

Kluwer Mediation Blog

Space, Pace, Grace and Face, Part 2

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In my last post (<http://kluwermediationblog.com/2013/11/27/space-pace-grace-and-face-steps-to-an-ecology-of-mediation/>) I started to think out loud about the elements that might contribute to the “ecology” of mediation – that is, the sense of location, context, or genius loci, that might also serve the substantive ends of mediation. My sub-text there was that there is an ineffable “something” about location and space – even in the sense that Wordsworth wrote of the “a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused ... “ in his “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey” (1798) – that we might not capture in prescriptive strategies or textbook cases, but which nonetheless may influence all participants’ engagement, comfort, attention and co-operation. This is, then, partly about the features of physical space, such as lighting, room size, style and position of furniture; but I suspect it’s about more than that. You, dear reader, already know this: you have all been in those places – whether indoors or outdoors – that either contribute to your well-being or give you a shiver up your spine. I’ll steer away from any paranormal explanations: this is, as the writers I referred to before make quite clear, a normal part of our feeling at home, comfortable, at ease in different spaces.

Of the other three elements in the title, I only want to deal with one: “grace”. The other two – pace (or the different experiences of time) and face (or recognition) – have been written about before. Moreover, as this is more or less my “Christmas blog”, I want to explore – in a secular, non-denominational way – some of the things that we, as mediators, might do to initiate and encourage “gracious” interactions in times of stress. The Christmas connection, if there needs to be one, is simply that many of us will have experienced those festive, family gatherings that are meant to be the celebratory highlights of the year but that can be marred by gaffes, abrasiveness, remembered antipathies, and imagined slights (to say nothing of any excesses of consumption and consumerism). We are, as Nietzsche said, human, all too human.

What led to my wanting explore this with my classes and here had, in fact, an intercultural component. What has interested me in having the good fortune to live in a place that is not my “own” country but is nevertheless home, and to have spent decent amount of time in a number of European and Asian countries, is observing just one element of social interactions: greetings. One of the greatest pleasures for the idle traveller is to sit, say, at a café and observe the ways in which friends, lovers, business colleagues, new acquaintances and – perhaps – those on a surreptitious rendezvous greet each other and do so not only in their different languages – which of course one does not seek to overhear – but rather in the physical language of proximity, eye contact, or

duration of physical contact in shaking hands. If, too, you want to explore this, take a look at some of the great street photographers like Cartier-Bresson, Erwitte and Doisneau and note the frequency with which greetings feature in their work. Of course, as an outsider and mere observer of many of these interactions, I can't "read" the full story, and what might look like a cool greeting may just be the norm; and there will be widely varying conventions as to how men and women in different cultures may greet each other. Equally, the warm greeting between two gentlemen of a certain age who meet while cycling in the streets on Lucca and conduct their whole conversation while gripping each other's arms or hands on the handlebars, is not the sort of greeting we might expect in less expressive cultures.

All of this is by way of extended prelude to a single point about the "grace" component of this ecology of mediation: greetings matter! This may seem obvious, and I have little doubt that mediators reading this will wonder what the fuss is about: we all know that it's important to take time with those introductions, greetings, and welcomes that bring people into the room and lay the foundations for the work that will follow. And yet ... and yet ... we equally know of those times when there appears to be a reluctance to offer the courtesy of a greeting, of the greeting is perfunctory, or there's an apparent desire to "get down to business". I'm also aware, when for example taking student participants to the mediation competition in Paris, that part of the training goes beyond the negotiation and mediation strategies at the table and involves pointing out the importance of greetings, farewells, and those little social "wheel oilers" ("je vous en prie") that make such a difference. And we've all experienced those occasions when we've greeted somebody only to receive a blank stare or incomprehension by way of reply.

One experience of this, that pre-dated my becoming involved with mediation, involved getting lost while driving somewhere in the depths of Somerset in England. As we drove along a no doubt charming country road, though not knowing if it was the right country road, we spotted an elderly gentleman walking our way. Stopping the car, I leapt out and approached him. As I was about to ask directions, he simply raised his hand and said something to the effect of "Laddie, you're about to ask me the way, and I'll tell you in due course. But round here, we always start by saying hello, passing the time of day, asking how the other person is ... then we ask for directions." Thus gently chastened, I learnt something – in the mid-1970s – that has stuck with me and is the simplest of the resources that we have; and yet for many, seems the hardest thing to do.

It's scarcely surprising, therefore, that those who now consciously use the style of conversation to rebuild social co-operation (see, for example, the Public Conversations Project: <http://www.publicconversations.org>; or Oxford historian Theodore Zeldin's rekindling of conversation: <http://www.oxfordmuse.com>) pay deliberate attention to those graces and greetings that make engagement possible and appealing. After all, how hard is "hello"?

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