

Kluwer Mediation Blog

Peacing Things Together

Joel Lee (National University of Singapore, Faculty of Law) · Monday, December 12th, 2016

As 2016 draws to a close, I can't help but reflect upon the events over the last 11 months. 2016 has not been a good year, at least in my opinion. Way too many lights in the world have passed on, natural disasters abound and with the political upsets around the world (and some continue to happen), it would appear that the world is barreling towards chaos. And perhaps that is the natural order (or disorder) of the universe.

And if the world is going to end due to circumstances *outside* our control, then so be it. And perhaps that is the point. If the world might end due to circumstances *within* our control, what could we be doing about it?

I remember a saying I heard in my youth which went "Peace is not the absence of war, we must wage peace as fervently as others would wage war". I do not remember the source of this but it impacted me deeply. (For completion, I must add that in the internet age, a search attributes the first part of the saying to Einstein or Spinoza. The second part seems to be a phrase used by various people but the source of it is unclear.)

What can we do to wage peace? What is peace anyway? Most definitions (official or otherwise) seem to reference peace as a non-warring state or a state free from war. But that's not very helpful. It is trite that the human brain cannot easily process a negative (including that sentence). Don't take my word for it, let's engage in a thought experiment.

"Clear your mind. Now, I don't want you to think of a pink elephant. Whatever you do, don't think of a pink elephant."

What are you thinking of? Unless you are semantically trained, you are probably thinking of a pink elephant. You can't help it. There is no easy way for your cognitive processes to "not think of something". This is why road signs that prohibit an action will depict the action and then cross it out.

Parents with children know that telling them "Don't run" or "Don't touch" very often invokes the prohibited behaviour. In Singapore, we have large LED signs on our expressways that can be used to alert motorists to hazards. For a period of time, those signs flashed the message "Don't Speed". While I do not have any evidence to prove that this didn't work, I suspect there might have been an increased incidence of speeding.

This is why in training and education, we advise that when giving feedback, we should avoid

telling people what not to do but to provide specific feedback about a positive action. Telling people what not to do does not give the brain a direction to move towards. Going back to those LED signs on Singapore expressways, someone must have caught on. The signs no longer flash “Don’t Speed”. They now say “Drive Safely”. More recently, they have also begun to say “Think of your loved ones and get home to them safely” (for that extra motivation I suppose).

And this is why I went on this detour. A definition of peace which references an absence of war does not give us, as a species, a direction to move towards. (I note with some irony that the definition of war suffers from no such problem. It is generally positively defined as a state of armed conflict. One wonders what might happen if we defined war as a non-peaceful state. But I digress.)

So, if Peace = Not War, then when war doesn’t exist, what do we do? I would like to suggest that the state of “Not War” is really just a starting point. “Not War” is not Peace but only the first step towards a state of peace. How do we move from this state of “Not War” to a state of Peace?

Grammatically, the word “Peace” is an abstract noun (also known as a nominalization). Abstract nouns do not exist as things. A pen, a building, a cat are all concrete nouns. They exist in the world as physical objects. Words like Peace or Love or Relationship or Conflict or Mediation are all verbs which have been frozen as a static noun. This has the effect of making the abstract noun seem immovable and permanent. It also has the effect of disempowering us from the actions we can take to change the circumstances.

By way of example, consider the difference between these two sentences.

“I’m afraid our relationship isn’t working out”

“I’m afraid the way we are relating isn’t working out”

Most people would experience the first sentence as final and immovable. The second however, is often experienced as a statement of how things are right now but with the possibility of movement. This is due to the use of verb form of the word “relationship”.

So, what is the verb form of “Peace”? “Peacing” is obviously incorrect, although it does express the concept sufficiently. How does one engage in “Peacing”? **This is where I invite the readers to share in the comments what they feel would be positive acts of Peacing.** After all, we Mediators are often referred to as Peacemakers and there must surely be lessons and ideas we can draw from our training, work and practice that can help.

On my part, I want to offer 3 ideas.

