

Kluwer Mediation Blog

We Can Work It Out / You Can't Always Get What You Want

Greg Bond (Bond & Bond Mediation / University of Wildau) · Monday, June 24th, 2019

I learned two foreign languages back in school, and there is a reason why my German was always going to be better than my French. I blame The Beatles. In my last blog I promised I would write about the Beatles and the Rolling Stones (and not Brexit). I will keep the promise.

In French lessons I always sat next to my friend Richard, and as we thought that the lessons were less than inspiring, or just because we could, we spent class after class discussing The Beatles, and occasionally comparing them to The Rolling Stones. An old debate that we gave new life to, in our adolescence. As a result, my French was always never going to be more than ok. In retrospect I have felt sorry for our teacher, Mr. Green, who was unable to put a stop to our chatter.

The Beatles, arguably the pop / rock band with the greatest cultural significance ever, split up acrimoniously in 1970. I do not know whether they tried to resolve matters amicably, perhaps with third-party help. If time travel were an option, I would love to fly back and have a go at mediating with them.

In 1965 the Beatles song "We Can Work It Out" was released. What a great title for mediation! The sentiment is so right, the appeal to common sense, trust and understanding so heartfelt. If you do not know this song, do listen to it. It is a plea for empathy, the mediator's prime tool. Paul McCartney sings:

*Try to see it my way,
Do I have to keep on talking till I can't go on?
While you see it your way,
Run the risk of knowing that our love may soon be gone.*

And the chorus rings out:

*We can work it out,
We can work it out.*

I sometimes wish parties to conflict and participants in mediation would adopt some of this forward-looking and optimistic mindset. I wish they would see the perspective of the other side. We need more trust and more empathy in the world.

But Paul McCartney got it all wrong. If you look closely at the lyrics of this great song, you will see that the appeal is one-way only.

Think of what you're saying.

You can get it wrong and still you think that it's alright.

Think of what I'm saying,

We can work it out and get it straight, or say good night.

I will call this a positional plea for empathy. The way forwards, Paul sings, is for his partner to listen to him. There is no offer to listen back, or perhaps listen first.

I confess that in the never-ending debate "The Beatles versus The Rolling Stones" I have always taken the side of the music of the Beatles, from those early days in French classes to today. Nonetheless, there is a great cryptic Rolling Stones song that mediators can watch out for. "You Can't Always Get What You Want" was released in 1969.

Mick Jagger sings about his attempts to acquire drugs, to get closer to a woman, and a failure to achieve each of these goals. Instead he is rescued from the perils of both drugs and the dangerous woman, and ends up with a soda. Well, that is one interpretation of these lyrics, which are open to many more, as they do not always make much sense. The chorus, however, is clear as day:

You can't always get what you want

You can't always get what you want

You can't always get what you want

But if you try sometimes you just might find

You just might find

You get what you need

Couldn't this be a mediator's mantra? And, yes, The Rolling Stones are still (more or less) together today, nearly forty years after The Beatles broke up.

The last words, however, will come from Lennon and McCartney. In the bridge to "We Can Work It Out," they sing:

Life is very short, and there's no time

For fussing and fighting, my friend.

A lesson often learned too late. Happy listening!

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