
Kluwer Mediation Blog

About Hacksaw Ridge

Andrea Maia (Mediar360 – Dispute Resolution) · Monday, March 6th, 2017

I love movies, especially the ones with real stories! And I usually try to make some sort of correlation between the “real stories” portrait at the movies and those I hear at my mediation practice.

Last week I watched the film “Hacksaw Ridge”, a great true story of Desmond Doss who, during one of the bloodiest battle of WWII, saved 75 men without firing or carrying a gun.

Desmond, an army medic and a devoted Seventh-Day Adventist who swore to never pick up a gun, was the only American soldier in WWII to fight in the front lines without a weapon, as he believed that while the war was, at that point in time, justified, killing was, nevertheless, wrong.

Among several peculiar situations throughout the movie, one in particular caught my attention. During a routine training session, Desmond refused to participate at the rifle practice, angering both his sergeant and fellow recruits, who mistakenly judged his act as cowardice. Several maneuvers were tried in order to drive Desmond out of the Army, including a court-martial attempt. The pressure would surely be unbearable to most us, but he bravely maintained his decision against the establishment.

At some point, instead of focusing on the movie, my mind started to drift away wondering how would be it to mediate these parties. Continuing my reflexive mode a few hours after at home, I realized how difficult is “to see through someone else’s eyes, to listen through someone else’s ears and to feel through someone else’s heart” as Alfred Adler cleverly preaches.

Overall, from the Mediation standpoint, how mediators would effectively handle a controversial situation like this, which is deeply based on personal, ethical and moral standards on one side (Doss) and on rational, hierarchical and highly strong (Army) values on the other? How could we make it more harmonious in a sense that they understand each other’s core values, hopefully by positioning themselves on each other’s shoes?

In other words, how can we create a sense of empathy, with a deep sense of appreciation for another’s situation and point of view. For those who followed this years’ Oscar Ceremony, one may have realized how many times the word empathy was used. Empathy has become a kind of buzzword at the moment.

For instance, Jimmy Kimmel, 2017 Oscar’s host, stated at some point during this year’s ceremony that the best thing to do would be for people to reach out to someone they disagree with and have a

conversation. According to him “That could make America great again”.

Among other suitable approaches to face a situation as difficult as the one presented at Hacksaw Ridge, where the parties involved have such opposite cultures and beliefs and find themselves in a rather “hostile” environment, I believe that, first of all, there is an urgent need to create some sort of empathy in order to try to bring the parties “close together”.

At this point, before going any further, it is important to define the meaning of the word EMPATHY when applied to our Mediation environment. According to the best seller author Goleman at his book “Emotional Intelligence: Why it Can Matter More than IQ”, Empathy is the ability to be aware of, understand and appreciate the feelings and thoughts of others. Empathy is “tuning in” to what, how and why people feel and think the way they do.

Another renowned expert, Prof. Robert Mnookin, in his book *Beyond Winning – Negotiate to Create Value in Deals and Disputes*, states that “empathy requires neither sympathy nor agreement, as sympathy is feeling for someone (it is an emotional response to the other person’s predicament). Empathy does not require people to have sympathy for another’s plight – to “feel their pain” (it is not about being nice). Rather, empathy is a “value-neutral mode of observation”.

In this sense, Empathy is the ability to non-judgmentally put into words your understanding of the other person’s perspective on the world, even if you do not agree with it or even if you find that perspective ridiculous. Empathizing with someone, therefore, does not mean agreeing with or even necessarily liking the other side. It is about how seeing the world through someone else’s eyes.

With the above in mind and returning to Hacksaw Ridge movie, how would I go about preparing myself to Mediate the problem between Doss, his sergeant and fellow colleagues if I was fortunate enough to face a Mediation like this? How would I be able to inspire openness and create empathy among the parties involved?

There are four different paths that I would certainly follow:

– **Inspire curiosity** – By being able to generate a sense of curiosity towards one another when involved in a group of participants with highly different cultures and backgrounds, is a very important element towards empathy creation

– **Challenge prejudices and discover commonalities** – Try to avoid focusing on preconceptions and prejudices by focusing on commonalities that bring the parties together.

– **Active Listening** – Show genuine interest and pay careful attention to what others have to say is probably one of the most efficient tools to develop empathy. Master the art of active listening.

“What is essential,” says Marshall Rosenberg, psychologist and founder of Non-Violent Communication (NVC), “is our ability to be present to what’s really going on within – to the unique feelings and needs a person is experiencing in that very moment”

– **Develop Imagination** – try to place yourself at someone else’s shoes and imagine how would you feel in that situation. Try to behave as if you were in the opposite side

Finally, despite being presented in a dramatic setting, situations as those portrayed at Hacksaw Ridge are rather common within our Mediation environment and we should be always prepared at

act accordingly. There are obviously some Mediators that, due to their individual and unique personalities, are able to foster empathy in a more natural manner. However, the ability to create empathy within certain groups is not an inborn trait limited to a few individuals only. Rather, it can be trained, mastered and although sometimes taken for granted, “Empathy creation” should be seen as one of the most important tools available to Mediators.


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The graphic features a black background with white text and a circular icon. The icon depicts a group of five stylized human figures, with a magnifying glass positioned over the central figure. The background is accented with horizontal lines in blue and green.

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