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Letting in the light – finding your tragic hero

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This essay is about you, your brain and the stories you know. In this essay Nadja Alexander explores the melodramatic nature of the tales we tell when we are stuck in difficult conversations and tense situations. Whether in public or private life, when we find ourselves in conflict we tend to use particular storytelling patterns called melodramatic narratives. Here we explore the potentially destructive nature of these conflict storytelling patterns and consider the extent to which they are wired into the default mechanisms of our DNA. Drawing upon ideas from the practice of storytelling, narrative structures and conflict coaching theory, Nadja shows how we can mindfully engage our emotional intelligences, to find our own inner hero—the tragic hero. In doing so, we can shift the way we think about conflict from the blame pattern of melodrama to the problem-solving yet realistic structure of tragedy. Yes, life wasn't meant to be easy, but it doesn't have to be a melodrama.

Nadja Alexander explains how we can use the narrative of tragedy in the conflicts of public and private life to engage even the most challenging of adversaries.

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Forget your perfect offering/There is a crack, a crack in everything/That's how the light gets in.

Leonard Cohen

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When I was young, I wanted to do something important, something meaningful that would make a contribution to society. Like many of you reading this book, I yearned to make a

[*] See http://conflictcoachinginternational.com/coaching. 'REAL' is an acronym for 'reflection, engagement, artistry, learning'.

difference and right the wrongs of the world—or at least some of them. Back then, I was able to tell right from wrong, good from bad, legal from illegal. Some three decades later, I continue to try to make a difference in the work that I do, but I have moved in my life from that youthful place of bold certainty in search of 'perfect offerings' to one of reflective curiosity. And it is from this place that I write to you.

As you read this essay, I invite you to recall the last time you were involved in a conflict. Although it might not be comfortable, try to remember what it was like for you. How you felt (were you anxious? angry? disappointed?), how you reacted physiologically (were you flushed or perspiring? what was your heart rate?), what you thought ('You idiot, I knew you weren't up to it,'), and what you said … or didn't say.

Go on … take a minute.

Most of us, when we find ourselves involved in a conflict—whether it be an argument with a family member, a difficult conversation with a colleague, a tussle on the sporting field or a well-articulated legal dispute—tend to fall into certain unconscious patterns of storytelling behaviour involving melodramatic narratives in which we are the passive victim and another person is the active villain. In these polarised conflict stories of right and wrong, of black and white, we fail to 'let the light in' (to adapt Leonard Cohen's words) to reveal the paradoxical complexity associated with our conflicts. We fear losing control of the situation and being swept up into a whirlwind of uncertainty and unknowingness.

In this essay I will explore these melodramatic narrative patterns and suggest a different way of telling conflict stories that is more constructive for negotiations in both private and public life.

The stories we tell

Stories are powerful. The practice of storytelling is fundamental to the way we interact socially and make meaning of situations and events. As social beings, we tell stories to make sense of the world and to understand one another.[1] So much of what we 'know' comes from stories. In part this is because when we feel something we remember it. Our capacity for memory is linked to our limbic system (also called our emotional brain) and its ability to connect information through stories and visual and emotional associations.

Storytelling has a long and impressive history across human cultures. The sharing of stories has traditionally formed an essential and integral part of the patterning of life and law for many indigenous cultures. For Indigenous Australians, the Dreamtime explains through mythological stories how the world was created, while stories of the Dreaming establish the structures of society and rules for social behaviour, and set out the rituals performed to ensure continuity of life and land. Dreaming stories can be about the creation of sacred places, land, people, animals and plants, law or custom.

World religions also were handed down in the form of stories. Jesus Christ was said to speak in parables—simple stories used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson. The stories of Jesus Christ and other great religious figures are as influential today as they were when they were first recorded. Consider the parable of the good Samaritan, in which a traveller is beaten, robbed, and left half dead along the road. First a priest and then a Levite come by, but both avoid the man. Finally, a Samaritan comes by and helps the injured man. Today, more than

2,000 years later, the colloquial phrase 'good Samaritan' is used to refer to someone who helps a stranger.

