.” I suggest rather “we can have a good relationship while we deal with this conflict!”



This distinction shows up especially in cooperative conflict. Here, the parties want resolution, but likely lack skill. First, it is important to recognize that resolution is different from solution! Solution means the problem goes away; resolution means we are at peace with the problem, and perhaps it has gone away, or not. The skill of cooperative conflict is for me to manage my energy (again I refer individuals to my *Blowing Out The Darkness* workshop), while we (the parties) engage in trial solutions until we find a resolution — this may take considerable time, but if we are willing to manage our energies, we will succeed. Human beings are not stupid, just habitual!

Non-cooperative conflict however is different! Assuming that I want to cooperate (and can manage my energy), the limitation becomes the other. Insisting that the other become cooperative simply leads to my being caught in my own third limb, the relationship between the other and the issue — not effective.

Generally their options are to:

- a) leave (in which case my problem vanishes), or
- b) insist that I engage in their solutions independent of my desires (thus getting into the relationship between me and the issue, a third limb difficulty).

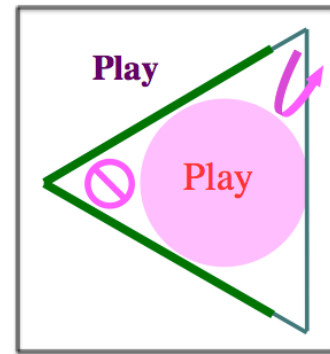
Here, I simply choose to play. I study the dynamics, and find a way to act that:

- I find hilarious, wondering how the other will respond, and
- somehow (and strangely) fits the emotional dynamics present.

As a result, I am enjoying myself, having fun, and the other is left to deal with the difficulty. As an example, if two siblings are repeatedly fighting, and one repeatedly complains to the parent wanting the parent to intervene, I often suggest the parent give five cents to the non-complainer.

What will happen? Usually they ask why? “Well, you asked me to do something,” with no other

explanation. First, the intervention takes the kids off the conflict pattern, and second, often the kids will then recognize that they now have a source of unexpected money — so they cooperate to keep the pattern going. Is it not worth the occasional five cents to teach kids to cooperate!



Again, a caution. Playful interventions are not necessarily playful to the other.

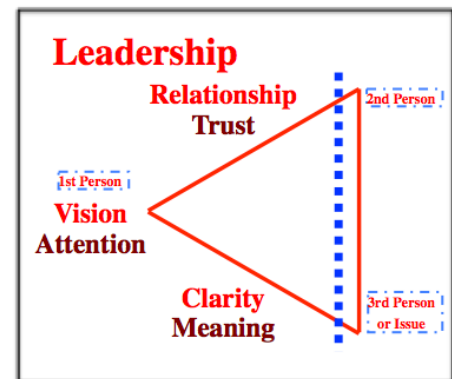
Leadership

One of the books that had a deep impact on me was that of *Leaders: Strategies for Taking Charge*, by Bennis and Nanus (1985). They indicated that effective leaders have four characteristics:

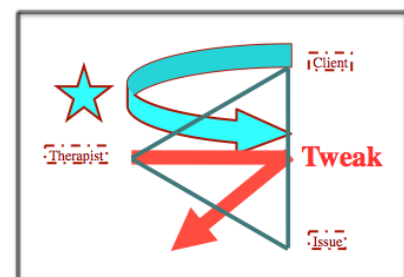
1. they create *attention* through vision, their own vision of where the followers are to go;

2. they create *meaning* through communication—they frame their vision in a compelling fashion, attracting and enlisting the support of followers;
3. they create *trust* through positioning—they persist in their vision despite the sabotage that [always] occurs; and
4. they *lead* others—they manage themselves, through focus on the positive aspects that they either can control, or can generate within themselves.

Ideally, leaders function from their strengths, and find positive uses for their weaknesses. (In this regard, a useful definition of an expert is “one who is not anxious about what he or she does not know.”) In my language of emotional triangles, this translates into self-differentiation (attention), relationship (trust), clarity (meaning), and wisdom (leaders lead others; they manage themselves).



In my role as therapist or facilitator (hence a leadership role), clients would come to me with the expectation that I would fix their problems, a third limb expectation. (The sophisticated clients would claim that they were accountable for their own issues, but the underlying message was still: “Dave, fix my problem.”) In some fashion, I would get into the third limb, with the intention of tweaking the situation (as in tweaking a guitar string), but with no expectation of outcome.



My job was to make a sound. It was the client’s job to decide if they liked the sound, and if not, what would they do about it. It was not my job to fix the sound. I used to tell clients: “I have three rules:

1. I am willing to do 50% of the work. (Occasionally more, but not consistently more.)

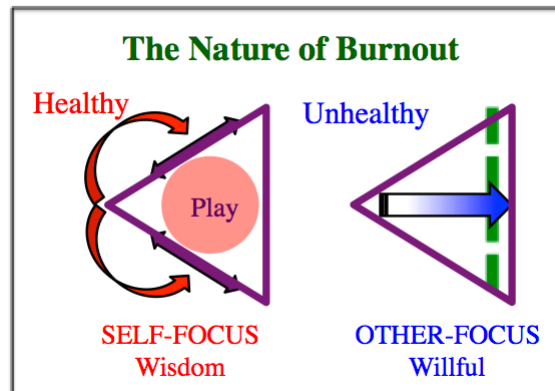
2. If at all possible, we will have fun. (Change is more effective when we are having fun.)
3. If anyone is going to be frustrated, guess who? (Not me!)

Burnout

Burnout is generally defined as “physical and mental collapse due to overwork or stress.” Yet some people work incredibly long hours in situations of very high stress. How? Why don’t they burnout?

I suggest that burnout is actually quite simple! It occurs when individuals consistently *overfunction* in their lives, i.e., they are consistently invested in third limb issues. As such, they are constantly in situations where they are generating patterns of resistance, and are far too serious in their emotional outlooks — they exhaust themselves in their seriousness.

The resolution of burnout is the topic of my workshop *The Bottom Line*. Briefly, management requires that:



- they lead themselves as well as others (with a better sense of vision and trust in their relationships)
- they make better distinctions of management roles (people generally confuse responsibility, accountability, and authority)
 - responsibility is the ability to respond
 - accountability is the obligated need to accomplish a task
 - authority is the designated permission to accomplish a task
- they give themselves better self-care
 - manage their energy effectively
 - write a lot (it discharges energy)
 - do anything, however small, to make a difference
 - find ways to be disciplined (meditation, et cetera)
 - find a supportive community focused on authenticity.

I trust that this monograph has given you some glimpses of the power of emotional triangles. As stated earlier, my life changed as a result.

Bibliography

Bennis, W., & Nanus, B. (1985). *Leaders: Strategies for taking charge*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Friedman, E. (1985). *Generation to generation: Family process in church and synagogue*. New York, NY: Guilford.

Friedman, E. (1990). *Friedman's Fables*. New York, NY: Guilford.

Friedman, E. (2007). *A failure of nerve: Leadership in the age of the quick fix*. (M. M. Treadwell, & E. W. Beal, Eds.) New York, NY: Seabury Books.