

HOW TO STAKE A TERRITORY IN THE FIELD OF FAMILY THERAPY IN THREE EASY LESSONS

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Three strategies to claim a piece of territory in the increasingly populated field of Family therapy are spelled out and exemplified for easy use by readers.

In a way that reminds us of what happened in the Wild West, the early pioneers of Family Therapy had a vast territory open to them; there was space for everybody, and nobody was in any great hurry to erect fences and make claims. A good part of the energy was devoted to establishing the new field and to struggling together against the non-family-oriented behavioral and social scientists who felt, not without reason, that their own territory was threatened. But once the new field was established and its population began to grow by leaps and bounds, people began to quarrel with their neighbors, moving fences at night, remaking the cattle, and doing other nasty things (somewhat reminiscent of the effects of crowding in rat cages). It seems that we are well past that critical threshold. Thus, the time has come to reveal to all people of good will the not-so-secret secret of successfully staking one's private territory, practiced until now only by a selected few.

Staking a territory in the field of family therapy that you may call your own may seem, at first glance, a rather complex task. Not so, not so. In this paper you shall find clear instructions that, if followed, will allow you, dear reader, a quick claim of land in this vast territory.

The question of whether staking a territory creates an artificial rather than natural boundary that may confuse rather than clarify issues should not be a deterrent. If leading nations and powerful corporations pursue without hesitation a policy of domination by means of creating artificial territories, inventing conflicts, fueling divergences, etc., why should you, mere individual, dismiss those very strategies?

LESSON 1: HOW TO SHINE IN REFLECTED GLORY

As your very first move, you should declare yourself an expert on somebody else. To do so, familiarize yourself with the ideas and the life of an attractive, creative, exceptional mentor or beacon (whom we shall call here GOD, acronym of "good old dad") whose prophet you wish to be.² God should have a good deal of output-writings, recordings, palimpsest, hieroglyphics or equivalent sets of testimonies. God's utterances should be rather dense or obscure, and so amenable to multiple interpretation that they may be labeled as literal if they are metaphors and as metaphors if they are literal. God should be either dead (do not miss the chance of *in memoriams* in which you may write about yourself and, eventually, the deceased) or living far away (especially if you will follow the *guru-by-proxy* strategy discussed below), or should at least exhibit the Zen master's aversion to straightforward communication (especially if you opt for the prophiteering strategy described in Lesson #2).

Once you become familiar with *god*, you are ready to achieve the status of *guru-by-proxy*. In order to establish proxyhood, you should consistently and relentlessly mention yourself and *god* as a package throughout your presentations or writings. You may, for instance, refer to warm, intimate, shared experiences (regardless of whether they are relevant to the subject matter or not, as they aim at creating the effect of fusion), by quoting personal communications between you

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² The choice of GOD over GOM follows literary conventions. *Goms* would probably suit as well, even though the still prevailing male-orientedness of our culture will make *gods* comparatively less controversial than *goms*.

and *god* (regardless of how insubstantial), by referring to him by first name or nickname (to connote intimacy) or simply by consistently using a first person plural that includes you and *god*, as if an almost mystical link exists between you two (which adds an interesting effect of transmigrational closeness if *god* happens to be already dead).

Exercise for Lesson #1. Let us assume that you wish to become a guru-by-proxy of, say, Ludwig Wittgenstein. From now on you should decorate your presentations and writings with such phrases as 'Ludwig --Wittgenstein, that is-- told me many times that.. .'; or, 'When I was with Wittgenstein at his secluded retreat a short time before he passed away, he told me in confidence, looking at me with his big, intense, blue (brown?) eyes, that' . . . or 'I'm sure that Ludwig would react with as much passion as I do to the notion that..' or 'It was Wittgenstein's clear intention to ... and not to. . .'

This style, when appropriately used, promotes in your listener or reader the impression that Ludwig Wittgenstein and you were inseparable buddies until the great man breathed his last. Further, with some literary skill you can convey the notion that you are Wittgenstein's ideological heir, appointed, in fact, by Ludwig himself, and that, somehow, both of you are still exchanging pithy messages across the barrier of life and death.

LESSON 2: HOW TO BECOME THE KEEPER OF THE TABLETS

The second possible move, highly complementary to the one just described, is to achieve the status of prophet or translator of the scriptures, and thus intermediary between the (obscure and infallible) truth of *god* and the (perhaps ignorant but certainly eager) masses. Let me underline: It is not that you will be building your own ideas following *god's* general models (seeing farther by standing on his shoulders, so to speak), but you will be clarifying for the public what *god* really said (he will be talking through your mouth). As a source of inspiration, you may be guided by the example of medieval ecclesiastics and replicate their righteous ownership and representation of God's word, thus establishing a one-down relationship of the worshippers vis-i-vis God and themselves. You may hesitate, recalling nasty things you may have read about the Inquisition, but think of all the power and territory that it grabbed.

In order to achieve appropriate propheteering stature, you should define the sources of your wisdom, i.e., *god's* personal output, as too complicated for direct human consumption and insist that your own statements are the correct (important word, use frequently) meaning of *god's* ideas. Needless to say, your statements must be at least as cryptic as the originals, but you must deliver them as if they were obviously clear. This style creates in your reader/listener the idea that he/she is simply stupid while you are unusually bright (since you consider your cryptic statements clear), and ensures the goal of inducing a one-downmanship in your reader/listener. You may even argue that *god* is too difficult to understand and thus you will not even attempt to clarify his ideas, but just spell out their implication for the listener's or reader's lives.