From religion we move to politics and reflect on the famous storyteller, George Washington. In 1783, his revolutionary army was on the brink of mutiny. Washington at first attempted to quell the mutiny with rational arguments; however, it soon became obvious that the would-be mutineers were not listening. He then changed tack, squinting and pulling out his glasses, indicating that he wished to read out a letter from a congressman: 'Gentlemen, you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have grown not only grey but almost blind in the service of my country.' At this point, a number of officers started crying. He read the letter, which contained the congressman's personal and deeply felt reflections, and then walked out without further discussion. George Washington knew he had convinced his army not to mutiny, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Today, each and every one of us continues the oral tradition of storytelling—whether in coffee shops sharing with friends, or at political rallies addressing thousands of people. In addition, we make use of technology to tell our stories by sharing on Facebook, by blogging, by contributing online news stories and by making films with our smart phones. In these various ways, storytellers can take on the transformative power of chameleons, slipping in and out of a variety of roles such as negotiator, lobbyist, activist, diplomat, trickster, conciliator, teacher, student, entrepreneur and agent of change.

Communications technology effectively suppresses space through time so that the sharing of stories between people at opposite ends of the earth and even among strangers can be instantaneous. Our stories become at once connected with others' stories and networked. In many ways this connectedness is a good thing that spreads ideas and brings people together. In other ways the intensity of story exchange through technology leads to information overload and misunderstandings, as we struggle to make sense of a never-ending shower of headlines and storylines that ultimately overwhelm us. Scientists tell us that our brains streamline information so that we can cope with it and effectively ignore what we cannot compute. In other words, we simplify the stories we hear in order to make sense of them and remember the information they contain.

Stories make us feel

While technological innovations may have changed the power and politics of storytelling, the patterns of how we tell stories have largely remained the same. More than 2,000 years ago, Aristotle argued that we make decisions based not only on logical–rational factors (logos) but also on factors that appeal to our feelings and imagination (pathos) and our sense of ethics and integrity (ethos). The great philosopher recognised that we are not purely rational beings responding to reasoned argument and evidence—a reality with which some mainstream economic theorists, who remain committed to ideal rational human actors, still grapple.

Similarly, politicians, entrepreneurs and other persuaders have always known that logical argument will only get you so far. They tell stories their listeners can relate to on an emotional level using narratives laced with personal storylines and enhanced with symbolism and metaphor to amplify the impact of the story and the message embedded in it. For example, Barack Obama's inaugural speech told a powerful personal story of an underdog

winning an election race against all odds and wove the tale into a greater social narrative of shared stories of triumph of freedom over slavery, justice over injustice, democracy over communism, hope over pessimism. 'Yes, we can.' These are stories of which we are all part. Half a century earlier, John F Kennedy used similar techniques in his *Ich bin ein Berliner* speech of 1963 and we have seen how George Washington connected with his soldiers by framing his message as a personal story.

In another illustration, Steve Jobs has been hailed as the greatest corporate storyteller of all time. When introducing the first-ever iPod to an audience, he didn't talk about the technology or the physical dimensions of the iPod. Rather he simply got excited about the idea of having '1,000 songs in your pocket'. So 1,000 songs in your pocket became a story. It fired up people's imaginations. Moreover, Jobs' personal excitement was contagious and was picked up by audiences all over the world. People listening to Jobs felt what he felt—excitement, anticipation. They felt part of the story. How did this happen?

Studies in neuroscience have shown that emotions are contagious, that is, they can move between us without us being consciously aware of it. This process is made possible by mirror neurons in the brain, which fire up and 'mirror' the physical signals of another. In other words, when we watch others' facial and body expressions, our brains—through the firing of mirror neurons—mirror what they perceive and thereby practise ways of relating to these expressions. This phenomenon helps to explain how we can have empathy for people we encounter without even speaking to them.[2] It explains how we can be moved to tears by the story of a stranger, and how, in a short period, Steve Jobs can leave us nurturing the desire for 1,000 songs in our pocket. It also goes some way to explaining why it is difficult to sustain confrontational behaviour towards someone who is 'nice' to you. Empathy is one of the most subtle yet effective techniques of persuasion.

