

Darth Vader Killed Your Father

Stephen R Balzac

*"I have never met a perfect master."
-- Rabbi Mitchell Chefitz*

That a master is not perfect is hardly surprising; after all, while perfection in any capacity is something to strive for, it can never be achieved. While the fact of imperfection is, therefore, of no great consequence, the nature of that imperfection may be. Imperfection can run the gamut from the instructor who wears loud shirts or makes awful puns to Darth Vader, a man who blew up planets, slaughtered billions of people, and broke a Windu. While very few people will ever meet a Darth Vader, there is still plenty of room within that range for the master whose imperfections totally destroy trust in them, and, indeed, reveal them not to be the person they appeared to be.

When such an event occurs, the emotional reactions can be extreme. It is akin to having a close friend or relative die suddenly in a car accident: there is no warning, no time to prepare or adjust. The shock comes out of nowhere, and the trauma can be severe. There are several reasons for this.

*"I am your father."
-- Darth Vader*

In *Star Wars: A New Hope*, Obi-Wan Kenobi tells Luke Skywalker that, "Darth Vader killed your father." Darth Vader, a man not exactly known as a paragon of virtue, contradicts Obi-Wan, claiming that he really is Luke's father. In *Return of the Jedi*, Obi-Wan explains that it's all a matter of perspective: Annakin Skywalker was a good man; when he turned to the Dark Side of the Force and became Darth Vader, the person Obi-Wan knew was dead: Darth Vader had symbolically killed Annakin Skywalker.

When someone is symbolically dead, there's a problem.

Although Obi-Wan's explanation could, at one level, be considered nothing more than Jedi word games, at another level it expresses a deep psychological truth. When someone we know and are close with harms or betrays us in some fashion, it can create a state of profound psychological dissonance. It doesn't much matter whether that person is a parent, a teacher, a priest, a

sensei, or some other trusted figure in our lives. If the act is serious enough, the results are pretty much the same: it is suddenly revealed that the person we thought we knew doesn't really exist. The psychological response this evokes is much the same as if the person actually had died.

When someone dies, a healthy person enters the grieving process. According to Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, this process consists of five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, sadness/depression, and acceptance. The stages do not necessarily occur in the order listed, nor will any given person necessarily experience all the stages. However, when facing the death of a loved one, most people will experience some of the stages. Denial is particularly common. It is not unusual for the bereaved to experience a sense of unreality, a disbelief that the loved one is actually dead. They might become angry with the person for dying, or at God for taking them away. They may become angry with themselves for not having done "something" to prevent the death. Bargaining with God is also a normal reaction: for example, "Take me instead!" Eventually sadness sets in, in some cases becoming serious depression.

*"There's a big difference between mostly dead and all dead. Mostly dead is slightly alive."
-- Miracle Max, "The Princess Bride"*

When someone is actually dead, there's generally a body. You can deny it all you want, but the reality is there. Anger directed at the dead person is futile. Screaming at, or bargaining with, God, may be therapeutic, but does not have a high probability of changing the outcome.

When someone is symbolically dead, there's a problem. There is still a body, but the body is alive and kicking. This complicates the entire grieving process in a significant, and not necessarily healthy, manner.

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To begin with, denial is relatively easy: after all, the person is physically alive. Perhaps they won't do it again. Maybe it was an accident. Maybe they'll change, reform, get better, promise to behave, etc. In the martial arts world, students might accept inappropriate or abusive behavior from a sensei because they have convinced themselves that it is "for their own good," or that is their own fault. Although Obi-Wan and Yoda have many, many clues that Annakin is sliding to the Dark Side, they keep finding other explanations for his behavior. It is not until Annakin's acts are so extreme, and the evidence so incontrovertible, that it cannot be explained away or denied that they accept what has happened.

