

Kluwer Mediation Blog

Upheaval and resilience: a note from the Shaky Isles

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In the weeks since the Brexit vote and, more recently, the US Presidential elections, both of which caught pollsters, media and just about everybody you and I know by surprise, there's a vocabulary that has become both familiar and, in New Zealand's experience, prescient. Look over recent articles online on any major news or aggregator site and you'll see the regular use of words like "upheaval", "uncertainty", "cataclysmic" – even "seismic". In his recent and optimistic [article](#) on the possibility that "Trumpism could be a solution to the crisis of neoliberalism", Robert Skidelsky opens with a reference to two political earthquakes – in the UK and in the US. The tenor of these discussions is, on the one hand, to express concern or dismay about the costs and consequences of each of these significant votes and, on the other, to begin to look for what might, constructively, emerge from the radical upheaval in the political and social landscapes.

Closer to home, in New Zealand, the earthquakes have been neither political nor metaphorical: most readers will have seen news headlines about the significant earthquake that struck the north east coast of the South Island just after midnight on Sunday/Monday 13/14 November – and the thousands of aftershocks that still continue to rattle buildings and nerves. I was in Wellington at the time, ostensibly to attend a conference during the following week and, despite decades of living in Wellington, I'd never felt such a heavy and long (2 minutes) shaking. Unsurprisingly, the conference was cancelled as the safety of the venue could not be guaranteed.

As this week progresses, we hear of further buildings that have been deemed unsafe and facing demolition. The point of this blog, however, is not to dwell on the state of physical disrepair in Wellington or the significant hardship still experienced by people closer to the epicentre and still without core services. Rather, I think there's a parallel between the physical and metaphorical earthquakes in terms of what may emerge from the rubble. Once the shock of the upheaval has been absorbed, the reconstruction begins – or in political terms – the optimism about what may yet emerge begins. One poet who has been cited often in these "post-xx" days is W B Yeats, principally for his lines in 'The Second Coming':

"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world"

The pessimism of those lines, and then in "Easter, 1916", his words –

"All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born"

– may seem reflected in the political and geophysical landscapes torn asunder, but there’s stronger evidence on the ground of the resilience and collaborative spirit that comes to the fore; and a reminder in this that part of the job of the mediator is to look for those opportunities, signs and offerings. As the late radical historian and civil rights lawyer Howard Zinn wrote:

“To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasise in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don’t have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvellous victory.” [Thank you, Anna, for that link].

True, in the immediate aftermath of the Kaikoura earthquakes, there were reports of the looting of homes recently evacuated by those either escaping the expected tsunami or just getting out of damaged homes; true, too, there was an example of a wealthy tourist couple who overcame the tedium of waiting for evacuation along with everyone else by hiring a private helicopter; and there have been some cases of opportunistic gathering of crayfish and paua (abalone) left high and dry by the dramatic elevation of the coastline. But what stands out is the collaborative and co-operative spirit that dominated the now nearly two weeks after the quakes. A few examples will suffice:

- in the first week after the quake, a local iwi (Maori tribe) opened their marae (meeting ground) in order to provide some 10,000 meals;
- local residents turned up in parking lots with huge pots of curry and stew to feed people driven out of unsafe homes;
- the local iwi that has kaitiakitanga (guardianship status) of seafood agreed immediately to an official ban on fishing – especially of crayfish and abalone – despite the prospects of significant financial losses, in order to allow the stocks to regenerate;
- local residents also sought, against the advice, or the orders, of officials, to return abalone to the sea, in the hope of giving them some chance of survival (and at the same time indicated that any further opportunistic gathering would meet with a firm response);
- residents opened their homes to strangers and neighbours – as has also happened in Wellington, where the instability of some apartment blocks has meant at least temporary dislocation for many residents;
- police, civil defence, the army and even visiting warships, in New Zealand’s waters for a commemoration of the NZ Navy’s 75th anniversary, pitched in to aid the recovery process.

And so on. I take just three points from this, as a reminder as to what we might look for beneath the agenda of those in mediation. First, unlike the mean-spirited assumptions of the neo-liberal orthodoxy that we are by nature competitive, individualistic, self-serving (which qualities, of course, some will continue to exemplify and applaud), we are capable of and thrive on collaboration and co-operation. As others in these blog pages have noted, the work of Martin Nowak on “super co-operators” provides far stronger historical, empirical and biological evidence that it is collaboration rather than all-out competition that allows us to survive and succeed. Second, without wishing to seem naive about the intense struggles of conflict and disputes, it may be that the guiding ethos of mediation and mediators is one of optimism – that there is, in all probability, something of value that can be salvaged from the chaos and demolition. As John Winslade and his colleagues in the narrative mediation field have discussed, parties will often

arrive at a mediation “conflict saturated” – that is, with little else in mind other than the experience of the presenting conflict. And yet, from the narrative of that conflict will often emerge the grounds for resolution.

A third and obvious issue to arise is communication: in the early hours after the first big quake, the National Radio station together with TVNZ provided constant updates, information and, as the need arose, tsunami warnings and expert advice. There have, however, been cracks in the post-quake communication, with many deeply affected residents and tourists feeling left out of the information loop as to the what, where, when and how of rescue and recovery processes.

As author Toni Morrison commented 12 years earlier, in the wake of the 2004 Bush election,

“I know the world is bruised and bleeding, and though it is important not to ignore its pain, it is also critical to refuse to succumb to its malevolence. Like failure, chaos contains information that can lead to knowledge — even wisdom. Like art.”

Without falling into anthropomorphising natural events and attributing human intentions (“malevolence”) to them, the point may be the same, that “this is precisely the time when [we] go to work.” [Morrison]

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