



# BEING RELATIONAL

**The Seven Ways  
to Quality Interaction  
& Lasting Change**

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# Contents

00 Introduction

00 **Part One: WHAT IS YOUR APPROACH TO INTERACTION?**

00 CHAPTER ONE **Being Transactional—  
A way that works for Winners?**

00 CHAPTER TWO **Being Relational—The Seven Ways**

00 **Part Two: THE FOUR WAYS TO QUALITY INTERACTION**

00 CHAPTER THREE **Being Engaged**

00 CHAPTER FOUR **Being Centered**

00 CHAPTER FIVE **Being Grounded**

00 CHAPTER SIX **Being Clear**

00 **Part Three: THE THREE WAYS TO LASTING CHANGE**

00 CHAPTER SEVEN **Being Generous**

00 CHAPTER EIGHT **Being Humble**

00 CHAPTER NINE **Being Kind**

Epilogue: Orans—The Image of Being Relational



## Chapter 4

# Being Centered

**I**f you are not centered, your ability to engage is seriously impaired and may be completely negated. Keep in mind that being relational is not a step-by-step process. It's not a do this, then do that kind of thing. In order to promote quality dialogue, you want to do your best to be engaged, centered, grounded, and clear all at the same time. You may already have a concept in your mind of what it means to be centered, maybe not, or maybe it is not very well defined. What does it mean to be centered? That question may best be answered by thinking of what being centered *is not*.

You are not centered when:

- You snap.
- You have an immediate big reaction—whether expressed loudly or tightly—to something someone says, does, or fails to do.

- You find yourself pursing your lips, narrowing your eyes, stomping your feet, waving your arms wildly, tightening your fist, banging the table with your hand, flipping someone off, or making other bodily gestures expressing frustration, anger, or intimidation.
- You habitually join alongside others to blame someone else.
- You feel a welling up of negative emotion within you that completely unsettles you, so you shut down, you wall off, you close down.
- You run away, take off, escape into something pleasant or busy, or into a bottle or a pill, or curl up in a ball when something upsets you.
- You routinely come in big, immediately take charge, and start giving orders.
- You routinely withhold, say nothing, remain aloof, disengaged.

Are any of these, or perhaps all, familiar to you? Maybe, maybe not. As a winner, some of the above behaviors might actually work well for you and be in your repertoire, your bag of tricks, your learned habits that you call upon to help make you the winner that you are—to get what you want. But, when you respond out of habit, you are not centered, and you often find yourself regretting your actions and behavior, you tend to burn bridges and alienate others. In more enlightened moments, you may find yourself questioning why you respond that way, or questioning who you are or have become. Your centered self can quickly become subordinate to your personal reactivity.

With an understanding of how being engaged is essential to quality interaction and dialogue, you now see how these behaviors

do not fit within the focusing on both self and other concept of transformative conflict theory. But no one is perfect and there is a silver lining to being off center—if you are aware of it when it is happening. That awareness can open up a way for you to be present, attentive, and curious *about yourself*, the inside job that is required and has the potential to shift your outside interaction in a way that is healthy and authentic. You don't have to lose your way, even though it can feel like you are when your center is subordinated to your habitual personal reactivity. Everyone gets stuck from time to time in the habitual ways associated with their personal defense mechanisms. *How might you move more freely and gracefully in relation to others?*

You have had the experience of feeling in harmony with others and within yourself. That is the essence of being centered. It is both within you, in your center, and around you, in how you are with others. Recall how that felt in your body. Remember that feeling. It is a resource.

You have had the experience of feeling in harmony with others and within yourself. That is the essence of being centered.

## **Being Centered is Finding and Staying in the Center Within You**

When we talk about being centered, you might be thinking, “Here we go; they are going to go off on the whole Zen Buddhist thing.” Or you might be thinking, “Yes, exactly, everyone knows you have to attend to your soul, your spirit, your essence, in order to be your highest and best self.” Well, yes, but finding the center within you really starts first with your body and your brain. It starts with a

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very practical look at how our body and mind work together when we are heart centered and how they work when we are not. There are many degrees of centeredness and we may only find the *optimal* state a few times in our lives. Some find it often, others never at all. If you are an athlete, an artist, a surgeon, a performer, you know it as being “in the zone,” where you are moving or performing effortlessly, with strength and confidence, and you draw physical, spiritual, and emotional energy from the activity you are engaged in. You act from a place of knowing without thinking, a place of pure intuition—**your heart**. Louise experiences the zone often in her transformative mediation work with others and refers to it as being *in flow*—when she is aware in the moment, as well as on a meta level, is able to see what is unfolding as if from above, and is still able to surgically intervene at the same time in a way that parts the sea for the clients, out of which emerges for them something unexpected, something intuitive, something said in the perfect meaningful way. It’s effortless effort that comes from the heart.

