

Kluwer Mediation Blog

Questions of Perspective, Some Thoughts on The Year Ending

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

A few days ago my daughter asked me a question that challenged and inspired me, and that has me thinking still. Often, we say it is little children who catch us out with their questions. But my two adult children seem to manage to test my assumptions, ideas and actions more and more the older they get, and the more they go their own ways.

My daughter asked: “What good did you do in the world in 2019?” It was a friendly moment as we were standing in the kitchen. What a question. She did not ask: “What went well for you over the last year?” She did not ask: “What were your highlights?” She asked: “What good did you do?” I struggled for a good answer.

The work of mediators involves a toolbox of questions we ask, and it is often by asking the right questions that we can help clients gain different perspective, or draw on resources that might have been lost in the course of conflict.

Often conflicts within organisations persist over long periods, and facilitation processes take time. People become frustrated that little progress seems to be made and that their old disputes keep flaring up. New questions might be: “Looking back, what has changed for the better since you entered on this facilitated process? What have you achieved?” And instead of “threatening” and unattractive non-agreement alternatives, we might ask: “What are the benefits of continuing to work towards agreement?”

It is a matter of a shift of perspective. Three or four times a year, I go to my own coach to discuss my work and cases. One empowering question he helped me to formulate this year involved my place of work, where, as in most places of work, there sometimes are frustrating managerial decisions. Instead of focusing on what I cannot get done as a result, the question we asked was: “What have I changed for the better there?” The list of things small and not so small was a long one. It gave me confidence to go back and keep on.

Clients are sometimes apprehensive about asking other parties to attend mediation. Instead of working on the underlying reasons why they are concerned, which might be the intuitive (and learned) approach, we might instead consider a wording that they would feel comfortable with. Perhaps: “So as to work on improving our everyday work together, I would like to ask you to mediation.” Not: so we can discuss grievances, settle disputes, or talk about how we feel, but “to make daily work better.”

Would a resource and solutions focused approach help us in much bigger social and political issues

too? I think so. The aim of this approach is not to gloss over problems and concerns, but to focus on ways forward. Much of the world is more polarized than I can remember since the end of the Cold War, and the liberal aspirations that came after 1989 are in retreat.^[1] In 2019 we have seen Brexit decided, and whatever your political views on this, we might agree that it has divided a nation. We are seeing greater divisions in the USA. The UN Madrid Climate Change Conference failed to produce the resolutions needed, most experts agree. Politics around the world is too slow to face up to the challenges. We are for sure not living in “the best of all possible worlds.”^[2] So what can we do? We can talk to each other. We can listen to each other. We can focus on what works now and on what will work tomorrow. We can ask ourselves what unites us and not what divides us.^[3] We can work on relationships, including the relationships in our families, places of work, and circles of friends and acquaintances.

My blog is regularly published on the 24th of each month, and so in December it coincides with Christmas Eve. Whether you celebrate Christmas or not, the message contains much that gives cause for optimism. A mediator might call it reframing, or empowering perspective shift. When Joseph discovers that Mary is expecting a child, he is very scared and wishes to walk away from her, but an angel appears to him in a dream: “Fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife.” “Fear not” was the message the angel brought to the frightened shepherds in the fields on the night of the nativity, put powerfully to music in Johann Sebastian Bach’s Christmas Oratorio. “Fear not” does not mean ignore the challenges. On the contrary, it invites us to take them on.

I return to my daughter’s question. It is essentially a resource-based question: if I can work out what good I have done in the world in 2019, then I might be better equipped to go into 2020 with a frame of mind that will help me to do some good in the future too.

[1] From my reading of 2019, *The Light that Failed: A Reckoning* by Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, a diagnosis of the decline of the liberal consensus, stands out.

[2] Voltaire’s *Candide*, as advised by Dr. Pangloss, drawing on the philosophy of Leibniz. I saw a stunning and timely production of Leonard Bernstein’s opera of *Candide* at Berlin’s Komische Oper in 2019.

[3] In *The Righteous Mind*, Jonathan Haidt looks at the irrational source of many of our strongly held moral convictions. The purpose of these is to bind us together in communities, so to make that work we hold on to them dearly. The final chapter of this remarkable book is a plea for us to explore what binds us together in the complex societies we have evolved. Another of my reading “highlights” of 2019. See Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, 2012.

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The graphic features a black background with white text and a circular icon. The icon depicts a magnifying glass over a group of stylized human figures, representing a search or investigation process. The text is arranged in a clean, modern layout with horizontal lines above the main title.

References[+]

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