

# HIGH-CONFLICT CLIENTS

## WHAT ARE THE SIGNS?



- Seductiveness / over-friendliness / over complimenting
- Unreasonably upset/angry at you
- Exerting anger
- Attempt to manipulate you
- Continuously escalating behaviours
- Personality disorder?
- They are too emotional
- They are very quick to complain – how they present emotionally can often persuade others that they are a victim – this can be used against you as the worker
- They are not listening
- They are desperately trying to convince me
- They want me to waive my wand and make everything go away
- Not willing to listen / consider different perspective
- The “issue” isn’t the issue – their personality is the issue
- Follow your gut – listen to your inner voice – pay attention to the hairs on the back of your neck
- They just want to win
- They want more than their fair share
- They will tell you everything bad about the other person and nothing negative about them
- Body language
- They work in absolutes – they use exaggerated statements/claim – *“she **always** speak down to me” “he **never** helped me with the children” “she has **never** supported my decisions”*
- They tell you their story for 60 minutes and only at the end of the appointment do they talk about police call-outs, them being charged with criminal offences, FVROs

“The scars of others should teach us caution.”

## What are the signs?



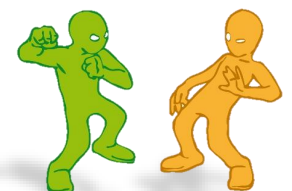
## Why are clients that way?



## Why do they challenge you?



## How do I respond?



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## WHAT ARE THE SIGNS?



- When numerous staff members are finding the client difficult to manage
- Continually complain and moan but decline all suggestions or offers of help
- In and out of court
- Recent hospitalisation for mental health concerns
- When they know the law better than me
- When they are yelling at me
- No capacity to self-reflect
- When parties have multiple agencies involved
- Pre-conceived ideas about the organisation's values towards or against certain genders
- Family Law system is against men
- Client says inconsistent things depending
- Frequent flyers – multiple cases with multiple partners
- Child abuse claims
- Child speaking in 'adult' like language
- Not seeing their child
- Stopping parent from seeing the child
- Passive aggressive presentation
- Generational history of trauma
- FVROs
- Multiple separations
- Suicidality
- Current drug use
- Revenge
- Jealousy
- Smelling of alcohol
- Sexual abuse allegations – CPFS
- Meth use

“When you really pay attention, everything is your teacher.”

## What are the signs?



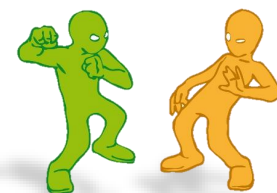
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- Survivors of FDV who give in to other parent
- Control by other parent
- Narcissistic traits
- Talks about “my rights”, “my position”
- Has nothing good to say about the other party
- Parental alienation – no contact
- Angry that they “have” to do this
- Finger pointing without any evidence

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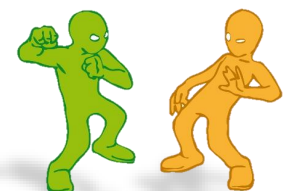
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“It is always the small pieces that make the big picture.”

# HIGH-CONFLICT CLIENTS

## WHY ARE CLIENTS THAT WAY?



- All-or-nothing thinking – black and white
- It has to be someone else's fault
- Unmanaged emotions out of proportion to events
- Preoccupied with blaming others
- *"Inability to control themselves and inability to solve the problem"* (EDDY, 2011)
- Author of their own misfortunes
- *"She makes me feel this way" "He made me do it"*
- Sense of entitlement
- Can't see the connect between their actions & how others respond to them
- Very difficult to change, adjust, adapt
- Wants attention
- They have to get what they want
- Can't handle negative feedback
- They are just taking out their anger on you
- The client feels helpless
- Coming from a defensive stance
- They feel we don't believe or understand them
- They are resistant but soften when they feel you understand
- They want to persuade/convince everyone – their emotions often persuade others that they are a victim
- Clients are selective with the information they provide
- *"The greater the menace the greater the mask"* (WADE 2015)
- I need you to tell me I am being reasonable
- The client feels pressured by the process even though the process is not meant to pressure anyone
- Chaos may be a regular part of their world

*"All anger stems from feeling hurt."*

## What are the signs?



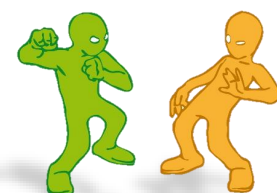
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# HIGH-CONFLICT CLIENTS

