

**Ep #354: The Third Arrow:
When Self-Shame Makes Everything Worse**



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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Ep #354: The Third Arrow: When Self-Shame Makes Everything Worse

This is *Feminist Wellness*, and I'm your host, Nurse Practitioner, somatics and nervous system nerd, and life coach B  a Victoria Albina. I'll show you how to get unstuck, drop the anxiety, perfectionism, and codependency so you can live from your beautiful heart. Welcome, my love, let's get started.

Hello, hello, my love. I hope this finds you doing so well. Today is the day, commonly known as Thanksgiving in the U.S., and I am here to talk with you, yes you, all about the third arrow. Because once you see it, you can't unsee it. It's a bell that can't be rung, and knowing about it might save your holiday and whatever semblance of sanity you have left at this point.

This isn't my first time talking about this concept in general. Way back a majillion years ago, episode 15, I talked about the Buddha's teaching about the two arrows. The first arrow is pain, unavoidable, part of being human. The second arrow is how we resist that pain, the "this shouldn't be happening" that makes everything worse. So I talked about the second arrow in an episode that at the time was named Choosing Suffering, and I was in the depth of a lot of stuff happening in my life, and I didn't notice that it had been named that or I would have changed it. Because I don't think we're ever choosing suffering per se.

But anyway, we don't need to parse that whole thing out, but I want to say if you want to learn more about the second arrow conceptually, you can read the Buddha's sutras, go for it. You can also listen to episode 15. So, going back, first arrow is pain, life flowing, the first arrow. The second arrow is saying, "Ow, why did you fling that arrow at me? You shouldn't have done that." Right? And so then we're grumpy about the fact of the arrow, and we're focused on "that shouldn't have happened" instead of what happened.

Okay, but then there's a third arrow that I haven't really found anyone talking about. I did some Googles and really didn't find a lot of literature about it. I have to say Billey Albina thinks that she came up with it, but I also thought I came up with it, so I think there's probably a lot of people

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talking about it, just not publishing about it. But I do think that the third arrow is the most damaging one. The third arrow is the shame we have about having a reaction. It's the voice that says, "I am broken, wrong, bad, effed up for feeling this way about my upsetness about what happened."

It's that story that, for example, everyone else can handle Thanksgiving with their family. Everyone I know is with their family and they're fine. What's wrong with me? It's like self-attack turned into a reflex. It becomes your habit, and for so many of us, it's hanging in the background of our entire day, adding misery to uncomfortable situations.

So, here's what it looks like day-to-day, in our regular life. So you went to Thanksgiving. You're at your family's house. You are setting the table, and your mom rearranges everything you just did, moves the forks, recenters the napkins, moves the place settings, just does what she's always done your whole life, just fixes it, meaning makes it into her style, her way, her belief system about what's right and what's not.

First arrow: hurt, humiliation. You feel small, you feel dismissed, you feel invisible. Again, all of a sudden you're like 8, you feel like you can't do anything right. Second arrow: your mind spirals. She always does this. Nothing I do is right. I'm never enough for this woman. God, why is she always riding me like this? It is so frustrating to come all the way over here to be so disrespected.

Third arrow: Oh my God, I'm doing it again. Oh God, I am so ridiculous for being upset. Here I am, a grown adult with a family of her own, a house of her own, a life of her own, crying in the bathroom about centerpieces and where do the gourds go. I should absolutely be over this by now. I've been doing so much self-work. I'm failing at healing. That's the core message.

Do you see the difference? The third arrow isn't about the forks anymore. It has nothing to do with the forks. It's about you judging you for having feelings about the forks. When you shoot the third arrow into your own

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tender heart, you're not just hurt, you're shaming yourself for being hurt. You're ashamed of being hurt.

And this is the cornerstone of my work and what we do because this third arrow connects directly to what I call emotional outsourcing, which is when we source our sense of the three most vital human needs—safety, belonging, and worth—from everyone and everything outside of ourselves instead of from within. When that is your survival strategy, when that is how you get through life, well then holidays in particular, anytime with family in particular, can become like a performance review. Right? Every reaction gets graded. And the third arrow is your internalized critic keeping you in line. If I shame myself harshly enough, fast enough, maybe then I can just be contrite enough and I'll earn my way back into approval because their approval means everything about my worth and value. Right? That's where your brain goes.

