

# THE POND

*The other moral to your same old story*

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## ***Prologue***

*Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle.*  
Philo of Alexandria

This invented story is my way of coping with the ambiguity of workplace dynamics and games people play. It helps me to make sense of pressure, tension, stress, indifference and breakup.

Is there another way of going about with pressure and tension?

In my world there is. In this adventure three fish discover that there is always a choice.

Luc Galoppin  
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## *The Pond*

Once upon a time there was a pond with the most exceptional fish one could think of. Everyone agreed that it was a vibrant ecosystem; a schoolbook example for other fish communities.

The man who took care of the pond was very focused on it and wanted it to be the best pond of all times. And so did the fish. In fact that's why they decided to get together a long time ago. The man, the fish and the pond, they shared the same goals and aspirations, as if they were made for one another.

As time went by, the pond grew bigger and more complex so the man started to take care of more and more. In the beginning he did this out of a desire to keep it all spic and span. The fish accepted his initiatives and they swam accordingly. Until one day the man realized that he was the one and only taking all the initiatives. To his opinion the fish had become complacent and they had lost their sense of initiative, so he ended up not trusting a single fish.

Instead of feeding them and providing them with oxygen, he hooked them up each day. That way, he knew exactly what they were doing and how they were doing it. Each day he weighed each fish, pushed the food down their throat and told them exactly what they should do before he let them into the water again.

The man was quite proud of the way he controlled it all. Any time of the day anyone could ask how the pond was doing and he would explain in detail with colors, graphics, metrics and key performance indicators. By all measurements, this was the best pond of all times!

Nothing could stop the man from performing exceptionally: he had a plan, he had a system; he had it all under control. In order to control the fish efficiently the man threw out nasty bait: a talking worm telling the fish how complacent and lazy they had become. Every day nasty bait told them how bad their work was, how the quality sucked, how they were behind schedule and how it made the man nervous as hell. The man thought this kind of bait would keep the fish sharp. And it did. The bait was simply irresistible.

Below the water surface, Red Fish, Blue Fish and Yellow Fish caught every nasty worm. They were smart fish; strong and bright-colored. Each time the bait was thrown out it was only a matter of seconds before they would catch that nasty worm. Red, Blue and Yellow were the best of breed. They were talented. They had passion. They were born for this pond.

- Red Fish was always the first to swallow the bait; “that’s not true” he said; “I’m going to tell him!” He knew they were better than that and he went out each day to prove it. But the rage and the misalignment grew with each catch.
- Blue Fish swallowed the bait differently; with each catch his self doubt grew, for he started to believe the accusations that the worm was throwing at him.

- Yellow Fish was smarter than that. He would not fight it like Red Fish, nor feel guilty about it like Blue Fish. His approach was to solve the man's problem. So he swallowed the bait each time, thinking he could solve the man's problem.

These smart fish were all different in how they approached nasty bait – so much is true. But there was one thing they all had in common: they always swallowed the bait impulsively and each time they got back into the water they felt sore. They didn't know why; they were bubbled...

And then one day a duck landed on the pond. He said he had seen these situations in other ponds, but the fish didn't pay attention to the duck; for it was just a duck and they had bait to catch. What does a duck know anyway about life below the water surface? They were too busy swallowing the bait that was thrown at them. Days went by and from the surface the duck could see the daily ritual the fish went through. These smart fish suffered, but they were too proud to admit it. After all, they were the best of breed. They never learned to ask for help.

Until one day the hooks left them aching so hard that they needed some time to recover, so they figured they might as well listen to the duck. "OK duck, let's hear it" Red Fish said. "Things are not OK down here, so tell us what you think is going on." Blue Fish said.

"It's fairly simple", answered the duck; "from up here it is obvious how you are exaggerating on the R-side". "The R-side; what the hell is that?!" Yellow Fish replied. The duck patiently continued:

"You see, there is a pattern in your daily suffering:

- Red Fish is driven by Revenge. That is the first R – and he is left with resentment;
- Blue Fish is driven by Regret. That is the second R, which leaves him feeling guilty;
- And you, Yellow Fish, you get hooked because you try to Rescue the man, and in the end you are insecure because it didn't work out as planned.

There is just one thing you should know about these R's: they will always get you hooked"

"But that's our nature – don't you understand?" Red Fish said. "This pond is our destiny- there is nothing we can do about it" Blue fish said. Yellow Fish concluded: "The only way out is to change the bait".

"Hang on - there is another way out", the duck said, "but it will require you to use a different R than you are doing today.

