

Mediating with Empathy - for Yourself

Kluwer Mediation Blog
December 24, 2020

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Please refer to this post as: Greg Bond, 'Mediating with Empathy - for Yourself', Kluwer Mediation Blog, December 24, 2020, <http://mediationblog.kluwerarbitration.com/2020/12/24/mediating-with-empathy-for-yourself/>

Christmas is a holiday and a time for reflection and relaxation for many around the world, so in this blog post I won't focus on mediation as it is practiced and trained. Instead I make two recommendations for films to watch, both of which are centered around the theme of empathy. Both touched me and gave me much to think about.

The first one was recommended to me by my son, who said I would really enjoy it. I had missed all the reporting on it, and maybe readers of this blog have too. *My Octopus Teacher* is one of the strangest documentary films I have ever seen. It is about a man who strikes up a relationship with an octopus living in shallow waters off the coast of South Africa. For a year, he dives and meets his new acquaintance and then friend almost daily, and somehow - to me miraculously - he manages to film his encounters too. He begins to feel for the octopus, to worry when it is in danger of being attacked by sharks, and to understand the ways in which the octopus protects itself. There are even moments of physical contact between the two, man and octopus. It is a very unusual film.

It begins with Craig Foster explaining that he was overworked and burned out, and decided to stop and rediscover himself. The foundation for empathy with the octopus - the other - is empathy with yourself. We could think more about this in our mediation practice and training. To understand and feel with others, we might begin with being in touch with ourselves.

The second film is a feature film entitled *Faith under Fire*, which a friend of mine sent me a couple of weeks ago on DVD after I told her that I was holding a series of workshops on "listening" for mediators and social workers. Based on a true story, it compellingly relates a day in the life of Antoinette Tuff, who manages to prevent a gunman running amok in an elementary school in the state of Georgia, USA. She finds herself alone in the front office with the intruder, who threatens both her and hundreds of children. Contact is made by phone to the police, and Tuff becomes an intermediary between them and the man with the automatic rifle. When she has a chance to get out of the office unnoticed, the police urge her to do so, but she stays. We get a sense that the police are ready to use force. How does Antoinette avert the disaster?

She engages the gunman, asking him his name, for example, and she does find out a little about him, such as the fact that his mother could not afford his medication for a bipolar disorder. All in all, though, the gunman remains reticent, and it is not really by listening to anything he says that Antoinette creates a bond with him. Instead, she talks about her own concerns, with a disabled son, and the difficulties of being a single mother, as well as praying out aloud. This releases the young man's empathy for himself, for the children in the school, and for Antoinette, and it creates a bond between Antoinette and himself. He gives himself up, saying he never intended to harm anyone. By showing her own vulnerable self, Antoinette allows the young man to understand his own vulnerability.

I watched this movie the evening after a strenuous week of work, including complex online mediation with multiple parties, very different perceptions of the issues, and lots of emotion. The whole week I was in my different professional roles, mostly involving understanding others. That evening *Faith under Fire* brought me to tears. The self-empathy it invokes was infectious.

My Octopus Teacher, directed by Pippa Ehrlich and James Reed, Netflix 2020; *Faith under Fire*, directed by Vondie Curtis-Hall, 2018.