So let me show you how this plays out today. Scenario one: you didn't go home this year, right? You made that choice really thoughtfully, really carefully. It wasn't a knee-jerk thing. You talked to your therapist, you talked to your coach, you journaled, you talked to your gut. You made a really solid choice that feels really good. By noon, your phone fills with family photos and "wish you were here" texts. Everyone from your high school is like, "Oh, we're meeting at that bar on South Main. Are you here this Thanksgiving?"

First arrow: loneliness, grief for a version of family that doesn't exist. Second arrow: scrolling, comparing. Listen, everyone else's house looks perfect when you're eating takeout alone, right? Third arrow, here's the kicker: I shouldn't be sad. I chose this. What's wrong with me that I can't just be grateful for the quiet? Right? What's wrong with me? The third arrow turns sweet, tender grief into a series of character flaws.

Scenario two: you did go, and you did what you do when you overfunction. You coordinated everything. You made place cards. You made everything

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perfect for everyone. Your uncle asks what you're doing for work these days. You explain your business. He laughs and says, "Oh, so you're still figuring it out? When are you going to get a real job?" First arrow: shame. Your throat tightens. You feel stupid. You feel small. Second arrow: your mind races. Everyone heard that. They all think I'm a failure. I should defend myself. I should leave. I should... Third arrow: Oh my God, why do I even care what he thinks? Jeez, I am way too sensitive. Successful people don't get rattled by comments like this. What is wrong with me? Or you go to the more functional freeze or the more numbing version. You laugh along, you change the subject, you spend the rest of dinner proving how busy and important you are. Either way, your body never gets what it needs, which is your presence, attention, compassion.

Scenario three: you're getting dressed and you've changed outfits four times. Nothing feels right because you're not getting dressed for you. You're bracing for commentary about how you look, because that's the first thing that always happens when you walk into the house of your family of origin. Someone thinks you're too fat, or someone thinks you're too thin. Either way, someone's got something to say.

First arrow: anticipatory dread. Your body remembers every single comment about your weight, your style, your hair, your gender expression, your everything. Second arrow: rigid self-monitoring. You check the mirror obsessively. You adjust and readjust, trying to find something, just anything, that won't invite a reaction. Third arrow: you self-critique. You get mean to yourself. You tell yourself, "I'm just being ridiculous. It's just clothes. Normal people don't do this. What's wrong with me that I can't just get dressed?" Forgetting that the reason for this whole thing is because your family has been harsh and cruel to you about your body, your experience, your presentation. But the third arrow makes it all about you.

Or this one: you're sitting at the table while people argue about politics, the same way they do every year, even though every year you say, "No politics

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at the dinner table." You feel yourself leaving your body, dissociating to stay safe in a hot room that's getting ever hotter.

First arrow: activation, fear of conflict. Your nervous system detecting threat. Second arrow: you are gone. You're checked out. You're watching from somewhere else while your body sits in the chair or you just are fully numb. Third arrow: later, you realize, "Oh damn, I dissociated again." And you shame yourself for spacing out, as if dissociation wasn't your body's smartest move to try to protect you in a moment where you felt there was really no other option.

Or this: you're home alone on the holiday by choice. You feel relief. Relief. You know exactly how this plays out. But then you feel guilt for feeling relief. And then you feel guilt about being home when you should be there. And then you feel shame about the guilt and shame about the relief and then guilt about the guilt about the relief. Oh jeez, triple arrow, fourth and fifth, neat and tidy.

My beauty, my nerds, here's why this happens. First arrow triggers your amygdala, threat detection, adrenaline and cortisol flow. Your body does its job. Danger. The second arrow keeps the stress circuit humming with thought spirals and meaning-making, storytelling. That's what brains are for, right? Third arrow recruits your oldest learning about worth.