Nothing is quite so identified with the center of your being as your heart. Yes, that organ beating within your chest has a special quality that, for thousands of years, has been associated with aspects of your being that are connected most intimately with who you are as a person—your conscience, your desires, your wisdom, your virtue, your peace, your *essence*. You feel it within you. It is the place where all these qualities of divine essence reside. It is also identified as the residence of a lot of dark aspects of you too. If you are going to be centered you need to spend time with this place in you and get in touch with its true nature.

Your heart is the conduit for the convertible energy of the body, the movement from off center to being centered. When you are centered, your heart is calm, peaceful, strong, wise, and expansive. You have a good heart. Maybe sometimes you doubt or forget that. But you *do* have a good heart if you are in touch with it and pay attention to it. We believe the true nature of your heart is good. Your heart will tell you when you go off center. Let's talk about how you can get back to center and hold steady there, even when you temporarily lose control, as you inevitably will. Everyone does—it's okay. You live in the real world. Lots of things affect you, throw you off center. That's normal.

Like we said, your heart will tell you when you are not centered. When you are stirred up, when emotions are on overflow, your heart races. When your pulse rate goes up by a mere ten beats per minute, whether two years old or eighty-two, you slip out of gear because the oxygen to your brain is constricted. This applies to you and to the other person you are with. It applies no matter how smart or worldly or experienced you are. So screaming at someone to change their behavior does not work. Indeed, neuroscientists tell us that being screamed at will cause more and longer emotional flooding, and is the last thing the brain will respond to when it is in overflow. In conflict, you have an experience that is mental, emotional, and physical. You become instantly more physically constricted and instantly more emotionally and mentally self-absorbed the moment you experience conflict. The experience of conflict with another person triggers your personal reactivity, hijacking logical thinking because your pre-frontal

In conflict, you have an experience that is mental, emotional, and physical.

brain, where rational thinking occurs, doesn't get the oxygen it needs to work optimally and this happens no matter how saintly or how smart and worldly you are. It doesn't take much for your pre-frontal rational thinking to lose its grip on your consciousness and for more primitive parts of your brain to take over. **It's neuroscience.**<sup>2</sup> Our brain is in three parts, often referred to as the *Triune Brain*. In conflict, the neural pathways in the brains of women and girls typically change track, engaging the limbic brain, or the emotional brain, which is the center of the brain. For men and boys, the neural pathways in conflict often bypass the limbic brain and flash directly to the brain stem, the reptilian brain, where survival instincts of fight, flight, freeze, and more recently named, feint, are triggered. And, the time it takes for the limbic or reptilian brain to be activated is a mere nanosecond, many times faster than the time it takes for the rational thinking pre-frontal

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cortex to be engaged. Thus, the likelihood of your brain being hijacked in conflict is high, and your ability to listen deeply and reflect, let alone your ability to be open to another when in a state of

conflict, is decreased dramatically. So, suspend your expectations that others will be centered in the face of conflict (and hope that those in your life do the same for you!) because, as a physiological reality, it is very difficult to remain centered when your reactivity is triggered. But you can do it.

Let's look at a scenario.

<sup>2</sup> See the works of Daniel Goleman, Daniel Siegel.

Imagine you are in the check-out line at the supermarket. You are in a bit of a hurry. Three people behind you in line, the mother of a crying, gooey-nosed two-year-old is yelling wickedly at her child to behave. “Stop It!!” she screams over and over. You are aware that it makes you uncomfortable—you are embarrassed for her, or perhaps you are aware of the judgment rising within you, “What a terrible mother” or “Women should keep their kids at home,” or “That poor child is exhausted and this woman insists on bringing her to the grocery store!” Or perhaps you get lost in a memory of when the same thing happened to you and how mortifying it was to be so helpless in a public place. Aware of some of these or other thoughts that race through your head, you take a breath. Fill your whole tank with fresh oxygen, a deep belly breath, and then exhale the energy attached to the thoughts, memories, and triggers. Come back to center, to calm in the face of this storm. Your awareness of what is going on in your mind and in your body is the key starting point. Then, coming from a place of center you might turn to the mother and say, “Some days are hard with kids. Please take my place in line.” Being centered helped you to be relational by offering kindness.

Also, consider in your imagination the screaming mother and the crying two-year-old. Indeed, the mother is in as much turmoil as the child. Her screaming at her daughter is because of her emotional flooding, which makes the situation worse for both of them, not to mention adding to the loudness and chaos for you and all the others in that system (the shoppers in the supermarket). Her brain may have lost capacity to think clearly as her oxygen was constricted; she was in the emotional flood zone. With practice, she might have some awareness and know that this is not her

normal way of operating. Your response from a place of center provides the pause for her where she might regain some oxygen for herself. And you have contributed to well-being for both of you and the system.