## WHY ARE CLIENTS THAT WAY?



- Be aware of Mental Health & AOD as contributing factors
- They just can't communicate effectively
- Family of origin issues
- Multitude of issues that the client has had to deal with
- Cumulative effect of the multitude of issues
- Lack of understanding of the system
- Lack of understanding of the law
- Cultural issues
- Lack of support networks, isolation
- Clients are so angry, hurt, and you are the person that they are dealing with on that day
- Clients who have to re-tell their story over and over again
- Sense of shame
- Feelings of powerlessness and lack of any control.
- Feel let down by the system
- Desperation at the limitations of our system
- The system will always protect the mother
- The system protects fathers
- Fear that it could take them months/years to obtain parenting orders
- It's all about the principle of the matter
- I am going to make life a living hell for her/him
- They didn't want to engage in the service to begin with
- We (service provider) are perpetuating the other parent's abuse by requiring the parent to engage in FDR
- Childhood trauma
- Financial issues

*"To solve a problem, you have to recognise your share of responsibility."*

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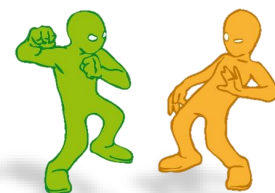
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# HIGH-CONFLICT CLIENTS

## WHY ARE CLIENTS THAT WAY?



- Poor self-regulation
- Attachment issues
- Have been labelled
- Dehumanised
- Self-fulfilling prophecy
- No emotional support
- Feeling disempowered
- Past trauma
- Stolen generation
- Institutional care
- FDV
- Child sexual abuse
- Learnt behaviour from their parental models
- It is just their personality

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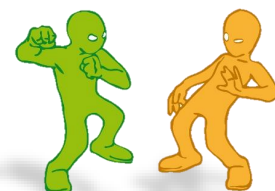
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## How do I respond?



“You only see the things on the surface.”

# HIGH-CONFLICT CLIENTS

## HOW ARE YOU CHALLENGED?



- I want to help them
- Why won't they listen to my reason?
- I feel so frustrated
- They are too emotional
- I am not a counsellor
- Hard to work with them when they are so rigid
- There must be something I am not doing because they are not budging
- I can't seem to do anything right
- So much pressure – I am expected to know the answers, to get everything right, to make everything right, and if anything goes wrong the finger is pointed at me
- Always having to be on my guard that once they are not happy they will make my life hell
- Something said or done has triggered a response in me
- I have to check my own prejudices
- I find their language offensive
- I really feel intimidated by how the client is treating me
- Hard to set firm boundaries
- Hard to stay calm – I get angry
- Why are you angry at me?! I'm trying to help you!
- I get defensive if they are being hostile or directing rage toward me
- Don't know what I should/shouldn't tolerate
- Remember your role and function  
eg: I am not a counsellor
- Remember the function of the forum  
eg: this isn't a counselling session

*“We will always encounter difficult people.  
Don't allow them to frustrate you or steal your joy.”*

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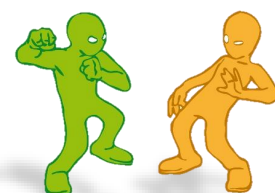
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# HIGH-CONFLICT CLIENTS

## HOW ARE YOU CHALLENGED?



- It isn't a reflection of my practice that they have to go to Family Court
- *"If they go to trial, I regard that as a failure."*
- I don't want them putting in a complaint against me
- They are asking me to do something that I am not comfortable with / outside of my role
- The parent has used the system ie: FVRO/VRO, when there is absolutely no evidence/risk/history of harm to the children or that parent
- Trying to balance the importance of the child having a relationship with his/her parent **vs** protecting that child from allegations of harm that have not been tested
- Battling with the question *"what if the allegations aren't true?"*
- What about the relationship between the child and the parent?
- Having to manage different players in the dispute ie: parents, grandparents, step-parents, etc
- I can't tolerate clients being rude to me
- I will not tolerate clients being verbally aggressive towards me
- Where a parent is unreasonably denying contact with the child
- Where there is evidence to show that there has been domestic violence but the parent who was violent is not taking ownership and not being accountable
- It is a challenge when one parent resists allowing more time between the child and other parent, just because that parent can't bear the child being away from them

*"If you're not being challenged, you're not getting any better."*

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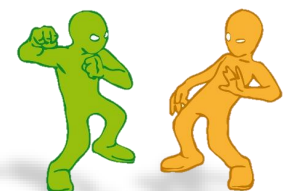
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# HIGH-CONFLICT CLIENTS

