

Chapter One: The Three Way Solution

With *Threeing* the three way solution is, in effect, a three person solution. Why three people? Why not two? Or five? To understand why three people form the fundamental unit for resolving relational problems for two, three, four, five or more people we must deepen our understanding of the word “relationships.”

Examining the source of a word sometimes enables us to make important connections. The word ‘relate’ is taken from a Latin verb that has four parts:

fero—I carry

ferre—to carry

tuli—I carried

latus—to be carried

The verb ‘relate’ was originally used to mean *to bear* or *to carry* a child. Interestingly, As indicated by our list, the word *difference* comes from the first and second part of the same verb. Using this shared verbal root to help us understand actual human relationships, *difference* and *relate* can be reconnected in an English sentence that helps us understand relationships.

*We differentiate ourselves from our relatives
by referencing the experience of childbearing.*

For example, your cousin on your mother’s side was carried by a woman (your aunt) who was carried by the woman (your grandmother) who also carried my mother. So the very word *relate* suggests that the question of how to relate is really a question of how we organize the differences among us.

In traditional families differences are organized in fixed roles. The father plays his role. The mother plays her role. The children have their roles. When you play your role, you play your part in the whole. The whole family depends on each person playing his or her part. Grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins also have roles, and there are rules for maintaining these roles. For example, a Korean student once explained to me that although his uncle is younger than he is, and a boyhood friend, he must nonetheless address his uncle in a formal family term that indicates the respect required in that relationship. Such rules of address keep the overall organization of differences in the family system clear and balanced.

Outside the family system, people attempt to “relate” one-to-one. With just one other person you can develop a deep mutual understanding. He understands you. You understand him. Understanding each other, however, is not the same as understanding the differences between you. Differences are themselves relational. They do not reside in either you or him. The differences within a two-person relationship cannot really be understood *as differences*, unless there is another relationship available for comparison. This explains why the popular notion that love is blind. The two lovers see each other, but neither sees the relationship they are in as a relationship. Without a third person, the exhilarating play of differences between two lovers can easily go to extremes. In truth, courting lovers do not want to see the relationship, they want only to see each other. They are jealous of any third person precisely because the very presence of a third person invites scrutiny of their relationship as well as questions about how their isolated two-person relationship fits with other relationships in their community. On a social scale, the Cold War between ‘Capitalists’ and ‘Communists’ was all consuming, allowing for no significant third party. For a ‘leader’ like Osama bin Laden the world is divided into the faithful and the infidels. For Bush, you are either with him or against him. This difference cannot be mediated by a third party.

In other words, for two people to understand the differences between them, to understand the relationship *as*

a relationship, there needs to be a third person available for comparison. Relating to one person with no comparison available, you might say, "You're not trustworthy." With a comparison available, you could say "I trust him more than I trust you." Of course, such a comparison is cruel because it implies that you will soon make a choice and leave the person you are with and go partner with the third person. Here we have the fundamental relational dilemma. On one hand, it takes three people to understand and balance relationships as relationships; on the other hand, each person within a three-person relationship is constantly faced with a choice between the other two. *Acts of choice cut us off from relationships as relationships*. The choice of one person tends to break off the relationship with the other person. Yet choices that exclude a third person leave the two remaining people without a way to balance their relationship as a relationship.

To further understand the relational dilemma let us consider this simulation of the problem, conducted at a research center in California. (Bateson, 1976 conversation) Three people are seated at a round table divided by partitions so they cannot see each other. In front of each of them is a device with a timer in the middle, a button for the left index finger, and a button for their right index finger. Only one button can work at a time. Touching either button closes an electric circuit that includes getting time on the timer,-- if another participant is also closing the same circuit,--and turning on a light for the participant to indicate she is in touch with one other participant. The objective for each participant is to be in contact with someone else for more time than either of the other two parties is in contact. A choice must be made between the other two in order to score. Only one two-person combination can be scoring at any one time. Relationships are subordinated to choice.