- I'm not asking you to change your nature, Red Fish, but you need to become aware of it;
- I'm not telling you to change for a better pond, Blue Fish, but you can think of yourself as the pond instead of the fish;
- And finally, Yellow Fish, you cannot change the bait that is thrown at you – you just need to know that you can choose not to swallow it.

The other 'R' I am talking about is called Responsibility."

The fish were bubbled. They couldn't make sense of what the duck was telling.

- "Becoming aware of my resentful nature?" Red fish thought. "That duck is crazier than I figured."
- Blue fish wondered: "Think of myself as the pond instead of a fish?. I don't have a clue what he is talking about. Besides, I think Mr. Duck forgot who's the victim here: I am the one in need. And since I'm not the one to blame, why should I change?"
- As always, Yellow fish was the one who thought of a solution: "I think the duck misunderstood the real problem at hand here. Maybe we should help him understand our situation a bit more so he can adapt his advice."

It was clear to the fish they had just been wasting their time. That mumbo-jumbo about the 'R's may be true for other fish, but it certainly didn't apply to them. They were different. Their pond was different. And the duck, they agreed, was just a crazy duck. As for them, they were talented fish and they knew what they had to do. So they decided they just had to try harder.

Again, days went by and the fish swallowed more bait than they ever had before, convinced that they could turn the tide. But things didn't change for the better. Trying harder didn't seem to work. In fact, the fish started to resemble their small versions for which they were treated by the man. Silently they got nicknamed by their smaller version. Red fish became known as 'raging red'; blue fish as 'whiner fish' and yellow fish as 'chicken fish'.

After a while, trying harder felt like swimming circles in a fishbowl. "We are swimming the same laps over and over and yet we expect to arrive in another place." Red fish said. Blue fish agreed: "This is hopeless." "This is insane", Yellow fish continued, "We might as well do whatever that crazy duck told us to do".

So they returned to the duck. The duck then explained that they would continue suffering as long as they tried to change the man or his behavior. "The one thing you should know is that you can't control the fisherman, nor the bait. You can only control your own behavior. Remember the different 'R' I talked about? Responsibility is nothing else than redirecting your attention to what you CAN control: what you do and the way you look at things. Just try it – you have nothing to lose! When you approach the bait with Responsibility, you become aware that you are able to stop and capture the useful information without getting hooked."

Because the fish had no other alternative they decided to try this crazy idea. Days went by before they could turn off the automatic pilot that hooked them.

Eventually, they did it and they reported back to the duck: "We managed not to get hooked for a few days now." Red Fish said. "And what were your findings?" the duck replied. "Well, it's hard." Blue Fish said, "because it needs all of our attention. But now at least the pain is less and we resume what we were here for in the first place." Yellow Fish thoughtfully added: "This is almost as difficult as swimming upstream. Some days we get hooked before we even realize it. It demands our constant attention."

“Indeed”, said the duck “approaching nasty bait with Responsibility is as hard as swimming upstream. Responsibility means that you can choose how you respond to a situation. And it’s not easy, because it demands your full presence and attention. Just remember that it’s the upstream swimming that makes you stronger!”

The man never changed. Neither did the bait. But the fish grew stronger each time they realized that there is always a choice in how they respond to a situation.

## ***The Moral***

*Apparently there is nothing that cannot happen today.  
Mark Twain*

Responsibility is the key for taking better care for oneself. Taking responsibility means a person no longer blames outside circumstances, or other people, or past events for the conditions of his own life.

Whenever something happens that interrupts our reality we can put all our energy in trying to get back to how it was before (“Why is this happening to me, it’s unfair”); or we can take it as a starting point and look for other available options (“Something interesting happened, let’s see which options we have as a result of this change”).

## ***Choices***

It’s a deliberate choice, not something that happens to you. ‘responsible’ literally translates as ‘able to respond’ or ‘being capable of responding.’ Choosing to be responsible for a situation, means owning it. Instead of being the victim of a situation, you choose to be responsible for the consequences. As a victim you will search for a persecutor or a rescuer. As an owner, you will start looking for solutions.

It’s a radical choice. You do it for the full 100% or you don’t. It all starts with the declaration: "I am the framework for everything that happens in my life".

## ***Secrets***

You may think of the pond as the outside environment, like the organization you work for, your school, your community, your country or anything else you could categorize as a circumstance outside of yourself. You could look at the pond as the restrictions limiting your potential; the life you are thrown into from the day you were born.

Well, here's the secret: it is not. The pond is not outside of you. Instead, it is the very relationship in which you are engaged. Your relationship. Your grip on making life work out for you.

