

Kluwer Mediation Blog

Gandalf, Choice, Power and Hope

Bill Marsh (Editor) (Bill Marsh Mediator) · Friday, January 4th, 2019

As mediators, we walk a delicate line between acknowledging and valuing the realities of the past and the present, with all the dysfunction and failings which have contributed to the conflict, and focusing on the present and the future with the opportunities they present to shape something new. Both are important, neither can be short-changed. I wrote about this some time ago when I referred to our role as being [“Bearers of hope and agents of reality. At the same time.”](#)

Over Christmas, I watched again the film version of Tolkein’s famous Lord of the Rings with one of my sons, only to be reminded that the wizard Gandalf speaks wisdom into this delicate balance. Frodo, in conversation with Gandalf, is despairing at the impending sense of doom which is gathering over the land:

“I wish it need not have happened in my time,” said Frodo.

“So do I,” said Gandalf, “and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.”

Frodo’s focus is on the failings of the past which have led to the present, and the impossibility of the challenge he confronts. The result is that he feels overwhelmed, and hence powerless. Gandalf turns Frodo’s focus to the present and the future, and presents him with the challenge of what HE will do; what, however small, will be HIS contribution. In doing so, he gives Frodo the dignity of choice, and hence a sense of agency, and in doing so coverts his sense of powerlessness into empowerment.

Gandalf’s wisdom applies to all involved in conflict – mediators, parties and advisers alike.

For mediators, it is easy to be confronted by a conflict and feel the impossibility of any resolution. Positions are entrenched, lines drawn. Reputations are staked on advice given and stances taken. Binary and mutually-exclusive actions and language pervade. And into it all is expected to step a mediator, a mere mortal (I do wish parties would stop asking me to “work my usual magic”).

No less a sense of impossibility, and usually more so, can be experienced by the parties, and perhaps their advisers. Mediators at least have significant experience of progress in their personal history books to call on. For protagonists immersed in a conflict, especially a major one, a long-running one, or their first one, the instinct is to think like Frodo – “I wish it need not have happened in my time”. The pre-occupation with that thought reinforces a sense of impotence and drives out an awareness of agency.

So in a very real way, mediators need to make people aware of their choices. Even apparently small ones – How they choose to behave towards others present at a mediation, what language they choose to express themselves, the issues they choose to focus on, whether they shake their opponents hand, with whom they will meet and talk, and so on. This is not an invitation to mediators to micro-manage the process, less still to try to “nanny” people into good behaviour (a pet hate of mine). Rather it is to confront people with the reality that they DO have at least some choices (and therefore power) and that the way in which they exercise that power will probably significantly impact on the outcome of the discussions.

My personal experience is that, at least most of the time, the dignity afforded by this choice brings out the best in people, and that (to borrow from Gandalf) they “decide what to do with the time that is given to [them]”, and decide well.

To no less a degree do mediators need to be aware of their own choices. When confronted by an apparently impossible situation, I have found it important to do the little things as well as I can. Each micro-choice I make about what I do and say not only (one hopes) takes the mediation process forward, but just as importantly gives me a sense that I have some agency, some contribution to make, in this apparently impossible situation. Making the small choices well remains at the heart of what we do.

Finally, and more widely, for those who at the start of this New Year ponder the apparent impossibility of many conflicts around the world with a heavy heart and a growing sense of impotence, Gandalf asks us to put that to one side for the time being, and simply ask what we CAN do, however small it might be.

Here’s to a year of small actions to confront the impossible!

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This entry was posted on Friday, January 4th, 2019 at 4:16 pm and is filed under [General](#), [Mediation Practice](#)

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