

# Kluwer Mediation Blog

## The Mediator who Planted Trees

Martin Svatoš (FORARB/Charles University) · Monday, February 20th, 2017



Recently, I have become an owner of two hectares of land in protected natural area which I intend to plant with trees. I was inspired to this by a wonderful book that I read some ten years ago. Though, it is neither about dispute resolution, nor about mediation, it contains pearls of wisdom which make this book definitely worth to read. *The Man Who Planted Trees*<sup>[1]</sup> is an allegorical tale showing us that destruction and adversity can be defied by single-handed effort if persistent.

Its plot begins in the time short before the First World War. A narrator of the story is making a journey through the Provence region in Southeastern France. Climbing up mountains, he enters a treeless, desolate valley. The old and empty ruins are the only remaining evidence of former settlement. Step by step, the sad destiny of the valley is revealed. It was previously inhabited by the colony of charcoal burner who did not make it a pleasant neighbourhood:

*The men took their wagonloads of charcoal to the town, then returned. The soundest characters broke under the perpetual grind. The women nursed their grievances. There was rivalry in everything, over the price of charcoal as over a pew in the church, over warring virtues as over warring vices as well as over the ceaseless combat between virtues and vice. And over all there was the wind, also ceaseless, to rasp upon the nerves. There were epidemics of suicide and frequent cases of insanity,*

*usually homicidal.*

Quickly, the narrator learns that the extensive exploitation of the countryside led to disaster when nearly all trees had been chopped down. Consequently, nothing stopped the wind from terrorising the residents and the villages were deserted for there had been no water in wells. The narrator is taken by surprise when he runs out of his water stocks and is threatened by drought.

He is, however, saved by a middle-aged shepherd, Elzéard Bouffier, who takes him to a renovated and cosy cottage where he is permitted to spend a couple of days in order to build up his energy. It comes up to light that the widowed shepherd has committed his life to restoration of the ruined landscape. He plants single-handedly the oak trees by collecting the acorns miles away, then selecting carefully the most strong and health ones, making holes in the ground by shepherd stick and finally by dropping the seeds into them.

*I told him that in thirty years his ten thousand oaks would be magnificent. He answered quite simply that if God granted him life, in thirty years he would have planted so many more that these ten thousand would be like a drop of water in the ocean.*

After having returned to the civilisation, the narrator is conscripted and fights in the First World War. Here, he witnesses all the warfare terrors: bombshells, poison gas, death... Being depressed after the armistice, he decides to return to the valley to seek peace. When climbing up, he is surprised by the grown up trees planted just before the war and by the new streams of water running down the hills.

*When you remembered that all this had sprung from the hands and the soul of this one man, without technical resources, you understood that humans could be as effectual as God in other realms than that of destruction.*

Despite the war that was happening all around him, the shepherd had pursued his plan. He shows the narrator the young trees planted at the same time, when the battle of Verdun, one of the bloodiest carnage ever, was fought. Now, the fresh, new forest provides the ex-soldier with the peace sought and he continues to visit Elzéard every year on.

By the end of the book, the valley is turned to a peacefully settled area protected by authorities.

*When I reflect that one man, armed only with his own physical and moral resources, was able to cause this land of Canaan to spring from the wasteland, I am convinced that in spite of everything, humanity is admirable. But when I compute the unfailing greatness of spirit and the tenacity of benevolence that it must have taken to achieve this result, I am taken with an immense respect for that old and unlearned peasant who was able to complete a work worthy of God.*

In fact, The Man Who Planted Trees narrates a story similar to mediation. In every single session,

mediators have to face a desolate land of destruction and try to plant – one by one – a tree of trust and mutual understanding. In the end of the day, the forest is planted and the parties are free to go and to care on. It is always up to them, whether their trees will grow up or whether they will let them vanish once again. Elzéard Bouffier devoted his life to re-forestation of a desolate valley in Southeastern France, every mediator devotes his life to restoration of human relationships all around the world.

In fact, every mediator is a kind of Elzéard Bouffier.

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References[+]

This entry was posted on Monday, February 20th, 2017 at 10:21 pm and is filed under [memory](#), [Understanding mediation](#)

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