

How to Slay a Dragon

A five-step guide for the conversation you've been trying to have.

John McEnroe once said his greatest strength was that he had no weaknesses. He was talking about his tennis game. I am talking about what you bring into the room with the person who has been smashing your pickles for thirty years. You're not going in there to win. You're going in there prepared. Prepared is your greatest strength. Prepared is how you don't give the dragon anything to bite.

Do these five steps and the conversation will go differently than it has before. Not necessarily the way you want. Differently. Softer. A door instead of a wall. Most of the time, better. Always, more yours.

WHAT PREPARED LOOKS LIKE

The real job of a daily practice is to give you space. Space between what is said in the room and how you react to it. Without that space, you keep running the same loop you have run your whole life.....same trigger, same reaction, same result. With that space, you get a shot at a new result.

Prepared isn't a thing you do once. It's a shape you keep your nervous system in. Below are four practices I do in my own life.....not as a prescription, but as a menu. Pick one. Pick all four. What matters is you have a daily practice before you walk into the lair.

Meet your own need first.

Before asking the other person for comfort, empathy, or understanding.....give those things to yourself. Once you know what you need, it's your responsibility to give it to you first. This alone bought me more room with my mother than any argument ever did.

Mirror work.

Look yourself in the eye in the mirror. Say I love you. Say one good enough. Do it until it stops feeling stupid. If you can't say it to the face in the mirror, you're going to need someone else's face to say it, which is how dragons get fed.

Gratitude.....one thing about the dragon.

Find one true thing you are grateful for about the person you are walking in to talk to. Not a lie. Not a spin. One real thing. Then say to yourself, I choose peace with this situation. Gratitude is the reframe. Sending love and choosing peace is the action.

Breath work.

Daily breathing exercises regulate the nervous system so you're less likely to be triggered in the moment. Even a few minutes a day. The body that's been practising slow breathing all week is a different body than the one walking in cold.

Start with my filled-in example. Better still, put your answers in your own journal or record them as voice memos.....somewhere you can come back to them.

WORKED EXAMPLE

My Alberta — three nights with my mother

BEFORE YOU WALK INTO THE ROOM

1

Name the Dragon. Name the Behaviour.

Before anything else, get clear on what you're walking in for. The work is not to fix the person. The work is to name a behaviour so clearly that the conversation has a single target instead of a battlefield. One person. One behaviour. That's the whole step.

The person:

My mother.

The one behaviour I am naming:

She went into my life without asking, booked Noah and Andrew flights to Alberta while I was in New Brunswick. Then when I named how much it hurt, she sent me a cartoon meme apology. Boundary ignored: my relationship with my sons needs to be considered and respected.

2

Read the Fear Underneath.

The person in that room isn't really trying to hurt you. They're trying to survive something inside themselves that they've never been able to name.

The behaviour I am seeing from them (not the reason why):

I am guessing my mom feels alone and scared. How she is acting is mean, defensive and righteous about what she did with my boys.

What I bring in for them:

Stay curious, stay kind, watch myself so I don't fire back.

What I notice in me when they do the thing:

When you ignore my relationship with my sons, I feel completely disrespected.

IN THE ROOM

3

Mind How You're Showing Up. Body, Tone, Face.

Watch yourself the way you would watch a kid you didn't want to scare. Slow movements. Soft tone. Eye contact but not stare. Sit down if you can. Get small enough to be safe to be in a room with.

My plan:

I know I am a pretty big guy and she's scared. I know standing didn't work, sitting didn't work. I will try the floor. Speak softer and kinder. I will rub her feet to help her calm down and feel safe.

4

Use My Pickle Jar Story. Put Your People in It.

The point is both people end up heard. The dragon has to feel seen first, then they can see you. There is a wrong way to do the right thing.

If you want to be heard then you have to listen.

What do I need my dragon to finally hear from me? One or two sentences.

Mom, I am repairing and creating a new relationship with both my sons after years of hurt, it is the hardest thing I have ever done. I need you to respect that I am their dad.

WHEN YOU WALK OUT

5

Track It. However It Went.

The point is to have a record of what actually happened in that room, while it's still fresh. Voice memo on your phone is probably easiest. Capture the real stuff.....what worked, what didn't, what triggered something, what feelings helped or hurt.

My record:

She said Oh my God, I smashed your pickles. The flights, finally seen. Then she said Jhöl, I'm so sorry, for what she said the day I came home and found Betty gone. Two moments. First in our family.

YOUR TURN**BEFORE YOU WALK INTO THE ROOM**

1

Name the Dragon. Name the Behaviour.

One person. One behaviour. Name it so clearly that the conversation has a single target instead of a battlefield.

The person:

The one behaviour I am naming:

2

Read the Fear Underneath.

The person in that room isn't really trying to hurt you. They're trying to survive something inside themselves.

The behaviour I am seeing from them:

What I bring in for them:

When you _____, I feel _____:

IN THE ROOM

3

Mind How You're Showing Up. Body, Tone, Face.

Get small enough to be safe to be in a room with.

My plan:

4

Use My Pickle Jar Story. Put Your People in It.

If you want to be heard then you have to listen. What do you need your dragon to finally hear?

One or two sentences:

WHEN YOU WALK OUT

5

Track It. However It Went.

Voice memo or written. Capture the real stuff while it's fresh.

My record:

Don't walk in to win. Walk in to set a healthy boundary with someone you love. A boundary is not a wall. It is not a fence. It is a line you hold inside yourself that the conversation cannot move. A boundary. Yours. Held by you. Repeat as needed.