

Victim One, Victims All (unedited transcription)

There is one dysfunctional characteristic that virtually all of us share. We manifest it as individuals, as couples, and as families, and some say that our culture is actually built upon it. It is so insidious and all-pervasive that we even do it to ourselves. That imbalance is victimization. One odious characteristic of victimization is that it seldom stops with the victim. Invariably the victim will turn around and victimize others, in a self-perpetuating chain that keeps victimization going forever.

Victimization – a simple definition

It is exploitation for personal gain. The key word here is exploitation, which implies that one gains at the expense of another.

Oppressor and victim -- our natural state?

“Does not everything exploit in order to survive?” some will ask. One who exploits takes without giving in return. He is the victimizer, his prey is the victim. In the natural realm nothing survives very long that takes without giving. Those who do so deplete their sources of sustenance. If victimization is so destructive both to the victimizer and the victim, how can it persist? Only in an artificially-sustained environment can victimization persist for any period of time. We humans have created exploitative environments for ourselves and the question remains as to how long they will be able to sustain themselves.

How did victimization begin?

How did the victim archetype originate and then become entrenched in our culture? “In our culture” is part of the answer, because the victim archetype, unlike many others, such as the quester (one who searches for purpose in life) and the journeyer (one who seeks out new lands, peoples, experiences), is not intrinsic to the human experience. Our pre-agricultural ancestors, along with the non-agricultural peoples who still survive in this day, would find this chapter meaningless. It would be like talking to them about presidential politics.

Prior to the advent of agriculture, humans lived in the Circle Way, which means that relationships were all on the same plane, and interactive. The organizational structure was the clan, which averaged from 15 to 25 people, all related by blood and spirit. This relatedness was complimentary and mutually supportive, and there was no established or permanent structure beyond the clan, so there was not the basics for the predatory relationships that support victimization, to evolve.

The victim archetype rooted itself in the very beginnings of our civilized culture right along with the first domesticated plants and permanent villages. It was then that we converted from a life based on abundance to a life based on scarcity. As pre-civilized gatherer-hunters we trusted in Mother Earth to provide. Abundance was all around us; all we had to do was accept what we needed from her open hand. We did not have to work for it, there was no price to pay, there was no one to regulate it, tax it, or make a profit from it. And then came agriculture.

Now, if we wanted to eat, clothe or shelter ourselves we had to work; procure land, prepare it, plant it, harvest it, and then we could eat or make clothing. We entered the culture of scarcity. This created the middleman. If I did not have land and someone else had control of it, I had to work out terms with him one way or another. If I was to eat and provide for my family. Enter taxes, laws and governments. We now have a culture of victims and victimizers.

Sadly, it did not stop there. It parasitized all aspects of life including emotional, psychological and spiritual. A dual class system evolved: producers and parasites. All government is dual class. Various socio-religious constructs surfaced to justify this system: the divine right of kings, democracy, socialism, and so on. They all had one thing in common – they created an illusion of equality in order to legitimize the victimizers and placate the victims.

Academics like to draw clear distinctions between the various dual class systems, even charting them on evolutionary scales. You will find each of them perching their personal favorite at the top of the scale as the epitome of political evolution. Political activists are often more extreme about their preferences, even to the point of being willing to die for them. At best one system might be a kinder, gentler version of another, because when the frosting is licked off, there lies the same old, moldy two-layer class cake.

A pillar of our culture

The victim role is not only entrenched in our culture, it is held in esteem. “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses... the wretched refuse...” (From the Emma Lazarus poem, “The New Colossus” at the foot of the Statue of Liberty) is the message the United States sent out to the world during the immigration heyday a century ago; we sanctify martyrs whether they be religious, political, social or cultural; “Turn the other cheek” (Matthew 5:39) is a dictum from our predominant religion.

Popular culture romanticizes the victim. There’s the joke about country music being all about, “I just got fired, my woman left me, my pick-up truck broke down, my dog up and died, and I don’t have enough money for another beer.” Linda Ronstadt’s 1977 song Poor, Poor, Pitiful Me (Warren Zevon, 1973 Warner-Tamerlane Publishing Corp & Darkroom Music (BMI)) reflects our adulation of the victim. As if the title weren’t enough, it is repeated over a dozen times in the song and driven home in the lyrics:

