

The Law of Three and Creative Conflict Resolution

The more fully we are able to observe the underlying patterns of events in our lives, the more easily and effectively we can relate to the events constructed by them. The surfer who can discern the pattern of the waves can select the right one to catch and can set a speed and trajectory to get the best ride. When I can observe a pattern of conflict in a significant relationship and can discover how this pattern reveals to me an internal struggle that I bring to all relationships, I can address that inner conflict in a manner that frees my energy for a fuller life.

Creative Conflict Resolution is a set of perspectives and practices that can help us use the creative energy inherent in the conflicts of our lives (the waves) to position ourselves to experience personal and spiritual transformation (the ride). The Law of Three is a foundational principle of all creative activity. If we can observe the Law of Three as a component of Creative Conflict Resolution, or of any transformational technology, we can consciously align with the forces that give rise to all new ways of being.

There are two places especially in the process of Creative Conflict Resolution where the Law of Three can be observed. One is in the context of how we address the conflicts that we have with others, with the not-self. The other is in the context of our internal conflicts, that is, in the ways we are not in harmony with our deepest nature.

THE LAW OF THREE

The Law of Three is an articulation of the process by which everything is created. It is a "law" in much the same way as gravity is a law. It is a universal phenomenon that can remain invisible to us because there is no place that it is not present.

There are many ways of talking about the Law of Three because it exists in all contexts and each causes us to see it in somewhat different terms. For the purposes of this essay, the Law of Three observes that whenever three forces are held in a particular kind of relationship to each other a

fourth reality arises in a different plane than the one in which the three are held. I have come to use the slogan, "when the three are held in tension, a fourth arises in a new dimension."

The St. Louis Art Museum has a room dedicated to objects that are naturally occurring but which are displayed in a way that says something artistic. There is a stone wall and a pile of rocks. My favorite object is a tall clear Plexiglas cylinder in which there is a whirlpool. The cylinder may be six feet tall. The whirlpool is a semi-consistent object that extends from the very top to the very bottom. It shifts but doesn't disappear. It is not so much a thing itself as a boundary between the water and the air that goes from the top where the water is being forced into the cylinder all the way to the bottom where it is sucked out.



This whirlpool is created by three forces which result in a kind of standing wave. All three forces are necessary. All must be present for the effect to arise. One is the water and the viscosity or fluidity of it. A second is the container, its shape and its solidity. And the third is the pump and its pressure, velocity, and volume. The shape of the cylinder, the viscosity of the water, and the pressure of the pump all work together to create the whirlpool.

Everything that arises is a result of the confluence of three forces. This is how creation happens. Two things are static. But three things, in the right combination, cause a forth to arise.

CREATIVE CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Creative Conflict Resolution is a set of perspectives and practices. Central to Creative Conflict Resolution is the observation that creativity and conflict resolution are the same thing viewed from different points of view. Conflict provides a creative opportunity.

The identity of conflict resolution and creativity can be difficult to grasp because we often see conflict as destructive. We have to become able to make a very important distinction in order to appreciate the creative opportunities which conflict presents. We have to be able to see that the conflict is not the same as what we do in response to the conflict. It is our reaction to conflict that can be destructive, not the conflict itself.

All conflict can be resolved if we only have the wisdom to respond creatively. The crucial element then is what we do whenever we become aware of conflict. When we know and use creative responses to conflict we get positive transformation.

As an application of the Law of Three there are three forces which, when held in the tension that is Creative Conflict Resolution, cause a new way of being to emerge which is a resolution of the conflict and a transformation of the relationship in which it emerges. The three forces are

- Seeking reality – *the arising*

- Discerning our response to the reality as we perceive it – *the arousing*, and
- Discovering what it is that we actually need – *the longing*.

Let us take a look at the context first and then tease these three apart a bit so that we might better apply this technology.

In addition to the philosophical position that conflict is a creative opportunity we also observe that all beings are powerful, that sometimes that power is used constructively and sometimes destructively, and that when we are able to construct what we genuinely need, we are also creating what everyone else needs.