Exercise for Lesson #2. Be sure to include, in your next presentation, a statement along the following line: "I would attempt to explain in accessible terms some of the basic models proposed by Wittgenstein. However, that would require an advanced knowledge of neurophysiology and of philosophy and, in order to do justice to Ludwig's complex ideas, would exceed the space of a journal article. These ideas can be expressed in the formula:

$$C2 = \frac{1}{z(-2n + f-ro-g-r)} \text{ as long as } z \text{ (a constant) remains lower than the threshold.}$$

What follows is an overview of all the implications that the application of Wittgenstein's formula has for the reader's professional life . . ." (et cetera)

You may wish to ensure that you write or talk in an authoritarian style (although some humble ploy such as "In my opinion," used sparingly, will do no harm), and with an abundance of statements of what is "correct" and "appropriate." This has the added advantage of conveying a veiled threat of excommunication for failure to adhere to the dogma.

LESSON 3: HOW TO BUILD A STRAW MAN

It is advisable, at least at the beginning, not to launch an all-out campaign of proselytizing but to lay siege to a specific target-perhaps a well-established, even useful, notion of which there are so many in our field. Remember that the noise of battle, regardless of how empty, always attracts a good press coverage. To proceed wisely, you may choose to create a false conceptual dichotomy (any concept can be divided in two, and one side be labeled as good or correct-the one you

like- and the other as bad or incorrect-the one you don't like), and establish a "let's you and you fight" situation, which will surely grant you some power. You may state, for instance, that the efforts of strategic therapists are myopic and banal as they don't consider what you and Wittgenstein (personal communication) agreed in calling an epistaxis dimension, necessary for a correct view of a multidimensional reality

Even better, you should find a poor, feeble, restricted definition of your target concept (a thorough bibliographical search will yield a bumper crop of narrow, inaccurate, and even stupid usages of many useful concepts), and then argue that that usage has been the only one applied by all authors. Then, on the basis of the argument that rampant abuse has contaminated that target-word beyond redemption, rather than suggesting an appropriate definition and usage for the target-term, introduce a new word of your own, imported into the field if not created by you.²

Exercise for Lesson #3. Add a free version of the following paragraph to your next paper. "As shown above, a thorough review of the literature proves that the concept of *boundary* has been hopelessly contaminated by the previous misuses of the word. Therefore, I propose to replace it by the fresher, clearer term *frontier* which I will define as a set of interpersonal rules that regulate who does what when and with whom, both within the system and in its relationship with supra- and sub-systemic levels."

Convincing, isn't it? But please, dear reader, snap out of it. This is only an example and its contents should self-destruct within your mind in five seconds. There is nothing wrong with the notion of boundary (except some narrow uses and misuses here and there); I have, in fact, used "frontier," a loose version of Minuchin's definition of boundary. (Or perhaps, on second thought, I may invite you to my next conference "Beyond the notion of boundary: Toward the concept of frontier!")³

In closing, I wish to emphasize: If you are planning to follow the strategies I have listed, you should not allow yourself to be deterred by the suspicion that your god, original thinker as he probably is, may have been writing in that rather obscure style of his not unintentionally but out of choice. Avoid considering the possibility that god, following his Socratic-or Zen- method of teaching, has sought to trigger in his readers intriguing ideas, to create doubts, to favor and induce creative thinking, to increase the flexibility and versatility of their cognitive processes. In eliminating this consideration you will avoid the dangerous quagmire of ethical considerations which could undermine your determination to stake out your own territory in the field of family therapy. To further motivate yourself, just think of your own fiefdom, banners floating in the breeze, proudly displaying your coat of arms, a magental field with two azure lions and, crossing it in diagonal, your motto: VIS PRIMUM, TUM MORES⁴.

NOTES

²To correct the definition would only entail the risk of retention of the original word rather than the adoption of the one YOU propose, thus reducing your necessary visibility. It would also rob from you the welcome opportunity of renewing the battle noise whenever the target-word is mentioned. In addition, you have to provide your potential followers with a password that would allow them to recognize each other in a crowd and especially in the dark.

³ There is, in fact, a fourth technique, known in the trade as the Korsakov Variation (following the key symptom of a psychiatric condition named "Korsakov syndrome," which is characterized by amnesia and the production of confabulated material to fill the memory gaps). This technique is applied by means of leaving out consistently, in all your writings and presentations, any reference whatsoever to any work by any previous author. This policy, if applied relentlessly, not only will generate in the reader or listener the illusion of your TOTAL originality-that your ideas have been raised entirely in your own private backyard-but has the added advantage of eventually generating that belief *in yourself*, especially if you read or hear yourself a lot.

⁴ Which, loosely translated from Latin, means "Violence first, then ethics." The cultivated reader may have realized that this motto is a very free version of the argument provided by MacHeath (a.k.a. Mack the Knife) as a justification for his multiple crimes in Bertolt Brecht's *The Three Penny Opera*: "Grub first, then ethics." In fact, shortly before his death., Bert told me, in confidence, that what he *really* meant to say was ...

However, a word of advice: This method is not for beginners but for seniors in the field. Thus, stick to the three lessons discussed in the text, and wait until you are quite well-known before attempting the Korsakov Variation.