As for the mother, on the spot, she must meet her own strong emotions with a practiced skill of deep listening and reflection. The mother could soothe her emotional reactions by taking deep calming breaths, which would have a calming effect on her daughter as well. She could then consider her options and perhaps remove herself and the screaming two-year-old from the situation by going in the bathroom or outside, even if that meant leaving the cart full of groceries. From a place of center, now with her child and herself out of the stress of the onlookers and the pressure of the line, the mother could get on the same level, eye-to-eye with her two-year-old or sit the child on her lap, hold her, hug her, soothe her—which for a two-year-old is the equivalent of being deeply listened to and reflected. Once the child is calmed, her nose is wiped and she feels loved and understood, then the mother can say, “I know you are upset. Is it okay now? I need to go back into the store and buy our groceries and then we can go home.” or “You may hold my hand if you want, and you do not have to ride in the cart, but if you leave my side, I will need to put you back in the cart. I don’t want to lose you while I am checking out because I love you, okay?” A two-year-old can hear and understand the why that is offered to explain the behavior. Relational negotiation begins with being centered. Engaged from a place of center creates well-being—relational reciprocity.

Much of being centered comes from the ability to calm the body, namely to calm your primitively instinctual monkey mind

and your racing heart. One of the most ancient ways of doing so is by *concentrating on your breath*. Your breath that is with you fifteen to twenty thousand times a day. Your breath that is neutral and has no content. Your breath that is always with you and is constant. Your breath, the first act you took when you entered this world and the last act you will make when you exit. Isn't it exquisite to think of something as simple as the breath in this way? It is the breath that is your personal gateway to allowing yourself to be calm in the face of your storms.

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## Being Centered is Counter-Egoic

When we teach professionals how to engage, negotiate, and respond to difficult situations in relational ways and they experience conflict transformation first hand in their own real conflicts, we regularly hear, "It's amazing, It's so counter-intuitive." It can indeed seem counter-intuitive to our Western culture which values action and displays of power. However, it's not counter-intuitive. Rather, it's completely intuitive. The most accurate and responsive movement you make towards others that you are in conflict with comes from a place of stillness. It is heart centered. That stillness is the quality of being centered, and it is cultivated by breathing deep and awakening your inner-observer. When you are centered, right action will emerge. Being centered is counter to our human defense mechanisms. So, it is more accurate to say that

being centered is not counter-intuitive, it is counter-egoic. It is not what our society has spent much time understanding or valuing; we are not taught breathwork for instance in school, particularly in middle and high school where it would be most well placed. And, from a neuroscience perspective, deep breathing is not what your racing brain prompts you to do. In conflict, the brain sends messages to clamp down on the prefrontal oxygen flow believing you are in threat of death. To help the brain function optimally, you need to give it oxygen and the best way to do that is to practice deep breathing. When you practice intentional deep breathing, you also cultivate your heart center. To do these things effectively and in time, effortlessly, you must often *relax your intellect*. Now, *that is counter-egoic* and is also certainly counter-cultural!

In any given day, you might have episodes of chaos and moments of getting sucked into a place you didn't anticipate. Whether it's the alarm clock that didn't go off, or the child bellowing two minutes before the bus picks him up for school that he can't find his homework or his shoes. Whether it's the friend in the car pool line who lays a big piece of gossip on you, or the casual lunch conversation in which your colleague complains to you about your mutual boss. Whether it's your good friend complaining about their spouse, who just happens to be your spouse's good friend, or your buddy who works in another division of the corporation and just told you he heard there are going to be more layoffs in your department. In these moments, we have an opportunity to pay attention to our inner selves before doing anything.

Being centered is paying attention to your heart, mind, and your body. To pay attention, you will need oxygen. If your mind is jumbled, it means breathing through your thoughts before you

say or do anything. If your body is unsettled, it means bringing some awareness and acceptance of this state, not fighting it. Fighting your chaotic insides puts a clamp on the emotional turmoil that has energy and wants to be expressed. You might say, “Controlling my emotions is a good thing.” Indeed, this may sound appealing, but it is actually quite destructive and dangerous, and those who do this often generally suffer the consequences including ulcers, high blood pressure, obesity, digestive complaints, and hypertension, not to mention skin ailments and other manifestations of persistent stress.

Fighting back the chaos and clamping it down buries that strong emotional energy internally. That energy needs an outlet; your organs, belly, and heart are often the repositories, and the more you ignore or clamp down, the more destructive the energy is on your body, and often later on other people. Instead, if you honor and befriend the emotional unbalance in the moment by giving it room through your breath, you are likely to find its energy released when you exhale. In that moment, you have a much better chance to regain your authentic center again. It’s there; it’s waiting for you always. Your breath will lead you there.