The way you look at the pond is a choice you take. In fact, it pretty much determines who you are as a fish. Looking at the pond from a different angle makes you a different fish. You take other actions when your destination is different

Allow yourself to look at the pond as your relationship. Have you been maintaining the pond lately? Or are you waiting for the pond to be filled for you? How do you talk about the pond? As a burden, or rather as your commitment?

## ***The Source***

*"It is not the mountain we conquer but ourselves."*  
- Edmund Hillary

The truth is that there is always a choice in how we respond to the world: as if it were a burden or as if it were our commitment.

## ***Causality***

If you feel like you're the victim of a situation, it is because you see yourself as the effect of a situation instead of the cause. You can't control the pressure and testing other people are laying on your shoulders. But you should know that you can control your own reactions and initiatives; and these can be directed towards a different destination. Destination Relationship instead of destination Revenge, Regret or Rescue. So have another look at what you would like to create, because you DO create the situation you are in by means of your reactions and initiatives.

Whenever you find yourself stuck like a fish on a hook, remember that you can choose to be the pond instead of the fish in terms of how you act and react in a situation.

Would you like to be a fish? Then you will get hooked every time the bait is thrown out. Do you choose to be the pond? Then your actions will create the context where both the fish and hook are welcome.

If I want to be right, it's the best guarantee to get hooked in a conflict. On the other hand, when your destination is relationship there are a lot of ways to make others win and at the same time being the cause for this situation to occur. You will begin to see the contributions of your past actions and thoughts and you may find that at some point you have sacrificed a relationship. All it takes is a healthy dose of integrity.

## ***Integrity***

So the next question is: exactly "HOW" can I be the cause for relationship to occur? There are 5 ways to do so and they are universal, i.e.: they are available to anyone, anytime, anywhere. They are:

1. Asking for help: Asking for help opens doors with honesty and is difficult to resist. It allows your counterpart to have a stake in the solution and to 'win' and at the same time you are the cause for this situation to occur.
2. Listening: Attention here - listening is a two-way act, as it involves listening AND acknowledging what you have understood. You need to demonstrate that you are totally engaged. Acknowledging is the part that makes people feel understood and connected.

3. Thanking: Gratitude is a skill we can never display too often. And yet for most people it seems like they need to wait for the perfect moment ... but it never comes. It is always the right time to say 'thank you'. Gratitude is not a limited resource and an overdose is not harmful.

4. Apologizing: An apology is a recognition that mistakes have been made and it contains an intention to change for the better. But most of all, an apology is an emotional contact with the people you care about. It is a closure which lets you move forward.

5. Giving more than is expected. To contribute more to a relationship than you or other people would expect. Not as a compulsion of guilt, but in a sense of not holding back. Instead of keeping the scores in order to calculate your fair share of the contribution, consider investing all you've got into the relationship, regardless of the scores. There is an Indian proverb saying 'All that is not given is lost'.

You will note that these five ways have one thing in common: they require you to be humble and to position yourself 'one down' with regards to the person you are talking to. You can only access these tools when you let go of your need to win the competition for being right.

### ***Ego***

It is only when you decide to give up on being right that you will be able to ask for help, to acknowledge feedback, to express gratitude, to make an apology, or contribute to the full. In case you would like to experiment with this source of responsibility, here three indicators that will help you find the right source for your pond.

#### *1. Am I controlling or am I committing?*

When I blame you for something that goes wrong, I seek to be in the right. In return I gain control over the situation. However, in as much as I blame you for something that went wrong - to that degree, in exactly that proportion, I lose my power. Life does not turn out the way it should. The only behavior I can control is my own.

#### *2. Am I being in the past, the present or the future?*

The game of "shoulds and oughts" is a blame game that gives me a sense of control because it puts me in the right. Oddly enough all these conversations either occur in the past or defer my responsibility to the future. I have no control over things that happened in the past, neither can I predict what will happen in the future.

#### *3. Am I being right or am I being in relationship?*

In the fault game your attention is focused on actions - what was done or not done by you or others. When you name yourself as the context your attention turns to repairing a breakdown in relationship. That is why apologies come so easily.

The wonder of it all is that when you 1.) commit 2.) here and now 3.) to the relationship, you can instantly reclaim causality.

## ***The Fish***

*“We think we see the world as it is, but in fact we see it as we are.”*

- Stephen Covey

Unnoticeable to themselves, the fish use the ‘R’ muscle that rocks their tail towards the bait. They do it unconsciously, as if it happens to them. But it doesn’t. Revenge, Regret and Rescue are movements they need to become aware of so they can start to control and refrain from using them when they decide to.

In the same way, Responsibility is a muscle they were not aware of. Just like practicing sit-ups or balancing a bicycle for the first time, this movement steers a balancing act which will require their full attention in the beginning.