As individuals, we make choices between incompatible acts. One cannot both sleep and not sleep. One cannot both stay and leave. Such acts of choice are in the realm of individual control. Yet in a relational nexus, one make choices that involve other individuals. The choice of one individual can exclude another individual-- I will make love with this one and not that one— fight with this one and not that one. Choices must exclude other choices.

The dilemma about choice and relationships generates a cluster of partial solutions to relational balance for two parties, among them risking periodic interaction with outsiders that allows the two parties in the partnership to renew their mutual choice of each other. A committed couple with problems may flirt with the possibility of having affairs, but not do so. In effect by rejecting third parties, the couple is agreeing that despite whatever ambiguity or second thoughts about the mutual commitment have arisen within the relationship, it is at least clear that we prefer each other to any outsider. Accordingly, the United States' 'war against terrorism' will test many relationships. How will alliances shift between Russia, China, and the United States? Relational dilemmas will multiply, resulting in complex, conditional alliances.

Two party relationships are incomplete, but it is difficult to complete three party relationships because of the problem of choice. For relationships to thrive, they require a commitment, a clear choice. Yet a clear choice of one relationship can leave another relationship out. Often, without the relationship not chosen, the chosen relationship cannot be balanced as a relationship. To say it another way, a relationship subordinated to the choice of one party can cut that relationship off from the play of differences with another party which could balance and enrich the chosen relationship. Relationships get subordinated to choice.

One reason for this relational dilemma in interpersonal relationships is basic biology. We cannot look in two pairs of eyes at once. If you are facing Ariel Sharon, you cannot face Yasir Arafat at the same time. You must make a choice between Sharon and Arafat. The practice of *Threeing solves the relational dilemma by neutralizing the excluding effect of choice on relationships*. In *Threeing*, you can make choices that balance your relationship with two other people simultaneously. You are never forced to make a choice that would exclude one of the two.

The way *Threeing* allows for non-excluding choices in a relationship with two other people is quite simple

once you understand it, yet it is hard to explain in words alone. The basic two-part structure of a sentence, the subject/predicate dyad, tends to reduce all three-part relations to dyadic statements. You can understand the dyadic statements and fool yourself into thinking you understand the triadic relations. To avoid this confusion, I will ground my explanation of the three-person solution in a diagram and a device. The diagram, the relational circuit, will appeal to your ability to think in icons or pictures that show relationships. The device, the tricolor talking stick, will appeal to your ability to learn by doing. Admittedly, both these explanations will, perforce, be dry, like explaining the floor plan of a basketball court and the rules for playing. *Threeing* itself is like the game of basketball, the action occurs when you're playing.

Some readers are in the habit of skipping over diagrams. I would ask you not to skip the diagrams. Thinking in terms of three is different in kind from thinking in terms of two. The diagrams insure the difference is understood. Thinking in twos comes naturally to us. Besides the structure of our language, there are a multitude of other human characteristics that reinforce our habit of thinking in twos. We have two feet, two legs, two hands, two arms. Habits of walking have a one-two cadence. We have a front and back. Our left side and our right side provide mirror images of each other, what the poet William Blake called 'fearful symmetry'.

To demonstrate to yourself how unconscious your habit of thinking in twos might be, you can point to something thirty or more feet away, look at it with one eye closed and then open both eyes. The object appears to move because we habitually locate things using the parallax provided by our two eyes. Besides these dual characteristics of the individual human organism, as a species we are divided into two sexes. A synthesis between two and three will be discussed in the chapters on war and sex. For now, I ask the reader to work at thinking in threes with the aid of the diagrams. For readers who wish to pursue the more technical aspects of the relational circuit diagrams, I suggest working with appendix II and appendix III.