Telling stories about conflict

When we are embroiled in conflict, sharing stories of loss, injustice and betrayal may be more constructive than angrily rejecting the other's story. Genuinely engaging in listening to others' stories as well as telling our own seems to release a dose of what Southern Africans call *ubuntu*—humanness—into an otherwise hostile dynamic that can easily escalate. It's what makes it possible to move past a deadlocked situation and engage with someone we feel has wronged us.

In contemporary times the most famous illustration of this principle is Nelson Mandela's negotiations with the apartheid government in South Africa, which ultimately led to his release from Robben Island prison and facilitated his rise to power as president of South Africa in 1994. During his 27 years in prison Mandela learnt not only the language of his oppressors, he also familiarised himself with their poetry, their literature, their music and their rugby. He got to know his jailers and in some cases their families. He learnt their stories. As a result he was able to negotiate a new inclusive political climate for his country and avoid the bloody civil war that so many had assumed would be inevitable.

Mandela's political genius lay partly in his ability to understand the stories of the Afrikaners—and hence their culture and way of thinking. But his genius lay also in his own storytelling. Rather than reacting with angry stories of victimisation, injustice and persecution, as many black South Africans expected and even desired, Mandela offered

stories of a future South Africa where no one would suffer because of the colour of their skin. Rather than stories of despair, he shared stories of hope. Rather than stories of revenge, he offered stories of reconciliation. Mandela's narratives were not always well received. Initially, many did not understand their leader's conciliatory approach and willingness to collaborate with 'the enemy'. They were confused and disillusioned; some felt betrayed. Amid tensions that brought South Africa dangerously close to civil war, Mandela stuck to his storyline. He emerged as a tragic hero who saved a nation and sowed the seeds of reconciliation. Upon his death in late 2013 he was celebrated as a giant of history. What Mandela did was extraordinary in the circumstances because it defied our human instinct to tell stories that polarise, demonise and justify revenge.

The melodrama of conflict storytelling

Let me explain. Our patterns of telling stories about conflict seem etched into our DNA. As children we instinctively respond to stories about beautiful princesses, noble knights, wicked witches, dragons and dungeons—a classic pattern of conflict storytelling featuring terrible villains, virtuous victims and well-intentioned heroes, referred to as the melodramatic genre. Just think of Cinderella. Cinderella is the innocent victim of her wicked stepmother, the arch-villain of the story. Prince Charming is our hero—well-meaning, morally upright yet at the same time naive. He does not recognise villainy when he comes across it and is susceptible to manipulation by evil characters such as Cinderella's stepmother, who refuses to allow her to attend the ball. In this sense the prince is fairly useless to Cinderella, at least at the start. This inability of the hero to immediately save the victim is essential in the melodramatic narrative as it ensures that the unfair conflict situation continues for a while and the victim gains even greater sympathy. Do you remember who it is that, at the eleventh hour, makes it possible for Cinderella to get to the ball? Yes, it's the famous fairy godmother, who with a wave of her magic wand whips up a ball gown and carriage suitable for a princess.

The melodramatic narrative form is familiar to us all. Its ubiquitous structure has filled our minds from childhood fairy tales to adult television soap operas and political rhetoric. When we tell a story about a conflict in which we are involved, we tend to slip into a structure comprising a combination of some or all of the elements of melodrama without consciously choosing to do so.[3] The melodramatic narrative offers a structure for us to organise our thoughts and feelings about the conflict. Think back to when you have confided in someone about a problem or conflict. How did you tell the story? Hold that thought for a moment.

As storytellers, we typically portray ourselves as the person who has been wronged. We play the innocent and passive victim in our own personal melodrama. We find ourselves effortlessly adopting a narrative structure of melodrama to describe the other person as the active cause of the conflict, and as someone working against us, harbouring unethical, illegal or otherwise bad and unjustifiable intentions. For example, they may be negatively judged as stubborn (rather than principled); as foolhardy (rather than courageous); as irrational (rather than passionate). The characters in our conflict story are morally polarised and they demonstrate little complexity. As a result, the storyline is thin and the sequence of events is presented as unfolding quickly and sometimes suddenly. The storyline is not always logical, as it may be accompanied by strong emotions such as confusion, disappointment, sadness, shock, a sense of injustice or disbelief. The conflict, as we tell it, plays out externally among the characters rather than internally or intra-personally, so that there is not much scope for

soul-searching or self-reflection. We are convinced that, if we could turn back the clock or make our villain disappear, everything would work out perfectly. The search for a happy ending is referred to as 'dream justice' in the melodramatic genre.