### ***‘R’ muscles***

Let’s have a look at how the fish can use their muscles differently so they can redirect towards destination Relationship.

#### ***Red Fish: Revenge***

Resentment comes from using the Anger Muscle for a wrong purpose: revenge. There is another way of going about with anger. When we are angry, we are often very aware of what we want or don’t want. This leads us to clarity about our objective and the objective of our team. Anger helps us to take decisions, to stay alert, and to stop confusion. There is a thin line between destructive anger and a vision that fuels a breakthrough. The difference lies in the destination. Choosing relationship over revenge when angry is what makes exceptional leaders.

#### ***Blue Fish: Regret***

Cynicism and whining are common expressions of regret. They are suppressed forms of expressing sadness. Cynical people often are very good at sensing which relations are being left out. Cynicism is the survival mechanism to compensate for a lack of human contact. There is thin line between cynical reactions and emotional intelligence. The destination is different. The muscle at use is the same: sadness. Although cynical people are tough, they also know exactly who is left out and which relationships have been sacrificed. They are very close to being the best relationship builders. Choosing relationship over self-pity is the glue in any relationship.

#### ***Yellow Fish: Rescue***

Insecurity results from using the Fear muscle for a wrong purpose: rescuing. When we are afraid, this means we are approaching unknown territory. Fear often works as an indicator towards dangers, but also towards new opportunities. New opportunities arise when we have the courage to take that direction. Often, insecure people are the closest to building the courage to deal with the unknown. Courage builds on the same muscle that can freak us out. The difference lies in the destination. Choosing relationship over rescuing creates hope and courage, an essential part for people to commit to a relationship.

### ***The Gift***

In the end, letting go of Revenge, Rescue and Regret, does not mean stopping to use those muscles. Anger, Fear and Sadness are essential muscles like the heart: we are not aware of using them day in, day out – but we do. The thing to remember is that your temper is a gift, provided that you use those muscles in a healthy way.

As they become aware of those muscles, the fish will start to understand that it is not the bait that twists their tail in the direction of it, but that somehow it is their own deliberate choice. In order not to get hooked they need to focus on relationship instead of being right. No need to mention that a regular work-out is the best way to keep that muscle in shape. And workout requires discipline.

### ***Discipline***

If we don't have the discipline to take care of ourselves, how can we expect the others in our pond to have that balance and discipline? Taking care of ourselves not only makes us feel better, it helps us become more sensitive to others.

"Do as I say, not as I do" erodes our credibility. The first step in discipline is an increased consciousness: starting to recognize extreme reactions in our lives as red flags are an important warning that an internal cue was missed.

## ***The Duck***

*When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.*

### Buddhist Proverb

The duck is an outsider with inside information, a foreigner who speaks the language of locals and is accustomed to their habits. He is swimming in the same pond as the fish and feeling the same temperature of the water. This allows him to relate and communicate with the fish. On the other hand, the duck is different: he was not born or raised in that pond, he rarely goes below the surface and he doesn't get hooked on the same bait.

The duck has seen other ponds and over the years he started to see a pattern. Under his wing he carries a diagnostic map describing the patterns that unfold each time below the surface.

<b>Underwater Diagnostic Map</b>	<b>Red fish</b>	<b>Blue fish</b>	<b>Yellow fish</b>
<b>What is the muscle twisting their tail?</b>	Anger	Sadness	Fear
<b>What is their focus?</b>	Revenge	Regret	Rescue
<b>What do they decide?</b>	I am being threatened. I need to fight back.	I am to blame, it's my fault.	Something is broken, I need to fix it.
<b>What do they do as a result?</b>	Being resentful.	Being miserable.	Providing unsolicited help.

On the backside of his map he has put a cure next to each of the diagnoses:

<b>Underwater therapy</b>	<b>Red fish</b>	<b>Blue fish</b>	<b>Yellow fish</b>
<b>What happens when they focus their energy on relationship?</b>	Their anger becomes the source for vision, clarity and direction.	Their sadness becomes a source of empathy, contact and relationship.	Their fear sources hope and courage.

The bottom line of these therapies is that anger, sadness and fear are essential muscles providing the basic energy of life in the ecosystem of any pond. Just like the heart, these are muscles we are not aware of. They require a healthy way of living and regular exercise; in this case:

- Discipline to take care of ourselves, and
- Destination relationship, instead of being right.

### ***Resonance***

Words of resentment, regret and rescue don't stop where they are spoken. They create ripples in the pond. The duck sits on the surface where it is easy to spot the ripples in the pond. Invisible to the fish who caused them they eventually influence the complete surface of the pond.

