
Kluwer Mediation Blog

Another Letter to Santa Claus

Joel Lee (National University of Singapore, Faculty of Law) · Monday, December 14th, 2015

Writers Note: Despite its whimsical title, I'm afraid this blog entry is not. Do not read if you are not in a good mental or emotional place.

Dear Santa,

It's been a few years since I last wrote. Many things have happened in between; some good, some bad. But November 2015 was hard. The Paris attacks were both heart-breaking and disheartening. That a group of people would be so willing to cause harm to large numbers of innocents with whom they have no personal fight but a symbolic and ideological one. This is not to say that symbol and ideology are not important but has it really come to this? Where in order to make whatever point one seeks to make, one must resort to violence? To be fair, it may well have been the last resort. It may have been that this group had exhausted all other ways and means to be heard and to have their grievances addressed.

From a mediation perspective, it is perhaps important to reflect upon two questions. First is whether all the ways and means to address this conflict have really been exhausted. Or is the option of violence being too quickly resorted to? Perhaps even by default? Second is if this group had engaged in non-violent ways to be heard, were we listening? And what was our response? And was that response so unsatisfactory that it called for the extreme measure of violence?

Then there is the aftermath. I am not talking about countries talking about going to war after the Paris attacks. While sad, the response is expected and understandable. Political leaders must take, and be seen to take, decisive action.

The aftermath to which I refer is the increasing polarization of the world. It is heart-breaking to see that in some places in the world, there is a backlash against certain groups for no other reason than their religion or the color of their skin or the clothes that they wear.

Again, from a mediation perspective, we can understand this. Some people are motivated by ignorance, fear and in some cases, hatred. These then form the filters of their bias which then manifest in exclusionary behaviors. As mediators, we know that this is part of the human condition and that effort must be made to recognize and address these biases. This reminds of the Cherokee story about the two wolves. One telling of it is:

An old Cherokee is teaching his grandson about life. "A fight is going on inside me," he said to the boy.

“It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil – he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.” He continued, “The other is good – he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you – and inside every other person, too.”

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, “Which wolf will win?”

The old Cherokee simply replied, “The one you feed.”

I guess what is scary for me is how eager and quickly some are feeding the wolf of ignorance, fear and hatred.

I’m sorry for rambling but maybe this is why I am writing. As mediators, we are expected to maintain neutrality, empathy and compassion in the face of conflict. We are expected to be the cheerleaders to our parties even in the darkest of their moments. But what do mediators do in the darkest of *our* moments? What do we do when we find it hard to be neutral or to empathize or to be compassionate? What do we do when we are so sorely tempted to feed the other wolf? Who cheerleads the cheerleaders?

I wish I had an easy answer to these questions. If I thought about it, I might say that we need to take some time for ourselves to introspect or to interact with other mediators for support or generally to expose ourselves to others who are in a better frame of mind. But when one is heartsick, it is hard to believe that these might work. I suppose the point is that to do these is better than doing nothing at all.

And Santa, maybe that’s what I want to ask for Christmas. Not for myself. You reading this is already your gift to me. And it has helped. But for all the cheerleaders of the world, whether they are mediators, or peacemakers, or doctors, or nurses, or security forces, or leaders, or citizens who have to deal with the other wolf, whether their own or others. Give them the ways and means to keep their faith in themselves and their mission. Help them take care of themselves so that they can continue creating the good in the world.

I know you have lots of letters to read and much work to do before Christmas so I’ll end here.

Take care Santa and Merry Christmas!

Cheers

Joel

P.S. I’ll be putting out some milk and cookies for you as usual. I’m afraid my wife has gone organic so I don’t have the usual cookies but I think you will like these ones.

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The graphic features a black background with white text and a circular icon. The icon depicts a magnifying glass over a group of stylized human figures, representing a search or investigation process. The text is arranged in a clean, modern layout with horizontal lines above the main heading.

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