
Kluwer Mediation Blog

Dear President Putin....a thought experiment

John Sturrock (Core Solutions Group) · Thursday, April 28th, 2022

I have been musing about what a mediator might say to President Putin given the opportunity. That led me to compose a letter a few weeks ago, with which I have since tinkered. This is merely a thought experiment. The letter goes something like this:

“Dear President Putin

I write as a mediator, a peacemaker. I do so in the hope that there may still be a constructive way to bring an end to the tragic situation in Ukraine.

[note to self: Would PP see this as “tragic”? What other starting lines might such a letter need in order to engage him?]

To do so, my experience tells me that people who disagree with you need to try to understand better what motivates you. That would help them to identify what, if anything, they can do to help bring about a speedy conclusion. I accept that you see the world differently from others, especially those in the West. We know from what we have heard that you and others look on with concern at some of what you see in the West. And I acknowledge that Russia has experienced many episodes of aggression towards it in its history. I recognise also that Russia is a proud country.

[note to self: Would this sort of acceptance, acknowledgement and recognition work with a person like PP? Does he feel he has not been heard?]

I am interested in you. If I may, I have some questions for you. What happened to you, way back, when you were much younger? What experiences have shaped you as a person? What was it like for you growing up? What happened in your family? Who did you love, back then? Who loved you? What about now? Who do you love now? What are they thinking about you now? What do you think of them? Does any of this matter to you? Do you care? How easy is it for you to talk about any of this stuff?

[note to self: We know that we are all shaped by events in our past; but would any of this work with someone like PP? Is it naïve to think that these sorts of questions have any utility? But don't we need to try to get under the surface if we are ever to find a way forward that is not violent? Let's keep going:]

What do you really think about what is happening now? In your heart of hearts? What do you fear most? What do you fear losing? Who do you fear? Why does it seem that you need to control

everything around you? What are you fighting against, inside? What do you regret most of all? What and who do you wish to protect? People, places, things, hopes, dreams? From what? What lies behind your mask? How, if at all, do you challenge yourself and your thinking? If you're stuck, how can you get yourself out of this? What would release you from all this, if anything? Can you even contemplate these questions? If you can't, where do you end up?

[note to self: Some of these questions might be perceived as judgemental or aggressive. Would we feel that we could ask robust questions? If we did, what effect would they have? As mediators, how do we create an environment where we can ask these kinds of questions? What would it take to achieve that here, if anything?]

You – and others – may think this foolish. Please don't mistake this letter. I am not suggesting there is an easy solution, nor that people will accede to your wishes. In fact, we need to recognise that there are strong views on all sides. Achieving peace is hard work, involving hard labour. But the alternative is hard too, for you as well as for others.

[note to self: Could we get into a BATNAS and WATNAS conversation? Does PP do that kind of thinking? And then some more tough questions:]

What would get you out of this that others can deliver? Who do you need to persuade or impress? What do they need? What options have you – and others – not yet explored? Medium to long term, what can be done to get us all to a different place? With that in mind, do you worry about climate change? I recognise that the transition to a non-carbon future world-wide must be a difficult prospect for Russia, given your reliance on the sale of fossil fuels to support your economy. What might others do to help? Could that make a difference?

[note to self: Is there something we are all missing? Going to the precipice and then to the balcony, what might we see that we haven't seen before?]

President, I don't know if you listen to music at all. There is a singer/writer, now deceased, call Leonard Cohen. I am not a big fan of his music but he has this lyric: ***“There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.”*** Can we, somehow, find that crack here?

[note to self: How do you finish a letter like this? What would be an attention grabber? Or is this just sentimental guff? And, worse still, offensive to those who have suffered so much?]

So, there it is. As I say this is merely a thought experiment. Make of it what you will. In conclusion, I am grateful to my friend and colleague in the Mediators' Green Pledge coordinating group, Sabine Koenig who, in another context, today sent these words: “For more than ten years I have been carrying now in my purse Ken Cloke's quote: *“Every conflict reflects what each person most needs to learn at that moment.”* Right now it seems that I may need to learn a lot more.” We all do, Sabine. We all do.



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