The Relational Circuit

A circuit is a closed pathway that organizes differences. The standard example of a circuit is the heating system in your house. A difference in the room temperature (the air gets hotter or cooler) makes a difference in the thermostat (it switches off or on) makes a difference in the fuel supplied to the furnace (it decreases or increases) which in turn makes a difference in the room temperature (the air gets cooler or hotter). Just as the closed path of differences regulates the heat in your house so the relational circuit that underlies the practice of *Threeing* regulates the relationships among practitioners. Taking turns in three different roles means the practitioners follow the path laid out in the relational circuit.

The Roles

Before presenting the complete pathway, let me present the three positions in the circuit that correspond to the three roles.

Figure 1

third position

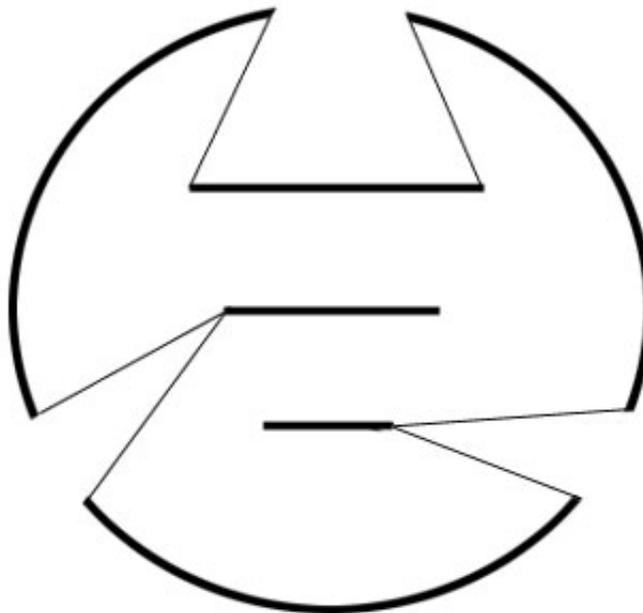
second position

first position

Notice that the shortest line is at the bottom and indicates the first position and the first role. The second and third positions have respectively longer lines. The longer lines indicate which roles “contain” or correct other roles. The reactor contains the initiator. The mediator contains both the reactor and the initiator.

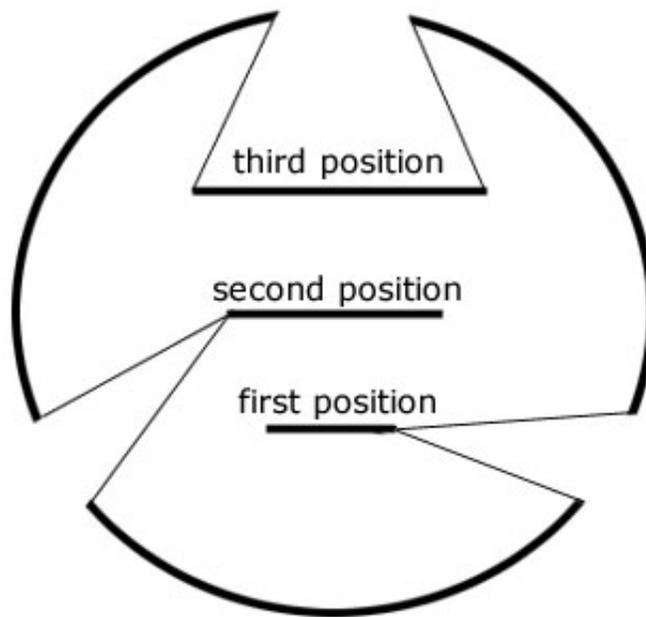
To complete our circuit we add lines that connect the three positions in a complete pathway. Here is a diagram of the complete relational circuit.

