

Dung Beetles and Basics

Kluwer Mediation Blog

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It's not easy to blog once a month, even on a subject I love. Often I sit down to write with no real ideas or inspiration. Sometimes I end up that way too (as you may have noticed!). It becomes easy to dread the approach of my monthly publication date.

Often the pressure lies in thinking that there always needs to be something profound or different to say; something cutting edge; some dramatic examples from the coalface.

I reflected on this as I sat at my screen to write this blog, facing yet another absence of inspiration. And ironically it occurred to me that this pressure contains a significant truth. That is, that most mediation engagements are not dramatic in global terms. Most are not cutting edge. Most do not contain high moments of transformation.

In fact, many can be somewhat prosaic, a collection of people struggling to find a way of engaging in difficult circumstances, and an outcome which they can live with. World peace does *not* break out. A fairy-tale future is *not* discovered and embarked upon. Ideally the parties find a way forward, some basis of compromise which is preferable to being in the fight, but it's probably a struggle and they may not end up popping champagne corks, or feeling euphoric. "At least it's over" may be their greatest solace.

Much of my daily work as a mediator is experienced in this environment. It can be easy to knock it, but in fact it is the heart of what we do.

Whilst we may dream about the dramatic moments, real progress and transformation is usually achieved through the little things - the small acts of respect, such as listening to someone who hasn't been properly heard for a long time, acknowledging people's right to make their own decisions while feeling able to engage them in a serious discussion about the wisdom of their choices, the odd humorous line, the power of a silence. This is the "stuff" of mediation, the raw material at our disposal. Pretty much all progress is made up of this "stuff". There are no short-cuts.

One of the reasons that we need to remember this is that, as with most things in life, we need to do the basics well. As a busy mediator, it is so easy to take one's eye off this truth, perhaps star-struck by the glamorous nature of the dispute, or just tired and hoping for a shortcut to the finishing line.

Another reason is that it helps to debunk our most treacherous feature - the mediator's ego. There is something profoundly seductive about the role of mediator, in the feeling it can offer that we are the "cavalry" arriving when all else has failed. This temptation towards heroism is ever-present, and few temptations will de-rail us as quickly as thinking it is all about us, or all about dramatic or heroic outcomes.

The vast bulk of our daily work lies in the routine, in the normal, in the profoundly human and humane. It turns out that the "little things" are in fact the "big things". Forget to focus on them, and we are doomed to fail. Forget to value them, and we will find ourselves chasing shadows and permanently dissatisfied.

A couple of years ago I received an award for services to reconciliation. The award itself was a silver medal with a scarab beetle on it. I was intrigued by the relevance of the image. On asking, I was told that the scarab spends its life among the dung and the rubbish. Only by doing that, can it begin to transform it.

The scarab makes my point perfectly. It does its daily work, quietly and unseen, by being present amongst the dung. Welcome to the life of a mediator!