Well I lay my head on the railroad track Waiting on the Double E But the train don't run by here no more Poor poor pitiful me	Poor poor pitiful me Poor poor pitiful me Oh these boys won't let me be Lord have mercy on me Woe woe is me
Poor poor pitiful me Oh these boys won't let me be Lord have mercy on me woe is me	Poor poor pitiful me Well I met a boy in the Vieux Carres Down in Yokohama He picked me up and he threw me down Woe He said "Please don't hurt me Mama"
me Well I met a man out in Hollywood Now I ain't naming names Poor poor pitiful me Well he really worked me over good Just like Jesse James Yes he really worked me over good He was a credit to his gender Put me through some changes Lord Sort of like a Waring blender me	Poor poor pitiful Oh these boys won't let me be Lord have mercy on me Woe woe is me Poor poor poor me Poor poor pitiful Poor poor
Lord have mercy on me Poor poor pitiful me Poor poor pitiful me	poor me Poor poor pitiful me Poor poor poor me Poor poor pitiful me

Oh these boys won't let me be
Lord have mercy on me
Woe woe is me

Here are a couple of my favorite quotes that illustrate the victim-victimizer basis of a currently popular Western form of government: Benjamin Franklin is reputed to have said that democracy is two wolves and a sheep deciding what to have for dinner, and newspaper columnist Dave Barry recently phrased it this way, "In a democracy, you say what you like and do what you're told." Both of these quotes allude to the fact that we have institutionalized the prey-predator relationship, which has resulted in three unnatural scenarios:

1. Sanction to prey upon our own species.
2. Establishment of permanent and structured prey and predator classes.
3. Checks and balances to maintain the classes.

The here-and-now

The upshot of this institutionalized dual-class system is an omnipresent prey-predator situation – a culture where virtually every interaction, whether it be children with parents, adults with each other, or people with the natural realm, is victim based. What does this mean for the average person? For most it boils down to lives of anxiety and mistrust. There seems to always be someone who wants to either control or exploit you. Everything has a price tag. Everywhere you turn there is a rule or a regulation governing your behavior. In this sort of environment there can be no true relaxation, no real trust. The perpetual question is either "what's in it for me?" or "what does he want from me?"

Although victims find ways to numb the pain---drugs, diversions and anti-social behaviors are the most common---most people are not content just being victims. They in turn, feel they must victimize in order to keep their heads above water, both physically and emotionally. Most people will do this either directly through enterprises which prey upon others or indirectly by cheating, stealing and lying.

What are the signs of a victim?

Feelings of resignation and acts of rebellion. You hear it all the time, you probably say it often enough yourself---statements that begin with "I have to," "I must," "I need to," "I'm obligated," "I made a commitment," and the like. Then there are the even more defeatist statements such as "Whatever," and "I don't have any choice."

Before many of us resign ourselves to being victims, we will rebel. We might become a classic political revolutionary or a religious heretic; most often we act out our rebelliousness on an every-day-basis by being competitive, aggressive and violent. As victims we find it easy to justify lying, stealing, cheating and gossiping. We hold negative attitudes toward taxes, politicians, school, jobs and parents. We find it difficult to live in the now, to find the bliss of the moment.

Instead we future-project. We live for that glorious time when things will be different. It may be the standard escapism from the every-day grind, looking forward to the week-end, the vacation, or retirement---the list is endless and all of this boils down to escaping from ourselves, rebelling from ourselves. We have internalized victimization to the point where we become our own victimizer, we become self-judging, self-critical. We have created an ideal self which exists only in our minds, only in the future.

This ideal self becomes our critic, our victimizer. The present is intolerable; the only way we can justify our existence and get by day to day is to imagine that there is a brighter future, that we could be someone other than we are, so our critic continually chastises us for failing to make

strides toward becoming our ideal. We end up becoming self-loathing, often turning to escapism and self-abuse. In the extreme, we recognize the impossibility of ever becoming our ideal---of ever escaping victimization---and throw in the towel by either committing suicide or joining an organization (usually religious or political) in which we are complete puppets. We could not please our own critic and meet our own ideal, so we sign ourselves over to someone else's critic in order to meet their ideal.

The signs of victimization on a cultural level are so endless and all-encompassing that they practically define the culture. Colonialism, penal and judicial systems, the military, the profit based economy, reservations for native populations, class systems, segregation, born-into-sin/salvation based religions---all of these cultural institutions and more are no more than sanctioned, institutionalized victimization. In all of them somebody has to lose. Usually the "winners" are few and the losers are many.

Our victim-based culture is reflected strongly in the entertainment industry. Oftentimes when I'm working with a client who is struggling with victimization, the Linda Rondstad song "Poor, poor, pitiful me" comes to mind. The core of country music is victimization songs---"my woman took off with my best friend, I lost my job, my dog died and my pick-up truck broke down," and so on, are prevalent themes. Blues music is similar and the themes are prevalent in other forms of music as well. The most popular television programs, reality shows, game shows and sitcoms are built around victimization themes as are most Hollywood movies.