Figure 2



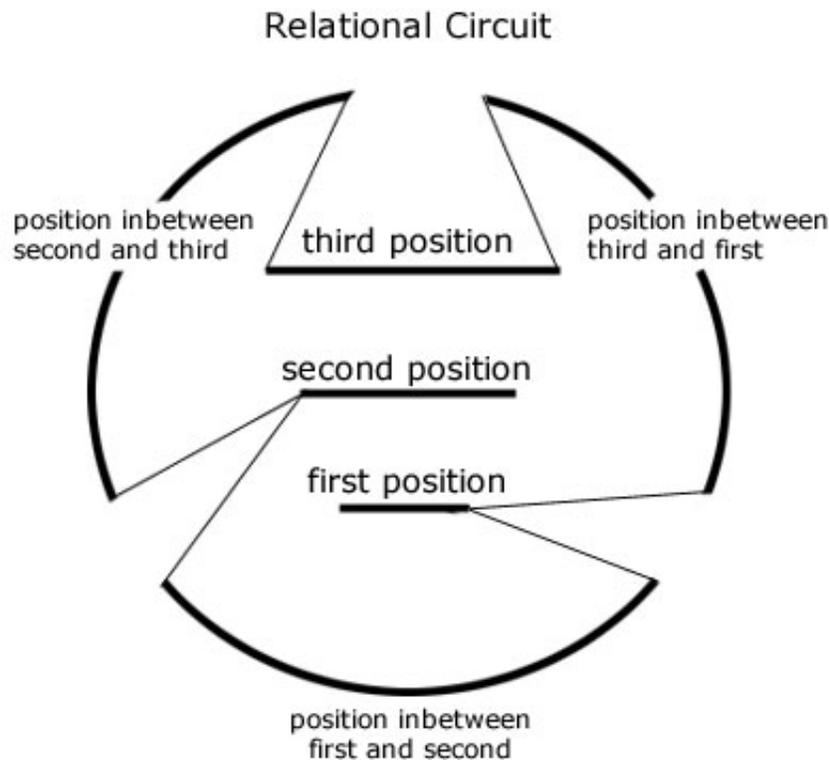
Here is another diagram of the same circuit with all the parts named.

Figure 3



Now let us label the roles proper to each part of the circuit.

Figure 4



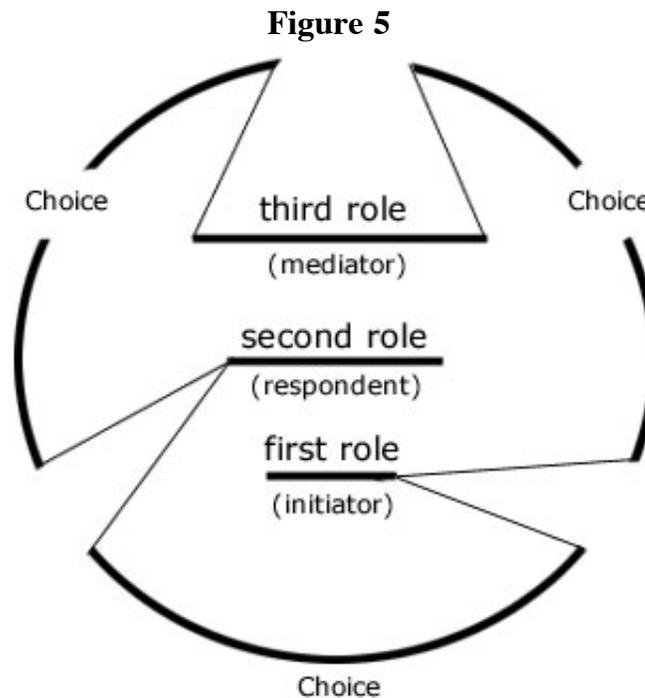
Imagine this circuit outlined on the floor with an eight-foot diameter. Imagine yourself walking along the path of the circuit. In any position, you always have the option of moving to two other positions. You always have a choice. The complete flow pattern for making these choices in concert with two other people is presented in the practice part of this book (p.). Examining the circuit, it is evident that if you make a choice to change your position, you change your relationship to the all the other positions in the circuit. Choosing a difference position makes a difference in your relationship with the other two people. Yet all choices take place within a circuit that always includes all three people. No one is ever excluded. The

whole pattern of relationships established by the circuit stays the same, but you change your role in relation to the other people when you change your position.

