Kluwer Mediation Blog

Argument, Dialogue, Compassion – and Mediation

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

The former British politician (and leadership contender when the Conservative Party was choosing Boris Johnson), Rory Stewart, is making a mark as an even more independent thinker than he was in the British Parliament.

Recently, he hosted a three-part series on BBC Radio 4 entitled A Long History of Argument. It is worth listening to the series on BBC Sounds if you have access to that app. He traces the history of argument from the Greeks to modern times and notes a marked change from about 2014 when public discourse became much more polarising as the echo chambers of social media began to dominate our communications. The future of democracy "may depend on rediscovering how to argue well" he says. The whole series is fascinating and, here, I focus on some of his conclusions and suggestions.

Stewart promotes Citizens Assemblies which can take issues out of the polarised setting of parliaments and enable people to make decisions at local levels of democracy. He favours a different type of conversation with people talking to each other in small places, encouraged to think more slowly, and to think together rather than separately. He hopes we can regain a sense of empathy, respect and trust, finding ways to persuade without pandering to or manipulating others. Listening, engaging back and forth, navigating the space between, as he describes it. All good mediator territory.

The answer to bad arguments, he says, is not to avoid argument but to argue better, to speak beautifully as he puts it, returning to the ancient Greek art of rhetoric. We should be educated in imagery, metaphor, the poetic analogies that can capture the ambiguity and tension of the world in a way that a simple recitation of mere facts cannot.

He cites the calming and reconciling language of Martin Luther King's I Have A Dream speech and contrasts the "tasteless falsification, exaggerated rhetoric, false metaphors and lack of careful thought" of many modern day politicians which intensify resentment and division. He reminds us of the origins of the word: arguere – to make bright or enlighten.

Stewart notes the US philosopher Kenneth Burke's observation that rhetoric can be used in service of insult, bickering, lying and malice but is also crucial to persuasion, cooperation, consensus, compromise, action and ultimately to sympathy, identification and, he concludes at the very end of the series, to love. These are all outcomes which many mediators aspire to help others to achieve.

I was struck by the occasionally seemingly interchangeable use that Stewart makes of the words

argument and *dialogue*. To my mind, even if used well, argument may still suggest the promotion of a particular point of view. Dialogue, on the other hand, suggests a genuine exploration of the issues without a preconceived view of the outcome. It assumes from the start that we don't know it all and need to engage in a "flow of meaning between or among us", as David Bohm described it. To achieve this is hard work, as we know, and lies at the heart of the work of mediators.

One of my favourite authors, the theologian Richard Rohr, says this: *"When we can listen and respond in [such a] way, each person is treated with the respect and dignity they deserve… Each person feels heard, and misunderstandings are clarified compassionately."*

He goes on: "*Unfortunately that is not the way the ego likes to work. Opposition gives us a sense of standing for something, a false sense of independence, power, and control. Compassion and humility don't give us a sense of control or psychic comfort. We have to be willing to let go of our moral high ground and hear the truth that the other person may be speaking, even if it is only ten percent of what they are saying. Compassion and dialogue are essentially vulnerable positions. If we are into control and predictability, we will seldom descend into the vulnerability of undefended listening or the scariness of dialogue.*"

As he observes, *"The truth is not well served, [when] neither individual feels secure, respected, or connected. Unfortunately, this has become the state of our public discourse."*

He asks "*Can we take responsibility for the fact that we push people to polarised positions when we do not stand in the compassionate middle?"*

The "compassionate middle". The territory of the mediator. Stewart and Rohr challenge us to keep thinking about how we can use our privileged position to enhance dialogue and compassion in and between large and small groups, especially when forceful arguments are being made by people who are often polarised. We know we add a special kind of value. Our individual and collective futures probably depend on us continuing to offer ourselves in more and more of these difficult situations. If not us, who?

This entry was posted on Thursday, July 28th, 2022 at 9:23 am and is filed under Argument, Causes of Conflict, Cooperation, Decision making, Developing the Field, Dialogue, Future of mediation, Language, Mediation Practice, Philosophy, Reflective Practice, Scotland, The role of the mediator, Uncategorized
You can follow any responses to this entry through the Comments (RSS) feed. You can leave a response, or trackback from your own site.