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# Kluwer Mediation Blog

## To Mary Parker Follett - An apology from a fan

Rosemary Howell (University of New South Wales) · Sunday, August 22nd, 2021

Attending Harvard's Program on Negotiation has been life and career changing for many of us - influencing careers in negotiation, mediation and coaching amongst others.

'Getting to Yes', first published in 1981 (and never out of print since) was the text accompanying the program, and I read it from cover to cover.

I missed the reference to Mary Parker Follett. It is slipped into the acknowledgements on page 4:

'Good anecdotes and examples are hard to find. We are greatly indebted to Jim Sebenius for his accounts of the Law of the Sea Conference (as well as for his thoughtful criticism of the method), to Tom Griffith for an account of his negotiation with an insurance adjuster, and to Mary Parker Follett for the story of two men quarrelling in a library.'

Easy to miss - and to dismiss.

The '**footnote syndrome**' has blocked the recognition and acknowledgement of many able and accomplished women. That has been Follett's fate to a large extent.

Born in Boston in 1868, Follett was thoughtful and infinitely curious. Her education reflected her curiosity and was remarkable in its breadth - economics, government, philosophy, history, law and political science. In a world where the emphasis seems to be on learning more and more about less and less her breadth of interests seems remarkable today.

**Albie Davis**, Director of the Massachusetts District Court Mediation Program, wrote her much quoted article [An Interview with Mary Parker Follett](#) in 1989, imagining herself sharing ideas with Follett and exploring some details of her work.

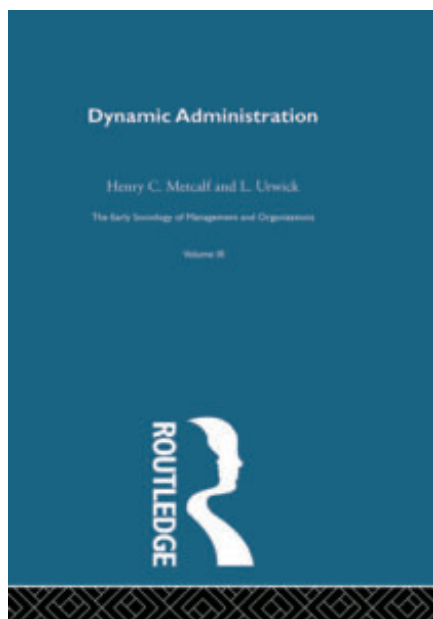
It was a good start.

One reason Davis' article is significant is that it appears to be the first acknowledgement of Follett's contribution to the world of conflict resolution. Before this her expertise had always been categorised as political or social science and

business administration.

Davis came from another world – our world – and her ‘imagined’ interview, 55 years after Follett’s death, demonstrated that her contribution included a much broader recognition of how conflict impacts organisations and their people.

Adding Davis’ article to the bibliography for my postgraduate students produced another gift. Students are wonderful teachers and my students are the best teachers of all. They saw ideas I had missed and went on to investigate and find jewels. In particular they sent me back to a key text.



I had foolishly dismissed [Dynamic Administration](#) (her collected papers), as a work of political and business philosophy – the description adopted by its editors. Pushed to give it a fairer reading, it was soon apparent that what this description failed to acknowledge was the significant themes regarding concepts presented later in *Getting to Yes* and other texts and now underpinning the thinking of conflict resolution professionals.

The standout impact for me is her remarkable understanding of conflict and her recognition that how organisations deal with it has a significant impact on a business’ success and the health and welfare of its people.

And while Follett has been rediscovered in the world of organisational economics[i], our world has been unfortunately and disappointingly silent.

### **An apology and an acknowledgement**

By way of apology, and in no particular order, it is time to for us professional conflict resolvers to give Follett the recognition she deserves for her strategic contributions to our work.

Her gifts are significant – here’s my list.

- **Integration is the most effective means of dealing with conflict**

Follett identified 3 conflict resolution possibilities – dominance, compromise and integration. She spelt out why integrative negotiation and its win/win approach always created the greatest opportunities to maximise value. This is where the concept of integrative negotiation comes from.

- **Exploring and sharing interests is the foundation for all successful conflict**

## resolution

Follett saw this as the foundation of achieving a good outcome at the table and identified it long before *Getting to Yes*.

- **Conflict has value**

Follett saw conflict as an opportunity - neither good nor bad - and talked about the creative power of friction. This concept appears often in our literature. [Crum's handbook - The Magic of Conflict](#) promotes this approach as does the much-circulated Harvard Business Review article of January 2005 called 'Productive Friction'.

- **Leadership and power are intertwined**

Follett developed the concepts of **power-with** and **power-over** and concluded that the most effective leaders empower others via a 'power-with' approach that strengthens organisations and their people.

- **Narratives are persuasive**

Follett is the mistress of the narrative. Fisher and Ury used her story of the students in the library in *Getting to Yes*. It is far more credible than the story of the sisters and the orange (at least to anyone who has ever been foolish enough to make marmalade). Follett's work is peppered with stories. They are real, which adds to their power and they create a framework to demonstrate theory in action. She is a great story-teller.

- **Diversity is valuable**

This is an important part of our language today. We endorse the Program on Negotiation's definition of a good working relationship as 'an ability to deal well with differences.' Follett's urging to embrace diversity, more than 100 years ago, was revolutionary.

## Continuing the acknowledgement

My last thought is a message to the editors of the next edition of 'Getting to Yes'. It is time to acknowledge that Follett was responsible for much more than a story about students quarrelling about whether to have the library window open or shut. She laid the foundation for so much of the material we use as our constant guides to negotiation and conflict resolution.

Let's abandon 'footnote syndrome' - time for a fanfare!

[i] See for example: Boje, David M. (2018) "Organisational Research Methods: Storytelling in Action"

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