All of this makes sense to me on an intellectual level and yet I have trouble recognizing it withing myself. How can I recognize it on a deep feeling level. Ask yourself if you are truly happy, if you are doing what you really want to do. If you are truly content with your intimate relationships and if you not only accept but cherish the person you are. When I ask most people these questions, they admit that they are leading lives of quiet desperation. Many feel defeated and are just going through the motions of living, and end up suffering chronic depression because of it. In fact, victimization may be the primary cause of depression.

When we feel disempowered and unable to address its cause, we sometimes respond by drifting into the state of torpor that we call depression. Some describe it as though it were a blanket of snow covering everything. They know there is life under the snow but it is hibernating, it is muffled under this heavy, dark blanket that numbs everything and makes it feel so inaccessible, so far away. The blanket makes them feel they can no longer effect the means and ends of their existence, so they begin to shut down and deny that existence.

All creatures are designed for one essential purpose--to be active players in life. When that is not a viable option, life itself is denied that individual. Depression becomes his coping mechanism; he disengages from life and retreats from it to the point where he is no longer being actively victimized. He goes on subsisting in this dulled and diminished state until such time as either his situation changes or his life ends.

Depression is a survival mechanism, intended to be temporary. However, because victimization is endemic to our culture, so also is depression. It then becomes the chronic state of being for a terribly great number of people.

"What can I do about it?"

You have already done something. Awareness is the first step in healing, and you now know how deeply victimization permeates your life, along with recognizing its cultural roots. The second step is to break the pattern of victimization by becoming self-empowered. This is quite a challenge in a culture that constantly reinforces victim patterns. But it is not impossible. What you feed grows; if you sever your victimizing relationships and surround yourself with healthy, empowered people you can change. Once you open the window to change, a momentum begins that eventually feeds and carries itself.

This is because our victim self is not our natural self, it is merely a learned behavioral pattern. We are designed and programmed to be self-empowered, self-actualized and to live in a state of bliss. When our natural self is given half a chance to see the light of day, it emerges with a vengeance as though it were a bud long suppressed by the cold and dark, and it is now exploding into the returning sun.

How can I feed this rebirthing of my natural self?

Awareness of our victim pattern is not enough. Because we are creatures of habit and pattern we must create a new pattern to supplant the old one. In order to do that we need to quit reinforcing the old pattern. Every time we enact it we strengthen it. Fortunately the reverse is also true. Every time we catch ourselves falling into the old pattern and do not enact it, we weaken its grip. In order to do that effectively we have to do it consistently. That means a zero tolerance approach to victim behaviors.

The hurdle to overcome here is that few of us recognize all of our victim behaviors, much less at the time we are sliding into them. Here's where we need the help of those close to us, and here's the reason we need to sever our victim-based relationships and surround ourselves with self-empowered people. The one time it is not necessary to sever relationships is when we are in relationship with individuals who are equally dedicated to healing.

Why do I need help?

There is no such thing as self healing. All of our behavioral patterns are relationship patterns, which is why it is critical that we be in healthy or healing relationships in order to break imbalanced patterns.

How can we best help each other?

We can help each other break the victim pattern by acting as each other's mirrors – reflecting back the victimizing behavior we see being enacted.

This needs to be done consistently and promptly, on the spot, so that the pattern can be nipped in the bud to prevent it from being enacted. I need to stress consistency, as it is critically important to the success of mirroring and breaking the victim pattern. Missing just a couple calls can allow someone to reinforce the old pattern and it may take days for that person to catch up again.

In order to be involved in this mutual mirroring, participants need two things, mutual consent and mutual trust. Without either, buttons will invariably be pushed and egos will bristle. With trust and consent it is much easier to separate the behavior from the person, and then the person is much less likely to react to being called on the behavior.

This mirroring needs to be done as simply as possible. All the mirrorer does is raise a flag indicating that he or she perceives that a victim behavior is beginning. This can be done with a couple words or perhaps just a look or nod. Remember that this is just an awareness tool. It is up to the enactor to take personal responsibility for her actions and to replace her intended victim behavior with a healthy one. Mirroring is not a time to talk about the behavior, it is not a time to issue advice or play psychiatrist. There is no judgement involved here, it is simply a flag raising to draw the person's attention to what you perceive as her potential victim behavior. Notice I say “what you perceive as.” There are times when the mirrorer is going to make a wrong call, and that is ok. It is better to err than to miss a call.

Here's a review of the steps:

1. Awareness
2. Break the pattern by mirroring
 - A. Need trust and consent
 - B. Do it promptly
 - C. Do it simply – just raise flag
 - D. No judgement
 - E. Zero tolerance – need consistency

The Enabler: The Victim's Accomplice

Victims seldom suffer alone. There is a creature called the enabler who is attracted to the victim like a fly is to dung. Let me define the enabler, and at the same time illustrate the victim-enabler relationship with this example (which is exaggerated for purposes of illustration):

Victim: "Poor, pitiful me."