Accordingly, when we tell the story of our own melodrama, the structure of the narrative form dictates that we are more likely to focus on the wrongs we've suffered than to reflect on our own contributions to the problem or on what we can do to sort things out. By focusing on the 'what' rather than the 'why' of people's behaviour we are less likely to acknowledge the complexity and potentially paradoxical nature of their motivations and intentions. Rather we make assumptions about intentions and motivations, deleting or glossing over what doesn't fit neatly into our world view and our preferred view of ourselves. Psychologists call this the 'fundamental attribution error'. Coming back to Cohen's lyrics, the melodramatic narrative steers us away from exploring the 'cracks' in our own perfect story.

Now consider again the conflict story that you told your friend. Be honest with yourself. When you talked about your conflict—either to yourself or to others—were any of the elements of melodrama present such as a positive, morally praiseworthy description of your own faultless contribution to the situation in stark contrast to the blame attributed to the other? Did you mind-read and assume certainty about the others' intentions and motivations, in line with the stock characterisations that you adopted? Did you yearn for a dream justice, where everything would go back to the way it was? Did you ... even just a little?

Confidence, conflict and storytelling—the plot thickens

Why is it that we intuitively rely on the narrative of melodrama to tell a conflict story? In his award-winning book *Thinking, fast and slow*, Daniel Kahneman puts forward the idea that 'the confidence that individuals have in their beliefs depends mostly on the quality of the story they can tell about what they see, even if they see little'.[4]

So stories reflect our confidence in ourselves and how we are perceived to fit into groups, communities, organisations and other tribes. For most of us, this means being right rather than wrong, winning rather than losing and being liked rather than loathed. Melodramatic narratives offer an ideal vehicle for transporting this message to the world.

But melodrama is not just attractive for storytellers. When someone is appealing to us with a melodramatic narrative, it's easy to blame the villain, to sympathise with the victim and to wish for dream justice. There is no expectation that we will have to get involved, dig deeper, take on responsibilities, actively engage in problem solving and mediate between the victim and villain. Rather, it's the unrealistic dream justice or nothing.

Intuitively, we know this. We sense that our task is to listen, sympathise and side with the victim. You see, the narrative form not only helps storytellers organise the information in their conflict story; it also helps the rest of us to recognise the type of story it is and know how to culturally respond.

Open up the newspaper on any day of the week and count the melodramatic narratives. Here are a few that I found after a couple of minutes on the internet. From the Australian press:

- 'Tony Abbott's business adviser says Australia taken "hostage" by "climate change madness"'[5]
- 'Libs vs Nats: GrainCorp stoush shows cracks run deep in the Coalition'.[6]

And from the international press:

- 'China slams US for sending Chinese terrorists to Slovakia'[7]
- 'Obamacare failing: registration still 80% below expected'[8]
- 'Licence to maim: courts were easy on McNeil'.[9]

Turn on the radio and listen to politicians telling stories involving themselves and the opposition, and you will hear perfectly pitched melodramatic narratives beckoning you to side with a victim and blame the identified villain.

