

Kluwer Mediation Blog

Listen. Then listen some more.

Bill Marsh (Editor) (Bill Marsh Mediator) · Sunday, December 4th, 2011

I am writing this from outside my home country, on a two-week assignment. It's not a "mediation" as we might typically know it – not yet, anyway – but rather an early stage engagement with a long-standing and profoundly deep-rooted conflict. My job at this stage is simply to listen to how some of those involved perceive things, not to engage across the divide.

Whether or not things develop beyond this point is a question for another day (and who knows, perhaps another blog).

Just listening? That sounds easy enough. After all, I am a mediator, so I listen a lot anyway. Or so I thought on the long flight here. But so far I have been listening for a whole week, and I still have a week more of listening to do. So I have had plenty of time to think about listening, and to practice it. And I am learning a few things.

First of all, it's hard work. Today I listened for over 10 hours, to countless stories of grief, betrayal and hurt. The day before was the same. And the day before that. The coming week will be no different. In all, I will listen here for 12 days, in numerous locations, covering thousands of miles. It's not a question of staying awake, because the stories are gripping and heart-rending in equal measure. It's just plain tiring to remain engaged and focused.

The next thing I have learnt is how profoundly appreciated it is by those talking to me. The truth is that we all have stories to tell and we all need to tell them, the more so those in conflict. I have been warmly thanked, hugged, bought meals, given gifts – just for listening. People who have suffered in isolation are suddenly being heard. And being heard is a validating act in itself.

Interestingly, people tell me that they feel much better simply for having told their stories. That's fascinating to me, because objectively their situation remains the same. No deal has been done, no resolution to the conflict has been found. And yet something has changed for them.

I have also learnt that when I give people space to talk, the conversation goes in some fascinating directions which I would never have guessed at. I have learned far more than I expected by keeping my questions and interventions to a few. I have also had to abandon my own sense of where the conversation ought to go, and just see what happens. The results have been unpredictable and hugely valuable.

Perhaps most interestingly for me, I have found that without any prompting on my part, they almost all raise the subject of reconciliation themselves. There is no sense that I have to steer the

conversation that way, much less to lead people unwillingly towards it. By giving them full rein to talk about their grief for as long as they wish, they bring themselves to the point of wanting to discuss making peace.

In eight days time, I will go home to resume my “normal commercial mediation practice” – which is beginning to feel increasingly abnormal by the day! What do I take back?

Naturally it's a very different context. I don't anticipate a two week listening exercise will be of much use in a one day commercial mediation! But I have learned that when the pressure to get to a deal is off, and no one is clock-watching, some extraordinary things can happen. I have learned that listening – and I mean really listening – has a profound impact on people. It validates them, and in due course begins to free them up to think about resolution. So I plan, somehow, to make more space for it in my mediations in future. I'll let you know how I get on.


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