

Darmok and Jalad on the Ocean: A Pop-Culture Exploration of Empathic Understanding

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore empathic understanding vis-à-vis the television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. I present scenes from an episode of *The Next Generation* as case studies and analyze them to reveal the external and internal nature of language, as well as the “delusion” of a shared language. I also use these scenes to highlight the difference between understanding and empathic understanding, errors in empathic understanding found in the *Wisconsin Project*, and the usefulness of pre-therapy in expanding therapist awareness and appreciation of empathic understanding. I also delve into the roles played by psychological contact, congruence, and unconditional positive regard in supporting empathic understanding, as illustrated by the pop-culture vignettes I provide.

Introduction

Dramas have the advantage of presenting ideas in immediate and compelling ways to which we easily can relate. These ideas often can be experienced more deeply and clearly than well-constructed theoretical discussions or arguments. In a previous paper (Levitt,

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2005), I explored the necessary and sufficient conditions of constructive personality change (Rogers, 1959) vis-à-vis the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Now I intend to “boldly go where no one has gone before” – this paper is an exploration of empathic understanding inspired by an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

Those who do not know the joys of *Star Trek* may be slow to warm up to the idea that *Trek* episodes can be enjoyed at a number of levels, from pure entertainment to philosophical reflection. Episodes of the original series, which first aired in the 1960s, often were thinly veiled explorations of contemporary social issues and concerns. They confronted racism, imperialism, and genocide. Episodes also explored the nature of power, beauty, and freedom. As the successor to the original series, *The Next Generation* continued this tradition.

In this paper, scenes are drawn from a single episode of *The Next Generation* and offered as dramatic “case vignettes.” Reflections on these pop-culture vignettes are offered along the way. Our journey leads toward a fuller understanding of empathic understanding.

Opening Scene: The delusion of shared language

In the *Next Generation* episode titled *Children of Tama* (<http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/nextgeneration/season5/tng-502.txt>), our intrepid crew of the U.S.S. Enterprise is on its way, once again, to explore a strange new world. As Captain Picard tells us, while dictating his captain’s log, the Enterprise is nearing a “territory occupied by an enigmatic race known as “The Children of Tama.” Enigmatic, it turns out, is an apt description. We are told that “formal relations were never established because communication was not possible.” By all accounts, Tamarians are incomprehensible. Indeed, when Picard and the Enterprise encounter the Tamarian captain, Dathon, and his vessel, Dathon’s first words to Picard and his crew are, “Rai and Jiri at Lungha. Rai of Lowani. Lowani under two moons. Jiri of Ubaya. Ubaya of crossed roads. At Lungha. Lungha. Her sky grey.” Picard and his crew are stupefied. Picard offers this response, “Captain, I invite you to consider the creation of a mutual non-aggression pact between our peoples. Possibly leading to a trade agreement and cultural interchange. Does this sound like a reasonable

course of action?” Not surprisingly, the Tamarians are stupefied.

Most of us seem to go through life with a profound delusion--that we speak the same language. In some ways, this is the ultimate diversity issue--holding onto a delusion of sameness because of sharing an external vocabulary. Ironically, this perception of sameness keeps us apart. The difficulty of seeing this delusion may be due in part to our need to share some common sense of meaning in order to communicate. When we use the same words with each other, it can be easy to miss that we each use these words with our own individual meanings; in a sense, we each speak a unique language, and it is incumbent upon psychotherapists to become multilingual in this regard.

Words are signposts that point to meanings, but these shared signposts point to myriad, individually created and fluid meanings. They point to unique inner realities that are not static. These inner meanings are not unchanging “facts” that are in any sense truly shared. When we express ourselves, we are also creating an ever-changing story and reality, and the meanings we ascribe to our own personal language change across time.

One difficulty inherent to communicating with a shared external language is that each of us has such unique experiences that color how we “see” the words we use. We each have our own unique meanings that words point to for us. We can get mired in our own meanings when we are faced with another person who uses our shared external vocabulary--unable to get beyond our own certainty that we understand the other because we are using the same external language. The other intends to express his or her personal meanings to get us to understand what he or she experiences by having these meanings unfold within us.

We tend to believe that our words have the ability to carry this understanding to others. What makes this so tricky is that words exist externally and seem static and unchanging. However, words also exist internally, and as such, their internal meanings for one person are always different from another’s internal meanings. Each of us lives a life full of experiences unique to us that color these words for us. Yet our externally shared words are what we fumble with; they are all we have--my internal meanings, your internal meanings, and a shared set

of external symbols (words) that we use to make contact in our attempts to understand and be understood by the other. The problem comes when I assume that your internal meanings must be the same as mine—after all, you just used words I think I clearly understand and know.

