

# Kluwer Mediation Blog

## Canoeing, Mediation, and Resilience: Navigating Conflict and Solo Expeditions

Julie Cobalt (Conflict Coach, Mediator, Trainer) · Friday, May 9th, 2025

*“I started paddling. The water felt ominous. I doubted my ability to read the map, worried about finding hidden portages, and wondered if I’d made a colossal mistake. But I just kept going...”*

That was my first day on a two-week solo canoe expedition through Minnesota’s Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA). At 53, with a family back in Dubai, I found myself alone, navigating 200 miles of lakes, rivers, and bogs. I had no technology, little human contact, and only a compass and topographical map to guide me. The learning curve was steep.

Yet this journey fundamentally reshaped my approach to conflict—and, by extension, my mediation practice. The lessons I learned about managing uncertainty, staying calm under pressure, and moving forward even when I felt lost translate powerfully into the mediation room. I want to share the most significant insights and show how they mirror the mindset and techniques effective mediators need when guiding parties through seemingly intractable disputes.

### 1. Discovering the “Yes, You Can” Mindset

On my second day, I was anxiously scouring the shoreline for the portage spot. Hours passed in confusion; every tree and inlet looked the same. My thoughts spiralled:

- *I’m terrible at reading maps.*
- *My compass must be broken.*
- *I should have practiced more.*

Gradually, I talked myself back to calm: *You have time. You can figure this out.* I methodically backtracked, checked each inlet, reoriented my map, and found the portage. It was a revelation to realize that *I* could halt my own panic, breathe, and reengage logically.

### Application to Mediation:

Parties frequently arrive at a negotiation convinced a solution is impossible. A mediator’s gentle assertion— *“Yes, you can solve this. Let’s find a way”*—can open the door to creative thinking. I’ve learned that simply believing resolution is possible, even when conflict looks dire, helps parties manage their anxiety and keep trying. Much like my frantic shoreline search, persevering despite self-doubt is often half the battle.

## 2. Staying Calm in Uncertainty

When you're alone in the wilderness, the prospect of getting lost is terrifying. One wrong turn on a large lake, and you can paddle for hours in the wrong direction. I felt that pit-of-the-stomach fear more than once, especially on expansive waters with no distinguishing markers.

Yet each time that panic rose, I had to breathe through it, slow down, and methodically re-check the map. I repeated "*Be calm, be smart, breathe, believe.*" under my breath whenever anxiety flared. Even if I was wrong about a route, I could correct course more easily when I didn't let fear consume me.

### **Application to Mediation:**

In conflict, people often feel disoriented, confused about the next steps, or overwhelmed by the tension. A mediator's role is to steady the process—sometimes by summarizing the progress made, sometimes by literally calling a pause. When parties are mired in uncertainty, the mediator's calm presence, confidence and structured guidance can feel like a compass in a dense fog. Showing people how to slow down, breathe, and find their bearings is often the turning point toward resolution.

## 3. Embracing Discomfort for Real Growth

One of the hardest lessons the BWCA taught me was that discomfort is inevitable. My shoulders ached from paddling and carrying the canoe. Bugs were relentless. And rain soaked everything from my sleeping bag to socks for days.

But I discovered a surprising payoff: once I accepted discomfort, I could focus better on problem-solving. Instead of protesting against the rain or the flies, I'd ask, *What can I do right now to keep going?* Maybe that meant adjusting my route due to the weather or taking an extra moment to treat my blistered feet. But I stopped wasting energy, wishing for conditions to be easier.

### **Application to Mediation:**

Conflict is uncomfortable. People resist it or try to avoid its hardest parts. Yet, fully acknowledging that discomfort—anger, sadness, distrust—can help each side see what's at stake. Mediators who encourage parties to face the tough emotions ("*Yes, it's upsetting, but let's see what this tells us about what you truly need*") often see breakthroughs. When both sides stop battling the discomfort and, instead, explore what it reveals, real progress can happen.

## 4. Solitude: No One Else to Blame

The solitude of a solo canoe trip is stark—no one to blame if you tip over or misread the map. When I got stuck at a beaver dam, it was entirely upon me to find a solution. I often felt terrified, knowing that if I injured myself, there was no quick way to call for help.

After I capsized in rapids on my final day, I had to swim after my drifting packs and bail the canoe.

For a moment, I wanted to collapse and rail against the situation. But who was there to blame? I had only myself, so I swam downstream, collected my packs, and pulled the canoe ashore. Strange as it seems, I learned to trust my own capacity in ways I never had before.

### **Application to Mediation:**

Mediation sessions sometimes devolve into finger-pointing. *“You ruined everything!” “It’s your fault!”* But forward momentum comes when parties understand that no external rescuer or scapegoat can fix their conflict. Real progress often begins the moment they take personal accountability: *“Here’s my part in this; here’s what I can do now.”* A mediator skilled at shifting the focus to self-responsibility helps parties build new possibilities.

## **5. The Value of Slowing Down**

By Day 4, my body was so sore I could hardly lift the paddle. In normal circumstances, I’d push on, certain that stopping *“too early”* would be lazy. But that morning, I decided to stay put instead. I spent the entire day in one spot, reading, swimming, sitting quietly, and noticing the forest around me.

That day gave me mental space to reflect on everything—my anxieties about the trip, my family and unresolved tensions in my life. I realized that some anxieties simply needed me to acknowledge them, instead of burying them under frantic action.

