

Kluwer Mediation Blog

Dining in the Dark – Insights for Mediation

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I recently had the pleasure of attending the Tan Pan [?? means “Negotiation” in mandarin] Symposium held in Hong Kong from 1-2 November 2013. This was organized by the International Institute for Conflict Engagement and Resolution (IICER) of the Hong Kong Shue Yan University.

This symposium saw the launch of the Tan Pan Journal and a number of innovative activities and processes designed to have participants think about the boundaries of the conflict resolution field and ways in which other (till now unconnected) fields can impact and transform the way we think about and practice conflict resolution.

One of the activities that we engaged in was “Dining in the Dark”. For readers unfamiliar with “Dining in the Dark”, it is literally having a meal in pitch darkness. Diners are served by visually-impaired servers and diners have to navigate their entire meal including handling cutlery, eating, drinking, pouring and other activities that we usually do without thinking; all in the dark.

Of course, the most obvious learning from this experience is to feel in a very real but limited way what life must be for those without sight. However, as I sat in the dark, a strange thing happened. Deprived of external or out sight, I found myself developing “in sights” about how “Dining in the Dark” was a remarkable metaphor for parties in conflict and how understanding this can assist mediators in better managing conflict. I’d like to share some of those thoughts with readers here.

When I was first brought into the dining room, we were led in groups of 5-6 to our tables. We were provided with a White Cane (those used by the visually-impaired) and asked to follow the voice of our server to our table. Needless to say, it took much longer than one would normally associate with the same process in lighted surroundings and there was a lot of uncertainty, bumping into things and feeling around.

I found this disorientating, almost to the point of overwhelming. Apart from knowing that I was to follow a voice (which I could not accurately gauge distance or direction from) and that the ground I was walking on was solid (although even that may not necessarily have been true throughout!), all of my familiar anchors to reality did not exist. I became anxious, fearful and had to resist the urge to run out of the room (although that wouldn’t have been possible considering I had no sense of where “out” was). I was eventually led to my seat without incident. As I sat there amidst the external noises of others trying to find their seats and the cacophony of my internal voices, I remember imagining how large the room must be and how one might get lost in it in the dark. It was only later, after the dinner, that I got a chance to see the room. It wasn’t large at all. On the contrary, it was small. This was of course easy to gauge with sight.

To assuage my uncertainty, I remember reaching out to the table top in front of me and began to feel for the items on top. This seemingly innocuous event could have turned perilous as I discovered forks (ouch), steak knives (thankfully no ouch) and a bottle of water (which I almost knocked over). Identifying where things were, relative to me, gave me a small measure of comfort. I clung to this as my anchor to certainty. I was to discover later, when the voice of the host guided us to locate various items, how many things I had not discovered on the table.

Once I was secure of where things were relative to me, I began to explore the boundaries of my location. I remember trying to locate the edge of the table, figuring out what shape it was and how large it was. I reached out in the darkness to identify who was sitting next to me and across from me, mapping out the people at my table relative to me. I engaged the help of the person across from me (incidentally Nadja Alexander, one of the editors of this blog), asking her to reach out so that when our hands and arms touched, we could gauge how large the table was.

During of the course of the dinner, we were made to go through many tasks. As mentioned, we were asked to locate items on our table. We were asked to pour water out of a bottle into our glass. We were asked to pass items around. We were asked to pour hot beverages for one another. And of course, we had to eat our 3 course meal in the dark, navigating the food with utensils and trying to identify what the food was. What was lovely about these tasks was the amount of explicit communication that had to happen for it to be successful. For example, when we had to pass a bottle of water around, the person next to me (Ian Macduff, another contributor to this blog) would say “there is a bottle coming from your left at shoulder height”. It was also lovely when everyone collaborated at the table to help each other. For example, there was a technique to pouring liquids into a cup and using one’s thumb to gauge the level of the liquid. Someone who knew this technique simply shared it so that everyone could complete the task successfully. Another example was people identifying what was being served and sharing that information. Strangely, knowing what was on the plate and what to expect made it easier to cope with the darkness.

My apologies if my recollection of the event has been lengthy. It was necessary to give readers a flavor of the experience and will make the connection between “Dining in the Dark” and our roles as mediators more meaningful.

I began thinking that “Dining in the Dark” was a very powerful metaphor for parties in conflict and the stages parties must go through to successfully resolve the dispute. There are 4 stages.

Stage 1 is disorientation. When we are in conflict, we aren’t necessarily able to see things clearly. We see things through the fog of perception, intense emotions and personal pain. We feel lost and our runaway minds create all manner of demons and exaggerate what might actually be a relatively small problem. At this stage, the conflict is unresolvable and we are not even in a space where we are open to looking at solutions.

Stage 2 is finding anchors. A natural response to the cognitive dissonance that disorientation brings is for us to identify things that are certain which we then use as anchors for our reality. The problem is that some of these anchors can be unhelpful in the process of resolving the conflict. We may cling on to anchors represented by our perception, the “truth”, the “principle of the matter”, our legal rights, our positions, our anger, etc. While these anchors can give us a measure of comfort, they often make us unable to see the other things that are actually on the table.

This is where the mediator’s job really begins. It is to be able to give conflicting parties anchors to

a new reality so that they will move away from the less useful anchors they are clinging to. We generally do this through our demeanor, our opening statements and our gentle guiding them through the process of mediation. Put another way, we need to make them comfortable; with us as mediators, the environment, the unfamiliar process known as mediation (and this applies to counsel as well!) and the other party.

When parties are comfortable, only then will they be able to move to the next stage of exploring the boundaries of the problem and where parties are placed in relation to one another and the conflict itself. At this point, we may discover that the problem is of a discrete size and that the party sitting opposite us may not be an adversary at all. In fact, their perspectives, concerns and interests may help you define the problem and highlight the solutions possible. Put another way, we may see things that we did not realize were there in the first place.

This takes us to the last stage where there is true collaboration between the parties, and the mediator, in helping one another by sharing information and coming up with solutions to the problem.

These are, of course, my random imaginings. “Dining in the Dark” was a powerful experience for me and I feel that the insights I developed in the dark will assist me in bringing light to those in conflict. I share these thoughts here in the hope that they may help you as well.

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