Our opening vignette leads us to think about the personal/individual context that accompanies the external words we share. It leads us to consider the possibility that we can draw on the same vocabulary but intend for very different meanings to be understood through our chosen words. In this scene, there are clear efforts at mutual contact, but these efforts are limited because Dathon and Picard each assume the other will understand his meanings because they speak in the presence of a universal translator that allows them to hear the other's words as if they are spoken in their own languages. There is no effort by either man to leave his own personal context to embrace and attempt to understand the unique meanings held by the other. Instead, they listen through the filter of their own meanings, which they ascribe to the words they hear being spoken by the other.

Scene 2 – Failures of basic psychological contact

As we return to our drama, Dathon and his first officer have an intense discussion, after which Dathon, holding two daggers, turns toward Picard on the view screen. In the next moment, Dathon and Picard dematerialize—both captains have been beamed to the planet below by the Tamarians. On the planet's surface, Picard sees Dathon before him with the two daggers and demands to know, "What the hell is this all about?" The Tamarians meanwhile have blocked all communication to the planet's surface; our two captains are isolated from their crews. This is the exchange that follows between Picard and Dathon, Dathon extending a dagger to Picard:

Picard: "You expect me to fight—is that it? A challenge?"

Dathon: "Darmok and Jalad."

Picard: "I don't know who or what Darmok and Jalad are. But I didn't come here to start a war." (Picard does not accept the dagger). "I refuse." (Dathon tosses the dagger near Picard). "Would you attack an unarmed man, Captain? There's not much of a challenge in that."

Dathon: (Dathon points at the dagger with a dagger of his own). "Temba. His arms wide."

Picard: (Shakes his head.) "I'm sorry captain." (He picks up the dagger and tosses it back. They stare at each other).

Dathon: (Frustrated, picks up the dagger.) "Shaka...when the walls fell."

What the hell is this about, indeed? A wonderful question. We might find ourselves asking this in the therapy room. The isolated world of the therapy room—two heroes alone on a planet, removed from contact with others. The client is without friends or family. The therapist is without colleagues or supervision. They must face each other in this space, in this moment of encounter. All else is absent as an external source of support and guidance. Only the inner world brought by each is present, and these inner worlds are vast and distinct.

That all of our inner worlds are unique is a more difficult concept to grasp than we might suppose. We tend to feel more comfortable with sameness, that with which we are familiar. As therapists, this may extend to clinging to the illusion of a shared language. We may find it comforting. The client uses familiar words, so we must be on safe ground—surely we must know what the other is really experiencing when they use words that are familiar to us.

What is happening in Dathon's efforts to communicate and Picard's efforts to respond? Picard and Dathon are speaking two entirely different languages with a shared vocabulary. Just as it is in therapy, it may appear we are speaking the same language even when we are not. This is the crucial element that was not grasped in the now famous *Wisconsin Project* (Rogers, 1967), an ambitious research study

that aimed to explore the effectiveness of the person-centered approach in therapy with people diagnosed as schizophrenic. What we see when reading the accounts of therapy attempts in this study is that some therapists are frustrated in their efforts to understand their clients. They retreat to imposing their own frame of reference, their own context, on the clients they do not understand. The assumption of a shared client and therapist frame is a critical error. It is an error in empathic understanding, and it marks a sharp departure from the nondirective foundation of the person-centered approach. The apparent failure of the *Wisconsin Project* is more about the failure of therapists to be person-centered than it is about the failure of a nondirective approach in engaging with people diagnosed as schizophrenic.

It is much easier as therapists when clients make more immediate sense to us. We are more likely to feel in some way grounded and at ease when encountering another who seems easy to understand. But when the client's world is so alien to us that we cannot find an immediate internal reference, the challenge heightens. What do we do? Do we refuse to engage, as Picard does in this scene? Do we declare the other as the one who is incomprehensible and impose our own context on him or her, rather than acknowledge our inability to comprehend? Do we start labeling and classifying behaviors and things that we call symptoms, or use techniques or our own reactions as a way to push our client's process? The fundamental question here is how do we go about understanding an other? Do we bring in an external theory or our own experiences with the hope they will somehow fit? Or do we hope to find a way to understand, as closely as we can, the other person from his or her own internal frame of reference, no matter how strange or foreign it may appear?

Prouty's pre-therapy (1994) takes the nondirective path of attempting to understand the other as if from his or her own frame of reference, rather than imposing a frame that is external to the client. It redresses the mistaken conclusion drawn from the *Wisconsin Project*, the false idea that remains entrenched to this day, that nondirectivity is ineffective when doing psychotherapy with people diagnosed with schizophrenia. Pre-therapy does this by providing the therapist with an expanded appreciation and awareness of empathic understanding, by

addressing the other's efforts at making contact with the self, others, and reality as an essential starting point for two people to be in psychological contact. The pre-therapist goes beyond the need to change someone else's very different reality into his or her own.

