
Kluwer Mediation Blog

Why Can't We All Just Get Along?!? Let the Violence Remind Us of the Good Work We Do

Zachary Ulrich (Ulrich Mediation) · Wednesday, July 20th, 2016 · Young Mediators Initiative (YMI)

As ADR practitioners, I think it is important to take a step back every now and then and reflect on the importance of the good work we do: We strive, every day, to bring people together and help them move forward. That's an amazing thing. As an American, I am currently surrounded by media coverage of a recent spate of violence driven by racial and ideological differences throughout my country. It's easy to focus on only the negative aspects of events like these, and I think it's important to remember the stark relief these kinds of events can provide for us as mediators and "guides" to others. If you're interested in hearing a little bit more on my thoughts regarding the good work we do and why it's so important, read on.

For those who have not heard, this past Thursday, July 7th, five police officers were killed and seven wounded during a shooting in Dallas, Texas. This attack constituted the most American police officers killed in a single incident since the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City. The shooting interrupted an otherwise peaceful protest march to show solidarity in the wake of several incidents between police and African Americans – some in recent weeks – many of which resulted in the deaths of the African American citizens involved. What's more, during an ensuing standoff between the suspect, Micah Xavier Johnson, and police, Mr. Johnson told police that he was upset about the recent shootings and wanted to kill white individuals – in particular, white police officers.

As a mediator, my gut reaction is to think of the societal dynamics that have led to these incidents and the twisted thinking that propels shooters like Mr. Johnson – and there are many. In our own way as mediators, every day we fight lesser versions of these same dynamics within the microcosms of the mediation rooms within which we work. Interpersonal biases, groupthink, differing backgrounds of parties, diametrically opposed interests, and other elements of what we do often serve as the crux of disputes we help resolve. On a larger scale, racially charged events such as those I've described can at least in part be attributed to all of these same factors.

The role of African Americans in U.S. society is complex and fraught with tales of bigotry and socioeconomic oppression – these dynamics persist to today both literally and as part of the culture of American society. While many of the overt institutionalizations of racism – e.g., slavery, forbidden or diminished civil liberties, and then later segregated public places and services – have been outlawed and socially shunned, the "scripts" left in the minds of both people exposed to such policies and their ancestors persist and will continue to be passed on through an intergenerational sense of identity built upon these realities. Furthermore, I fear that what was once overt racism has,

in many cases, merely been repressed: America still has a lot of work to do in the way of extending a true sense of equality among the cultural and racial “melting pot” of its society.

In some ways, then, events such as the shootings in Dallas and its predecessors do in fact serve one positive function – they force the conversation. They force out into the open otherwise latent racism and hatred that has been shunned and tabooed through the recent decades of America’s civil rights movement. Are there better ways to have societal conversations about these kinds of issues? Probably. Is it tragic that violence has to be a catalyst for such dialogue? Of course. But society – as with every individual human being – often grows and matures in fits and starts, and it sometimes requires a “kick in the pants” to self-reflect and, hopefully, grow.

Which brings me back to mediation. If you’re still interested in and reading this blog post you likely not only care deeply about mediation practice but also about the greater good you can contribute to society through your work. At least on some level. And that’s wonderful, because mediation really is – at its core – probably the most efficient means of societal change and growth we have. Unlike the latent passions and violence that characterize many society-wide news events, mediation is a process wholly designed to provide a venue for open exploration, the frank examination of emotional and cognitive biases, and realistic assessments of often opposed interests. Mediation didn’t begin in a vacuum – this is a process that has been used in different forms for thousands of years. And that’s because one common element of any intractable conflict is that people ultimately need a way to move on – whether through violence or cooperation. Sometimes that dialogue takes many generations to complete, but the end result is eventually the same.

Mediation, then, allows us to explore the best parts of humanity. It forces us to accept others’ needs when considering our own – to me, that’s the definition of a functional society. At the risk of becoming too philosophical and invoking Locke or Hume, I suggest that mediation is a derivative of the social contract to which most modern nations subscribe; it’s a means by which we agree to disagree and cooperate to make joint progress.

The work we do as mediators – even when completely focused on business interests and the bottom line – is fundamentally good. There’s no escaping it – ADR practitioners do good work, inherently value and encourage healthy communication dynamics, and provide for a better tomorrow. With that I say, “Go forth!” Mediate with pride – and as you consume media coverage of often horrible and tragic violence, remember that there are good processes at work, too, and that you’re an important driver of one of them.

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