

Reflecting on Purpose

Kluwer Mediation Blog

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The process of discerning what to write about in a blog is interesting. Sometimes inspiration comes quickly. On other occasions, there is a barren wilderness, or a hotchpotch of half-formed ideas.

This month feels like the last of these. I thought to write about a really excellent new book by the Oxford economists, **Paul Collier and John Kay**, entitled **Greed is Dead**, Politics after Individualism. The authors distinguish "authoritarian or contractual hierarchy" (where instructions are cascaded down from the top) with "mediating hierarchy" involving "constant negotiation"; they criticise binary processes and outcomes as detrimental to the community; they comment that "when disputes arise, they need to be resolved through processes which are accessible and inexpensive, and which search for compromise"; and observe that "collective intelligence is the combined product of competition and cooperation". Collier recently praised the work of mediators in an article in the New Statesman magazine. Much to ponder there.

Then there is the latest book by my good friend, the author, ecologist and scholar **Alastair McIntosh**, **Riders on the Storm**, at the same time one of the best summaries of the current science on climate change and associated environmental issues, and a timely challenge to each of us about needless consumption and escalating population - and, crucially, about the inner psychological and spiritual work which will be needed by all of us if we are to navigate the times ahead.

For mediators, it would be hard to look past the recent piece by **Ken Cloke**, with his usual insights into the role mediators can play in an evermore polarising world. This sentence alone gives much to consider: "It is important ... to recognize that there are lower and higher forms of connection, cooperation, and common ground." "The lower form can be found in compromise....To reach higher common ground, it is necessary to affirm the common humanity of both parties." Discuss!

However, I find it impossible to ignore an email I received recently from my good friend in Oregon, **Tim Hicks**, author of that outstanding book about the neural working of the brain and conflict, **Embodied Conflict: The Neural Basis of Conflict and Communication**.

In response to an email to Tim to offer my concerns about the situation in Oregon, Tim replied in these terms, which I share with his permission:

"Thanks for your message. The past week has been exceptional. For us, personally, the impact has been staying indoors to avoid, as much as possible, the seriously hazardous smoke conditions. Visibility a couple of days ago was down to 100 yards. We've not seen the sun for days now. A fine and dangerous ash covers everything. The birds and other creatures are quieted. But many, as you know, have suffered far worse and continue to suffer. The large fire near us was about 25 miles away and was approaching in our direction for a couple of days before its advance slowed. There was one day we considered whether we might have to evacuate. Fortunately, we were spared. It was sobering to consider what to bring and the prospect of losing one's home to fire was stark.

All this is prelude, is it not. I've read predictions that multiple concurrent events will be the future's norm. I fear for our children and grandchildren. At one point, systems will begin to collapse (and psychologies along with them) and living may become much more chaotic and harsh.

I'm finding it difficult to be optimistic these days, and particularly because of the condition of social discourse in this country and the apparent unmooring of understanding from any kind of grounding in reality. There is something deeply saddening in the fracturing of this society's ability to rely on some level of reality consensus. The expansion of conspiracy theories and the number of people susceptible to them is like a kind of spreading miasma of psychosis, a deep and oppressive social fog in which people are stumbling around with no ability to agree on basic truths and understandings. Disagreements now are not founded on a basis of basic reality agreements but involve the very foundations of our reality constructing.

Though I am not feeling very optimistic and optimism is almost beginning to feel delusional, nevertheless, I appreciate the spirit of persistence and commitment to standing up and not giving up, regardless. As they say, better to go down fighting."

I don't think any message has so profoundly affected me in recent times as this from Tim. It reinforces for me how extraordinary are the times in which we live and the challenges we face individually and collectively - and globally. It is easy to forget, as the Western world experiences these dislocations, that many in the developing world have been facing such tragedies on a daily basis for years - and are much less well placed to cope with them.

Tim's message has caused me to ask again: **what should I be doing?**

It is so easy just to continue in the usual way, with the usual pursuits, finding comfort in the notion that there is not much that I, as a mere individual, can do. Or indeed to reassure myself, rather smugly, that at least what I am doing is "good work."

However, I conclude that this is not enough. I need a set of principles to guide my use of what will always be limited time, a set of criteria by which to guide my decisions about what initiatives or requests I should engage with - and how. Here is what I think I need to try and do:

- Put relationships first; without that, everything else will be less easy to manage and potentially damaging to me and others;
- Somehow, be kind and compassionate in all of these relationships - that will take discipline, especially when under pressure;
- Find appropriate time for my family and neighbours, those close to me through physical and psychological proximity;
- Consider the impact on the environment of everything I choose to do;
- When it comes to what we sometimes call "work", not make money the primary driver, merely an incidental; and yet, whatever I do needs to feel valued and valuable;
- Look for and respond to opportunities where I can make a real difference to other people; perhaps things that others cannot do just as well or at all;
- In consequence, have the courage and humility to say No to things, even if they are flattering, well-paid and/or interesting; letting go of things that have merely made me feel good;
- To achieve these aspirations, look after my physical, psychological and spiritual well-being;
- Finally, give great thanks every day for what I have: family, friends, worthwhile work to do, time to reflect - and inspiration to write a blog every now and then.

And, of course, in a diverse world, to accept that for some this might read as sanctimonious nonsense. Nevertheless, to use Tim Hicks' words, to continue to stand up and not give up.