In the same vein, John Dewar observes:

> As a nation we pay too much attention to the sensational and the short-term. Whether it's a social media spat, a gaffe in question time, or a political interview that runs off the rails—our national discussion is increasingly derailed by a sideshow of daily crises and spin.[10]

Dewar, who is on the board of the Australian Futures Project, argues that Australia's most serious problem is the absence of a constructive process for consensus building and decision making. In other words, Australians are locked into a sensationalistic, melodramatic pattern of storytelling that distracts us from talking about how to manage the big ticket issues, such as environment, energy, economic structures, the ageing population, health-care costs and education, that will shape the quality of our lives and those of future generations. And it's not just politicians. Civil society, media, business and professional groups, civil servants and academics are all happy to blame one another for the problems they face. In the melodramatic narrative, we look to others for solutions—for example, to voters, to the legal system, to law enforcers, or to those with power, resources or authority to step in and fix things for us. In political narratives, almost everyone seems comfortable blaming political leaders for everything from climate change to stock market crises. We look to politicians to solve our problems, rather than taking time to reflect on our own contributions to them and what we might do differently to improve the situation.

In short, we lack a constructive narrative for capturing difference and working through the difficult conversations that we need to have. Former prime minister Malcolm Fraser famously proclaimed 'Life wasn't meant to be easy.' Yes, it's no picnic. But it doesn't have to be a melodrama. Melodrama doesn't help us solve conflict. It exacerbates it. Melodrama demonises and depersonalises the person on the other side, deepens and reinforces differences, and limits the scope for constructive engagement with the conflict.

We need a better way to organise our ideas about managing conflict and creating better futures. Recognising the traps of melodrama in our personal and political stories is the first step towards changing how we talk and think about conflict and, as a result, how we engage with the present to shape the future. Moving away from melodrama involves asking the 'why' question; it requires a shift from a place of certainty to curiosity; it involves acknowledging the gaps in the storyline, welcoming complexity and accepting the tensions of paradox. How can we begin to make this shift?

Shifting to tragedy as a more constructive and realistic storyline

While it's easy to view conflict as something negative to be avoided, conflict management professionals are trained to look for the positive in conflict. Conflict coaches, for example, may help people look for opportunities in conflict to make choices, which will transform their destructive energy into realistic, constructive outcomes.

Similarly, tragedy is often thought of as something negative, something bad. You might be surprised to learn that, as a narrative form, tragedy offers more useful structures than melodrama for constructively dealing with conflict.[11] Why is this so? In stark contrast to the one-dimensional characters of melodrama, tragic characters are imperfect creatures who contain contradictions and inconsistencies and experience the tensions of competing needs, values, desires and ideals. Typical character flaws include jealousy, ambition, naivety, pride or greed. These flaws are internal to the character rather than being externalised to a villain as in melodrama. They sit alongside positive qualities such as diligence, generosity, kindness, and honesty. We are able to empathise with tragic characters because we recognise our own human weaknesses in them. Consider the characters of Frank and April Wheeler, played by Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet, in the 2008 film, *Revolutionary Road*, based on Richard Yates' 1961 novel of the same name. Frank and April share aspirations to make something different out of their lives together, to stay true to their independent and non-conformist ideals despite the suffocating social conventions of 1950's middle class America. However, they soon find themselves living a perfect life in a nice Connecticut suburb with young children, both desperately bored. They cling to fragile optimism that they will realise their hopes and ideals one day, while compromising these same values day by day and slipping into a deep relational malaise. Most of us can relate to the ambiguities and contradictions of Frank and April at some level. As Frank and April make the mistakes that precipitate their downfall, we are able to reflect on our own flaws and foibles. This is the essence of the 'tragic tension'.

It's at this point that tragedy becomes really interesting for us as a practical paradigm for conflict management. For it's precisely these internal paradoxes that give rise to the idea that as we move into the future, however bleak it may appear, there is choice. April makes a choice to move the family to Paris for a fresh start and so that Frank can find his passion. Frank agrees. Then, when April discovers she is pregnant, Frank chooses to take a job promotion in Connecticut, while April chooses to abort the baby, with fatal results. In their tale of conflict, Frank and April make choices, and these choices have serious consequences that affect the lives of many. There are no evil villains, happy-ever after heroines or voiceless victims in Revolutionary Road. It is a story of deep conflict with a different narrative structure featuring tragic heroes who make their own fate.

