
Kluwer Mediation Blog

Guerrilla Gardening – and a Plea for a Universal Declaration of Interdependence

John Sturrock (Core Solutions Group) · Tuesday, August 28th, 2018

My colleague and fellow Kluwer author Charlie Woods has likened my scatter-gun approach to starting new projects and coming up with new ideas to “guerrilla gardening”. I am sure he means it as a compliment. Some ideas take seed.... So, here is another seed.

Just a week or two ago, I was reading a (UK) Sunday Times’ review of **Yuval Noah Harari**’s new book “*21 Lessons for the 21st Century*”. The message contained in it was so stark that I found myself temporarily paralysed with fear about the future. I had a visceral sense of powerlessness against a coming tide of AI, automation, biotechnology, digital dictatorships, global warming and control by superior elites. No wonder we find ourselves distracted by minor issues like Brexit and Trump’s behaviours. At least we can get our twentieth century (or just primitive?) minds around such everyday threats.

And then I read Simon Jenkins’ review of “*The Perils of Perception*” by former Ipsos Mori managing director, **Bobby Duffy**. Duffy’s thesis is that, statistically and empirically, things are much better than they have ever been. However, we suffer from serious delusion and are intuitively biased towards gloom, hard-wired for pessimism as a defence mechanism dating back to the age of survival against physical threats. But the resulting “miasma of misconception” seems almost as bad as Harari’s predictions, as the anonymity of the mob and populist fake news movements lead us into silos, echo chambers, and other identity groups, where we blame others for our “own and the world’s misfortunes”.

This feeling of hopelessness/helplessness coincided with me reflecting on what we might do in our communities and countries to reassert our sense of identity as part of the whole and how we might express our need for, and dependence on, each other, as an antidote to isolation, silos and alienation.

What might we do that is a bit different? I noted that former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, who died recently, placed considerable emphasis on the concept of global interdependence. This seemed to resonate. So, I offer the idea of an **Interdependence Day** and a **Universal Declaration of Interdependence**.

In the UK, for example, we might aim for an Interdependence Day in mid-March next year, just before we exit from the EU (if we do). This is not to assert that we should remain in the EU (whatever we may think individually) but to acknowledge that, in **John Donne**’s words, “no man

is an island”. We hear less frequently the fuller context: “*No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main...*”.

This is not to say that we cannot be individuals and organise ourselves in ways which differentiate one from another. It’s important to recognise diversity and difference – in aspirations, beliefs, purpose, values and our understanding of the way to live. Each of us is unique with our own special characteristics and traits, and we can never be one monolithic whole. However, unless we can hermetically seal ourselves off from the “others”, we are not and cannot be truly independent of each other, whether as individuals or as groups. That has implications for policy, politics, and our collective and individual futures.

We really are interdependent. We need to work with each other, as individuals and peoples. Anything else is futile and self-defeating. Only by collaborating to improve our individual and collective lot will we manage to navigate through the stormy waters of this century.

Harvard Professor **Martin Nowak** writes in “*Super Cooperators*” that we need each other in order to succeed: “*If we are to continue to thrive, we have but one option. We now have to refine and to extend our ability to cooperate. We must become familiar with the science of cooperation*”. We mediators and negotiators know this so well.

Nowak makes the point that, although we have much more in common than ever sets us apart, our species has tended to operate in tension, whether as individuals or as groups, with a selfish instinct leading at least in part to global problems such as climate change, environmental pollution, resource depletion, poverty, hunger and over-population. We can now add to that Harari’s list of terrors. And view all of it in the context of what happens when we radically overstate, or misstate, the consequences.

The only way to deal with this is to articulate what unites us, work together to overcome our differences and indeed make sacrifices for each other in order to maximise our prospects of thriving – or even just surviving. So, we need to articulate what a **Universal Declaration of Interdependence** will look like. Our Edinburgh Declaration of International Mediators (*see my May blog*) may contain a few seeds.

I offer a bottle of champagne to the best proposal received within the next four weeks. Then we must each decide whether we shall launch it with our own **Interdependence Day**. Why not? Who will join me in the guerrilla garden?

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