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## **Being Centered is Finding and Staying Centered Among Others— Being Alert to Triangling**

In addition to finding the center within yourself, being centered calls you to find and stay centered in your relationship to others.

Losing your centeredness in relationship to others typically happens when someone comes to you with a complaint, gripe, or piece of gossip about someone else. So, when your colleague tells you on Friday that your boss, Mr. Uptight, wants all the projections for the next year's budget by Monday, breathe. Take a deep breath and find your center before you respond. This will probably mean deep listening, offering a reflection, and not responding right away.

When caught off-guard, if you respond right away, you are probably not coming from a place of centeredness. You could get sucked down the rabbit hole into your neighbor or your colleague's complaining. It is easy to fall. All it takes is for you to agree with them or respond by saying nothing, which in our Western society often is translated into agreement. There is a moment of discernment, but it is likely that, without being centered, you bypass it and habitually take a familiar path of agreeing with or saying nothing, thus escalating conflict and division.

Out of habit or in a reactive moment you might respond, "Oh my God, that jerk!" or "Oh, great (sarcastically). There goes my weekend." Without even thinking, you respond by agreeing. It's fuel for what we call off-centered triangling. Triangling<sup>3</sup> is when

Triangling is when you become part of someone else's conflict without even realizing it.

you become part of someone else's conflict without even realizing it, because you are not aware, you are not in tune with your inner cues, and you respond out of anger or fear or helplessness or

just laziness. You are not being centered; *you join with another person in a triangle in opposition to a third person who is not present.*

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. the work of Virginia Satir or *Interpersonal Conflict* by William Wilmot

Triangling is a strategy you may have learned on the playground as a child, generally perfected by most little girls by the time they reach fifth grade. Or, you may have seen it in your home of origin thousands of times. *It is an unhealthy way to build coalitions, generally in order to gain power.* You gain power and become closer to someone by being with them in opposition to a third person. If you think of it for a moment, this is a strategy you know well. It is often used by winners to gain power, saying, “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” History is full of examples of triangling on a large and often dangerous scale, think Nazis, aligned with German people, in opposition to Jews, or Jihadists, aligned with Muslims, in opposition to American “Infidels” or, to be balanced about it, Neoconservatives, aligned with American people, in opposition to Islamic “Terrorists.” Or how about purely American examples—Democrats, aligned with working class Americans, in opposition to “Right-Wing Conservative Extremists” or Republicans, aligned with freedom loving Americans, in opposition to “Left-Wing Radical Liberals.” It is just about the most toxic way of being in relationship with others, causing untold amounts of violence, suffering, death, and destruction.

Gain power and become closer to someone by being with them in opposition to a third person.

Triangling, as we said, is used to build coalitions. Your response in joining a coalition against someone builds momentum for the coalition building effort. Let’s look again at that more personalized, closer-to-home example. It is grist for the rumor mill when your colleague goes to the next person in the office or corporation with the same complaint about the boss and tells them, “Yeah, when I told Pete about what the boss did, you should have seen

his face. He's pissed too." Before you know it, a coalition against someone else is created and you are swept up in it, whether, in hindsight, you want to be or not.

There are often consequences to this that are neither desirable for the coalition builders nor for the joiners. As the coalition builds, the demonization of the third person gets exaggerated and distorted in order to draw in as many people as possible, even if they are objectively reasonable and neutral. The outcome of the coalition building is often an extreme characterization of the other—a characterization that is false, especially as broadly applied to a large group of people commonly labeled. Even where there may have been a kernel of truth, the triangle distorts and credibility is sacrificed in the end. Even when there may be genuine, even celebrated, differences, the triangling process exaggerates the differences, loses sight of the commonalities and injects greater friction into relationships.

Furthermore, as your experience will tell you, once you are **in** a triangle, it can be very hard to get **out** and reclaim a non-aligned posture. If you back out of a triangle you can be accused of sympathizing with or even supporting the demonized other. You risk alienating and breaking your relationship with the person who came to you with the complaint. You risk being ostracized yourself from the coalition group and being branded a traitor. Coalitions built in this way imprison with fear those who join them and prevent any authentic shifts in understanding of the demonized other.

Triangling is especially a trap if you are agreeable, if you consider yourself peaceful or non-confrontational or conflict avoidant, because, when you are approached by someone who has an *issue* with a third person, the tendency is to nod or to agree and

go along with what was said by the other person. But even if you follow the sage advice to stay out of it—not getting involved and not saying anything—this can have the same negative consequences as if you had agreed. In this hyper-connected, crowded world we live in, saying nothing and doing nothing is often construed as agreement and consent, and before you know it, you get lumped into the coalition: *the entire department* is upset.