Scene 3 - Therapist incongruence as a barrier to empathic understanding

In this scene we find our two captains making their own campsites to get through a cold night. Dathon succeeds at building a roaring fire. Picard's own attempt fails and Dathon smiles, saying, "Shaka...when the walls fell." Picard wonders aloud if Dathon will kill him in his sleep. Dathon offers, "Darmok of Kanza. Jalad of Kituay." Picard returns with, "Picard of the Federation," earning him a blank stare from Dathon. Dathon, seeing Picard is cold, throws him a piece of wood and says, "Temba." And then we have the following exchange:

Picard: "Temba? What do you mean? Fire? Temba means fire?"

Dathon: "Temba his arms wide."

Picard: "This Temba is a person? His arms are wide. Because he's holding them apart? In generosity? In giving? In taking?"

Dathon: (gesturing at the branch) "Temba, his arms wide."

Picard now shows signs of trying to understand Dathon's meaning beyond the words they share. He is attempting to understand the meanings that are unique to Dathon, in terms of Dathon's frame, but only when he seems to have gotten a bit past the possibility that Dathon will kill him. The role that perceived threat plays in impeding our ability to be empathic is tremendous. As clinicians, the perceived threat is more likely to our self-concept and sense of self-worth, rather than an actual threat of death. In this scene we can see the subtle change with Picard when he is not as close to considering Dathon a

threat.

As clinicians, when we are more congruent, more comfortable in our own skin, we are less likely to see threats where they do not exist. Congruence is in fact essential for empathic understanding to occur. It offers safe ground—if I am safe with myself, I can venture out into the unknown of another person’s world, no matter how strange or frightening it might appear to be. In fact, the congruent therapist is not likely to see the other’s world as strange or frightening. The congruent therapist is able to see the other’s world as clearly different, founded on an entirely different reality, with a different language, a different set of meanings, even though the words may be familiar on the surface. The congruent therapist is able to get beyond the need for finding himself in the other, to face the other as a unique presence in the world, and to prize each aspect of that world with openness.

I am reminded of a group experience years ago. One woman was struggling with accepting that another woman in the group could have such a different experience from her own. I remember asking her what it would be like for her if everyone in the group were exactly the same as she. She paused, and then said, “I think I would be psychotic.” Interestingly, many of us cling to the need for others to be like us, to at least share a common meaning or language, rather than trust that we can boldly go where we have never gone before—to seek out strange new worlds and survive intact. We cling to a false reality when we try to refashion all we see in our own image, or some variation of ourselves. Yet we often seem to have this “psychotic” delusion that we are somehow all the same.

Scene 4 – The breakthrough

The next morning Picard finds Dathon’s campsite empty, so he searches for clues to help him understand Dathon better. Dathon suddenly comes upon him shouting “Darmok! Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra!” There is a tremendous animal roar offscreen—Dathon is not at all surprised, and says, matter of factly, “Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra.”

There is another roar and a low electrical crackling noise—both captains are facing the invisible source of the threatening sounds as

Dathon tries once more to give a dagger to Picard, who now understands and accepts it. Picard and Dathon face the invisible threat together, and Dathon tries once again to communicate with Picard:

Dathon: "Darmok and Jalad..."

Picard: "...at Tanagra. I remember the words. But I don't understand." The creature remains near, threatening. There is a crackling and then silence.

Dathon: "Uzani...His army at Lashmir."

Picard: "At Lashmir. Was it like this at Lashmir? Similar to what we are facing now?"

Dathon: "Uzani...His army. With fist open."

Picard: (excited now) "A strategy? With fist open..." (Picard opens his hand) "With fist open. Why...? To lure the enemy."

Dathon: "His army. With fist closed."

Picard: (closing his fist) "With fist closed. An army. Open...to lure the enemy. Then closed...to attack. That's how you communicate, isn't it? By citing example. By metaphor..."

Dathon: "Sokath. His eyes uncovered!"

Picard's own experience with the military gives him the perspective he needs to begin to see possible meanings in Dathon's communications. But he still must move beyond himself to begin to see Dathon's world. He must be able to make the shift from an internally constructed theory of Dathon's world experience to an acceptance of a world of meanings that lie beyond his own.

Later, on the Enterprise, Picard realizes that "more familiarity with our own mythology might help us relate to theirs." Taking this a step further, we return to the notion of congruence, being comfortable

in our own skin, comfortable with our own internal mythology, allowing us to embrace and fully value a reality other than our own. The more we know and are comfortable with ourselves, the more grounded we can be in understanding others as they are, the more others become apparent to us as unique beings.