If you grew up hearing that calm, agreeable, low-needs people are the most lovable, your nervous system treats any activation as social risk because it was. It scrambles to self-correct through perfection, people-pleasing, performance. This is the brilliance of survival skills, my beauty. This is why I'm always talking about how there's nothing wrong with us for having the survival skills we have. Right? We shouldn't talk about them as inherently wrong. Your body adapted to keep you safe in the environment you had. It served you then. It just doesn't serve you now. And so the work we're doing together is to give it new options.

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So what do you do when the third arrow shows up? My beauty, let's talk remedies, but first, a note from me.

All right, my beauties, let's get into the remedies. These are the tools you can use today, right now, when you feel that shame spiral starting. One: name it. Say it out loud or in your head, "Third arrow. That's the third arrow. I'm feeling the third arrow. It's trying to shame me for being human." Labeling unloads your nervous system as it were, right? We can look to functional MRI studies of affect labeling to support this with evidence. Naming what's going on turns chaos into something your brain can work with.

Change your state first, story second. So, let me remind you of this, or if you're new to my work, let me teach you. Story follows state in the nervous system, meaning if you're in sympathetic overdrive, if you're activated, if you're fight or flight, if your lions are coming, lions are coming, telling the story, "I'm calm and everything's fine," your whole body's like, "Yeah, forget about it." No, it doesn't believe you. Right? And so too, if you're checked out, if you're dissociated, if you're not present, and you try to tell the story, "Just change your thinking to be like, 'I'm present with me, I'm intentional,'" you're not embodied in it, because your nervous system is somewhere else. It's in a different state that doesn't align with the story.

Story follows state in the nervous system, meaning if your nervous system is jacked up, your thoughts will be jacked up. If you believe, if your nervous system thinks lions are coming and your shoulders are up by your ears and you're in this anxious rev-up, then your thoughts will be rev-up thoughts. Your thoughts will be lion-based thoughts. Yeah?

Story follows state. Your nervous system state—sympathetic, ventral or dorsal, or a mixed state from there—dictates the kind of thoughts you're having. Yeah? So change your state first, your story second. Press your feet into the floor, ground yourself, orient, step outside. Let your gaze go wide outside. Touch grass, track one distant sound and one close sound.

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These specific activities begin to tell your body, "I'm here. New information is available." Yeah? New information is available and I am here in this time and place. And so your interpretation will follow your physiology, not the other way around.

Next, resource worth internally. So when the third arrow hits, from emotional outsourcing, you will likely want to scan the room to see if people still approve of you. And the work is to not do that, but rather to scan your own body instead. So ask, "What do I actually need right now? What do I, me, what do I actually need?" And you might be super unused to asking that, and that's okay. So if you don't hear an answer or you don't know what to do, give yourself something small: a glass of water, fresh air, your hand on your heart, right? Something to ground you. This is how you source safety from yourself instead of simply performing for the room, which is what most of us have been doing most of our lives.

When boundaries trigger the third arrow, there's a special piece of work to do here. Okay, so let's say someone pushes pie. You say, "No, thank you." They push again. You feel your irritation rising, and you immediately think, "I'm being difficult. I should just take the pie. I mean, why am I always like this? Right? They're just trying to be nice. They don't even know that gluten like makes me feel so bad, or like all that sugar will keep me up all night." Right? Like, why am I like this? And that's a third arrow there. Your preferences, your needs, your boundaries, never the problem. Right? Shaming yourself for having boundaries, needs, preferences, that's the problem, right?

So I want to invite you to try, "I heard you. Thank you so much, but it's still a no from me." And then notice that urge to apologize or to justify. And justifying is different than explaining, right? Because it's totally chill to say, the sugar or the gluten or whatever it is, but justifying is what takes us out of self. And that urge is the third arrow trying to get you back in line. You don't owe anyone a justification for why you don't want pie. When we love

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folks, we can explain ourselves. But check in with your tone, your energy, any urgency that's leading to how you're saying what you're saying.

