

Letting Go?

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John Sturrock (Core Solutions Group)

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"The last great act of a courageous leader is to let go." I suggested to the CEO as he pondered whether this was in fact a good time to step down. He had many reasons not to leave. He attributed these to other people's needs for a good transition, giving him a decent send-off, planning for the future over several months. In reality, this had all been underway for months already. He was holding on for his own reasons, unsure what the future would hold for him, uncertain about what he would do and where he could turn. He needed a prompt, permission, to accept responsibility. In my role as mediator/coach, I was able to pose the questions to enable him to make the choices he needed to make.

That same week, the great English batsman, Alastair Cook, retired from Test match cricket, explaining that his mental "tank" was empty. He left the stage with an achievement written in the stars. A century, 147 runs, in his last ever innings for his country. This was professionalism of the highest order. His form apparently restored, would he now continue, he was asked? Of course not, he replied. He was letting go. The time had come to move on.

Letting go has featured significantly in my life of late. The Core business moved office a few weeks ago. The new space is, quite deliberately, considerably smaller than the old. As a result, I have had to dispose of most of the accumulated paperwork of the past twenty years of my professional life, since I left active legal practice and began my journey of innovation and adventure in mediation. As I worked my way through file after file, I was reminded of ventures and people long since forgotten. They seemed special at the time and now catharsis was mixed with nostalgia.

45 large bags of papers have gone for shredding. Gone for ever with all the memories, hopes and expectations they contained. Some may be contained in a folder on a computer somewhere but the sheer physical tangibility of the paper record cannot be replaced. It feels good to let that go.

From this description, it will be obvious that I am a hoarder. So, it was with some pride and a great deal of pleasure that I discovered in our basement at home, during the same week as our office removal, my box of programmes from rock concerts I attended in the 1970s and 1980s. Among them was the programme for my first ever concert at the Usher Hall in Edinburgh in April 1976. The band was Camel, playing their then latest album, Moonmadness. Not only was this a great find but it was timely, because that same day I was heading to Newcastle on Tyne to see in concert, after all those years, Camel, playing in full: Moonmadness. Not only was that special in itself but, for reasons I do not yet understand, I received a "VIP upgrade" on my ticket.

For a not insubstantial sum, I was invited to meet the band privately in person and to take a front row seat. As the band-leader (and sole survivor from 1976) is my all-time lead guitar hero, needless to say I accepted the invitation. We had a great chat and he was genuinely moved to see my 1976 programme which he duly signed with "warmest wishes". These little things are real joys in life. Thank goodness I did not let my concert programmes go when we moved house a few years ago.

I have faced similar dilemmas recently in my work as a mediator and coach with Core Solutions. We concluded another fascinating residential Summer School in September, the fourth in a row and the 34th such mediation skills course overall since 2001. We've seen real transformation over the years. This was a really thoughtful group, with deep learning during the day and wonderful discussions over dinner. But when should we let this training course go? Hand over to the next generation? Accept that it is time to move on to other things? Do we wait until the tank runs dry or leave on a high? Only the latter makes sense.

I was pondering all of this when the latest rankings for mediators in the legal directories appeared. These lists always bring with them a mix of excitement and embarrassment. How one is compared to one's professional colleagues strikes a deep chord, not necessarily a pleasant one if there is a competitive edge to it. Why do these things matter? Do they matter? Why do some of us pay for advertisements to appear in these tomes and for our names to be ranked as "leaders"? What is it that drives some of us actively to pursue our placing in these lists? What traps do we fall into when we involve ourselves in these pursuits?

Is there another letting go required here? A letting go of ego? For mediators in particular, this seems a relevant question. Powerlessness is written heavily on our calling card. And yet....we are as vulnerable as others to insecurity about our position in the marketplace. And to needing the validation which comes with outward signs of "success". Acknowledgement that we matter. Maybe we need to let that go too, in the ultimate acceptance of what our role really means. Acceptance that the whole point of being a mediator is that we fade away when the job is done. And recognition that the sense of personal gratitude for having an opportunity to contribute to others' needs, to the best of our ability, is all that should really matter to us.

Postscript: I'd like to dedicate this to David Richbell, a friend and mentor, who died in the week of publication of this blog. David was a fine example of both courage and vulnerability. Many of us owe him an incalculable debt for training us and supporting us over many years in our mediation journeys. David has now experienced the final letting go and, as we celebrate a life lived for mediation, we remember with sympathy those he has left behind.