In some respects, the roles in *Threeing* are like the roles in the game paper-rock-scissors. You may recall that game from your childhood. It offered an alternative to the normal bullying that goes on among children. In the normal pattern, the biggest child pushes the next biggest child, the next biggest shoves the littlest and the littlest goes out and kicks a rock- he dare not push the biggest child. By contrast, in paper-rock-scissors the relationships are organized in a closed pathway, similar to how the relational circuit organizes *Threeing*.

In the game of paper-rock-scissors, each child, simultaneously, throws out one hand. The hand is either flat (paper) fistful (rock), or split fingered (scissors). The children then give each other playful slaps on the wrists according to the formula paper-covers-rock, rock-breaks-scissors and scissors-cuts-paper.

Here is how the game maps onto the relational circuit.



In paper-rock-scissors the three children are never forced to choose between their two other playmates. They choose one of three roles: paper, rock or scissors. The choice of a role does not exclude anyone. With *Threeing* the same pattern of choice operates. Choices are not between people. Rather choices are made between different positions in the circuit of relationships. The different positions indicate different roles to be played within the whole circuit of relationships. These are not choices that exclude one person for the sake of another. Participants learn to play all three roles and make choices of roles that balance three-person interaction.

The emotional experience of the nonverbal practice of *Threeing* is intense and complete. One participant said that unlike that cartoon where two people pass each other on the street, say 'Hello' and then each wonders what the other meant, after *Threeing* you have a satisfying emotional clarity about what happened. Another participant said that while *Threeing* he went back to a recurring dream he had. In the dream one half of him went down a tunnel and the other half when up a stairs. Never in the dream did they meet. In *Threeing*, the tunnel and the stairs did meet. The practice of *Threeing* invites the fragmented parts of our "selves" into a new coherence.

A diagram of the relational circuit on the floor makes possible the nonverbal practice of *Threeing*. Participants keep track of the roles they are playing by referencing the positions in the circuit. A verbal version of *Threeing* is also possible using a device called a Tricolor Talking Stick.

The Tricolor Talking Stick

A tricolor talking stick is a round, fifteen-inch length of wood with a diameter between one and three inches. The stick is painted with three five-inch bands of solid color: yellow, red, and blue. The red band is in the middle of the stick. The yellow, red and blue cover of the book in your hands is designed so that you can use this book itself as a tricolor talking stick.

The person who holds the stick speaks, others listen. By holding a particular color on the stick, the speaker indicates that he is speaking in a particular role. By painting the stick with three colors we can keep the three roles clear and keep the relationships from getting tangled up. Just as training wheels help one learn to ride a bicycle, so the tricolor talking stick help three people to learn *Threeing*. Once people learn to change roles without tangling themselves up, the training wheels can come off. I recall one program I conducted for workers displaced from the defense industry. After a few days, three of the workers became so facile at relating to each other in the three roles that they put the stick on a table between them and each used a pencil to touching a color on the stick thereby indicating the role he was playing. The pencils jumped from one color to another in constant improvisation. The participants created for themselves a fullness of feedback.

To learn verbal *Threeing*, three people take turns in the different roles by passing the stick around and holding the color that indicates their roles. Holding the yellow band indicates that one is playing the first role (initiator). Holding the red band indicates that one is playing the second role (reactor). Holding blue indicates the third role (mediator). You can remember the connection between role and color by association. Yellow is associated with the rising sun in the morning, (initiation) red with the reactivity of "seeing red" (responding) and blue with the overarching sky above (mediating).

This process can work for simple as well as complex decision making. In using the talking stick, sometimes the emphasis is on the role the person is playing: initiator (yellow), respondent (red), or mediator (blue). Example: yellow throws out an idea, red reacts and blue mediates. Let's say that Maria, Stacey and Lynn are trying to decide which movie to get from the video store. Lynn (holding yellow) suggests *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, a movie that both portrays and critiques violence. Maria (holding red) responds, concerned about the images of violence in the suggested movie. Stacey (holding blue) mediates between the two, respecting Lynn's desire to reflect on violence and Maria's sensibilities as well as her own concerns. If all are not agreed, they can change roles and try another round, and another, until they settle on a movie. Procedures for more complex decision making with four or more people are available.