As heroes in our own personal conflict or 'tragedy', we can take up Leonard Cohen's poetic challenge by acknowledging our own imperfection and boldly shining a spotlight of curiosity on it. We can choose to take responsibility for our own fate and make decisions by actively engaging with people and circumstances that we perceive are less than ideal. It's not about making right or wrong choices – it's just about taking a piece of the future into our own hands, and making a choice. Alternatively, we can refuse to recognise our own role in the conflict, to question our perception of things, or to change our story and, in doing so, we continue to make the same mistakes. In the tragic narrative, the inability to make these kinds

of shifts, or recognising too late the need to make them, emerges as the flaw that leads to the fall from grace, and sometimes the death, of the tragic hero.

In contrast, melodramatic victims are passive and weak, unable to make choices, hoping against all odds to be miraculously saved from the fate to which they are otherwise ultimately resigned. While melodrama demands either total victory or defeat, tragedy rejects such dichotomies as being fundamentally false.

In the tragic tale, victory can sit with defeat, however uncomfortably. Optimism never frees itself from realism. And in a conflict setting, cooperation goes hand in hand with competition. Paradox is triumphant.

Set against the deep social conflict of 19th century France, Victor Hugo's classic novel, *Les Misérables*, offers a profound and timeless illustration of choice in the tragic narrative. The central character, Valjean, is an honest man yet a thief, a doer of both selfless and selfish acts, a man capable of great compassion and intense jealously, a man who believes in God yet who also believes he can make and change his own fate. By any measurement, Valjean could have considered himself a victim in a major melodramatic narrative and behaved accordingly. Among other injustices, Valjean is sent to prison for 19 years for committing a petty theft in order to survive. And that is just the beginning. However, as the complex and dramatic plot unfolds, Valjean continues to reflect on his actions. He keeps learning from his experiences and makes choices—some better than others—about how to engage with diverse challenges as they emerge in his and others' lives. Valjean's story does not deliver dream justice. It continues a tumultuous path. However the path is one of Valjean's choosing. And this is the defining aspect of the tragic narrative as a conflict management tool.

As described earlier, Nelson Mandela employed a tragic narrative that gave his country choice, rather than the melodramatic storyline that many expected and felt was justified. After his presidency and his death, South Africa remains a nation managing complex tensions: division and unity; optimism and apathy; peace and violence; love and fear. The difficult conversations continue, in some cases using narrative-based facilitation, mediation and coaching tools to encourage the structured sharing of stories in diversity.

Practical steps to find your tragic hero

So how do we avoid engaging in the culturally ubiquitous conflict narrative of melodrama and begin the journey to discover our inner hero, who can accept the tragedy of the conflict and actively try to make the best out of it?

A good place to start is to use the following guidelines and sets of questions—drawn from the REAL Conflict Coaching System—to talk your friends and colleagues through their own melodramatic conflict narratives. Practice this a few times. It's easier if it relates to a conflict or situation that you are neither involved in nor feel strongly about. When you are involved in conflict yourself or have a strong view about a public interest conflict, it may be challenging to coach yourself from a melodramatic to a tragic narrative. Ideally a conflict management coach or a skilled friend would help you make this shift.

Once you become familiar with helping others work through their own tales of conflict, you will be on the path to being able to do the same for yourself and finding your own tragic hero in every conflictual situation.

As we have seen, a melodramatic narrative thrives on sweeping generalisations, polarised positions, stereotypical characterisations and a superficial story line. The questions below offer a starting point for unpacking these narrative elements in ways that enable you to offer storytellers greater clarity and comprehension about the conflict, to assist them to see that they do have choices and to identify what those choices are. This, in turn, leads to more confidence in engaging with the conflict and others involved in it.

1. Goal setting

What does the storyteller want to achieve by telling you the story? What is their goal in relation to the conflict? For example, do they want a greater sense of clarity and comprehension about what has happened and why? Do they want to identify their choices? Do they want to identify some strategies and skills to deal with the situation? Do they want all of these things or something quite different? Helping the storyteller continue to focus on their goal through the rest of the questions will help them make the narrative shifts they need. A particularly useful question might be, 'What needs to happen in this conversation so that you can say it was worth your time?'

