

The Soul Of Mediation & Leaving A Legacy For The Next Generation

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"The meaning of life is to find your gift. The purpose of life is to give it away." Pablo Picasso.
Last month I travelled to Edinburgh for the International Academy of Mediators conference, chaired and hosted by John Sturrock. The theme of the conference was "Looking outward – mediation: a new enlightenment?" Not only was this central theme of looking outward clear to see in the diversity of topics, of speakers and of participants, it will also continue to be seen – and by an increasingly larger audience – through [The Edinburgh Declaration of International Mediators](#). The Declaration, which was launched at the conference and signed by nearly 100 mediators, is available for all to adopt, implement and share.

As part of the discussions on how mediators might look outward, Bill Marsh and I facilitated a couple of workshop sessions on the topic of the soul of mediation and leaving a legacy for the next generation. In this post, I'll share some of the insights from those sessions and also offer a few of my reflections on looking outward.

The soul of mediation

Our session opened with some words, shared by Bill, from Kenneth Burke which reminded us that our conversations were a small contribution to an unending conversation on conflict and its resolution; a conversation which has long preceded us and will continue beyond our time. With this reminder of the unending conversation of which we were part, we reflected on what it was that had brought each of us to mediation, and has kept us there. Some shared how mediation has allowed them to be more authentic, to bring more of themselves to their work than when they practised as lawyers or barristers. Some noted the key role which mentors have played in nudging them onto this path. However, the recurring theme was that most had been drawn to mediation due to its underlying values and principles, and the impact which it can have. And this acknowledgment reminded me of [Bill's recent post](#) on the basics of mediation, in which he writes: "*the small acts of respect, such as listening to someone who hasn't been properly heard for a long time, acknowledging people's right to make their own decisions while feeling able to engage them in a serious discussion about the wisdom of their choices, the odd humorous line, the power of a silence. This is the "stuff" of mediation, the raw material at our disposal. Pretty much all progress is made up of this "stuff".*" It was because of this "stuff" that many had found their way to mediation and have stayed there.

One participant used the powerful analogy of mediators being like midwives: always supporting the process, listening carefully and respectfully to people's needs as something new is created and doing so with a quiet presence, away from the limelight. He memorably concluded this analogy by noting that you never see the midwife in the photograph of the newborn...As a mother of two, I was tempted to raise the issue of pain-relief though sensed that this would be taking the analogy a little too far...

Looking outward to the next generation: leaving a legacy

Our discussion on what each of us might be able to offer in order to move mediation forward prompted a variety of observations, including:

- *There's now something to pass on:* many noted that, in an increasing number of countries, there is now a clear legacy to be passed on to the next generation as mediation has become a well-established method of dispute resolution. However, others emphasised that there are many people training as mediators and there is not enough work (an issue which has been addressed in [Sabine Walsh's earlier post](#)). One suggestion of how the next generation may put their skills to greater use was the creation of more local peace hubs or centres, of which there are, for example, at least a couple in London.

- *Broader application of mediating skills:* Many expressed their hope that mediation skills will be used more broadly beyond the conflict resolution field, for example in management. The next generation was encouraged to challenge the norms and take mediation to a wider group, including teaching mediation in schools.

- *Technology:* Concern was expressed regarding the heavy use of technology, particularly by the younger generations, and the damage which this may be doing to language skills and to the ability to really communicate. However, optimism was expressed that younger generations are demanding, and are highly enthusiastic about, better ways of addressing conflict.

- *Being bold:* It was acknowledged that it can seem daunting for the younger generations to enter the field as there is no gradual transition from training as a mediator to then practising. This sense is perhaps exacerbated by the awareness that there are many "greats" in the field, leaving the next generation to perhaps doubt what they might be able to offer. The bold message from the current generation of mediators to the next generations was: have courage; challenge the norms; take mediation to a wider group; and do not let things hold you back. The next generation was also encouraged to demand that the current generation of mediators partners with them as a legacy is passed on and nurtured.

Looking inward to look outward

In the weeks since the conference, I have been reflecting on its legacy for me as someone who might fall into the category of the "next generation." And I keep coming back to the same highlights: the captivating talks by Dr Scilla Elworthy, three times Nobel Peace prize nominee, and Professor William Ury, one of the authors of the seminal *Getting to Yes*. I'll focus on just one of the themes which they both addressed in their talks. It's the theme of – as Ury put it – tuning your own instrument.

Both spoke of the key skill in mediation of deep listening, of listening to all that is being said, and not being said. And both shared how self-awareness and self-care have been essential for them to be able to do their work. Elworthy spoke of "*quiet self-inspection*" and of the self-care she gives herself by working in her garden. Ury spoke of using quiet reflection and meditation to find a place of calm and of presence before placing himself in what appear to be the most intractable of disputes. To tune his own instrument, Ury explained, "*the more I want to engage in the world, the more I need to spend time of quiet, time in nature.*"

The effect of self-awareness and self-care was clear to see: in each of their unique ways, Elworthy and Ury offer striking examples of presence, integrity and humility. Above all, they both seemed so very comfortable in their own skins, and many noticed and commented on this. It's easy to think that such qualities simply come naturally to some. But the acknowledgment by Elworthy and Ury of the importance of their inner work, of finding that place of calm, are a reminder to us all that in order to bring our best selves to our work we first have to do the inner work. And it's a topic which, of course, Ury explores in his *Getting to Yes With Yourself*. Perhaps this inner work is, at its very core, about developing the inner yes which Ury describes: "*This inner yes is an unconditional constructive attitude of acceptance and respect – first toward yourself, then toward life, and finally toward others.*"

The importance of the inner work was an unexpected lesson for me: I thought I would come away from the conference with a heightened resolve to look outward. And I did, though I also came away with an awareness that in order to do that I need to spend some more time looking inward. And there's no better way to close than with these words from Elworthy's recent book, *The Business Plan for Peace*: "*the most important lesson I have learned is that inner work is a prerequisite for outer effectiveness, for the simple reason that the quality of our awareness affects the quality of results produced. If we want to communicate clearly, transform conflicts, generate energy, and develop trust within our families and in our places of work, our first challenge is to do the inner work.*"

Here's to the inner and outer work.

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