Worse yet, when you are responding from a place that is off center and you have a tendency to agree because it's easy or it makes you feel cozy with and in the same situation with another person, or even safe momentarily, then there is a dangerous tendency actually *to add to the problem*. First, that cozy feeling you give to them, harmlessly forming a flimsy alliance, may prevent you from later being able to state your own views or from finding out more about the situation or from exploring other options for action. Also, as if agreeing with and forming false or flimsy alliances is not bad enough, you could even add to the brushfire of others' complaints and gossip with your own gasoline by making additional comments about your boss such as, "I believe it. I remember he did this to us last year too." The complainers disseminate complaints and gossip, which spreads like fire and you are caught up in it.

When that happens, *camps* begin to form in the office. This can happen too in families, or in communities about decisions made in local government. It can happen with any group, whether

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it's a group of three people or of millions. You know what this looks like as it is quite common and destructive to working relationships. Certain people who feel cozy with each other alienate themselves from other people who are doing the same kind of triangling amongst themselves. They all become disconnected from each other and often the original problem: the *real* concern held by the vast majority of people in the group—that there is not enough notice and time to do a good job for the boss (when he asked on Friday for the projections on Monday)—goes unattended, unaddressed. In its place is created an additional problem: the malcontent of gossip and the politics of destructive coalitions. Triangling is part of the landscape of our day-to-day existence, especially for winners. Doing nothing or adding to triangles is not being relational.

### **Being Centered is Choosing Not to Triangle in your Families and Family Systems**

Make no mistake, triangling isn't just a political, community, workplace, or extended family phenomenon. A triangling scenario might also easily exist right in your own home. Like when your middle school-aged son tattles on his teenage sister that she was still texting or on Facebook way past midnight, and you agree with your middle-schooler how wrong it is and you might even add to the problem by saying, "Let's hope *you* aren't like that when you get older." Whoa! A triangling response that doesn't come from a place of center not only creates distance between family members and causes a sense of separateness from each other, it can create

an additional fracture in the relationship between the other person and you. The *real* original concern that the younger child had when coming to you may have included such tender things as being worried about his older sister, not wanting his older sister to get bad grades, hearing her crying because something mean was put on Facebook, seeking love and attention for himself, being confused about parenting standards. However, because the parent responded in a way that was not centered, the real original concern that the child had never gets addressed. And, for those interested in family systems and how the decisions and responses of two people affect the whole, consider that middle-schooler. Is he now closer and more connected to his sister? Probably not, indeed the parent created a new wedge between them: I will love you more because you are not like she is. What will happen to the middle-schooler when he is a teenager and is on Facebook at midnight? Will he be more likely to be deceitful and even feel shame because the parent's response never dealt with the behavior, but made it about the child herself?

Triangling in your family relations unintentionally causes great harm. Likewise, when the leaders of businesses, departments, teams, boards of directors, non-profits, government agencies, and churches complain about or demonize others inside the "family" that they manage or live with, and the response pattern of triangling is repeated over and over, it causes the kind of emotional wounding and false alliances that take years for businesses to change or months of outside intervention in conflict transformation to shift, and often take decades for communities to recover from.

Triangling in your family relations unintentionally causes great harm.

So, when your colleague comes to you complaining about the boss, remember, this person is coming to you. They obviously like you or respect you or know you exist, at the very least. They are looking for an ear. The fact that you work in the same business has significance. You have a relationship with them. Each community, from the nuclear family to the multinational corporation and the community of nations, is its own system, a family system, with inter-working and inter-dependent people, all inter-related. The flash fire of triangling causes great damage. The fires of responses that are off center and do not come from the heart center burn through a family system. Next time you are faced with a triangling situation, consider not aligning with or adding to the problem by staying centered. We will address what a centered and unitive response can look like, but first, we want to share with you another type of triangling that is equally damaging to systems.

There is also danger in triangling even if you **don't** align and agree with the person coming to you with a complaint. Let's say that, instead of agreeing with and even adding to, you might be inclined to dismiss the complaint or to dismiss your colleague personally. You might say to yourself, *This is just a bunch of nonsense and I'm having nothing to do with it.* And you might tell your colleague just that. Maybe you say, "You complaining again? Be glad you have a job."

Or perhaps you might fashion a more benign or tempered response, "Well, somebody will figure it all out" or "Yeah, well, I'm just happy to be working." Whew! You might think to yourself, "I got myself out of that one." But we all know you didn't. Why? Because a person who has a problem or a beef with someone else and comes to *you* about the problem they have with that person

is looking for a number of things. If they are off center and unbalanced, they are likely to be seeking alignment, and when they don't get it, and instead get from you an experience of being dismissed or put down, then, in their own unsettledness, they are likely to seek out others in the family system, such as other neighbors, colleagues, co-workers, or family members. Their response now is likely to have more energy and to include *you* as well and sound like, "You got the memo about the due date on the projections for the budget? Stinks doesn't it? You know what Bill said? Says it's no big deal. What a suck-up!" What is the result? A new set of triangles. New problems, and now fractures in relationships you didn't have before—against *you*—new cliques. And you were trying not to get involved!