In discussing the movie they decide on and view, Maria, Stacey and Lynn could share their opinions in a similar way by using the roles to recall different aspects of what they have seen. The first role (yellow) deals with the emotional qualities of the movie, the second role (red) deals with specific facts and details in the movie, the third role (blue) deals with the overall plot of the movie as well as what it means in a larger context. By taking turns in each of these roles, the three friends can discuss their different interpretations of the movie without anyone's views being pushed aside.

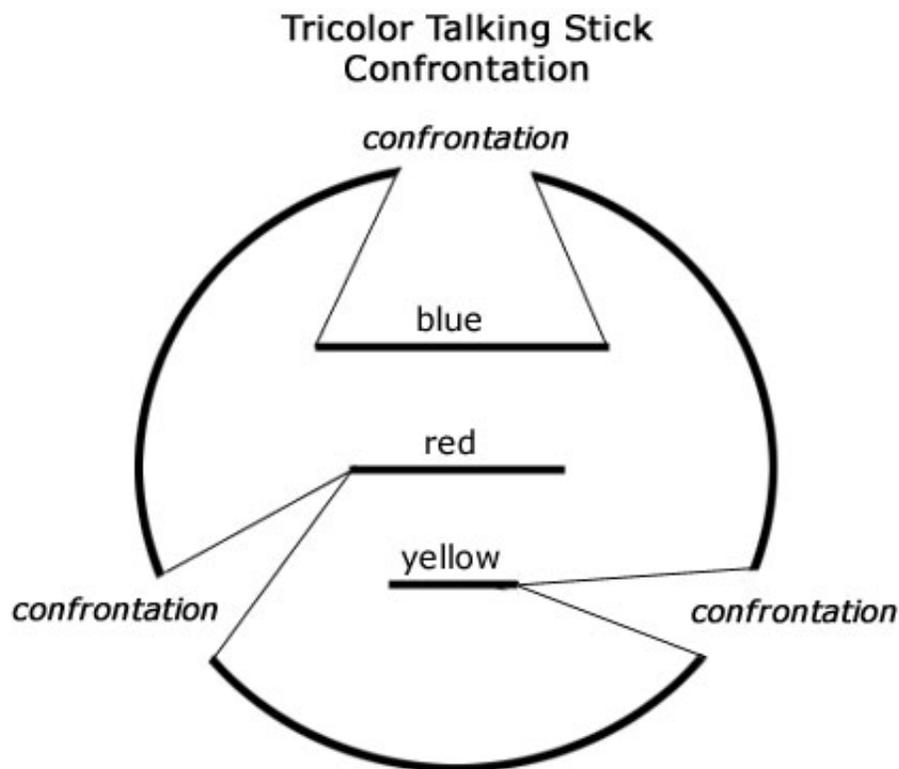
Note that the three roles of initiator, reactor and mediator invite non-confrontational discussions. The tricolor talking stick can also be used to regulate conflict and confrontation. As the word "con *front*" suggests, confrontation means facing off with an opponent. Boxers standing toe-to-toe in the ring are confronting each other. Their actions mirror one another. One hits. The other hits back. There is symmetry to what they do.

The roles of initiator, respondent and mediator do not mirror one another. They fit together, but they are not similar. In this, they are like a grandmother, mother and child. The grandmother observes and advises, the mother nurses and the child suckles. Similarly, The United Nations might oversee the aid that an advanced industrial country provides to a 'client' state. The behaviors fit together but they are not the same. The interaction is without symmetry. They are asymmetric or complimentary.

While the main roles in *Threeing* are non-competitive and asymmetric, within *Threeing* there is the opportunity for competition and symmetric interaction. Making peace does not mean avoiding conflict or confrontation, only violent confrontation. Confrontation can be very productive in the context provided by *Threeing*.