Creation is not a zero sum game. When I create what I need, I create what everyone else needs. When I try to get what I need by taking it from someone else, not only do they lose, but I don't actually get what I need. When I use the power I have to create what I need I am acting in harmony with the laws of the Universe. I am reconciled to the Will of God.

From time to time I notice that I am not getting what I need. Often I notice this first as an awareness that others are not as I would have them be. They are not arising in my relationship to them the way I want. My son isn't cleaning his room, my spouse isn't appreciating my efforts around the household, my boss doesn't promote me or give me a raise.

Indeed, if I allow myself to be fully aware of all of the irritations in my life I can discover many areas in which I am not getting what I need. Because we don't want to be needy or to be self-centered we may suppress this awareness. But when we understand that being self-centered and needy is very different from being centered in our Selves and able to act on our own behalf we can open to an awareness of our irritations.

Still if we are deeply aware of all of the things that irritate us we can be overwhelmed. We benefit from the lessons on how to eat an elephant.

Q: How do you eat an elephant?

A: One bite at a time.

So we pick just one thing to work on and address it only. This may be a onetime event but more likely it is an event that is an iteration of a pattern of events. When we observe our most significant relationships we discover certain persistent patterns of conflict. When we hone in on just one persistent pattern of conflict [PPC] we can begin to eat the elephant without choking.

EDGAR'S WORK ON HIS BIRTHDAY

Edgar came into the group room wearing an expression that warned, "Don't mess with me!" He never liked being in group but he was especially wary this evening. Nevertheless his demeanor had an edge to it that projected a kind of confidence. He had often felt like he was told by the group that he wasn't making the best choices. But tonight he was justified.

Like the other men in the group, Edgar was there to satisfy a condition of his probation or parole for an aggressive offense. When it was his turn to check in he tried to play down the mood he had been in since he got there because he knew he was going to be expected to talk about it. All he wanted to say was that he was angry because his birthday was earlier in the week and he hadn't heard from his mom.

Once everyone had checked in we got back to Edgar's issue. He still didn't want to talk about it but he wanted to be sure we all knew that he had a right to be pissed. His birthday was a couple of days earlier and he had gotten nothing from his mom. No card, no call, no present, no nothing.

"This ever happened before? Maybe something's wrong."

"No nothing's wrong. She is just this way. She never paid attention to any of her kids."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Can't do anything. She won't change. I am just going to have nothing to do with her."

So we were able to determine that this was a persistent pattern of conflict in a significant relationship. What had arisen was that Edgar had a birthday and he had received no acknowledgement from his mom. He knew she knew when his birthday was. She was there when it happened. It was a big day for her too.

The impact on him was that he was angry and fed up. His plan was to just have nothing to do with his mom. We wondered with him what it was that he needed. Of course he wasn't going to be able to change his mom, but if things were the way he wanted with his mom, what would they be like?

It took a while for Edgar to let go of his insistence that nothing was going to change, but once he knew we weren't going to accept that nothing could be different he admitted that he wished he and his mom were tighter. He said, "I wish she acted like I was important to her."

We reflected back, "So you would like a relationship in which the two of you honored each other and showed that you appreciated each other."

"Yes," he said, "I wish we mattered to each other."

"So then, is there anything you could do to create a relationship with your mom in which you each knew that you mattered to the other?"

"No," he said impatiently, "She isn't going to change."

One of the other group members spoke up. "Have you tried calling her?"

"Calling her?" Edgar snorted. "What possible reason would I have to call her? It was *my* birthday."

"Well," another group member offered, "You could call her up and thank her."

"Thank her? For what? For forgetting my birthday?"

"No, you could thank her for giving you birth. What would happen if you called her up and said, 'Hey mom, my birthday was last week and I completely forgot to call you and thank you for giving me life.'"

Edgar was stunned. He realized that he actually could do that and that it would in fact move towards the relationship he wanted with his mom, but it would mean giving up his attachment to his resentment towards her. He wasn't sure he could do that.

FOUR MOVEMENTS

Creative Conflict Resolution can be broken into four segments or movements. The first three construct the fourth. This is one of the two iterations of the Law of Three in Creative Conflict Resolution we want to explore here.