There might also be some who secretly agree with you, and so that alliance is formed as well, silently. The system also becomes predictable over time with which groups will respond in which way to new requests or demands. The system loses responsiveness. The system becomes non-dynamic. Ruts develop. Systems become closed, stuck in dysfunctional, predictable, non-flexible patterns. Over time, with repeated triangling responses, divisions emerge where there were none, and you may have contributed to this in the *way* you responded—off center, out of balance.

## **Being Centered is Being Complaint Free**

Triangling is serious business, so let's talk about how to be centered when encountering potentially destructive triangling. In devoting a life to understanding conflict in organizations and in families, we believe there is a *unitive, restorative* way to handle

We believe there is a *unitive, restorative* way to handle situations where triangling might occur. It starts with you and how you deal with things that cause you grief, pain, and discontent.

situations where triangling might occur. It starts with you and how you deal with things that cause you grief, pain, and discontent. It may seem obvious, but the best way to be centered and prevent destructive

triangling is to *avoid being the one who **starts** the triangling phenomenon by complaining to another person and expecting alignment.* You strive to be complaint free.<sup>4</sup>

So what does that mean? Sure, you have opinions and hurts and things you do not like. It takes awareness and discipline not to grouse, gossip, put others down, or speak poorly of someone else behind their back. Striving to be complaint free means that you are relational in response to things that trigger a negative reaction within you—things that piss you off, annoy you, push your buttons. As discussed above, when this happens, you do your best to stay internally centered. Also, as we discuss ahead, you remain grounded in truth, focusing on what *is*, not what should be or could be. You focus on the reality of the situation. You call upon your internal well of kindness, generosity, and humility. Then, *you make the decision not to carry your negative reaction and express it to another person, unless that person is the one who can effect the change you desire, and your request for change has objective legitimacy.* You choose not to complain to a third person about someone else. You choose not to lure another person to triangle with you in opposition to the person or entity you have a beef or problem with.

<sup>4</sup> See Bowen, Will, *A Complaint Free World* (2007, 2013)

Does this mean you just have to put up with something that is bothering you? Grin and bear it? Shut up and just do your job? Well, as we like to say in the mediation room, maybe and maybe not! Being complaint free does not mean you are a victim or that you passively suffer injustices, ill treatment, and abuse. It also does not mean you do not express your concerns or viewpoints. However, it also does not mean that you seek to control the behavior of others by pointing out all of the ways in which their behavior does not meet your standards of propriety. So there is a healthy way to remain centered while also seeking to address concerns and problems. It looks like this:

**First:** Is what is bothering you something that you, or anybody else for that matter, have little or no power to change? If so, then you don't bother complaining about it. Even if it's just a complaint about the weather and you're just making small talk, why put forth that negative vibe? You might think it will help break the ice with someone and start a friendly conversation, but you just don't do it. Instead you break the ice with a positive comment.

And when there are big issues that may seem totally out of your control to address, when you really can't go to anyone directly to address the problem—like your unhappiness with tax policies or decisions to use military force—you engage others in discussion and debate, and you take a relational problem-solving approach. It's not complaining to discuss your views with others on big issues. In fact, if you are silent about big problems just because you feel they are issues that are over your head and out of your control,

you might actually be complicit in condoning them. You are a citizen, a member of the community, and what you think matters. When you are relational, you do express your views, but you don't complain. You don't point blame at a person or group thus setting up, joining, or adding to a destructive triangle. You address issues and policies, and

Building coalitions to address wrongs, injustices, and problems is not complaining and destructive triangling when it involves dialogue on issues. We encourage that.

resist attacks on people and their personalities. Building coalitions to address wrongs, injustices, and problems is not complaining and destructive triangling when it involves dialogue on issues. We encour-

age that. But when your complaint becomes an attack on another person or group of people, dialogue on issues is lost and the goal is merely to demonize the opposing group. So, you don't just express the negative side of your views and stop there. It's not "I don't like . . ." Instead it's "I would like . . ." You look for solutions. And you engage in dialogue, asking others what their views are, in an attitude of deep listening. You work to get information and to become more knowledgeable about the consequences associated with the change you seek. You seek to persuade and influence others, and you listen and are open to being persuaded and influenced by them.

**Second:** If the problem is one that is not too big, is there something you can do differently to change the situation? Often you can head off a complaint at the pass and save yourself needless suffering by changing your own behavior.

You look at that option first. This doesn't mean that you just put up with something you don't like, or that you go way out of your way to avoid dealing with the issue or the person, you simply consider, "Is there something not too burdensome I can do that will make the situation better for myself?" If there is, then you do it and make the complaint disappear. There are a myriad of possibilities for constructive simple action.

