

Kluwer Mediation Blog

Are We Regressing from Getting to Yes?

John Sturrock (Core Solutions Group) · Monday, December 23rd, 2024

“Beat your ploughshares into swords, and your pruning-hooks into spears.” Surely some mistake, I thought; shouldn't it be the other way round? Swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning-hooks?

It was during Evensong at the magnificent Liverpool Cathedral a few weeks ago that this reading from the Old Testament Book of the prophet Joel caught my eye. I'm not a Biblical scholar so a bit of research was needed to reveal that, indeed, there are two directly contradictory passages with these words, the more familiar being in the Book of Isaiah, which calls for a peaceful world.

Just a couple of days earlier, my colleague and Kluwer blogger Charlie Woods had drawn to my attention a worrying graph which showed that, while older generations who grew up with high growth developed positive-sum beliefs, recent generations who have lived with low growth are more inclined to zero sum attitudes. In other words, older generations believe that wealth can grow so that everyone gains; younger generations believe that people can only get rich at the expense of others.

That same week, former German Chancellor Angela Merkel revealed that Donald Trump doesn't believe in win-win. It's now over four decades since Fisher and Ury first published the seminal *'Getting to Yes'*, the whole premise of which, as we know, is that it is only by working together that we can expand the pie and maximise gains. When I started out in mediation over twenty years ago, it seemed that the *'Getting to Yes'* philosophy was in the ascendancy. It doesn't feel that way now.

That we seem to be regressing to a win-lose view of the world is worrying. Indeed, it's the lose-lose outcome that should alarm us all. The consequences are profound. Victory at all costs results in exactly that. Whether it be in the growing number of regional wars expanding globally or our failure individually and collectively to face up to what is required to address climate change, the threats we face are becoming existential.

What to do about it? Well, my Liverpool visit was to work with the managers of, and investors in, a world-leading public institution. Our theme was *“Better Conversations, Better Partnerships, Better Outcomes”*. Over two days we explored the importance of doing those things that will optimise delivery of key services.

Working together, finding common ground, overcoming group think, pausing before responding, avoiding binary thinking, being humble enough to say “I don't know all the answers”, asking really

good questions and really listening to the responses, showing courtesy and respect to all with whom we deal, challenging our assumptions and other unconscious biases, acknowledging the danger of the “single story” and trying to see the other side(s), engaging what we call “system 2” thinking, and recognising that often the only person we can really change is ourselves.

This seems like a tall order and we need to work hard to employ these ideas, skills and techniques in a sustainable way. But we can do it and, arguably, we have no choice if we are to survive in a civilised manner. Just a few days ago, I heard that a profound shift has taken place in that institution following our two days together. And it is a happier, more productive place as a result.

In Liverpool, you can't go far without being aware of the profound influence of The Beatles. In this Christmas season, John Lennon and Yoko Ono's festive song 'Happy Xmas (War Is Over)' rings out once more, the lyrics as poignant as when they were first heard 53 years ago. But it's the words of Lennon's 'Imagine' that still seem most relevant in our polarising world: “*I hope someday you'll join us, And the world will live as one.*”

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