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ADR Bulletin

Commentary on ADR

Mediation and new century sadness

Kevin Hearn

Mediators will be familiar with the situation where parties cling tenaciously to certain options during negotiations; options which, given the circumstances revealed, seem to fail the 'reasonable person' test. If a hidden agenda does not emerge, mediators may speculate only later on what the drivers may have been. It is sometimes argued that the failure to recognise and deal with issues of personal loss is often a major obstacle to co-authoring decisions in situations of conflict.[1] Failure to recognise and deal with a number of such losses may generate such intense interior or intra-personal conflict that collaborating to resolve most exterior or inter-personal conflict may be too demanding.

Interior conflict is the central theme to be explored in this article. The following quote from Australian poet Keith Russell may provide a useful introduction. Russell is describing the experience of sitting beside his dying father in hospital.

I saw
his sprit break
seven years before
this turn like a horse snap
and snap the rope
clean much cleaner than
the surgeon's art he broke his life
by giving up the dead
a history overboard
a sugar bag full of fish
dropped like an anchor
without chain no way to
bring it back no way held …[2]

This theme is explored by Malik[3] but on a much broader scale. His focus is not an individual person whose spirit breaks but a culture whose spirit may be breaking. His focus is the doubt, pessimism and disconnectedness that he claims is pervasive in 'Western' culture as we begin a new century. It is as if a 'Do Not Disturb' sign has been placed outside many people's doors.[4]

The central claim of this article is that myth in 'the West', which was reasonably stable for centuries, has been transforming, possibly since the early part of the 20th century. As a result, many people have been experiencing

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unresolved (perhaps unidentified or un-understandable) interior conflict. This in turn is resulting in a condition being described as new century sadness, something which may be sabotaging many people's capacity to co-author decisions when two or more parties are interacting in exterior conflict.

Before attempting an explication of this ongoing transformation, a question may need to be addressed: is this really to do with mediation? The short answer is: possibly not, if conventional mediation is being assumed. Conventional mediation is understood as interventions appropriate to one of the four 'schools' recently identified by Clements: ADR; public policy; analytic; and transformation/ reconciliation.[5] No matter how the conflict resolution field is divided, it would seem that 'conflict' within conventional mediation is understood as involving an interaction between at least two parties;[6] that is, exterior conflict.

Engaging effectively with conflict gone underground through myth transforming may require something in addition to conventional mediation; something that could be called new century mediation. This idea will be developed later in this article.

Myth, transformation and 'the West'

A central assumption of this article is that, despite the best efforts of philosophers, scientists, poets, artists and other gifted and wise people, what is often called 'reality' is too subtle, too elusive, to be captured by humankind's 'nets of language and symbolism'.[7] Myth is being understood in part as a way of coping with this elusiveness; a way of coping with the not-yet-known.

The primary role of myth is to provide exterior prompts to meaning which tell us something of who we are; of what things mean. However its role does not include elbowing unique, interior prompts to meaning out of our lives as individual human beings. If this was to occur, we could end up as entities who seem human but whose behaviour would be occurring without an awareness of radical choice; entities which contemporary philosophy refers to as zombies.[8]

Campbell describes myth as having energy-releasing and energy-directing qualities: it 'turns us on' and turns us in a certain direction.[9] But since we do not have the equivalent of 360 degree vision, our perspective is always blinkered or limited no matter what version of myth is turning us on. There is always more to life (to the not-yet-known) than any version of myth would have us believe.

Myth is being understood in part as a way of coping with … elusiveness; a way of coping with the not-yet-known.

An individual's connection with myth would seem to begin primarily with knowing other than intellectual or rational-analytic knowing; knowing which may be called body wisdom[10] or body literacy.[11] So myth cannot, at a later date, be intellectually refuted, although it may be resisted.[12] Myth may be especially important in childhood, for survival, but also to develop confidence for later incomprehensible encounters with the not-yet-known.