**Third:** Is the problem one that is objectively real or is it a result of your unreasonable expectations or your inability to deal with things as they *are* as opposed to how you think they *should* be? This calls upon you to be grounded, which is discussed ahead more fully, but if your complaint stems from your egoic need to control others, to always be right, and to always know best, then your request for change probably is not objectively legitimate. This doesn't mean that you ignore bad behavior, but you don't let your pride, arrogance and ego get in the way of being open to the ways of others. You engage with them before criticizing and complaining. You are humble in considering that your way might not be the only way. You are generous in not picking apart and correcting every little imperfection in another person—especially in your family, where being relational begins.

**Fourth:** If the problem is one that someone else can address, then you take the issue to that person directly. If you have a problem with a particular person, you go to that person only. When you go to them, you are clear, stating the facts surrounding the issue as you know them. You do not

exaggerate or generalize. You do not minimize or gloss over. You know that underlying your complaint there is a request for something. You make a request for the change that you desire. You may need to negotiate with them, and you do that relationally, using all of the tools and disciplines associated with being relational, which you will learn throughout this book.

Following this path, you avoid becoming the person who *starts* a wave of destructive triangling. You can also be the person who *stops* destructive triangling by offering a unitive response. Let's look at how to do that.

## **Being Centered is Choosing Unitive Triangling**

Say you are aware of the feeling that you are about to get sucked into someone else's problem or conflict, it might be a flutter of your heart, or a quickening of your pulse, or maybe it's a certain excitement or even shock at the gossip that is shared with you. Now what? You remain calm and aware of the unsteadiness or the flutter in you. Your body provides wonderful cues that something important is happening in the exchange, in the interaction you are now in, whether you invited it or not.

Now you pause and listen deeply and fully, not yet responding. You find the center within you through your breath. Pause and breathe. Feel that belly breath. No one else will even notice. It's all personal, just for you. Let the oxygen fill your body. Listen fully and completely to the complaint, the gripe, the gossip, the

putdown. Suspend your judgment so you can listen fully without having to judge. You are aware of the leaning you may have one way or the other to join or to dismiss. You remind yourself of possible destructive triangling responses—agreeing with and adding to the complaint, or dismissing the complaint and putting down the complainer. Instead, you honor the speaker's situation and honor your own presence. The other person complaining may be loud or ugly or funny. They may make you uncomfortable. Don't fight that, instead befriend that, be curious about it and stay steady. Stay centered, fully awake, and open—ready to be responsive.

When the person stops complaining about the other person, *offer a reflection*—part of being engaged. Reflect back exactly what they said. This is not reflecting back what you think they meant to say. This is *reflecting back exactly what they said, their words, not yours*—their stated meaning, not your interpretation. Wait, pause and breathe again. Repeat as necessary. Be amazed at the effect your centeredness has on them. They are likely to calm down and soften the rough edges of their complaint as they sense that you are not immediately joining in it. They are also likely to expand on the complaint and get underneath to a core concern that is often rooted in fear. What a service you just provided, making a choice to live relationally by staying centered and not getting sucked in or adding to a problem, which often in turn provides them the space and opportunity to become more open to themselves and their otherwise narrow experience. Being centered allows you to be responsive, not reactive. Being centered allows them to think more clearly, more thoughtfully, more fully about a situation as well.

Being centered allows you to be responsive, not reactive.

Responses to others that are not centered come from your own discomfort, inadequacies, fear, past hurts, and anger which are all forms of *personal reactivity*. Reactivity rather than thoughtful responsiveness is fuel for triangling where you become part of someone else's conflict without even realizing it. There is an aspect of forbearance in being centered. Whether it is in the moment that you pause rather than operating out of personal reactivity or it is in the much more disciplined act of holding your sharp tongue or keeping your prattling to yourself, there is a decision to be your own best self, a decision that emanates from being centered.

You can do a lot when engaging from a place of center, depending on the situation. It allows you to be able to listen deeply, even if for a mere two or three minutes. When you offer a reflection of the real essence of what they said, it allows them to feel a connection with themselves, to hear themselves, sometimes as if for the first time. It also allows the other person to feel the connection with you. The interaction becomes more personalized. Coming from center allows an opening, a space, where the speaker, complaining and unhappy, now has *a place to unload and be restored* to their own center where they can consider alternatives. In that space, the speaker is now safe and has nothing to resist or defend against. In that space, they might even edit or retract some of what they said about the person they were complaining about. They may have a moment of insight or clarity—that they had exaggerated a bit, their view of the person they have a problem with is too narrow, or maybe they embellished or puffed it up and it's really not quite that way. They may even chuckle at themselves. All this transformation has the potential to occur because you engaged from a place of center.