## HOW ARE YOU CHALLENGED?



- Challenge to gauge their objective
- When client's lie, why? Because they are hurting themselves
- Transference and counter-transference
- Breaching our boundaries
- Different values and beliefs
- Trigger from past
- Difficult to move forward
- Unable to reason
- Don't have enough time to assist them, they need time for therapeutic help
- Triggering my hot buttons
- The brick wall
- Have the need to be the expert and have all of the answers
- Personal triggers
- We need to keep one step ahead
- Blame on culture
- Different presentations
- Different chaos
- Missed appointments
- Declined support
- Attachment to us
- Let go of feeling like I need to fix or influence and just hear them, get a real understanding and work with what is possible
- Aggression and self-importance
- YES BECAUSE I CAN'T HELP!
- They trigger my personal issues

*“You’re allowed to scream. You’re allowed to cry. But don’t give up.”*

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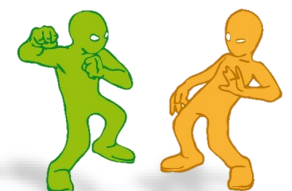
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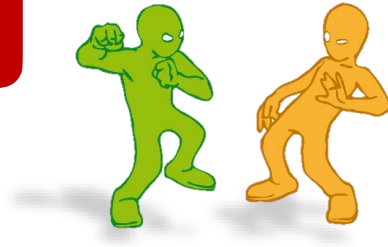


## How do I respond?



# HIGH-CONFLICT CLIENTS

## HOW DO YOU RESPOND?



- Change your own behaviour / change how you react – changes the interaction & relationship dynamic
- Is it about you? – Try not to take it personally
- Sometimes nothing you say will change their perspective or opinion
- You don't need to convince them
- Are you overreacting?
- Let it go
- You have already said what you had to say, there is nothing more that needs to be said
- Is there a real issue or is just their personality?
- Do I need to give the situation my attention – we are wired to pay the most attention to emergencies
- Is a response even needed?
- Manage the client better – don't let the client dictate
- See past the behaviour – look at the "why"
- Do I fight fire with fire? Doesn't always work.
  - Aggravates the client
  - You might look unprofessional and inappropriate
- "B.I.F.F." – **Be brief, Informative, Friendly, Firm** (EDDY, 2014)
- Choose your words carefully
- Respond quickly v's pause before you respond
- Refer to their qualifications/occupation/expertise by way of example to explain a point/perspective
- What type of relationship do you need to have with them?
  - Manage the relationship
  - Reduce the relationship
  - End the relationship

"Attitude is everything.

10% what happens to you and 90% how you react to it."

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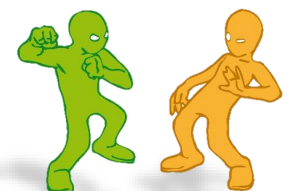
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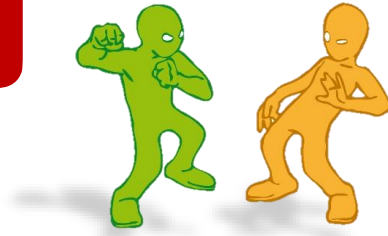


## How do I respond?



# HIGH-CONFLICT CLIENTS

## HOW DO YOU RESPOND?



*Continued...*

- Focus on policies – set limits without direct challenge
- Butter them up – manipulation?
- Criticism is taken as an attack
- Recognise their emotion
- Appreciate their frustration – verbalise it
- We can validate you by appreciating how you might feel, I can't always validate your position though
- Acknowledge what they are trying to achieve – acknowledge their intent
- Acknowledge the efforts that they have been making
- Explore whether now is the right time to be engaging in these discussions ie: too emotional, too soon
- I can't say always *"you are right" "he/she is wrong"*
- Don't accept that anything they say is a given just because they say so – we don't the truth
- I have to take you both on face value, I don't know you any better
- Outline what you can/can't do
- *"Looking back, could / would you have done something different?"*
- Put responsibility back on them – *"It's up to you to decide"* – the client has to make that choice
- Beat your head up against the wall expecting a different outcome
- *"What do you think a solution could be?"... "What needs to happen to make that work?"*
- Reality-test
  - *"You're saying she's an unfit mother, but you are OK with leaving your child with her 50% of the time?"*

**"Emotions are contagious –  
Intense emotions are intensely contagious."**

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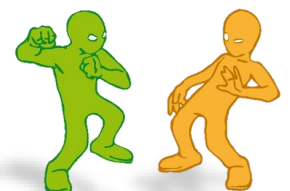
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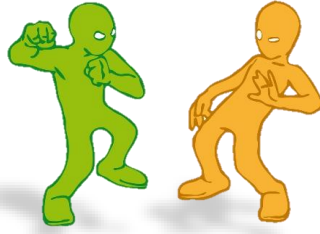