### **Application to Mediation:**

In a tense negotiation, it’s tempting to barrel forward. But sometimes, the best strategy is to call a timeout—whether a short break or even pausing negotiations for a day or more. Giving participants a chance to process can soften rigid positions or spark creative ideas. And often, unexpected solutions appear in those moments of stillness when everyone steps back and gathers perspective.

## **6. Finding Joy in Small Moments**

Not everything was hardship. I still laugh about a mother wild turkey and her brood jumping out at me—or skinny-dipping after an exhausting portage. One of my odd pleasures became flipping the canoe onto my shoulders—a small victory I never thought I could manage alone.

Such moments of joy and self-congratulation fuelled my motivation. They also helped me reframe each day: *Yes, the bugs are fierce, but look at the beauty of the sunset, or My shoulders hurt, but I’m still upright and paddling.* Focusing on those highs offered a much-needed emotional boost when I felt worn down.

### **Application to Mediation:**

Conflict can be grim, so celebrating small positives can shift energy. Even simple acknowledgments, like pointing out where parties agree or noting improvements in their communication style, can inject hope into the process. Encouraging a bit of optimism or humour reminds everyone that not all is lost—that they’re capable of finding common ground, even if it seems remote at first.

## 7. Charting Your Course With Intention

I used to avoid map reading on group trips, preferring others to lead. Alone, I had no choice but to plan my route—deciding which lakes or portages to tackle and anticipating possible storms. This process of *intentionally charting* a course became deeply satisfying. Even when I'd get lost or stumble upon an unexpected beaver dam, the process of planning and adapting was my lifeline.

A key moment came when I confronted a series of marshy portages I'd been dreading. Instead of blindly hoping it would all work out, I gave myself permission to scope out each path first, double-check my map, and change direction if needed. That sense of agency transformed my anxiety into determination.

### **Application to Mediation:**

In mediation, the process flow—whether addressing simpler issues first or tackling the most complex item right away—makes a huge difference. Involving parties in that choice can be empowering. When people feel they have input into *how* the discussion moves forward, they're more committed to finding a resolution. And if it turns out they need to detour or revise their approach, they're more flexible if they helped co-create the plan.

## 8. Gratitude as a Compass

By the end of my trip, gratitude overtook every other emotion. Gratitude to my parents for first bringing me to these waters decades ago and to whatever grace of nature let me survive rapids, storms, and miscalculations.

I realized that each difficulty—maddening bugs, swollen feet, terrifying winds—had shown me I was stronger and more resourceful than I'd believed. With gratitude, I could see the entire journey as a gift rather than a trial.

### **Application to Mediation:**

When a mediation concludes, whether the dispute is resolved or not, acknowledging the effort and growth both sides displayed can soften residual tension. Gratitude—for the willingness to come to the table, for the chance to speak openly—fosters an environment of respect that can outlast the mediation itself. It helps parties see that *even if the process wasn't perfect, they gained something valuable from trying*.

## **Bringing It All Together: Lessons for Navigating Conflict**

My canoe expedition taught me that *internal resilience* is the most important gear you can pack, whether you're traveling alone through a wilderness or guiding parties in a dispute. Each day on the water required me to face adversity that no text message, or quick phone call could solve. I had to stay centred and trust my abilities.

The same goes for mediation. Here are a few distilled lessons:

### 1. **Cultivate Steady Self-Talk:**

In stressful moments, the voice that says “*Keep going, you’ve got this*” can be lifesaving. In mediation, we can serve as that supportive voice for parties—or encourage them to develop that self-reassurance.

### 2. **Sit with Discomfort:**

Conflict, like wilderness travel, is fraught with tension and fear. Yet stepping directly into that discomfort often reveals hidden reserves of creativity and compromise.

### 3. **Pause When Needed:**

Whether it’s a base-camp day or a caucus break, taking a break to reflect can realign the process and inject clarity.

### 4. **Embrace Accountability:**

When there’s no one else to blame, you figure out how to move forward. In mediation, accepting responsibility for your role in the conflict can be the catalyst for resolution.

### 5. **Find Joy and Hope:**

Small moments of relief and humour can carry you through the hardest stretches—whether it’s finishing a brutal portage or agreeing on a minor point in a contentious negotiation.

### 6. **Practice Gratitude:**

Recognizing growth and effort refines our perspective and helps us respect both the journey and the people with whom we share it.

## **Conclusion: The Ongoing Expedition**

I returned from those two weeks exhausted, bruised, bug-bitten, and occasionally rattled by my own fears—but also enriched in ways I never imagined. Each day was a navigation puzzle that demanded resilience, creativity, and staying power.

In mediation, conflict can feel as disorienting as being alone on a huge lake in a storm. But if we acknowledge the discomfort, harness the power of calm focus, and accept that *we are strong enough* to keep paddling, we often find a way forward. Solitude in the wilderness taught me to trust my capacity for problem-solving; mediation, done well, does something similar: it shows people they’re capable of forging solutions, even when it appears there’s no path across the water.

Next time you feel lost—personally or professionally—imagine you’re gripping a paddle on an ominous lake. The map might not look like the terrain before you. You might worry that you’re hopelessly off track. But if you take a breath, recalibrate, and keep moving, you’ll discover a portage or a shoreline that leads to resolution. That is the essence of resilience—whether navigating remote lakes or guiding disputants to a peaceful shore.

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