

Kluwer Mediation Blog

On Perception, Everyday Aggression, and Dialogue

Greg Bond (Bond & Bond Mediation / University of Wildau) · Tuesday, September 24th, 2019

Some ten days ago I was cycling down a path near my home, minding my own business. On one side of the path there is a row of bushes and behind them a high cemetery wall, while the other side is made up of a lawn and about ten metres further back a row of 1960s medium-rise functional apartment blocks. The path is wide, nearly two metres, and not highly frequented. For me it is a short cut from my home to the station, and I cycle there often.

In front of me was an old man, walking with a stroller, bent over, with a dog on a lead attached to the stroller. Together, the man and the dog occupied the whole path. I was cycling, and did not wish to shock or disturb the man, as I thought it might be a little difficult for him to react quickly enough to rein in his dog or stand aside. He looked pretty frail.

So I slowed down and veered left, avoiding the man by a few metres by cycling on the lawn. As I passed him, he shouted at me, something like: “Yes, yes, ruin the grass, cycling is not permitted here.” For an instant I slowed down, wondered whether I should stop and talk to him, but I rode on.

There is too much public aggression in German society, and probably in many other societies too. The question as to whether I was legally entitled to cycle on that path, where many people do cycle, put aside, road rage in mild but unpleasant forms is one everyday expression of this aggression. I was cycling recently down a road which was partly under construction, and the roadworks had narrowed the road. A van driver behind me twice honked his horn at me, but there was nowhere I could go to get out of his way. When he finally overtook me, he gave me some rather rude gestures. He seemed so angry.

In another incident, when I was driving my car, I turned into a narrow street only to see that I would not be able to get through without letting a van that was coming towards me pass, but as I wanted to reverse into the only roadside space, the driver behind me had slipped in and occupied it. He had seen that the road was blocked and had had the choice to wait back. I now had to reverse back onto the main road, with poor vision and the danger of trams hurtling by. It was summer, the car windows were open. When I looked at the other driver, he shouted at me, asking me very impolitely if I was drawing unemployment benefit. I told him it would have been easier if he had not turned into the space, and continued my manoeuvre.

The roads can be friendly places, but all too often they are the places where aggression spills out. Which is why we are so pleasantly surprised when we see kindness on the roads. In many ways they are, I feel, an image of something going on in society. Roads and pathways are communal, places where we meet and where we negotiate space with each other. These negotiations are all too

often positional, uncompromising, and nasty, with the negotiators convinced they are right and the others are wrong.

There is no no-cycling sign on the path by the cemetery wall. It may be the case that an ordinance or bye-law forbidding cycling on footpaths in housing areas applies. The law is one thing, practice is another. In Germany, cycling on footpaths is widespread.

There is something else that my cycling story showed me very clearly. Perceptions of one and the same event can differ so greatly. If we were able to take as given that we all see the world our own ways, but that these are not other people's ways of seeing, and to take this into account before we get angry, I think there would be a lot less aggression in society. While I was considering how not to disturb this frail old man, so that he might peacefully continue on his arduous walk with his dog, he saw my actions as wilful destruction of public property. How different can it get?

Gone are the days when I would have become angry in return, and perhaps shouted back at the old man. I have my training and work as a mediator to thank for being more relaxed about this kind of incident, though I do confess to having been angry at the driver who honked at me.

This is an everyday story, and because it is everyday it is important. It happens to us all, all the time.

Politics in Germany are becoming more and more divisive. Politics in Europe are becoming more and more divisive. Some politicians and many commentators are saying that we need to regain our abilities to listen to each other, and to engage in dialogue. Perhaps this is true.

After being shouted at by the man with the dog, I regretted not having stopped to talk with him. I resolved to do this the next time anything like this happened. I did not have to wait long for an opportunity. A few days ago I was cycling down the same path. An old woman was bent over a shopping trolley, next to her was her dog, this one not on a leash. Again I thought I did not want to shock her or surprise her. Perhaps I should have got off and walked. Instead I rode very slowly past her, just still on the path. As I passed she angrily shouted: "This is not a cycle path!"

I dismounted and pushed my bike as I walked back to her. I asked her if she was angry, or rather I acknowledged that she was. She confirmed it. Why, I asked. Because this was not a cycle path, she said. I apologised, and then I said I was not sure she was right, but it did not matter, what I wanted to say was that I had no intention of upsetting her. She began to tell me about the people who worked in a disabled people's workshop just up the road, and how she was afraid of them when she was out with her dog. How she shouted at them too. She liked complaining, she smiled. I asked her where she lived and what her dog's name was. I stroked the dog. I imagined her living alone, probably lonely, probably not having been listened to for a long time, maybe never having been really listened to in her life. I imagined her shouting at me as a plea for some form of recognition. "I may be old, I may be alone, I may have only my dog, Ketty, but I am still here. Will someone please take note that I am here!"

I suggested she might not shout at people, as mostly people mean well. As I had done when I rode very slowly past her. I wished her a good day.

I have resolved to seek conversation every time someone shouts at me or is aggressive towards me on the streets, something which happens around here too often. (It is not me, believe me, it is a social issue.) I do not know if I will have the guts when that someone is a rough-talking tough-

looking man who would be able to knock me out with a punch but I am going to give it a try. There is a reason for what we all do. I believe in de-escalation, but believing is not sufficient. I need to practice it.

The next time I cycle up behind someone old and frail on that path by the cemetery, I am going to dismount, walk past them slowly and wish them good day.


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