When myth no longer 'works' – that is, when it is transforming – people may become dissociated and disoriented.[13] We experience distress and impairment, depending, in part, on how much we identify with what is transforming. An example at the individual level may be the so-called mid-life crisis when just about everything that was important seems confusing, lacking in meaning, no longer relevant. A similar crisis may occur institutionally when public institutions are privatised or private institutions are taken over by the state. At the level of a culture, the impact is felt potentially by all the individuals and institutions within that culture. This may be called a paradigm crisis.[14]

Such a crisis occurred in Western Europe some 500 years ago when the culture of that region transformed from Medieval Christian to Modern Secular. This was a transformation not from an age of faith to an age of reason as was originally claimed but from an age of one faith (or way of coping with the not-yet-known) to the age of another faith.[15]

Within the former age the faith called upon was, in the main, religious faith, specifically Christianity. Within the succeeding age secular scientific faith assumed this role. This transformation involved the people of Western Europe in over a century of 'religious' wars; a time of 'immense turmoil and destruction'.[16] However, eventually increasing numbers of 'newly self-conscious and autonomous human beings'[17] in Europe began discovering new meaning. Previously, meaning had to 'fit' primarily with principles of Christian doctrine. Now, meaning had to 'fit' primarily with principles formulated within the parameters of secular scientific doctrine.

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries a wide range of new meaning emerged and began spreading around the planet via European colonisation underpinned by global trade. No questions were raised sufficient to shake confidence in 'the West'. But when Spengler's 'The Decline of the West' became a best seller in 1918, its title seemed to capture 'an emerging cultural mood'.[18]

By the 1990s Beck was arguing that 'Western' society had become a risk society where the 'bads' (environmental degradation and social problems resulting from innovation that had become autonomous) were now predominant over the 'goods'.[19] In the

same decade Bauman was claiming that there was evidence coming from 'Western' societies of growing 'anxiety, cageyness, the tendency to fault-seeking and fault-finding, to scapegoating and aggression' which he claimed were symptoms of 'gnawing existential mistrust', including mistrust of 'Western' institutions.[20]

In the early years of the 21st century a debate continues as to the capacity and flexibility of such institutions. Some claim that many of these institutions are now 'on the edge'; others argue that they may be under pressure but there is no evidence of crisis.[21] Perhaps another way of analysing our contemporary situation is to say that many *people* are 'on the edge', no longer trusting institutions that seemed stable for centuries; political institutions, commercial institutions, religious institutions, and so on. If our intellectual awareness of myth comes *after* our body awareness then, as myth transforms, institutions may seem out-of-sync with what our body wisdom is telling us.

Stresses and strains of transforming myth may also be driving a recent formulation of 'conflict'; a kind of two-tier concept. At one level is what may be called grassroots conflict which is resolvable, at least potentially. Then there is what some theorists are calling 'wicked' conflict, where the problems are said to defy definition.[22] The assumption seems to be that there are now so many contradictory messages that the best that can be done is to try to steer this conflict so that damage to our global competitiveness is minimised.

A more creative way of responding to this multiplicity of meaning may be through the notion of 'captivity',[23] understood as occurring where humans are in a situation from which they feel they cannot exit but which seems increasingly meaningless. Over time, such people may develop a condition called learned helplessness, the conviction that no matter what they do, it will not effect change.[24] Ultimately this may result in the breaking of the human spirit. Integral to this process is a certain distortion of communication in which a person feels battered by contradictory messages.[25]

During the transformation of myth at the level of a culture, messages from the 'old' version are being contradicted by messages from the 'new' version so many people may feel battered and disconnected and may be operating with a 'Do Not Disturb' mentality. Conventional mediation does not seem to be equipped to engage creatively with ongoing conflict at this level.

New century mediation

Four core assumptions inform what is being called 'new century mediation':

(1) a certain kind of conflict has gone underground within many 21st century individuals living a 'Western' lifestyle and this is manifesting itself in countless ways, which collectively may be called new century sadness (people are 'pulling down the blinds' because they feel threatened and desire protection)[26]

(2) this underground conflict is sabotaging people's capacity to co-author decisions when two or more parties are interacting in exterior conflict

(3) such ongoing complexity of conflict is occurring mainly because myth in 'the West' is transforming

(4) new meaning to clarify this transformation is available so we do not have to wait until some new version of myth is 'in place' to gain greater clarity.

