



## Breaking Apart: What *Breaking Bad* can teach us about Separation, Power and the Psychology of Conflict

*By Dr Rayleigh Joy, Director of The Groundworks Lab*

For those of us who work in the world of family law, whether as therapists, lawyers or mediators, we know that separation is rarely clean, quick, or purely legal. It is a psychological unravelling, a painful crossing from one version of life to another. And for some families, that crossing becomes perilous, prolonged, and marked by intractable conflict.

In my clinical work with post-separation families, I often find myself searching for ways to understand and explain what happens when people who once loved each other become locked in cycles of litigation, mistrust, and fear. It's not just about parenting arrangements or who gets Christmas. It's about grief, identity, control, and survival.

Lately, I've found myself returning to two powerful narrative frameworks: **The Hero's Journey** and the story arc of **Walter White in *Breaking Bad***.

At first glance, this might seem like a strange pairing. But bear with me.

### **The Hero's Journey: A Map Through Chaos**

The Hero's Journey, a structure described by mythologist Joseph Campbell, maps a universal pattern in stories of transformation. A hero leaves their familiar world after a crisis, encounters tests and trials, and either emerges wiser... or is undone by the journey.

It's a structure used in everything from *The Odyssey* to *Star Wars*. But it's also deeply relevant to separation.

Because separation, especially high-conflict separation, is a hero's journey, except the battlefield is emotional, relational, and legal. And many parents don't realise they've crossed a threshold they cannot uncross.

### **Enter Walter White**

In *Breaking Bad*, we meet Walter White as a mild, disempowered chemistry teacher. Faced with a terminal diagnosis, he makes one desperate choice, to cook meth, and begins a slow, spiralling descent into power, secrecy, and destruction.

He tells himself he's doing it for his family. For survival. For justice. But slowly, something else takes over. His unprocessed shame, his need to matter, his hunger for control. And in trying not to die, he loses himself.

### Sound familiar?

I've met many "Walt Whites" in separation conflict. They don't cook meth, of course. But they begin as wounded, frightened, confused, and, in the heat of family breakdown, they become caught in power struggles that slowly reshape their identity. They start to believe their own narrative, justify actions that cause harm, and lose access to empathy.

### Professionals Can Get Swept In Too

As professionals, we're not immune to these dynamics. We can find ourselves drawn into the conflict as rescuers, fixers, warriors, or even unintentional enablers. That's why understanding the emotional and narrative arcs of separation isn't just an academic exercise. It's a necessary skill in trauma-informed, family-centred practice.

### A New Lens for Working with Conflict

I'm currently developing a workshop that brings together:

- The Hero's Journey framework
- Character arcs from *Breaking Bad*
- Psychological insights into power, shame, attachment, and identity
- Clinical and legal strategies for supporting change

It's designed for those working in the family law ecosystem, therapists, ICLs, lawyers, report writers, case managers who want to better understand the inner and outer journey of separation, particularly in high-conflict matters.

Because beneath the affidavits and court orders, there's often a more human story unfolding. A story of loss, fear, and the deep desire to survive a rupture.

And if we can see that story - and name it - we're more likely to help people rewrite it.

– *Dr Rayleigh Joy*

🌐 The Groundworks Lab - Family Dispute Resolution, Family Reports, Counselling



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