The duck can see how the surface resonates and the damage it does. Most of this is invisible to the fish. As the fish try harder and push themselves over a limit, their R's resonate even harder on the surface and cause more damage. Resonance is a difficult thing to get past. Other fish move along those waves unconsciously. They resonate with the waves of resentment, regret and rescue caused by their fellow fish and get sucked into the same behavior. It only takes one fish's resonance to tilt the whole pond into a grumpy 'R'.

### ***Credibility***

What is less obvious is the duck's credibility towards the fish. Feedback from those who are not belonging to our own kind / group / team / age / tribe / etc. is often not taken serious. Although outsiders don't know what it is like to be you, they are fairly accurate on telling you what your behavior results into. And in the end, the result is the message received, not the message sent.

Do you find yourself disqualifying the ducks around you before you even listen to what they have to say? For example:" That smartass doesn't know what she's talking about, after all I run this organization for 25 years and she's just a rookie.", or: "What does he know about my parenting, he doesn't even have kids", etc.

Experienced ducks such as spouses, parents, grand-parents, brothers, sisters, teachers and empathic consultants have a good understanding of what you are going through. They know you well enough see how you are doing and at the same time they are distant enough to see patterns in your behavior. They take it from the cues that you are sending out and that you are unaware of. They know that the best a duck can do is sharing what they observe, and if the fish don't want to hear it, let it go. Only the wise ducks master the art of letting go. Wise ducks have wings.

## ***The Fisherman***

*Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature. Nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure or it is nothing.*

Helen Keller

## ***Cold Water***

The fish have no way of influencing the fisherman. He is a circumstance; a condition they endure. Fishermen are the ones in charge. They need to make sure everything is all right. The pitfall for most fishermen is the illusion that they need to carry that weight on their own shoulders. Alone.

As a result they fall prey to the exact same 'R's as the fish they are hooking up. They forget where they are coming from; the good nature of their own temper. They forget that they are OK; that there is nothing to fix; nothing to compensate for.

As they become disconnected from destination Relationship they start throwing out nasty bait as a last resort. And their behavior gets reinforced by competent fish going in over-drive. The rest is history repeating itself.

## ***Stepping In***

Whereas ducks have the skill to make sense of ripples in the pond, a fisherman is the one who is entitled to do something about it. He is the keeper of the pond, the preserver of the relationships it is made out of.

So what difference would a change of destination towards Relationship make in how the fisherman leads that pond?

Lonely fishermen prefer standing beside the pond, hooking the fish, measuring them against their standards, instructing them and then throwing them back. The result? This will either make dead fish or piranhas out of them.

Attentive fishermen add oxygen to the pond that allows the fish to inverse the cause-and-effect relationship: They let them be the cause instead of the effect of the situation. This is more likely to result in a 'Responsible' response: Give the fish the opportunity or the 'ability' to 'respond' positively.

Are you a fisherman and finding it difficult to lead empathically? Then you should get into the water and make sure you can feel the same temperature of the water. Only then will you be able to frame their reactions in the right context and determine the need for oxygen.

## ***The other Pond***

*“Not doubt, certainty is what drives one insane”  
- Friedrich Nietzsche*

And then there are the other ponds. Who knows you could be happier there? Will moving to another pond make all of your current problems go away? The water is always cleaner in the other pond. But then again, changing ponds may be exactly the splash of fresh water you needed?

Changing ponds is not about victory or defeat. Neither is it about feeling guilty. Now that you know that the pond is your relationship, there are three questions you should ask yourself:

1. "Am I running away from the intensity of the relationship?" If you find yourself changing ponds all the time and expecting the outcome to be different - you should consider listening to what the ducks around you have to tell you.
2. "Is my current pond an energy drain?" When you find yourself mentally exhausted day-in, day-out and committing 100% does not give you more energy? Then you should consider taking care of yourself by letting go.
3. "Am I committing to something new?" It is never the right time to make a change. There will always be events and circumstances that point in the other direction. The one thing that is important though is that you 'move towards something new' instead of 'away from something old'

## ***Epilogue***

*This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of Nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.*

George Bernard Shaw

This story is more about taking care of yourself than it is about achieving results. In the end taking care of yourself is what matters most. It is where everything else you achieve gets determined by. Most of us have come a long way before realizing that.

In the end it is not only about you and your career. It could easily expand to customer relationships, family life or even relationships with your significant other.

Different ponds. Same patterns.

The most difficult part is to figure out "Who am I being at this moment: the man or one of the three fish?" The truth is: you are the pond.