It's easy to see how bargaining can quickly grow out of denial: if they promise not to do "it" again, they can have another chance. Or the student might view the promise that he will be taught certain material as worth the price. Each individual set of circumstances will generate their own set of conditions that drive the bargain. Depending on the situation, this may or may not be an unreasonable reaction. Sometimes it is possible for the person to reform and rejoin the group. Sometimes it isn't. There is a wide range between minor slights and blowing up entire planets. The problem is that it can be very difficult to figure out where to draw the line, especially when where that line is drawn can emotionally mean the difference between life and death.

Revenge of the Sith ends with a climactic battle between Obi-Wan and Annakin/Vader. Rather strangely, considering everything that was said about Jedi philosophy, Obi-Wan leaves Vader crippled, burned, and dying. He does not, however, put Vader out of his misery, but settles for yelling at him and then leaving. Needless to say, Obi-Wan is angry. In the end, he reacts out of anger and a desire for revenge, rather than simply killing Vader. It's not enough that the person who killed Annakin should die, Obi-Wan wants him to suffer as well. Anger, in this situation, has a focus: the person who committed the crime or caused the harm. Now most of us will probably never do anything quite so drastic as slicing

off someone's arms and legs and then dropping them in boiling lava, but we might certainly feel that way. A danger is that an action taken in anger can lead to guilt, and that, in turn, can lead back to bargaining.

A further danger is that anger does not have to be directed at the offender. For example, if a sensei abuses or molests a student, other students in the dojo may blame themselves for not noticing or not "doing something;" worse, if the anger is ignored or otherwise not dealt with, it can come out in unexpected places. Here it's important to understand how memory works, at least at a basic level: the human brain stores information as a web of concepts and indices. If anger is linked to a particular situation or person, then anything that evokes that person can trigger an angry reaction: thus, anger may be triggered by someone who is physically similar, by being in a similar situation, by some particular behavior or action that is reminiscent of the person, etc.

Despair, in the context of grieving, is not just feeling sad or bummed out; rather, it can be a physiological response that is potentially extremely serious if untreated. It will also prevent those experiencing it from achieving a healthy acceptance of the situation. The victim of the act may blame himself or herself, with devastating consequences to their self-image and self-efficacy. Why would they blame themselves? By accepting the blame, they remove the responsibility for the act from the abuser, thus opening the door first to denial: "this did not happen because of them, it happened because of me. They are who I always thought they were;" and bargaining: a form of "take me instead of him." (this is oversimplified, but a full discussion of the psychology of blame is beyond the scope of this article). Ultimately, despair can lead to a sense of hopelessness and a loss of enjoyment in the activity where the event occurred.

With acceptance comes the end of the grieving process. This doesn't mean never feeling saddened by the loss of the person, or that you necessarily like it, it just means coming to a state where the feelings are no longer overwhelming. You can accept what happened, and have

achieved a certain level of calmness. Obi-Wan eventually achieves acceptance in his grieving process, and of his own actions, by viewing Annakin Skywalker as being dead. Thus he finds his balance between Annakin's act of betrayal and his memory of the good person he once knew.

"For my next act, I will perform open-heart surgery on myself."

-- Gonzo the Great

Gonzo the Great is a remarkable and multi-talented... whatever he is. He is also capable of repeatedly putting his elbow into his own back, a feat that has not yet been duplicated by even the most skilled Seifukujitsu practitioner. For open-heart surgery or massage, help from another person is essential. The same is often true when dealing with the emotional reactions discussed in this article.

It is very easy to act in ways that we do not expect when we are unaware of how our natural reactions can be co-opted. When an instructor betrays the trust of his students, it is not just the primary target who is affected; everyone present can be hurt: become aware of how the emotions play out, and recognize how normal reactions are not necessarily appropriate. Pay attention to your own feelings and reactions, and how you are responding to other people.

Ultimately, this is a real loss. Although the specific nature of the loss will affect the details of the grieving process, grieving still needs to occur. It cannot be rushed and it cannot be forced; it will progress at its own pace. Each person affected will experience the different stages of grief in their own way; it cannot be avoided. As with any other significant loss, it can be very helpful to talk to other people during this period; dealing with the process on your own is much like massaging your own back.

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