We start by bringing to mind a persistent pattern of conflict [PPC] we want to address. Sometimes it is the presence of the conflict that brings us to the method. Sometimes we are curious about the method and don't notice that we are in conflict. Whichever is true for you, I strongly urge you to identify an issue you want to address. If you have an issue in mind as you read this, you have the opportunity to try out the method on your own life situation.

For our part we will use the situation of Edgar and his unacknowledged birthday as our case example. I expect that anyone reading this essay will be somewhat more psychologically minded than Edgar so his situation may seem obvious, but I have chosen it for its simplicity. While many situations are far more complex, the same principles apply.

Having brought our attention to a PPC which we seek to understand and resolve, we then engage each of the four movements.

First Movement: What Happens or *the arising*

We know we are having a problem because something is happening we don't like or not happening that we would prefer. There is a condition or event that alerts us to the fact that all is not as we would have it be. We start by putting on a perspective of compassionate curiosity in order to get as clear as we can about what is actually happening.

Edgar's situation was superficially pretty straight forward. The date of his birthday came and went and there was no communication from his mother acknowledging the day or him. In this culture people are noticed and honored on their birthdays.

When another member of the group wondered if perhaps his mom hadn't contacted him because of some problem in her life, Edgar was already certain this was not the case. He had no evidence

that we know of outside of past experience. He may well have been right. But his certainty about what was happening was not simply an awareness of what was arising in the present. It was a construction based on his past experience with his mother. Thus, a part of what was happening was that Edgar was constructing meaning out of expectations based on past experience.

Less apparent to Edgar was that he had constructed an expectation that his mother would call him even as he was certain that she wouldn't because she never did. There was a part of him that was attached to his hurt because it justified his resentment. Expecting something he didn't want seemed to protect him from disappointment.

Second Movement: What we do or the arousing

There is something we automatically do whenever this PPC arises. Its arising stimulates or arouses a patterned response in us. There may be one thing we always do or there may be a set of options we draw from, but *this* has happened so often in so many relationships that we have a default reaction.

Our choices have consequences. In this movement we want to explore the results of the choices we make. We already know we are not getting what we need. If we were, this wouldn't appear to us to be a conflict. To what degree are the consequences of our choices actually the cause of the arising we don't like?

Edgar is going to have nothing to do with his mother. He certainly isn't going to call her to remind her that it is his birthday. She should remember after all, indeed she must, and so what it means that she didn't call is that she doesn't care. He doesn't notice that he wants her to forget so that he can be confirmed in his resentment. This internal event is not available to his consciousness.

These meanings are not actually intrinsic to the event. They are something Edgar is creating. He doesn't see them as consequences of his choice. This is just *what is*.

It is just as likely that Mom is fed up with his sorry ass always wanting something for himself and never expressing any concern for her. "It's his birthday? Well, big deal. He never notices when it is my birthday, why should I get all worked up about his?"

When we look closely at what is actually happening and consider the ways in which what we are doing in reaction creates the opposite of what we need, we may have enough clarity and energy to shift our behavior into more productive and satisfying patterns. But sometimes we find we are still falling short. We need something more and so we must do something different.

While it is true that we will benefit from new behaviors, there is one more force to harness as we look for transformation. With only the two forces of *what normally happens* and *what we normally do* we do not have the countervailing vector that allows for a genuinely new and creative response.

Third Movement: What we need or the longing

It is surprisingly difficult to know what we need. One barrier is that we use the word "need" in at least three different ways and only one of them refers to the *quality* that is missing when this PPC arises.

One way we talk about *need* has to do with the strategies we know of or may have even tried. We often hear ourselves wondering what we are *supposed to do*, as though there is a guidebook that we weren't given or forgot to read. Thus one way we think of needs is, "What I need to do." This is not the force we are looking for here.

Another way we talk about *need* has to do with outcome. If a certain event happens, then I will get the quality that is missing. Therefore, "What I need is for you to..." It may be that if the other does as I want, then the quality that is missing will arise. But, as we are not in control of the choices of others, we are not going to reliably generate the missing qualities for ourselves by getting others to change. And if we are going to generate that quality for ourselves, we are going to have to know what it is.