In this changed atmosphere, now, depending on your relationship to the person—as colleague, boss, family member, or fellow citizen—you can offer things like, “I understand part of your concern, but I also have questions as to why you think that.” Or “I see your point of view and appreciate it. I would like to know more of the total story from the others, and then see from there what might be done.” Or “Yes, I have found that person or situation to be difficult too; but I’ve also known that person to be fair or willing to discuss an issue. You might want to consider meeting with her about it.” Or “I understand that you are upset about this. Are you thinking of doing anything about it? Maybe or maybe not? Can I help you think it through?” These questions open doors for the other to consider options and think about information that is needed for informed decision-making and action that promotes well-being. There is a steadiness in being relational, and because you are approaching a situation engaging from your heart, you respond more authentically. You ask the kind of questions that others might not dare to ask, not because you are brazen or naïve, but because you are engaged and responding with a curiosity and a desire for fully informed thinking and robust understanding. This allows you to work hard to get information and to be willing to give information.

You are not fearful about the response that you might get to an open question—a question to which you do not know the answer, a question that is not leading or answerable with a yes or no. Coming from a place of center does not

Coming from a place of center does not guide or direct conversation in one way, nor does it seek to control negotiations. Being centered allows you to follow and to experience the natural rhythm of a conversation or a negotiation.

guide or direct conversation in one way, nor does it seek to control negotiations. Being centered allows you to follow and to experience the natural rhythm of a conversation or a negotiation. They are not linear. It's not a step-by-step thing—identify the problem, explore interests, brainstorm solutions, form agreement. No. You have the ability to follow a meandering and sometimes circular path. And you follow that path through to quality decision making, which is not always about problem solving in that moment. You refrain from trying to force others to do what you think is best because you engage from a place of deeper knowing and belief that together, through dialogue, clarity will emerge and a well-informed decision will be made. Action, then or later, is then a natural byproduct.

You believe that there is something positive that can come out of the interaction itself, and you set a positive frame, making this belief transparent. You know from Transformative Conflict Theory and the theory of relational reciprocity that something positive often does come out of quality interactions. Your belief is also supported by neuroscience, which confirms that the brain scans for the positive frame, and upon hearing it or experiencing it, becomes more alert and receptive. So, you begin your interactions with, “I am glad we are talking about this and hope and believe something positive will result.” You are patient, not hurried. You have confidence in whatever unfolds.

Consider your own life, those times when you responded in a thoughtful and centered way, without personal reactivity, even though you may have been like a tornado or a fire on the inside. You centered yourself, took some deep breaths in the moment or over a period of time. You regrouped and responded differently

than you otherwise would have. When you choose to respond to the triangles of daily living in ways that come from a place of center, you create a *unitive triangle*— a way of relating to the others involved that restores the quality of the interaction itself, a way that fosters personal strength and openness to the other person as a first option. Your choice of unitive triangling rather than destructive triangling not only helps to restore the fractured interaction between two people or groups, but also enhances the quality of interaction between you and the complainer, and additionally strengthens the experience between you and the third person complained about when and if they learn of your tempered and steady response.

When you engage from a place of center, this is another huge payoff for you. As you practice being centered and responding to triangles in a unitive way, expect restoration of your own personal strength and a more steady sense of yourself when confronted with future conflicted situations. Anticipate the benefit of a new or renewed openness to different points of view with the strength to explore collaborative solutions with others in ways you never before realized. When faced with triangling situations, which are everywhere, you remain centered and you choose unitive triangling as a first option, which increases

*Unitive triangle*—  
a way of relating to the others involved that restores the quality of the interaction itself, a way that fosters personal strength and openness to the other person as a first option.

When faced with triangling situations, you remain centered and you choose unitive triangling as a first option, which increases well-being for all, including yourself.

well-being for all, including yourself. That is a powerful way to create change without destruction and division.

And if you are a parent of young children, you have scores of opportunities to foster unitive triangling each time a child complains to you about a sibling, especially in those situations where the sibling in question is also present, including common scenarios such as boys roughhousing too aggressively and the younger grouses or squeals about being hurt or picked on. Rather than jumping in to align with one or the other, to dismiss or correct the child you are displeased with, instead consider a reflection and assist the complaining child to make a request of the other child. You will be amazed at what happens.

## Questions for Your Consideration

In exploring Being Centered consider the following questions. If you are not sure about your answers, go back and visit the chapter.

- What do you notice is going on in your body when you are in conflict?
- In a difficult or uncomfortable situation, which of your responses to the situation makes things worse?
- Thinking of a difficult or bad experience you had with someone, how could your response to them have been different?
- How do you relax your personal reactivity when someone says something to you that you think is completely false or outrageous?
- What do you do when you have a complaint about someone?

- What do you do when someone comes to you with a complaint about another person?
- What do you do to try to prevent unhealthy coalitions from forming when people disagree?