Scene 5 – The client as hero

In this brief scene, Picard and Dathon begin to work in concert to attack the creature when Picard suddenly begins to dematerialize—the Enterprise has found a way to beam him back. With Picard gone, the creature overwhelms Dathon, who is slashed and battered.

Dathon took an enormous risk in initiating an encounter with Picard. He knew that the two of them would face an invisible threat with no one else to help them once they were beamed down to the planet surface. He also knew that Picard might not understand him well enough to be fully present in facing this threat with him, leaving him vulnerable. Metaphorically, this is the same threat clients face when entering into the therapy relationship.

That an other reaches out to be understood is extraordinary, given the perceived risks. The client's efforts at self-healing through reaching out to an other in psychotherapy, seen in this light, are heroic. The client reaches out from a position of vulnerability in relation to the therapist. Clients are faced with the very real possibility that the therapist may “dematerialize” at any time, that the therapist will “disappear” at a crucial moment and leave them alone with a terrifying struggle. In other words, a break in empathic understanding can be experienced as devastating. Fear of not being understood, or worse, not being understood and then being judged while vulnerable, can be an enormous barrier to reaching out and communicating with an other.

Scene 6 - Encountering the other – unconditional positive regard as a source of empathic understanding

In our final scene, the Enterprise is unable to retrieve Picard successfully – and so he rematerializes back on the planet's surface, only to find Dathon close to death:

Dathon: "Shaka..."

Picard: "...when the walls fell."

Picard, now beginning to understand the uniqueness of Dathon's communication, asks the Captain to tell him more in his dying moments:

Picard: "Temba. His arms wide...Give me more about Darmok."

Dathon: "Darmok on the ocean."

Picard: "A metaphor for being alive? Isolated? Darmok on the ocean...Temba. His arms wide. Give me more. Darmok on the ocean..."

Dathon: "Tanagra on the ocean. Darmok at Tanagra."

Picard: "At Tanagra. A country? Tanagra on the ocean. An island. Temba...His arms wide."

Dathon: "Jalad on the ocean. Jalad at Tanagra."

Picard: "Jalad on the ocean. He went to the same island as Darmok. To Tanagra."

Dathon: "The beast at Tanagra."

Picard: "The beast. A creature on the island? On Tanagra. Darmok and Jalad...did they fight the beast? They arrived separately. They struggled against a common foe. The beast at Tanagra. Darmok and Jalad."

Dathon: "Darmok and Jalad on the ocean."

Picard: (realizing) "They left together."

Picard now understands why Dathon brought them to this place to face danger alone. When he stops imposing his own frame on Dathon, he sees the fullness and uniqueness of what Dathon is expressing. The gap between two separate beings is bridged when an inner language is grasped and shared.

Later, on the Enterprise, Picard reflects on what has transpired and tells his crew, "In my experience, communication is a function of patience and creativity." Picking this story apart a bit further, Dathon is the one who is creative and patient, attempting to communicate. Picard is the one trying to understand. His first attempts at understanding Dathon are entirely from his own frame, based on his own theories. When he moves beyond his fears of threat and is able to fully regard and appreciate Dathon as an individual, he is able to attempt to empathically understand Dathon *as if* from Dathon's own frame of reference. Empathic understanding is a special kind of understanding that moves beyond the therapist's frame of reference in an attempt to grasp the client's frame of reference, free of any external theories. It is a uniquely nondirective stance, in a context of psychological contact, that requires therapist congruence and unconditional positive regard for the other.

As Picard no longer feels a threat to his integrity from Dathon, his congruence, his comfort in his own skin, allows him to more accurately symbolize what Dathon may be communicating. In other words, his understanding becomes more accurately empathic to Dathon's frame and less biased or filtered by his own. Also, when Picard realizes his counterpart's heroics, his worth, he becomes more open to being told, to being directed, instead of directing and trying to impose his own structure on Dathon. Gone is the frustration and mistrust, replaced by a nondirective effort to empathically understand the other.

Empathic understanding comes when therapists can let go of their own internal meanings for words, regarding clients highly enough to learn what these words mean to them. It comes out of a willingness to give up power and control. Empathic understanding ultimately is a nondirective stance towards the other. It is a means of connecting with the client's personal truth and not attempting to change it into the therapist's truth or some other externally constructed truth (e.g., a

diagnosis or psychodynamic formulation). Congruence allows the therapist to be grounded and let down his or her guard, to actually symbolize the other as he or she is without having to impose one's self on the client's reality. Unconditional positive regard is the other critical element that allows for empathic understanding. Unconditionally valuing and receiving the other frees the psychotherapist to follow and embrace the client's unique meanings without an effort to change or shape those meanings into the therapist's own.

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