Enabler: "Oh, you poor soul, you have been wronged, let me help you."

The enabler demonstrates the three classic characteristics of his role:

- Compassion (Oh, you poor soul)
- Reinforcement (You have been wronged)
- Rescue (Let me help you)

Sometimes two, and most often all three, of these characteristics are present in the enabling relationship; however, in order to be a bonafide enabler, one has to exhibit only one of the three, and any one qualifies.

Victims and enablers come from the same stock—the same out-of-balance family patterns that produce victims, produce enablers. In fact, victims and enablers will often switch roles, with the victim reaching out to enable the enabler when she feels victimized.

And yet there is a core difference between the two—victims can exist alone; enablers cannot. All a person needs in order to feel victimized is a reason. Because of the emotional nourishment he gains from being victimized, he might even invent the reason. He could even heighten the emotional charge by choosing to suffer alone. Those who do so consistently usually end up self-destructing, which could manifest as anything from chronic depression to suicide.

Sometimes the victim will seek out an enabler; most often that is not necessary, as enablers are dependent on victims to play their role, so they actively search for victims.

The great disservice that enablers provide to victims is in reinforcing the victim role. Without the enabler, the victim has to perpetuate his own illusion which is not only not always possible, but there's room for the voices of other perspectives to be heard. When the enabler reinforces the victimization behavior, it is all the harder for the victim to gain perspective and realize what thin ice he is standing on.

The Passive Enabler

Many enablers do not recognize themselves, and they go undetected by others, because they do not actively act out their role. They either:

- stuff their thoughts and feelings, or
- go along with whatever the individual or group says or does.

They are enablers just the same, because the three characteristics of the enabler--compassion, reinforcement, and rescuing--are still there. Silence gives tacit approval to the victim. She interprets it as compassion, and it reinforces her victimization. By going along with the victim, even passively, the enabler rescues her.

In fact, passive enabling is often more destructive to the victim than active enabling, because the victim can interpret the enabler's "silence" to most reinforce her behavior. There is a saying: "Not to speak is to speak." This means that when we do not voice our truth, the effect of our truth--or its misinterpretation--is still felt. In the case of the passive enabler, the saying would be more accurate if it were "Not to speak is to shout."

Another Scenario

Now let us revisit the above "Poor, pitiful me" dialog, substituting an emotionally-healthy individual for the enabler:

Victim: "poor pitiful me."

Healthy respondent: "I can see how you are suffering, perhaps there is another way to look at it. If you wish to help yourself through this, I will support you."

There are three vital parts to this response:

- Empathy ("I can see how you are suffering...")
- Perspective ("perhaps there is another way to look at it")
- Support ("If you wish to help yourself... I will support you").

Notice how these aspects of the response differ from the enabler. Instead of compassion we have empathy, the primary difference being that the compassionate respondent relates so strongly to the victim that he is emotionally pulled into the victim's reality. In doing so, the respondent validates that reality, thus reinforcing it. The empathetic response, on the other hand, is an acknowledgment--and only an acknowledgment--of the victim's feelings. In this way, the respondent shows respect for the victim and his reality, without buying into it and thus further validating it.

In the second part of the response, the enabler seals the lid on the victim being victimized by stating, "you have been wronged." The healthy respondent, on the other hand, does the complete opposite and tosses the lid away by saying, "perhaps there's another way to look at it," he has encouraged the victim to open the curtains and look out the window to see what other possibilities there might be. In the last part of the response the enabler not only acknowledges and reinforces the disempowerment of the victim, but tells him it is just fine for him to sit and wallow in his misery while the enabler takes it upon himself to either apply a band-aid or right a wrong. The healthy respondent, on the other hand, encourages the victim to empower himself and offers to help him; however the offer is very different from the enabler's, because the healthy person's offer is not to do it for the victim, but to assist the victim only in helping himself.

There is no stopping us!

We can change a culture because a culture is its people, a culture is us. Change begins from the ground up. If each of us takes personal responsibility for our life, we will touch the people around us in the most profound way possible – example. We will enliven something within them that they know to be intrinsically right, intrinsically in balance. Nobody really wants to be a victim and nobody feels good in a deep sense when they victimize someone else. We are social creatures, we care for our own kind. We want to see others in their bliss as much as we want to be in bliss ourselves, and our ancestral memories and genetic makeup are on our side. All we have to do is get over the inertia of the old, sick pattern and the rest will take care of itself. We just have to let our real self out of his cage and he will gladly blossom and dance in the sunshine.