## How do I respond?



# HIGH-CONFLICT CLIENTS

## HOW DO YOU RESPOND?



*Continued...*

- *"I wonder if the Tom understands it that way?"*
- Focus on big ticket items, don't sweat the small stuff
- You don't have to get the right answer, you can find an position that you can live with
- Talk through their positions with them – *"What will you do if that can't happen?"*
- *"If you aren't going to push it, then what is the alternative?"*
- Decide whether the forum is no longer appropriate for what they are trying to achieve
- Is a different forum more suitable ie: FLC, CIP, Building Connections, Mums & Dads Forever, CPFS, FSN, etc
- *"Maybe if it is that difficult, maybe you do need someone else to give you the answer."*
- Focus on what they are trying to achieve – work towards that if you can
- Does it really matter what the other party has said they have/haven't done, isn't the question can you live with what they are asking from you now?
- I am not here to find out the "truth"
- I am not here to be convinced about the "truth"
- *"I am not here to judge you... but you have an idea how that looks right?"*
- Don't try to convince them
- Be OK to accept that there is nothing that you can do
- *"Don't work harder than your client" (Dr Purcell 2017)*
- Only challenge so far – know when to stop
- Pushing through the issue is starting to feel unsafe
- Don't buy into what they want

*"I am not responsible for your outcome."*

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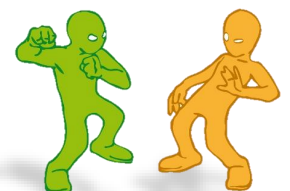
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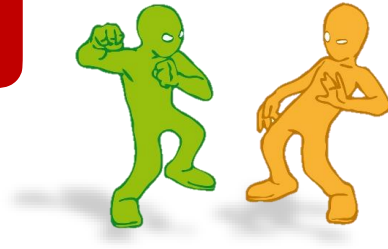


## How do I respond?



# HIGH-CONFLICT CLIENTS

## HOW DO YOU RESPOND?



*Continued...*

- Protect yourself
- Stand firm
- We can't help everyone
- Destabilise them – redirect their attention
- Step out
- **Breathe** – take 3 deep breaths
- Remember your **Inner Smile**
- Bring yourself back to **calm**
- Modelling calm & respectful communication
- Talk to a colleague for a different perspective
- Be aware of strong disapproval / criticisms / judgement sends a message that you are superior and you have a right to criticise = client might not appreciate that
- Respect their right to their opinions eg: parenting styles
- *"I can't force the other person"*
- Use suitable metaphors to help convey meaning and assist comprehension ie: "elastic band = attachment", "foundations for a bridge = co-parenting dynamic"
- Redirect client focus to the children
- Place another seat in mediation – *"imagine your child sitting there – what do you want them to hear, to see, to feel when he/she sees and hears you together?"*
- *"Do you hate her/him more than you love your child?"*
- It could cost you anywhere from \$60,000 - \$100,000+ !
- Potentially 24-35 month process
- The FDR process is not meant to pressure anyone, people often are pressured nonetheless by the process
- Discuss what Family Court process involves eg: length of time, amount of hearings, cost of lawyers, etc



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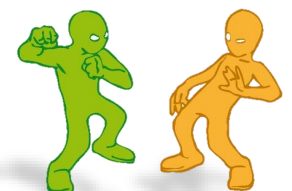
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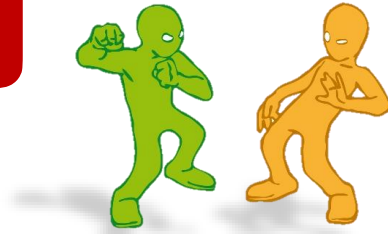
## How do I respond?



*"Ah crap... at least I tried."*

# HIGH-CONFLICT CLIENTS

## HOW DO YOU RESPOND?



*Continued...*

- *"I can't answer that question, that's legal advice"*
- Don't tolerate bad behaviour
- Break line of sight – use your hand, a book, your face
- Take time-outs
- Give clients opportunity to breathe, calm down
- Maybe need to be separated
- Shuttle Conference?
- Shut it down if you feel unsafe or threatened
- Maybe today is just not the day – go away sleep on it and come back another day when you are ready
- If no forward movement, question whether another FDR session would be productive
- Give clients "homework" to consider in-between sessions and then pre-FDR before running follow-up session
- Let them talk, let them vent, let them *'empty their cup'*
- Don't need to argue a point with the client because you disagree with their reasoning
- Emphasis that the Court cannot "fix" underlying relationship issues and fundamental co-parenting issues
- Don't say the "C" word – *"counselling"* – think about how to better wrap/present that idea
- Try to find out where/when it all started – *"when did it start going all wrong?"*
- If you have relevant experience, decide whether it is safe to share that experience or not – assists in conveying understanding, assists in your credibility
- Not being seen to collude with derogatory opinions and statements

