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Other Thoughts On Mediation



Mediation requires transformation. That in turn, requires better communication with and between others and within oneself.

From world events to within each and every one of us, these are times of contentious change, the letting go of assumptions, of potentially profound growth, and of moving forward as best we can in harmony and prosperity.

In times of change, it is important to think differently, to evolve our language, to explain options and consequences, and develop new temporary assumptions from which to base our actions. Perhaps most important, we need to develop our ability to change our own minds.

The complexity of 21st Century life ensures mediation is a growth industry. There are more knowledge and more choices to navigate now than just a few years ago. The rise in the individual's physical and psychological mobility, rapidly advancing communications and other technology, the resultant transparency, and the opportunity these provide creates widespread and global empowerment.

Those realities, combined with the individual's rising power in voice and

in the other weapons of choice, require the personal skills of discernment to choose from the many options afforded. Decision-makers sometimes need wise guides to help in the transformation of their thinking.

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Mediation has taken on a meaning related to a process in which there is a dispute or conflict whereby neutral outside support is required to “mediate” a disagreement.

The International Stage

Globalization is often perceived as “new frontiers” and many times globalization conflicts with tribalism; that, in its extreme, builds “barricades” to outside influence. Fear of change, the lack of dialogue and knowledge, the resultant hardened positions can be seen everywhere—in most organizations, in hometowns, in government departments, within and between communities, and at higher levels where peacemakers and peacekeepers and other mediators get involved.

In times of rapid change, as in the times we are in today we witness literal

tribalism in conflicts in flashpoints like Iraq and Afghanistan.

We witness Canadian troops attempting to work out relationships with Afghani tribal warlords. Getting in the tent just to talk is fraught with danger and that might be the easy part. The language, customs, tradition, beliefs, and history of the people present even larger challenges. The wider Middle East is rife in conflict between tribal beliefs and traditions; the resultant siege mentalities manifest in daily violence. Is there a better system for mediation than democratic institutions?

In the early 1970s, I attended the Sandhurst Military Academy Passing Out Parade and noted then a dramatic change in attitude. I loosely paraphrase what I heard Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath say to young officers graduating that day. He said, you now have the finest training the UK can give you in military history, strategy, and battle tactics, but many of you are going to Northern Ireland and will face crowds of women with children in prams.

Mediating peace in UK streets required yet another warrior skill. On the ground, front-line mediation between an individual soldier and a potential combatant was an hourly consequence of duty. Soldiers were evaluated not so much on their ability to win battles, but rather to mediate

specific incidents with people in their own neighborhoods. This is difficult work requiring multi-faceted training, that of listening, communicating, mediating, as well as the traditional skills of soldiering and mental agility.

Witnessing Northern Ireland and watching the news today from multiple “mediated” perspectives—BBC, CBC, NBC, CNN, Fox, Al Jazeera, the potential hundreds of newspapers, Websites, and magazines—we witness similar encounters as occurred in Belfast and Londonderry in the 1970s. Recent events in New Orleans, cities in France, even staid Sydney, Adelaide, and Perth reflect the importance of mediating disputes of service, respectful inclusion, and diversity.

The flash and bang of the 24/7 global news today brings startling images of conflict to viewers around the world. Individuals thus empowered or stifled by the potential effects of these images make the mediating of public diplomacy and strategic communication more difficult. Frighteningly so, the growing number of intelligent individuals with an agenda know this.

Closer to Home

In the past 30 years, we have watched the language of conflict at the international, national, and domestic levels evolve from those great classic one-liners: “surrender or die,” “love it or leave it,” and “my way or the highway” into wider acceptance of programs of dispute resolution that are not hallmarked by unilateral action and the violence that often accompanies it.

Adversarial commercial litigation, unproductive labour relations conflict, court-based family and community dispute resolution are all moving toward mechanisms and processes to work things out. Mediators in numerous fields work with organizations and individuals. If you are unable to get along or avoid a conflict or a dispute at home or abroad, a mediator can help. This is all good.

The rising of the mediator is also a sign of the complexity of life today. They are perhaps this century’s new

priests, doctors, psychologists, and other forms of guides that reflect a need to help individuals navigate their options, discern interests, and plan for the future. In many cases, a mediator’s good work helps individuals avoid conflict and dispute, resolve options, and tackle the choices they face.

Without balanced individuals, there are consequences that often lead to conflict in homes, communities, and between and among tribes and nations.

Many people traditionally mediate in our lives. Parents and other relatives mediate children within family and society; teachers mediate knowledge; police mediate their ever-expanding beat; the courts still mediate in extreme cases; the church and television both mediate; the Internet and peers also mediate much in the lives of our children and in our professions but, most important, in all of this it still boils down to the individual.

It is at the individual level that mediation is most often needed or required. It is the individual who can develop him or herself to make decisions, to lead groups or organizations to move things forward in concert as a group or with other groups. It is also an individual who sometimes wisely abdicates to mediation.

If there is a marked rise in the need for mediators, there must be a corresponding rise in the need to help individuals develop their capacity to mediate things in their own lives. For all the things needing discernment, judgment, and choice, will there be enough mediators to serve societies’ needs? The rate of change dictates that people must become better at mediating in their own lives, of accepting the diversity of options presented in this new century.

Mediating Self

True democracy is said to be predicated on an educated population that can think and discern important questions of the day. Common knowledge, common sense within the common man and woman are at the root of democracy as we appreciate it. (Remember that truly inclusive democracies are less than 100 years old. Women, Aboriginal people, and non-White settlers know this.)

If the individual is vital to democracy, how do we define a well-adjusted, educated individual? One of the key Aboriginal values in Canada is the concept of balance between self and others. Relationships with others, it is believed, will be out of balance unless the internal elements of the individual—his or her spiritual, emotional, physical, and intellectual well-being—are all strong.

If these four things are balanced within an individual, then a family, indeed a community and a nation, can all be in balance. Without balanced individuals, there are consequences that often lead to conflict in homes, communities, and between and among tribes and nations.

In times of change, the balance between self and others starts with the self. Mediating the balance within one person might be the most important challenge that we, as individuals, face.

A balanced individual with a strong body, a healthy mind, and a good heart, who is supported in spirit and who demonstrates personal leadership, mediates in his or her self, between self and others, and knows when—and if—mediation is required. That individual recognizes that mediation requires transformation, that communicating with self and with others will involve the death of certain assumptions, and that new opportunities will arise and that all will be well. ▲

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