So we are not talking about the strategy I will use or the ways I want others to be different but the quality of my experience that I discover is missing for me. There is something about my essence that I am not able to connect to or something about the essence of reality that is hidden from me. That is what I need.

To fully know the quality that is absent will require that I be able to go deeply into my Self. It will require that I have access to my thoughts, memories, and interior choices. This interior work is sometimes called shadow work. The work is about getting fuller awareness of those very important aspects of who we are that are hidden from us...that reside in the shadows.

Edgar was not familiar with these aspects of himself. We could speculate with him about what might be true for him in ways that aided his self-awareness, but for him to become able to do this on his own would take more time and attention than the program could give. Still, he got a glimpse of the richness of his own deepest self and was invited to wonder how his life might be different if he were to develop this awareness.

Edgar knew that he wanted his mom to call him and he was dimly aware that he liked that she didn't as it confirmed his worldview. He thought maybe he wanted the call because that would mean that he was important but he thought he already believed he was important. He had very little sense that there is a part of him that can't believe he is important if his own mother doesn't call him on his birthday.

But what he really missed noticing that nearly everyone else in the room was certain was true was that he needed a sense of connection to his mother in which they both knew they were important to the other. This quality of mutuality was something that he couldn't construct because he wasn't able to have compassion for her. He was just too angry.

Fourth Movement: What we might do or the new way of being

This fourth arises in a new dimension. It is not just something else I can try; it is a new way of being. Nevertheless, this new way of being must result in a new set of choices and those choices must address the actual arising and, since the pattern of conflict is persistent, this is going to happen again. What will I do then?

Having explored with curiosity what it is that is actually arising; I have greater clarity about *what is*. Whatever I choose to do, it must be an expression of what I know to be true. Falsehood will never create what we need.

Having observed with compassion what I do when this arises, I am aware that much of what I have chosen in the past is not working for me. I want to especially avoid the things that waste my time and energy, don't create what I need, and often create the opposite of what I need. I especially want to watch for the ways I try to make others be different. This effort violates them and frustrates me.

Having discovered that there are qualities which are missing for me when this happens, and having greater clarity about what they are, I want to be sure that this new way of being includes actions which move me toward what I need. I won't be able to perfectly construct all of what I need. But I want to be sure I am moving in the right direction.

While we want to remain open to any new discoveries about who we might be and how we might be, we at least know that we want to be this new way when the persistent pattern of conflict arises such that we act with integrity, not trying to change the other, and moving toward what we need.

Edgar knew that his mom wouldn't initiate change in their relationship. He knew he didn't like it as it was. He knew that not contacting her wasn't going to fix anything for him. And he was beginning to glimpse that he could be different with her. In the conversation with the group he began to develop a vision of a different way of being with her.

What arose for Edgar was that he might create a way of being with her that had integrity for him, wasn't expecting her to change, and moved toward the relationship that met his needs with her. He could call her up and thank her for giving him life. This is something he could do that was honest, didn't manipulate her, and moved toward a relationship in which they honored and appreciated each other.

Edgar didn't call his mom. He was just too angry. While there was a part of him that wanted to call her and apologize for not thanking her sooner, there was another part of him that wasn't going to stand for that. He knew that he was not in control of the angry part of himself so, if he were to speak with her, he would probably just make things worse.

THE LAW OF THREE IN OUR INTERIOR WORK

Edgar is frozen. He can't address what he needs in his relationship with his mom because there are two parts of him, both highly emotionally charged, which each have an idea of how they want Edgar to act. One wants him to move toward his mom and seek to heal their relationship. The other out of anger and fear of being hurt more has him backing away.

In truth there are more than just these two parts. While we often speak of being of two minds, we have way more than two perspectives battling it out for control of our behavior. The image that

often comes to mind for me is that my interior is like a busload of school children. Sometimes I am calm and they are all sitting quietly. Sometimes I am joyous and they are all singing a song together. But sometimes they shout at each other and shoot spit wads. I know that they are all a part of me and they all deserve a seat on the bus. I just want to be sure that they don't jump behind the wheel and drive.

