

Navigating our collective journey: where are we on the boat?

Kluwer Mediation Blog
April 28, 2020

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Please refer to this post as: John Sturrock, 'Navigating our collective journey: where are we on the boat?', Kluwer Mediation Blog, April 28, 2020, <http://mediationblog.kluwerarbitration.com/2020/04/28/navigating-our-collective-journey-where-are-we-on-the-boat/>

I was privileged recently to give opening remarks at a meeting of mediators in the International Academy of Mediators. The remarks were a reflection on the times we as mediators are living in. I share an adapted version here.

"There is no us and them, only us".

These words were uttered here in Edinburgh in May 2010, almost exactly ten years ago, by our great friend and colleague, Ken Cloke. Ken was addressing the annual meeting of the Church of Scotland, just before it began a debate on same sex relationships among ministers.

"There is no us and them, only us". Never before has this phrase seemed more apt than today. If ever we were in it together, now is the time. I have been struck by the universality of the feelings we recognise, wherever we are. What we are going through is an extraordinary, common human experience.

And yet we are all different too. Our responses are different. How we respond individually is unique in its own way. How each of our countries responds is also different, strikingly so in some cases.

Indeed, it struck me when I woke very early one morning, as I often do these days, that some of us don't need other nations (allegedly) to undermine us with fake news. Some of our own leaders appear to be doing that for us, just fine.

But even those other nations are in this same boat. As Ken Cloke has said, it doesn't matter which end of the boat we are at, if the boat itself is sinking. Never before perhaps has our sheer interdependence been so clear. And the need for radical cooperation. To paraphrase Einstein, the old ways of doing things are unlikely to make us safe again.

So, here is a question for us mediators. Where are we on the boat? Are we going about business as usual, hoping that others are baling us out? Are we part of the baling out team? Or are we looking towards those whose hands are on the tiller? Are we making suggestions to those with their hands on the tiller, those who decide where we go?

You may well ask: what locus do we have, as mediators, to make suggestions?

Well, the danger may be that baling out works to some extent and the boat simply continues in the same direction with the same people in the same situations doing the same things. But where to? Back to hubris, back to business as usual? Is that really where we want to go? Or do we need seriously to consider not only the direction of travel, but how we are getting there?

After all, how we get there is what we mediators are all about. The destination is not so important to us, but how we travel on the journey is critical. So perhaps we do need to have the confidence and the humility to get alongside those with their hands on the tiller.

Recently on the BBC Horizon series there was a magical programme about the Hubble telescope, celebrating its launch from the Kennedy Space Center in Florida, on the space shuttle Discovery, almost exactly 30 years ago. I was there that day, watching at a distance!

What a technological achievement Hubble has turned out to be. On television, the wonderful sights of the universe as seen from Hubble put the coronavirus pandemic into a broader perspective.

It also reminded me of the Voyager spacecraft which apparently may re-enter our solar system 250 million years in the future. Wow, what a journey. Unimaginable really.

At a time like this, we need to remember that we are all on a journey, as individuals and as a species. A remarkable, complex, stimulating, uncertain, humbling, paradoxical journey, full of hope and also of lament. Being as well as doing. Death as well as life. Suffering as well as love.

We mediators are well qualified to help others navigate this unprecedented journey. Not just in our traditional role in conflict resolution, though that remains important, but in what we can contribute more widely to conversations about our collective future.