2. Storytelling

Invite them to tell you the story. For example, ask, 'What happened?' Let the storyteller tell the tale in their own way without censorship or judgement from you. If it's a melodramatic pattern, then let's hear all about the victim, the villain and all the other characters. Notice the main theme of their story. For example, is it a 'What's happening?' story? Or could it be a 'Why me?' story? Is it a 'There's no hope' story or simply a self-righteous rant.

3. Explore and challenge

Now explore their story. Be curious, not judgmental. Identify possible gaps or cracks and shine a light in there by asking the storyteller to tell you more. What's missing in terms of time frames, people involved, history and related events, their action (or inaction). You want to be able to see the movie of what the storyteller says happened. Until you can see the story rolling out in front of you, keep asking questions. Encourage them to develop the plot and thicken the story. Unpack their generalisations. Encourage them to be as accurate as possible. For example, instead of talking about 'him' or 'her' or the 'new boss' and depersonalising the story, encourage the storyteller to use the real names of people and places. Challenge the storyteller – 'let the light in', as Cohen would say. Are there any inconsistencies in the story? Was it really like that? Could there be another explanation? When the storyteller does not have all the details, encourage them to notice the assumptions they are making. What evidence is there to back up the tale as they have told it?

4. Why does it matter?

The next stage involves digging deeper and asking the storyteller why the story matters. These questions begin to get at the issues of emotions, identity, power and values. Questions that may be useful include: 'Why does this matter so much?', 'What is it about the situation that is most important to you?', 'How is this situation getting in the way of your goals?', 'How is this affecting you?', 'What needs do you have that are not being met in this situation?'

5. Different perspectives

These questions are about considering different perspectives. In any conflict situation, there are three main perspectives:

- the storyteller's perspective
- the other person's perspective
- an objective perspective.

This stage is difficult. People in conflict are unlikely to be ready to consider a different perspective until they have had time to fully explore and explain their own perspective. When you think they are ready, then try asking questions like: 'What story do you think the other person would tell about what happened?', 'In what ways do you think the situation matters to the other person?', 'What do you think the other person would like to happen?', 'What are the other person's needs, identity, emotions, power?', 'How can you achieve your goal, taking into account the other's needs and other factors?'.

6. Alternative futures

Next, your role is to assist the storyteller to identify and develop other ideas and options – in other words, a new story with expanded choices. Try asking a 'wonder question', like: 'Suppose you woke up tomorrow and the conflict was miraculously resolved, what would you notice that would tell you something was different?', 'How would you notice?', 'Who else would notice?', or 'What would they notice?'.

Supporting the storyteller to develop a future story is not about narrowing the client's future to one neatly packaged scenario; rather, it is about increasing complexity and including variations and alternative stories, before evaluating whether and how those preferred futures can be achieved. Here it is equally important to 'reality test' the future story to ensure that it is not completely unrealistic. It is a careful balancing act to be able to do this without crushing the storyteller's optimism and vision entirely.

7. Steps towards the preferred future

By this stage, the storyteller should have a clear idea about what happened, why it matters, and what their preferred future would be like. Now it is time for the storyteller to develop action steps to work towards that preferred future. Your task here is to ask questions to support the storyteller identifying and committing to action steps. Action steps should be:

- specific (e.g. not just 'talk to Joe', but include details of time, place, what topics will be discussed, etc.)
- ordered logically (e.g. are the different steps staged or dependent?)
- reality tested (e.g. are the steps achievable?, what might their consequences be?)
- placed within a particular time frame
- reviewable.

Questions to ask the storyteller might include: 'What would be your first step that would make a difference?', 'What can you do yourself?', 'What do you need from others?'.

As indicated previously, points 1 to 7 are guidelines that may offer some insights into how to shift from a 'going nowhere' melodramatic conflict narrative to a tragic conflict narrative that can offer different perspectives and choice in a less than ideal situation.

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So next time you feel stuck in what seems to be an intractable conflict, overwhelmed by the enormity of a problem that is not of your doing, confused by a plethora of conflicting scientific data, or daunted by insurmountable challenges that threaten your own interests, know that you have a choice. You can take the predictable path of the melodramatic victim. Alternatively you can choose to tell a different tale and in doing so, find your own tragic hero.

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