Kluwer Mediation Blog

The Situation in Ukraine – what role for mediation?

John Sturrock (Core Solutions Group) · Monday, February 28th, 2022

The escalating situation in Ukraine brings challenges to those of us committed to mediation and peace-making. Is there a time when what we stand for does not work and cannot be pursued? When dialogue, even in the most threatening of situations, is not appropriate? I don't pretend to have the answers but I have been reflecting on three very different examples of dialogue in the face of seemingly awful situations. What, if any, parallels or lessons might we draw? As you read what follows, what thoughts occur as we consider the Ukrainian situation?

The first example is the deeply personal engagement between Jo Berry, daughter of the murdered British MP, Sir Anthony Berry, who died when the Irish Republican Army attempted to blow up Britain's senior political leadership in 1984, and the man who planted the bomb which killed him, Patrick Magee. For more than twenty years they have met, initially courtesy of an intermediary, and talked privately and publicly about what happened and why.

Most recently, in an event to record that journey, they each talked about the need to listen and understand how the other saw things. Magee says that the Republicans in Ireland felt demonised, censored, not understood and silenced. He also now accepts that they demonised the enemy and couldn't see their humanity. Only in meeting Jo Berry could he discover that her father was a "fine human being". Only in meeting Patrick Magee, could she understand the oppression and breach of human rights which he experienced. "I didn't meet him to change him but to see him as a human being," she says. "I'm really sorry I killed your dad," he says to her. Listening without judgement, they acknowledge each other's pain.

"Pain is the same everywhere, no matter the conflict," says Magee. Despite their differences and disagreements, they have been willing and able to sit down and have a conversation. They speak of rehumanising each other, rather than demonising. Berry asks herself what she would have done in his circumstances, in his shoes – what choices would she have made? They ask how each other's needs can be met knowing that, otherwise, there can be no sustainable peace. They talk about changing the story, unlocking the narratives of the past, slowing down the dialogue, not simply trying to get their own message across or convert the other to a view of the world, but casting aside certainty and rightness and breaking things down to the level where they find they have so much in common. Berry commends a "cups of tea" policy to encourage respectful dialogue.

As Magee observes, if the resources in the world which are devoted to conflict were diverted to talking and finding common ground, we wouldn't have so much conflict.

A similar view about the excessive amounts spent on defence budgets (now, of course, being

ramped up further as a result of the Ukraine situation) is expressed by the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu as he reflects on the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid South Africa, in an interview with Tom Stipanowich of Pepperdine University. We are different he says, not to be separate but to compliment each other and meet each other's needs. Everyone depends on everyone else – the African concept of Ubuntu where damage to you is damage to me. If I demonise you, I also demonise myself. Tutu reminds us that the enemy is also a human being, with their own fears and expectations and moulded by circumstances. We need to connect.

This is all well and good, you might say, but where does all this leave us today? Well, my third example, which I adapt from my recent article in our national newspaper here in Scotland, offers some learning from the past. The escalating situation regarding Ukraine brings a chilling reminder of the days of the Cold War which came to an end at the beginning of the 1990s with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

My own country, Scotland, played an apparently significant role in the reduction of risk at that time. Throughout the 1980s, the University of Edinburgh played host to a series of private meetings, entitled the Edinburgh Conversations, with the theme of Survival in the Nuclear Age. These involved senior academics, military officials and diplomats from the United States, the Soviet Union and the UK, with no official status.

The Conversations alternated between Edinburgh and Moscow. Scottish location, informality and hospitality were at the heart of the events and I still recall the privilege of being a fly on the wall in Abden House in Edinburgh as the participants gathered for the start of one of the Conversations.

The meetings came about because the Professor of Defence Studies at the University, John Erickson, was a world-renowned expert on Soviet military affairs whose independence and creative genius meant that he was equally respected in the Pentagon and the Kremlin. That academic rigour and independence was critical.

On one occasion, the talks were due to commence in Edinburgh just a few days after Soviet jets had shot down a South Korean jumbo jet with 269 passengers on board. Despite Western hostility, the talks proceeded, with everyone recognising the gravity of the situation and the importance of continuing to talk and prevent further escalation. The same approach was taken when the US launched an airstrike on Libya at almost exactly the time that another set of Conversations commenced.

When the talks began, East-West relations were arguably at an all-time low. Diplomacy was at a standstill. By their end, it was thought that the Conversations had contributed significantly to the transition in the Soviet Union. It was understood that neither side wished nuclear war. A modicum of trust had been built up. Personal relationships were established across ideologies. Frank exchanges had taken place. Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev had met in Iceland and the dismantling of some nuclear weapons had begun.

The key must have been that people listened to each other, trying to understand the other viewpoint, recognising their needs and fears, with respect and courtesy, while being clear and realistic about what mattered to them. Judgments were suspended, at least in part, as they addressed the narratives of the past, humanising each other; indeed, as I recall, they would often find their common humanity in the course of shared social occasions, with cups of tea and more

(often accompanied by music and gifts), which honoured traditions and offered moments of humour and relaxation – and opportunities to reflect intimately in private. Frustrations were managed and words would be detoxified and reframed when the talks looked like they might break down. Golden bridges were built, painstakingly, and victory speeches carefully crafted in the form of communiques, often taking hours during the night.

The Scottish hosts effectively worked as mediators, the third siders, and I remember the extraordinary efforts of my wise mentor, the late Michael Westcott, who acted as Secretary to the Conversations. He served in a wholly humble and authentic way, without ego, courageously giving his all, never seeking any personal approval or acclaim. His preparation, perseverance and attention to detail was immense. What an example.

Could something like this happen again? Whatever occurs in the short term, and assuming that we do not engage in mutual destruction, history suggests that dialogue will be needed at some point in the future, perhaps sooner rather than later. Attempts at mutual understanding, identification of real interests, hopes and threats, reduction of risk, better relationships – all are likely to have importance.

The key back in the 1980's was the presence of people of substance who brought to the Edinburgh Conversations their international reputations, skills and wisdom. We need to hope that people of this standing can be found somewhere in the world in 2022 and beyond.

As those of us who are mediators, third siders and peacemakers reflect on all of this, what might be our role today? As Desmond Tutu encouraged us: "Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world."

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