

Kluwer Mediation Blog

Reflections on the legacy of Thierry Garby – the great narrator.

Alan Limbury (Strategic Resolution) and Rosemary Howell (University of New South Wales) · Saturday, January 22nd, 2022



On the first day of this year the international mediation community lost a wonderful friend and colleague.

The memorial page established by his family shows just how wide and deep the affection reaches. He provided memorable experiences to so many of us.

And whilst we both certainly remember (and enjoyed) his joie de vivre, the most powerful recollection is how effectively he used the power of storytelling. His gift as a great narrator is an enduring one and it is a gift he continued to share right until the end.

His parting gift was a story contained in a Basque song, “The Wings, The Bird”, an ode to freedom and the acceptance of departure, that Thierry wanted us to remember him by – and we will. You can watch and hear it on [the memorial page](#).

There was a story he liked to share with students at the ICC International Mediation Competition. He was a master storyteller so the story developed slowly and carefully. Thierry described a vitriolic and long-lasting dispute regarding an apartment owner’s noise problem. He described parties enmeshed in acrimony and accusations and the need for each to prove that they were right and the other party wrong. He described how, listening to the noise in the room, he immediately

saw a solution that could meet the interests of both parties.

When he was telling this story (and he told it to a number of groups of students) he would pause – letting the mediators in the room recall the familiarity of this experience and making the students wonder what was coming. He would then describe choosing not to intervene – waiting until the parties had satisfied their need to confront each other, explain to the mediator why they were right and “let off steam”. Once that had happened, Thierry found an elegant way of encouraging the parties to explore possible outcomes, including the solution that had sprung to his mind. Unsurprisingly, that was the outcome the parties chose.

And, of course, Thierry knew what the biophysicists have been telling us for a while now. Facts by themselves are not particularly persuasive. Wrap them into a narrative however, and they become persuasive and memorable.

Thierry could simply have told the students to be patient – to let parties fight and squabble and vent until they are ready and open to solutions. Instead he told us a story which contained that exact message but which was infinitely more engaging and memorable.

There is a reason why Thierry’s narrative approach was so powerful and memorable. [The work of Karen Eber, for example](#), provides a useful, accessible explanation of the science.

Eber reveals that, when we are engaged in a story, neural coupling ‘lights up’ our brain via the Occipital and Temporal lobes, engaging our senses and emotions. This triggers three things – empathy is generated for the storyteller, oxytocin (our ‘feel good’ chemical) is released and trust is enhanced.

This doesn’t happen when we are simply fed the data and the facts. It is the narrative that creates a context, making data meaningful.

During the 2018 ICC International Mediation Competition, Adeline Guilen of Mediation Studio interviewed Thierry, reporting his favourite word as “Jubilation” and his favourite quotation as “Hallelujah”! You can watch the interview [here in French](#) and [here in English](#).

This seems a very appropriate way to remember our friend and colleague.

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