And then talk to yourself like someone you love. "Hey, sweetheart. Hey, my tenderoni. Old lessons are loud today. We are on our own side." Right? You wouldn't tell a kid who fell, "You idiot." You'd say, "Ouch, that hurt. Come here." So be that loving, gentle lap for yourself to snuggle up in. Yeah?

Okay, so those are general remedies. Let's apply this to the specific situation you might be in today because the third arrow shows up differently depending on where you are and what choice you made and what you're spending the day doing. So let's say you stayed home on the holiday. The third arrow will likely tell you things like, "You abandoned people. You're selfish. Real family shows up." Notice that voice. It's not truth. It's just old conditioning. Right?

So try this instead: "I made the best choice for myself and my body, and that's not abandonment. That's honoring what's real from self-love." Then do something that lets your nervous system know you are safe enough. Make tea, draw a bath, light a candle, sit in the quiet. Your body will believe what it can feel. So bring sensory things in. Right? A nice-smelling candle or essential oils, or bake something, something tangible, a really soft blankie on the couch.

If you're there and it's hard, the third arrow says, "You should be able to handle this. Everyone else is fine. What's your problem?" Right? What's wrong with you? So if it's challenging, take care of yourself. Right? Say, "Hey, I'm going to step outside now." And you can take a phone call or whatever, call a friend, co-regulate, check in, or you can simply just step outside. Right? And then go. Take yourself out of the challenging situation so you can breathe and ground and manage that third arrow instead of forcing yourself to stay there and continuing to berate yourself. Your body learns to trust you when your actions match your words. So give yourself a moment to breathe, to center, to orient, to be with yourself so you can make

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the most loving, supporting decision for you, and thus for the people you love, because remember, good boundaries, good self-care, managing the third arrow, it's all resentment prevention.

And finally, watch out for weaponized gratitude. If someone says, "Other people have it worse," when you express a feeling, or if your brain says that to you, that is a third arrow in disguise. Real gratitude and real pain can exist at the same time. Your body knows the difference between what's true and what's performance.

My beauty, I told you at the start, once you see the third arrow, you can't really unsee it. And now you've seen it. So at the next gathering, in the bathroom mirror, when that familiar shame starts building, "I'm too sensitive, I should be over this, what's wrong with me?" you'll recognize it for what it is: the third arrow mid-flight. And you'll have a choice you didn't have before.

When your mom rearranges the place settings and you think, "I'm ridiculous for caring," you'll notice it. When your uncle makes that comment because he always makes that kind of comment, and you spiral into "successful people don't get rattled," you'll name it. When that internal voice says, "You've abandoned everyone by not going home," you'll see the lie. You'll see the lie in it. And you'll be primed to say, "Third arrow, thank you so much. I appreciate what you're trying to do for me, but no, thank you. Not today. I'm no longer available for this." And then you'll do the next right thing: feet on the floor, hand on your chest, words you'd say to someone you love. That's the practice. Not perfection, not never getting hurt. Come on. Just declining to attack yourself for being human. That's all we're doing.

The first arrow will keep coming. That's life being life-y. That's it. That's going to keep happening. Stuff's going to keep happening. Things are going to keep breaking. The cat's going to keep throwing things off the table. That's what they do. The second arrow will activate because that's

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your nervous system doing its job. Right? But you don't have to throw that one at your own tender heart. You don't have to. And the third arrow, that's the most optional. That one's yours to just absolutely refuse. Because beauty, your worth isn't up for debate at the dinner table. It's not contingent on how gracefully you handle things or whether everyone approves. Your safety, your belonging, your worth, they live in you.

Holidays are loud. Let your voice be louder. And above all, my beauty, make it kind. Make it compassionate. Make it caring. Because if you're not taking care of your own tender ravioli sweet little heart, who is? Thanks for listening, my beauty. I appreciate you. I'm sending you lots of love. Let's do what we do. Gentle hand on your heart should you feel so moved. And remember, you are safe. You are held. You are loved. And when one of us heals, we help heal the world. Be well, my beauty. Ciao. I'll talk to you soon.