New meaning emerges in 'the West' largely from

> a professionally defined field of prior knowledge and is directed toward evaluation by a specialised, usually technical, body of readers and judges who are the first sieve through which any claim to new knowledge must ideally pass.[27]

However, if myth within the culture called 'Western' is transforming, presumably so is the above process. As myth transforms, 'old' assumptions about the emergence of new meaning may remain 'blunderingly in force' and may be providing an 'increasingly unworkable and dangerous blueprint' for the theorising of conflict and mediation – among other things.[28]

Perhaps a question posed by Einstein (1879-1955) may help us here. The question was: is the universe friendly? 'I have begun to discover its physical meanings but the question that haunts me is, is it friendly?'[29] Is this universe, where humankind lives on a 'tiny planet revolving around an undistinguished star … at the edge of one galaxy among billions ultimately friendly or hostile?[30]

Before responding, it may be useful to check something. What are our bodies telling us? How is our body literacy making us feel? Hopefully a number of readings or soundings can be taken over a period of time. If there is a feeling of belonging to this place and time and a sense that potentially, everything belongs, it may be useful to reflect on the following: (1) this universe may be friendly; (2) if friendly, it may be a universe of meaning; (3) this meaning may be accessible at the level of the individual.

Ultimately this is about the individual choosing to trust her/his judgment based in part on body knowing. It is not just about verbalising. We may need to reflect on how recent the development of verbalising is in evolutionary terms. It has been in use, it would seem, for only about the last 100,000 years[31] of our ongoing evolution as a unique and distinct species which is estimated to have begun some 4.4 million years ago.[32] Prior to the last 100,000 years, the whole body (not just the brain) would seem to have been crucially important in our ongoing search for meaning; our search for the not-yet-known.

But today, as regards receiving news of the not-yet-known, we seem to pretend that our bodies do not exist![33] As long as we are feeling well, we seem to think we have no need to read our body.[34] Nowadays, if the body is feeling healthy, perhaps the main 'search' in which it plays a significant part is the search for a pleasing appearance;[35] an appearance which helps me construct an identity, acceptable to (perhaps better than some) others. The body would seem to have become largely irrelevant as far as the search for the not-yet-known is concerned.

The notion of 'stepping back' may be useful in sketching out stage one of new century mediation. First, stepping back from verbalising, in the sense of spending time in our universe of meaning without involving words – or as few words as possible. Second, stepping back towards an earlier form of

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accessing meaning which may be called 'embodied knowing'. This could be done in our own way and in our own time. It is a process of beginning to regain trust in embodied knowing. It may be understood as an intra-personal, collaborative process; a co-authoring process for making sense of what is bothering us at the time.

Another important element of new century mediation could be to become more aware of the role of myth in our lives. Myth may be understood, in part, as a set of assumptions to enable us to cope with the not-yet-known. However it is also a manifestation of our desire to be connected; to share; to experience something beyond our own place and time. This desire is also a vulnerability. If a certain version of myth at the cultural level was to become compulsive – that is, alternative versions (alternative visions) become unthinkable – we may begin to operate with a kind of learned helplessness. There may then be a disconnection from our ongoing evolution as a meaning-seeking, social species. The risk, in the long term, is that we could begin to live as zombies: living, functioning … but finally incurious and inescapably submissive – or sadistic.

Summing up

In the 21st century there will be, hopefully, many useful words spoken and written about conventional mediation. A second hope is that as 'conflict revolutionaries'[36] we will engage non-violently and creatively, with conflict gone underground, resulting in what is being called new century sadness.

A key assumption guiding this article is that there is a 'dimension of depth'[37] in our universe of meaning which is available, potentially, to any individual but which remains elusive or mysterious, not in the sense of something opposed to or contrasted with knowing nor something which, once explained, disappears.[38] Rather, something which is full of new meaning; full of the not-yet-known.

A second key assumption is that while verbalising is an important evolutionary development, it may enable a distortion of communications through which the attractiveness of the not-yet-known is rendered largely invisible. Such distortion may be integral to the process of breaking the human spirit. The body recognises the not-yet-known; verbalising may facilitate its ongoing emergence.

Myth is accessed initially primarily through knowing other than the intellectual or rational-analytic. We are in it before we know it. By the time we are intellectually aware, myth cannot be refuted although it may be resisted. If we accept that a certain version of myth is the true version or is as good as it can get or that we can never know what a good version is anyway, we may be hopelessly discounting the not-yet-known and thereby stalling our evolution as a meaning-seeking, social species.

Conventional mediation theory would seem to privilege exterior or inter-personal conflict over interior or intra-personal conflict. This article is suggesting that an urgent challenge for contemporary mediation theorists is to work towards achieving a more balanced understanding of conflict and hence of conflict resolution. ❖

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