*"Trust yourself and have confidence in your ability to make correct decisions."*

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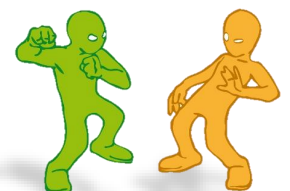
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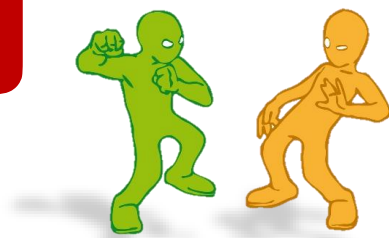


## How do I respond?



# HIGH-CONFLICT CLIENTS

## HOW DO YOU RESPOND?



*Continued...*

- Assist them to redefine their relationship – re-set the expectations and “rules”
- Emphasise that neither parent can tell the other how to parent – you can ask the other to support how you wish to parent – this is not a given, but ideal
- Try to find another way to bridge the gap between yourself and the client
- Give the client a private space to talk it through without the pressure of the other person’s gaze
- Offer a FDR Certificate
- If client is agitate I speak softer and try to be very calm
- Stay calm, allow them to vent
- Reflet back
- Empathise
- Let it slide
- Be assertive, not confrontational or aggressive
- Have a break, separate them
- Role play with clients in private session
- Make them put themselves in children’s shoes
- “Let it go”
- Use compassion as a central tenet in all my interactions with others
- Empathise and hold open body language
- Listen
- Check in with self being the observer before responding when challenged
- Do not rise to their aggression
- Look at things from their POV – try to use empathy
- Self care after appointment

“Self-care is a priority and a necessity – not a luxury  
– in the work that we do.”

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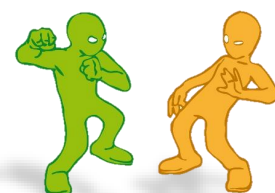
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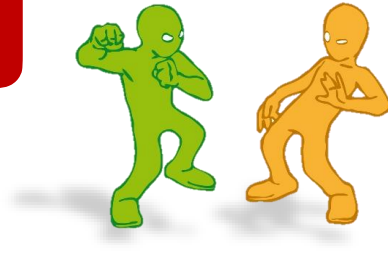


## How do I respond?



# HIGH-CONFLICT CLIENTS

## HOW DO YOU RESPOND?



*Continued...*

- Set boundaries if appropriate
- Slow down pace
- Validation
- Stay calm
- Acknowledge
- Communicate
- Challenge behaviours
- Re-word to focus on kids
- Change conversation
- Model acceptable behaviour
- Take a different approach
- Demand they stop, take a breath and think again
- Take it to supervision
- Educate, inform, support, hold emotion, hold situation, refer / signpost, best interests of the children
- Show a different response to what would have been expected
- Explore options as opposed to problems
- Acknowledge their hurt
- Hold children in mind and keep bringing them into focus
- A bit of stuck record is OK
- Private session to explore what's going on for the client
- Is there a reason for the way they are acting
- Judo!
- Remind myself that I am not responsible for these parents' conflict
- FDR is small part of river of conflict
- Speak directly to the "direct talkers" – cut the crap talk.

*"Not my circus. Not my monkeys."*

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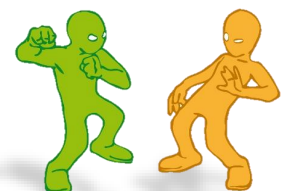
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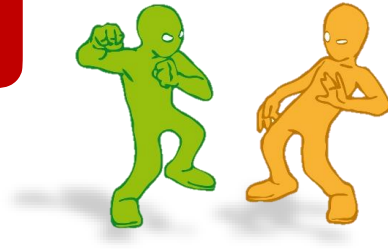
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# HIGH-CONFLICT CLIENTS

## HOW DO YOU RESPOND?



*Continued...*

- Recognise the emotion in the person but move the discussion on (if possible)
- Distract, then run!
- Silence create space for client to reflect before responding
- Document / take notes on what said / done
- Hang up.
- Breathe before responding – find my centre
- Terminate appointment
- If I pre-empt the “Why”, I create my version of their story. Let them explore and understand the “why”. It is not my story.

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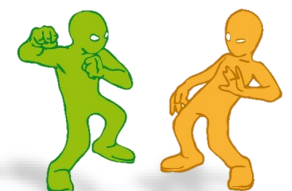
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“I wonder how much of what weighs me down,  
is not mine to carry.”