Before detailing the procedure for confrontation, I present a diagram of how the tricolor talking stick, including the confrontation procedure, maps onto the relational circuit.

Figure 6



Using the talking stick, participants can combine the three non-confrontational asymmetric roles, as indicated by the yellow, red and blue bands, with symmetric or confrontational roles. The difference between confrontation and non-confrontation is indicated by the way that a person holds the stick. To indicate confrontation, the stick is held horizontally with the ends pointing at the two people in confrontation. In the non-confrontational roles of yellow, red and blue, the stick is held vertically.

In *Threeing*, the non-confrontational roles themselves rely on using certain types of phrases to make sure the inquiry is not mistaken for confrontation.

Yellow

How do you yourself feel about the suggestion you've made?

Did you have any expectations about how the rest of us would feel?

Red

What are the facts behind your suggestion?

What events have we shared as a group, or gone through as individuals that would support your suggestion?

Blue

If I understand you correctly, you are saying that if we do _____, then things will work out, am I right?

Can you show me how you got from the “if” to the “then”? I did not follow you.

Just as playing the roles of yellow, red and blue suggests a certain style of speaking, so confrontation suggests a certain style of speaking. Certain introductory statements can go a long way toward making the confrontation formal and clear enough to be productive.

“I don't agree with you. Here is why...”

“While I can see your argument, I disagree because...”

“Here is how I understand the context in which I am stating my argument...”

“Here is how I would define these terms.”

“I am assuming...”

“Here's what I think, here's how I came to think this way...”

“I came to this conclusion because...”

“Here are the facts I'm basing my argument on”.

At any point in the exchange among three, the member of the group who has the stick can directly challenge another member of the group by laying the talking stick on a horizontal line between the two of them. He or she then addresses the other group member using the type of adversarial or confrontational statement described immediately above. The person addressed directly can then turn the stick around and respond. The third person can also enter into this exchange if one of the two in confrontation points the stick at the third person. Three times back and forth between two people is a reasonable limit. Then the stick must be pointed at the third person or pointed upward by one of the people arguing. Pointing the stick at the third person is asking that person to enter into the confrontational behavior. Pointing the stick upward is to offer a fresh proposal for non-confrontational consideration. The triad then works through the fresh proposition in the three roles. If there is no consensus among the three, then the decision-making procedure presented elsewhere comes into effect.

Holding the stick in a vertical position is equivalent to standing on the yellow, red or blue line. Holding the stick horizontally is equivalent to standing on the outside arcs. Imagine yourself as one of three people standing on the outside arcs of choice. The process of symmetric interaction, or confrontation, would consist of one person oscillating from one end of her arc to another. At each end of the arc, one of the other two people would stand and face the oscillator. Standing face-to-face, they would mirror each other's behavior in sound and movement. This pattern is like playing monkey-in-the-middle without the ball. Each person takes a turn being the monkey.

Once participants become familiar with the roles indicated by the tricolor talking stick, they can learn how to confront each other without the confrontation escalating into a vicious cycle. They can then talk to each other with real frankness. In one worker training program I conducted with the Talking Stick, after the participants-- mostly strangers to each other-- got comfortable with the protocols, their frankness was very impressive. We had a series of all-for-one sessions. One worker would present his plans for getting a job and three other workers gave him feedback based on the three roles. The normal politeness that glossed over

faults yielded to strong and accurate truth telling based on the security everybody felt playing the three roles. The feedback was both merciless and good natured. “You’ll never get a job if you don’t sit up straight.” “Stop with the doughnut shop fantasy, you’re not a businessman.”

The relational circuit and the tricolor talking stick constitute the core of the three way solution. The three way solution neutralizes the excluding effect of choice on relationships. No one person is ever forced to choose between two others. No one is pushed toward excluding the third party another. In *Threeing*, the function of the triad is to reinforce the triad.