There are very many frameworks for understanding and addressing the issues that arise for us because of our interior multiplicity. Some of them include the *Diamond Approach* of A. H. Almaas, *The Work* of G. I. Gurdjieff, and *Psychosynthesis* of Robert Assagioli. These are aimed mostly at persons interested in personal and spiritual transformation. There are also psychotherapeutic approaches aimed at persons who have life problems including recovery from severe trauma. Among these the one I find most robust because of its elegant simplicity is *Internal Family Systems* theory of Richard Schwartz.

Internal Family Systems [IFS] is itself a synthesis of earlier frameworks and modalities. It draws from general systems theory and applications for family systems but then observes that we each have an internal family. These internal constellations of "parts" arise naturally as we interact with the world around us. But from time to time, the stress or trauma of living in dysfunctional systems pushes some of our parts to extreme positions. They are freighted with unexpressed emotion and discontinuity with present reality.

Healing comes from the recognition that we are stuck in our lives because there are interior aspects of ourselves that are polarized with each other. These parts pushed to an extreme position are frozen in a binary dance in which each keeps the other in check. What is required is that there be an infusion of a third force that allows "a fourth to arise in a new dimension."

In IFS terminology this third force is the Self. We each have a Self and this Self is at the core connected with higher or some would say spiritual energies. When we bring Self and Self-energy to the polarized parts, we experience healing transformation.

Creative Conflict Resolution uses the framework of IFS as an approach to addressing the internal conflicts we discover as we try on the new way of being that is the Fourth Movement. We can have great insight into what is happening and how we want to be and then be frozen to act the way we want to act. This seems like a horrible problem but it is actually the very best problem. It is the dawning awareness of how, at this very deep level, we are actually constructing the problem we are having with another.

When the conflict that is arising in our relationships with others can finally be seen as a conflict I am having with myself, I am then in a position to address the core issue instead of just putting out a fire that is an artifact of the core issue. When the two positions that are generating the binary stuckness are both aspects of my own being—are both manifestations of parts of myself making apparently opposing choices—then I am in a position to influence all sides of the argument.

In Edgar's case, he was stuck between a part of him that wanted to matter to his mom, and a part of him that didn't want to risk trying to connect with her only to be rejected or to be disrespectful to her. He was initially unable to even see that these parts exist for him and that they are polarized with each other. The group was able to hear these parts in Edgar and help him come to see them in a process that IFS refers to as "holding Self."

Had there been more time and more trust Edgar might have come to see that the part of him that wanted to connect with his mom was acting on behalf of a young and vulnerable part of himself that longed to be important to Mom. And he might have been able to see that the angry part that only wanted distance from his mom was trying to protect him from further disappointment and humiliation. Thus Edgar might have come to see that both of these parts who appeared to be at odds with each other were committed to protecting a young and hurt aspect of himself that was longing for recognition. Had he been able to do that, he might then have realized that there are parts of him who can protect the young vulnerable one and can speak to Mom on behalf of the young one and can assure the young one that he is important whatever Mom may choose to do or fail to do.

Ultimately all of our parts are trying to do what they see as being in our best interest. They simply are looking at different aspects of reality and coming to different notions about how we ought to be to move us toward what we need. When we can be fully present to these parts and fully witness their perspective and their feelings, they can relax from their extreme position and we can act in freedom to express our essence and to create what we and all others need.

This very condensed exploration of Creative Conflict Resolution is intended for persons who are already familiar with schools of personal transformation. For more about the Law of Three, I recommend some general articles on the Internet including the article on Wikipedia on the [Fourth Way enneagram](#). An outstanding if complex look at the Law of Three in a spiritual context is Cynthia Bourgeault's *The Holy Trinity and the Law of Three: Discovering the Radical Truth at the Heart of Christianity*.

For more about Creative Conflict Resolution I recommend my web site at JustConflict.com or my book [Just Conflict: Transformation through Resolution](#).

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