First, I think a key part of Peacing is promoting understanding and acceptance. To be clear, this is more than just tolerance. To tolerate something has a bit of a negative connotation. As if you didn’t like it but you are forcing yourself not to react and to behave in a certain way. Understanding and acceptance is something entirely different. Understanding requires empathy and the ability to step into the other person’s shoes and see the world through their eyes. This would already be a very good start. Sadly, there seems to be precious little of this today. We cling on to our notions of separateness and think that “the problems of the other person are not my problem”.

The next step would be acceptance of the differences that exist and that it is ok to be different. This doesn’t necessarily mean that we agree with their lifestyle but that we accept that they have a

different lifestyle. This is often difficult to do because we see a different lifestyle as a threat to our lifestyle. Our “either-or” paradigms (win-lose, us-them, right-wrong) must evolve into a space where we can say things can be “this *and* that”. We try to do this in bringing parties to a settlement in mediation. Perhaps this can be done in a wider space.

Secondly, a key part to Peacing must be the ability to start and continue to have dialogue with all stakeholders. Just as we facilitate communication in mediation and that communication is key to helping parties find common ground, ways must be found for groups (whether communities, races, countries, etc) to have honest, productive communication about our fears, emotions, assumptions and concerns. The space and process must be managed such that there is responsible freedom of expression without judgment. The process must manage how, who and when one speaks and also take into account how to manage strong emotions.

It is important for the freedom of expression to be responsibly exercised. One should not be able to get away with deliberately saying inflammatory things or saying things in an inflammatory manner. It may mean that facilitators have to reframe or that might even have to be coaching in communication as a precursor to the dialogue. Judgment cannot exist either so that people don't feel afraid to speak, albeit responsibly. An excellent demonstration of what not to do can be easily found on social media where flame wars abound and trolls flourish. It is easy to say something on social media without thinking too hard about the consequences of what one says. Responsible action in social media is so rare it often seems like an oxymoron.

This leads us to the third point. How often do we walk our talk? I have been in the presence of people who meditate (not mediate) speaking about mindfulness and the no-ego state and in the next moment losing it when a car cuts in front of them. Maybe the reason why people don't handle conflict well is because they don't know any other way? Think about it for a moment. We learn how to handle what life throws us from our families, friends and frankly the media. Our family and friends, while often well-meaning, don't often encourage us to understand and accept the other person (whom we have perceived to have wronged us or are unacceptably different) and to engage in productive dialogue. Instead, they often feel it is their role to side with us and make us feel that we are justified in our actions. As for the media, we are bombarded with bad news and TV shows and movies that glorify war and show us that shouting the other person down or physically hitting them is an acceptable way to deal with conflict. And honestly, I get it. A news service that only shares good news will go out of business. And no one will tune in to a TV show or pay to watch a movie where the protagonist goes about his/her way dealing with conflict in a positive, affirming and empowering manner. It is after all a form of escapism. The problem is that viewers sometimes forget that it is a form of escapism and they unconsciously take on those behaviours as appropriate ones to use in the world. And this toxifies the environment.

As mediators, we are role models. When resolving disputes between parties, how we do it also informs and educates parties on how to speak, how to address emotions and how to solve problems. But outside our formal roles as mediators, we need to also walk our talk. How do we handle conflict in our daily lives with our loved ones? How do we communicate with those we are in conflict with? How do we handle difference or challenges?

My apologies if it seems to some readers that some of what I have said is naive or that I have suggested nothing new. Some may even say, what can we as private individuals do? Well, I am happy to accept that greater minds than mine have thought about this. I am also willing to accept some of these ideas have been tried and have not worked. I do not see these as reasons to not keep

thinking about how to wage peace or that we should stop challenging ourselves to make the ideas work. As for the enormity of the enterprise, I take a leaf from the environmental movement. “Think Global, Act Local”. We do want we can in the context of our own spheres of influence and we will hopefully hit a threshold, a bifurcation point from which a greater order will emerge from the chaos. Let’s see what we can do by Peaceing Things Together.


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